

# Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education

Critical Language Pedagogy in Theory,  
Research and Practice

Edited by  
Christian Ludwig and Theresa Summer

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-1-032-11607-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-11610-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-22070-1 (ebk)

1

## Approaching Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education

*Christian Ludwig and Theresa Summer*

(CC BY 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003220701-2

The funder for this chapter is University of Bamberg

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# Introduction



# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# 1 Approaching Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education

*Christian Ludwig and Theresa Summer*

## Introduction

When the idea of an edited volume on taboos in foreign language education evolved, it seemed very simple. Too simple. A taboo is something that is not acceptable to talk about or do. Taboos can, for example, include restrictions on certain activities and behaviours in society as a whole but also dietary restrictions among certain religious groups, or words that are inappropriate to use in certain contexts. Despite the fact that there are still boundaries that should not be crossed, today's society seems to be increasingly open and accepting towards things that used to be frowned upon. Although traditionally discussed among anthropologists, the term *taboo* now exists across almost all disciplines, including cultural studies, social sciences, and medical studies. With regard to foreign language education, the word *taboo* covers quite a wide range of phenomena, including specific topics, verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, and behaviours. There is not only taboo language that should not be used by students but also taboo subjects, customs, and lifestyles that are often avoided as they may spark some sort of controversy. As Kaye poignantly puts it, "topics such as divorce and depression and illnesses such as cancer and AIDS may not be as taboo as they used to be" (Kaye, 2015, n.p.). Consequently, such topics may no longer be taboo in society and can thus be tackled in the (foreign language) classroom. Importantly, this requires a pedagogic framework as well as, depending on the particular taboo topic, an interdisciplinary approach and support by school psychologists or psychotherapists. In this introduction, we argue that critical foreign language pedagogy constitutes a suitable lens for discussing taboos and controversial issues as these are often defined by institutions of power. Exploring taboos and controversial issues thus allows teachers and students to explore cultural, religious, and social norms while promoting different perspectives and viewpoints, and encouraging transformative discourses.

Against this background, we first take a closer look at the concept of taboo itself, arguing that in the context of foreign language education, the terms *taboo* and *controversial* are often used synonymously to refer to something that is considered unacceptable or inappropriate. Closely related to this, we then suggest a

systematic yet flexible categorisation of taboos. To conclude, we introduce taboo literacy as a goal of critical literacy before shedding light upon implications for educational practices.

## Taboos: Past and Present

According to the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, taboos are “older than the gods and [go] back to the pre-religious age” (Freud, 1913/2010, p. 26). The word *taboo* itself comes from the Polynesian languages and was first introduced to the English language in the 1770s by Captain James Cook. During his visit to Tonga, he wrote in his log:

Everyone of my visitors received from me such presents as I had reason to believe they were highly satisfied with. When dinner came upon table, not one of them would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was served up. On expressing my surprize at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning but in general signifies that a thing is forbidden. Why they were under such constraints at present was not explained.  
(Cook, 1842, p. 110)

As this quote illustrates, the word *taboo* was used to refer to something that was forbidden. Importantly, the meaning of the word *taboo* has changed and expanded over time, and there seems to be no more consensus on what constitutes taboos today as the term is becoming increasingly imprecise (Horlacher, 2010, p. 3). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2015), the word *taboo*, used as a noun, adjective, or verb, refers to “a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing”. As such, taboos no longer need to be religious but can relate to basically any object, action, location, social and cultural practice, or person. This raises various questions such as: Why do certain individuals, groups, or societies see certain things as taboo while others do not? Who decides which customs, things, or topics are given the taboo tag, as everyone seems to have their own definition of what is taboo? What happens to taboos when society decides to finally come to grips with “outdated” norms and values? Why do some taboos become weaker, while others gain strength (Fershtman et al., 2011)?

As Kaltenbrunner (1987, p. 7 as cited in Horlacher, 2010, p. 11) emphasises, we live in an era that seems to be characterised by “its aversion towards taboos and in which ever more taboos are losing their erstwhile power”. However, it seems that “under the guise of an emancipatory and critically enlightened rational thinking new taboos have been created that are no less repressive than their predecessors” (Kaltenbrunner, 1987, p. 7 as cited in Horlacher, 2010, p. 9). Furthermore, taboos even seem to be needed more than ever in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, diverse, and ambiguous as they, superficially at least, help people to find order in chaos. As Hopkins pointed out back in

1994, we should “accommodate to the turbulence, indeterminacy, and fluidity of the world outside if they [schools] are to meet the increasing demands that are laid on them [students] by economic and social circumstance, and especially the demands of our democratic society” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 7). Yet, taboos are often precluded from being openly discussed in educational contexts as the sensitivity of taboos varies from individual to individual. Despite these concerns, adolescents need opportunities to learn “how to respectfully articulate and voice opinions, but also how to listen to and receive others’ opinions and viewpoints on important issues” (Groenke et al., 2010, p. 29). Here, critical pedagogy provides the perfect framework as it encourages students not only to listen to each other but also to reflect and act critically.

### **Critical Foreign Language Pedagogy**

One of the major tenets of critical pedagogy is that beliefs and practices in society, which are related to the power and domination of certain groups over others, should be questioned and challenged. In other words, teachers should guide their students towards critically examining existing ideologies and practices, and encourage them to respond critically. The pioneer of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1968/2014a, 1972), emphasised the transformative power of education, which should allow all students to develop their critical consciousness and become critical thinkers. Crucially, as Steinberg poignantly argues, “Freire didn’t create a critical pedagogy, he presented multiple ways of knowing” (Steinberg, 2020, p. 5), meaning that there is a complex web of ways in which critical pedagogy can be approached.

Briefly summarised, critical pedagogy, or critical pedagogies in the Freirean sense, proposes a problem-posing approach to education, which encourages learners to change their perspectives, achieve an awareness of power structures and social (in)justices, and become critical thinkers (Gerlach, 2020a, p. 17). As Steinberg emphasises, critical pedagogy is more of a spirit rather than a rigid concept:

[Critical pedagogy] isn’t a thing, a method, a way, it’s not a philosophy, not a curriculum. Critical pedagogy is a spirit, an image of what can be if we are able to see what is. It is a commitment to be teachers as activists, to be unpopular, to be humble, but be shit-stirrers, and to create pedagogical uncoverings of what we can do... what our students can do.

(Steinberg, 2020, p. 5)

According to this perspective, critical pedagogy is not a specific teaching method or approach but rather “a social and educational process” (Crookes & Leher, 1998, p. 327). The importance of integrating this educational process into foreign language education has been addressed by various scholars (Akbari, 2008; Crookes, 2013; Gray, 2019). As Crookes notes, scholars investigating critical pedagogy within foreign or second language education are “creating the subfield

of critical language pedagogy” (Crookes, 2013, p. 8). Taking this as a starting point, this volume draws on Crookes’ definition of critical pedagogy as

teaching for social justice, in ways that support the development of active, engaged citizens who will [...] critically inquire into why the lives of so many human beings, perhaps including their own, are materially, psychologically, socially, and spiritually inadequate—citizens who will be prepared to seek out solutions to the problems they define and encounter, and take action accordingly.

(Crookes, 2013, p. 8)

Within this subfield of critical language pedagogy, research has been rather scarce, especially within Europe. The volume *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik* (*Critical Foreign Language Education*) by David Gerlach (2020b), however, has started to fill an important research gap, focusing particularly on critical foreign language education within the geographical boundaries of Germany. Yet, given the complexity of today’s world and the great range of social injustices becoming apparent through global movements such as Animal Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, or Extinction Rebellion, critical pedagogy is by no means an easy undertaking. In fact, as Steinberg notes, “[t]eaching, critically teaching, is hard work. It requires us to rise above the petty annoyances of those who *aren’t like we are*” (Steinberg, 2020, p. 4). There are numerous intersections between the field of critical foreign language pedagogy and the teaching and learning of foreign languages that become apparent not only at the methodological level but also at the level of content, some of which are discussed in the following.

In the 1980s, the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasised the role of authentic and social interaction in the target language. As Kumaravadivelu states, “[t]he phrase ‘competence in terms of social interaction’ sums up the primary emphasis of CLT” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 60). Cooperative and collaborative approaches especially support social interaction among students as they mutually engage in a coordinated effort to understand and solve a problem—an approach which also strongly favours positive interdependence and individual accountability despite its emphasis on the group. In a similar vein, approaches and concepts such as foreign language learner autonomy (Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Little et al., 2017), inquiry-based learning (Dobber et al., 2017), differentiation (Bromley, 2019; Eisenmann, 2019), and inclusive pedagogy (Bartosch & Köpfer, 2018; Bongartz & Rohde, 2018) all emphasise the critical role of the learner in living and promoting diversity. If learners are encouraged to analyse multiple perspectives, they need opportunities to deal with issues that really matter to them and to their personal lives. As Cotterall points out:

The learning setting must offer learners the opportunity to engage in genuine inquiry and expand their understanding of topics and ideas which

matter to them. [...] [T]hey should represent authentic questions (of personal significance to the learners) which demand real answers.

(Cotterall, 2017, pp. 103–104)

Furthermore, in order to provide an “education that lasts” (Edes, 2020, p. 90), it is indispensable to follow a dialogic approach, which builds on the voices of both teachers and learners and draws on the wealth of perspectives and ideas present in every student group. In other words, a critical pedagogy approach manifests itself through the integration of taboo(ed) topics and issues, which so far, presumably remain largely absent from education. While there is a plethora of topics and themes which students may explore in collaborative settings and through the target language, taboo and controversial topics may be particularly meaningful and beneficial to students, especially with regard to developing students’ communicative competence around topics and problems they encounter in real life. Closely related to this, ignoring such topics would diminish the students’ roles as critical thinkers and ignore their diverse perspectives. Against this background, the following section focuses on the great variety of taboos and controversial issues as well as their potential for implementing critical pedagogy.

## **Taboos and Controversial Topics**

Taboos and the transgression of taboos can be found in almost any societal discourse. Despite the ubiquity of taboos and taboo-breaking, the word *taboo* itself seems to remain an ambiguous and vague term in foreign language education. In one of the few existing categorisations of taboos in foreign language education, potentially controversial issues are often subsumed under the acronym PARS-NIP, referring to seven main currently present taboos: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms (e.g., communism, sexism), and pork. This acronym is a rather rigid classification of taboos, which largely ignores their ephemeral nature. This construct was modified creatively by a group of English educators who added further “alternative” uses of the acronym, such as periods and porn for “P”, as Figure 1.1 illustrates.

In the context of foreign language education, the concept of PARSNIP is mostly addressed in the field of materials development. Thornbury, for example, uses the term “parsnip policy” to refer to policies of publishers that exclude controversial topics, which consequently “imbues ELT books with a certain blandness” (Thornbury, 2010, n.p.). According to Meddings, publishers thereby rule out various potentially offensive territories, which “is why teachers and learners become so familiar with units on travel and the weather” (Meddings, 2006, n.p.). Nonetheless, these topics may also include representations of alternative lifestyles, pastime activities, or non-traditional family structures. In other words, foreign language teaching materials typically focus on everyday-life topics such as families, spare-time activities, and cultural content by focusing on specific countries and their traditions. Consequently, teachers working with the textbooks are



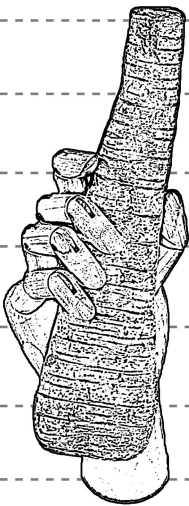
P		Politics / Periods ...
A		Alcohol ...
R		Religion / Race ...
S		Sex / Suicide ...
N		Narcotics / Nudity ...
I		-isms / Integration ...
P		Pork / Porn ...

Figure 1.1 Parsnippy Topics.

Note. Authors' illustration, topics as listed in Seburn et al. (2016, p. 1).

likely to refrain from discussing taboos with their learners unless they consider themselves to be critical pedagogues. However, teachers may not only be held back by publishers, education authorities, or curricular guidelines but also by political views and agendas as the Florida “Don’t Say Gay” bill illustrates.

Consequently, parsnippy topics that go beyond easy-going, communicative, and everyday-life small-talk issues are often rather scarce in published teaching materials. There are a few exceptions, however, such as the resource book *Taboos and Issues* (MacAndrew & Martínez, 2001), devoted specifically to a range of taboos, the above-mentioned ebook series called the *PARSNIPs in ELT* (Howard et al., 2016; Seburn et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015), and *Can I Teach That?* (Linder & Majerus, 2016). The last one, for example, presents a range of stories, strategies, and advice for teachers using controversial topics and activities. Although this example does not specifically focus on foreign language education, it illustrates how spaces “for students to speak about difficult things that are happening or have happened to them” (Linder & Majerus, 2016, p. ix) can be created.

Based on this, this introduction (as well as the publication as a whole) extends the list of parsnippy topics and aspires to provide a more systematic categorisation while also offering a more flexible handling in educational contexts. First, it suggests a broader definition of taboos, understanding taboos as challenging, controversial, and tough topics that are perceived as taboo by some people or social groups in certain situations. A categorisation of taboo topics within

this broad definition is crucial to enable a systematic analysis in research and a progressive conceptualisation for and an integration of taboos into teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, categories enable teachers (and students) to grasp an elusive concept such as taboo. Thus, the categorisation of taboos shown in Figure 1.2 includes a broader range of critical issues in today's society. It presents eight main flexible categories. All of the suggested taboo categories are either related to issues of social (in)justice and (un)equal power relations, which can be related to the areas of race, class, gender, and disability (Vasquez, 2017, p. 3) or to individuals' personal well-being, forms of behaviour, and ways of life. Obviously, each of the topics comes with its own challenges, especially when addressing them in the classroom. For example, before considering a discussion about suicide, one needs to be careful not to publicise suicide in order to avoid copycat suicides (Werther effect).

As concerns the presence of such taboo topics in academic literature and ELT research, a noticeable aspect is that taboos are rarely discussed among researchers and practitioners (Becker et al., 2022). This is particularly surprising for two main reasons. First, students are constantly confronted with (the changing and challenging of) taboos in their daily lives as existing social, cultural, religious, and other norms disappear and new ones are established. For example, social media platforms have potentially manifested taboos as people are promoting seemingly perfect bodies and lifestyles on Instagram and TikTok, and digital devices have contributed to the rise of new taboo issues such as sexting and cyberbullying. In fact, digital media may also expose students to potentially inappropriate or disturbing (taboo) content and language, which would not have reached them as easily a few decades ago and which raises new questions of (self-) censorship (Allan & Burrige, 2006).

A second reason why it is surprising to find only a marginal body of literature and empirical research focusing on taboos and foreign language education is the fact that English teachers across the globe are often confronted with very rigid taboos in specific countries that require a great deal of intercultural sensitivity. An example of this is the use of international and largely Western textbooks in predominantly Muslim countries that demand competence in handling taboo content among teachers. Two recent studies were conducted in this field, however, examining two different practical dimensions of working with textbooks: In a study among teachers in Saudi Arabia (in a university ELT context), Etri examined teachers' ways of handling taboo content such as dating and identified that they engage in various forms of censorship such as avoiding or skipping taboo content (Etri, 2021). A further study examined the effect of pork visuals (considered taboo among Muslim and Jewish learners) on the processing of linguistic and visual input among 40 Muslim language learners through eye-tracking, indicating that the pork content did not distract learners' attention (Dolgunsöz, 2019). These studies illustrate that taboos are existent in education and, depending on the political and cultural context of education, handling them in practice presents a challenge in legal, methodological, and ethical terms.



*Figure 1.2* Contemporary Taboos and Controversial Topics.

*Note.* Authors' illustration.

Against this background, dealing with some selected taboos in the foreign language classroom cannot only help bring students in contact with views, ideas, and opinions different from their own but also motivate them to critically question and explain their own views. As Hess points out: “[t]he relative diversity of schools makes them particularly good places for controversial issue discussions. Students likely will be exposed to views different from their own and have to explain their own views during such discussions” (Hess, 2009, p. 6).

So far, we have discussed the importance of critical language pedagogy, particularly focusing on the potential of taboo topics for engaging students in critical discussions, for example, through working with various text types. Analysing and producing pop culture artefacts such as songs and TV series (Werner & Tegge, 2021) but also literary texts such as poems, multimodal novels (Delanoy

et al., 2015), and graphic novels as well as born-digital texts (Ludwig & Kersten, in press) in particular can offer new and multiple perspectives on taboos, which can be explored in foreign language education among intermediate and advanced as well as young learners (the wide range of picturebooks on controversial and challenging issues may serve as an example here). Yet, adolescents, as Enriquez highlights, “are the ones most affected by exposure to these texts” and, therefore, “it is helpful to understand their definitions of controversy, the topics they consider inappropriate for the school setting, how much exposure they feel is too much” (Enriquez, 2006, p. 17).

Obviously, the aim of integrating taboos in foreign language teaching and learning is not to evoke unreflective negative responses, enhance personal stress or fear, create conflicts, or bring back negative memories. Thus, dealing with taboo topics requires careful anticipation on the part of the teacher, as well as support, feedback, and guidance in exploring certain topics and issues for (pre-service) teachers and learners alike. The next section focuses on the development of taboo literacy as a central pedagogic aim to enable learners to analyse, respond to, and create taboo(ed) artefacts and thereby reflect upon them critically.

## **From Critical Literacy to Taboo Literacy**

In the context of foreign language education, an important concept deriving from critical language pedagogy is the goal of developing learners’ critical literacy. According to Crookes, critical pedagogy commonly invites “an action response”, whereas critical literacy encourages the “learner to develop tools for seeing the ways in which language has position, interests, power, and can act to disadvantage those on the lower rungs of a hierarchical society” (Crookes, 2013, p. 28). In other words, and with particular regard to foreign language learning, such explorations can uncover how “language is fundamentally tied to questions of power” (Janks, 2010, p. 11), i.e., how language and power are closely intertwined as language establishes and maintains power (cf. Fairclough, 2014). In a similar vein, Gerlach also emphasises the fact that critical theories and critical pedagogy deal with the relationship between the world, understanding the world and language (Gerlach, 2020a, p. 24). This is closely related to the definition of critical literacies from the perspective of a multiliteracies approach, which lists three dimensions of critical literacies: (1) connecting with lived experience, (2) thinking critically, and (3) taking action. At a more practical level, this includes dealing with texts from students’ lives and identifying multiple perspectives (1), identifying problems and voicing concerns (2), and offering solutions or participating (3). Notably, “meaningful participation” is described as “a touchstone of critical literacy”, which is, for example, facilitated through digital media and technological conditions that provide powerful opportunities for participation (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, pp. 160–161). Consequently, dealing with taboos and controversial topics can foster the development of critical literacy or, more specifically and in the context of handling taboos, taboo literacy, in foreign language

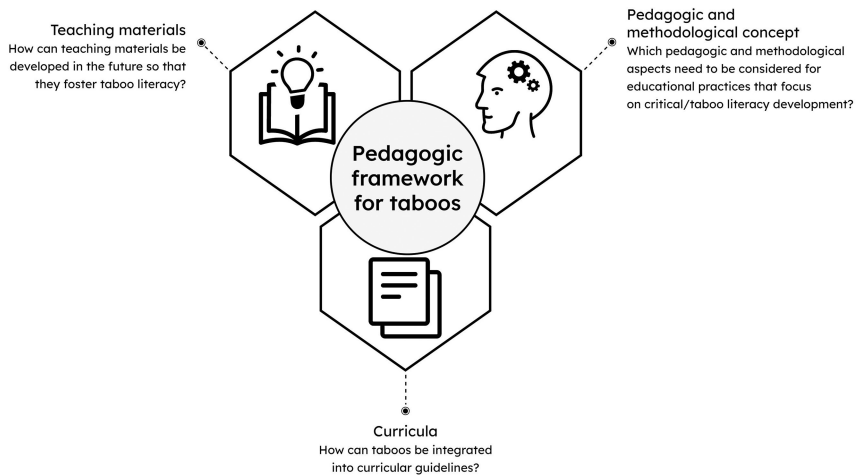
education. Learners should be offered opportunities to deal with some tough, controversial, and taboo topics and texts relevant to their lives, analyse these, and participate on the grounds of their new insights. The following section therefore addresses a range of pedagogic implications for integrating taboos and controversial topics into critical foreign language education.

## A Pedagogic Framework for Taboos

This section presents a pedagogic framework that aims to relate theory and research to practice by exploring three interrelated questions. These questions, illustrated in Figure 1.3, require a new consideration of how to foster taboo literacy in practice by examining implications for curricular, pedagogic as well as methodological guidelines, and materials development. While examining these three areas, this section offers some practical suggestions for teaching practice.

First, the curriculum, which embodies decisions about the teaching objectives, content, the methods of instruction, and the evaluation of a programme (Thornbury, 2017, p. 74), can be examined for their taboo qualities, i.e., opportunities for discussing “regular” topics from a more critical perspective. Second, curricula can be analysed by detecting opportunities for dealing with taboo issues and developing guidelines for promoting taboo literacy. This primarily applies to the areas of teaching objectives (i.e., developing taboo literacy as well as other competences and skills developed through engaging with taboo issues) and the content (i.e., dealing with topics that are considered taboo).

Nonetheless, curricula for English in Europe already offer a considerable amount of freedom to teachers and learners when it comes to the choice of



*Figure 1.3* A Pedagogic Framework for Taboos.

*Note.* Authors' illustration.

content. In European documents such as the *Common European Framework of References (CEFR)*, the development of communicative competence is still high on the agenda. In the new descriptors of the *Compendium Volume* to the *CEFR*, four modes of communication are listed—namely, reception, production, interaction, and mediation (Council of Europe [CoE], 2018). Evidently, an exploration of taboos in practice can facilitate the development of all of these modes. To give an example, cultural taboos such as swear words and taboo language (see Chapter 10) can be dealt with in practice by identifying the use of swear words (reception) and comparing the use of such words to other languages in a plurilingual approach (mediation). Moreover, in an example of online interaction activities listed in the *CEFR*, it is suggested that learners can personally engage “in a critical discussion of arts or music with friends online” (CoE, 2018, p. 186). This could, for instance, include a critical analysis of eco-songs (Summer, 2021), music videos, and digital art by reflecting upon the portrayal of people’s relationship with the natural world, consumerism, and environmental risks.

In addition to new curricular objectives, taboos can serve to fulfil already existing ones, such as the development of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). As taboos are a key element of every culture, they can be explored to identify cultural similarities and differences, as illustrated in the chapter in this volume by Amarasinghe and Borgwaldt (Chapter 18). It discusses taboos in Germany and Sri Lanka, not only emphasising the fact that topics which may be considered taboo in one culture are acceptable in another culture but also that one may have a blind spot for taboos in one’s own culture. Closely related to this, taboos can also provide an impulse for exploring learners’ potentially (trans)cultural identities. Learners can rehearse their roles as global citizens by engaging with different (trans)cultural perspectives and identifying differences and similarities across individuals, which are implicit in different texts and artefacts. Byram’s (2008) concept of education for intercultural citizenship also promotes a greater focus on political, social, and cultural issues in foreign language education and thus provides a theoretical rationale for discussing taboos.

The second domain of the framework addresses pedagogic and methodological aspects—hence, questions related to the development of teaching goals (i.e., in combination with competences, skills, and content), lesson plans, as well as activity or task design. While combining the above-mentioned modes of communication (CoE, 2018) with the development of taboo literacy, the first direct implication is that current teaching materials need to be substituted with additional, authentic materials.

In addition, pedagogic implications on the methodological level require a (re) consideration of learner-centredness. As an essential principle of foreign language education, learner-centredness accounts for the subjective needs of learners involving collaborative approaches in which educators and learners share insights into their experiences and knowledge (Nunan, 2013; Tudor, 1996). For the development of taboo literacy in foreign language education, the notion of learner-centredness is absolutely crucial and, in terms of task design, it needs to be reconsidered. This is due to the potential challenges and dangers involved in

handling the wide variety of taboos in educational settings. Primarily because of the power imbalances between teachers and learners, reasons against the integration of taboos into (foreign language) education are manifold. Potential risks include offending learners by violating their religious and political beliefs, their moral codex and sexuality, creating personal conflicts among learners (and teachers), and provoking extreme and negative emotional responses due to traumatic experiences of individuals, who may have been personally affected by violence, experienced personal loss, or political persecution. Rather than relating topics to learners' personal experiences, as would be the norm in communicative approaches that encourage learners to relate to personal situations and concerns, for instance, dealing with taboos requires a different approach in which the topic rather than the learners' personal views or experiences is in the foreground and in which different texts and perspectives are investigated critically. What is more, when selecting particularly controversial topics and texts for the classroom, teachers should consult school psychologists and ask for advice.

Due to the importance of creating a positive and trustworthy atmosphere in educational settings, it is important to try to cut out the negative experiences of learners—especially when it comes to controversial topics such as violence. Rather than asking learners about their experiences with regard to cyberbullying, for instance, it would be more appropriate to explore the experiences of others. As mentioned above, this could be approached through different texts and (pop culture) artefacts and by focusing on explorations that allow for multi-perspective discussions, which are based on arguments and which, ideally, reach beyond the microcosm of the classroom and help students to practise for the macrocosm of the world.

Related to the aforementioned challenge, another critical aspect related to the integration of taboos and controversial issues into practice is the occurrence of eruptions. Introduced by Janks (2010), the term *eruption* refers to the occurrence of difficult situations and unexpected conflicts in the classroom. An example of such an eruption is reflected upon by West (2021), who reports on a homophobic incident in an in-service English language teaching course in South Korea, in which a video sparked a homophobic eruption. As such eruptions can theoretically happen at any time in the classroom, the integration of critical pedagogy into TEFL programmes at university and an interdisciplinary approach with psychology with a focus on handling taboos and the conflicts that come with them could potentially help teachers develop strategies for dealing with such unexpected conflicts. By engaging in an open discourse with learners and encouraging self-reflexivity, also among teachers (Buyserie & Ramírez, 2021), normativity can be challenged.

The following teaching guidelines, subsumed under the acronym TABOOS in reference to the more narrow PARSNIP model, serve as general suggestions for activity design and materials development by taking into account potential dangers and risks involved, as described above, and trying to carve out and illustrate the potential of critical language pedagogy and taboos for foreign language education (see Table 1.1). Given the great variety of taboo topics (see



Table 1.1 Educational Guidelines for Dealing with Taboos

<i>Educational guidelines</i>	<i>Suggestion</i>
<b>T</b> Texts and artefacts	Bringing in a variety of texts and artefacts that offer different perspectives on taboos.
<b>A</b> Advice and help	Creating an atmosphere of trust and specifying where learners can get help. Depending on the taboo topic in focus, a trigger warning might be important or a choice of topics/texts to avoid negative experiences among learners.
<b>B</b> Be fair!	Encouraging learners to be fair by listening to their classmates. This also holds true for teachers, who need to handle biased perspectives and listen to their students' points of view.
<b>O</b> Open: knowledge	Widening learners' horizons by providing relevant, reliable, and important information and facts on historical, social, and cultural developments.
<b>O</b> Open: views	Opening one's classroom for new topics, forms of discussions and interdisciplinary approaches while pushing for common ground (for example, by adhering to basic human rights), and inviting multiple perspectives.
<b>S</b> Student-centeredness	Considering learners' subjective needs/interests and inviting them to bring in their own materials and raise questions relevant to their lives in the on- and offline world outside the classroom, if appropriate (depending on the learners and the topic in focus).

Figure 1.2), on the one hand, and teachers' need for practical models for their everyday teaching, on the other hand, a one-approach-fits-all is inappropriate, which is why we present some basic educational guidelines and suggestions.

Overall, the educational guidelines of TABOOS highlight the importance of developing lesson plans and activities that are student-centred by addressing topics relevant to their lives but without directly involving their personal (possibly traumatic) experiences. Foreign language education should guide learners towards tracing the roots of taboos by widening their horizons and learning more about the origins of social injustices, discovering power relations and cultural conventions, exploring consequences of tabooing certain topics, and finding possible solutions.

Closely related to this, we clearly declare ourselves in favour of a negotiated syllabus, which does not avoid but embrace some controversial issues if discussed properly and which, as Clarke points out, "takes the basic principles of communicative language teaching to their logical conclusion" (Clarke, 1991, p. 13). It actively involves students in choosing topics and activities but also other key classroom processes such as evaluation, feedback, and assessment. It seems that through such radical and full student participation, contemporary taboo issues could move to the forefront, provided that students are willing to be challenged and can be encouraged to move beyond their comfort zones.

An additional, more general pedagogical aspect that deserves attention is the role of parents in dealing with taboos in education. Situations in which parents



complain about religious festivities such as Christmas at school, which they feel may exclude their children, or dealing with controversial issues that are brought up in novels read at school and irritate some parents, are situations which are presumably well-known to practising teachers. If teachers begin a lesson sequence on sexting, for instance (due to conflicts that have arisen among learners), a valuable piece of advice might be to inform parents about such plans by explaining the purpose behind such a project. In this way, teaching content is not only negotiated with the students but also with parents. Furthermore, finding out more about students' backgrounds and encouraging parents to help can also guide students through taboo experiences. Ultimately, and ideally, not only students but also parents may become what Freire refers to as "critical co-investigators" (Freire, 1968/2014a, p. 81).

The third aspect of the pedagogic framework (see Figure 1.3), teaching materials, relates more specifically to how textbooks or (digital) materials can be designed to promote taboo literacy as an outcome in students. As already mentioned, "normwashed" classroom materials, which avoid discussing or even mentioning controversial issues, are common rather than unusual. Yet, they play a key role in facilitating discussions around controversial issues. Although real-world materials offer a viable and feasible solution, they also require time—mostly in terms of finding suitable materials and designing goal-oriented tasks around them. Once again, learner-centredness plays an important role here as students can bring their own materials to the classroom and produce materials which may be used for further learning. Materials can, for instance, include literary texts such as poems and young adult literature, songs and music videos, and born-digital texts. Evidently, no matter whether materials are brought to the classroom or even produced by students, they need to be carefully evaluated by teachers.

Here, guiding questions on integrating taboos in general and choosing appropriate materials such as the following may help as they shed light upon the complexities involved in dealing with taboos in education:

- How can a taboo topic be connected with existing classroom materials, such as the textbook (e.g., by supplementing it with texts from learners' lives)?
- How can students be supported in better understanding the complexity inherent to any taboo issue?
- Which approaches can be applied to reflect both on the topic as well as the classroom work that revolved around the topic?
- How can students' skills for critical dialogue and discussion be enhanced?
- How can the discussion of taboo topics be more explicitly linked to their role as (future) global citizens?

These questions hint at the fact that teacher education as well as in-service teacher training play a crucial role in promoting both critical and taboo literacy. Therefore, teacher education programmes, in which critical literacy plays a marginal role, as has been observed by Gray (2019), are bound to fail. They insufficiently raise future teachers' awareness of the importance of integrating challenging

issues into their lessons, do not prepare them for addressing issues that are still (too) often avoided in education, and still omit approaches to learning foreign languages which emphasise the active and participatory role of students in all decisions and steps of learning.

According to Kelly (1986), teachers adopt four different attitudes towards discussing controversial issues: (1) exclusive neutrality, (2) exclusive partiality, (3) neutral impartiality, and (4) committed impartiality. Teachers who support exclusive neutrality (attitude 1) argue that taboos should not have a place in the classroom, which is believed to represent a neutral space. Supporters of exclusive partiality (attitude 2) avoid (creating) situations in which students get a chance to voice their opinion, which may go against the teacher's or other students' opinions. Especially teachers who belong to the first two categories seem to be likely or at least reluctant to avoid controversial issues. This attitude, detrimental to the Freirean model of education, represents an example of his banking model in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor (Freire, 1968/2014). As Dahlgren puts it: "[a]t its most extreme and authoritarian level, teachers utilizing this approach actively shut down students who have the temerity to question the authority of their opinions and even grade students with opposing views in a punitive manner" (Dahlgren, 2008, p. 27).

A further challenge is that educators may feel incapable of dealing with specific taboos due to their own lack of crucial knowledge and skills. At the same time, however, teachers may not always be aware of their dismissive attitude towards critical issues, or they may simply be afraid of overt multiperspectivity and vocality and thus rather implicitly enforce traditional topics, roles, and materials. In contrast to these two groups, teachers with an attitude of neutral impartiality (attitude 3) promote the discussion of critical issues, while avoiding expressing their personal attitudes and opinions. Committed impartiality (attitude 4), according to Kelly (1986), represents the most satisfying attitude. Teachers who support this approach cater to the needs of today's diverse classrooms by revealing their own attitudes and views without indoctrinating or brainwashing students while, at the same time, allowing students to voice their own thoughts and ideas.

## **Final Remarks**

Teachers play an essential role in helping students navigate this increasingly complex and diverse world. While students rely on their teachers to address issues to be more prepared for what they may encounter in real life, teachers need tools, material, and methods to address these topics appropriately. Taking this as a starting point, this volume not only offers a rationale for addressing controversial topics in the classroom by explaining why controversial issues are important but also provides concrete topics, tools, materials, and methods to help teachers make their foreign language classrooms more controversial. This edited volume emphasises the fact that today's students not only need to become more informed but also more critical, self-reflective, and open towards the perspectives

of others. Without doubt, teacher education plays a key role in promoting critical and taboo literacy so that learners become critical, democratic, and active citizens.

## References

- Akbari, R. (2008). Transforming lives: Introducing critical pedagogy into ELT classrooms. *ELT Journal*, 62(3), 276–283.
- Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bartosch, R., & Köpfer, A. (2018). *Inklusion und Nachhaltigkeit: Entwicklungslinien moderner Englischdidaktik*. Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
- Becker, D., Ludwig, C., & Summer, T. (2022). Taboos in ELT through the lens of critical pedagogy. *Teacher Development Academic Journal (TDAJ)*, 2(2), 9–16.
- Bongartz, C., & Rohde, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Inklusion im Englischunterricht*. Peter Lang.
- Bromley, M. (2019). Differentiation in the classroom. *SecEd*, 10(1), 21–27.
- Buyserie, B., & Ramírez, R. (2021). Enacting a queer pedagogy in the composition classroom. *ELT Journal*, 75(2), 193–202. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccaa072>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections*. Multilingual Matters.
- Clarke, D. F. (1991). The negotiated syllabus: What is it and how is it likely to work? *Applied Linguistics*, 12(1), 13–28.
- Cook, J. (1842). *The voyages of Captain James Cook* (Vol. 2). W. Smith.
- Cotterall, S. (2017). The pedagogy of learner autonomy: Lessons from the classroom. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 8(2), 102–115.
- Council of Europe. (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. Council of Europe.
- Crookes, G. (2013). *Critical ELT in action: Foundations, promises, praxis*. Routledge.
- Crookes, G., & Leher, A. (1998). Aspects of process in an ESL critical pedagogy teacher education course. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(2), 319–328.
- Dahlgren, R. L. (2008). *Experiences of social studies teachers with teaching controversial public issues in the classroom* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida]. UF Digital Collections. <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0022576/00001/pdf>
- Delanoy, W., Eisenmann, M., & Matz, F. (Eds.). (2015). *Learning with literature in the EFL classroom*. Peter Lang.
- Dobber, M., Zwart, R. C., Tanis, M., & van Oers, B. (2017). Literature review: The role of the teacher in inquiry-based education. *Educational Research Review*, 22, 194–214.
- Dolgunsöz, E. (2019). The effect of taboo content on incidental vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language: A facial expression analysis study. *Studia Psychologica*, 61(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.21909/sp.2019.01.768>
- Edes, I. (2020). Listening to student voice. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 19(2): 81–91.
- Eisenmann, M. (2019). *Teaching English: Differentiation and individualisation*. UTB.
- Enriquez, G. (2006). The reader speaks out: Adolescent reflections about controversial young adult literature. *The ALAN Review*, 33(2), 16–26.

- Ettri, W. (2021). Strategies for withstanding the inevitable at ground zero: an analysis of intercultural sensitivity in the ELT classroom. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 11, 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2021.111003>
- Fairclough, N. (2014). *Language and power*. Routledge.
- Fershtman, C., Gneezy, U., & Hoffman, M. (2011). Taboos and identity: Considering the unthinkable. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 3(2), 139–164.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Cultural action for freedom*. Penguin.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1968).
- Freud, S. (2010). *Totem and taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* (A. A. Brill. Trans.). Lits. (Original work published 1913).
- Gerlach, D. (2020a). Einführung in eine Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik. In D. Gerlach (Ed.), *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik: Grundlagen, Ziele, Beispiele* (pp. 7–32). Narr.
- Gerlach, D. (Ed.). (2020b). *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik: Grundlagen, Ziele, Beispiele*. Narr.
- Gray, J. (2019). Critical language teacher education? In S. Walsh, & S. Mann (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teacher Education* (pp. 68–81). Routledge.
- Groenke, L. S., Maples, J., & Henderson, J. (2010). Raising “Hot Topics” through Young Adult Literature. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(4), 29–36.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- Hopkins, R. L. (1994). *Narrative schooling: Experiential learning and the transformation of American education*. Teachers College Press.
- Horlacher, S. (2010). Taboo, transgression, and literature: An introduction. In S. Horlacher, S. Glomb, & L. Heiler (Eds.), *Taboo and transgression in British literature from the renaissance to the present* (pp. 3–21). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Howard, R., Lam, N., Petrie, D., Simpson, A., Smith, M., Veigga, T., & Wade, P. (2016). *Parsnips in ELT: Stepping out of the comfort zone* (Vol. 2). <http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/29356/1/parsnips-in-elt-stepping-out-of-the-comfort-zone-vol-2.pdf>
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2012). *Literacies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kaltenbrunner, G. K. (1987). Vorwort des Herausgebers. In G. -K. Kaltenbrunner (Ed.), *Der innere Zensor. Neue und alte Tabus in unserer Gesellschaft* (pp. 7–18). Herder.
- Kaye, P. (2015). *Taboo in the classroom*. British Council. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/taboo-classroom>
- Kelly, T. E. (1986). Discussing controversial issues: Four perspectives on the teacher's role. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 14(2), 113–138.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). TESOL methods: Changing tracks, challenging trends. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 59–81.
- Lamb, T., & Reinders, H. (Eds.). (2008). *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Linder, S., & Majerus, E. (2016). *Can I teach that? Negotiating taboo language and controversial topics in the language arts classroom*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Little, D., Dam, L., & Legenhausen, L. (2017). *Language learner autonomy: Theory, practice and research*. Multilingual Matters.
- Ludwig, C., & Kersten, S. (Eds.). (in press). *Born-digital texts in language learning and teaching*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- MacAndrew, R., & Martínez, R. (2001). *Taboos and issues: Photocopiable lessons on controversial topics*. Thomson Learning.

- Meddings, L. (2006, January 20). *Embrace the parsnip*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2006/jan/20/tefl4>
- Nunan, D. (2013). *Learner-centered English language education: The selected works of David Nunan*. Routledge.
- Oxford University Press. (2010). Taboo. In *Oxford Dictionary of English*. [https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0840030](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0840030)
- Seburn, T., Finegan, K., Greene, S., Howard, R., Lam, N., Petrie, D., & Veigga, T. (2016). *Parsnips in ELT: Stepping out of the comfort zone* (Vol. 3). Smashwords. <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/669186>
- Smith, M. JC, Lemos, C., Petrie, D., Simpson, A., Bilsborough, K., Lam, N., & Wade, P. (2015). *Parsnips in ELT: Stepping out of the comfort zone* (Vol. 1). Smashwords. <http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/27130/1/parsnips-in-elt-stepping-out-of-the-comfort-zone-vol-1.pdf>
- Steinberg, S. R. (2020). Special issue introduction: 50 years of critical pedagogy and we still aren't critical. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 19(2), 3–5.
- Summer, T. (2021). Eco-songs in foreign language education. In V. Werner, & F. Tegge (Eds.). *Pop culture in language education: Theory, research, practice*. Routledge.
- Thornbury, S. (2010, June 27). T is for taboo. *An A-Z of ELT: Scott Thornbury's Blog*. <https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2010/06/27/t-is-for-taboo/>
- Thornbury, S. (2017). *The new A-Z of ELT: A dictionary of terms and concepts*. Macmillan.
- Tudor, I. (1996). *Learner-centredness as language education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vasquez, V. M. (2017). Critical literacy. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.20
- Werner, V., & Tegge, F. (Eds.) (2021). *Pop culture in language education: Theory, research, practice*. Routledge.
- West, G. B. (2021). 'Is this a safe space?': Examining an emotionally charged eruption in critical language pedagogy. *Education Sciences*, 11(186), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11040186>