

HALINA MAJER  
(UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, ŁÓDŹ)

## DON'T MENTION DEATH? WHAT IS AND WHAT ISN'T TABOO IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

### ABSTRACT

English textbook authors generally take the “safe”, conventional approach’ to their topics. Meant to appeal to a heterogeneous, globalized market, textbooks avoid taboo and conflict, thus excluding broad areas of deeply universal human experiences. Using the example of “death” as an obvious “taboo” subject, this paper discusses the potential value of addressing controversial issues in language classrooms, as they encourage authentic communication and involvement.

KEYWORDS: textbooks, EFL, taboo, language teaching, communication

### STRESZCZENIE

Autorzy podręczników do języka angielskiego z reguły zajmują się „bezpiecznymi” tematami. Podręczniki, przeznaczone dla różnych grup odbiorców w globalnym świecie, mają unikać problemów „tabu”, rodzących konflikty. To wyklucza całe obszary uniwersalnej tematyki, dotykającej głęboko ludzkich doświadczeń. Artykuł ukazuje, na przykładzie konceptu „śmierci” jako typowego „tabu”, że kontrowersyjne tematy na lekcjach mają wartość, ponieważ prowokują autentyczne zaangażowanie i komunikację językową.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: podręczniki, język obcy, tabu, nauczanie, komunikacja

The issue of “taboo” topics in a foreign language classroom is not new; it has been approached by numerous specialists in the field, particularly with reference to English being the foreign language in question. In this paper, several references will be made especially to Mario Rinvolucri and Scott Thornbury, who have both written extensively on this subject, and whose ideas this author has found poignant and inspiring. The title of the present paper has been based on Scott Thornbury’s (2002) use of the well-known “Don’t mention the war!” phrase, applied by him to the EFL context. Paradoxically, the war which Thornbury was not supposed to mention as a young teacher in Egypt several years ago, was the very concrete “October 6<sup>th</sup> War” of 1973 (Thornbury 2002). In the present paper, the concept of “death” will be used and examined as an archetypal

taboo topic. However, somewhat unlike in Thornbury's discussion, the main focus will be not so much on English textbooks – which Thornbury tends to generally dismiss as “counterproductive” – as on conversation lesson topics. Nonetheless, when a foreign language classroom is mentioned, it still seems necessary to consider textbooks as an essential component of the teaching/learning process.

### EFL TEXTBOOKS TABOOS

No matter how often and how strongly textbooks have been criticized and their indispensability has been questioned, it may safely be stated that for a vast majority of language teachers all over the world they remain the most reliable and obvious source of language teaching materials. The discussion of taboo topics should start here; however, the basic conclusion can be reached surprisingly fast, and it will be beyond doubt confirmed by teachers – these topics are simply absent from reading texts, recordings, or language exercises.

Let us consider the textbook issue from a typical language teacher's perspective, taking English – as the most commonly taught foreign language – as an example. When we aim to evaluate an English course book, in order to adopt it for a group of students to suit their needs, we will certainly examine its grammatical contents, the amount of vocabulary, the length and difficulty of reading texts and recordings. We will probably not be overly concerned with the topics – not because we do not care, but because they are so blatantly predictable. Any teacher of English will easily enumerate the representative topics to be encountered in coursebooks: family, hobbies, school, sports, food, shopping, entertainment, travelling, animals, science, environmental protection, famous people, customs and traditions, and so on. Additionally, those very predictable areas, which could still potentially provide opportunities for controversy, are usually treated in a rather uniform, light manner, thus avoiding any possibility of serious conflict or clash in the classroom.

Naturally, we cannot blame teachers for willing to avoid conflicts or unpleasant discussions in the classroom, particularly if personal values and beliefs might be involved. As Porcaro (2004) notices, these prototypical topics “in themselves can have an important place in English language learning discourse”. However, as he further points out, learners – particularly older ones, on a higher level of language proficiency – “are curious about, want to learn about and want to talk about events and items not only in their immediate social sphere and personal lives”. Surprisingly often learners also want to and are able to relate “to the larger issues and forces that shape their world: birth, death, good, evil, power, danger, survival, generosity, adventure” (Porcaro 2004: 39).

A question arises why textbook authors generally take the “safe approach” and choose not to go beyond the above mentioned, somewhat boring, uniform and

conventional areas, which cannot be seen as conflict-generating. One obvious reason may be that they conform to the policy of publishing houses, whose intention is “to appeal to a globalized and heterogeneous market” (Thornbury 2002), and thus avoid topics of “taboo nature”, thus it is the educational publishers that impose this “massive self-censorship”. Consequently, teachers, while often complaining about bland teaching materials, are also hesitant to take responsibility themselves for topics which may cause embarrassment in the classroom.

The result is “offering only vanilla content” (Porcaro 2004: 39), and ignoring numerous potentially meaningful and engaging topics. This diagnosis of the state of textbook market has been pointedly summed up by Luke Meddings (2006): “If you’ve ever wondered why coursebooks can seem so anodyne, it’s because they are designed to be. Sensitivities to potential offence in different territories rule out whole areas of human experience, including references too, which is why teachers and learners become so familiar with units on travel and the weather.”

A similar explanation is offered by Thornbury, in his ‘A–Z of ELT’ blog: (<https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2010/06/27/t-is-for-taboo>): “In ELT publishing the ‘verbal hygiene’ that publishers impose on themselves is motivated less by a wish to assert multicultural values than by the need to avoid offending potential markets. ELT publishers do have strict guidelines aimed at promoting ‘inclusiveness’ (...).” At the same time, disturbing topics are perceived as “likely to reinforce gender, racial and ageist stereotypes”. To Porcaro’s ironic “vanilla content” label, Thornbury (2002) adds an equally derogatory epithet, calling the typical textbook content “de-cafféinated”. He goes further in his general criticism of textbooks, too, claiming – following Grady (1997) – that the typically presented textbook discourse reduces the language material to linguistic form only, which does not require “much thought or action” on the part of the student, other than deciding which grammatical structure would be appropriate. “It doesn’t really matter what you think, so long as you use the third conditional”, Thornbury adds (2002: 36).<sup>1</sup>

The ELT methodologist who has probably used the strongest words while discussing the coursebook writers’ and publishers’ policy concerning the choice of issues to be included among written and recorded texts for learners is Mario Rinvoluceri. In his 1999 paper he refers mockingly to the so-called “EFLese sub-culture” in the following manner: “The EFL discourse world avoids the shadow side of life with little or no reference to death, poverty or war (...) Ambition, rage, jealousy, betrayal, destiny, greed, fear and the other Shakespearean themes are far from the soft, fudgy sub-journalistic, woman’s magazine world of EFLese course materials” (Rinvoluceri 1999: 14). Thus, the “EFLese sub-culture” consistently avoids several universal human issues. As Meddings (2006) puts it, “ELT publishing swears by the Parsnip”.

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<sup>1</sup> These considerations are part of Thornbury’s wider argument, raising doubts concerning the general relevance and usefulness of textbooks in an EFL classroom.

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## PARSNIP ISSUES

The widely used acronym “PARSNIP” is a convenient reminder of topics that globally-oriented teaching materials avoid – Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, “Isms” (for example communism, nationalism, etc.) and Pork.<sup>2</sup> Banning these topics is meant to assure that practically any nationality can use the materials without feeling offended, and it also minimizes the possibility that any of the discussion topics could result in students offending each other. The externally controlled “parsnip approach”, however – we have to agree with Rinvoluceri, Thornbury and Porcaro here – excludes wide areas of such deeply universal (“Shakespearean”?) human experiences as love, sex, conflict, danger, despair, illness, death, war, the good and the evil – to mention only a few of the so called “divergent” themes. Thus, many meaningful and potentially engaging topics are automatically eliminated from classroom discourse.

As it might be expected, the somehow artificially imposed anti-taboo “ban” on non-conventional classroom topics has created an opposite reaction, too, from teachers and ELT methodologists alike. “Let’s venture out of the cosy coursebook cocoon into the real world”, says Scott Thornbury (2002: 37). “Step out of your ELT comfort zone”, Wade et al. (2015) suggest. It has often been often pointed out by teachers that taboo subjects within the classroom can actually generate a high level of interest amongst students, especially as it is for them a rare opportunity to deal with something not normally found in textbooks or in language exercises. Additionally, these topics usually introduce “a rich area of language where students can learn slang, double meanings, euphemisms as well as politically correct vocabulary” (Knight 2016: <http://oxbridgetefl.com>).

An interesting argument has been raised by Fahim and Amerian (2015: 1), who point out that recently “one of the most important and mostly-emphasized issues in EFL pedagogy has been Critical Thinking (...) defined as the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment”. The so-called “divergent” topics – ignored in usual EFL courses syllabus – can in fact have higher potential in preparing the needed framework and educational content for the development of the sense of “critical thinking” and the desirable critical thinking skills in language learners. The taboo topics also seem to be perceived by many teachers as challenging and therefore attractive. Oddly enough, recently it has become easy to find not only supporting arguments, but also concrete guidelines and lesson plans constructed on the basis of the “parsnip” related discourse area. A good example of a joint effort undertaken by a group of ambitious teachers is a recently prepared online textbook *PARSNIPS in ELT: Stepping out of the comfort zone* (Wade et al. 2015), in which the authors – Mike

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<sup>2</sup> “Broadly speaking a taboo is a subject not acceptable to talk about and can be classified in 3 ways; general taboos (sex, death, money), serious issues (politics, racism, sexism) and personal matters (appearance, hygiene, relationships)” (Knight 2016).

Smith, Cecilia Lemos, David Petrie, Adam Simpson, Katherine Bilborough, Noreen Lam and Phil Wade – each present a detailed scenario for a lesson based on one of these topics; thus we get, respectively, “Politics by Mike, Alcohol by Ceci, Religion by David, Sex by Adam, Narcotics by Katherine, Isms by Noreen, Pork by Phil”, containing not only general ideas for skillfully handling the difficult topics, but also lead-in suggestions, questions, group activities, exercises, role-plays, etc.

Naturally, teaching subjects which might upset or offend learners will never be easy. An excellent summary of different perspectives on the issue was provided by Marisa Constantinides (2010), in a summary of an ELT chat from October 2010, titled “Addressing taboo subjects in the classroom”. First, taboo areas were identified by the participants; in addition to the obvious “parsnip” concepts several others were mentioned, like for example: swearing, violence, sexual orientation, conflict with authority, lying, controversial people, divorce, euthanasia. Then, the following interesting related points were raised:

1. Who defines what is taboo and what isn't? Teachers? Institutions? Don't the students have a say?
2. What is taboo varies greatly and depends heavily on context and geography.
3. The distinction (...) between what is actually taboo and what is merely a controversial issue as they are not quite the same thing.
4. Topics may be unavoidable, either because students want to talk about them or because they are so pervasive in the mass media.
5. Need to differentiate educational contexts (EFL/ESL/ESOL) – some contexts may be more conducive to teaching taboos than others (Constantinides 2010).

Other crucial points in the discussion included the problem of teacher's responsibility for avoiding exclusion of students who might feel uncomfortable, as well as the dangers of promoting false generalizations or stereotypes; even the negative connotation of “cultural imperialism” came up as a potential threat. Nonetheless, it was also claimed that if we strictly supported the school of thought endorsed by Claire Kramsch (1998), an undisputed authority in this field, that “language and culture go hand in hand” (Constantinides 2010), it would hardly be possible to escape the mentioned discussion topics. An interesting, if somewhat surprising, point in the exchange was the one concerning potential “policy of teacher protection”, because, as the discussion participant observed, “it requires a very open school environment or a very brave teacher to teach certain things freely” (Constantinides 2010).

### “DEATH” IN CLASSROOM TASKS

The following section will present three examples of practical suggestions for classroom activities based on one of the most controversial taboo topics, i.e. death. The ideas have been taken from three different sources, different authors, and rely

on the authors' individual approaches towards handling disturbing issues in the classroom. All of them, however, share the assumption that the concept of death can be dealt with in groups of relatively mature students, taught by experienced teachers.

In a didactic study "Death as an Instructional Unit Application", James Porcaro argues that "death need not be proscribed as a, well, deadly topic for the English language classroom. It may be treated in a manner that is comfortable for students in compelling lesson components that meaningfully involve them and affect successful language learning" (2004: 44). He further advocates a multi-dimensional approach, based on integrating all the language skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing – addressed at his college students. He assures teachers that that these lessons "have never been a problem for any of his students. Indeed, they have been well received, appreciated for their originality, and successfully carried through" (Porcaro 2004: 44). Among many suggestions of possible tasks – including videos, discussions, translation – the most interesting and original seem to be the ones prepared according to the scheme of poetry being the source of language material, and recitation being one of the practice techniques. As Porcaro claims, "poetry is universal among all societies and deals with themes that are common to all cultures and human experiences, such as love, death, nature, despair, and hope. Poetry utilizes all the resources of language and provides rich input to language learning" (2004: 44).

The internet EFL related websites appear to be a rich source of potential conversation questions on a variety of topics, including several "dangerous" ones, "death" among them. A wide selection of discussion ideas may be found on [teflpedia.com](http://teflpedia.com) – under the heading "Death conversation questions", and [iteslj.org](http://iteslj.org) – as "Conversation Questions: Death & Dying". As many as 94 questions have been found, which seems to be an amazingly and surprisingly large number of conversational options. The lists of questions are preceded with a note that teachers are free to use them in the classrooms; they have also been labelled with very brief warnings: "Teachers will obviously need to use some judgement and sensitivity before using these questions" ([teflpedia.com](http://teflpedia.com)), and "Maybe too sensitive for some groups, but many are extremely interested in how different cultures deal with death" ([iteslj.org](http://iteslj.org)).

The questions vary greatly in nature. We can find a whole range of death-related aspects, from ones that can be pertinent to philosophical or cultural issues, e.g.:

- Do you think that there is anything worth dying for?
- What are some funeral customs in your country?
- What are some useful euphemisms for telling someone that someone they know has died?
- Is the death of a loved one considered a joyful or a sorrowful occasion?

Through some fairly general, theoretical points, e.g.:

What is the worst way of dying?  
What is the ideal way to die?  
What should you say or not say to a friend who is facing death?

To very personal ones, e.g.:

Would you like to die?  
Are you afraid of death?  
Do you believe in life after death?  
Do you often think of death?  
Would you consider physician assisted suicide if you were suffering a painful dying experience?  
Who do you think would mourn for you after your death?  
Would you want to know the exact day of your death?

This set includes the somewhat shocking “How would you like to die?” question. What follows are a number of questions which can be defined as “practical” ones, e.g.:

Would you like it if someone sang you a song or read a poem about you, or a letter to you, at your funeral?  
How long do you expect your spouse or life partner to wait before they move on after your death?

Some of the suggested discussion questions can be evaluated as more than slightly disturbing, e.g.:

Would you want your cremated remains to be part of a fireworks show?  
If you were on death row, who would you want to watch you be executed?

While it may be difficult to imagine some of the above quoted questions being actually asked – and answered – during language classes, their authors do not make any further comments concerning their suitability, except for the short initial warnings (mentioned above). Conversely, the authors of the third set of classroom activities to be discussed here are very careful to caution prospective users of their materials and they give precise guidelines for teachers, concerning classroom atmosphere, recommended seating arrangements and teaching techniques, as well as possible difficulties in conducting a lesson and teacher’s adequate reactions. The textbook in question is called “Taboos and Issues” and was written by Richard MacAndrew and Ron Martinez (2002).

The presented textbook is a collection of photocopiable, detailed lesson plans, devoted to a large variety of taboo subjects, featuring “death” as the opening unit (“Death: Talking about death, funerals, home burials”). Each unit consists of equal sections and they all have similar layout: an introductory “lead-in”, initial

discussion questions, short reading texts followed by tasks, vocabulary exercises, follow-up discussion. Each unit contains a cartoon or a short joke, which helps to create more relaxed atmosphere and makes the difficult topic more approachable. In the introduction to the textbook, the authors provide concrete teaching tips for teachers; for example they suggest that when a question is formulated, we should start by asking students to think in silence, before they are encouraged to say anything. Further on, it is good to assign pair or group work before the topic is opened to whole class discussion. During individual work, pair work or group work, it is essential to remain careful and monitor the situation closely, being ready to change the topic, should problems occur.

Naturally, teacher must remain neutral during discussions that arise, limiting his/her role to giving encouragement to the learners to express their views. Engaging and involving students is the main purpose of speaking activities; however we must “never lose sight of the fact that it is a language lesson and they must be in no way pressurised into discussing or revealing things about themselves with which they are in any way unhappy” (MacAndrew and Martinez 2002: 1). Similarly, a student who does not wish to participate in the discussion must be allowed to remain silent.

In the tasks prepared by the authors, emphasis is strongly put on cross-cultural issues. The following exercise is a typical example of their approach:

Do you find this conversation offensive?

- *I haven't seen Harry for months. How is he?*
- *Dead! He died just before Christmas.*

Which would you prefer to say?

- *He passed away just before Christmas.*
- *We lost him just before Christmas.*

Do you use similar expressions in your language to avoid the words ‘dead’ or ‘died’? If so, what are they? (MacAndrew and Martinez 2002: 4).

The discussion questions have been skillfully formulated, usually giving the learners multiple choice options, which is a good way to encourage learners to talk in pairs and to initiate further exchange of viewpoints, for example:

How do you feel when the subject of death comes into a conversation?

- a. Uncomfortable – I don't want to talk about it.
- b. It depends how other people react.
- c. Fine – it's perfectly natural to talk about death.

Or do you have another reaction? (MacAndrew and Martinez 2002: 5).

In their guidelines and comments the authors clearly acknowledge the necessity of bringing “stimulating and relevant” issues into the classrooms and they assure that their materials are “in no way intended to shock”. However, they reiterate the words of caution: these materials must be used sensitively, for an obvious reason

– individual students may have had painful, traumatic experiences, immediate ones or relating to their families or close friends. Another recommendation is to only use such materials in classes which the teacher knows well, where the teacher can be certain that students trust him/her and each other, and that they are tactful and considerate enough to respect their feelings. In any case, the teacher will have to remain cautious and must be prepared to abandon the topic, should difficulties arise.

## CONCLUSIONS

In view of the discussion above, providing a straightforward answer to the question whether it is right to employ taboo topics to teach language is not easy. Attempting to summarize and conclude the argument, let us reconsider some points from the earlier quoted sources, with particular reference to the conclusions presented by Kaye (2007) and those reached by the participants of an online ELT chat (Constantinides 2010), formulated as “for” versus “against” claims.

Thus, the following advantages are repeatedly mentioned: To begin with, taboo issues are “real life” and will definitely be encountered by language students outside the classroom. As most learners study a foreign language to use it in authentic communication, they need to know what is appropriate and what is not. It is dangerous not to understand taboo areas, which are part of culture and key element of culture. Furthermore, such knowledge makes interesting cross-cultural comparisons possible. Another argument “for” is a practical one: taboo topics often generate high levels of interest and involvement in learners and encourage discussion. Undoubtedly, they are a rich source of language, exposing students to euphemisms, slang, double meanings, or examples of political correctness. Last but not least, introducing these topics helps to teach students to discuss difficult problems in a ‘civilised’ way, and to be respectful and sensitive to other people’s viewpoints.

On the other hand, a strong point “against” has been made by Kaye (2007):

Taboos are taboos for a reason. They are areas of language and topics which are prohibited by a society, and when we use them in a classroom we run enormous risks of offending our learners in the most profound ways possible: religious and political belief, sexuality, morality (...) Our work as teachers is not to provoke extreme emotional responses from our learners, although we may think that a provocative role is the right one. Our work is to teach the systems and skills of English. There are many effective ways of doing this apart from exploiting areas that learners would never discuss, not even in their own language. ([www.teachingenglish.org.uk](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk)).

It is difficult to ignore this assertion. Other examples of justification of the “against” position include some potential difficulties indicated earlier in this paper: We may be excluding students who feel truly uncomfortable; also teachers

themselves may feel apprehensive and not at all happy in confrontation with topics which are likely to provoke strong emotional responses in the classroom. “It can be a minefield”, “treading on eggshells”, the participants of the EFL chat (2010) have warned. On top of that, there is also the danger of negative reactions from outside the classroom – parents, managers, school authorities. “It may not be worth the risk”, Kaye (2007) concludes. And it certainly requires careful consideration, sensitivity, as well as genuine empathy and tactfulness on the part of the teacher.

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