

A study of appropriacy of cultural conceptualizations of taboo topics in EFL classes

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Abstract

The cultural practices related to local uses of certain topics are a socially communicative minefield for English learners. The purposes of this study were two-fold. First, the cultural linguistics framework was employed to investigate the appropriateness of cultural conceptualizations (CCs) of taboo topics in Iranian EFL classes. A revealing result was that students do not feel embarrassed or uneasy about using CCs of taboo topics. Second, the study attempted to explore teachers' and students' perceptions about the effects of employing taboo topics in EFL classes by means of interviews. The results indicate that teachers need to be cognizant of the forbidden nature of these topics and approach them critically via CCs to avoid insulting students. They also provide a basis for pedagogical implications for instructors in Iran teaching English as a foreign language.

Keywords: taboo topics; cultural conceptualizations; cultural linguistics; appropriacy; EFL classes

1. Introduction

In recent years "taboo language" has been regarded as an important issue in classroom settings. Wardhaugh (2006, p. 239) defines *taboo* as "the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members that might lead to anxiety, embarrassment, or shame" and it is seen as an "extremely

strong politeness constraint". When it comes to language, certain things are not supposed to be said or referred to. Language learners are inclined to express themselves on a range of real topics (Dellar, 2006) and stimulating real learning through the introduction of such topics is an effective way to engage students (Leather, 2003). However, the discourse in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes does not provide learners with this opportunity (Rinvolutri, 1999) and thus their needs are not met properly (Kaye, 2006). Since there is a strong relationship between language and culture, taboos cannot be ignored because they are an important element of every culture. According to De Vincenti, Giovanangeli and Ward (2007), the taboo nature of suppressed topics will be perpetuated if they are overlooked. More importantly, neglecting such issues may prevent foreign language learners from obtaining a clear picture of the diverse lifestyles and ethnicities in English-speaking countries (Tshelska, 2006). In spite of the opportunities offered by language teaching to address daily issues and cultural considerations (Gee, 1994) by modeling and opening communication and appropriate risk-taking techniques (Murphey, Sato, & Chen, 2001), several outdated social issues are repeatedly discussed in many classroom settings.

Some studies have supported the controversial views of researchers who strongly advocate using taboo topics in the classroom primarily because of their motivational value in arousing learner interest (e.g., Deckert, 1996; Haynes, 2000; Khuwaileh, 2000; Timina & Butler, 2011). On the other hand, studies conducted by Nelson (1999), Small (2003), Dellar, (2006), Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) or Tekin (2011) showed the negative side of using controversial topics and topics of taboo nature in classroom teaching. However, only a handful of studies (e.g., Gobert, 2014; Liyanage, Bartlett, & Guo, 2015) have specifically examined topics which may be considered inappropriate for classroom language teaching. Moreover, the analytical framework of cultural linguistics has not been used thus far to examine the appropriateness of taboo topics in Iranian EFL classes. Besides, although EFL students' attitudes towards class discussion of taboo topics and the motivational value of such topics in teaching speaking have been investigated (e.g., Tekin, 2011), teachers' and students' perceptions in this respect still remain to be explored.

2. Theoretical background

Learners' context and culture have a direct effect on their understanding of which topics are likely to be considered taboo. Generally speaking, sex, drugs, religion, and death are the main taboo topics to be found in EFL course books (Bell & Gower, 1998). According to Thornbury (2010), PARSNIP, which stands for politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms, and pork, is the acronym representing the

universally prohibited topics in textbooks produced by mainstream ELT publishers in Iran. Gray (2002) adds anarchy, AIDS, and Israel to this list. Based on an analysis of a series of four EFL coursebooks for junior and senior high school learners of English published in Finland, Keturi and Lehmonen (2011) found that suicide, violence, abortion, cursing, and smoking were treated as taboo. All of these topics would also be considered taboo in Gulf Arab Muslim classrooms, but perhaps not in other Muslim or Arab contexts such as Pakistan or Lebanon.

However, many studies have strongly supported the claim that using taboo topics can motivate learners (e.g., Banville, 2005; Bronner, 2002; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). These topics are discussed keenly in private conversations (Bronner, 2002), effectively creating and supporting copious opportunities for interaction and communication (Banville, 2005; Kaye, 2006). Using these topics allows students to speak about provocative issues, encourages them to express their personal experiences and views (Dalby, 2007), and motivates them to engage in authentic communication (Bronner, 2002; Kaye, 2006). Moreover, using controversial issues for discussion helps develop skills in negotiation, agreeing, disagreeing, explaining an opinion, and justifying it. Thus, discussing taboo topics generates a high level of engagement by providing opportunities to express opinions and share them with others (Dalby, 2007; Senior, 2007).

The concept of appropriacy of language in the context of use, which is taken from communicative competence models (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), underpins approaches to language curricula and pedagogy (Alptekin, 2013). Hynes (1972) emphasized that knowing "what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it" (p. 277) is a central element of language competence, a term which brings linguistic, socio-cultural and discourse knowledge under the umbrella of appropriate language use. Appropriateness of language use can be applied in the language classroom by introducing what seems to be comparatively straightforward "rules" and recognizable practices of using language in genuine communication. An example of this is the way a particular communicative function and its pragmatic elements, like politeness and formality, is performed and understood.

It should be noted that language which is considered appropriate in the context of the classroom might be inappropriate in other settings. This is because language classroom materials are decontextualized, bearing little resemblance to the language used in authentic interaction (Brown, 2013). One reason for this unwanted discrepancy is due to the violations of ostensible rules generated by a lack of agreement about such rules and about the notion of appropriateness across language uses and users (Horan, 2013; Winter & Gallon, 2008). Furthermore, although what are often considered violations are unwitting in some cases, they are clearly deliberate in other instances, being aimed at achieving a social or pragmatic purpose (Dewaele, 2008; Horan, 2013; Mugford,

2008). The complexities surrounding the issue of the appropriateness of language use in language teaching are highlighted when considering taboo language. Mercury (1995) believes that such language is constrained either implicitly or explicitly in use and considered forbidden because it has the potential to arouse the feeling of offense, shock or embarrassment. Taboos are “always personal and they vary according to time, cultures, subcultures and groups inside cultures” (Keturi & Lehmonen, 2011, p. 49) with an openly evident ambiguity in the use of taboo language in public media (Ardington, 2011; Dewaele, 2004; Holster, 2005; Winter & Gallon, 2008).

Cultural linguistics, as characterized by Sharifian (2011, 2015), focuses upon the cultural conceptualizations that are embedded in and communicated through specific languages and examines languages in their social and cultural context (Yu, 2007). Sharifian (2003) employs the word *conceptualizations*, instead of *schema*, as a general term to refer to preliminary cognitive processes involving “systematic selection of certain aspects of a referent scene to present the whole, disregarding the remaining aspects” (Talmy, 1983, p. 225). Sharifian (2017) explains that cultural conceptualizations (CCs) include cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors and these three form pragmatic analytical tools for investigating the relationship between culture and language. Cultural schemas are conceptual structures, belief systems, norms, values, and the expectation of behavior patterns relevant to a wide range of elements and dimensions of experience (Sharifian, 2017). Cultural categories are cognitive strategies with a cultural foundation that are depicted in the lexicons of specific languages, such as, for example, age categories, emotion categories, food categories, color categories, and the like. Cultural metaphors are cross-domain conceptualizations derived from cultural systems such as religion, ethno-medical tradition, worldview or a spiritual belief system. (Sharifian, 2017). Cultural linguistics can also offer ways speech practice and language community are created through cultural models. Both models of culture and cognition are intertwined and provide a basis for linguistics and nonlinguistic behavior.

As Sharifian (2012, 2013) explains, the cultural linguistics framework proposes a practical analytical tool and a novel approach for describing and analyzing World Englishes and some other domains of applied linguistics. The analytical tools of CCs can potentially be applied to investigate the hidden rationale behind conceptualization of specific cultural practices and their reflections in locally designed and published (English) textbooks.

There are several studies that have examined the effect of using taboo language in English classes in different contexts. Nelson (1999) investigated students’ reactions to the topic of sexual identities, which was discussed under the control of teachers. The study lasted for two consecutive weeks and the data

were collected from written responses, worksheets, interviews with teachers and students, as well as classroom observations. The results showed that students had a positive attitude towards discussing such issues. Even the most passive students eagerly took part in in the discussion, which testifies to a highly motivating effect of taboo subjects. In another study, Small (2003) examined the effect of controversial topics such as wars and poverty and taboo topics such as AIDS in several language classes in which 80 students participated. It was found that those students were eager to participate in the discussions and showed a highly positive reaction to the inclusion of these topics. They also appreciated the chance to learn something interesting and meaningful and in addition to learning English as such. Khuwaileh (2000) studied taboo topics in the Jordanian EFL context and found that female students were not willing to write about AIDS, contraception, kissing, sexual diseases, condoms, heterosexuality and homosexuality or religion. The study concluded that teachers need to develop their own teaching materials which are culturally specific in order to decrease the gap between theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language. In another investigation exploring students' reactions to taboo topics, Tekin (2011) examined the attitudes of Turkish students toward the topics of homosexuality, adultery and premarital sex with the help of extensive post-lesson questionnaires. The results showed that students did not have a negative attitude and were not reluctant to talk about these topics in English classes even though they were seen as taboo by the majority of the Turkish society. Most of the students (85%) expressed the view that the materials used for discussing these topics were useful since they were factual and unbiased. In another study conducted in an Asian context, Timina and Butler (2011) explored the attitudes of 70 Taiwanese students to identify which topics made them feel uncomfortable. It was found that the students were unwilling to discuss several areas of their private lives including their mistakes, weaknesses, boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, illnesses, sex, homosexuality, personal family income, personal religious beliefs, politics, personal appearance, single-parent families, superstitions and death. The main reason for the unwillingness to discuss these topics was their taboo nature in participants' culture.

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

The study was aimed to shed light on the use of taboo topics in the foreign language classroom in Iran. In particular, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Is it appropriate to use cultural conceptualizations of taboo topics in EFL classes in Iran?

2. What are the learners' and teachers' perceptions concerning the effects of employing taboo topics in EFL classrooms?

3.2. Participants

A group of 15 higher intermediate learners aged between 14 and 19 taking an EFL course and also 15 EFL teachers teaching at intermediate and advanced levels in one of the most prestigious institutes in Iran were chosen to participate in interviews.

3.3. Procedure

In the first phase of the study, the analytical framework of cultural linguistics was applied to a corpus of Iranian taboo topics encompassing girlfriend/boyfriend and dating, superstitions, hugging and kissing/music and dancing to determine if the topics are appropriate in Iranian EFL classrooms or whether it is better to exclude them. Cultural linguistics as a recently developed field of research with multidisciplinary origins explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualization (Sharifian, 2011, 2017). In cultural linguistics, culture is viewed as a cognitive system and language is seen as being strongly influenced by the cultural construction of conceptualizations by human conceptual faculties (Sharifian, 2011). Cultural linguistics offers a theoretical framework of cultural cognition as well as an analytical framework for investigating the language uses which are underlined by cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian 2011, 2017). The conceptualization process involves schematizing and categorizing. As a consequence, cultural conceptualizations consist of key notions such as "cultural schema", "cultural category", and "cultural metaphor". Cultural schemas refer to "conceptual structures (or pool of knowledge) heterogeneously shared by members of a cultural group" (Sharifian, 2011, p. 24).

In the second phase of study, two semi-structured interviews were conducted in Persian to tap into learners' and teachers' perceptions about the impact of employing taboo topics in EFL classes. Semi-structured interviews are based on a set of predetermined open-ended questions with the possibility for interviewers to follow up on participants' ideas (Cohen & Cabtree, 2006). In the case of students, the following questions were asked:

1. What are the effects of taboo topics on your motivation to speak?
2. Do you think it is appropriate that teachers use taboo topics in classroom discussions?
3. Do you feel embarrassed or motivated when the teacher introduces a taboo topic into classroom discussions?

4. Do you tell your parents or the authorities of the institution when the teacher uses taboo topics in the classroom?

When it comes to the teachers, they were requested to answer the following questions during the interviews:

1. How often do you use taboo topics in classroom discussions?
2. Do you think taboo topics may motivate EFL learners to speak?
3. What taboo topics do you use in classroom discussions?
4. Considering the Iranian religious and cultural context, are you worried about the consequences of using taboo topics in classroom discussions?

4. Results

4.1. Taboo topics

Regarding the main research question of the study, the researcher drew upon the CCs of themes usually forbidden in conversation in Iranian EFL classes on the basis of related literature as well as the experiences accumulated when teaching in various institutions in Iran. The main question was whether it is beneficial to discuss and address the forbidden topics in EFL classes or whether it is better to avoid them. Figure 1 shows seven main topics that are taboo in the Persian language. Some of these topics are discussed in more detail in the subsections below.

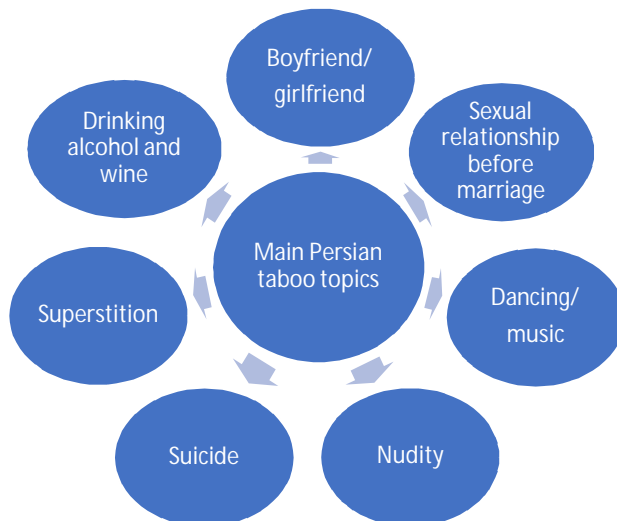


Figure 1 Seven main taboo topics in the Persian language

4.1.1. Cultural conceptualization of girlfriend/boyfriend and dating

For the majority of Iranians, having a girlfriend/boyfriend means having a companion of the opposite sex. When young individuals are getting to know each other, being together alone could be conceptualized as a sign of wrongdoing. In the Iranian culture, interacting with a person of the opposite sex is an experience that is not usually shared with parents. Islam entirely forbids physical closeness between people before marriage and puts emotional closeness in a gray zone. Therefore, in Islam the emotional relationship between males and females is conceptualized as misconduct and a shortcoming in one's faith even if this relationship is online before the *nikāḥ*, or the legal contract of marriage between a bride and a groom in Islam. The reason is that such a relationship may lead to different sinful behaviors such as "sexting". Young people are strictly required to only conduct relationships with members of the opposite sex with their parents' full knowledge and to preserve a formal relationship until after the *nikāḥ* (Kannani, Mohammadzadeh, & Mohammadzadeh, 2014).

As Allen (2006, p. 44) maintains, "a culture that stresses so much the autonomy of the person incorporates layered and profound mindfulness of personal needs and rights and these are a matter of rigid respect". The topics that other religions or nationalities consider suitable in daily lives and in classroom interactions (i.e., girlfriend/boyfriend relationships, dating, and male/female embracing and kissing) are unthinkable within Iranian EFL classrooms because of the students' understanding of what their religion allows. This does not mean of course that no Iranian has ever experienced a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship in today's world. Still, as some students follow the religious prohibition or have been brought up by religious families, introducing the theme of girlfriend/boyfriend relationships and dating in EFL classrooms may not be appropriate. However, the present author has taught numerous lessons regarding boyfriend/girlfriend taboo topics and found them to be effective. By approaching the topic through the CCs of boyfriend/girlfriend, both religious and non-religious students become more interested in these culturally laden topics, which can then be addressed in cultural rather than moral discussions in the classroom. However, marriage is not deemed a taboo subject within the public sphere of the classroom in Iran and some lessons do address this topic. In terms of religion, all the students are aware that marriage is a recommended life choice by Islam. However, it is inappropriate to address the topic of same-sex marriage in EFL classes because such marriages are prohibited in Iran. Nevertheless, teachers and students could still investigate the CCs of same-sex marriage or lesbian relationships in Iran, transforming this issue into a safer topic for discussion. For instance, the present author has broached related topics such as

how different communities understand the differences between males and females or the differences between arranged and non-arranged marriages.

4.1.2. Cultural conceptualization of kissing/hugging

Kissing can be characterized as touching or squeezing one's lips against somebody or an object (Floyd et al., 2009). The cultural event of kissing in Iran may imply different things, such as the expression of love, romance, respect, friendship, greeting, peace, etc. Hence, in Iran, depending on whom you kiss, there is a binary of halal and haram kissing. For example, kissing a non-mahram (a person who is not intimate from religion's perspective) male or female is conceptualized as an evil act. However, guiltless kisses exchanged between married couples, a parent and a child or vice versa, a grandparent and a grandchild, etc. convey warmth and are halal. Shari'a unequivocally forbids all kinds of relationship between men and women before marriage. Hugging and kissing a girl before marriage may be seen as illegitimate and violating religious norms.

At the same time, throughout the history of Iran, the cultural event of kissing has been a custom, a formal, symbolic or social sign demonstrating dedication, regard or greeting. A kiss is additionally used in Iranian culture as a form of greeting between friends or colleagues. Shaking hands with people of the same gender in formal situations and kissing three times on the cheek in informal circumstances are common gestures of salutation. In some situations, a hug in connection with a kiss may be a sign of non-verbal communication. Depending on the setting and the nature of the relationship, a hug can demonstrate recognition, affection, love, fellowship, brotherhood or sensitivity. Caution must be exercised to ensure that contact of this kind does not have any sexual connotations as any physical contact with the opposite sex outside the family is prohibited. To publicly kiss or hug a person of the opposite sex is forbidden although doing such things with a same-sex friend is permitted.

Most locally developed ELT coursebooks avoid touching upon issues of this kind at least in their Middle Eastern editions, but why are these subjects taboo? Hugs and kisses exchanged between a man and woman are a private issue and such acts are prohibited between unmarried couples. As a language teacher, the present author has seen many students showing a great interest in starting discussions about hugging and kissing though some others found this inappropriate. Because of religious prohibitions, most Iranian EFL instructors deliver instruction using non-taboo subjects which are less interesting for most students. However, in order to reduce the taboo nature of kissing and hugging in the EFL classrooms, it is recommended that teachers start discussions about the CCs of kissing and hugging in various Iranian contexts to avoid embarrassment shown by some students and turn this and other taboo topics into non-taboo ones.

4.1.3. Cultural conceptualization of dancing and music

The cultural topic of Persian dances pertains to Iranian dance styles. The genres of Iranian dance are different in different parts of the country. Iran's population includes numerous ethnicities such as Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Turkmen, Jews, Americans, and Georgians. Each ethnic group or region has its particular dancing styles (Koutlaki, 2010). Several Islamic rules ban men dancing for women and women's dancing for men is strictly forbidden. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all kinds of dancing including folklore dances became taboo. Before the revolution, Iranian women were allowed to sing, dance and be videotaped. According to Islamic law, any type of music which provokes joy and excitement is taboo. This raises a crucial question whether music is taboo or allowed. The question is still relevant after more than 30 years as each piece of music needs a "legal ground" before it can be performed. No matter whether a singer is famous or the band is authentic, they cannot perform their music without some kind of legal justification.

Some religion-minded students are reluctant to listen to music, while others are familiar with the latest trends in pop music, know about famous rappers and even use urban slangs of the songs in their daily communications. Music-related topics, whether Persian or English, can be given to students as projects since they are subjects that young people are enthusiastic about. Music and dancing are topics of cross-cultural importance. However, many Iranian students are not comfortable with such topics. In particular, female students are reluctant to talk about dancing unless the music and dancing in question also incorporate traditional elements. Each country has traditional music and dancing, and despite the fact that some devout Muslims may not listen to or take part in traditional music and dancing, most Iranian do. Thus, when Muslim students are asked whether they like dancing, they come up with pictures of discos and night-clubs, which is in stark contrast with their traditional dances and music.

4.1.4. Cultural conceptualization of superstitions

Superstitions are usually seen as irrational, primitive and flawed beliefs grounded in insufficient information. Nevertheless, it has been asserted that superstitions, incorrect though they might be, perform some utilitarian functions that may lead to satisfaction of people's needs (Scheibe & Sabrin, 1965).

One example of a commonly accepted superstition concerns the *evil eye*. This superstition assumes that individuals have the power to look at people, animals or objects in order to cause them harm (Oxford Islamic Studies, 2018). Most Iranians are in fact inclined to believe in *cheshm* (jinx). *Cheshm* literally means "eye", which is why the evil eye is so predominant. It is therefore common to hear Iranians say

cheshm nazanam before opening a new topic. A person with *cheshme shur* (i.e., salty eyes) is said to be cursing you. It is therefore traditional in many Muslim communities to say *Masha'Allah* ("God has willed it"), following a compliment, to fend off the evil eye. Another common Iranian practice, performed both privately and publicly, is burning *Esfand* (i.e., wild rue seeds) to ward off the evil eye. The seeds are put in a tin canister and heated over the fire. As they burn, they make a popping noise and as they do so, Iranians say *betereke cheshme hasud* ("May jealous eyes explode") or *cheshme hasud kur* ("May jealous eyes be blind") while waving the smoke over the heads of the people they love. Iranian mothers usually do this for their children after they are complimented by friends or acquaintances.

Since Iran is a religious country and superstition is popular with most people, most Iranian students are familiar with these topics and enjoy talking about them. The CCs of various Persian superstitions are thus suitable themes for discussion in EFL classrooms. In particular, superstitions are a good starting point for teaching conditionals. Lessons built around superstitions, (e.g., a black cat walking across your path, walking under a ladder, breaking an egg to avoid evil eye, etc.) are usually effective as Iranian students find them close to their realities. In fact, some Iranian teachers construct their lesson plans around superstitions. By assigning homework, teachers can encourage students to use superstition-related language. For instance, in order to teach cause-and-effect phrases, teachers can easily modify this topic to be used in speaking or grammar classes. As a homework task, the students can be assigned a list of the most common superstitions whether in Iran or in other countries. They could be then required to talk with many native English speakers about the meaning of those superstitions. They can find a native speaker of English through email or social media or they can surf the internet to find relevant information. Teachers can motivate students to discuss whether they believe in such superstitions and ask them for justification. After the students have collected the meanings and implications of the superstitions they were assigned, they could be required to write two sentences for each superstition: one expressing a cause and the other expressing an effect. The objective of the task would be to make students use the cause-effect phrases introduced in class. Although superstitions are considered a taboo topic in Iranian EFL classes, they can be very effective for teaching both speaking and grammar.

4.2. Interviews

As mentioned above, in order to explore students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the effects of using taboo topics in Iranian EFL classrooms, two semi-structured interviews were conducted. Translations of representative examples of responses to the questions posed in both groups are provided below:

Excerpt 1 (Student 1, male, 19 years of age)

1. *It is not important for some people, but it could turn a boring class into a more interesting one as more students get engaged in classroom discussion. In addition, students are exposed to a variety of topics which are more interesting to talk about.*
2. *Why not. We do not have any discussion about these topics either at school nor at home. So the only place that students could share their ideas easily is in English classes.*
3. *Unfortunately, the education system in Iran bans the discussion of such topics in schools. So, it is natural that most Iranian students get embarrassed or laugh in this situation.*
4. *No smart student would discuss these ideas with their parents because they know that their parents would not be happy about this.*

Excerpt 2 (Student 2, male, 15 years of age)

1. *I think that when some students start talking about such topics, other silent students will be encouraged to get involved in classroom interactions. This means that learners' motivation to speak in English classes will increase.*
2. *Yes of course. It will have a potentially beneficial effect on motivating students to speak.*
3. *At first, the topics may not be welcome, but this kind of discussion could increase our knowledge about our culture and also play an important role in our future lives.*
4. *No. I would not do it. If these topics are discussed more in the classroom, then they will become ordinary ones like other topics in English textbooks and no one will find it necessary to report this to their parents or school managers.*

Excerpt 3 (Student 3, male, 14 years of age)

1. *Yes, because these topics really make me more involved.*
2. *I like the introduction of these topics since they get all the students talking.*
3. *I take part in such discussions willingly because I enjoy improving my speaking skills.*
4. *Yes. Because my parents are ok with such issues and they want me to improve my speaking.*

Excerpt 4 (Student 4, male, 16 years of age)

1. *I think these topics have a positive impact on Iranian students because students are stimulated to talk about them and in this way their English will improve.*
2. *As I said, these topics encourage students to speak in the classroom, so I believe that teachers need to bring up such topics in order to change the dull atmosphere of the class and replace the tedious and repetitive topics in the textbooks.*
3. *For some students who are not influenced by traditional and cultural issues, these topics are ordinary and they never feel ashamed, but for religious ones and those who think traditionally, these topics are unusual and they may cause embarrassment. In my opinion, English classes are the best places to talk about them and reduce such embarrassment.*

4. *My response to this question is somehow similar to the previous one. I think that religious and traditional students may inform their parents or school authorities that such topics are discussed.*

Excerpt 5 (Student 5, male, 18 years of age)

1. *These topics boost our motivation and get us involved in discussions.*
2. *Yes. I believe that these topics will help even teachers to change their attitudes about the nature of such issues.*
3. *I feel more motivated to participate in classroom discussions and express my opinions. I really like these topics and do not have any problems talking about them in public.*
4. *I never share such things with my parents or anybody else. I keep them a classroom secret. There is no reason to talk to others about topics discussed in class.*

Excerpt 6 (Teacher 1, male, 42 years of age)

1. *I hardly ever use taboo topics in classroom discussions. Considering the Iranian cultural context, they can be problematic at times.*
2. *I reckon these topics will definitely encourage learners to participate in class because they are very interesting for them.*
3. *I once included the topic of friendship between boys and girls, and the students were very involved.*
4. *Honestly speaking, I have always been afraid of using them because of possible consequences.*

Excerpt 7 (Teacher 2, male, 31 years of age)

1. *I have never used them in my classroom discussions. They are not safe topics.*
2. *I believe they would be highly effective in motivating my students to speak.*
3. *I have never used any taboo topics in my English classes.*
4. *I am always afraid of using forbidden topics in my classes.*

Excerpt 8 (Teacher 3, female, 31 years of age)

1. *I use taboo topics when students want to have discussion about them. In addition, I introduce them when I feel the textbook topics are boring and make students feel tedious.*
2. *Based on my experience, I think using taboo topics greatly motivates students to speak and participate in class.*
3. *Boyfriend/ girlfriend, drinking, dancing, superstitions.*
4. *I never start talking about such topics. If students want to do it, we start discussing them.*

Excerpt 9 (Teacher 4, female, 28 years of age)

1. *I rarely use taboo topics in discussions in my class.*
2. *I am of the opinion that these topics could attract students' attention and get them interested in taking part in the discussions.*

3. *I have used the topic of teenage girl and boy friendship in Iran.*
4. *In governmental institutions, the teachers ought to be careful, but in private institutions, using such topics will not create problems.*

Excerpt 10 (Teacher 5, male, 36 years of age)

1. *Not too often, because they are dangerous topics in Iranian classes.*
2. *If I were a decision maker, I would let the teachers use them to improve students' speaking skills.*
3. *I have had discussions about divorce or kissing between relatives at parties. Shaking hands with females and political issues have also come up.*
4. *I have never been scared of using these topics in the classroom.*

Based on the examples provided above, it seems that most students believe that taboo topics stimulate their motivation and that their introduction may encourage especially those more silent to participate in classroom interactions. In addition, these topics could enliven boring interaction in the classroom as they depart from the themes typically included in textbooks. When it comes to teachers, it seems that, on the whole, they show a preference for using such topics in the classroom because they believe that this would improve students' speaking skills. However, the religious context of Iran often prevents them from introducing such topics on a regular basis.

5. Discussion

In the first phase, the focus of the study was on the investigation of CCs of taboos in the cultural context of Iran and their suitability for Iranian EFL classes. As has been demonstrated, the CCs of taboo topics such as boyfriend/girlfriend and dating before marriage are forbidden in the Islamic culture of Iran. However, discussing the cultural conceptualizations of kissing, hugging, dancing and music is not prohibited because individuals sharing the same gender are permitted to kiss and hug each other in public as long as they are family members. With respect to dancing and music, women are not permitted to dance and sing in public for religious reasons. Moreover, any kind of music that provokes joy and excitement is banned. Like people in other countries, Iranians have and follow their own superstitions. These patterns of superstition, not unique to the country, are widely spread across Iran and other regions because culture knows no boundaries. Furthermore, superstitions are not equally shared by all the Iranians, confirming Sharifian's (2011) observation that cultural conceptualizations are not homogeneously distributed in any community. Previous studies on taboo topics in EFL classrooms (e.g., Gobert, 2014; Liyanage et al., 2015) have not applied the analytical framework of cultural linguistics to examine the cultural conceptualization of taboo topics. The present study has done so in

regard to the taboo topics of boyfriend/girlfriend, and dating; hugging/kissing and dance/music and superstitions. By identifying the CCs underlying the taboo topics specific to a given country, students become aware of the relevance of such topics and the role they can play in EFL classes.

The second aim of the study was to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions about the effects of using taboo topics in Iranian EFL classes. Generally speaking, students' responses indicated that the introduction of taboo topics could encourage both active and passive students to take part in classroom discussions. Although Iran is an Islamic country, most students displayed a positive reaction toward these topics, seeing them as an integral part of human life. Most students do not feel ashamed but and in fact feel more motivated to become aware of their own culture through the medium of English. While some religious students may find these topics inappropriate at the outset, most of the participants agreed that they would get used to them with time. As the interviews with teachers revealed, almost all of them were willing to include taboo topics in their lessons to improve students' speaking skills and trigger their interest. However, considering strict religious and cultural norms, they either avoid using taboo topics or use them rather cautiously. Such apprehensions lead to the use of such repetitive topics as technology, education, immigration in classroom discussions, which discourages many students from active participation, limits the opportunities to develop speaking skills and results in boredom. The results of the present study suggest that educational decision-makers ought to create an atmosphere in which the teachers would not be reluctant to employ such topics as divorce, boy/girl friendship, drinking, dancing, etc. This would surely contribute to enhancing communicative abilities and allow students to better understand the cultural phenomena in their society.

6. Conclusions and pedagogical implication

The study has investigated the use of taboo topics in EFL classes in Iran. The findings provide a basis for important pedagogical implications that are applicable to teaching English not only in Iran but also in other countries. In particular, it would seem that teachers should go beyond the themes typically covered in textbooks and introduce topics that might be seen as culturally inappropriate in some contexts. The study of culture in EFL classes should be richer than what Kramersch (1993) referred to as 4Fs (i.e., food, fact, festival, and folklore). Applying cultural linguistics allows in-depth analysis of the CCs related to taboo topics, although the concept of culture as such remains "complex and elusive" (Lo Bianco, 2003, p. 11).

Teachers are expected to be aware of the forbidden nature of taboo topics and treat them tactfully. By approaching such topics through CCs, they can avoid

making students uneasy as well as causing embarrassment. The implementation of taboo topics in EFL classes could enhance students' knowledge regarding cultural norms and practices, encourage critical thinking, foster interactions about these conceptualizations in intercultural communication, and boost their pride in their own cultural identity and culture in general. In fact, specific local and foreign CCs of taboo topics can be profitably discussed and learned by students and teachers in the classroom. If teachers and students are provided with unique CCs viewpoints, they will be able to discern dissimilarities in viewpoints in a critical way and accept the fact that people may cherish dissimilar values, which are socio-historically established. However, teachers in Iran have to be careful about the topics they choose for discussion in their classroom and how they approach them. Unlike in the USA, no legal protection is provided for instructors who decide to teach social issues under the guise of critical pedagogy (see Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000), and they are vulnerable if students or parents complain to the authorities about the teaching of generally-agreed taboo topics.

On the other hand, although some taboo topics like sexism and sexuality, abortion, kissing, drugs, alcohol, bikinis, nudity, dancing can be viewed as inappropriate for classroom discussions, teachers can negotiate with students to come up with a list of engaging but uncontroversial topics that are relevant to the students' lives. Such a negotiated syllabus which may include critical pedagogy topics such as single-parent families and divorce is probably the best choice for teachers wishing to motivate Iranian Muslim students in EFL classes. As a result, students are more likely to be interested in the topics covered and no cognitive dissonance might occur. Also, since topics are negotiated and agreed upon by both parties, the risk of rejection and causing embarrassment is reduced. By bringing more socially engaged English language teaching into the students' lives, teachers can empower the learners and make their classrooms more attractive places. Organizing training courses with a focus on CCs for both pre-service and in-service teachers can enhance their understanding of diversity, racism, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, making it possible for them to deal with concepts of this kind in the EFL classroom. Teachers need to know more about their own and other cultures, especially those of their students.

There are several limitations to this study that should be considered in future research. First, since no research has been done in this area, insufficient reliable resources were available covering cultural conceptualization of taboo topics. Second, in this study, the teacher did not clarify the CCs of Persian taboo topics to the participating students. However, in future studies, both teachers and students could elaborate on such cultural conceptualizations in more detail in the classroom. Finally, while this study solely focuses on Persian CCs of taboo topics, it would be beneficial for future studies to investigate the CCs of taboo topics in other countries.

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