



# DISCUSSING THE UNSPEAKABLE: A STUDY ON THE USE OF TABOO TOPICS IN EFL SPEAKING CLASSES

(KONUŞULAMAYANI KONUŞMAK: EFL KONUŞMA  
DERSLERİNDE TABU NİTELİKLİ KONULARIN KULLANILMASI  
ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA)

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated Turkish EFL students' attitudes towards class discussion of two topics generally perceived as taboo in the Turkish society, namely homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex, for the purpose of testing the motivational value of such topics in EFL speaking classes. Another purpose of the study was to analyze Turkish students' reactions to the materials and activities used in a lesson on homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex. To these ends, questionnaires were given before and after the discussions. The participants were asked about how disturbing they found the materials and activities used during these discussions. The results indicate that the students both enjoyed and learned a lot during these discussions and they did not find the materials and activities used in these lessons disturbing at all. In fact, statistical analysis of the related survey items revealed that the participants' attitude towards the whole idea and process of using taboo topics in the classroom was highly positive.

**Keywords:** taboo, EFL, speaking, homosexuality, pre-marriage sex, adultery

## ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin, Türkiye Toplumunda genellikle tabu olarak görülen eşcinsellik ve evlilik öncesi cinsel ilişki konularının İngilizce konuşma derslerinde tartışma konusu olarak kullanılmasına karşı takındıkları tavrı incelemektedir. Çalışmanın amacı, bu tür tabu nitelikli konuların, İngilizce konuşma derslerindeki motive edici yönünü araştırmaktır. Çalışmanın başka bir amacı da, öğrencilerin, eşcinsellik ve evlilik öncesi cinsel ilişki ile ilgili bir ders esnasında kullanılan materyal ve aktivitelere gösterecekleri tepkiyi saptamaktır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, katılımcılara uygulama öncesinde ve sonrasında anketler verilmiştir. Araştırmaya katılan öğrencilere, bu konular üzerinde sınıf ortamında yürütülen tartışmaları ve bu tartışmalar sırasında kullanılan materyal ve aktiviteleri ne ölçüde rahatsız edici bulduklarına dair sorular yöneltilmiştir. Ayrıca, bu tür konuları genelde tabu olarak algılayıp algılamadıkları da sorulmuştur. Araştırmada elde edilen bulgular göstermiştir ki, öğrenciler, bu tartışma konularını ve bu konularla bağlantılı materyal ve aktiviteleri sınıf ortamında görmekten rahatsızlık duymamakla birlikte, bu tür konular üzerindeki tartışmalar sırasında hem eğlenmekte hem de öğrenmektedirler. İlgili anket sorularına verilen yanıtların istatistiksel analiz sonuçları göstermiştir ki, öğrencilerin sınıf ortamında tabu nitelikli konuların kullanılmasına karşı tutumları genel itibariyle oldukça olumlu yöndedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** tabu, EFL, konuşma dersi, eşcinsellik, evlilik öncesi cinsel ilişki, zina

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Our world has changed, but in many ways our schools have not. Educational theorists and reformers have focused on the selection of subject matter and begun to advocate a curricular reform with more emphasis placed on controversial issues (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans & Saxe, 1996). Furthermore, the communicative approach, which is widely used in language teaching, broadens the scope of possible topics utilized in the classroom activities (Deckert, 1996) by supporting the introduction of new and fresh topics to the language classroom. Although there have been rapid developments in approaches to language teaching over the last few decades and these developments bring a stronger emphasis on teaching language for communicative purposes (De Vincenti et. al, 2007), we still shy away addressing real global necessities (Thanasoulas, 2001). On the assumption that communication is not only an exchange of information, foreign language teaching should foster critical awareness of social life (Small, 2003); and it is very important for a student to question both society and life (Benesch, 1999; Brookfield, 1987).

Controversial issues get little attention in schools because of their taboo nature (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000). Many things closely related to daily life cannot be addressed in the school context, but the teacher cannot do much about solving this problem (Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al, 2003). However, nobody living in the modern world can keep away from constant exposure to taboo language and topics, and teachers cannot close their eyes to this reality (Kaye, 2006). Despite the fact that discussion of taboo subjects are systematically silenced in most educational institutions (Henze, Lucas & Scott, 1998), we, as teachers, have to question whether it is appropriate to use taboo subjects in the language classroom, since turning a blind eye to the developments in the society and changing needs of the students may not be the most effective professional response (Vrbová, 2006). Thus, an important aim of this study is to draw the boundaries between the so-called appropriate topics that conform to moral principles and the taboo ones considered inappropriate for class discussion by many.

It is a fact that things used to be much harder in the past, because teachers were easily sued and sometimes sentenced even when they used taboo words or topics for educational or literary purposes (Hoy, 1977). Even in late 80s, taboo topics such as pregnancy, homosexuality, AIDS, pornography, sexual harassment and rape used to appear in the media with court cases rather than in the formal curriculum (Levine, 1986), because they were believed to have torn schools and communities apart (Sadker, Sadker & Shakeshaft, 1987). However, the questioning is much easier now with the change in our modern societies (Dellar, 2006). Wider use is made of authentic materials such as newspapers advertisements; and new technologies such as

podcasts, or the Internet make it possible to reflect social changes in the classroom (De Vincenti et. al., 2007). However, these changes should be supported by new research, curriculum, materials and practices. Therefore, echoing Thornbury's (1999) question, it is time we asked why we keep ignoring controversial issues; and at what expense?

Looking from a cultural perspective, it should be noted that there is a strong relationship between language and culture. As taboos are a key element of every culture, they cannot be ignored. If such topics continue to be overlooked, they will perpetuate their taboo nature (De Vincenti, et. al, 2007); and more importantly, foreign language learners might have no idea about diverse lifestyles and ethnicities in English-speaking countries (Tshelska, 2006).

Looking from language learners' perspective, one can see that they want to express themselves on a variety of real topics (Dellar, 2006) which, according to Leather (2003) and Skopinskaja (2003), plays an important role in engaging learners through prompting real learning. Teachers' awareness of their students is vital for creating an effective learning atmosphere (Harrison, 2007), because it is a well-known fact that an effective learning environment will not be possible without taking into consideration learners' aspirations, motivations and needs (Finocchiaro, 1971). However, the ESL discourse world is far from giving learners this opportunity (Rinvoluceri, 1999); thus, our students' needs are not met (Kaye, 2006).

From a materials development perspective, it is a common complaint voiced by most teachers that the materials designed for language learning are bland and devoid of the topics we frequently encounter and discuss in our daily lives (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001; Small, 2003). Furthermore, in many language classrooms, a number of outdated social issues are addressed repeatedly (Pennycook, 1997) although language teaching offers a wonderful opportunity to go beyond simply teaching the language in order to learn more about daily issues and culture (Gee, 1994); and to model and learn open communication and appropriate risk-taking (Murphey, Sato & Chen, 2001)

Challenged with all these different perspectives, teachers may either work in the direction of preserving dominating normative positions or they can challenge them (De Vincenti et. al, 2007). Mostly, conscientious teachers are troubled by dogmatic pedagogic statements which limit their creativity (Finocchiaro, 1971). Therefore, they approach commercially prepared materials critically and question their appropriateness for their students (Johnson, 1995).

The author of the present study is well aware of the motivational value of taboo topics in the language classroom (Banville, 2005; Bronner, 2002; Dalby, 2007; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001) like many other teachers who believe that an effective way of encouraging students to speak is to select controversial topics (Senior, 2007)

because such topics have a high potential of triggering lively and language-productive discussions (Dalby, 2007; Thornbury, 2002). Also, it seems likely that taboo topics will be increasingly popular and become a more regular feature in language classrooms. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to raise the awareness of language teachers about the motivating aspect of such topics in the language classroom, because as Pennycook (1999) suggests, awareness is the first step in the process of change.

More research in this area needs to be carried out and researchers should question how to further develop materials and activities that will grant students the freedom of choice to explore controversial topics, and topics of taboo nature more specifically. A critical approach to TESOL can only be realized by taking a road nobody has taken before and by walking on that road fearlessly (Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002).

In the light of the aforementioned arguments, the present article will hopefully be considered a bold step on this relatively unexplored road for the purpose of questioning and exploring the unknown (Benesch, 1999; Brookfield, 1987; Pennycook, 1999); and will be found useful by especially experienced teachers who after years of teaching experience recognize the motivational value of controversial topics which lead to lively discussions (Dalby, 2007; Nelson, 1999). Rather than following a conservative ‘avoid taboos’ cliché, this article addresses the very question of using taboos in the language classroom in order to explore new and more effective areas of classroom practice. However, the major problem, which is also the toughest conundrum in critical work appears to be how to reconcile freedom with constraint (Pennycook, 1999; Small, 2003).

### **Teachers’ Perceptions about Taboo Topics**

Taboo which is a Polynesian word means an object or a general ban that should not be touched because taboos represent the traditional (Levine, 1986; Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000; Dalby, 2007), and the religious in a way (Orr, 2006). In fact, a taboo subject is one that people avoid in their discussions because it goes against cultural and societal norms, sometimes to the extent of damaging personal relations (Maxwell & Reichenbach, 2005). In other words, taboos, which are highly questioned by Levine (1986) due to their unknown source, make discussion of certain topics forbidden, and discourage people who intend to discuss them (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000). However, Dalby (2007) points out that taboos play an indispensable powerful role in protecting individuals and society.

Taboo topics are such topics as death, nudity, sex for sale, gays, abortion, trans-sexuality, drugs, suicide, religious beliefs, incest, among others (Deckert, 1996; Bronner, 2002; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001; Kaye, 2006; Senior, 2007). It is common knowledge that the number of subjects that are considered taboo are less frequent in modern societies than one would imagine

(Dellar, 2006). As a matter of fact, taboos change as societies change, but there are still a great number of people who insist on their commitments to certain values because of their beliefs that values are absolute, inviolable, and in a way sacred (Kaye, 2006; Thanasoulas, 2001). This explains why it is so hard, and in some cases almost impossible to break them, or merely open them to discussion (Tetlock, 2003). TESOL (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Organization in general shows a high level of commitment to moral causes such as promotion of human rights, equality and peace; and teachers, in particular, have a tendency to perceive many things as taboo (Deckert, 1996).

Teachers' perceptions about the role of the student in the learning process and what is appropriate for class discussion are value-laden issues (Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al, 2003). Some teachers have a tendency to view taboo topics like abortion, cannabis and the like as conversational marginalia with which their students rarely know what to do. Therefore, the majority of them, adopting a conservative view, avoid even the smallest possibility of talking about such topics (Dellar, 2006; Harrison, 2007). However, teachers must be more open in their discussions and more willing to be led by their students; and learn to manage sensitive issues than to avoid them by pursuing only safe lines of research (Lee, 1993).

The purpose of the teacher while using taboo in the classroom is an important matter (Dalby, 2007). Teachers should not have an intention of breaking taboos rather than using them for educational purposes (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). Teachers should give their students the opportunity to raise taboo subjects (Leather, 2003), but always keep in mind that it is a language lesson (Bronner, 2002; Whiley, 2006). It is also important to take into account MacAndrew and Martinez's (2001) warning that teachers should use taboo topics sensitively with students whom they know very well and Deckert's (1996) suggestion that teachers should follow the discussion closely in order to prevent possible overreactions. If unexpected reactions occur, teachers must replace the topic with a safer one instead of pushing the students. However, the level of intrinsic motivation will be much lower if the teacher constantly and excessively interrupts the discussion (Grady, 1997).

### **Pros and Cons of Using Taboo Topics in the Classroom**

There lie two contradictory views about raising taboo topics in the language classroom on two ends of the spectrum: on one end, the liberal colonialist point of view which welcomes any type of discussion; and on the other end, the conservative view which is against even the smallest mention of controversial issues in the classroom (Pennycook, 1999). Now, we will look at the advantages and disadvantages of using taboo topics in the classroom through constant references to these two views.

The first and probably the biggest pro of using taboo topics is that such topics carry high motivational value (Banville, 2005; Bronner, 2002; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). In fact, they are the very attractive topics which learners discuss avidly in private conversations (Bronner, 2002); and they can be really productive in terms of creating an atmosphere of communication (Banville, 2005; Kaye, 2006). Students have a lot to speak about controversial topics by including their personal experiences and views (Dalby, 2007); and teachers will have something interesting to share with their students through using them (Bronner, 2002; Kaye, 2006). As Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) suggest, because taboos are novel in the classroom, they have a potential for in-depth discussion and analysis, which is indeed a desired outcome in any language classroom. Furthermore, discussing controversial issues will help students use skills in negotiation, agreeing, disagreeing, explaining an opinion, and justifying etc. Thus, they generate high levels of student involvement not because the activity requires them to do so but they are keen to express their views (Dalby, 2007; Senior, 2007).

In spite of the motivating aspect of taboo subjects, it can be really hazardous and risky to address them in the language classroom due to certain drawbacks (Leather, 2003; Small, 2003). Controversial topics can create personal animosity or reinforce cultural stereotypes; misunderstandings and tensions can occur (Senior, 2007). Furthermore, by discussing taboo subjects in the classroom, teachers run the risk of offending some learners and causing friction between students holding differing views (Banville, 2005), which can take weeks or months to recover (Dalby, 2007). This may not be worth the risk in some cases (Kaye, 2006). Therefore, according to Finocchiaro (1971), the teacher should avoid them altogether.

Sometimes, students might be reluctant to participate in order to avoid friction and embarrassment in the classroom; and especially for some students taboo topics may be painful because of past experiences (Cunningham Florez & Burt 2001; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001; Deckert, 1996; Kaye, 2006). Even different classes in the same institution may react to taboo topics differently (Senior, 2007). Therefore, teachers who intend to open taboo topics to discussion in the classroom must be very careful.

There are thus both advantages and disadvantages of using topics of taboo nature in the classroom. However, as Whiley (2006) suggests, there is nothing wrong with including social issues in language teaching as long as teachers are aware of the pitfalls.

### **Guidelines and Materials for Correct Use of Taboo Topics in the Classroom**

Using taboo topics in the classroom can be challenging for both teachers and students (Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002) and it certainly comes

with some drawbacks (Finocchiaro; 1971; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). However, if certain guidelines are followed, these drawbacks can be reduced to a minimum.

Firstly, all students must be over 18 due to the taboo nature of the topics and probable explicit content. Furthermore, it might not be a good idea to violate the regulations of university (Deckert; 1996; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002) and local conditions in which learning takes place (Deckert, 1996).

Personalization of taboo subjects must be avoided (Hartman & Faulkner, 2002). Open questions like ‘Do you know anyone who...?’ should be preferred as a better choice than pair or group discussions in order to prevent a high level of personalization (Dellar, 2006). On the other hand, Leather (2003) suggests that personal questions about what the person would do in a particular situation should be preferred to maximize student participation, which is in parallel with Skopinskaja’s (2003) argument that personalizing the foreign language learning is a positive attempt.

Another discussion goes on around learner autonomy, especially necessitated by the student-centered approach which allows students a more active role in content selection (Deckert, 1996). Autonomous learners “become the creators rather than the recipients of knowledge” (Okazaki, 2005:177); and an effective way of creating a classroom atmosphere that leads to rich language acquisition is “giving learners control of the discourse” (Ellis, 1998:155). Slimani (1989) draws attention to the longer retention of topics initiated by learners, and adds that learner-initiated discussions have a higher motivational value for learners due to the perception of taking initiative in their learning process. This is consistent with Nelson’s (1999) study in which the participants opened up the topic of homosexuality setting out from the implications of two women walking arm-in-arm. Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) openly express their discontent with teacher-initiated discussions, because they might not go beyond a ‘let’s talk about it’ approach, in which teachers merely want their students to talk about a topic they have brought up. Although learner autonomy is so important, it is not very likely that learners will be given the opportunity of choosing their own topics for class discussion (Grady, 1997).

Finally, the role that a teacher adopts throughout the discussion is critical. In this context, it is important to adopt an impartial role during a class discussion of controversial topics, and the best way to ensure this impartiality is to start a discussion only if it naturally follows an already started one (Sommers, 2007). If the teacher expresses his/her opinions and feelings on the discussed topic, students may feel that being in parallel with the teacher’s point of view will somehow be rewarded. Thus, the teacher’s role should be to facilitate discussion, guide and provide a secure atmosphere where different views can be uttered freely with no negative impact on other learners. Finally, teachers must avoid provoking emotional responses, which will certainly



cause serious problems although it may seem to be effective in inflaming the discussion (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001).

### **Taboo Subjects in Course Books vs. Authentic Materials**

"A lot has been written about the lightness of much EFL material" (Leather, 2003:205), but there is still the lack of mention of such topics as death, poverty, war, homosexuality in EFL course books (Rinvoluceri, 1999; Thornbury, 1999; Small, 2003), although it is a demand uttered by numerous researchers and textbook writers (Kappra, 1998; Nelson, 1999; De Vincenti et al, 2007). In fact, the main aim of contemporary textbooks is to entertain students (Small, 2003). Furthermore, major ELT publishers are criticized for intentionally excluding controversial topics from textbooks (Bronner, 2002; Leather, 2003; Rinvoluceri, 1999; Skopinskaja, 2003; Thanasoulas, 2001) and also for discouraging authors from including taboo topics in the course materials they prepare.

Students display sensitivity towards the topics included and images portrayed in course materials (Kappra, 1998). Therefore, probably the biggest challenge for EFL teachers is the choice of adequate instructional materials (Skopinskaja, 2003). Because some topics are considered taboo, they are screened out and replaced by politically correct ones such as time, hobbies, pets etc. at the expense of teacher autonomy (Pulverness, 2004). Furthermore, ready-designed course materials are highly problematic because of cultural differences (Khuwaileh, 2000) and the bias relating to social and moral values (Deckert, 1996; Vrbová, 2006). It is worth mentioning here that some brave attempts have been made to write English supplementary course books lately (i.e. *Taboos and Issues*, *Dangerous English*, *Discussions A-Z*). There are also examples of course books such as *Snapshot*, *Opportunities*, etc. which include serious social issues like racism and disability. Nevertheless, the overall situation does not give much hope.

One of the two main reasons why real-world topics are not reflected in EFL course books is the invented culture of EFL which portrays a world where "nothing too offensive happens, or is even mentioned" (Leather, 2003:205). The other reason is the supremacy of linguistic form over content embedded in structural syllabuses which primarily focus on grammar rather than using topics in the service of form (Grady, 1997). However, publishers keep closing their ears by avoiding any possibility of offence (Dellar, 2006) to satisfy learners who belong to a variety of cultures (Thornbury, 2002).

The solution to the content problem, however, does not lie in abandoning course books altogether to open more space for learner-initiated content. However, if taboo topics come up at some stage of the lesson, the teacher's reaction should be tolerant and encouraging (Thornbury, 2002). Teachers should be granted the flexibility to bring their own materials –



including visuals such as videos and pictures (Small, 2003) – into the debate if they intend to use taboo topics in the classroom.

Despite the views of researchers like Atkinson (1998) who suggests that everyday life had better be left outside the classroom, authentic materials that are available in the news and on the Internet can be a good alternative to course books (Cunningham Florez & Burt, 2001; Hartman & Faulkner, 2002; Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al, 2003; Vrbová, 2006). There is a strong resemblance between taboo topics and the issues we find in media everyday (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001; Dalby, 2007), and students have a natural inclination to learn more than English while discussing current events (Small, 2003; Banville, 2005). Therefore, using authentic materials can play an important role in motivating learners and creating opportunities for lively discussions of such topics.

### **Past Studies on Using Taboo Topics in the Classroom**

Research shows that bilingual speakers feel freer and less anxious while discussing embarrassing topics and using taboo words in their L2 as compared to their L1 (Allan & Burrige, 2006; Harris, Ayçiçeği & Gleason's, 2003) due to the distance factor as Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) puts it.

There are a number of studies which investigated the topic of using taboo topics in the classroom. It will be appropriate to mention major previous studies that explored this relatively unexplored area.

*There are studies that justify the arguments of the researchers who strongly defend using taboo topics in the classroom mainly due to their motivational value as mentioned below:*

Nelson (1999), for example, observed three different ESL classes for two consecutive weeks in order to collect data about students' reactions while the topic of sexual identities, which is considered taboo (Thornbury, 2002), was discussed in control of carefully selected teachers. Nelson's primary focus was on the question of how to create a gay-friendly learning environment; therefore, the starting point of the discussion was the implications of two women walking arm-in-arm. Her study included written works, worksheets and interviews with the teachers and about half of the students in addition to her own observations. What amazed Nelson most was the positive attitude of the students towards the topic and their eagerness to talk about it. Even the most reserved ones participated in what she calls the lively discussion, adding evidence to the highly motivational aspect of taboo subjects.

Small's (2003) study was based on survey results and observations of 80 students who discussed controversial topics such as wars poverty etc. and taboo topics such as AIDS in several language classes. Small (2003) noticed that students were willing and eager to participate in the discussions and showed an overwhelmingly positive reaction. They also expressed gratitude

for the chance to learn something meaningful and interesting in addition to English.

An informal optional lunchtime course which included various taboo topics such as swearing, bitching, suicide, politics, illegality, homosexuality etc. (Dellar, 2006). Dellar does not give a detailed description of the course, but reports that the lectures regularly attracted around 50-60 students from all ages and cultural backgrounds although they could have preferred not to attend it. Dellar (2006) simply played the role of a facilitator. Similarly, Benesch (1999), who discussed the murder of a gay university student with her EAP class, reports that her role was of a conversation facilitator, and adds that she occasionally played the role of an intervener in order to examine certain views further.

Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) report on an elective course in which students presented their favorite topics of taboo nature in groups. Throughout the course, the teacher was mostly a facilitator, but he also played the role of a mediator at times, especially when the discussion became too heated in order not to be overwhelming with excessive control and constant interruptions. In Hartmann and Faulkner's (2002) study, songs that had themes of taboo nature such as incest, child abuse, homosexuality and drugs were used.

*There are also studies which reveal the negative aspects of using controversial topics and topics of taboo nature as detailed below:*

Khuwaileh (2000) for example, reports on a study administered in Jordan. The study investigated English for Science and Technology learners' choices from a list of scientific topics including topics of taboo nature. They were required to choose a topic and write on it. The most significant finding of this study is that most of the participants (especially females) did not prefer to write on topics like AIDS, sexual diseases, contraception, etc. though they were encouraged to choose these topics. Interviews with the learners revealed that the main reason why they avoided these topics was the risk of putting themselves in a critical position by using impolite words. Some students even pointed out that they would be embarrassed to the degree of not being able to look at the teacher's face directly while talking about such topics. Most female students even stated that their personality, religion, honor and politeness were more important for them than the certificate they worked to get.

Another study with similar findings was previously administered by Deckert (1996), who explored preferences of 105 students enrolled in one university's ESL writing courses. The majority of the participants preferred practical and informational topics rather than controversial ethical and moral ones popular in modern American Society. The results also indicate significant gender difference in terms of topic appeal. Girls avoided taboo topics more than boys did.

As inferred from the results of the previous studies, there are contradicting views and unclear points about the place of taboo topics in the classroom. The studies mentioned above can give an idea about the use of taboo topics in the EFL classroom, but the present study does not replicate any of the afore-mentioned studies.

## THE STUDY

### Aims

The present study examined a group of Turkish students' attitudes and reactions towards the class discussion of two topics generally perceived as taboo in the Turkish society, namely, homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex. These two topics were chosen by means of an initial questionnaire which was conducted on 121 students who were learning English at the prep classes of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of a university. According to this questionnaire, the two topics are seen as the strongest taboos in the Turkish society by the great majority Turkish students (92 % and 96 % respectively).

The study sought answers to the following three research questions:

- (a) What do Turkish students think about the taboo nature of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex?
- (b) What are Turkish students' attitudes towards the use of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex as discussion topics in their speaking classes?
- (c) How will Turkish students react to the materials and activities used during the discussions on homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex?

The study also investigated the relationship between the participants' gender and the attitude they displayed towards the discussion of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex in their speaking class.

### Methodology

In order to answer the above-mentioned research questions, two different types of questionnaires were designed as part of this study. The first one, which contained 12 items, aimed at finding out the participants' general attitude both towards the chosen taboos issues and, more specifically, towards their use as discussion topics (see Appendix I). This questionnaire was administered at the very beginning of the study before the topics were discussed.

The second questionnaire had two different versions, one of which was given after the three-hour lesson on homosexuality, and the other after the three-hour lesson on adultery/pre-marriage sex, but both contained the same

24 items (see Appendix II). The only modification carried out was to replace the word homosexuality with adultery/pre-marriage sex.

### **Setting**

The study was carried out at a state university in Western Turkey. One reason why this particular university was chosen was that the school received students from families living in different parts of Turkey where people have different lifestyles, worldviews and cultures, a fact that was seen important to get more generalizable results from the study. Another factor is that the second author is employed as an instructor of English at this university, which is assumed to be appropriate to ensure natural classroom dynamics and a relaxed atmosphere for class discussion of the topics under investigation.

### **Participants**

The study was carried out with two intact groups of participants, all of whom were prep class students of the ELT Department with upper-intermediate level of English proficiency. In order to be students of the ELT Department, each of them had to take the nationwide English proficiency exam and scored high enough to be accepted to the department; but they could not score high enough in university's English proficiency exam to begin directly with the ELT program. These students were automatically placed in an upper-intermediate level preparatory class. Therefore, their language skills were good enough to discuss controversial topics in English and answer the survey questions of this study.

A total of 46 students aged between 17 and 19, 40 of whom were female, participated in the present study.

### **Materials and Instruments**

The materials used in the study were selected according to how related they were to the topics under discussion, and how successful they would be in arousing interest and creating lively discussions. The materials used throughout the three-hour lesson on homosexuality included different pictures related to homosexuality, a popular song about the disappointment of a girl who fell in love with a gay boy; a short video about gay culture and rights in the world; short texts presenting opposing views on the issue by people looking at homosexuality from scientific, religious and moral perspectives; an illustrated newspaper article on Elton John's wedding ceremony; and a text containing interesting statistics about homosexuality.

The materials chosen for the topic of adultery/pre-marriage sex were very similar. They comprised pictures and a video related to the topic, a song about the regret of a woman after cheating on her husband, texts containing different views and statistics, and a newspaper article about the cheating of a famous person. Adultery and pre-marriage sex was discussed as one topic due to the

absence of clear-cut distinctions between the two issues especially in the Turkish society.

None of the materials used in the study contained nudity or pornographic elements and they were all within legal limits.

### **Procedures for data collection**

The study was conducted as a part of the English course during regular class hours. Although the students were granted the right not to attend the sessions, all of them were present and participated in the activities.

The study, as mentioned above, was conducted with two groups of students. Both groups of participants received the same treatment and did the same activities. The aim was not to compare the groups.

The three-hour lesson on homosexuality started with a pre-questionnaire and proceeded with comments on a picture of two boys holding hands. Most of the students agreed that such a picture undoubtedly implied a romantic relationship between the two figures. Thus, a short discussion started on whether they ever witnessed such an event, and how they would react if they did. After this short discussion, they were given a handout which contained arguments both for and against homosexuality – more specifically whether or not homosexuality is a sin. They read the opposing views carefully and discussed them in pairs. When they were asked about their opinions on the issue, it was surprising to see so many students looking enthusiastic to participate. This discussion was followed by another handout that contained homosexuality statistics accompanied with pictures of gay couples reflected on the classroom wall through a data projector. The next activity was a music-based discussion activity. While listening to a song about a girl hopelessly in love with a homosexual boy, the students first tried to catch the missing words in the lyrics and then discussed what they would do if they were in a similar position. They discussed it first in small groups and then as a whole class. This activity was followed by two more discussion activities, one on same-sex marriage after reading a short illustrated newspaper report on Elton John's wedding ceremony. Another discussion on gay rights after watching a fifteen-minute video on gay rights in different parts of the world followed the first discussion. The post-questionnaire was administered immediately after these discussions.

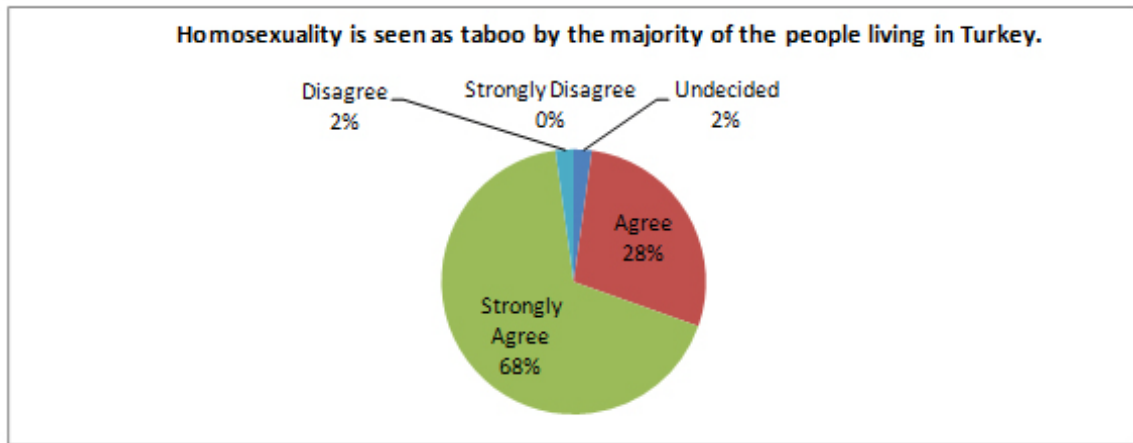
The format of the lesson on adultery/pre-marriage sex was exactly the same. The lesson started with a talk about a picture which implied adultery/pre-marriage sex. There were discussions on moral and religious aspects of adultery/pre-marriage sex, statistics, a short video about how adultery/pre-marriage sex were treated differently in different cultures and a song about the remorse of a cheating wife.

Each session lasted 135 minutes with a fifteen-minute break and ended with the related post-questionnaire. Every effort was made to create an objective and relaxed atmosphere for discussion.

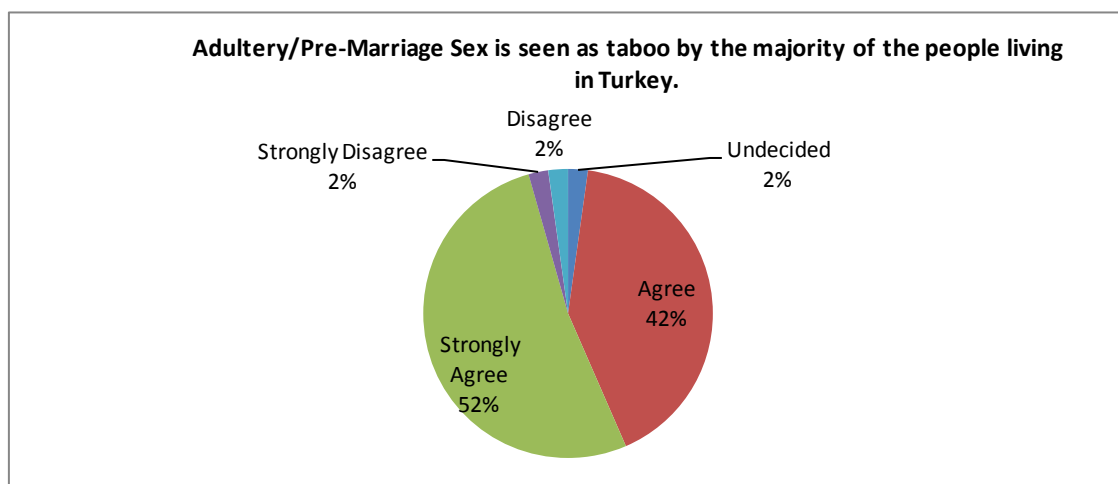
## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Findings related to research question 1:** ‘What do Turkish students think about the taboo nature of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex?’

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, almost all of the participants agree, and in fact the majority of them strongly agree that the topics of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex are seen taboo by the majority of Turkish people.

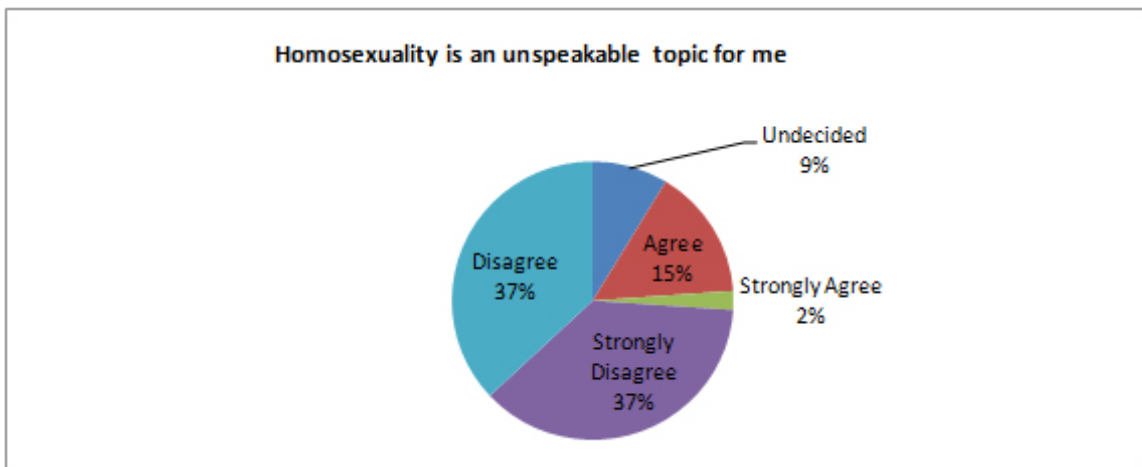


**Figure 1: Participants' Perception about the Taboo Nature of Homosexuality in Turkish Society**

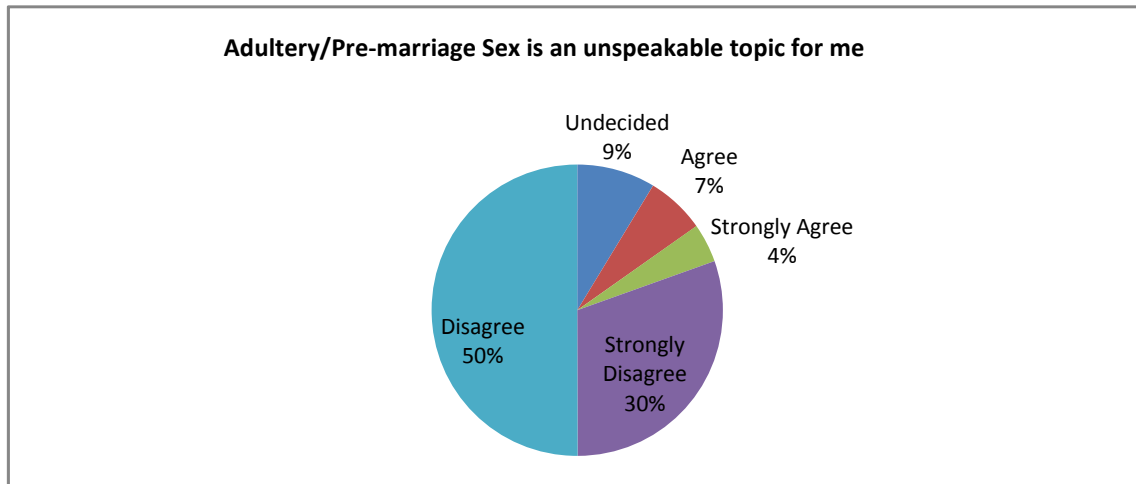


**Figure 2: Participants' Perceptions about the Taboo Nature of Adultery/Pre-Marriage Sex in Turkish Society**

Analysis of another important item in the questionnaire, however, portrays a totally different picture by showing the gap between the participants' personal attitudes towards these topics and their perceptions about how these topics are seen in the Turkish society. A reading of Figure 3 and Figure 4 indicates that the topics of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex are not seen unspeakable or taboo by the participants although they strongly believe that these topics are taboo, and thus unspeakable in the Turkish society.



**Figure 3: Participants' Perceptions about the Taboo Nature of Homosexuality**

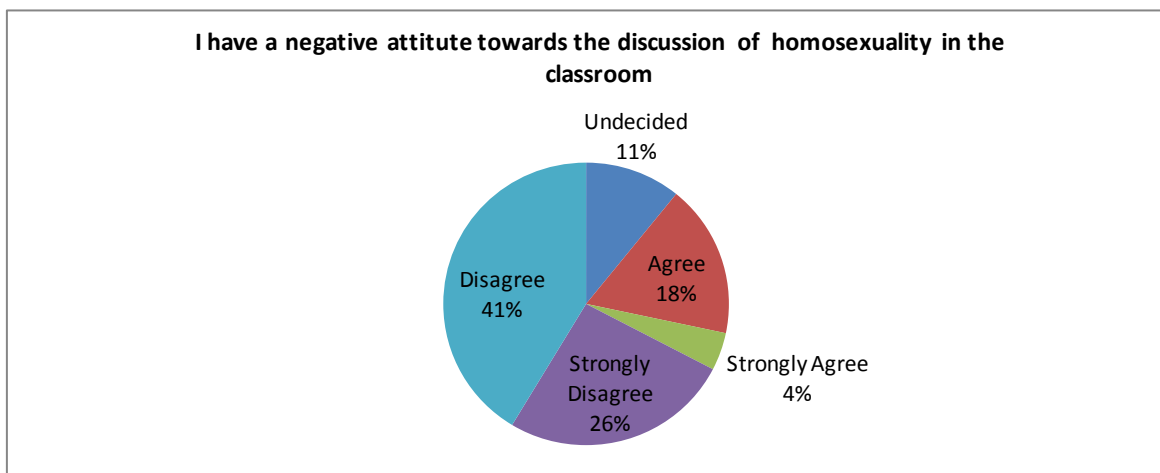


**Figure 4: Participants' Perceptions about the Taboo Nature of Adultery/pre-marriage sex**

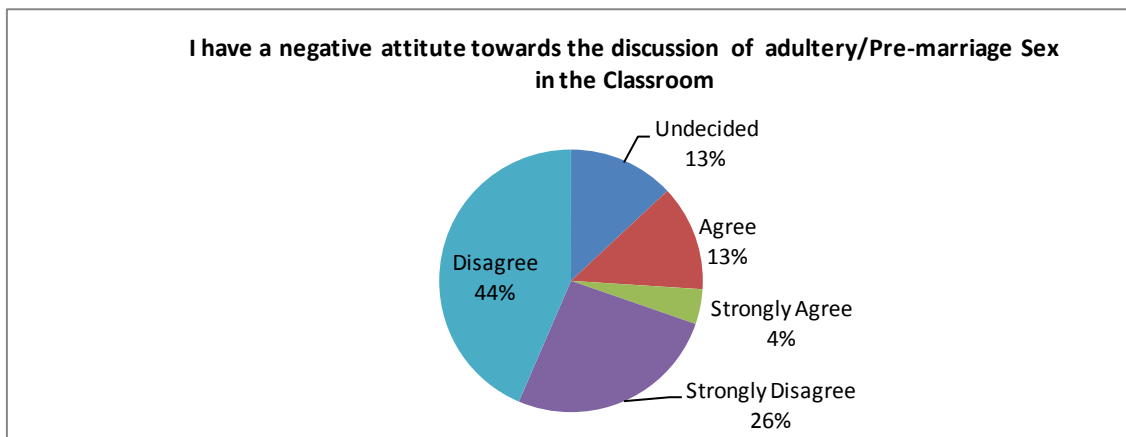


**Findings related to research question 2: ‘What are Turkish students’ attitudes towards the use of homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex as discussion topics in their speaking classes?’**

Analyses of the related survey items, as shown in Figures 5 and 6, indicate that two-thirds of the participants do not have a negative attitude towards the discussion of these two topics in the classroom just as they do not find them unspeakable, as explained in the previous item. Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that they were ready to welcome these topics to their speaking class despite the general perception of the Turkish society.



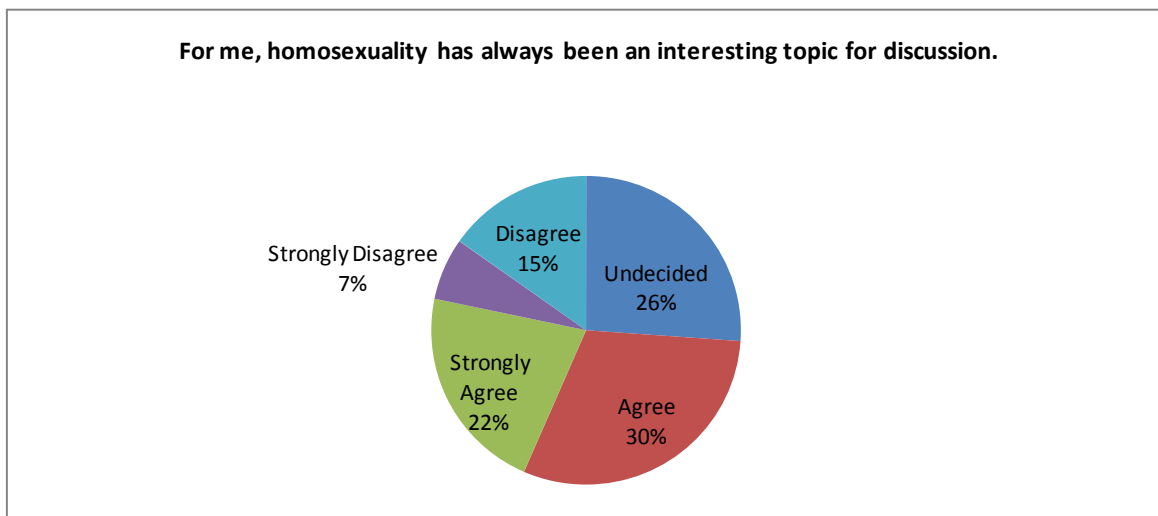
**Figure 5: Participants’ Attitudes towards the Discussion of Homosexuality in their Speaking Class**



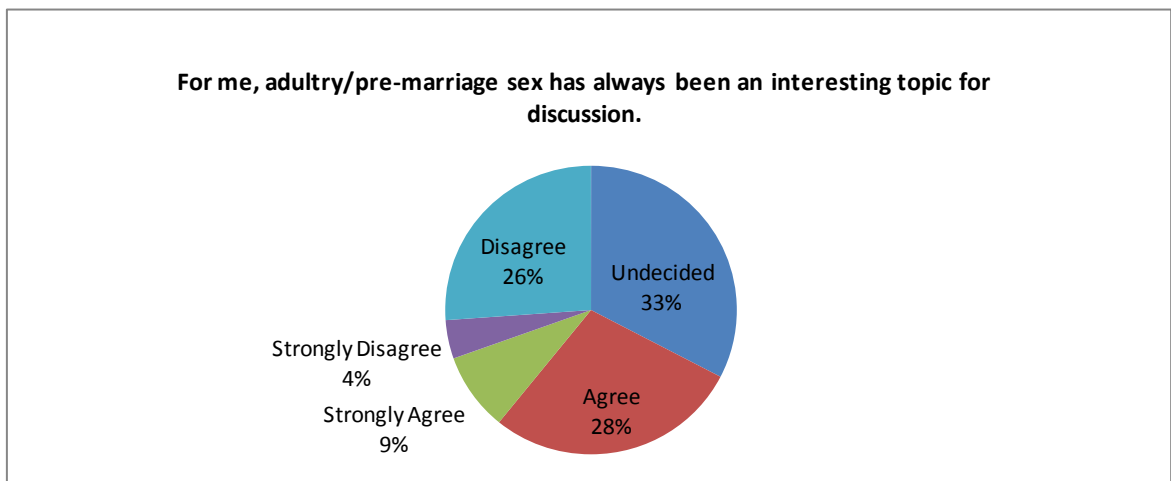
**Figure 6: Participants’ Attitudes towards the Discussion of Adultery/pre-marriage Sex in their Speaking Class**

The participants were also asked about how interesting they found homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex in their personal lives. According

to the results, homosexuality appears to be more interesting than adultery/pre-marriage sex. In fact, more than half of the participants agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (22%) that for them homosexuality has always been always been an interesting topic for discussion (see Figure 7). Although, the percentage is not as high with adultery/pre-marriage sex, it is still noteworthy, as seen in Figure 8, that only one-third of the participants disagree that the topic was interesting for them. If we take the large number of unsure participants into account, we can still conclude that both topics were of interest to the majority of the participants.



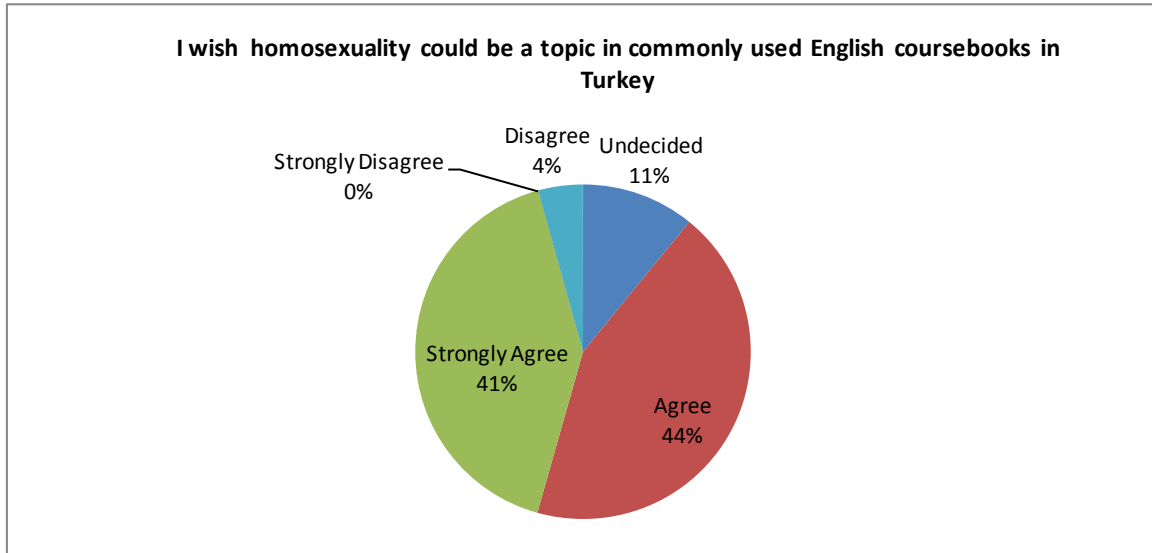
**Figure 7: Participants' Responses concerning their Interest in Homosexuality**



**Figure 8: Participants' Response Concerning their interest in Adultery/pre-marriage Sex**

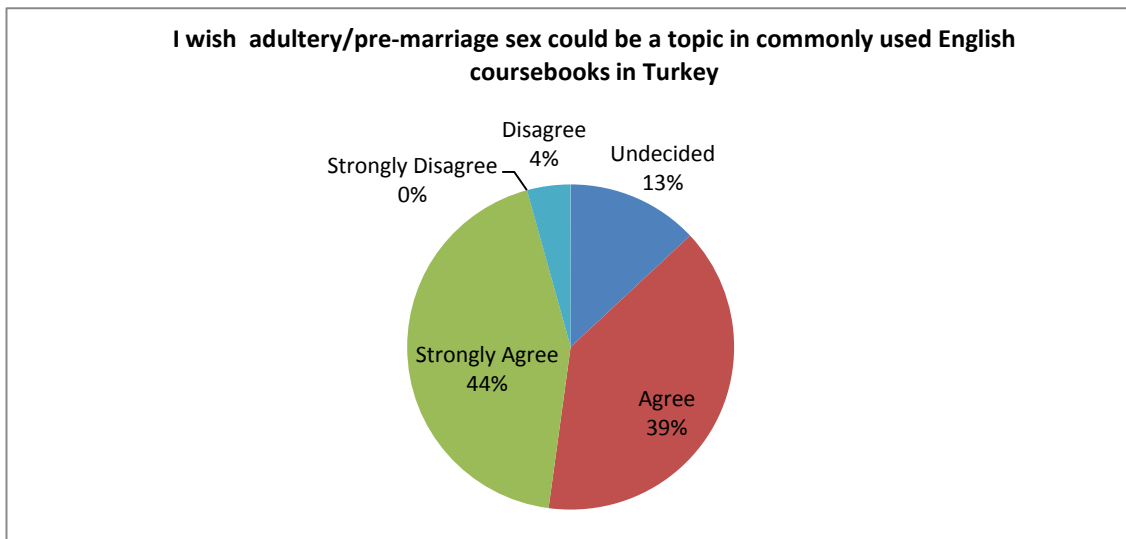
Finally, the data presented in Figures 9 and 10 helps us better understand the participants' attitudes towards the use of homosexuality and adultery/pre-

marriage sex in language classrooms as these figures clearly show the positive attitudes of the participants towards the inclusion of these topics in commonly used English textbooks.



**Figure 9: Participants' Responses Concerning the Inclusion of Homosexuality in Commonly-used English Textbooks**

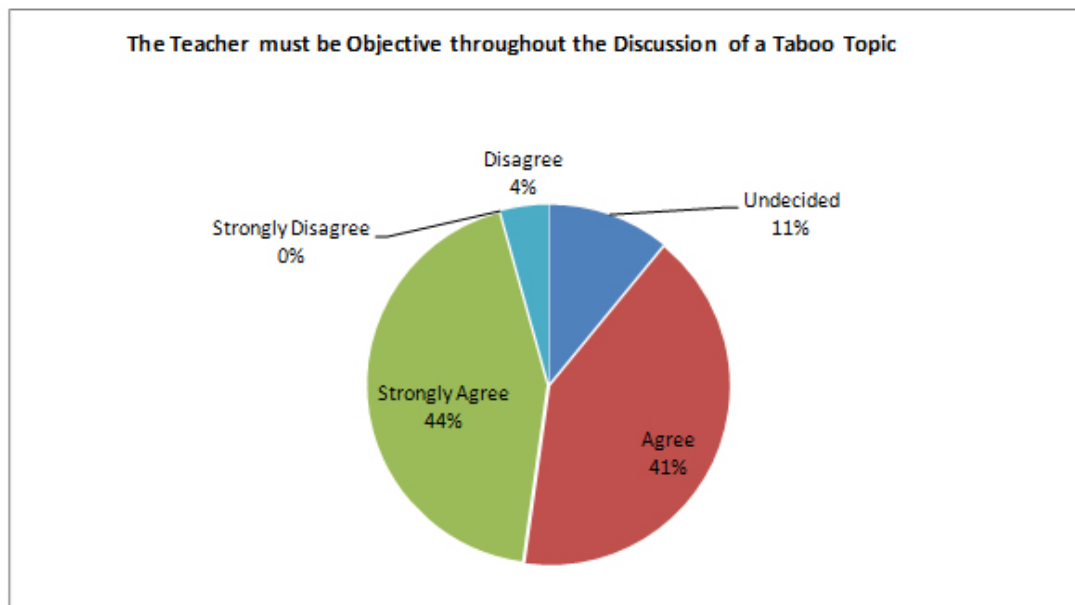
It is clear in Figure 9 that a great majority of the participants want to see homosexuality in their textbooks, which indicates that the participants do not see it as a topic to be excluded from class discussions or else totally avoided in a school setting.



**Figure 10: Participants' Responses Concerning the Inclusion of Adultery/pre-marriage Sex in Commonly-used English Textbooks**

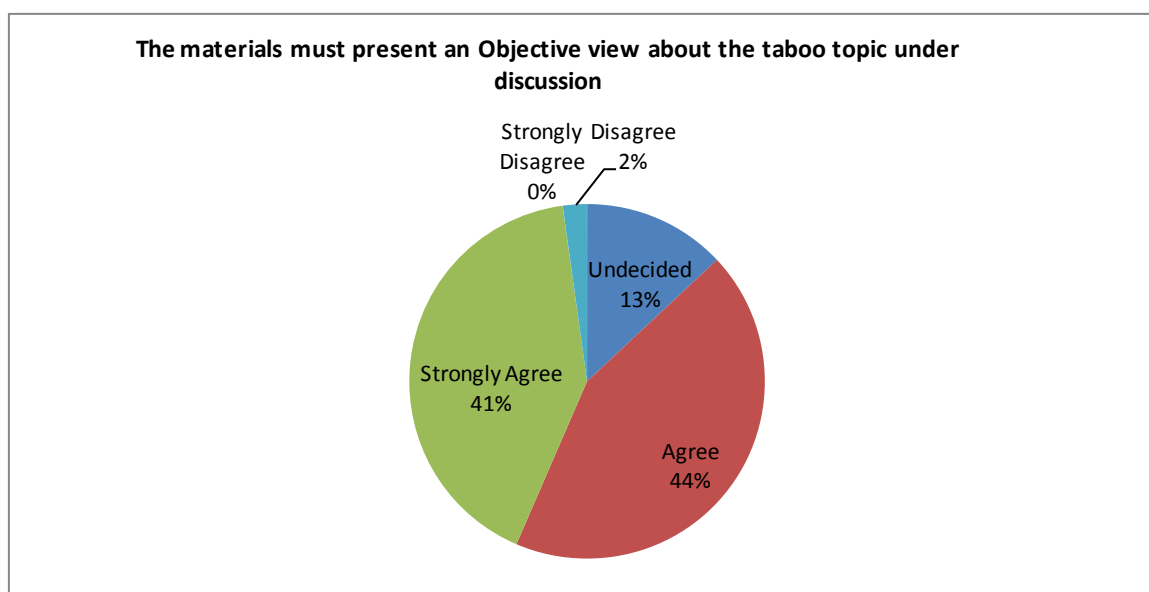
The results presented in Figures 9 and 10 are parallel in the sense that the participants are in favor of giving a chance to topics of taboo nature in English teaching materials. The reason why the number of the participants who want the inclusion of these topics in course materials is higher than the ones who want to discuss them in the classroom can be explained in relation to their reservations and concerns during the actual use of these topics in the classroom.

The questionnaire also contained items on the importance of teacher and materials objectivity. As presented in Figures 11 and 12, the participants attach much importance to teacher objectivity and believe that the materials s/he uses during the discussion of a taboo topic must present an objective view of the topic under discussion.



**Figure 11: Participants' Responses to the Survey Item on the Importance of Teacher Objectivity**

It is clear in Figures 11 and 12 that according to 85% of the participants, objective materials used by an objective teacher are very important during the discussion of a taboo topic.



**Figure 12: Participants' Response to the Survey Item on Objectivity of Materials**

All of the findings discussed so far indicate that the participants of the present study are highly in favor of discussing homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex in their speaking class despite the taboo nature of these topics in the Turkish society.

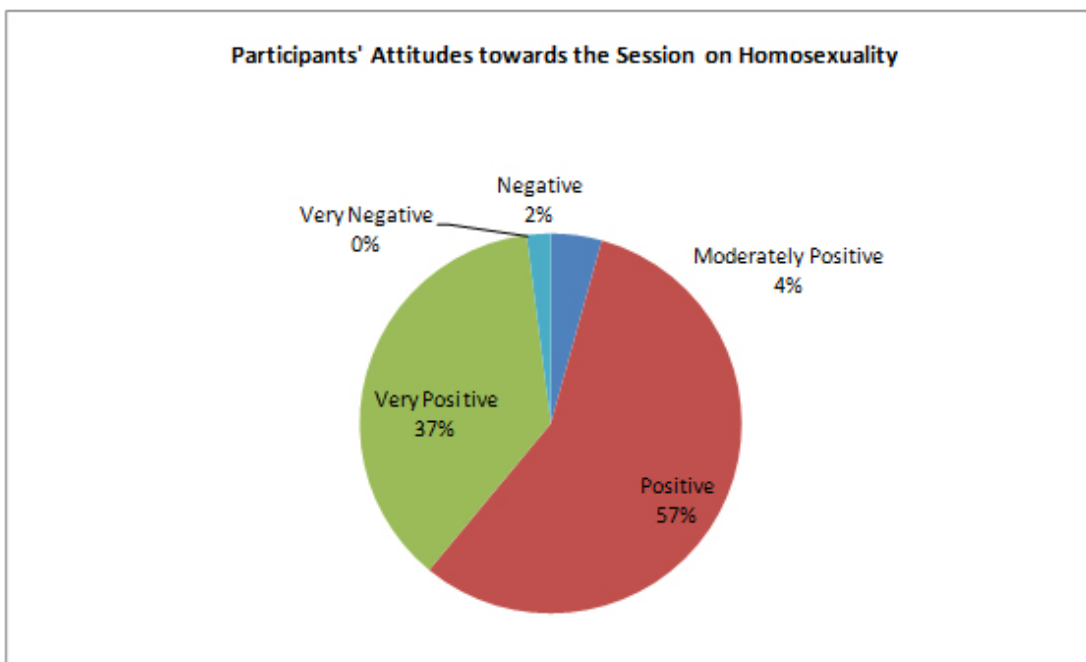
**Findings related to research question 3:** *'How will Turkish students react to the materials and activities used during the discussions on homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex?'*

In order to find an answer to this question, participants' responses to 48 items in the post-questionnaires (24 items related to the lesson on homosexuality and the other 24 related to the lesson on adultery/pre-marriage sex) were analyzed.

The participants received 1-5 points from each survey item according to their responses. To put it more clearly, a "strongly agree" response indicating a totally positive attitude scored 5 points whereas only 1 point was given to a "strongly disagree" response that indicated a totally negative attitude. Thus, each participant got a total score from each one of the questionnaires. Because there were a total of 24 items in each questionnaire, the minimum possible score was 24, which indicated a totally negative attitude towards the lesson and the materials and activities used in it; and the maximum score that could be received was 120, an indication of a totally positive attitude towards the lesson and its content. The interval between the minimum and maximum scores was then equally divided into the following five categories: participants

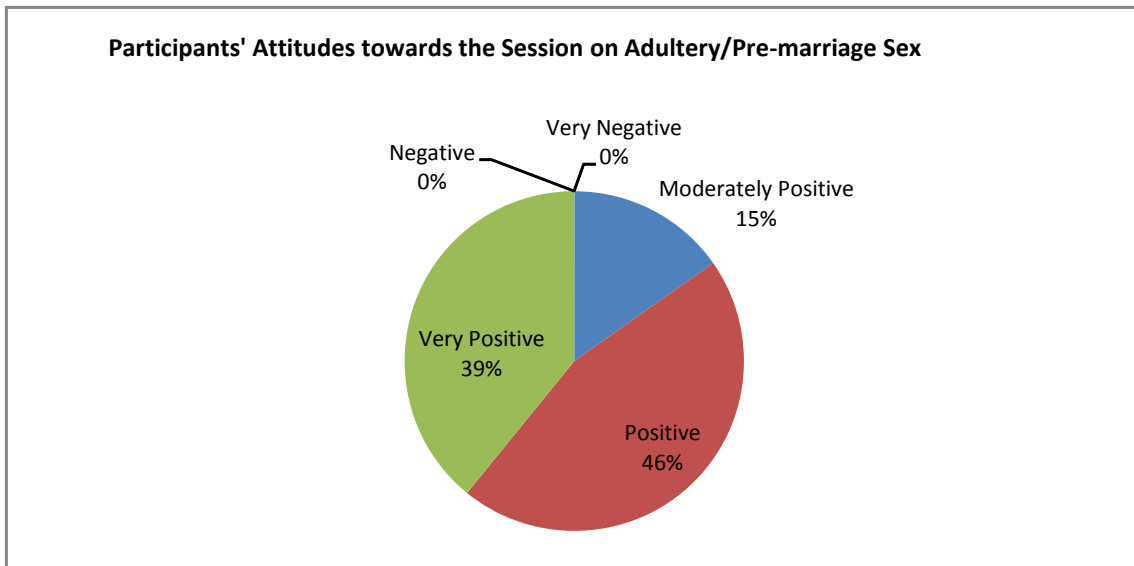
who had very negative attitude towards the lesson and its taboo content (those who scored between 24-42); displayers of negative attitude (those who scored between 43-61); participants who had a neutral attitude (those who scored between 62-80); participants who displayed positive attitude (those who scored between 81-99) and finally those who scored 100 or above were categorized as the ones who had very positive attitude towards the materials and activities used in the lessons on homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex.

Figure 13 below shows the participants' attitudes towards the lesson they had on homosexuality.



**Figure 13: Participants' Attitudes towards the Lesson They had on Homosexuality and Its Content**

Figure 13 summarizes findings of the whole study very well, because it clearly indicates that the great majority of the participants (94%) displayed a positive attitude towards the lesson they just had on homosexuality. In fact, only one student was negative about the whole process.

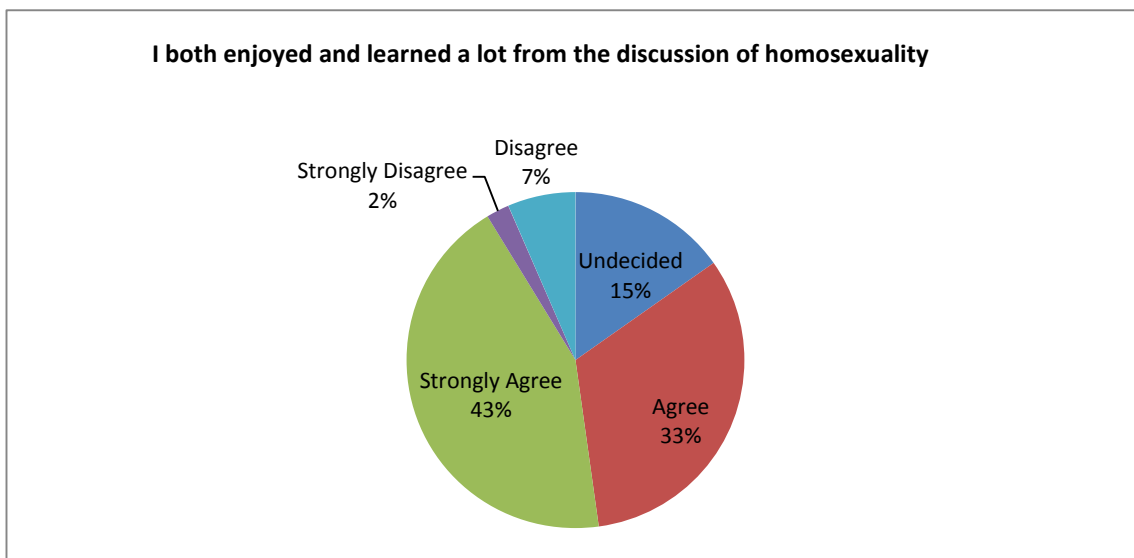


**Figure 14: Participants' Attitudes towards the Lesson They had on Adultery/pre-marriage Sex and Its Content**

It was more or less the same with the discussion on adultery/pre-marriage sex as displayed in Figure 14 which shows that 85% of the participants left the classroom with positive attitude. None of them displayed a negative attitude towards this lesson and the activities and materials used in it.

These results also indicate that the participants found none of the materials used during the lesson disturbing or inappropriate.

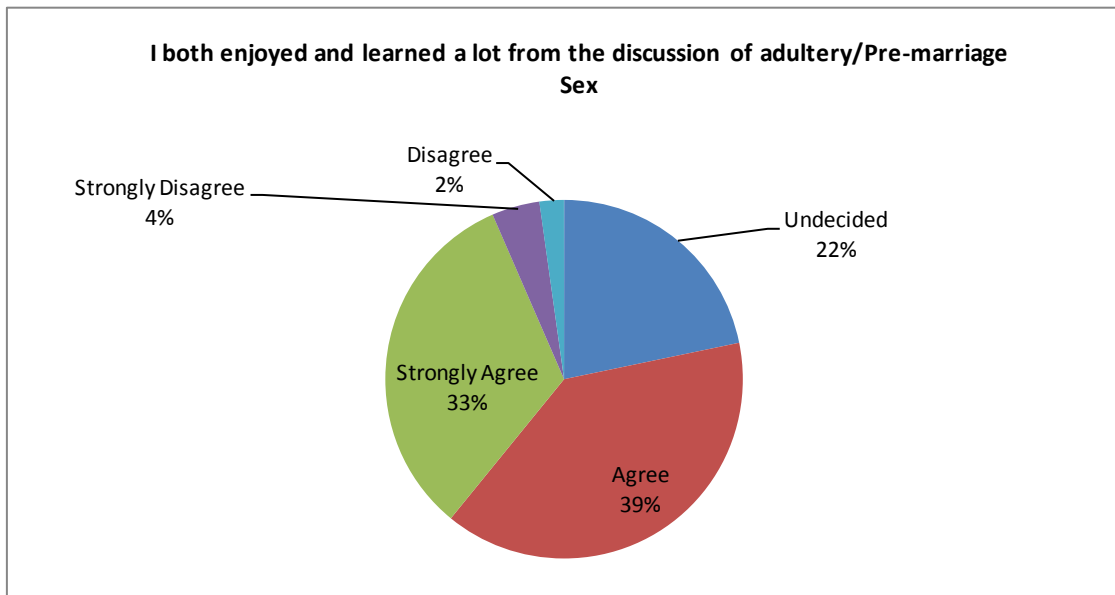
This finding is further supported by the data given in Figure 15 below.



**Figure 15: Participants' Responses Concerning the Motivating Aspect of Homosexuality**



Looking at the results presented in Figure 15, it would not be wrong to claim that the participants of the present study had an enjoyable and beneficial speaking lesson while discussing and learning about homosexuality. Although the percentages are not as high as they are with the topic of homosexuality, the lesson on adultery/pre-marriage sex was also found very enjoyable and useful by 72% of the participants (see Figure 16 below).



**Figure 16: Participants' Responses Concerning the Motivating Aspect of Adultery/pre-marriage Sex**

The study also investigated the relationship between the participants' attitudes and their gender and hometowns, however the findings were not statistically significant. The data was analyzed through T-tests and ANOVA using SPSS for Windows version 15.0. The data was also analyzed to see the relationship between the participants' attitudes and their hometowns, because, there are striking cultural differences in different parts of Turkey. More specifically, Western Turkey is generally assumed to be more modern and European than the Eastern Part. However, the study did not reveal any significant relationship between these two variables either.

## CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Before drawing any conclusions, some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this study was limited in scope and conducted with a limited number of learners. Therefore, the findings of this study need to be verified with a study done on a larger number of students from different

cultures and social backgrounds. Secondly, the study investigated only the attitudes of students studying at the preparatory class of an ELT Department in Turkey. To get a more balanced picture, it is necessary to carry out the same study or a similar one with male and female students at different ages, studying at different schools and departments in different parts of the world.

Bearing these limitations in mind, this study yielded relevant results in opening new horizons for worldwide ELT practice. It can be tentatively concluded from this study that taboo topics attract attention and can be discussed in EFL speaking classes for the purpose of creating lively discussions as Dalby (2007) and Nelson (1999) put it. Furthermore, the study has shown that if handled well, discussion of a taboo topic does not harm classroom dynamics, but in fact it contributes to them positively, because while students share their views, they also try to understand each others' views.

As for the implications of the present study, they are two-fold. The first involves materials development and course book writers while the second involves classroom procedures. Principles set for producing course books need to be based upon research findings (Richards, 2006). The findings of this particular study do not support limiting the number of speaking topics to only safe ones like global warming or environmental pollution due to different concerns. Although further research to validate these results is still necessary, it can be suggested that teachers should not sacrifice the motivational aspect of taboo topics (Banville, 2005; Bronner, 2002; Dalby, 2007; Hartmann & Faulkner, 2002; Kaye, 2006; MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001) for the sake of safer classroom practice or better career. In fact, these are the very topics our students keep encountering on the media. The present study has shown that in fact these topics are the very topics that our students want to talk about, so why not do it in the language classroom? Following the results of this study, a change in the common practice of EFL speaking classes is also needed. Teachers may consider bringing taboo topics to their speaking classes. However, considering that the majority of teachers follow the course book closely in English lessons (Ur, 1996), such a change may heavily depend on a change in course book design.

The findings of this study also indicate that what might be considered taboo by the majority of the society can be an enjoyable topic waiting to be discussed in the classroom. This study has shown that a society's negative attitude towards a topic does not necessarily make it taboo, thus unspeakable in the classroom. Our students might be thinking quite differently from the rest of the society.

In conclusion, this study endeavored to offer a new perspective regarding the practice in EFL speaking classes. It illustrated students' interest towards and their willingness in discussing two taboo topics in their speaking class and the positive attitude they displayed afterwards.

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## APPENDIX 1

### THE QUESTIONNAIRE GIVEN BEFORE THE DISCUSSIONS

**Dear Learner,**

This questionnaire aims to collect data about your reactions to the use of taboo/sensitive topics in your speaking/oral communications classes. I rely on your honest answers, opinions and ideas to better understand how to improve the learning and teaching environment in your speaking/communication classes. Thanks for your help.

**PART I:** Please answer the following questions about yourself.

**Nickname:** .....

**Gender:**  Male  Female

**Your hometown is in:**  Western Anatolia  Central  
Anatolia  Eastern Anatolia  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please state)



**PART II:** Please check (√) the box that applies to you most.

**[1/SD] Strongly Disagree**

**[2 /D] Disagree**

**[3/U] Undecided**

**[4/A] Agree**

**[5/SA] Strongly Agree**

		<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
<b>1</b>	Homosexuality is seen as taboo by the majority of the people living in Turkey.					
<b>2</b>	Adultery/pre-marriage sex is seen as taboo by the majority of the people living in Turkey.					
<b>3</b>	Homosexuality is an unspeakable topic for me.					
<b>4</b>	Adultery/pre-marriage sex is an unspeakable topic for me.					
<b>5</b>	I have negative attitude towards the discussion of homosexuality in the classroom.					
<b>6</b>	I have negative attitude towards the discussion of adultery/pre-marriage sex in the classroom.					
<b>7</b>	For me, homosexuality has always been an interesting topic for discussion.					
<b>8</b>	For me, adultery/pre-marriage sex has always been an interesting topic for discussion.					
<b>9</b>	I wish homosexuality could be a topic in commonly used English course books in Turkey.					
<b>10</b>	I wish adultery/pre-marriage sex could be a topic in commonly used English course books in Turkey.					
<b>11</b>	Teacher must be objective throughout the discussion of a taboo topic.					
<b>12</b>	Materials to be used during the discussion of a taboo topic must present an objective view about it.					

## APPENDIX 2

### THE QUESTIONNAIRE GIVEN AFTER THE LESSON ON HOMOSEXUALITY

**Dear Learner,**

This questionnaire aims to collect data about your reactions to the use of taboo/sensitive topics in your speaking/oral communications classes. I rely on your honest answers, opinions and ideas to better understand how to improve the learning and teaching environment in your speaking/communication classes. Thanks for your help.

**Nickname:** .....

**PART II:** Please check (√) the box that applies to you most.

**[1/SD] Strongly Disagree**

**[2 /D] Disagree**

**[3/U] Undecided**

**[4/A] Agree**

**[5/SA] Strongly Agree**

		SD	D	U	A	SA
<b>1</b>	I both enjoyed and learned a lot in this lesson on homosexuality.					
<b>2</b>	I would not attend the lesson if I had known beforehand that the topic to be discussed was homosexuality.					
<b>3</b>	I participated in the activities.					
<b>4</b>	I learned many interesting things about homosexuality in this lesson.					
<b>5</b>	Seeing pictures of gay people was disturbing for me.					
<b>6</b>	The news I read about the marriage of two famous gays was disturbing for me.					
<b>7</b>	Watching the video with the theme of gay rights all over the world disturbed me.					
<b>8</b>	The opposing views I read about homosexuality disturbed me.					
<b>9</b>	Learning a song with the theme of homosexuality disturbed me.					

10	I felt embarrassed while discussing homosexuality with the other members of my group.					
11	I felt embarrassed while discussing homosexuality during the whole class discussion.					
12	I did not participate in the group discussion activity because I felt uneasy with this topic.					
13	I did not participate in the whole class discussion because I felt uneasy with this topic.					
14	I felt embarrassed when the words gay/lesbian/homosexual/transsexual/transvestite were used during the discussion.					
15	Being asked ‘How would you feel if your best friend/child told you that she/he is a homosexual?’ disturbed me.					
16	Being asked ‘do you personally know anyone who is gay?’ disturbed me.					
17	The discussion gave me pain because of my past experiences.					
18	The discussion on homosexuality damaged the relationships between students holding different views.					
19	The teacher should go on using similar topics in his lessons.					
20	The teacher shouldn’t have brought this topic to the classroom for discussion.					
21	According to me, the lesson was propaganda of homosexuality.					
22	The discussion of homosexuality contributed to the improvement of my speaking skills.					
23	This discussion helped me change my attitude towards homosexuality in a positive way.					
24	The topic of homosexuality was motivating for me.					