



**MacANDREW, R. and MARTÍNEZ, R.**

**Taboos and Issues**

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The communicative approach, which is widely used in language teaching, broadens the scope of possible topics utilized in classroom activities (Deckert, 1996). However, we still shy away addressing real global necessities (Thanasoulas, 2001) although we know that it is necessary for students to question society and life (Benesch, 1999). Thornbury (2002) suggests that controversial and sensitive topics have a high potential of triggering lively and language-productive discussions, which will certainly help students use skills in negotiation, agreeing, disagreeing, explaining opinions, justifying etc. Besides, our learners want to express themselves on a variety of real topics which offer a wonderful opportunity to go beyond simply teaching the language (Dellar, 2006). However, issues such as abortion, aids, homosexuality, prostitution and religious beliefs get little attention in schools because of their taboo nature (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000), but they can be really productive in terms of creating an atmosphere of communication (Banville, 2005), because they are the very topics that learners discuss avidly in private conversations. Furthermore, it would not be wrong to claim that taboo topics will be increasingly popular and become a more regular feature in language classrooms in the near future. Therefore, it is time to ask ‘why do we keep ignoring controversial issues?’ and at what expense?



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Thornbury (1999) bemoans the lack of mention of such topics as death, poverty, war, homosexuality in EFL coursebooks, although it is a demand uttered by researchers and textbook writers. However, publishers keep closing their ears to these demands mainly because of their concerns about appealing to a heterogeneous global market (Grady, 2002), satisfying learners who belong to a variety of cultures (Thornbury, 2002) and avoiding any possibility of offence (Dellar, 2006). In fact, the main aim of contemporary textbooks is to entertain students (Small, 2003). Furthermore, major ELT publishers are criticised for intentionally excluding controversial topics from textbooks (Bronner, 2002) and also for discouraging authors from including taboo topics in the course materials they prepare.

In this respect, *'Taboos and Issues'* should be seen as a bold step towards questioning and exploring this relatively uncommon practice in the discipline. The book will hopefully 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 (Nelson, 1999). Rather than following a conservative 'avoid taboos' cliché, -*'Taboos and Issues'*- addresses the very question of using taboo topics in the language classroom in order to explore new and more effective areas of classroom practice.

According to the authors of the book, *Taboos and Issues* is not a coursebook, however it can be used as supplementary course material in speaking / oral communication classes of upper-intermediate/advanced level EFL/ESL learners at the age of 18 or above (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001)

There are 40 units in the book and each unit addresses real global, controversial and sometimes taboo issues in a straightforward style. The material is photocopyable, which makes it easier for teachers to use. A sample of the topics covered in the book includes nudity, prostitution, death, sexual harassment, gay families, AIDS, changing sex, swearing, guns, animal rights, divorce, abortion, drugs, prevalent psychological disorders in society etc. As can be seen, some of the topics are of a more taboo nature than others, but no doubt the topics are the most extraordinary and interesting aspect of the book.

Some units are illustrated with funny but at the same time thought-provoking cartoons such as the one in the unit about death. However, a quick look at the entire book reveals a lack of illustrations, which is probably the biggest shortcoming of the book. Therefore, I wonder why the authors did not illustrate the book with real-life images and pictures taken from media, which would certainly make the book more interesting and enjoyable.

Each unit is two pages long, including discussion questions and short quasi-authentic reading passages that present different aspects of the topic under discussion. These texts create a lot of opportunities for students to compare their opinions and feelings with each other. However, probably the biggest drawback about these texts is that they are culture-specific, which makes them rather distant and even boring at times. For example, the unit about guns is highly American and the statistics about gun use makes it rather boring. It is also worth drawing attention to the comprehension questions that follow each reading passage. They either ask for the general gist of the text or some specific key information. These questions will certainly help students focus on the text as long as the teacher does not turn the lesson into a reading lesson by attaching more importance on texts than on discussion.

The discussion parts first assign tasks for pair work which then lead to larger group and whole class discussions. These steps are very close to the natural interaction that occurs among groups of people in real life situations (MacAndrew & Martinez, 2001). The teachers' notes at the beginning of the book suggest that the students should be given time to think about the topic silently before going into pairs or small groups, which is also quite reasonable.

In addition to the activities that stimulate oral discussion, each unit also includes some language work followed by further discussion activities which require a high level of personalization of the topic due to questions like 'have you ever tried drugs' (p.37). However, Hartmann and Faulkner (2002) draw attention to the dangers of personalization of taboo subjects. Dellar (2006) points out that open questions like 'Do you know anyone who...?' would be a better choice in order to prevent a high level of personalization. I have the same opinion that high level of personalization might offend some students, therefore should be avoided where possible. On the contrary, Leather (2003) suggests that personal questions like 'what would you do in this situation' should be preferred to maximize student participation.

Language sections involve vocabulary, collocations, idioms, and useful expressions that the students will need in order to express their ideas throughout the discussion without difficulty. The language exercises generally focus on vocabulary rather than form.

I have always been interested in topics of controversial nature and from the moment I came across this book, I started to seek ways of using it with my speaking classes in order to experience the motivational aspect of these topics. When the right time came, I used the book at university with upper-intermediate level learners at the age of 18 or above. What I observed was a striking difference in the motivation of my students. The topics certainly prompted a lot of

discussion, which resulted in a higher level of participation. Due to the neutral stance of the book, my students could read about both the positive and negative aspects of the topic under discussion. Then, they could express themselves freely by referring to the discussions both in favor and against as given in the book.

Another characteristic of the book I loved was its flexibility. I often skipped certain language exercises and used the authentic materials I brought to the classroom such as pictures, news, discussions from the media, short videos and even songs which dealt with the topic under discussion. After each session I received quite positive written feedback from my students. Thus, my observation about the motivational aspect of the topics was supported by the students' comments about how much they enjoyed the lesson and learned a lot too.

I will certainly use this book again with my future groups of students. However, the fact that it worked well with my present groups does not guarantee success with every class I will teach in the future. It would be wrong to start with such controversial topics at the very beginning of the semester with newcomers. It will certainly take some time before I know my new students and gain their trust, which is for me a prerequisite for using '*Taboos and Issues*'.

Although I was quite pleased with the results of my experience, one important point should be noted here. As the authors of the book rightfully warn, this book is meant to be used by experienced teachers who know their students very well and predict the reactions they will display when a taboo topic is opened for discussion in the classroom. Therefore, the few teachers' notes in the book are only limited to the answers and accompanied with a short warning on the dangers of each topic. There are also a few alternative teaching suggestions scattered through the book. I totally agree with the authors in that this book, if used by inexperienced teachers may cause irrecoverable damage in relationships among the students and between the students and the teacher, which will certainly not be a desirable outcome. Therefore, the teacher who has the intention to use '*Taboos and Issues*' in the classroom should follow the discussion closely in order to prevent possible overreactions; and should be ready to change the subject if the necessity arises.

'*Taboos and Issues*' is an important step forward but not enough. Further attempts to write such books are necessary. I would suggest that future authors put more up-to-date topics in their books and decorate them not only with cartoons but also photographs from newspapers and magazines. It will certainly make the book more lively, colorful and interesting no matter how disturbing these visuals may look for some people; because we keep encountering such pictures and even more disturbing ones on the media everyday. Following the development of Internet resources, future books should also include website

addresses where students can reach further information about the topics after discussing them in the classroom. The teacher can use 'Taboos and Issues' effectively by giving the topic in the previous lesson and encouraging students to do some research on it so that they will come to the classroom quite prepared and ready for discussion, because some of the topics in 'Taboos and Issues' require a considerable amount of knowledge before discussion.

In conclusion, after thoroughly evaluating the book, I highly recommend it for language teachers teaching upper-intermediate and advanced level students at the age of 18 or above, because 'Taboos and Issues' is a brave and useful book. The motivational value of the topics certainly outweighs the reservations that might arise due to the taboo nature of the topics. These are in fact the high-interest topics we always encounter in the media and have the potential of leading to lively discussions in the classroom. This is exactly what teachers need for their speaking classes.

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