
Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education: Critical Language Pedagogy in Theory, Research, and Practice

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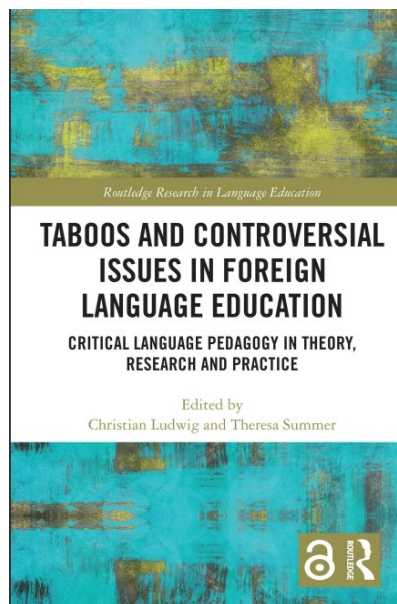
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Book Review

Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education: Critical Language Pedagogy in Theory, Research, and Practice

Teaching critical literacy to students can come in many ways, but who would have thought it could be taught using taboo and controversial issues? The book *Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education: Critical Language Pedagogy in Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Christian Ludwig and Theresa Summer, and published in 2023 by Routledge, explores this unorthodox method. The book examines the discussion and integration of sensitive, controversial, or taboo topics in the language classroom, presenting unconventional approaches to teaching critical literacy. The book targets teachers who are ready to try something new and out of the box compared to their usual ‘peaceful’ approach. The editors share theories, practices, and technical implementations for using these taboos and controversial topics in foreign language education while offering advice and caution for those interested in applying this approach. This book stands out in the literature for its bold exploration of a pedagogical territory that is often avoided in L2 education—namely, the use of controversial and taboo topics as a means of fostering critical language awareness. It contributes a fresh, practice-oriented perspective to Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), challenging the conventional boundaries of foreign language instruction and offering educators tangible ways to engage learners in socially relevant discourse.

The book comprises four major sections, namely, the introduction, theoretical considerations and insights, empirical inquiries, and specific taboos with practical examples. The book has a total of 22 chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, with six chapters authored by the editors. The introduction provides important information about the concept and history of taboos, critical foreign language pedagogy, controversial topics, taboo literacy, and the pedagogic framework for addressing taboos. Theoretical insights emphasize the benefits of including controversial topics in language education, while practical examples illustrate how teachers can implement these discussions effectively. The theoretical considerations and insights section (chapters 2 until chapter 6) explores the taboo topic by seeing it from different perspectives, from cultural, economic, social, and political, common inquiries, as well as the requirements needed to work with it. They explore the intersection of cultural, social, and political dynamics that influence how taboo topics are recognized, discussed, or avoided in educational settings. From theoretical considerations of taboos’ role in shaping the political economy of language education to practical strategies for integrating critical approaches and promoting resilience in classrooms, these topics emphasize the importance of fostering open dialogue, cultural understanding, and critical thinking. Together, they advocate for a nuanced approach that balances sensitivity with the need for meaningful engagement with difficult subjects.

In the next section, the empirical inquiries (chapters 7 to 9) focus on understanding and addressing the perceptions, attitudes, and pedagogical strategies surrounding taboo topics in English Language Teaching (ELT). One chapter, authored by Theresa Summer and Jeanine Steinbock, presents findings from a wide-scale survey conducted among German adolescents. The results reveal that learners are generally open to exploring taboo themes in English lessons, particularly when the material is grounded in pop culture, such as music or short films (p.78). This is an interesting one to delve further, due to the fact that the abundance availability of music and short films that discuss certain themes related to controversial issues or taboos in this current era, such as mental health, bullying, and swear words in rap songs—which is provided in the last section of the book. Following this, in the next chapter, Summer and Ludwig report on a separate study involving pre-service language teachers. Their research shows that these future educators are largely in favor of integrating controversial topics into EFL instruction. The final chapter in this section, written by Christine Gardemann, emphasizes the value of forming a “pedagogical alliance” within critically engaged language classrooms. She defines this as a mutual trust between teacher and students (p.93), which becomes essential when navigating sensitive or taboo subject matter. They emphasize the role of learners and teachers in navigating sensitive subjects, examining how these issues are perceived by students, pre-service teachers, and educators. The inclusion of specific examples, such as teaching “XX Reasons Why”—in this case, there are 13 reasons—highlights the importance of creating a pedagogical alliance, i.e., a collaborative and empathetic relationship between teachers and students to approach the challenging topics effectively. Collectively, these topics underscore the need for awareness, preparation, and mutual respect in tackling taboo issues within ELT, ensuring that such discussions contribute to meaningful learning experiences.

Finally, in the last section, which covers the most chapters (chapters 10 until 21), the specific taboos with practical examples show the variety of practical examples of certain taboos that can be implemented in teaching certain topics in a language class. This chapter is the main core of the book regarding the actual usage of CLP using controversial and taboo topics, which provides a lot of beneficial examples in a real-life teaching context that L2 language teachers can try to experiment with. This volume's chapters can be categorised into three main thematic clusters, each of which addresses a distinct aspect of sensitive or taboo subjects. First, linguistic taboos—like the usage of profanity in rap lyrics—challenge conventional language usage conventions and investigate how language instruction could critically analyse them. Second, social taboos address topics like human trafficking, mental health, and sexting that have a direct impact on students' daily lives. These subjects encourage more in-depth discussions regarding social responsibility and individual well-being. Third, taboos based on culture and identity, such as racism, disability, and animal rights, encourage students to think critically about ethics, inclusivity, and social norms. The utilisation of diverse and captivating media, from comics and poetry slams to movies, television shows,

and multimodal texts, illustrates creative pedagogical approaches for making these difficult subjects understandable and relevant in language classes. Additionally, the chapters emphasize the importance of fostering critical awareness, empathy, and cultural understanding in classrooms, whether through global perspectives, regional contexts like Sri Lanka or South Africa, or professional training for translators and interpreters. This comprehensive approach underscores the pedagogical potential of taboo topics to invite critical thinking, social awareness, and transformative learning experiences. This section of the book is very interesting, especially in the chapters where the taboo or controversial issues are the ones related to our daily life problems that we encounter, such as mental health and racism, which can be portrayed in the aforementioned media. Though one thing to take notes on is that most (but not all) of the chapters in this section took place in German settings, so the context will be different should it be brought into other countries' settings.

The purpose of the book is to guide teachers in fostering critical literacy, critical language pedagogy (CLP) to be exact, among students by engaging with controversial and taboo topics that are typically avoided in traditional classrooms. This transformative approach helps students engage in real-world conversations in their target language, building critical thinking and intercultural awareness beyond just learning grammar and vocabulary.

The authors introduce key concepts such as PARSNIP (Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, -Isms (e.g., communism, sexism), and Pork/Periods/Porn) and TABOOS (Texts and artifacts, Advice and help, Be fair, Open: knowledge, Open: views, Student-centeredness). The book supports embracing controversial issues in language education as a way to challenge conventional methods and improve communicative skills. Furthermore, the book highlights that many foreign language classrooms avoid PARSNIP topics to stay neutral. However, confronting these taboos can enhance language learning by encouraging students to handle sensitive topics with thoughtfulness. Topics such as racism, mental health, and gender are addressed, demonstrating how language education can support students' social and personal growth.

This book presents an unorthodox yet intriguing approach to teaching critical language pedagogy. It encourages teachers to incorporate controversial and taboo topics to stimulate discussion and develop students' critical thinking skills. It is particularly suitable for teachers seeking innovative methods to enhance student engagement and pedagogy. Notable things to consider for book readers who might be interested in experimenting with this approach: pay attention to your workplace, this approach might not run very well in orthodox religious-based schools where taboo or sensitive issue is prohibited from being discussed as it may sparks conflict, either with the students, parents, other teachers, or the school committee. Second, those who are not L2 language teachers might not benefit much from this book because it focuses on them and only them. Third, both you and your students need to strongly trust each other to implement the approach, because if not, it may lead to pointless debate

and may end up in conflict. Hence, as the authors caution, this approach is not without risks. Addressing taboo topics can offend students by violating their religious or political beliefs, moral codes, or personal values. It may also provoke emotional responses in individuals with traumatic experiences. Such discussions are especially challenging in diverse or religious-based schools with strict cultural norms. Therefore, teachers must tread carefully, understanding their context, situation, and audience before applying this method.

Previous review by Jackson (2023) notes a few concerns about the book: the introduction lacks a comprehensive overview of CLP—he suggested supplementary readings like Crookes (2013) and Crookes & Abednia (2022) for those seeking a clearer introduction to the theory. Also, some chapters could have been more rigorously edited, and the book's high price may limit accessibility for educators in under-resourced contexts—ironically, those who might benefit most from critical pedagogy. The points raised by Jackson (2023) are especially relevant as they validly highlight the concerns regarding the book's content and price.

The book editors recommend thorough preparation, including reading all chapters of the book, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the framework and strategies for effective implementation. Furthermore, it is also suggested that teachers practice this approach beforehand several times with their colleagues to determine whether it is applicable or not in their institution's workplace. However, this book can be considered as pricey (£31.99 for the E-book version), which makes it unaffordable for many teachers in different areas of the world who have an interest in the particular topic.

In conclusion, *Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education* is recommended for language teachers seeking a challenging, unorthodox approach to teaching critical literacy. If applied thoughtfully and strategically, this method can be highly effective, though with some considerations to note. Teachers are advised to practice beforehand and consider their teaching context to navigate potential risks successfully. Despite its challenges, this book offers valuable insights into innovative foreign language education practices. Further exploration in different countries is needed, especially for countries with diverse people, like Indonesia, to see whether the approach or method is truly effective, because the setting for most of the countries in the book is from Germany, where they're known for their open-mindedness and willingness to accept differences.

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