

## Dealing Taboo Topics Inside English Literary Classrooms: Pakistani Teachers' Perspective

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Received on: 18-07-2023

Accepted on: 21-08-2023

### Abstract

The current research aims to explore the teachers' stance for dealing taboo topics (sexuality and gender) inside English literary mixed-classrooms of postgraduate and undergraduate level of Southern Punjab universities of Pakistan. Pattee (2006: 34) mentioned, "the ability of Young Adult literature is representing the valuable information about intimacy and sexuality". A survey was conducted among one hundred and twenty university teachers and the data (focus group discussion and responses through close-ended questionnaire) was analyzed by statistical procedures to interpret the result qualitatively under Bakhtin (1981) and positioning (1992) theoretical framework. The findings disclosed that Pakistani teachers get embarrassed and reserved in mixed classroom for discussing taboos. Moreover, they do not use the alternative terms for taboo(s) but by positioning themselves in institutional context, they ventriloquate the speech in "allowable discourse".

**Keyword:** Taboo, Mixed-classroom, Young Adult literature, Bakhtin and positioning theory

### Introduction

In every language, there are some words that can not be generally used; it may cause disgust and displeasure for listeners and community. Linguistically, such words are known as "taboo". Taboo is an integral part of the language, it plays an important role in the language (Gao, 2013). The word "taboo" was from the expeditions of the eighteenth century and was used into the English and German languages by people like Captain Cook and Adalbert von Chamisso. Taboos can be rituals, acts, words, and customs which are not acceptable in a

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society. These can be social and religious and these are different in every culture. Language as “subject-in-process” convey meanings to the individuals and worlds. Mills (2004) identified the social construction of “open system” of language. Humans are free to interpret, convey, perceive and reinterpret the words and discourse(s). Davies & Harré (1990) valued discourse as an institutionalized use of any language. Classroom is the social world where teachers and students participate actively and construct educational discourse. In educational setup, teachers and pupils try to keep in-process subject-positions. (Davies, 2006). Teachers do use the words from discourses provided by the school, community, curricula and sometimes, construct by themselves through available discourse.

English literature inside classrooms develops a unique discourse. Many taboo topics like sexuality, intimacy, relationship and LGBT (lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender) can not be said and discussed openly in every society but teacher introduces such topic, engages the students in discussion and allows the students to interpret and reinterpret texts critically in a dialogic classroom environment. “Dialogue builds an epistemological relationship among speakers to recognize a social way of knowing and learning”. (Freire & Macedo, 1995: 379).

English literature inside classroom positions the teachers and students to un-open the taboos and controversial issues through critical talk. Vetter (2010) favors the use of literature for critical reading and understanding. It is the sphere of the classroom which engage teachers and students in a relationship to discuss taboo topics. Literature representing social life stories unfolds many unexpected, unwanted, unseen and unsaid layers of human nature, attitude and lifestyle. Hayn et al. (2011) emphasized shifting young adult literature from teaching context to research activities. Discussing literature inside classroom provides English content area for understanding the development of sexual identity. Usually, literature is seen as secure and right choice for exploring sexual identities (Gilbert, 2004; Pattee, 2006). Discussing taboos and “noa” (topics considered ordinary and generally acceptable) in literature involve teachers and students in critical reading and constructing and deconstructing textual information. Many researchers identified English literature for taking readers towards critical thinking and discussing the notions of sexuality in any social and cultural boundaries. (Finders, 2000; Ashcraft, 2006; Brunner, 2002).

The current research aims to explore the teachers’ stance towards taboo topics inside the English literary classrooms in Pakistani context. The primary objective of the research is to observe Pakistani teachers’ point of view for discussing taboo topics inside classrooms. The other objectives are to identify how teachers position themselves inside classrooms for discussing taboo topics and to explore taboos “as matter of fact” or not inside English literary classrooms. The findings of the research will help to understand the teachers’ perspectives towards taboo topics for English literary classrooms and open the door for further research in future.

### **Theoretical Framework and Previous Studies**

The current study relies on Bakhtin’s theoretical representations (1981) and positioning theory (1992). Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia, dialogism, social languages, and ventriloquation make the nature of the current study clear and vivid.

Bakhtinian concepts focus on the social nature of language. It is the multidisciplinary nature of the language in specific time and place which makes its use with different semantic

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understanding in divergent time and place. Bakhtin and Holquist (1988) discussed the term heteroglossia as the power of language at specific time and place with the contextual references for using and selecting same words in different time and space where they produce separate meanings. Therefore, on one side, it is heteroglossia to conceptualize language; on the other side, it is dialogic characteristic of any language which is to empower the humans for knowing and adopting different point of views. (Holquist, 1981).

Bakhtin (1984) identified monologic form and dialogic forms of certain discourses; monologic form represents one person for knowing and possessing the information, later, who directs the others for what they are ignorant or in error. Pakistani pedagogical environment is, usually, of monologic discourse whereas dialogic classroom environment is associated with critical learning practices. (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Scott, 2013).

Bakhtin represents language as a “social discourse contextual to time and place”. Bakhtin (1981) identifies the social use of language for specific sociopolitical purposes of every day. In educational settings, the social use of language in specific time depends on the users (teachers, students, administrators, parents) and reason to use (counseling, pedagogies, discussing, disciplining, and socializing).

Inside English literary classrooms, the teachers use particular curricula (novel, drama, critical theories, and poetry and vice versa) to discuss academic concepts with social language. The teachers may choose the material or use the already assigned notes to discuss them either in a monologic or dialogic form. In both situations, the role of the teacher is to convey the message of writers of the texts to the students in a classroom setting of an institution. Wretsch (1991) labels teacher’s use of a language inside classroom for specific voicing or certain representation. Bakhtin describes ventriloquation as the way to represent some one’s voice through other voice. Samuelson (2009) defines “ventriloquation as a voice of the speaker to reveal one’s ideas, opinions and social and political positions in a context”. Through ventriloquated speech, the speakers convey connotative meanings of ‘denotative literary terms’ by using social language in a particular time and place (heteroglossic world) in a dialogue.

Positioning theory is a social constructionist approach (Slocum and Langenhove, 2003) that began to emerge in 1980s in the area of gender studies and it further expanded in the other fields of life particularly education. The positioning theory helps to understand how teachers ventriloquate inside English literary classrooms by using the institutionally “allowable” social discourse. Moghaddam and Harré (2010) mentioned that positioning theory is about “how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others”. The theory helps to identify the status of person or group in a community. “Positioning has direct moral implications, such as some person or group being located as ‘trusted’ or ‘distrusted’, ‘with us’ or ‘against us’, ‘to be saved’ or ‘to be wiped out’” (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010).

Like Bakhtin’s (1981) conceptualization of social language, dialogue and ventriloquation, positioning theory recognizes the social set up where the discourse or conversation can help to interpret the meanings (Felix, 2023). In a dialogic communication, the individuals stand at their subject positions in the specific dialogue where subject position is a location of that subject in known talk where speakers and hearers develop their persona. The theory of positioning helps to; (1) identify the discourse(s) that speakers and listeners constitute in certain ways and (2) provide practices through which participants interact. Scott (2013)

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explored experiences of English teachers to negotiate the effects, reactions, and expectations for discussing sexuality and gender in school community. Ludwig & Summer, (2023) highlighted the importance and relevance of Young Adult Literature by discussing controversial issues and taboos in the classroom teaching.

Fershtman et al. (2011) carried a study to investigate the relation between taboo and society and how these two can shape the societal use of taboos. The intensity and acceptance or rejection by the individuals in society can decide the status of taboos in certain context. Li-Ching Ho (2015) investigated six Singaporean geography teachers' understandings of climate change education under the study "Teaching Controversial Issues in Geography: Climate Change Education in Singaporean Schools". He reflected some of the tensions within the larger education system in Singapore. Byford et al. (2010) conducted a research of high school teachers for teaching controversial issues in the social studies and explored that teachers feel good for discussing controversial issues, but perceived consequences provide limitations for teachers in developing and teaching controversial issues.

The mentioned review of related literature and Bakhtin's theories help to analyze teachers' stance; considering use of the social languages, how teachers ventriloquate (dialogically or monologically). Positioning theory helps to identify how teachers position themselves in institutional context. The relevance of the current study and theoretical framework makes the layout of the said study clear.

### **The Present Study**

Tsitsipis (2004: 573) comments, "to embed Bakhtin's conceptualizations into sociolinguistic context, a *public sphere* is required in which social agents interact on uneven terms". English literary classroom as *public sphere* situates teachers and students as social agents in educational context. The current study uses Bakhtin's notions of social languages, dialogue and ventriloquation to observe Pakistani teachers inside English literary classrooms to discuss taboo topics; being the part of a conservative society, how teachers discuss taboo topics of sexuality, intimacy and LGBT in mix classrooms. Similarly, positioning theory helps to identify how teachers position themselves inside classrooms for discussing taboo topics. To carry research for the mentioned objectives, following research questions have been made.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do Pakistani teachers respond towards the taboo topics inside English Literary mixed classrooms?
  - i. Do the teachers discuss taboos as per receptivity of the audience?
  - ii. Do the teachers use alternative terms for taboos mentioned in course books?
2. How do teachers position themselves for discussing taboos inside English literary classrooms?

Accordingly, following hypotheses were formulated;

- i. Teachers remain comfortable for discussing taboos inside English Literary mixed-classrooms.
  - ii. Irrespective of the receptivity of audience, teachers discuss taboos as per educational requirement.
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3. Teachers do not use alternative terms for taboos/ topics.
4. Teachers have institutional power to discuss taboos inside classrooms.

### **Methodology**

The study is qualitative and quantitative in nature to explore the teachers' perspective for discussing taboos inside English literary classrooms of graduate and post graduate levels. Qualitative approach has been used for describing and interpreting the teachers' stance during focus group discussion towards taboos whereas quantitative approach represents the statistical procedures to find out the frequency and relationship of chosen variables of the study. The study was carried out to identify the teachers' perspective only.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

To find the answers of the research questions, an experiment was designed in which written responses were collected from sample of English teachers who teach English Literature at graduate and postgraduate level in Southern Punjab. A survey comprising close-ended questions based on likert-scale (strongly agree.....strongly disagree) was conducted. The questionnaire was in two parts; part one included fifteen questions to find out the teachers' response and part two carried list of taboo words to know the occurrence of these words in classrooms discussion and to affirm the teachers' response towards taboos. The difficulty for the data collection was the availability of teachers who teach English literature at graduate and postgraduate level.

### **Participants**

For the current study, total 61 teachers, teaching English Literature at graduate and post graduate level in heterogeneous classrooms, of Southern Punjab (Educational institutes of D. G. Khan, Multan and Bahawalpur) responded for the current study. In order to determine the degree of appropriateness and naturalness of the responses selected for the present study, a pilot study was administered to five teachers randomly selected from the similar population to the main study. The goal of the pilot study was to establish the contextual appropriateness of the items in eliciting the responses under study and also to see if the instructions and questions were clear to the participants. The results suggested that teachers would indeed respond with questionnaire but there would be a focus group also. Therefore, the researcher involved ten participants as focus group to discuss their experiences and observation concerning dealing taboos inside mixed-classrooms.

### **Data Analysis**

The responses of the teachers though questionnaire and focus group discussion were analysed under the theoretical framework of Bakhtin and positioning theory. The data analysis leads towards the qualitative interpretations based on the quantitative results. The results through data analysis identify teachers' position in English literary classrooms as discursive in educational context where they ventriloquate the taboo concepts in curricula using social language.

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**Results**

The overall analysis represents how Pakistani teachers deal taboos inside English literary mixed classrooms of graduate and postgraduate level. The results reveal that teachers as social agents deal taboos on objective grounds. It means that they justify the use of taboos inside the classrooms. However, because of context of institution, country, religion and personal ethics, the teachers are a bit reluctant to introduce and discuss the taboo topics. Context plays an important role. The teachers in Pakistani context acclaim to be comfortable with taboos inside the classrooms. To see the comfort level of teachers with taboos inside classrooms, a chi-square test was carried out.

Table 1: Chi-square analysis for teachers' comfort level with taboos

	comfort with taboos					Total
	strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	
Gender Female	1	0	10	16	9	36
Male	0	6	6	9	4	25
Total	1	6	16	25	13	61

Chi-square value

10.232

P-value

0.037

The results show that there is significance between teachers and taboos inside the classrooms. The above table only reflects that they are comfortable with taboos as these are the part of the curricula. The detail discussion of the results would be in discussion section. On same notes, the teachers do not depend on receptivity of students in an institutional setting. Whatever is mentioned or the part of curricula, teachers convey the information towards the students. For this they do not even use the alternative terms for the taboos. They describe them as these are the part of the academic learning.

Table 2: Chi-square analysis for no use of alternative terms for taboos

	no alternatives				Total
	disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	
Gender Female	12	8	13	3	36
Male	2	5	18	0	25
Total	14	13	31	3	61

Chi-square value

9.983

P-value

0.019

The results reflect that teachers as social agents identify their position in classroom setting and they do not use alternative terms for the taboos; it shows the professional honesty of the teachers towards pedagogical input and output and it is the power of their discursive discourse that they use to maintain their position. Teachers mention that they are reserve to discuss taboos in heterogeneous classrooms.

Table 3: Chi-square analysis for teachers’ getting reserve in heterogeneous classroom

		reserve to discuss taboos					Total
		strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	
Gender	Female	9	0	11	13	3	36
	Male	0	6	5	14	0	25
Total		9	6	16	27	3	61

Chi-square value  
18.919

P-value  
0.001

The results reveal the association between teachers and their reserve nature in mixed class for discussing taboos. Though teachers are comfortable with taboo topics for pedagogical activity but they get reserve in a mixed class and they get embarrassed while discussing the taboos in detail and answering controversial issues in mixed class.

Table 4: Chi-square analysis for teachers’ getting embarrassed in heterogeneous classroom

		embarrassed in front of opposite gender					Total
		strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	
Gender	female	13	9	7	7	0	36
	male	0	7	8	6	4	25
Total		13	16	15	13	4	61

Chi-square value  
15.928

P-value  
0.003

The results show that there is significance between teachers’ embarrassment in front of opposite gender in English literary classrooms. They justify why they get reserve and get embarrassed. They agree to discuss taboos and they do express their opinions, beliefs and ideas using social language for taboos conceptualization but at the same time, they are aware of the social boundaries which make them cautious for being stigmatized in society.

Table 5: Chi-square analysis for teachers’ cautious attitude for being stigmatized

		cautious for being stigmatized				Total
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	
Gender	female	0	12	13	11	36
	male	2	0	17	6	25
Total		2	12	30	17	61

Chi-square value  
14.492

P-value  
0.002

The results identified teachers as social agents in educational environment where they convey the meanings in a dialogic or sometimes, monologic environment but they get

cautious as they believe that openness of the teacher is stigmatized in Pakistani society. There is significance between teachers and taboos, getting reserve and embarrassed in mixed class, being stigmatized in society, and no alternative terms whereas the analysis does not show the association between teachers and their style for discussing taboos, students' receptivity, limited participation of audience, eye contact with opposite gender, personal reluctance, avoidance of topics and taboos as matter of fact.

### **Discussion**

The results describe the interesting facts about Pakistani teachers' stance towards discussing taboos inside English literary classrooms of graduate and postgraduate level. Table 1 shows the comfort level of the teachers and focus group also mentions that they consider taboos as part of English literature but because of Pakistani society, which is not so open towards the topics of sexuality, intimacy, relationship, gender and transgender, teachers get reserve in mixed class to discuss taboos and taboos topics. In a focus group discussion, teachers disclose that they avoid much detail because of the heterogeneous audience; female audience feel odd in the presence of male audience. As Sieben & Wallowitz (2009) mentioned that the most of English teachers try to maintain the comfort of their students inside classrooms by not discussing the tendentious topics.

Out of 61 teachers, there are 36 female teachers and 25 male teachers; it means that there is 60% and 40% participation of teachers respectively for data analysis. A high number of male teachers (18 out of 25 teachers) do not use the alternative terms for taboos inside classrooms but at the same time 23 out of 25 male teachers are cautious for being stigmatized for their openness in the public sphere. The male teachers present its reason in focus group discussion that their ventriloquation choice reinforces the preferences to sustain mostly monologic classroom stance and positions them with authority in pedagogical activity. Male teachers exercise their discursive duties and power which allow them to use the taboos but on personal grounds they get cautious for their openness. Comparatively, out of 36, 16 female teachers don not use alternative terms but they are equally conscious of being stigmatized. Focus group discussion among teachers answered clearly the ambiguous quantitative responses of the teachers; both male and female teachers try to restrict themselves to the academic notions and they avoid to relate the topics of sexuality and gender with the general and personal observation and experiences of the social context. The selected list of taboo words from English literary books of relevant genres affirmed the limited and restricted use of taboo topics inside classroom. As Anderson (2009) pointed that it the position of the teacher inside classroom provides him a conditional freedom to verbalise the taboo topics with in social boundaries.

Discussing taboos inside classrooms does not harm the value and rights of the teachers, as they view their positive position in the institutional context. They introduce taboo topics, discuss them in academic session, relate the social, political and cultural practices with mentioned taboos and sum up those controversial talk within particular pedagogical activity. The chi-square analysis does not show the association between teachers and taboos as the 'matter of fact'. The reason for that is society. Pakistani society is conservative for the taboo topics of sexuality and gender. Teachers do not discuss voluntarily such topics; these are

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linked with the academic material either provided by the institution or the teachers or students select. The use of social language for discussing such topics is limited inside the classrooms; out of the pedagogical activity, teachers and students, as social agents, do not discuss the taboos. That’s why they do not use the alternative of the taboos inside English literary classrooms. The discussion of taboos takes place in academic place and time (Bakhtin’s heteroglossic world). In terms of cumulative percent, 78% teachers are comfortable with taboos inside English literary classrooms; for that 77% teachers consider taboos as matter of fact. 72 percent teachers depend on students’ receptivity and remain cautious for being stigmatized for their openness. 78 percent teachers remain alert for their style during discussion of taboos. But on the other hand, 95% and 93% teachers get reserve and embarrassed in the mixed class respectively. Therefore, 90% teachers avoid eye contact with opposite gender while discussing taboos inside English literary classrooms. 93 % teachers are personally reluctant to introduce and discuss taboos. High cumulative percent of teachers represent how and why teachers consider taboos. Bakhtin’s notions help to answer *how* Pakistani teachers deal taboo topics inside English literary mixed classroom (they ventriloquate the speech) and *why* is answered by positioning theory (teachers as agents in institutional context). Teachers have power to arrange the class monologically or dialogically. The only reason to discuss them is the ‘public sphere’ which is classroom and academic activity. For performing the pedagogical activity, 95% teachers do not alternative terms for taboo topics. In doing so, actually teachers ventriloquate the voice of textual information and engage students in a dialogic environment (Bakhtin’s conceptualization). Teachers are positioned inside the classroom setting to discuss such topics and they exercise their position for introducing and controlling the controversial topics and talk. The research discloses that teachers’ positioning inside classroom and educational context influence the discussion of sexuality, intimacy and LGBT in classroom. To answer research questions, the formulated hypotheses have been tested and found valid. The association between gender and comfortable level affirm that teachers are comfortable with taboos inside English literary classrooms and for that they do not depend on students’ receptivity.

Table 6: Chi-square analysis for teachers’ dependence on students’ receptivity

		depends on audience receptivity					Total
		strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	
Gender	Female	3	4	3	18	8	36
	male	0	3	0	13	9	25
Total		3	7	3	31	17	61

Chi-square value  
5.193

P-value  
0.268

Teachers do not rely on the acceptance level of students for taboo topics as they consider taboos as part of the pedagogical activity. The focus group discussion explores that discussion of taboo topics is limited to the classroom and teacher-student group where they identify themselves as the agents of institutional context. Teachers may limit themselves to the textual language and discuss taboo topics just with the reference of the pedagogical

activity and setting.

### Conclusion

By discussing results on the basis of qualitative and quantitative analysis under Bakhtin and positioning theoretical framework, one can understand why and how Pakistani teachers position themselves discursively in English literary classrooms for discussing taboo topics (sexuality, intimacy, and LGBT) through ventriloquation. In doing so teachers may use referential or institutional discourse to present the literary work, writer, analysis, evaluation and discussion (Samuelson, 2009). Teachers discuss the taboo topics through ventriloquated speech; they use referential names, titles for discussion. Teachers perceiving taboo topics in institutional context consider “allowable discourse” but they personally feel embarrassed and reserved for such topics. They do not allow and facilitate in-depth discussion of taboo topics and do not allow the students of opposite gender to discuss controversial topics inside classrooms. They, therefore, support, subvert, or discuss discourses with their own discursive positioning.

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