

# **Uncomfortable Topics and Their Appropriateness in Asian EFL Classes**

**Svetlana A. Timina, PhD**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Applied English  
Shih Chien University  
Kaohsiung, Taiwan

and

**Norman L. Butler, PhD**

Lecturer in English  
Foreign Languages Department  
AGH University of Science and Technology  
Cracow, Poland  
Visiting Lecturer (2008)  
University Language Centre  
University of Bradford  
Bradford, UK

Publication date: 5 January 2011

## **Abstract**

**The primary purpose of this paper is to find out if certain topics are embarrassing and not easy for Taiwanese university students to discuss in the EFL classroom. Seventy students, who are English majors and study in the Department of Applied English at Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan were surveyed. The results of the study revealed that there are a number of topics which are uncomfortable for students to talk about. The paper also focuses on the appropriateness of such topics in class. It concludes with a number of suggestions on how to ease students' embarrassment when they have to deal with uncomfortable topics during English classes. The theoretical framework for this article is provided by the general idea of the school as an organization and social institution.**

## **Introduction**

The government of Taiwan puts a strong emphasis on fostering English language education in the country in order to develop the country's ties with the world community in various spheres, especially business, tourism, and culture. English is the main foreign language taught in all secondary and higher educational institutions. All students learn English for 8-10 years at elementary, junior and senior high school. The number of English classes per week at Taiwanese high schools varies from 2 to 12 (Iftimie, 2006, 292).

At Taiwanese universities, English is a compulsory course for all non-English majors. They learn English for two hours a week during four semesters (two years). (Iftimie, 2006,

292). The number of compulsory English classes per week for students majoring in English differs from one university to another. For example, in the Department of Applied English at Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung Campus first-year students have 10 hours of compulsory English classes per week, second-year students have 4 hours, while third-year and fourth-year students have 4 and 2 hours per week, respectively. Moreover, they are offered a whole range of elective English courses or courses that are taught in English.

A significant feature of Taiwanese higher education is the fact that many universities employ foreign teachers of English<sup>1</sup>. And, when these instructors have to deal with Taiwanese students, they often encounter unexpected difficulties. One of these difficulties is learner speaking anxiety and an unwillingness to communicate. Most learners easily get intimidated by foreign speakers of English or their peers having a higher level of EFL proficiency (Cheng, 1997; Tiangco, 2004). This kind of verbal behavior is typical of other Asian students, and is culturally rooted (Hu, 2002; McKenna, 1999).

Misinterpreting student behavior because of a lack of understanding of some essential features of Chinese culture may lead a foreign instructor to the false assumption that his learners lack motivation to learn English. In other words, many problems and misunderstandings which occur in EFL classes at Taiwanese universities are the result of a “cultural gap” between foreign teachers and students; the students' attitudes toward discussion reflect differences in learning styles between cultures.

A foreign instructor should bear in mind that Taiwanese students are products of their culture and educational system. In Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism silence has a positive connotation. Students are expected to respect and not to challenge their teachers. Out of respect, students are usually not as ready to argue or to voice opinions in class as European or American students (Hu, 2002). Besides, a salient feature of education is memorization and an emphasis on written tests. Moreover, there are certain cultural restrictions and taboos concerning discussion topics. Some subjects, which European and especially American students feel free to discuss, may embarrass Taiwanese students. Many western instructors have noted that they encounter difficulties concerning the choice of topics discussed in classes which hinders their students' effective communication in English.

To overcome these difficulties instructors should know what topics are uncomfortable for students to talk about, understand the reasons for their unwillingness to do so and find ways that help them become active members of intercultural communication in EFL classrooms.

The theoretical framework for this article is provided by the general notion of the school as an organization and social institution.

### **Aim and Motivation for this Article**

The purpose of this work is to find out if some topics are uncomfortable and difficult to discuss for Taiwanese students during English classes and the causes of these difficulties.

The motivation for this work is the current educational policies of the Taiwanese government concerning the learning of English.

### **The Research Question**

Are some topics uncomfortable for Taiwanese university students to discuss in English classes? The predicted answer was “yes” because some subjects are sensitive and controversial.

### **The Research Methodology**

#### **The Research Approach**

A quantitative research methodology was used in this study.

#### **The Method of Data Collection and the Participants**

In order to find out what topics were uncomfortable for students to talk about, a questionnaire was administered to learners at Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung campus, Taiwan. All the participants were third year students. Third year students were chosen deliberately, as they were considered mature enough to be capable of thinking critically and independently. There were seventy interviewees, fifty-eight females and twelve males - all of them English majors.

#### **The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consists of two kinds of variables: dependent and independent. The dependent variable includes the students’ responses to the questions. The independent variable is gender (male or female). The questions that are included in the questionnaire are as follows.

- 1. Do you agree that uncomfortable or embarrassing topics must be avoided in an English class?*
- 2. Look through the list of topics and check those you find uncomfortable for discussion. Add some of your own topics.*
- 3. Explain reasons why you would not like to discuss each of the topics that you have mentioned in the previous question. Choose from the list and also add some of your own reasons.*
- 4. If you have to deal with such topics, who do you prefer to discuss them with? You may check or circle more than one answer.*
- 5. Sometimes such topics have to be discussed in class. What should be done to make it easier for the students? You may check more than one answer and add your own ideas.*
- 6. What is your sex: male or female?*

The questionnaire contains 55 items and is divided into the following sections:

Question 1: items 1-4 (options “yes / sometimes / no” and the line “your reason” where subjects could write reasons if they wanted).

Question 2: items 5-25 (a list of possible options and a blank space to be filled in with the students’ own ideas).

Question 3: items 26-36 (a list of possible options and a blank space to be filled in with the students’ own ideas).

Question 4: items 37-42 (a list of possible options).

Question 5: items 43-53 (a list of possible options and a blank space to be filled in with the students’ own ideas).

Question 6: items 54, 55 (male / female).

The options that are not included in the primary list and were added by the students were taken into consideration to complete the overall picture related to the research question.

### **The Procedure**

The questionnaire was administered between the 20th and 24th of October 2008.

### **Student Answers and Results**

The following topics were considered to be uncomfortable to discuss during

English classes: private life (my weaknesses, mistakes, illnesses, relations with my boyfriend/girlfriend etc.) (36), sex (33), politics (33), personal family income (33), personal appearance (16), single-parent families (12), gay and lesbian families (12), men’s and women’s intimate hygiene (9), death (9), homosexuality and lesbianism (8), personal religious beliefs (7), man-woman relationship (6), superstitions (3), childless and adoptive families (3), some religious traditions and rituals (3), my weight (2), my school grades (2), gossip (1), ghosts (1), weird habits (1), kinds of friends I have (1). Therefore, the predicted answer to the first research question was confirmed.

It should be noted that some of the topics were selected only by female students: *“Personal appearance”, “Homosexuality and lesbianism”, “Gay and lesbian families”, “My religion”, “Religious traditions and rituals”*. One topic was mentioned only by male students: *Childless and adoptive families*.

The students also added some of their own ideas about topics they wouldn’t like to discuss in an English class. These topics included: *“My weight”, “My school grades”, “Gossip”, “Ghosts”, “Weird habits”, “Kinds of friends I have”*. The overall list of topics, embarrassing to Taiwanese students, and the accompanying statistics are displayed in the following table.

Topic	Number of students selecting it (males/females)-%
1. My private life (my weaknesses, mistakes, illnesses, relations with my boyfriend/girlfriend etc.)	36 (7 / 29) – 51.4%
2. Sex	33 (5 / 28) – 47.1%
3. Politics	33 (3 / 30) – 47.1%
4. Personal family income	33 (4 / 29) - 47.1%
5. Personal appearance	16 (- / 16) – 22.9%
6. Single-parent families	12 (5 / 7) – 17.1%
7. Gay and lesbian families	12 (- / 12) – 17.1%
8. Men’s and women’s intimate hygiene	9 (3 / 6) – 12.9%
9. Death	9 (4 / 5) - 12.9%
10. Homosexuality and lesbianism	8 (- / 8) – 11.4%
11. Personal religious beliefs	7 (- / 7) – 10%

12. Man-woman relationship	6 (2 / 4) – 8.6%
13. Superstitions	3 (1 / 2) – 4.3%
14. Childless and adoptive families	3 (3 / -) - 4.3%
15. Some religious traditions and rituals	3 (- / 3) - 4.3%
Topics added by students	
16. My weight	2 (- / 2) – 2.9%
17. My school grades	2 (- / 2) -2.9%
18. Gossip	1 (1 / -) – 1.4%
19. Ghosts	1 (- / 1) - 1.4%
20. Weird habits	1 (- / 1) - 1.4%
21. Kinds of friends I have	1 (- / 1) - 1.4%

### **Concluding Remarks**

Students gave the following reasons for not wanting to discuss certain subjects in English classes: because they are tabooed in their culture and not often discussed in their native language (80), too personal and intimate (52). Other reasons mentioned included: lack of knowledge of the topic (42), shyness (35), fear of making a poor impression on the others (33), the conflicting character of the topic (30), and fear of being misunderstood (27).

The majority of participants (27 students or 39%) think that uncomfortable topics must be avoided in an English class. However, this majority is not overwhelming because 24 students (34%) were less categorical and selected “not sure”. An interesting and a little unexpected fact is 19 participants (27%) answered “no” to this question stating that there should be no restrictions about the class content. Only 1 male student out of 12 chose the answer “yes, such topics should be avoided”, while others (6 male students) said “not sure” and “no” (5 male students). Those students who thought such topics could be accepted in an English class wrote various reasons in their comments (each was mentioned only once):

*It’s interesting to know other opinions.*

*Maybe, after we talk about this topic, it will not be embarrassing to me.*

*It will help a foreign teacher to better understand what students think.*

*You never know. Maybe, some people will accept such a topic and are interested*

*in it.*

*I feel free to discuss anything.*

*We can learn more; improve our English and even our way of thinking.*

*Such topics are usually intriguing and excite people's curiosity.*

*I am curious about the opinion of my foreign teacher.*

*I want to learn some words I don't know.*

*We can learn about cultural differences.*

As for topics which are considered to be embarrassing by Taiwanese students, the results of the study show that there are four topics that they find the most uncomfortable for discussion. They are the following.

*1 My private life (my weaknesses, mistakes, illnesses, relations with my boyfriend/girlfriend etc.).*

*2. Sex.*

*3. Politics.*

*4. Personal family income.*

The most frequently mentioned reason why the students wouldn't like to discuss certain topics in their English classes was: "*We normally do not discuss this topic in public in my culture. I wouldn't discuss it even in my native language*". This reason was selected by the students 80 times and was related to such topics as "Sex", "Private life", "Personal family income", "Politics", "Men's and women's intimate hygiene", and "Homosexuality". The second major reason, selected 52 times, was: "*I don't want to share my very secret and intimate ideas with other people*". That comment was referred to "Private life", "Personal family income", "Personal appearance", and "My weight".

The other reasons that the students often mentioned were as follows.

*1. I may not have enough knowledge on this topic, so, I don't feel confident* ("Sex", "Men's and women's intimate hygiene", "Non-traditional families") (42).

*2. I feel really uncomfortable, embarrassed, and shy* ("Sex", "My weight") (35).

*3. I am afraid the other students will think something negative about me* ("Politics", "Personal appearance", "Private life", "Personal family income", "Superstitions") (33).

*4. This topic is too conflicting.* ("Politics") (30).

5. *I am afraid that the others won't understand me* ("Politics", "Private life") (27).

The students agreed that once in a while they had to deal with embarrassing topics in English classes because of the textbook content, for example. Most of them said, if they had to share opinions or speak on a topic like this, they would rather discuss it (a) "*with their conversation partner*" or (b) "*within a group of 3-6 students*". Option (a) was mentioned by 48 (68.6%) out of 70 students (9 males/39 females), and option (b) was mentioned by 41 (58.6%) students (6 males/35 females). The other options were mentioned a lot less frequently:

1. *With my Chinese teacher of English* – by 15 (21.4%) students (1 male/14 females).
2. *With my foreign teacher of English* – by 12 (17.1%) students (1 male/11 females).
3. *With the whole class* – by 12 (17.1%) students (4 males/ 8 females).

There were also two marginal groups. Six students (8.6%), all females, stated they wouldn't accept discussing certain subjects under any circumstances. Seven students (10%) (2 males and 5 females) seemed to eagerly embrace the idea of discussing the uncomfortable topics in English classes. For example, they wrote: "*I feel free to discuss any topic! It's fun!*"; "*No, I won't feel embarrassed! That's good!*"

The students were also asked to share their ideas on how the teacher could help them overcome their uneasiness if they had to deal with uncomfortable topics in class. The options they selected are the following.

1. *The teacher should let the students choose their conversation partners and groups according to their personal preferences* (selected by 44 (62.9%) students).
2. *The teacher should give the necessary vocabulary, so that students could express their thoughts on the topic more clearly* (39 (55.7%) students).
3. *The teacher should introduce to students other people's opinions on such topics* (36 (51.4%) students).
4. *Such topics should be discussed more often. This will give the students a chance to overcome their embarrassment and shyness* (33 (47.1%) students).

Some of the students also added their own proposals to the list.

*Let the students choose what topics they want to discuss.*



*At first, a foreign teacher can introduce his/her own opinion and the opinions of people from his/her country.*

*It is better for me to write my opinion on paper anonymously.*

The study of topics that are uncomfortable for discussion in an adult EFL class in Taiwan has helped identify several problematic areas of which western teachers need to be aware. First, when EFL students participate in the English class discussion, certain topics should be handled with care and tact. Otherwise, they are likely to inhibit their active participation in the discussion. Such a seemingly harmless topic as “My private life” may turn to be painful if it involves issues like “my weaknesses and mistakes”, “my school grades”, “personal appearance and weight”. The cause might be rooted in a cultural stereotype, which is often referred to as “the concept of face”. Taiwanese students do not like to tell negative things about themselves for fear of “losing their face”. Another group of topics that Taiwanese students label as uncomfortable is related to certain cultural taboos, i.e., they are hardly ever discussed in public in the Chinese culture. These are topics like “Sex”, “Personal family income”, “Men’s and women’s intimate hygiene”, and “Homosexuality”. When the students name the topic “Politics” too conflicting, they, obviously, do not mean international politics. They imply a rather controversial to many Taiwanese people the issue of the cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China. One part of Taiwan’s population supports the pro-China political party Kuomintang (KMT), while the other part seconds the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that strives for the independence of the island and its recognition by the international community. As one of the students pointed out, “It’s conflicting. We may belong to different parties.” An important factor, that also causes students’ passive attitude to discussing embarrassing subjects, is lack of confidence, lack of any knowledge on the topic and, hence, lack of necessary vocabulary. The lack of confidence involves a fear of making mistakes. It hurts their feelings, brought on by their lack or perceived lack of English proficiency.

Secondly, the students admit the fact that sometimes they can touch upon embarrassing topics in class. In this case, they prefer to talk either with their conversation partners, who are normally their friends, or in a small group of students (3 to 6). Giving their opinion to the whole class, to their Chinese teacher of English or their foreign

teacher of English are less desirable options.

Finally, most students admit the possibility of dealing with such topics in their English class because they find them intriguing, unusual and curious. They even consider them to be one of the ways of improving their English.

The following strategies can be made use of to make it easier for students to talk about uncomfortable subjects in EFL classes.

1. Discuss the topics in pairs or small groups of students who trust one another.
2. Help your students build a pre-class knowledge base for a given topic or issue. When they gain confidence in their knowledge, they are more motivated to participate in the discussion.
3. Provide students with information about what other people think on the subject.
4. Provide learners with the necessary vocabulary to discuss such topics.
5. Do not ask them to express their opinions to the whole class.
6. Keep in mind the gender differences and define your strategies accordingly.

Our findings have implications for English language teaching at universities in Taiwan. Nevertheless, it is recommended that further research be carried out, involving additional institutions.

### **Note**

1. Many higher educational institutions in Taiwan employ not only native speaker teachers of English but also non-native speakers who have relevant qualifications. They are referred to as “foreign teachers” or “foreign instructors”.

### **References**

- Iftimie, N. (2006). Working in an Asian university: expecting the unexpected. *Buletinul Institutului Politehnic din Iasi LII* (5), Iasi, Romania, 292.
- Cheng, M. (1997). The impacts of teachers’ beliefs on students’ anxiety about foreign language learning. In J. Katchen (Ed.). *The Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium on English Teaching* (pp. 113-129). Taiwan: The Crane Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Tiangco, J.A.N. (2004). *Towards the indigenization of English learning and teaching at*

- the Fortune Institute of Technology. Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference on Improving EFL Learning (pp. 60-76). Taiwan: Fortune Institute of Technology.
- Hu, G. (2002) Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. Retrieved: 30 October, 2008, from <http://www.multilingual-matters.net/lcc/015/0993/lcc0150093pdf>
- McKenna, M. (1999). Coping with problems caused by stereotypes in Japan. *The Internet TESL Journal* V (7). Retrieved: 8 November, 2008, from <http://iteslj.org/>