



From Passive Recipients to Active Thinkers: Taboo Strategy in ELT

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Abstract

This article investigates the implementation of a thinking skills strategy, Taboo strategy, among first-year non-English majors at a university in China. Through the classroom observation and a student survey, the research exemplifies the stages of implementing Taboo and explores how Taboo influences pedagogy and shifts classroom dynamics from passive towards active interactions. Findings indicate significant improvements in students' engagement in discussions (reported by 92.1% of participants), active listening, and articulation of ideas. The study also identifies challenges tied to time constraints and resistance to student-centered methodologies in teacher-dominated contexts. Implications for integrating thinking skills strategies within course design and professional development frameworks are discussed.

Subject Areas

Pedagogy

Keywords

Thinking Skills, Taboo, English Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Teaching thinking skills is crucial in the education system, especially “while advanced AI models have proved the potential to support education, offering new tools and resources to enhance learning” ([1], p: 373). Apparently, thinking is required to leverage the benefits of these technologies, maintain the core values of effective pedagogy, and ensure that human cannot be replaced by AI. Long ago, John Nisbet said, “By the beginning of the twenty-first century, no curriculum will be regarded as acceptable unless it can be shown to make a contribution to the teaching of thinking” ([2], p: 34).

Thinking skills in this article is employed as an umbrella term for a range of intellectual virtues including “curiosity, wonder, attentiveness, intellectual thoroughness, reflectiveness, inquisitiveness, or intellectual perseverance” ([3], p: 225). In other words, it focuses on dispositions pertaining to inquiry and problem solving, such as impartiality, courage, open-mindedness and honesty.

“Advances in theories of thinking and learning, together with a number of practical experiments, suggest that thinking can be taught” ([4], p: 62). Despite the widespread acknowledgement of importance of teaching thinking skills in the educational settings, strategies of teaching thinking skills have not been fully explored. It is especially true and challenging in the ELT in China due to her tradition of highly valuing language structures and relatively neglecting thinking skills. Thus, how English teachers implement a thinking skills intervention and what strategies work practically remain unclear.

The present study aims to specifically exemplify a Taboo strategy of integrating thinking skills into the ELT by doing an investigation into a first-year college English classroom at a university in China. This investigation is to focus on the stages involved in conducting the Taboo strategy and its impact on pedagogy and the classroom dynamics. Two research questions are addressed as follows:

Q1: How is the Taboo strategy implemented in the ELT classroom?

Q2: How does the Taboo strategy influence pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics in a Chinese ELT setting?

2. Taboo Strategy

Taboo Strategy is a thinking skills strategy that encourages creative and critical thinking by imposing constraints on the use of certain words, concepts or ideas when discussing a topic. By restricting the obvious or conventional ways of thinking, individuals are encouraged to explore alternative perspectives, ideas, and solutions. It is based on the constructivist theoretical frameworks.

“The constructivist theory of learning argues that learners create their own frameworks of interpretation in a search for meaning and understanding” ([2], p: 27). In other words, learners must make their own construction of knowledge to make sure that it is to be retained and readily retrieved when needed. Constructivist views of learning are profoundly influenced by the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget. They both emphasized activity as the basis for learning and for the development of thinking [5]. In this respect, constructivist theoretical frameworks are applied to underlie effective teaching and learning of thinking skills.

When it comes to approaches of teaching thinking skills, the main division seems to be whether thinking skills should be separated from or integrated into existing curricula. The separate approach believes that teaching a single course is far simpler than attempting to revitalize the style of instruction throughout a curriculum while the infusion approach believes that thinking is an integral element in any teaching and should not be treated as an ‘add-on’ element. As Gilbert Ryle points out, “All lessons are lessons in thinking” [6]. Taboo is the infusion approach. And

Sternberg ([7], p: 254) sums up its advantages as follows: “(1) do not require a wholly separate course, which may not fit into school priorities, (2) seem to run less risk of fostering inert knowledge about thinking skills— that is, knowledge that is never applied outside the thinking skills classroom, and (3) reinforce the thinking skills throughout the curriculum, rather than conveying the message that thinking skills are something apart from other curriculum”.

In “Taboo”, students are encouraged to perform a learning task **differently**. Take the task of describing “apple” differently as an example. They are encouraged to come up with **different** words or ideas that are associated with “apple”. If “fruit”, “cellphone”, and “sweet” are mentioned, then their words are “taboos” as long as they are mentioned. In order to stay alive in this activity, students should describe “apple” without using the “taboo” words (fruit, cellphone, sweet). Instead, they may alternatively say different words, such as “red”, “healthy” etc. in order to avoid “taboos” above. That is to say, words or ideas mentioned will be “taboos” and they are forbidden to be used by others. “Taboo” encourages students to be a good listener first and be creative and open-minded in order to come up with new words or ideas.

The following investigation will reveal how Taboo is infused as thinking skills in an ELT classroom and its impact on pedagogical practices and classroom dynamics.

3. Investigation on an ELT Classroom with Taboo Strategy

A classroom observation and a post-class survey were employed as methodology to answer the research questions mentioned above.

3.1. Context of the Investigated Class

The class on which this investigation focuses is a first-year non-English major students at a university located in the South of China. College English course, “English Movie Viewing, Listening and Speaking” is their compulsory course. Purposive sampling selected this class due to the reason that the instructor (Dr. A) is one of the students’ favorite teachers at the university, evidenced by her consistent high-quality teaching evaluations.

There are 51 students in the class. Dr. A picked them as a class in semester 2 of the academic year. According to Dr. A, students in the class are very quiet, passive to participate in the class and tend to come up similar answers if they are assigned a learning task. So she works hard to get her student to be involved in the class.

3.2. A Sample Lesson

It was a course of college English, “English Movie Viewing, Listening and Speaking”. And students were supposed to learn the movie clip of “Shawshank Redemption”, which was about the story of a prisoner, Brooks, trying hard to hard to stay in the prison even though he had been set free. Apparently, most students at first had no interest in what was happening in the prison since it was far away from

their life. Instead of watching the movie clip directly, Dr. A used Taboo strategy as a lead-in to the movie clip of “Shawshank Redemption”. It followed the stages of launching, instructing, and debriefing.

3.2.1. Launching

It was the first time for this class to work on the Taboo strategy. Therefore, Dr. A began by introducing what Taboo was. To make sure that her students had already caught the point, the teacher then took “apple” for example and required them to describe it without using words on the blackboard (which were confined as taboo words).

3.2.2. Instructing

Knowing clearly what Taboo was, the class was divided into five groups to play a game. They were required to write down their images of “prison” with different words on the blackboard in one minute. Meanwhile, they had to think about how to explain their list in case other students would need more details. The group writing more different words with reasonable explanations would win.

Consequently, each group got down to discussion actively and collaborated to work on their images of “prison” with different words. Meanwhile, the teacher walked around the class and observed group interactions or eavesdropped on thinking, ready for immediate cries for help and getting information for debriefing. Also, she worked as a timer, making sure each group stop when time was up.

Noticeably, she did not check their answers immediately and announce the result, but let the whole class question the words on the blackboard that confused them for any reasons, such as the spelling, the meaning, or reason for writing the word. Then she invited the student who wrote down the confusing word to explain it for the class. If the explanation was reasonable and acceptable, the word was counted as a score. Otherwise, it was not. Finally, more than 40 words had been contributed from the whole class. Students were very excited by their own performance. Afterwards, she asked the students, “What similarity among the 40 words on the blackboard?” They responded to her question actively: “All are negative words.” (words on the blackboard including “dark”, “hatred”, “miserable” etc.) And she said, “so your performance indicates that nobody wants to stay in the prison. But there is a person, who wants to stay in prison. Curious about the guy?” It was perceived that the students had been willing to listen to others carefully, felt confident to explore their views, and looked curious what was going on in the movie clip.

3.2.3. Debriefing

At the end of the Taboo activity, the teacher debriefed the lesson by asking her students such questions as “what have you learnt from Taboo?” Many volunteers responded positively, for example, “I learned to listen to others, particularly to those with whom I disagree”, “there are more than one answers”, “I learned to think more before I stated my view”, “I experienced a different way of learning being creative” and “I developed my talking”.

3.3. Discussion on Its Impact on Pedagogy and Classroom Environment

Taboo is a thinking skills strategy. Based on the sample lesson and the student survey, it is working as an example to demonstrate the impact of thinking skills intervention on both pedagogy and the classroom environment.

3.3.1. Impact on Pedagogy

In terms of pedagogy in this article, it is mainly concerned with teachers' professional development. Obviously, there is no success of a thinking skills intervention without adequate professional development. A number of effects on teachers' professional development will be elaborated from the three stages of the sample lesson, *i.e.* launching, instructing and debriefing.

1) Launching

Clear instructions and the modelling of the activity are crucial components in this stage and a strategy may not work effectively without them. It was noticeable that Dr. A had conducted the two tasks in this stage of launching successfully, since no puzzled facial expression was found among the students and they performed the activity in the way that she expected. As noted above, in modelling, she explained how Taboo in the lesson was conducted by demonstrating with a concrete familiar word "apple". The modelling activity, functioning as scaffolding, did help the students to understand what they were supposed to do.

Modeling is much more than giving simple procedural instructions. To model effectively, the teacher, as John Nisbet noted, "must be aware of her own thinking processes, so that the children can see how she responds emotionally and intellectually to the task, how she sets about establishing a suitable working procedure, how she marshals information and searches her memory for relevant points, how she copes with distractions, the stress of time limits, and so on" ([2], p: 29). In this respect, teachers are supposed to cultivate their own thinking processes in the first place. It could be achieved by "knowledge-for-practice", a conception of professional development proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, which means that teachers should use knowledge and theory provided by university-based researchers to improve their practice [8].

2) Instructing

Relationships and questioning are the foundational and critical building blocks of effective instructing. A big collection of research has shown that the quality of teacher-student relationships is playing a powerful role in determining the effectiveness of student learning [9]. To build healthy teacher-student relationships, it is critical to listen to each other and empower the other [10]. In this sample lesson, it was noticed that Dr. A designed this stage intentionally that students had to listen to others attentively first before they could avoid Taboo words and they were empowered to work as an instructor for explaining the confusing words. Sitting in the class, the writer could perceive the healthy relationships between Dr. A and her students, which made one feel safe and respectful.

In terms of the skill of questioning, it requires teachers to learn what questions

to ask that can make students think and make their thinking explicit. Richard Paul, an American authority on critical thinking, recommends that questions, such as “Why do you say that?”, “Can you explain?”, “Are there arguments against?” may achieve the aim mentioned above ([2], p: 29). Besides, according to Lee (2015) [11], use of open-ended questions is also a rapport-building strategy. It was noticed that such kinds of questions were asked regularly by Dr. A in the sample lesson. After the class, when the writer chatted with Dr. A about her view on the necessary conditions for the successful implementation of a thinking skills intervention, she emphasized the importance of open-ended questions and fostering a climate of openness in the classroom. It requires teachers not to instruct authoritatively on what is right or wrong but to bring ideas into the open. Take the sample lesson for example. For the students providing words confusing others, Dr. A asked “Can you explain that” to let them justify their ideas. In this way, the students are encouraged to think and present their opinions confidently.

Generally, relationships and questioning go hand in hand in the stage of instructing in teaching thinking. As a teacher, to foster a climate for questioning, he or she has to build a healthy relationship with the students in the first place.

3) Debriefing

A thinking skills lesson may not be accepted as a success without debriefing. Teachers can assess whether they have succeeded in improving their students thinking through it. Dr. A explored such main questions for the debriefing as “what did you learn from the activity”. To react to the students’ comments intellectually, the teacher by herself may have to examine the activity carefully, especially the purpose required the students to achieve. Thus, it leads the teacher to make considerable effort to study both the teaching material and the activity intensively.

It is shown that teachers’ thinking processes and skills of questioning have been accelerated through the three-stage model of a thinking skills strategy with regard to their own professional development.

3.3.2. Impact on the Classroom Environment

Apart from the impact on pedagogy, its impact on the classroom environment is very obvious. Active discussion between the teacher and her students and the co-operative learning among students are most impressive as reflected in the sample lesson and in the information from the student survey.

Instead of being passive, it was perceived that active discussion occurred throughout the lesson. The students were provided with adequate opportunities to assert themselves. It was thus different from their former performance, in which they were relatively passive, showing low levels of engagement as mentioned above. Since the students are encouraged and provided with chances to think authentically, they look active instead of passive, which does help them a lot to internalize knowledge at a meaningful level. A climate of respect and openness was fostered in the sample lesson.

In terms of co-operative learning, it is generally applied in the stage of instruct-

ing in a thinking skills lesson. It was demonstrated in the sample lesson that by working in groups, each student got a chance to talk about his or her thoughts and this thus developed their awareness and control of their own thinking processes, which is defined as “metacognition” [12]. Meanwhile, students learned to justify themselves and listen to others as well, which will empower them to become independent in the future. Competition among groups is good for challenge and motivation and it gives the lesson pace. The team winning the championship clapped their hands excitedly to celebrate their success, making the lesson fun for the students. And having fun experiences together is the ingredient in forming healthy relationships [10].

Evidence of its positive impact on the classroom environment can also be retrieved from the students’ feedback in the survey. In an attempt to find out how the students perceive Taboo as a way of helping them to learn, a after-class student survey (see Appendix) was devised for individual student responses after class. 51 copies of the questionnaire were handed out to the investigated class and all of them were collected back when completed. The result shows that 47 students like the Taboo strategy, four students neither like it nor dislike it and none dislikes it. This means that approximately 92.1 percent of the students react favourably to thinking skills lessons and the main reasons given for liking them were found to be as follows:

- 1) It is fun and easier to learn in a group;
- 2) Different ideas can be shared;
- 3) Getting more chances to think and talk;
- 4) Learning to listen to others.

For 7.8 percent of those who neither like nor dislike thinking skills lessons, they simply stated “I do not mind doing them” or quite neutral words to that effect.

When the students were asked to circle aspects that they think have been improved in Taboo (See question 3 in Appendix), they most circled more than one aspect provided in the survey. **Table 1** shows the number of all students mentioning each item.

Table 1. Aspects improved by means of Taboo.

Aspects improved by means of Taboo	Number of all students mentioning it
Discussion	47
Listening to other people’s ideas	42
Explaining my ideas	35
Others	3

The three choices provided in the questionnaire are widely accepted as most apparent effects in terms of a thinking skills lesson. Numbers in the table indicate that all of them have been achieved in thinking skills lessons, especially “discussion” with a number of 47 students (92.1%) choosing it. As for others, there were only three students mentioning it with two identifying “cooperation” specifically and one stating “creativity”.

It is useful to be reminded of Vygotsky's concept of 'the zone of proximal development' (ZPD), which "refers to a situation where a child cannot yet do something unaided, but can do it with help of a teacher" ([2], p: 30). To conclude the impact of a thinking skills intervention on pedagogy and the classroom environment, well-conducted thinking skills strategy is such a ZPD, where both students' intellectual development and teachers' professional development can be accelerated.

4. Challenges in Implementing Taboo and Their Suggested Solutions

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that Taboo as a thinking skills strategy has gained positive value in ELT. However, getting most teachers to implement Taboo in their classes may be a challenge. First, it is time constraints. Furthermore, it is the resistance to student-centered approaches in teacher-dominated contexts. Also, the influence of specific cultural tradition in different educational contexts may not be ignored.

4.1. Time Constraints

Generally, teaching thinking is a time-consuming task, as it takes time to think. What's more, apart from teaching the overcrowded knowledge content of the subject, teachers have to spend extra time focusing on their students' thinking in the class [2]. Take the sample lesson for example. More than 15 minutes are spent on "lead-in" while it takes less than 5 minutes for most classes, and some classes even skip it to save time for language structure exercises. Besides the time inside the class, it takes teachers more time outside the class to prepare for a lesson if they plan to implement a thinking skills strategy. Dr. A said she had spent double more time on the preparation of Taboo than a normal lesson.

In this respect, it is firstly suggested that low-cognitive activities, such as dictation, instruction of grammar, should be reduced in the class and arranged before or after class. Secondly, teachers have a very well-prepared lesson plan and thus increase the efficiency of the class. As for the workload of teachers, it can be reduced if they can work collaboratively as a team and the burden of preparation for the lesson can be reduced.

4.2. Resistance to Student-Centered Approaches in Teacher-Dominated Contexts

The Chinese education ministry has encouraged the student-centred approaches in the educational settings, but there has been a distance between the ideal and the practice. Resistance from the traditional attitude of "teacher-centred" that students receive passively rather than give information and thoughts actively results in another apparent problem in terms of implementing a thinking skills strategy. However, education today has changed considerably due to the advent of AI. Teaching and learning therefore needs to be reflected upon and re-examined. Teachers have to change their view and thus change their teaching methodology to prepare

their students for the changeable world.

4.3. Cultural Tradition of “Authority of Teachers” in China

Apart from the general problems mentioned above, China may have its own special difficulty if adopting thinking skills for teaching in the Chinese educational context. China has the tradition of valuing highly the “authority of teachers”, which may date from the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). It is believed that teachers are the font of truth and wisdom and they must be respected and believed in. Thus it is common to see that most students tend to be silent and hesitant to express their opinions in the class even though they know what to say or have been encouraged to do so. Though it has improved since both teachers and students have realized that two-way communication is one of crucial elements in effective teaching and learning, it needs great efforts to reach a satisfactory standard.

Maybe it is very threatening for teachers who are used to being respected and powerful in the classroom to change such a strong attitude in a short time. However, it is possible to change it in the long term if teachers learn to be broad-minded, since it is noted above that questioning requires a climate of openness in the classroom. Gradually, students may feel comfortable to express their opinions in the class. A thinking skills lesson will thus go on smoothly with their involvement.

To help these teachers change their attitude, it requires expertise training in teaching thinking skills, including showing them a model thinking skills lesson, which may let them perceive the obvious difference from a lesson without a thinking skills intervention, reasons for implementing thinking skills and strategies for achieving it. At the same time, workshops and seminars should be available for the sake of the communication between teachers.

5. Conclusions

Jean Piaget noted last century, “The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done” ([6], p: 29). Therefore, we need young people with thinking skills. A way forward to enhance the development of thinking skills is through thinking skills strategies. Taboo strategy has justified its positive existence as a thinking skills strategy in ELT by its contributions to pedagogy and the classroom environment. Though the focus of this investigation is on Taboo in ELT, the three stages of implementing Taboo may work as a framework for other thinking skills strategies. Also, it is intended to place it in the teaching context in different courses, since, as noted above, the explosion of interest in the idea of teaching thinking is world-wide.

It is hoped that the sample lesson with Taboo can be the blueprint for designing experiences in the classroom that increase the likelihood of thinking skills. It is also hoped that teachers, themselves, have perceived their important role in changing our youth from passive recipients to active thinkers.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix: A Student Survey

I would like your help in evaluating Taboo as a way of helping you to learn, so please fill in the questionnaire. Thank you!

1) Do you enjoy the activity of Taboo? Please circle the statement that you most agree with.

- I liked it.
- I neither liked nor disliked it.
- I did not like it.

2) Could you give a reason or reasons for your answer to question 1?

3) What do you think you have learnt from Taboo? Please circle the one or ones that you most agree with.

- Discussion
- Listening to other people's ideas
- Explaining my ideas
- Others _____ (Please state it specifically)