

## LINGUISTIC TABOO IN *THAI* EFL CLASSROOM

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### Abstract:

Potentially, there exists language phenomenon in every society such as taboo words or expressions. Taboo word occurred in the society as a part of the culture which perhaps are different in terms of meaning and form. Certainly, those taboo words will be disadvantage to EFL/ESL learning if they resemble to the English words. This study was intended to investigate 1) the existence of *taboo* words used in daily verbal communication in Thai society; 2) how the taboo words implicate to Thai learners' EFL learning. This study was qualitative which employed the researchers themselves as the key instrument. The subjects of the study which also became the source of the data were Southern Thai EFL learners. The data were collected by using interview and documentation. The data analysis was conducted in three stages: reducing data, displaying the data, and drawing conclusion or verifying the data. The findings revealed that there existed a lot taboo words in Thai society.

**Keywords:** *Linguistic taboo, EFL classroom*

### I. Introduction

The reality that there must exist language phenomena in every society such as taboo in the form of words or other language expression. Taboo word is a social possession which is strongly influenced by culture that seems to be different from society to society. In other word, there has been a relationship between taboo words (language property of society) and the culture. It is in line with Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in Blount (1974) which incorporates two paramount theories: the theory of linguistic relativity (weak version) and linguistic determinism (strong version). Within the theory of linguistic relativity, it is implied that different ways of interpreting the same world are caused by different cultural backgrounds of the interpreters and that languages encode these differences. The theory of linguistic relativity underlines that the content of every culture is brought about by its language. The theory of determinism states that not only does world-view of speakers of certain language influence their language, but also that the language they use profoundly affects how they think. In such a sense, language is metaphorized as a tyrant both reflecting the speaker's experiences, and, not defining it, imposing upon his/her particulars and ideas about the world. Thus, language is

the shaper of ideas rather than a merely reproducing instrument for voicing them (Thomas & Wareing, 1999).

Undisputedly, taboo, as the other language phenomena do, exists in almost even all cultures and has been the property of society. Taboo is culturally defined depending on how a particular cultural group perceives it. Culture is a system of shared meanings that are expressed through different symbolic forms such as symbols, rituals, stories, and myths that hold a group of people together. Considerably, taboo words must be found in most, if not all, cultures and languages in the world. However, taboo words vary so much from society to society or culture to culture. Taboo is a way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behavior believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behavior is held to violate moral code (Wardough, 1988: 230). Tabooed subjects can vary widely such as sex, death, bodily functions, religious matters and left hand. They range through wacky (nudity), profane (swearing), topical (designer babies), downbeat (do you get depressed?), personal (cheating on your partner), slightly cheesy (gays and jobs) and extremely touchy (and possibly dangerous) and so on and so forth. Freud's taboo deals with on occasion as a form of verbal seduction, e.g., 'talking dirty'.

Something should be underlined that language taboo may occur in any kind of society or culture. Particular words are not supposed to be taboo. Particular words appear to be taboo when their meaning are denoted or associated to the culture of other languages. They may be also considered as taboo when their meaning can violate moral code of other particular culture. Thus, taboo potentially arise from bilingual situations (Haas in Wardough, 1988:230). Presumably, taboo words are also found in Thai language. Thai people, the children in the school of age have been becoming bilinguals. Instead of speaking Thai as their daily lingua franca, the children learn English as the foreign language which is an obligatory subject of school.

As the other Asian people belief, in Thai culture, taboo words as the result as well as a part of cultural norm and values should be strongly held by the society. Therefore, the value will be kept and heredited from generation to generation. One of the ways to retain the value is via education. However, to conserve the value by

educating them to the children or students will not be easy. The students , particularly the EFL learners must be affected by the existence of taboo words in their society.

Potentially, in the area of teaching and education particularly EFL teaching in Thai classes, taboo words as language phenomenon are considered to give implication. It is frequently found that a word of a particular language appears to be taboo in other language. The different of conception of words potentially will be disadvantage to the learners. Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (1957). Moreover, Banathy, Trager, and Waddle (1966) assert that "... the change that has to take place in the language behavior of a foreign language student can be equated with the differences between the structure of the student's native language and culture and that of the target language and culture".

Based on the rationale, the present study tried to investigate the existence of taboo words which are used in daily verbal communication in Thai society. The study also aimed at finding out the implication of taboo words to Thai learners' EFL learning.

## **II. Method**

The study was a qualitative in nature, using a multi-site study requiring many sites or subjects (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998), i.e. the subjects in this study were Thai EFL learners and adults in Southern part of Thailand. The design of this study was descriptive as it tried to describe narrative data represented in the form of words. The key instruments were the researchers themselves with the knowledge of Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics. The source of data was the teachers and Thai EFL learners and the data were Thai taboo words. The procedures in collecting data were schemed in the following: 1) gathering Thai language corpus (words, idiom, phrase) which were still in use and categorized as *taboo* in Thai society; 2) interviewing the Thai EFL learners to dig up information about their recognition and perception on English vocabulary in their EFL learning. The data analysis was conducted inductively in three stages: reducing data, displaying data, and drawing

conclusion or verifying the data on the basis of the procedures suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984).

### III. Result and Discussion

Thai Words	Thai Graphic System	Thai-English Equivalent Homophonic Words	Meaning
yed	เย็ด	yet	fuck
khi	ขี้	key	excrement
hii	หี	he	clitoris, vagina
doo	ดอ	door	penis
he-ar	เอี้ย	here	A dog you are

The data obtained using interview and documentation indicated that the many Thai words were categorized as *taboo*. The words which closely similar to English words in term of pronunciation (homophonic) or spelling (homographic) are claimed to be taboo in Thai culture. Thus, Thai EFL learners avoided to use the words, whereas those words are basic and most frequently used in daily English communication.

The learners were hindered to acquire some English vocabularies. They felt awkward to learn and use some English words which resembled to Thai words which unfortunately implied taboo. The fact that religious faith and cultural norms the Thai people held forbad the EFL learners to use *taboo* words in any context.

Certainly, this condition was not beneficial to the learners' EFL learning. The process of language component (vocabulary) acquisition took a longer time since the students could not directly accept it as the materials they had to learn. It lasted until they realized that the acquiring the language component (vocabulary) caould not be postponed anyamore.

#### ***The implication of The Phenomenon to EFL Teaching***

Realizing that taboo words existed in Thai culture, the EFL teachers in Southern Thailand should be aware in preparing everything prior to performing the instruction especially in the matter of learning materials. The teachers should not directly introduce the materials, in this case English words, to the learners at the very early stage of instruction. It is important to take into consideration to give

initial learning and understanding to the learners about values and norm across cultures. The learners should recognize the contrast between their mother tongue (Thai) and English. In shorth, the proposition of cultural norms-soluted language instruction should be considered and taught appropriately to reduce the learners' inner cultural conflict or shock.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendation**

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be drawn that the *taboo* words were found in Thai society. Those words remained and were used by Thai people especially in Southern part of Thailand in daily verbal communication. It is also concluded that *Taboo* words became hinderence for Thai learners learning EFL.

It is worth to conduct other research with larger data to get more logical and empirical evidences about *taboo* words. It will be beneficial in the future research to explore more the and its implication to EFL learning.

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