

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION OF TABOO LANGUAGE USE AND ATTITUDES AMONG ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS AT UIN SUMATERA UTARA

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ABSTRAK

This study investigates the use of taboo language and students' attitudes toward taboo expressions among English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara. Taboo language is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that reflects the interaction between language, culture, and society. With the increasing influence of digital media, students are frequently exposed to taboo expressions through social media platforms, films, television series, online videos, and other forms of English-language communication. This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to 30 English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara. The findings reveal that students are highly exposed to English taboo language, particularly through digital media. However, most respondents reported using taboo language only in informal situations and avoiding it in academic or formal settings. The study also found that students generally recognize the importance of understanding taboo language as part of English language learning while acknowledging that its use should be adjusted according to social and cultural norms. Furthermore, students perceive the acceptability of taboo language as dependent on context, interpersonal relationships, and cultural background. These findings suggest that English Education students possess a relatively high level of sociolinguistic awareness regarding the appropriate use of taboo language in different communicative situations.

Keywords: Taboo Language, Sociolinguistics, Language Attitudes, English Education Students, Language Use.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool for human communication and social interaction. Beyond its communicative function, language also reflects cultural values, social identities, and interpersonal relationships. Sociolinguistics, as a branch of linguistics, examines the relationship between language and society and investigates how social factors influence language use and variation (Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Through language, individuals express not only information but also emotions, attitudes, and social identities within different communicative contexts.

One linguistic phenomenon that has attracted considerable attention in sociolinguistic studies is taboo language. Allan and Burridge (2006) define taboo language as words, expressions, or linguistic forms that are socially restricted because they are associated with topics considered sensitive, offensive, or inappropriate within a particular culture. Such expressions commonly relate to sexuality, religion, bodily functions, death, and profanity. Although taboo language is generally discouraged in formal communication, it remains prevalent in everyday interactions and serves various communicative functions, including expressing emotions, emphasizing messages, creating humor, relieving frustration, and establishing social solidarity (Jay, 2000).

The rapid development of digital technology and globalization has significantly increased exposure to authentic English-language communication. Through social media platforms, online gaming, movies, television series, music, and other digital content, English language learners frequently encounter taboo expressions in English. As a result, students

are increasingly familiar with taboo language despite receiving limited formal instruction regarding its sociocultural meanings and appropriate usage. Previous research has indicated that digital media has become one of the primary sources through which students are exposed to taboo language and informal linguistic expressions (Nurhayati & Sari, 2021).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of taboo language is strongly influenced by social and cultural factors. The acceptability of taboo expressions often depends on the relationship between speakers, communicative purposes, cultural norms, and situational contexts. Expressions that may be considered acceptable among close friends can be regarded as inappropriate or offensive in academic, professional, or formal settings (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Therefore, understanding taboo language requires not only linguistic knowledge but also sociocultural awareness and pragmatic competence.

Language attitudes also play a crucial role in determining how individuals perceive and respond to taboo language. According to Meyerhoff (2019), language attitudes refer to individuals' beliefs, evaluations, and feelings toward particular language forms or linguistic behaviors. In the context of taboo language, attitudes may vary significantly depending on cultural background, educational experiences, personal beliefs, and social environments. While some individuals view taboo expressions as offensive and unacceptable, others consider them a natural aspect of informal communication.

Previous studies have investigated taboo language in various contexts, including films, song lyrics, social media discourse, online communication, and everyday conversations. These studies have demonstrated that taboo language serves multiple communicative functions and reflects important social and cultural values. However, most previous research has focused on the classification and functions of taboo language or its occurrence in media content. Relatively few studies have examined both taboo language use and attitudes simultaneously among English language learners, particularly within Indonesian higher education contexts.

Furthermore, research focusing specifically on English Education students remains limited. As future English teachers and language professionals, English Education students represent an important group for investigating sociolinguistic awareness and language attitudes. Understanding how these students use and perceive taboo language may provide valuable insights into language learning, intercultural communication, and pragmatic competence.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate taboo language use and attitudes among English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara. Specifically, the study seeks to identify patterns of taboo language use, examine students' attitudes toward taboo language, and explore their perceptions regarding the acceptability of taboo expressions in different communicative contexts. The findings are expected to contribute to sociolinguistic research and provide a better understanding of language behavior among English language learners in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. Quantitative research was chosen because the study aimed to collect numerical data regarding students' use of taboo language and their attitudes toward taboo expressions. The quantitative approach enabled the researcher to identify patterns, frequencies, and perceptions of taboo language among English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Respondents' Demographic Information

A total of 30 English Education students from UIN Sumatera Utara participated in this study. The respondents consisted of male and female students from different age groups.

Table 1 Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	23	76.7%
Male	7	23.3%
Total	30	100%

The table shows that female students constituted the majority of participants, accounting for 76.7% of the sample, while male students represented 23.3%.

Table 2 Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20 years old	16	53.3%
21 years old	10	33.3%
22 years old	3	10.0%
23 years old and above	1	3.3%
Total	30	100%

The findings indicate that most respondents were 20 years old. This suggests that the participants generally belonged to a similar age group and educational background.

2. Patterns of Taboo Language Use

To answer the first research question, respondents were asked about their exposure to and use of English taboo language.

Table 3 Exposure to English Taboo Language

Indicator	Percentage
Frequently hear taboo language on social media	86.7%
Encounter taboo language in movies and online videos	83.3%
Able to recognize common English taboo expressions	66.7%

The results indicate that English Education students are highly exposed to taboo language through digital media. Social media platforms, movies, television series, and online videos appear to be the primary sources of exposure.

This finding reflects the increasing role of globalization and digital communication in language learning. Students are frequently exposed to authentic English expressions, including taboo language, outside formal educational environments.

Table 4 Use of Taboo Language in Communication

Indicator	Percentage
Sometimes use taboo language in daily conversations	36.7%
Use taboo language more often in informal situations	50.0%
Use taboo language with close friends	66.7%
Avoid taboo language in academic settings	70.0%

Although exposure to taboo language is relatively high, actual use remains limited. Most respondents reported that they use taboo language only occasionally and primarily in informal interactions.

The findings suggest that students are aware of sociolinguistic norms governing language appropriateness. They tend to avoid taboo expressions in academic and formal contexts while considering them more acceptable among close friends.

3. Students' Attitudes Toward Taboo Language

The second research question focused on students' attitudes toward taboo language.

Table 5 Students' Attitudes Toward Taboo Language

Statement	Percentage
Taboo language is acceptable among close friends	56.7%
Taboo language should not be used in formal situations	80.0%
Understanding taboo language is important for English learners	73.3%
Learning English helps understand taboo expressions	83.3%

The data reveal that students generally hold balanced attitudes toward taboo language. While they recognize its presence in everyday communication, they do not view it as appropriate in all contexts.

A large majority agreed that taboo language should be avoided in formal situations. At the same time, students acknowledged the importance of understanding taboo expressions as part of developing English language proficiency and communicative competence.

These findings support the idea that language learners need sociocultural knowledge in addition to grammatical competence.

4. Perceptions of Contextual Acceptability

The third research question investigated how students perceive the acceptability of taboo language across different communicative situations.

Table 6 Contextual Acceptability of Taboo Language

Indicator	Percentage
Offensiveness depends on context	56.7%
Cultural background influences perception	73.3%
Acceptability depends on social relationship	73.3%
Social media increases exposure to taboo language	66.7%

The results indicate that respondents do not perceive taboo language as inherently inappropriate. Instead, they evaluate its acceptability based on contextual factors such as social relationships, cultural norms, and communicative purposes.

Most students agreed that cultural background significantly influences how taboo language is interpreted. Similarly, the relationship between speakers was considered an important factor in determining whether taboo expressions are acceptable.

This demonstrates that students possess sociolinguistic awareness regarding language variation and contextual appropriateness.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara navigate the complexities of taboo language in their linguistic repertoire. By examining the intersection of exposure, actual usage, language attitudes, and contextual perceptions, this discussion elaborates on the sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic awareness possessed by these future English teachers.

1. The Paradox of High Exposure and Restricted Usage

The descriptive statistical analysis reveals a fascinating sociolinguistic phenomenon: a sharp contrast between the students' high level of exposure to taboo language and their relatively restrained usage in daily communication.

- **The Role of Digital Globalization:** The data shows that 86.7% of respondents frequently hear taboo language on social media, and 83.3% encounter it in movies and online videos. This confirms that digital media serves as a primary, borderless vehicle for language acquisition outside the classroom. In the modern digital era, English language learners are no longer restricted to pedagogical, sanitized classroom input. Instead, they are actively engaging with authentic, unfiltered English discourse online.
- **Selective Language Production:** Despite this saturation, only 36.7% of students report using taboo language in daily conversations. This gap indicates that high input does not automatically translate into high output. The students do not merely mimic the language they consume online. Instead, they filter their linguistic production through a conscious framework of social appropriateness and cultural boundaries.

2. Sociolinguistic Awareness and Contextual Adaptability

From a sociolinguistic perspective, a speaker's capacity to alter their linguistic style according to the social setting is a hallmark of communicative competence (Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). The English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara demonstrate a high level of this competence.

- **Audience and Setting Segregation:** The findings indicate that 66.7% of respondents use taboo language exclusively with close friends, while 50.0% utilize it more often in informal situations. Conversely, a robust 70.0% actively avoid taboo language in academic settings.
- **The Function of Solidarity:** Utilizing taboo language among close peers suggests that these expressions are not used with malicious or offensive intent. Rather, in line with Jay (2000) and Beers Fägersten (2012), taboo words serve an interpersonal function to establish social solidarity, reinforce in-group membership, and create a relaxed atmosphere of intimacy among friends.
- **Situational Shifting:** When moving into academic spaces, students seamlessly shift their register, demonstrating respect for institutional hierarchies and cultural expectations. This clear segregation proves that students are highly sensitive to situational appropriateness (Stapleton, 2010).

3. Dualism in Language Attitudes: Pragmatic Comprehension vs. Productive Restraint

The attitudes held by the respondents reflect a nuanced dualism. They draw a sharp line between the necessity of understanding taboo language and the acceptability of producing it.

- **The Importance of Pragmatic Literacy:** An overwhelming majority of students agreed that learning English helps understand taboo expressions (83.3%) and that understanding taboo language is vital for English learners (73.3%). As future English educators, these students recognize that taboo language is an undeniable, intrinsic part of the living English language. To achieve true pragmatic competence and cross-

cultural literacy, a learner must comprehend taboo expressions to avoid accidental offenses, interpret media accurately, and understand native speakers' emotional states.

- The Constraint of Professional Identity: However, 80.0% of respondents firmly agree that taboo language should not be used in formal situations. This strong consensus likely stems from their identity as English Education students. In the Indonesian cultural context—particularly at an Islamic state university like UIN Sumatera Utara—teachers are viewed not only as instructors but also as moral role models (*uswatun hasanah*). Therefore, their negative attitude toward producing taboo language in formal settings aligns with the preservation of their future professional identity and cultural values.

4. Perceptions of Fluid Acceptability and Cultural Relativity

One of the most critical insights from this study is that students do not perceive taboo language through a rigid, black-and-white moral lens. Instead, they view it as a fluid, dynamic linguistic phenomenon whose value is entirely dependent on external variables.

- Relativity of Offensiveness: The data indicates that 56.7% of students believe offensiveness depends entirely on context. Furthermore, 73.3% agree that interpersonal relationships and cultural backgrounds dictate acceptability. This perspective aligns closely with the pragmatic assertions of Jay and Janschewitz (2008), who argue that the weight of a taboo word is determined by who says it, to whom it is said, and where it is uttered.
- Navigating Western Media vs. Indonesian Culture: The high agreement on the influence of cultural background (73.3%) highlights the intercultural navigation that these students perform daily. They possess the cognitive flexibility to understand that while an English taboo word might be throwaway humor in a Western Hollywood film, its direct usage or translation within the local Indonesian, polite society could be deeply offensive. This indicates that their sociolinguistic awareness is doubly layered: they understand the pragmatic rules governing native English speakers while simultaneously respecting the sociocultural and religious norms of their immediate Indonesian environment

CONCLUSION

This study investigated taboo language use and attitudes among English Education students at UIN Sumatera Utara. The findings revealed that students are frequently exposed to English taboo language through social media, films, television series, and other forms of digital communication.

Although students are familiar with taboo expressions, they do not regularly use them in daily communication. Most respondents reported avoiding taboo language in formal and academic settings while considering it more acceptable in informal interactions among close friends.

The study also found that students generally have positive attitudes toward understanding taboo language as part of English language learning. However, they believe that its use should be regulated according to social and cultural norms.

Finally, students perceive the acceptability of taboo language as highly dependent on context, cultural background, and interpersonal relationships. These findings demonstrate that English Education students possess a considerable degree of sociolinguistic awareness regarding taboo language and its appropriate use.

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