

## Iranian EFL Learners' Perception of English Taboo Words

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**Abstract:** *This study is aimed to investigate the perception that Iranian EFL male and female learners have of taboo words. Therefore, 100 Iranians EFL learners were invited to participate in the study to see whether there is any statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female learners regarding the perception of taboo words in terms of gender differences. Participants' homogeneity was measured through Oxford Quick Placement Test. The project used a researcher-made questionnaire to elicit data from participants. The results suggest that there is a statistically significant difference with the effect size of 0.3 between Iranian EFL female and male learners in the perception of English taboo words. i.e., Iranian EFL female learners took taboo words more severely. Finally, based on the findings of this study, gender difference plays a key role in offensiveness or inoffensiveness of English taboo words.*

**Keywords:** *Taboo Words, EFL Learners, gender differences, offensiveness*

### Introduction

#### 1. Introduction

Language, like culture, is constantly changing. As language changes, societies' attitudes towards words considered offensive are too. In all cultures around the world, linguistic taboo words exist. Words which are avoided and loaded with emotional force and deemed to be offensive. Jay (2009) defines taboo terms as "offensive emotional language". Or Akindele and Adegbite (1999) portray taboo as immoral and improper. Taboo words, as the time goes by, undergo some changes in meaning or offensiveness, say they sometimes become more offensive sometimes less offensive or even drop their offensiveness. Anderson and Trudgil (1990) state that offensiveness of taboos vary i.e. rise or drop depending on where and when a taboo word or to whom it is directed and when it is used! Jay & Janchewitz (2008), Mabry (1974), Wells (1989) all argue that contextual variables are a major determinant of word offensiveness and inoffensiveness.

Taboo words can be associated with sex such as 'fuck', religion such as 'for Christ's sake', bodily functions such as 'piss', race or ethnicity such as 'white trash and Negro', scatological stuff such as 'shit', death such as 'go to the hell'. Taboo words fall into four categories: expletive, abusive, humorous, auxiliary (Anersson & Trudgil, 1990). Expletive: expressions of this category are used to express emotions of surprise, exasperation, annoyance and frustration

etc. but these taboos are not directed to anybody. Abusive: taboos of this category are directed towards others, they are derogatory and extremely offensive including name-calling and different types of ethnic and racial slurs. Humorous: L2 learners need to know that English taboo words are not always abusive or aggressive. They can also be playful rather than offensive. Like abusive expressions they are targeted at a particular individual or thing but unlike those, these are not offensive. Auxiliary: These taboos are not directed towards a person or situation. They are always or often non-emphatic. The first two ones (abusive and expletive) are major categories. Heins (2007) and Mc Enery (2006) emphasize that it is obvious that when to a particular person or thing or even society, taboo words are directed, they do do harm.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Linguistic taboo and swear words, due more to the strong charge they carry, can outrage, shock and surprise people. It has generally been accepted that men and women neither speak nor perceive language in an exactly same way. That how people take it or react to such strong language, hinges on how severe they find it. A taboo word, on which one is frowned, might be interesting to another and vice versa. It is unclear to what extent sex differences influence EFL interlocutors' analyses and perception of expletives. In this regard, no comprehensive research and studies have been performed in Iran; therefore, not much pathology has been done to see pros and cons of taboo word field and if its inclusion or exclusion is in favor of EFL learners or against.

Offensiveness of taboo words in Iran, where English is taught as a foreign language may not be as much offensive as English native speakers take them. A multitude of factors are at play, as one of the factors, gender can play a vividly chief role and account for diversity in attitudes to f-words. It has been generally accepted that in many speech communities females are more status conscious and it must fit the sexual stereotype of women in Iran due to pervasive religious atmosphere. In this study, gender is crux of the matter and known as an independent variable.

## 3. Significance of the Study

Not many studies have been carried out on the area of taboo and its interpretation from a masculine or feminine standpoint in Iran. The researcher has been unable to find any studies having explored opinions and attitudes of Iranian EFL students or professors on and towards English taboos. As a result, findings of this study can expand generalizations in the field of discourse and sociolinguistics.

Language is interwoven with culture. Therefore, how individuals perceive the language, react to it depends on the culture they were born or raised in. Wardhaugh (1998) argues that language is a bearer of culture and understanding a given culture is a key to learning and comprehending its language. Through language Romaine (2000), maintains that social and cultural patterns are

being reflected. So as to function and react properly in a given society or community, speakers should be armed with the knowledge of culture. Having such know-how permits speakers to express their social identity, discourse and sociolinguistic competence.

Accordingly, taboo language is deemed to be an indispensable truism of everyday English language. In today's Iran, being exposed to English footages, music videos, movies etc., L2 speakers hear taboo words in every conversation. Admittedly, this linguistic area is a key factor of English and in order to understand culture in-depth, knowledge of taboo words is necessary.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The present study tries to investigate gender differences, which are involved in analyzing and perceiving four-letter words amongst Farsi-speaking learners of English and severity of such taboo words from Iranian EFL males and females' perspectives and those of the English. This is to see whether gender makes any difference or whether there is any significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female speakers as to the perception of taboo words, furthermore whether there is any significant difference in the way Iranian male and female EFL learners and British native speakers take them. Sex and its role are to be considered as an independent variable.

This study is also aimed at new dimension of English language as the process of globalization where English is taught as a foreign language at universities, schools and institutes. On the other hand, for not much research has been carried out until nearly recently into English taboo words and the positive or negative roles they can play in school curriculum, the study is to shed light into issue.

#### 5. Research Question

*Is there any statistically significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners regarding perception of taboo words?*

#### 6. Literature Review

Al-Khatib (1995) made an attempt to analyze linguistic taboos in Jordanian Arabic. He depicted the generation and use of taboos and discussed the ways to avoid linguistic taboos in Jordanian Arabic. He figured out that Jordanian linguistic taboos were in complete harmony with Leech (1964), theory postulating that words are subject to a strict set of rules which is agreed on by community of practice and the reality they demonstrate and the meaning they carry is a precondition for communication. The use and perception of taboo words have been investigated in regard to both monolinguals and bilinguals. To see if taboo words would stand out from neutral words, Lieury *et al.* (1997) found that taboo words were four times greater than neutral words in long-term recall. In order to investigate independent variables such as sex, age, social class, generational gap and their effects on the use and frequency of taboo words sociolinguists

have undertaken some studies albeit in short supply. Rayson *et al.* (1997) argue that age could have a far-fetching bearing on the use of expletives, on the other hand, social class could have no considerable effect. Stenstorm (1995), observed no gender difference in choice and frequency of taboo words amongst teenagers but she found that boy use intensifiers (bloody, damn, fucking etc.) less often than girls but a broader set of taboo terms than girls. In an investigation by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001), New Zealand university students' taboo word usage was explored through qualitative analysis of casual unstructured dialogues and purpose-oriented and more structured conversation. Little gender difference in terms of severity of expletives was found. It also was noticed that females tend to swear less slightly than males. These studies indicate taboo words psycholinguistically stand out and their use is associated with sex and generational differences.

Both psycholinguistic and psychoanalytic case studies account for the greater emotional resonance that the first language has vis-à-vis the second language.

Amati-Mehler *et al.* (1993), stated that previously learnt language namely, L1 has a more robust emotional resonance than the language later learnt in life. Gonzalez-Reigosa (1976), Javier (1989) in their studies on emotional vocabulary in L1 and L2 languages of bilinguals showed that they had a greater emotional resonance in L1 language than the language they had learned beyond early childhood. In an study about perception and self-reported English expletives used by university ESL learners in USA, males were found to comprehend and use more taboo words than females (Register, 1996).

## **7. Method**

### **7.1. Participants**

At the beginning, 146 Iranian EFL learners participated in the study. After they were administered Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) they were reduced to 100. Men were 37 and women 63. They were either students or university professors or institute instructors aged 19 to 62. Those who were students were doing English as their academic courses of study at Iranian Azad or State-run universities. Their courses of study were sub-disciplines of English language in Iran, namely English Translation, EFL and English Literature. Students were mostly postgraduates who were studying English at universities to get a Master's Degree or a Ph.D. A few of them were junior and senior students in BA course. Except for 14 candidates who had PhDs and taught at universities, the rest were administered an OQPT (Oxford Quick Placement Test) at the beginning. If they could pass the exam with a passing mark (cut-off point is 40) they were allowed to have the questionnaire.

### **7.2. Instrumentation**

Two instruments were employed to gather the necessary data;

#### **1. OQPT**

## 2. Taboo Words Battery

### 7.2.1. OQPT

The test developed by Oxford University was used to determine participants' level of language proficiency. It consists of 60 multiple-choice items. According to this test, participants were divided into 3 groups of low, middle and high regarding their language proficiency. Those candidates whose scores are from 0-29 are regarded as the low group, 30-47 as the middle group (lower and upper intermediates) and advanced students are in high group with scores from 48-60. For this study, assupper intermediate and advanced-level students are assumed to be well-suited.

### 7.2.2. Taboo Words Battery

Since there was no right taboo word battery for the purpose of polling people as to how severely they think of taboo words, the researcher developed a questionnaire in which all commonly used taboos are included. The questionnaire is of 30 items. Each item consists of 5 response options on Likert scale (1. neither offensive nor inoffensive, 2. inoffensive, 3. offensive, 4. rather offensive, 5. very offensive). Taboo words in questionnaire were italicized and printed in bold as not to escape participants' attention. In order to compute reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was performed on 30 candidates; the computed Cronbach alpha was 0.78. Taboo words in terms of their severity fall into one-star, two-star, three-star or four-star word. One-stars are the least offensive and four-stars, the most (Swan, M., 2009). The researcher has tried to take this point into consideration. Some taboo words are specific to Americans and some to the English. In the questionnaire, this point was considered too to see e.g. 'screw' that is a four-letter word specific to Americans how offensive the English will take it.

## 8. Data collection Procedures

At first, OQPT were administered to candidate, if they were able to obtain the necessary score needed, namely, 40-60, they were handed a questionnaire to fill out. As regards sampling, for non-native speakers of English both probability sampling (random) and non-probability sampling (snowball and convenience) were employed.

## 9. Scoring rubrics

Each item is of five alternatives including 1. neither offensive nor inoffensive, 2. inoffensive, 3. offensive, 4. rather offensive, 5. very offensive. Therefore, scores 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are assigned to alternatives respectively.

## 10. Data analysis procedures

The present study is of a questionnaire-format design in which the collected data are analyzed quantitatively. Having collected data, the SPSS software (ver.16) was used. In particular, independent samples *t*-tests were employed to analyze the data and answer research questions.

## 11. Results & Discussion

### 11.1. Descriptive Statistics

As table1. illustrates the mean of Iranian EFL male learners is **98.45** and the mean of Iranian EFL female learners is **117.19**. Iranian EFL male learners have the standard deviation of **10.30** whereas that of Iranian EFL female learners is **15.31**. It indicates that amount of variation within Iranian EFL male learners' scores is smaller than Iranian EFL female learners'

**Table1. Descriptive Statistics for Iranian EFL Male and Female Learners**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Iranian females</b>	63	117.19	15.31
<b>Iranian males</b>	37	98.45	10.30

To answer the research question

*Is there any significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners regarding perception of taboo words?*

an independent sample *t*-test was run to investigate the differences between the two different groups, namely, Iranian EFL male learners and Iranian EFL female ones. Table 4.9 shows the results for Iranian EFL male learners [M=98.45, SD=10.30] and Iranian EFL female ones [M=117.19, SD=15.31]. The results reveal that the difference between the perception of these two groups is statistically significant [ $t(98) = 6.6, p = 0.00$ ], ( $p < 0.05$ , Sig., 0.004); therefore, the first null hypothesis is rejected.

**Table2 Independent samples *t*-test for Iranian EFL Male and Female Learners**

Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Female	Male		
117.19 15.31	98.45 (10.30)	6.60*	98

Note: \* =  $p \leq 0.05$ , Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means

## 11.2. Discussion

The results are quite in line with what Selnow (1985), found. In his study carried out to explore sex differences of undergraduate students in terms of perception and usage frequency of taboo words, he found that females had a lower opinion of taboo words used on television and formal settings as against men. On the other hand, males are more prolific users of expletives. Later, Johnson's findings (1993), subscribed to the claim that men use taboo words more frequently, furthermore, in public in contrast to women, men use more taboos.

The obtained result runs counter to Risch's study (1987), investigating derogatory terms used by 44 middle-class female university students, aged between 18-32. The study threw into question validity of the assumption that women are socially and linguistically conservative, ladylike and use less and milder taboo words than men. Her results suggest females compared to males use a surprisingly high number of offensive terms.

## 12. Conclusions

The major finding is that there is a considerable difference between males and females in Iran as to how they take English taboo words. The stereotype of females in Iran is that they ought to be modest, humble, easily shocked at taboo words or explicitly sex-related stuff. It is deeply rooted in Iranian culture that through the history, Iranian females have always been considered to feel embarrassed and offended when or where taboo words are heard or directed to them. Although Anderson and Trudgill (1997, p. 37) maintain that in a given society, people often have the same reactions to "filth, uncleanness, immorality or bad language" and although Iranian society is almost keeping pace with the process of globalization and going towards westernization willingly or unwillingly and although feminist movement and air of egalitarianism pervade it there is still a delineated boundary between females and males with regard to English taboos.

It is worth noting that in contrast with older females, the younger ones in Iran due to more exposure to English materials have more liberal attitudes towards English taboo words and feel emancipated nowadays but it per se doesn't tarnish the image of Iranian females. Base on the findings of this study it was found that concerning the perception of English taboo words there is a statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female learners. The findings are against an increasing number of studies that have shown the increased use of taboo words by women (Oliver & Rubin, 1975) or against those of Stapleton (2003) that gender differences does not play any role in the use of strong words. He found that both male and females resorted to using strong taboo words to obtain shared group goals.

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