

## UTILIZING CRITICAL THINKING AS MODEL FOR PEACE-BUILDING IN MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH CLASSES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

By

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### Abstract

*Prevalent political, social and economic driven conflicts in Nigeria make it a fragile country. These necessitate peace-building. Communication in English (CiE) is one of the General Studies (GS) courses in Nigerian Universities. The classes are multicultural drawing students from divergent cultural and pseudo-cultural backgrounds. As a result, this study was conceived with the intention of investigating the efficacy of adopting Critical Thinking (CT), a 21<sup>st</sup> Century skill, for peace-building in multicultural CiE classes. In order to achieve this, thirty (30) volunteers from different cultural and ideological leanings were exposed to seven CiE II topics as stipulated in the Benchmark Academic Standards (BMAS) of the National Universities Commission (NUC). They were taught via the CT model for fifteen weeks (two hours in each week). The first and the last weeks were for pre-test and post-test respectively. It was found that CT can be utilized to actuate affective disposition towards peace-building in multicultural CiE classes in Nigerian Universities in the participants. It is recommended that the class size reduction for CiE classes should be emphasized. In addition, the facilitators of the project should not only possess procedural and declarative knowledge of English language arts but must have the skills of pragmatics, conflict sensitivity and advocacy. It is envisioned that products of such multicultural English learning classes would contribute towards peace-building in a multicultural and fragile Nigeria.*

### Introductory Background

One of the primary aims of University education is the overall development of an individual so as to make one useful to oneself and humanity. The same aim is applicable to Nigerian Universities. Nigerian Universities are made up of students as well as teaching and non-teaching members of staff that are from divergent cultural backgrounds. The students are expected to take Communication in English at the first year and second year levels irrespective of their bias (National Universities Commission, 2007). Given the diverse cultural background of the students, the Communication in English class apparently becomes multicultural. Students come into the class with points of view (sometime highly opinionated and deep-rooted) that could trigger conflict. In consequence, the class needs to be conscious of this so as to engender classroom discourse that is in tandem with the tenets of the principles of politeness.

Nigeria is at present having a lot of conflict challenges thus the need for peace-building. Even though the National Universities Commissions Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (NUC, BMAS) has Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution (PSCR) as a core General Studies course, the communication in English of the General Studies programme can as well be used to complement what PSCR is doing with particular emphasis on peace-building. It is in the light of this that this study was conceived with the intention of establishing the efficacy of

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using critical thinking – a 21<sup>st</sup> Century skill – in Communication in English class to facilitate peace-building in a multicultural setting.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Societies all around the world are prone to conflict. Conflicts could be driven by several factors. In addition, Arum, Cho, Kim and Roksa (2012:5) reports that “Early experiences of economic hardships can have life-long consequences.” These consequences could include one’s inability to bear challenges without stirring conflicts. Even though there are reports that indicate that there could be no linear correlation between poverty and conflict, this paper argues that economic hardship could make one feel excluded thus disturbing existing peace.

The recent past, and current situation in Nigeria, reveals that there is no part of Nigeria that is not having some political, social or economic conflict no matter the degree. This has made it apposite for the University system to strategize towards developing peace-builders that would prevent conflicts and mitigate the effects of conflicts in the society. This is given the fact that conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution depend on the effectiveness of available conflict management mechanisms and the capacity of the peace-builders. Osundare (2005:29) counsels that for Universities to be citadels where the culture of enquiry is engendered, “our thinking will need to be bolder, more rigorous, more interrogative, more creative and more purposive.” A University whose mission and vision is driven by Osundare’s counsel would in a sense impact the society positively thus making the university an agent of peace-building.

One of the propellers of conflict is inability to accommodate differences. The differences could be political, social or economic. The General Studies class is made up of people that come from different cultural, status, demographic and related backgrounds. This could enhance or debilitate peaceful coexistence. For instance, Kramsch (2014:249) asserts that: “Globalization, coupled with global media and global communication technologies, has exacerbated the multiplicity of codes, media and ways of making meaning in everyday life.” This has led to a situation that two people who appear to come from the same cultural background could act differently on a particular substance depending on their exposure to, and belief in, the global setting. This individual background would influence how we view life thus leading to conflicts that are political, social or economic.

Gbeyonron (2014) reports the use of ethnocentric language by Nigerian from different ethno-linguistic background. In addition, Gbeyonron (2013) reports that language use could be misconstrued in a multilingual cum multicultural Communication in English classroom. In a work by Santos and Suleiman (1990:177) differences between American and Arab learners of English were revealed thus; “the depth of questioning about family affairs, health, and other private matters are culturally incompatible. Jokes are also culture-bound; what is humorous to an Arab might be outrageous to an American and vice versa”. In a work by Al-Alawi (2005:214) on what is obtainable in North American schools, it was found that the second language learners of English bring to class “... diversity of cultures, past experiences with different education backgrounds and perspectives concerning social and economic power structures. This tremendous diversity and lack of cultural commonality can lead to feeling of alienation, anxiety and tension.” The same situation is applicable in the Communication in English classroom in Nigeria. While it was expected that religion will bridge the gap of cultural

incongruence, it is evident that intra-sectarian differences abound. Alienation, tension and anxiety can drive conflicts.

It should be noted that mixed and large classes are made up of students that also have distinct learning styles and preferences even when there are near commonality in cultural background. Lavery (2001:19) asserts that in such classes: "... some may be very good in reading poems and understanding it, but not accustomed to discussing the meaning in English and lack the vocabulary to do so." In a situation like this, instead of English to serve as a tool of peace-building (as would be revealed in subsequent paragraphs in this work) it is serving as an instrument of alienation thus capable of driving conflict. For instance, Kennett (2011:315) considers English as a driver of conflict. He reports that in Sri Lanka; "In the past, English was considered divisive. The Sinhalese called it Kaduwa – the sword that cut between the classes ..."

It is pertinent to note that facilitators of Communication in English classroom discourse should not ignore the subjectivities learners of Communication in English bring to multicultural classes. These include ethno-centrism, stereotyping, cultural blindness, cultural imposition (Gbeyonron, 2014; Sultana, 2011). These enhance cultural shock and sometimes intolerance. Bloor and Bloor (2007:133) caution that "while tolerance of sexual or scatological taboo words has increased, pejorative terms denoting ethnicity or nationality have become less widely tolerated." Thus, there is the need for lexical sensitivity when involved in classroom discourse in multicultural classes. In this connection, The New London Group (2000:14) underscores that in multicultural classes where the aim is to enshrine global connectedness in spite of local diversity, interlocutors in classroom discourse need to learn how to "... negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects ..." Indeed, this is the only hope for averting the catastrophic conflicts about identities and spaces that now seem ever ready to flare up.

Given the multicultural nature of Nigeria and the Communication in English classroom, arguments abound in respect of the roles 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills, as domiciled in the University system, can play in engendering peace-building capacities in students and graduates. Such skills will make them acquire competencies that would make them active and effective members of the society in this era of global connectedness, competition and challenges (Graddol, 2010). One of such skills is critical thinking. Peace-building has been used in different senses. It was at a time regarded post-conflict activity that attempts to consolidate peace and prevent the recurrence of conflict. However, United Nations (2001) stresses that peace-building entail actions "... aimed at preventing the outbreak, the recurrence or continuation of armed conflict and therefore encompass a wide range of political, developmental, humanitarian and human rights programmes and mechanisms." According to Lo Bianco (2016:1) the concept *peacebuilding* "is generally understood to involve a range of measures to reduce the risk of a lapse or relapse into conflict by addressing causes and consequences of conflict." Thus, peace-building could be initiated by communities, gender-based organisations, youth organisations, local authorities, committees and other civil society organisations.

The University can breed peace-building. For instance, peace studies and conflict resolution is one of the courses in the General Studies Curriculum of Nigerian Universities (NUC, 2007). This course attempts to, among others, instil peace-building skills in the learners. However, in order to achieving peace studies and peace-building across the curriculum, the Communication in English curriculum could be utilized as an instrument for enhancing peace-

building capacity in the learners. According to Carrier (2013:1) English does not only open doors and provide opportunities for overall mobility via education but also allows "... people from diverse backgrounds to build a more positive intercultural dialogue." This implies that English like other local languages can be used to facilitate peace-building, reconciliation and stability. It is germane to note that all Nigerians cannot be considered to be members of the English speech community. The percentage of Nigerian users of English compared with that of speakers of Nigerian languages is insignificant (Iwara, 2008). However, it is expected that all Nigerian undergraduates need a working knowledge of English. As such, in order to use English for intercultural dialogue and peace-building, critical thinking is necessary.

Lai (2011:4) report that "more recently, the partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills has identified critical thinking as one of several learning and innovation skills necessary to prepare students for post-secondary education and the workforce." According to Facione (2000:61), critical thinking is all about "...judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe." This involves using cognitive and affective abilities to account for the actions one needs to take. Critical thinking is not only necessary in a language class but also propelled by language. Iwara (2008:3) underscores that "... language is a key factor in the thinking process, and is therefore, a critical tool in the development paradigm." It should be noted that peace is paramount in development.

Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William (2003:60) state that: "this process of making one's thinking explicit through talking is important for two reasons; it allows teacher some access into the students' thinking so they can intervene to address misconceptions or promote further learning." Furthermore, Sultana (2011:115) agrees that the goal of using critical thinking in the class is to "... attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each learner will feel included and valued, and will feel friendly and respectful toward people from other ethnic and cultural groups." This will involve utilizing the conversational and politeness principles that encourage quantity, quality, tactfulness, generosity, modesty etc. and political correctness. Gamble and Gamble (2005:132) states that "politically correct language is meant to take the sting of confrontations by blunting the sharpness of the words we use." Using politically correct language in a lesson that is aimed at peace-building would enhance confidence building and inclusiveness. This is given the fact that interlocutors reflect before the comments they make are uttered.

Critical thinking through English lessons has been used in peace-building. Kennett (2011:316) reports that in Sri Lanka a programme called STEP (Skills Through English for Public Servants) which combines good governance and development topics with skills in critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution was designed to make participants "... gain confidence in problem solving distinguishing factual information from media type, finding ways of achieving equity and diversity in deeply divided society and understanding the value of dissent." The project helped significantly in peace-building.

There is the need to reiterate that sensitivity is very important when using critical thinking in a Communication in English classroom that is targeted towards peace-building. Lack of sensitivity could mar the objective of the intervention. Smith (1998:633) underscores that "... social psychologists have identified factors that influence attitude change. They include the person delivering the message, the message itself, the medium of communication, and the audience." Retrospectively, this assertion agrees with Chomsky's (1967) which

postulates that "... actions that are cynical and vicious, whatever their intent, will inevitably condition and deface the quality of the ends that are achieved." Critical thinking therefore becomes very important because it would guide an interlocutor to weigh whatever they want to say on the basis of whether they are courteous. The facilitator of the classroom discourse should be objective so as to attract confidence as they coordinate the session with the aim of de-opinionating the students.

In using critical thinking in the communication in English classroom discourse, the facilitator should when establishing the ground rules make the students understand they are expected to be active in all on-task activities. Students need not be over-bearing in the quest of not being passive. The session must be conversational and interactive. According to Markee (1997:98) "... one-way information gaps, in which only one participant hold new or unknown information, promote less obligatory conversational adjustment than two-way tasks, in which all participants hold information that is necessary to solve a problem." Issues raised in peace-building-based classroom discourse should be addressed by a significant number of students using critical thinking skills.

The facilitator should also know that in using critical thinking to engender peace-building there is no one best approach. The approach that has the potency to solve problem should be encouraged. The context matters a lot. Bloor and Bloor (2007:133) assert that: "... it is dangerous to draw critical conclusions on the basis of the use of specific words, or even longer extracts, isolated from their context, socio-historical context and the intention of the author, as far as this is deductible." It should be noted that in using critical thinking for peace-building, the students may be given a newsletter or other written text or articles to analyze critically. The author's intention, co-text and context should serve as rudder for the establishment of objective conclusions. This would breed cognitive restructuring which seeks to transform distorted opinions and thinking.

The facilitator of the classroom discourse must have subject matter expertise in the topic of discourse. They must also have the skill of actuating the student to engage in dialogue. The New London Group (2000:15) emphasizes that: "when learners juxtapose different language, discourses, styles and approaches, they gain substantively in meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and the interactions." Critical thinking generates dialogues that expose manipulated logic, white lies and blatant falsehoods that have been fanning the embers of hate and exposing veiled distrusts.

Given that distorted opinion, negative beliefs, twisted reasoning, half falsehood and conscious lies pervade the mainstream media and the populace, the facilitators of critical thinking for peace-building has a big challenge. As such, Johnstone (2010:13) agrees that a teacher of English in multicultural classroom must be a pedagogue, a linguist, an intercultural communication community member and an advocate. As an advocate, the teacher is expected to address "... genuine misunderstandings and anxieties on the part of parents or possibly have to contend with views expressed through the media which is politically, ideologically and socially biased." The facilitator must do these so as to make critical thinking and critical literacy successful instruments for peace-building in multicultural Communication in English classes.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This study adopted Leech's (1983) principles of politeness and Lewis and Smith's (1993) product approach to critical thinking to provide impetus for its theoretical framework. Leech (1983) postulated six maxims in his principles of politeness. They are tact, generosity, agreement, sympathy, modesty and approbation. Only the first four have direct relevance to this study. The product approach to critical thinking is hinged on the fact that one cannot observe actual thought as such concentration is placed on the products of thought viz.; analysis, interpretation, formulation of good questions etc. As for the research design, pre-experimental research was utilized to test the efficacy of utilizing critical thinking to engender peace-building capacity in students of multicultural communication in English classroom.

The population of the study is the undergraduates who registered for Communication in English II (CiE II) in the 2015/2016 academic session at Yobe State University, Damaturu (YSU). The study was conducted at a time when Nigeria was recovering from the outcome of general elections that was characterized by hate speech – along religious and ethnic lines – and other primordial tendencies. The YSU is located in north-east, Nigeria which was still battling with the activities of non-state armed groups after a prolonged high monetary poverty rate, deficient infrastructure progress and weak macro-economic indices (Magrin & Perouse de Montclos, 2018). Thirty (30) students volunteered to be exposed to the following topics: phonetics, oral communication and public speaking, logical presentation of papers, report writing, lexis, précis and figures of speech via the critical thinking model. Contemporary issues that could trigger conflict were integrated in the teaching of the seven topics for fifteen weeks. Week one was for pre-test while week fifteen was for post test. The outcome of the pre-test was used as the determiner of the teaching approach as the six out of the seven topics were taught. It should be noted that emphasis was not placed on teaching peace-building across the curriculum when the topic *phonetics* was taught. Each contact week is for two hours. The volunteers were not only guided on how to develop oral and written speeches, write academic papers and reports but also the appropriate conflict sensitive words, phrasal verbs, idioms and figures of speech to use in the cause of writing. Issues were raised and discussed based on the principles of deconstruction and critical thinking with the researcher serving as a guide and advocate. The volunteers were given tasks that would prompt them to embark on self-study or autonomous learning in respect of each of the topics. They were asked to review newspaper columns, articles, audio and video materials on trending issues in Nigeria to shape their minds on how to respond to the issues of discourse. The outcome of the post-test was subjected to comparative analysis with the submission made by the volunteers during the pre-test via content analysis. The results of the experiment were unaudited given that the volunteers sat for examination in the mainstream CiE II.

## Results

The volunteers were asked to write an investigative report on the causes and impact of the armed insurgency associated with Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad (JAS) as pre-test. The pre-test as a power test as the volunteers were given a week each to develop a 700-word report. Content analysis of the responses made by the volunteers in the pre-test revealed the expression of victimhood and labelling by the respondents who were drawn from different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The results of the continuous assessments revealed that an incremental ability of the volunteers in the presentation constructive discourse that is clear, complete, concise,

consistent, correct and courteous is a reality thus facilitating understanding. This is as a result of the feedbacks from the researcher that do indicate areas where the discourse presented by each of the volunteers lacks tact, generosity, agreement and sympathy. The result of the post-test on the same topic given in the pre-test revealed presentation that is more balanced and factual than the one in the pre-test. The volunteers critically probed their initial perception of the causes and impact of the armed insurgency associated with JAS and came up reports that are devoid of ethno-centricism, stereotyping, cultural blindness and cultural imposition.

## **Discussion**

A blurred world vision stirs prejudice and the cry of victimhood. This was found in the way the volunteers presented their respective reports in the pre-test. According to Hundal (2018) such type of narrative which is common all over the world is "driven by irrational devotion to their respective causes ... these violent offshoots have an equally skewed vision of global politics, sharing delusional belief that their identity, culture, and faith is under attack from outside sources." One of the primary objectives of higher education is to make the undergraduate expand their world vision. This involves accepting, respecting and appreciating diversity. This study's attempt at integrating applied peace linguistics in the teaching CiE II via the critical thinking and conflict sensitivity approaches enabled the volunteers to broaden their world vision in a multicultural setting. According to Hermessi (2017:2) in the intercultural approach "FLT is seen as a cultural encounter that broadens the mind through exposure to difference in cultural practices, perspectives, and products. Such exposure is believed to ultimately affect the way L2 learners see other cultures as well as their own."

The issues discussed during the lesson appear to be controversial. The volunteers were exposed to spoken and written discourses that address the issues of contentions prejudicially and fairly to shape their thinking before drawing conclusions. Moncrieff and Corredera (2015: 23) assert that "Stories present conflict, which leads to consideration of choices and values, not as abstractions but in compelling, concrete contexts. Furthermore, stories allow students to consider situations, behaviors, and ethical concerns with a certain salutary amount of distance."

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria, like most countries in the world, is a fragile state given the inability of the citizenry to maximize the country large population and multicultural situation for good. Although the trouble fanned by intercultural intolerance in Nigeria pre-dates the 1960s, recent utterances, sermons, advocacies, narratives in conventional conversations and on the mainstream and social media by many Nigerians are culturally insensitive thus capable of triggering violent conflicts. Most of these discourses which are evidently biased are products of irrational dispositions and not critical thinking. In view of this, this study assumed that the application of critical thinking in the understanding and deconstruction of topical issues is capable of expanding the world vision of individuals thus making them respect the worth and dignity of fellow human beings. The findings of this study revealed that human beings that have erroneous perception of fellow human beings can be made to have a positive feeling of others hitherto disdained where the facilitator allows classroom discourse that is based on critical thinking. The researcher in this study was able to achieve this because he acted as a facilitator

of classroom discourse that facilitates constructive dialogue instead of confrontation. The volunteers were made to interact with materials that appeared to be expressed in the language of victimhood and hate and other materials that serve as rejoinders to them. By so doing the volunteers were activated to engage in critical thinking to expose the weaknesses of the bias materials and thence inculcate and manifest peace-building skills. The researcher has been monitoring the reaction of the volunteers to Nigerian national issues on the social media. The researcher found that the volunteers have been making constructive comments based on national interest that are geared towards peace-building even though existing reality indicate that Nigeria is divided along ethnic and religious lines. Some members of their respective ethnic and religious affiliations do consider them as sell-outs when they express positions based on critical thinking that project national interest instead of victimhood narratives. Yet the volunteers are not deterred. This study therefore concludes that the CiE II classroom can be used as a platform for engendering peace-building once critical thinking approach is used where the multicultural class is split into small groups.

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