

Fostering Ethnic and Religious Harmony through Classroom Language Experiences

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Abstract

This paper explores ways the classroom environment can fertilise ethnic and religious tolerance in students. In a pre/post test design, 76 students at a university secondary school in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria were randomly selected to respond to a twenty-item survey. Afterwards, the experimental group was exposed to a critical thinking game that focused on rational appraisals of ethnic and religious prejudices. A t - test analysis indicated a significant difference in prejudice between the experimental and the control group. It was concluded that classroom language experiences could foster positive changes in ethnic and religious prejudices

Keywords: ethnic, religious prejudice, conflicts, tolerance

“Ignorance and prejudice are the handmaidens of propaganda. Our mission, therefore, is to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance, and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity. Racism can, will, and must be defeated.” (Kofi Annan, quoted by Living Life to the full (2012) <http://www.livinglifefully.com/prejudice.htm>)

INTRODUCTION

“Ethnic and religious prejudices have found fertile ground in Nigeria,” p. xx. declared Karl Maier (2000), who had lived in Nigeria for two years, 1991-1993. Although one may not agree with the later conclusions of Karl Maier concerning the imminent disintegration of Nigeria, his remarks about ethnic and religious prejudice in Nigeria cannot be swept under the carpet. Recent events in the country, especially the incessant attacks on Christians and bombings of churches tend to lend credence to Karl Maier’s observations

Peace is globally a very elusive commodity; and harmony, therefore, has taken flight in individuals, communities and nations. The global crises of terrorism, disease, poverty and natural disasters unequivocally query the presence of peace and harmony. Nigeria has experienced serious security issues since the onset of democracy. A few years ago, the Niger Delta reverberated with gunshots and bombs as militant youths attacked government and oil company installations and personnel to protest the alleged economic neglect and political marginalisation of the oil rich region. Now, the Northern part of Nigeria rocks with suicide bombings by Boko Haram (literally ‘book is bad’), an Islamic fundamentalist organisation with avowed hatred of western education and Christianity.

The latter occurrences in view of their ethno-religious implications have placed the nation in electric tension reminiscent of the 1966 pogrom by the predominantly Hausa-Fulani Muslim North against the predominantly Christian Igbo of Southern-Eastern Nigeria which culminated in the Nigerian civil war. Christians and other Southerners living in the North live in constant fear. Many have relocated to the South. Northerners, especially Muslims living in the South live in fear and apprehension of possible reprisal attacks. Ethnic and religious prejudice, which has been prominent in the Nigerian polity, has grown to a new frightening dimension.

One of the factors behind the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is prejudice. Prejudice is not merely the recognition of difference, but the magnification and demonization of difference. Prejudice is a learned behaviour. It is coded into the history rather than the DNA of a people. It is premised on pseudo-science, myths, half-truths, misinformation, fabrications, fallacies and outright falsehood. Prejudice can be induced by deliberate manipulations, indoctrination and propaganda. At the core of prejudice is fear. Fear breeds distrust, and distrust engenders acrimony, and acrimony inexorably results in violence. Ignorance, misinformation, myths and fallacy feed prejudice. And as the Prejudice Sustenance Mechanism (PSM), Fig. 1, illustrates, each of those factors is dependent on the others. For instance, ignorance sustains myths; myths are sustained by misinformation and fallacy which, in turn, fuel ignorance. All, therefore, provide the strong pillars for prejudice.

Figure 1: The Prejudice Sustenance Mechanism (PSM)

Mr. Koffi Annan, former UN Secretary General, expressed concern that prejudice would continue to ruin innocent lives and make progress with the ambitious international agenda of peace, security and development unattainable. Mr Annan consequently suggested restoration of trust among peoples of different faiths and cultures should be given the highest priority (UN Press Release, 2004).

As teachers we believe that the classroom can provide a useful setting for tackling prejudice. This is in tandem with the views of Bielefeldt (2011) who during the Human Rights Council’s clustered interactive

dialogue asserted that the school context provides a powerful opportunity to dispel negative stereotype (The International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), 2012).

In addition, the US National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) (2012) points out that children are aware of racial and gender differences very early, and form stereotypes by age twelve. Therefore, the Council recommends that tolerance be taught to young children with continuous reinforcement of the message over time. The council proposes a curriculum, which includes classroom exercises from newsletters and newspaper sections targeting younger audiences. Other methods include short theatrical productions and role-playing exercises. According to the NCPC,

Educating students about other cultures, races, religions, and gender helps them understand people different from themselves. Understanding ultimately leads to greater tolerance. Instilling critical thinking skills, creating role-playing, and cooperative learning have proven effective teaching tools (Para.5).

Moreover, Maurice (2012) opines that tolerance as a counteraction to prejudice can be brought about by teaching the harms caused by prejudice, teaching teamwork, unity, appropriate pride in the school, and appropriate social interactions. Such steps, Maurice believes, “will lead to actually living out tolerance far quicker than making tolerance mandatory, and teaching it as if it is the only acceptable way to get along.”

Since prejudice is learned, it is reasonable to expect that tolerance could also be learned. Since the English Language class offers communicative opportunities, it could be a veritable vehicle for unlearning prejudice and learning tolerance. Since prejudice thrives on misinformation, it is probable that accurate information about the object of prejudice could lead to a better understanding of the object of prejudice; and with understanding, tolerance might arise.

However, teaching tolerance as a subject in the curriculum can itself engender intolerance, Smartt (2012) believes:

Teaching about tolerance, modeling tolerance, and pointing out the value of tolerance through examples, are all currently a part of the educational process. Often when this idea of teaching tolerance is brought up; it has intentions of becoming the rule. In that very act, intolerance is created.

We consequently decided that rather than attempt to teach tolerance, we adopt processes that question the structures of intolerance or prejudice, so that tolerance can evolve and develop as the students begin to notice the discrepancies in the foundations of their prejudice.

A very important skill needed to query the assumptions of prejudice and intolerance is critical thinking. Dumbteeb (2009) describes critical thinking as “...an individual’s cognitive skill and reasonable and reflective thinking ability in forming judgment to analyze and evaluate facts and opinions, make inferences, interpret information, and solve problems.” In other words, critical thinking enables people to deliberately re-examine information, reappraise their presumptions and take decisions based on careful thoughts. Semali (2004), as cited by Dumbteeb (2009), suggests that thinking critically facilitates personal judgments, choices, and decisions that have social and personal consequences. Studies by Nimkannon (2007) and Wallace (2003) reveal that traditional classrooms do not foster critical thinking skills among students.

Thinking would naturally be biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, and potentially prejudiced Scriven and Paul, (2004). Duron R., Limbach, B, and Waugh W. (2006) define critical thinking as the ability to analyze and evaluate information. They describe critical thinkers as people able to “raise vital questions and problems, formulate them clearly, gather and assess relevant information”.

It is on such premise that we designed a game to enable students query and evaluate presumptions that harbour prejudice. The game is named Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG).

METHODOLOGY

The study area was Calabar, a predominantly Christian coastal city, the capital of Cross River State in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Calabar is distinguished for her hospitality, mouth watering cuisine, and tourism industry. The Calabar Christmas Carnival attracts local and international tourists as it is touted Africa’s largest street party.

The study sought to examine whether the application of a critical thinking game, named Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG) in an English Language class could influence students’ ethnic and religious prejudice. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested using the Dependent and the Independent t test.

Hypotheses:

1. Students exposed to Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG) will not have significantly less ethnic prejudice than students not exposed.
2. Students exposed to Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG) will not have significantly less religious prejudice than students not exposed.

The study was conducted in the University of Calabar International Secondary School during the 2011 long vacation extension class. The secondary school is a coeducational day school. The class was organised

during the July to September long vacation. Participants were drawn from both students of the school and students from other schools who were on holiday and wished to remedy some deficiencies or gain some academic leverage. The demographic profile of the University of Calabar Secondary School is nearly mono-religious, that is Christian, but ethnically heterogeneous.

During the holiday classes, the school's Vice Principal Academic was approached to grant permission for the Senior Secondary one (SS1) students to be given numbers based on their registration for the holiday lessons. The students were randomly assigned to the two available classes. Students with odd numbers were assigned to the Control group, while students with even numbers were assigned to the experimental group. The Ethnic Religious Attitude Measure (ERAM) questionnaire was coded with a number that corresponded to the number of each student. Research assistants, four students on teaching practice from the Faculty of Education, University of Calabar, helped in administering the questionnaires to the participants in both groups.

To reduce the Rosenthal effect (conscious of being under investigation), the students were taught by their regular teachers: Dr Timothy and Dr Obiekezie. Dr Timothy taught English Language to the Experimental group, while Dr Obiekezie taught the control group. Ethnic Religious Attitude Measures (ERAM) questionnaires were administered to both classes. Afterwards the control group studied a unit on Islam in their English text book (Senior English Project for Secondary Schools Book 1 by NJH Grant, S Nnamonu and D Jowitt, (2011). It included reading a passage about Prophet Mohammed and completing a cloze test on the register of Islam. In the pre-reading activity the class was asked about the founder of Islam, the five pillars of Islam and the Islamic holidays. Then they read the passage silently, and answered some comprehension questions. The unit lasted for one week. Other unit contents included oral English, summary exercises and grammar. These contents were also taught to the experimental group.

However, Dr Timothy introduced a game, Generalisation Assessment Game (F - GAG), to engender critical thinking in the experimental group. Arising from the passage about Mohammed and the register of Islamic terms, the Experimental group was divided into groups of at least four students each. Each group was given four cards with BOLD inscriptions–

- Red- ALWAYS TRUE
- Blue- SOMETIMES TRUE
- Yellow- NEVER TRUE
- Green- RARELY TRUE

Then the following statements which had been written on pieces of paper were put in a box by the teacher:

- i. Muslims are good people
- ii. Christians are good people
- iii. Muslims commit crimes
- iv. Christians commit crimes
- v. Muslims make good parents
- vi. Christians make good parents
- vii. Muslims make good friends
- viii. Christians make good friends
- ix. Northerners are Muslims
- x. Southerners are Christians
- xi. Muslims and Christians can live together in peace
- xii. Religion is important to Nigerians
- xiii. Nigeria is a multiethnic state

The class received instructions on how to play the game. From each group a volunteer would randomly pick a piece of paper and read the content to the class. The volunteer's group had to respond by raising a particular colour of card to show whether the statement is Always True, Sometimes True, Never True or Rarely True. The respondents were instructed by the teacher to support their answers with reasons or examples. For instance, if in response to item (ix) (Northerners are Muslims), a student raised a red card, meaning, Always True, and a student from another group asked questions or gave examples of Northerners who are not Muslims, the group that raised the red card would lose a point to the group that debunked the others' assertion. Two points were awarded to any group that satisfactorily justified each of their responses. The students generated other statements besides the teacher-generated statements. These were similarly examined. Where necessary the teacher supplied relevant information and clarification.

After this game, each group modified or rewrote their statements and read to the class. For instance, the statement: "Christians make good parents." was modified to read: "Some Christians make good parents."

In the next step, students were asked to generate their own statements with regard to what is generally believed about some ethnic groups in Nigeria. The teacher wrote the statements on the board. Then the earlier principles of querying whether the statements are ALWAYS TRUE, SOMETIMES TRUE, NEVER TRUE, or RARELY TRUE were applied and the statements were subsequently modified. Some of the statements included:

- i. Efiks are promiscuous.
- ii. Igbos love money.
- iii. Yorubas love partying.
- iv. Hausas are Muslims.
- v. Ibibios are dupes.
- vi. Ijaws are fishers.
- vii. Fulanis are shepherds.
- viii. The Urhobos are clowns.
- ix. People in the Niger Delta are militants.
- x. Northerners are terrorists.

After two days, the Ethnic and Religious Attitude Measure (ERAM) questionnaires were administered to both the experimental and the control groups. The questionnaires were made of two parts; A: for demographic information and B, for measuring ethnic and religious attitudes. For items 1-10 Strongly Agree was scored 1, Agree 2, Disagree 3, Strongly Disagree 4. But for items 11-20, which were the reverse of items 1-10, Strongly Agree was scored 4, Agree 3, Disagree 2, Strongly Disagree 1. Therefore, the higher the students' scores, the less their prejudice. The descriptive statistics is given in Table 1

The data collated were analysed using statistical software, **Statdisk 10.4.0** for Triola Series of Statistics Textbooks (Published by Addison Wesley Inc., 2006). The dependent t test was used in determining whether there was any significant difference in ethnic prejudice attitudes between the pre-test and the post-test in the control group. With a calculated t of 0.69 and a p-value of 0.4885, it was evident that there was no significant difference between the pre test and the post test ethnic prejudice scores of the control group. The result is shown in Table 2. The pre-test and the post-test data were also obtained for the experimental group and analysed using the dependent t-test. The result as shown in table 2 indicated a calculated t of 2.1286 and a P-value of 0.0400. Therefore, there was evidence that students' ethnic prejudice was significantly less after being exposed to the Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG). The dependent t test was used in determining whether there was any significant difference in religious prejudice between the pre-test and the post-test in the control group. With a calculated t of 1.565 and a p-value of 0.1260, it showed that there was no significant difference between the pre test and the post test religious prejudice scores of the control group. The result is shown in Table 2. The pre-test and the post-test data were also obtained for the experimental group and analysed using the dependent t-test. The result as shown in table 2 indicated a calculated t of 2.897* and a P-value of 0.0063. Therefore, there was evidence that students' religious prejudice was significantly less after being exposed to the Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG).

The control and the experimental group were also compared to see if they differed significantly in their ethnic prejudice. The result as shown in table 3 indicated a calculated t of -2.407 and a p – value of 0.0185. Therefore, there was evidence that students exposed to the Generalisation Assessment Game had significantly less ethnic prejudice than those not exposed. The control and the experimental group were also compared to see if they differed significantly in their religious prejudice. The result as shown in table 3 indicated a calculated t of -2.715 and a p – value of 0.0082. Therefore, there was evidence that students exposed to the Generalisation Assessment Game had significantly less religious prejudice than those not exposed.

Overall, the results show significant difference between the post-test and pre-test prejudice measures of the experimental and control group and indicate that:

1. Students exposed to Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG) had significantly less ethnic prejudice than students not exposed.
2. Students exposed to Generalisation Assessment Game (GAG) had significantly less religious prejudice than students not exposed.

Discussions

Our study has learnt credence to the fact that tackling prejudice should be a deliberate, conscious and well thought-out effort. The statistically significant difference observed in our results between the experimental and group in term of ethnic and religious prejudices is in consonance with the views of Bielefeldt (2011), who asserted that the school context provides vantage platform for putting to flight acquired typecast of prejudices that breeds disunity, engender strife and distorts peace.

Furthermore, our experimental approach that applied friendly, proactive, interactive and relaxed mode of using game in teaching tolerance is in agreement with the suggestion of Maurice (2012) and Smartt (2012), that instead of teaching what intolerance is and factors that can fuel it, its effects and consequences should be taught in a appropriate social interactive and teamwork manner which would break the chain of mechanism that sustains prejudice as depicted in Figure 1.

Our results show that the application of our experimental game, Generalization Assessment Game (GAG), promoted critical thinking skills in the experimental group. This supports the description of Dumbteeb (2009) of the influence of critical thinking in facilitating the re-examination of information, reappraisal of

presumptions, personal judgements, making choices and decisions that have social and personal consequences. This essential skill may be the factor responsible for the differences in ethnic and religious prejudices observed in the two groups.

In addition, the acronym for our experimental game, GAG, supports the literal meaning of the English word “gag” which is ‘to stop or suppress someone from speaking or expressing an opinion’. In this study, the game GAG based on our results may have stopped the students from continuing with learnt ethnic and religious labelling and prejudices. Thus, promoting prejudice-reversal mechanism as illustrated in Figure 2.

Conclusions

The way to battle prejudice, according to Living Life to the full (2012), is through education. Education is not just the presentation of information, but the creation of opportunities for critical appraisal of information. But since traditional classrooms according to Wallace (2003) and Nimkannon (2007), do not foster critical thinking skills among students, our study indicated that a game such as the GAG could transform a classroom into a haven for critical thinking.

Therefore, as our quasi experiment indicated that rationally appraising every day assumptions and myths about others could crack the foundations of ethnic and religious prejudice. The GAG game in its simplicity can be played in any context. The students can play at home or in social gatherings, using it to query statements and suppositions usually taken for granted.

We conclude that prejudice can be reversed if people have accurate knowledge, accurate information, and facts, and if people engage in critical thinking. Such variables, as figure 2 illustrates, could provide solid pillars on which tolerance might rest.

Fig 2: Prejudice Reversal Mechanism (PRM)

Implications:

The classroom is transformable and transforming. It needs to transform from a place where teacher modified information is dished out to students to a place where information is critically mulled over and dissected before assimilated. Every class should be a forum for critical thinking. In other words, the teachers should themselves model critical thinking in their utterances and interactions. This demands flexibility in classroom activities and in learning contents. The teacher’s role in this type of classroom diverges from the all-knowing autocrat and shifts towards the democrat who believes in the reciprocity of knowledge and knowledge sharing.

Moreover, there is room to examine the sustainability of the impact of the generalisation assessment game beyond the experimental period. The solution seems to be in continuity in approach in the English Language class. Besides, it can be employed across the curriculum if teachers themselves are educated in the critical thinking development strategies.

Finally, while it is evident that language activities that engender critical thinking could influence ethnic and religious attitudes, it is necessary to acknowledge that several factors are at play in the classroom and beyond, factors of which the teacher may not be in control. This study, moreover, was conducted in a secondary school that hosts mainly the children of the privileged class. Except this study is replicated in other settings, it might be difficult to be categorical about the causality of the Generalisation Assessment Game in changing ethnic and religious prejudice.

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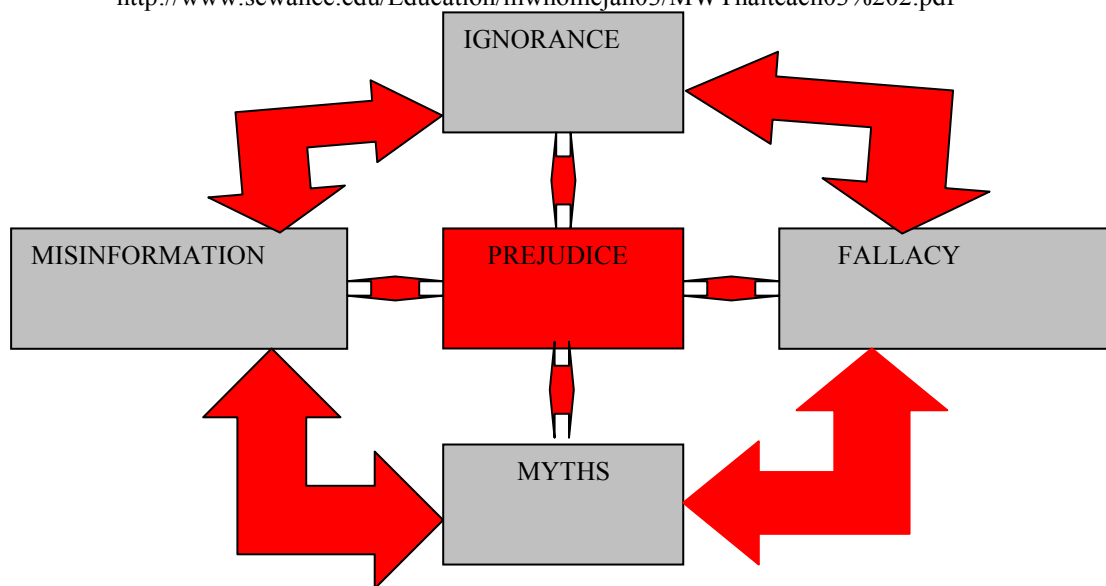


Figure 1. The Prejudice Sustenance Mechanism (PSM)

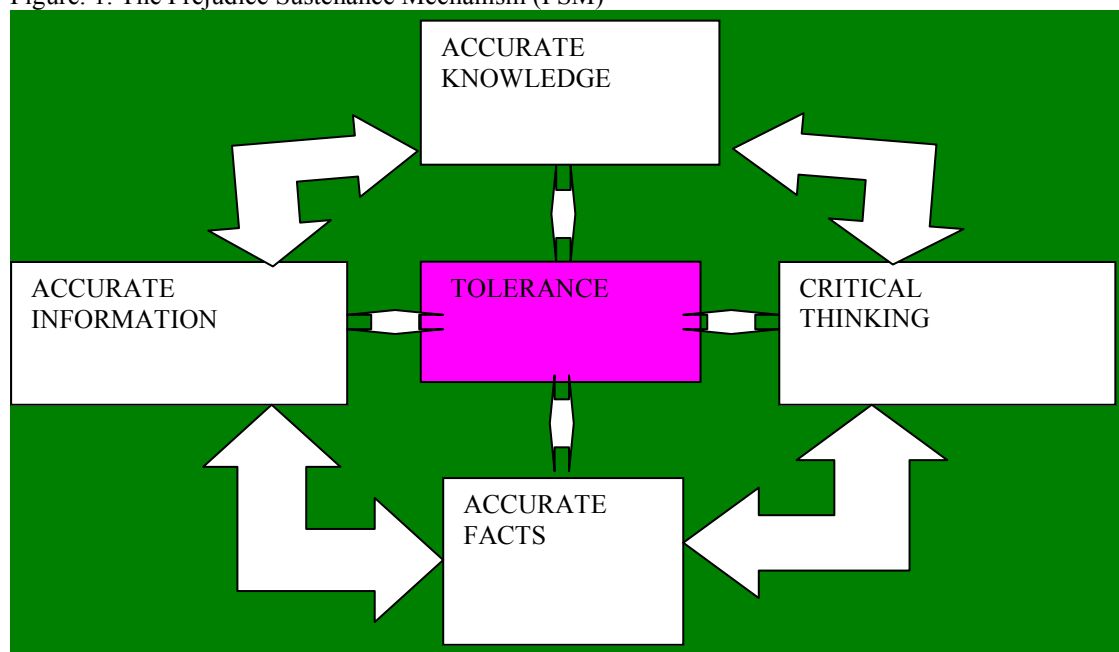


Figure 2. PREJUDICE REVERSAL MECHANISM (PRM)

Table 1
 Descriptive statistic

	Pre-test Ethnic Prejudice Measure		Pre-Test Religious Prejudice Measure	
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental
Mean	23.4	24.2	21.8	23.36
Standard Deviation	6.08	6.4	5.4	5.65
Sum	891	922	830	888
N	38	38	38	38
	Post-test Ethnic Prejudice Attitude		Post-Test Religious Prejudice Attitude	
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental
Mean	24.3	27.2	23.9	27.8
Standard Deviation	5.2	5.3	5.4	6.6
Sum	925	922	1034	1058
N	38	38	38	38

Table 2
 Dependent t test Analysis of Pre-test and Post test Ethnic and Religious attitude of the experimental and control groups

	N	D	Sd	t	Critical t	P -value	Decision
Ethnic Prejudice							
Control Pre-test vs. Post -test	38	0.894	7.884	0.69	±2.026	0.4885	Retain the null
Experimental Pre-test vs. Post -test	38	-2.947	8.535	2.1286*	±2.026	0.0400	Reject the null
Religious prejudice							
Control Pre-test vs. Post -test	38	-2.105	8.291	1.565	±2.026	0.1260	Retain the null
Experimental Pre-test vs. Post -test	38	-4.473	9.417	2.897*	±2.026	0.0063	Reject the null

* Significant at .05

Table 3
 Independent t test analysis of the difference in the ethnic and religious prejudice post-test prejudice measures of the Experimental and the Control Groups

	N	Σ	sd	t	Critical t	P -value	Df	Decision
Ethnic								
Control	38	24.3	5.2	-2.407*	±1.9925	0.0185	73.973	Reject the null
Experimental	38	27.2	5.3					
Religious								
Control	38	23.9	5.9	-2.715*	±1.9925	0.0082	73.088	Reject the null
Experimental	38	27.8	6.6					

* Significant at .05

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