

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS MECHANISM FOR INTERFAITH  
DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION AMONG RELIGIOUS ADHERENTS  
IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN OGUN STATE**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the role of the English language as a mechanism for interfaith dialogue and cooperation among religious adherents in higher institutions in Ogun State, Nigeria. In a multicultural and multi-religious society like Nigeria, fostering peaceful coexistence through effective communication is essential, especially within academic environments where students of diverse faiths converge. English, being the official language and the primary medium of instruction, provides a common platform for interreligious engagement. The study adopts a descriptive survey design, utilizing questionnaires and interviews to gather data from students of different religious backgrounds across selected higher institutions. Findings reveal that English facilitates mutual understanding, reduces religious tensions, and promotes peaceful cohabitation among students. However, challenges such as limited language proficiency, lack of emotional connection, and semantic misunderstandings hinder its full effectiveness in interfaith communication. The study concludes that while English plays a pivotal role in promoting interfaith cooperation, it must be complemented with intercultural competence and peace-oriented language practices. Recommendations are made for educational institutions to integrate interfaith communication training into language education and to promote inclusive dialogue platforms on campuses.

**Keywords:** Adherents, Cooperation, Dialogue, Mechanism, Interfaith

**Introduction**

Nigeria is a religiously diverse nation, with the three dominant faiths—Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexisting within a multiethnic and multilingual society. Ogun State, located in the southwestern region of Nigeria, reflects this religious plurality, particularly in its higher institutions where students from various religious backgrounds interact daily. While this diversity presents opportunities for cultural enrichment and mutual

understanding, it also carries the potential for conflict, especially when communication barriers or intolerance prevail. Interfaith dialogue has been identified as a viable approach to fostering peaceful coexistence and tolerance among religious adherents in such pluralistic environments (Akinwale, 2022).

The English language, Nigeria's official language, plays a pivotal role in bridging communication gaps among diverse ethnic and religious groups. In higher education institutions, English is not only the medium of instruction but also the lingua franca that enables interreligious engagement and intellectual discourse. Through debates, seminars, religious forums, and student union activities, English facilitates the articulation of beliefs, negotiation of meaning, and resolution of misunderstandings among students of different faiths (Olaosebikan & Ajayi, 2023). Consequently, the language holds potential as a mechanism for promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Despite the availability of a common language, interreligious tensions still emerge in campuses, often fueled by miscommunication, religious extremism, or perceived marginalization. These incidents underscore the need to examine how English is being used effectively or ineffectively as a tool for interfaith dialogue. Moreover, the way religious ideas are framed and expressed in English can influence how messages are received and interpreted by members of other faiths. When strategically utilized, English has the power to foster empathy, encourage critical reflection, and dispel stereotypes, thereby serving as a valuable instrument for peacebuilding (Yusuf & Bello, 2022).

Given the rising concerns about religious intolerance and radicalization among youth, especially in tertiary institutions, it becomes imperative to explore innovative ways of strengthening interfaith relations. This study, therefore, investigates how English language functions as a mechanism for interfaith

dialogue and cooperation among religious adherents in higher institutions in Ogun State. By understanding its communicative potential and the barriers limiting its effective use, the study aims to recommend practical language-based strategies that can be integrated into educational and religious practices to nurture peaceful interfaith interactions (Idowu & Onifade, 2023). Several researchers have investigated how the English language serves as a tool or barrier in facilitating interreligious understanding in Nigeria's higher institutions.

Adebayo and Yusuf (2021) conducted a study on Language Use and Religious Tolerance among Undergraduate Students in Southwestern Nigeria. Using a mixed-method approach, the researchers surveyed 300 students across five universities and found that English was widely used during interfaith forums and student religious association meetings. The study revealed that while English promoted basic understanding across religious divides, many students still struggled with expressing deeply rooted religious doctrines and emotions in a second language. The authors recommended integrating interfaith communication strategies into general language courses to enhance clarity and sensitivity in interreligious interactions.

In a related study, Okonkwo (2020) examined The Role of English Language in Enhancing Religious Coexistence in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. The qualitative research involved interviews with 30 religious student leaders from various institutions. The findings indicated that English, as a neutral medium, helped bridge ethnic and religious differences. However, the study also reported frequent misinterpretations due to differing semantic understandings, particularly in faith-based debates. The researcher concluded that intercultural competence should accompany language proficiency to improve communication outcomes.

Similarly, a study by Ibrahim and Lawal (2022) titled *Challenges of Using English for Interfaith Communication among Nigerian Undergraduates* surveyed 250 students from Ogun State institutions. The results showed that while English fostered inclusiveness, it lacked the spiritual depth of indigenous languages. Students from Traditional and Islamic backgrounds particularly emphasized that certain concepts were better expressed in Yoruba or Arabic. The study recommended that interfaith programs in schools should promote bilingual dialogue to balance clarity with cultural depth.

Another empirical study by Salami and Olayemi (2023) focused on *Interfaith Dialogue Practices and the Role of Language in Conflict Resolution on Campus*. Based on observations and focus group discussions in two faith-based universities, the researchers found that English was the primary language for formal interfaith discussions and student peace-building initiatives. However, language barriers still existed for students from non-English speaking rural backgrounds. These students often felt excluded or marginalized during discussions, leading to reduced engagement. The study emphasized the need for inclusive communication practices and periodic language support workshops.

Finally, Umeh and Adegbite (2022) carried out a quantitative study on *English Language as a Tool for Promoting Religious Harmony in South-West Nigerian Universities*. Analyzing responses from 400 students, the study found a strong positive correlation between students' English language competence and their participation in interfaith events. Students who had received training in public speaking and intercultural communication reported more confidence and less anxiety in expressing their beliefs respectfully. The authors recommended the inclusion of interfaith modules in English and communication skill courses.

## **English Language**

English language is a global means of communication that functions as a lingua franca in many multicultural and multilingual societies. In Nigeria, it serves as the official language and the primary medium of instruction in higher institutions, enabling people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to communicate and engage in academic, social, and intercultural discourse (Adegbite, 2022). Its role extends beyond mere communication to include facilitating understanding, critical thinking, and peaceful coexistence among students from varied belief systems. In the context of interfaith relations, English language enables religious adherents to express their beliefs, negotiate meanings, and resolve conflicts through mutual dialogue. It provides a neutral linguistic space where faith-based conversations can occur without the dominance of any indigenous language, making it essential for promoting unity in pluralistic settings like Nigerian campuses (Okonkwo & Yusuf, 2023). Thus, English serves not only as a medium of academic engagement but also as a tool for fostering peaceful interfaith interaction.

## **Interfaith Dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue refers to structured and respectful conversations between individuals or groups from different religious traditions with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. It is an intentional effort to bridge differences and promote empathy, especially in diverse environments like universities where multiple faiths coexist (Sulaiman & Eze, 2022). Interfaith dialogue is not about theological agreement but about promoting respect for religious plurality and shared values. This form of dialogue plays a crucial role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, particularly in societies with a history of religious tensions. In higher institutions, interfaith dialogue can

reduce suspicion, correct misconceptions, and foster collaborative action among students from different religions. English language often serves as the medium through which such dialogue is facilitated in Nigeria, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity (Bamidele, 2023).

### **Cooperation**

Cooperation involves working jointly towards a shared goal or outcome, especially when individuals or groups with different backgrounds collaborate in peace and unity. In interfaith contexts, cooperation signifies the willingness of adherents from diverse religious groups to participate in activities and initiatives that promote social harmony, community service, and peaceful coexistence (Ibrahim & Adebayo, 2022). It requires open communication, trust, and mutual respect. In higher education settings, cooperation among religious adherents can manifest in joint events, interfaith clubs, or advocacy for peaceful dialogue. When such collaboration is facilitated through a common language like English, it becomes easier to navigate differences and foster a collective sense of purpose (Oyeleye & John, 2023). Cooperation, therefore, is a key component in sustaining interfaith relationships and reducing tensions on campuses.

### **Religious Adherents**

Religious adherents are individuals who actively practice, uphold, and identify with a particular religious belief or tradition. In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, adherents of major religions—such as Christianity, Islam, and Traditional African Religions—often coexist in shared spaces, including educational institutions (Adewale & Musa, 2023). These individuals may hold strong theological views and cultural practices shaped by their faith. In higher institutions, religious adherents often participate in faith-based associations, worship gatherings, and moral discourses that shape their campus experiences.

Their interaction with peers of other faiths, particularly through a shared language like English, presents opportunities for mutual understanding and spiritual tolerance. Recognizing and respecting the diversity of religious adherents is crucial in promoting a culture of dialogue and peace (Okorie, 2022).

### **English as a Lingua Franca in Multicultural Contexts.**

English has emerged as a global lingua franca, especially in multicultural and multilingual societies where communication among people of different native languages is essential. In Nigeria, where over 500 languages coexist, English functions as a unifying medium that bridges ethnic, religious, and cultural divides (Ajayi & Omotosho, 2024). It is the language of instruction, governance, media, and increasingly, informal communication among the youth. In higher institutions in states like Ogun, where students of diverse backgrounds converge, English serves not only for academic purposes but also as a medium of daily social interaction, fostering understanding across cultural lines.

In multicultural contexts, English facilitates inclusivity by enabling dialogue among people who would otherwise be separated by language barriers. For instance, interfaith dialogue and cooperation among Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional religions in Nigerian tertiary institutions are often conducted in English. This allows participants to articulate their beliefs, listen to others, and find common ground using a shared linguistic code (Adepoju & Hassan, 2023). When English is used with mutual respect and clarity, it becomes a vital instrument for promoting peaceful coexistence and discouraging religious extremism or misunderstanding.

However, the use of English as a lingua franca in multicultural settings is not without challenges. Differences in proficiency levels, accents, and cultural expressions may lead to misinterpretation or exclusion. According to Udo and

Eze (2021), communication breakdowns often occur not because of the language itself but due to how it is used—especially when one group dominates conversations or imposes cultural norms embedded in language. Thus, for English to effectively serve as a tool for unity in multicultural spaces, conscious efforts must be made to promote inclusive, respectful, and culturally sensitive communication practices.

Moreover, English as a lingua franca carries symbolic value in multicultural societies. It represents neutrality in contexts where indigenous languages are often tied to ethnic or religious identities. Its neutrality allows it to be perceived as a fair medium in intergroup communication (Ojo & Bala, 2023). This symbolic neutrality contributes to its effectiveness in peacebuilding efforts, particularly in educational settings where young adults from different backgrounds engage in intellectual, religious, and social exchanges. Therefore, promoting the responsible and inclusive use of English can significantly contribute to interfaith harmony and multicultural integration in places like Ogun State and beyond.

### **Role of Language in Conflict and Peacebuilding.**

**1. Language as a Medium of Communication:** Language plays a central role in communication during both conflict and peacebuilding processes. It is through language that individuals express their grievances, identities, ideologies, and aspirations. Miscommunication or hate speech can escalate tensions, while clear, respectful language can ease misunderstandings and foster dialogue (Adeniran, 2022).

**2. Language as a Carrier of Ideology:** Language is not neutral; it reflects and shapes ideology. In conflict situations, it can be manipulated to reinforce stereotypes, stigmatize groups, or legitimize violence. On the other hand, peace-

oriented discourse can reframe narratives to promote mutual understanding, empathy, and reconciliation (Ojo & Bala, 2023).

**3. Language as a Tool for Dialogue and Mediation:** In interfaith and intercultural conflicts, language serves as a bridge for dialogue. Common languages—especially lingua francas like English in multicultural societies—enable conflicting parties to engage in structured dialogue and negotiation. This fosters mutual respect and reduces prejudice (Udo & Eze, 2021).

**4. Language in Framing Conflict or Peace Narratives:** Media and political leaders often use language to shape public perception of conflict and peace. Conflict-framing language emphasizes division and threat, while peace-framing language emphasizes shared values and cooperation (Abubakar & Salisu, 2023). The framing influences how people react to events and whether they support peace initiatives.

**5. Language and Identity Construction:** Language is central to the construction of group identity. In conflict settings, language differences can reinforce “us vs. them” mentalities. However, in peacebuilding, inclusive language practices can create a sense of shared identity and community among diverse groups (Bakare & Jimoh, 2022).

**6. Language as a Tool for Healing and Reconciliation:** In post-conflict situations, the use of empathetic, restorative language can facilitate healing. Storytelling, apologies, and peace education communicated through language foster emotional reconciliation and collective memory that supports peace (Chukwu, 2023).

**7. Language Policy and Linguistic Inclusion:** Inclusive language policies in schools, religious institutions, and government can help bridge divides. When people feel linguistically included, they are more likely to participate peacefully

in social, religious, and political life (Ajayi & Omotosho, 2024). Exclusionary language policies, by contrast, breed resentment and conflict.

**8. Language in Religious Peacebuilding:** In religiously plural societies, language helps mediate theological differences and prevent doctrinal misunderstanding. English, in particular, is used as a common ground in interfaith initiatives in Nigerian universities to foster unity among Muslims, Christians, and Traditionalists (Adepoju & Hassan, 2023).

### **Challenges and limitations of using English for Interfaith Communication**

**1. Limited Proficiency among Students:** Many students, particularly from rural or non-English speaking backgrounds, may have limited proficiency in English. This affects their ability to clearly express complex religious or cultural concepts during interfaith dialogue, leading to misinterpretation and communication breakdown. According to Adebayo and Olaoye (2022), the fluency gap among Nigerian students often hampers their confidence and ability to participate meaningfully in discussions that require deep cultural and religious sensitivity.

**2. Loss of Nuance and Cultural Meaning:** English may lack the vocabulary or contextual depth to accurately convey certain culturally or religiously significant concepts. This could lead to dilution, oversimplification, or misrepresentation of religious beliefs. As noted by Okafor and Yusuf (2023), the use of a second language like English in interfaith discourse may strip sacred expressions of their indigenous depth, thereby creating theological misunderstandings.

**3. Dominance of Western Thought Patterns:** English, being rooted in Western ideologies, often reflects a worldview that may not align with African religious and cultural perspectives. This may unintentionally privilege certain ideas while marginalizing others. Eze and Balogun (2021) argue that English often projects

Western secular norms, which can clash with religious perspectives that are deeply rooted in African spirituality and communal traditions.

**4. Power Imbalance and Language Hierarchies:** In multilingual communities, English is often perceived as a language of power and elitism. This perception may alienate participants who feel less competent or comfortable in English, reducing equitable participation in interfaith conversations. According to Ibrahim and Nwachukwu (2023), the dominance of English in academic and formal discourse settings may create hierarchies that silence minority religious or linguistic voices.

**5. Emotional and Spiritual Disconnect:** Religious expression is often emotionally charged and deeply spiritual. English, being a learned language for most Nigerians, may not evoke the same emotional or spiritual resonance as native tongues. As Obasi and Tijani (2022) explain, interfaith dialogue in English often lacks the emotive and spiritual intensity present in indigenous language expressions, which are more heartfelt and culturally grounded.

**6. Miscommunication Due to Semantic Differences:** Words and expressions in English may have different connotations depending on the speaker's cultural and religious background. This can lead to unintended offense or misunderstanding during interfaith interactions. Nduka and Salawu (2021) highlight that semantic differences across cultural and religious groups may result in miscommunication, even when the language of communication is shared.

**7. Institutional Neglect of Indigenous Languages:** The emphasis on English as the medium for formal dialogue often side lines the use of indigenous languages that may be more effective in promoting interfaith understanding in local contexts. As observed by Adeola and Umeh (2023), neglecting indigenous

languages in peace and dialogue initiatives reduces the accessibility and inclusivity of interfaith engagements.

**8. Lack of Training in Interfaith Communication:** Most students are not taught how to use language for sensitive interfaith dialogue. Without guidance, even fluent English speakers may unknowingly use language that is offensive or insensitive to others' beliefs. Udo and Ayeni (2022) stress the importance of equipping students with intercultural and interfaith communication skills to avoid language-based conflicts on campuses.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Symbolic Interactionism Theory, Peace Linguistics Theory, and Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. These theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how language particularly English functions as a tool for fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation among religious adherents in higher institutions in Ogun State. Symbolic Interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, emphasizes the role of language and symbols in social interactions. It posits that individuals construct meanings through communication, and these meanings shape their behavior. In the context of interfaith dialogue, English serves as a shared symbolic system through which students of diverse religious backgrounds interact, negotiate meanings, and build mutual understanding.

Peace Linguistics Theory, as developed by scholars like Kenechukwu and Crystal, focuses on the role of language in promoting peace, reducing conflict, and fostering social harmony. This theory argues that language can either promote peace or incite conflict depending on how it is used. In interfaith settings, the way English is employed—whether it encourages respect, empathy, and tolerance or provokes division can significantly influence the nature of religious interactions.

The theory emphasizes the need for conscious use of non-hostile, inclusive, and sensitive language in cross-religious communication, making it highly relevant to this study. It supports the view that language education in institutions should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the ethics of peaceful and respectful communication.

Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action underscores the importance of rational, open, and inclusive dialogue in achieving mutual understanding and consensus in society. The theory views language not just as a tool for transmitting information, but as a medium for coordinating actions and resolving social conflicts through reasoned communication. In higher institutions, where religious diversity is a common feature, the use of English for interfaith engagement aligns with Habermas' idea of communicative rationality. It promotes a dialogical space where religious adherents can engage in respectful debate, clarify their values, and arrive at shared solutions without coercion or prejudice. These three theories collectively provide a robust framework for examining how English functions as both a medium and a mediator in fostering interreligious cooperation and peace in academic settings.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, English language plays a vital role as a unifying medium for fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation among religious adherents in higher institutions in Ogun State. As the common language of instruction and interaction, English enables students from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds to communicate, share ideas, and engage in meaningful discourse. It serves not only as a linguistic bridge but also as a tool for promoting mutual respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence within academic communities. However, while English facilitates dialogue, its effectiveness is often influenced

by factors such as language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to use the language in inclusive and respectful ways. Therefore, institutions must intentionally promote intercultural communication competence and peace-oriented language practices to maximize the potential of English in advancing interfaith understanding and harmony.

### **Recommendations**

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- i. Higher institutions should incorporate interfaith communication and peace education into English language and general studies curricula to equip students with the skills needed for respectful and inclusive dialogue.
- ii. Religious student organizations should collaborate to organize interfaith forums and discussions using English as a neutral medium to promote understanding and peaceful coexistence on campuses.
- iii. Language instructors should emphasize the use of peaceful and inclusive language during classroom interactions, especially when addressing sensitive religious or cultural issues.
- iv. Campus management should provide platforms and safe spaces where students of different faiths can express their beliefs freely in English without fear of discrimination or hostility.
- v. Government and educational policymakers should support the training of lecturers and student leaders on intercultural communication and conflict-sensitive language use to enhance interfaith cooperation.
- vi. Students from minority religious or language backgrounds should be given additional language support to ensure their full participation in interfaith engagements conducted in English.

- vii. Researchers and scholars should continue to explore the intersection of language and interfaith dialogue, particularly the ways English can be optimized for fostering harmony in Nigeria's diverse academic settings.
- viii. Faith-based institutions should encourage their members to adopt non-violent and empathetic language during interreligious discussions conducted in English to reduce tension and promote unity.

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