

**ACTIVE LISTENING: A PANACEA TO ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*This article is a position paper which looks at insecurity in Nigeria and ethno-religious crises or insecurity in particular. While acknowledging interventions of diverse kinds that have been done over the years, it zeros in on language and communication skills approach and active listening as a means to curbing the menace as it advocates listening to how a speaker speaks rather than just what the speaker says as a way out. It advocates five practical techniques which could be employed. It recommends that active listening skills be taught to students in schools as well all others in society who might not have received formal education since it is a skill that transcends the English language.*

Keywords: Listening, Ethno-Religious, Crises and Nigeria

**Introduction**

Nigeria is a country that has been plagued by crises of diverse nature and proportion since its amalgamation in 1914 due to its pluralistic nature. Most of these crises have created a situation of insecurity that has led to loss of lives, property and a general atmosphere of animosity between groups. A kind of crisis that permeates the nation often goes on concurrently at different locations within the country is ethno-religious crises which has a tendency to create great insecurity. Efforts of religious leaders, government authorities, human rights groups among several others have been effective to some extent in taming the tide of ethno – religious crises however, there is need to explore other ways of curbing it- Interventions that are initiated by the parties involved in these conflicts. This is imperative since these crises have further worsened insecurity in Nigeria. This paper offers the language and communication perspective to tackling ethno – religious insecurity or crises and specifically active listening approach to tackling it.

### **Ethno-religious Crises in Nigeria**

Insecurity could come up when there is a struggle over status, power or scarce resources. Nigeria has a pluralistic nature and as a result, it has experienced several crises which the political class has exploited as a symbol of mobilization and instrument of negotiation for patronages and sharing of national resources (Ajayi & Bambose, 2019). In essence, certain groups of influential and well placed individuals in Nigeria have taken advantage of the situation for their selfish purpose. Over the years, Nigeria has witnessed a spike in incidences of insecurity which have taken the form of insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder clashes, ethno-religious crises, among other (Babalola, 2019). Insecurity has steadily been on the increase and its dimensions have greatly increased. Issues of peaceful co-existence have continued to be a recurrent conversation in Nigeria since the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria. Ethno-religious conflicts have led to insecurity such as the 1967 Civil War and several others that have come after it. Ethno-religious conflicts that come up between two contending ethnic or religious groups which may have social, political, economic or religious undertone in which each group feels a need to fight for their position in society (Maijida, 2017).

Concerted efforts have been made to curb ethno – religious crises in Nigeria. Religion has been employed to inculcate positive values and help pattern human behaviour to be in agreement with societal norms and values as well as inculcate justice, equity, fidelity, and sanctity of human lives to its adherents (Okobia, 2020). The military had also played a critical role in trying to curb incessant ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria through the use of coercive force and the presence of military personnel (Musa, 2018; Okeke , 2012). These efforts, as laudable as they are still leave much to be desired.

### **Language and Communication**

Communication entails exchange of information that contains shared symbols or codes such that messages are understood by those involved in the interaction. In communication, there is transmission; receiving; acting on the message, information, thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and feeling through mutually agreed, understandable codes of symbols. This is instructive, as it portends the fact that crises may arise out of a situation where there's no mutual agreement and codes or symbols are not understood especially in the way they are intended. Communication is achieved through the four basic language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These skills are put to use usually in a two-way interactive exchange of information (Olanrewaju, 2016).

English language enjoys a pride of place in the international community and is the language of instruction in Nigerian educational institutions. Though known to be a second language which is acquired after the first or language of the immediate environment, there are situations in Nigeria today in which young children acquire it first. English serves an intermediary role due to the linguistic complexity that exists in the country as such it serves as a 'national language' of some sorts. It is the language of politics, mass media, administration, business, commerce, it is indeed the language of utility (Babalola, 2019). This implies that it is used for education as well as in other non- formal settings. It is helpful that specific proficiencies that the English language exposes people to be used to solve their problems. Exposure to such skills could be through formal education or such desirable skills could be put to use when using other indigenous languages.

### **Language and Communication Arts and its role in tackling insecurity**

Language encompasses all forms of expression and is basic for communication through words. It is also an organised system of linguistic symbols used to communicate between people, a symbolic system that links what goes on inside peoples' heads and what

goes on outside. It is a means through which meaning is negotiated, understanding and relationship is built (Adeniyi, 2009). He added that language is a means through which humans communicate. This does not mean that when one possesses language, it automatically translates into effective communication.

It has been established that effective communication and language use play vital role in issues that pertain to national transformation and change. In essence, language is the foundation upon which national development projects are built. It is a powerful tool capable of influencing personality, opposing ideas, generating violence, or could be put to positive use in order to inspire, educate, settle dispute, and establish cordial relationships, foster peace in communities. Communication offers a platform upon which to use language. Language is a tool which could be used either to organise the world when put to effective use and equally has a tendency to cause or further aggravate chaos. Ineffective use of language is known to be a threat to national unity as it breeds hostilities and unhealthy rivalry as well as disagreements of diverse kinds (Babalola, 2019). By implication, insecurity may be further heightened or controlled if not eradicated by the way communication skills are put to use (Olanrewaju, 2016). Babalola (2019) is of the opinion that language can be used to gain friends or foes; this goes to further buttress the point that language could be used to encourage healthy co – existence or to further widen gaps between parties in communication. In his words “Language, if realized in its utmost positive essence, can turn the whole world into a close loving family and we shall be able to do away with confusion, turbulence and war p.146”.

Communication serves as an integral tool for fostering meaningful dialogue in a diverse society such as Nigeria. It is also at the heart of good governance. When communication is carried out effectively, there is free flow of information to civil societies who monitor government’s performance and requires transparency such that citizens get enlightened about what they owe the government as an obligation and for government to

perform its duties to citizens (Olanrewaju, 2016). Where mutual distrust exists however, insecurity is further heightened rather than curbed. He further made reference to Harris while buttressing this point by adding that:

Peace education teaches alternatives to violence. If the aim is to develop generations of people sensitive to others, English language classes may shoulder its share of the responsibility to accomplish this prominent and worthy mission. This mission will convince students that, all human lives are of equal value and that all human beings to be seen and treated in the full richness, beauty and complexity of each life. Babalola (2019 p.147).

### **Listening**

Adeniyi (2009 p.119) refers to listening as “...the most important part of communication”. Listening is an active involvement of an individual that involves a sender, message and receiver. It is a “...psychological process of receiving, attending to constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or non-verbal messages” (Tyagi, 2013 p.1). It is the art of discriminating between sounds, recognizing words and understanding their meaning, identifying grammatical grouping of words, identifying expressions and sets of utterances that act to create meaning, connecting linguistic cues to non-linguistic and para-linguistic cues using background knowledge to predict and to confirm meaning, recalling important words and ideas (Tyagi, 2013). It is a process that entails hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding. Similarly, Adeniyi (2009) believes listening entails much more than mere hearing although hearing is the first component of listening followed by understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding.

Mailu(nd) sees it as the active process of receiving and responding to spoken and sometimes unspoken messages. Hearing on the other hand is said to be accidental and automatic brain response to sound which does not require much effort. Listening requires that a person puts in effort, takes time to learn the art, be intentional about it, understands it's a voluntary not involuntary art, understands it's an active rather than passive process, a process that aids decision making, an art that prompts response, is stored in both short and long term

memory, involves coordination of both ears and brain. It enables a person interpret messages and analyse situations in order to gain better interaction leading to better understanding between speakers and listeners as they get to give and receive feedback.

### **Active Listening**

Active listening is “the act of hearing a speaker, avoiding premature judgement, reflecting understanding, clarifying information restating a paraphrased version of the speaker’s message and asking questions, summarizing and sharing” (Topornycky & Golparian 2016, p.176). Interpersonal relationship should value free, positive acceptance of a speaker; active, emphatic listening; active, genuine and sincere self expression in communication. Active listening is a therapeutic micro – skill which is considered a critical communication skill that has been found to be invaluable in occupations such as education, crises negotiation, nursing, social work, public administration, physician – patient relation, sales and a host of others. It enables a listener hear accurately, understand, empathize, draw out ideas and information, find answers, show appreciation, connect, build self – esteem, weigh options, change perspectives, build relationships, soothe among others (Topornycky & Golparian, 2016).

### **Using listening skills to tackle ethno-religious crises in Nigeria**

Adeniyi (2009) active listening could be employed in tackling crises situations and insecurity. Engaging in active listening could go a long way in calming nerves and nibbing crises in the bud. This does not imply agreeing with the other party’s view point; it actually is making a speaker feel acknowledged and understood and trying to learn from his or her views by paying attention. This is important if minimizing conflict and ill-feeling is the goal. On each party in the conflict learns to listen actively, clearer discussions are possible and chances of escalation leading to situations of insecurity are eliminated or even reduced to the barest minimum. In doing this, an active listener should listen to:-

- Content: what is said
- Feeling: unexpressed hostilities, anger, resentments, detected from the tone of the speaker's voice. An active listener may acknowledge such underlying emotions and refer to them by gently suggesting what is perceived, not imposing one's interpretation but by truly clearing the air. The other person needs to understand it is not just assumption but an attempt to check and a way of reaffirming commitment to resolve conflict. He or she is then given a chance to confirm if what was perceived is so.

In curbing the menace of ethno – religious crises as well as other forms of insecurity in Nigeria, the following techniques of active listening are advocated by Topornycky & Golparian (2016). These could be employed for active listening with the aim of curbing or tackling ethno – religious crises:-

1. **Paying attention:** an active listener should listen to both the words and body language of a speaker while ignoring distractions, maintaining eye contact, and delaying formulation of response. When this is done, whenever there's a conversation that bothers on divergent view, there is less likelihood of assumption that all is well when there are underlying hostilities. This is because a listener pays attention to how things are said not just what is said and they do not listen with the sole aim of replying but with the intent of understanding and truly seeing the angle from which a speaker is speaking. This shows an attitude of friendliness.
2. **Showing that one is listening:** having an open and inviting posture, appropriate nods, smiles and encouraging a speaker with some verbal comments is another important technique. This serves as a morale booster to encourage a speaker to be sincere and open up on topics he ordinarily might be hesitant to discuss. He gains confidence to

open up and aims towards being understood by a listener who seems open to listening and understanding.

3. **Providing feedback:** this technique entails a listener confirming understanding of what he listened to by seeking clarification of what he understood. This could be done by paraphrasing, giving summary and asking clarification questions. This technique is useful for the fact that wrong assumptions that could further fuel crises are corrected and better understanding is sort in areas of confusion. This requires being attentive and responsive. This has to do with conversation management.
4. **Deferring judgement:** this has to do with allowing a speaker finish saying what he has to say without interrupting or bringing up counter arguments. This way, a listener is not listening with pre – conceived notion but is rather open to understanding and not forming sentiment – based judgement or drawing up conclusions too early.
5. **Responding appropriately:** this technique has to do with treating the other person the way he would love to be treated, responding sincerely and openly. An active listener shows consideration in this way such that he is not out to offend but to foster understanding and address conflict that might have taken a negative turn.

When a conscious effort is made to listen actively, there is greater understanding of crises situations and appropriate responses are given leading to better conflict resolution. This way ethno-religious conflicts are nibbed in the bud such that even t5hough divergent views continue to exist, they are addressed in a better manner leading to fewer and eventually elimination of violent crises.

## Conclusion

This paper discusses the fact that Nigeria, being a pluralistic state has had to grapple with insecurity fuelled by crises of diverse nature. Several efforts have been made either by the use of dialogue and other subtle means as well as the use of force and security



architecture to contain such crises. This paper focuses on ethno – religious crises in Nigeria as a brand of insecurity and how language and communication could be employed in tackling in. It specifically dwelt on how active listening could be used to tackle the menace of ethno – religious related insecurity or crises.

### Recommendations

- Active listening should be encouraged when teaching learners in schools such that they relate in a meaningful and more tolerant manner whenever they need to communicate. When they have learnt how to listen actively, they are better equipped to respond to crises situations in their environment without contributing to taking it to the level of chaos which could lead to loss of lives.
- Active listening could be taught when teaching English language or communication skills however its application could be extended to other languages especially in communities that have not acquired formal education or to those who do not communicate in English. In essences, active listening transcends the boundaries of English language use.

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