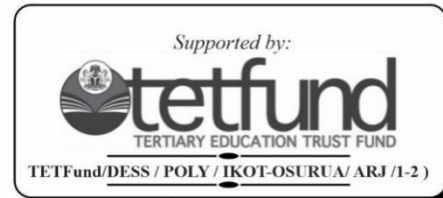


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## ADDRESSING LANGUAGE ABUSE IN PUBLIC SERVICE: A CASE OF AKWA IBOM STATE POLYTECHNIC, IKOT OSURUA



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### ABSTRACT

The prevalence of language abuse within the Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic community is a matter of significant concern. This study explores the diverse manifestations of language abuse and their implications for communication among faculty and students. This study employs critical discourse analysis as its framework and involves data collection through natural interactions, classroom lecture recordings, and interviews with students and subordinates. It identifies several forms of language abuse, including verbal, ethnic, and religious discrimination, harassment, and language exclusion through code-switching and code-mixing. Through the analysis of six speech events, the study reveals that language abuse yields grave consequences, including the development of lecturer interaction phobia, psychological and emotional distress leading to decreased focus and academic performance, diminished self-esteem, and social isolation. In light of these findings, the study proposes implementing training programs to educate staff on effective communication, cultivating a respectful and student-oriented environment, and establishing procedures for reporting instances of language abuse. Moreover, it advocates for

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management's commitment to appropriate disciplinary measures as needed. These initiatives are poised to significantly mitigate language abuse and foster a positive and supportive learning environment for students.

**Keywords:** *Public Service, Language Abuse, Consequences, self-esteem*

## INTRODUCTION

The exploration of language and its complexities has been a cornerstone of scholarly pursuit in the realm of linguistics for over a century, underscoring the vital role of communication through language. While language serves various social functions,

its primary utility is facilitating communication, a foundation upon which all other language functions must be built. This paper delves into two distinct perspectives on language: the first, articulated by Crystal and Robins, describes language as a structured system of conventional symbols designed for self-expression. The second perspective, offered by Nwala and Obisike in 2014, broadens the definition of language to encompass all forms of data exchange among living beings, not limited to human interaction.

The essence of effective communication is deeply

intertwined with language, principally aimed at facilitating exchanges (cf: Udom 2012, 2013, and 2017). This underscores the importance of integrating individuals within a language community, ensuring clear and effective communication. In the context of Nigeria, English has been adopted as the lingua franca for governmental, administrative, and educational purposes.

The selection of an official language serves multiple functions: it ensures streamlined and transparent governmental processes, fosters unity in a culturally diverse society, and enables citizens to participate in governance actively. However, the criteria for selecting an official language may vary, with some regions opting for multiple official languages to reflect their diverse linguistic, historical, cultural, or political landscapes.

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Effective communication remains critical to human interaction, especially within formal settings such as educational institutions. For instance, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic relies on the use of language to achieve its educational objectives. Despite the importance of language in these contexts, there have been concerns regarding the misuse of English by staff within public offices, particularly during interactions with students, whether in classroom settings or administrative offices. The misuse encompasses a range of inappropriate behaviors, including the dissemination of misinformation, verbal harassment, and the use of disrespectful or inappropriate language.

The paper aims to thoroughly analyze these instances of language misuse within the public offices of Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, focusing on staff-student interactions. By examining these cases, the study seeks to unearth the implications of such language misuse on the institution's educational goals and the overall communication effectiveness within the academic community. To illustrate, imagine a scenario

within a classroom at Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic where a lecturer uses overly complex language filled with jargon, making it difficult for students to grasp the lesson. This hinders learning and creates a barrier between the lecturer and the students, undermining the role of language as a tool for effective communication.

Alternatively, consider an administrative office where staff members use language to intimidate or belittle students coming in for inquiries, thereby creating an unwelcoming environment that discourages student engagement and participation. Through detailed analysis and real-life illustrations, this paper seeks to highlight the critical role of language in educational settings and the detrimental effects of its misuse on the institution's mission to foster a conducive learning environment. Statement of the Problem.

Language abuse in public offices has a significant negative impact on various aspects. First, it creates a hostile and toxic work environment that decreases

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productivity, damages morale, and increases employee turnover rates. The inefficiencies in public service delivery hurt its effectiveness. Second, language abuse reinforces discrimination and inequality, as derogatory language can strengthen biases and marginalize certain groups of people. It fosters an environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds may feel excluded or unwelcome in public offices, hindering efforts to promote equality and diversity.

Furthermore, language abuse in public offices erodes public trust and confidence. When public officials use offensive language or spread misinformation, it can undermine the credibility and integrity of the entire public office, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. In the specific case of Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, language abuse might have hindered the quality of education and tarnished the institution's image. The institution aims to produce quality graduates who can compete with their peers around Nigeria and beyond. However, abusive language might have forced some students to abandon their education altogether,

thus affecting the quality of the graduates produced. In order to effectively address language abuse in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, it is important to identify its various forms and explain how they affect communication between staff and students. By doing so, management has created a more respectful, inclusive, and effective working environment that reflects the values of transparency, integrity, and equal treatment for all individuals.

#### **LITERATURE/THEORY**

The investigation of language abuse in public offices is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA emphasizes the relationship between language, power, and social structures. The aim is to uncover how language maintains power relations in institutions and society. Language abuse in public offices can take different forms, such as using jargon, technical language, or bureaucratic language that creates barriers to communication and excludes certain groups of people.

CDA would analyze how these linguistic choices reinforce power dynamics and hierarchies in public offices.

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CDA could also explore the role of ideology in language abuse. For example, public officials might use manipulative or deceptive language to hide their true intentions or downplay the severity of certain issues. CDA would investigate how this manipulation of language serves to advance certain political or institutional agendas and maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, CDA would examine the effects of language abuse on marginalized or less privileged individuals. By analyzing the linguistic features and discursive strategies employed in public offices, CDA would shed light on how language may perpetuate discrimination, exclusion, or unequal treatment. Discourse analysis is useful for studying social issues such as power imbalance (cf: Udom, et al (2024); Enang, et al (2014)). According to Snape and Spencer (2003), discourse analysis originates from sociology. It examines how knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles, and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts. The technique focuses on how language is used in given

settings. In discourse analysis, the task is to identify the context and the various interpretive repertoires and attempt to match one to the other to understand the function of the different stories being told from the respondent's point of view.

Discourse analysis refers to analyzing written or spoken language in its social context (Cf: Ekanem et al. (2023); Udom et al., 2019). It is the analysis of language in use. It can be done in writing or even face-to-face. In other words, discourse can be communicated through words. Discourse Analysis is a linguistic method of analyzing the structure of texts or utterances longer than one sentence, considering their linguistic content and socio-linguistic context.

Woko (2022), citing Brown and Yule (1983), says that Discourse Analysis evolved from works in different disciplines in the 1960s and early 1970s, including linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Some scholars and their contributions that either gave birth to or helped develop discourse analysis include J. L. Austin (1962), who

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introduced the popular social and speech-act theories. Dell Hymes (1964) provided a sociological perspective with the study of speech; John Searle (1969) developed and improved Austin's work. The linguistic philosopher M.A.K. Halliday (1961) greatly influenced the linguistic properties of discourses, and in the 1970s, he provided a sufficient framework for the consideration of the functional approach to language.

Grice (1975) also influenced the study of language as social action reflected in the formulation of conversational maxims and the emergence of social semiotics. These individuals helped to develop the field of Discourse Analysis.

Cook (1989) explains that Discourse Analysis is a method of studying written and spoken language, which primarily deals with its social use. Discourse analysis aims to research the workings of language and learn the meaning derived from the words, depending on the situation. In the process of analysis, the conversation's context is considered along with its meaning.

For instance, the context may include the speaker's location or non-verbal cues (body language) during the discourse. In written communication, images and symbols used may encompass the context. This work, therefore, falls under the umbrella of Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a framework that investigates language abuse in public offices. It focuses on the relationship between language, power, and social structures to uncover how language perpetuates power dynamics and hierarchies. In public offices, language abuse can take several forms, such as jargon, technical, or bureaucratic language that excludes certain groups of people and creates communication barriers. CDA examines how these linguistic choices reinforce power dynamics and hierarchies within public offices.

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manipulation of language advances particular political or institutional agendas and maintains the status quo. CDA also analyzes the effects of language abuse on different social groups, particularly marginalized individuals and those with less privilege. Discourse analysis is suitable for studying social issues such as power imbalance.

It examines how knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles, and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts. The technique focuses on the way language is used in given settings. In discourse analysis, the task is to identify the context of the various interpretive repertoires and attempt to match one to the other to understand the function of the respondent's point of view of the different stories being told. Discourse analysis refers to analyzing a written or spoken language in its social context, which users can do in writing or face-to-face. In other words, language users discourse can communicate through words.

Discourse Analysis examines the structure of texts or utterances longer than one sentence, taking into account both their linguistic content and their sociolinguistic context. The development of Discourse Analysis evolved from works in different disciplines in the 1960s and early 1970s, including linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

Scholars such as Austin, Hymes, Searle, and Halliday contributed significantly to the development of the field of Discourse Analysis. Cook explains that Discourse Analysis aims to research the workings of the language and learn the meaning derived from the words, depending on the situation. In the analysis process, the conversation's context is considered along with its purpose.

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research the workings of the language and learn the meaning derived from the words, depending on the situation. In the analysis process, the conversation's context is considered along with its purpose.

Language abuse is a term that describes the misuse or manipulation of language in ways that distort its intended meaning, mislead others, or undermine its purpose. The practice of utilizing language in a misleading or harmful manner to influence or dominate others rather than to promote clear and honest communication is commonly known as manipulative language. This form of communication is characterized by its deceptive nature, as it is often utilized to control others or gain an unfair advantage.

In professional and academic settings, it is essential to maintain a high standard of honest, ethical, and transparent communication and avoid using manipulative language. This helps to establish trust, build positive relationships, and promote a collaborative and respectful

environment. In the realm of politics, this may involve propaganda, as Salawa (2018) suggests. Political players may deliberately use biased or misleading language to shape public opinion or promote a particular political ideology or agenda. False narratives may be created, and allegations may be disseminated to the public to incite hatred or love for a particular candidate.

Hate speech is another form of language abuse. It refers to the use of language to express discriminatory or offensive views towards individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Hate speech aims to dehumanize and marginalize others. Another form of language abuse is gaslighting, which involves manipulating language to make someone doubt their perceptions, memory, or sanity. This is achieved by distorting facts, denying events, or contradicting previous statements to undermine individuals'

confidence and control their behaviour.

Double-speak is another form of language abuse, where ambiguous or euphemistic language is used to conceal the true meaning of a statement or to disguise unpleasant or controversial ideas. Politicians, corporations, or organizations often employ it to manipulate public perception. According to Epstein (2013), using inflammatory or provocative language online to provoke strong emotional responses or to incite conflict and disruption can be seen as trolling.

Trolls often abuse language to harass, offend, or upset others. Language abuse can have significant negative consequences, including spreading misinformation, fostering division and hatred, eroding trust, and diminishing the effectiveness of communication.

Promoting respectful and honest language use is important to maintain a healthy and constructive dialogue in society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a descriptive method, and all analyses are based on the qualitative data collected. The data were collected using observation and recording. The researcher visited a few Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic offices to observe how teaching and non-teaching staff use language. The staff's consent needed to be sorted since the study did not reveal the identity of the communicators.

More importantly, the expressions needed for this work are those made in natural settings. In cases of recordings, the researcher informed the communicators after the interactions had been recorded. Data were also collected from classrooms where lecturers delivered lessons normally. Six conversation events were analyzed in this work. The relevant expressions are chosen for analysis, especially those that suggest language abuse. Students were interviewed, and their opinions were obtained regarding the effect of language abuse on them.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

	Speech Event	Expressions	Forms of abuse
1	Class lecture delivered by a lecturer to ND I students	<p>-Students of these days are too lazy and careless about everything</p> <p>-Some of you are very stupid and you will fail</p> <p>-You only know how to open your legs and how to do yahoo</p> <p>-Some of you cannot even bath very well and brush your teeth</p> <p>-You are so empty that even if I teach you every day, you will still fail</p>	Verbal abuse
2	Lecturers' interaction with a student in the office	<p>-Why do you submit your assignment late? Did your mother die again? After wasting all your time, you still wrote nonsense</p> <p>-School is not for you. You are not intelligent. Go and learn handwork</p> <p>-I know you come from Uyo. Uyo girls only know how to jump from one man to another</p>	Verbal abuse, ethnic profiling and hate speech
3	Office clack attending to new students	Take your files and go outside. I will call you one after another. Are you deaf? Common get out and stop behaving like goat. Obey simple instruction	Exclusion and verbal abuse
4	Departmental secretary addressing a male student in the office	<p>-You dressed like one of these criminals and your hair is unkempt</p> <p>-Common shift backwards. Stay there and talk.</p> <p>-Some of you came here to waste your parents' money. It seems you are not</p>	Verbal abuse and profiling

		interested in school, so stop wasting our time and your parent's money. God forbid oh	
5	A lecturer conducting an examination with NDII students	<p>-Stop turning your neck. All these Igbo people, you know how to cheat in everything</p> <p>-Some of you have started failing already</p> <p>-After this examination, I do not want to see any of you in my office for any reason</p> <p>-When I was teaching, some of you were busy making noise up and down</p> <p>-Even those of you who claim to be righteous like Deeper Lifers, all of you are cheats</p> <p>-Deeper Lifers behave like Muslims. They pretend a lot</p>	Ethnic profiling, nuisance, religious hate and verbal abuse
6	A lecturer delivering a lesson to HND 2 students	<p>-Some of you will be going out to NYSC soon. Don't go there to marry those Hausa illiterates. We trained you and we need you back.</p> <p>-Our Niger Delta people have been helping others including Igbos but we don't get anything in return instead they try to dominate us.</p> <p>-Remember where you come from</p>	Tribal discrimination and exclusion

The data in the table show forms of language abuse by public servants in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua. In categorization, language abuse occurs in the form of tribal discrimination, verbal abuse, language exclusion, nuisance, religious discrimination, hate speech, and profiling.

### VERBAL ABUSE

Verbal abuse is indeed a form of language abuse. It involves using words, tone of voice, or language patterns to demean, criticize, belittle, or manipulate another person. Verbal abuse can be

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inflicted in various settings, such as personal relationships, work environments, or public

spaces. Language is a powerful tool that can be used to build relationships, convey ideas, and express emotions. However, when language is used as a means of control, intimidation, or harm, it becomes abusive. Verbal abuse can have significant negative effects on the recipient's self-esteem, emotional well-being, and overall

mental health (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Examples of verbal abuse include insults, name-calling, mocking, yelling, swearing, constant criticism, gaslighting, and using offensive or derogatory language. Verbal abuse can be overt or subtle, and it can occur in both private and public contexts. It

can be inflicted by individuals in positions of power or authority, such as parents, partners, bosses, or peers.

1) Students of these days are too lazy and careless about everything

- 2) Some of you are very stupid, and you will fail
- 3) You only know how to open your legs and how to do yahoo
- 4) Some of you cannot even bath very well and brush your teeth
- 5) You dressed like one of these criminals, and your hair is unkempt
- 6) Common shift backward. Stay there and talk.
- 7) Common, get out and stop behaving like a goat

The words are spewed to students who ought to be dignified and respected. The students on our campuses are fighting well against hurdles and hindrances from family, finances, and academic stress. They constantly need words of encouragement from the staff of

Akwa Ibom Polytechnic instead of constant bashing. Few students have shown no seriousness in their studies, but generalizations should not be made because others are sponsoring themselves or being sponsored by poor parents. It is important to recognize and address

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verbal abuse because it can have long-lasting consequences. Victims of verbal abuse may experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and a distorted self-image.

They may also find it difficult to trust others or communicate effectively due to the emotional scars left by the abuse. Ethnic Profiling and Discrimination Tribal discrimination can indeed be associated with language abuse. Language can be used as a tool to marginalize, demean, or discriminate against individuals or groups based on their tribal or ethnic backgrounds. This type of language abuse reinforces stereotypes, fosters prejudice, and perpetuates harmful attitudes and behaviors (Bok, 1999).

Tribal discrimination often involves the use of derogatory language or slurs targeting specific tribal or ethnic groups. It can manifest in various ways, such as

the mocking of accents, ridiculing cultural practices, or using offensive stereotypes to belittle or dehumanize individuals from certain tribes. By employing

language to discriminate against tribal or ethnic groups, individuals or communities are marginalized and denied equal rights, opportunities, and respect. This abuse of language can lead to

social division, heightened tensions, and the perpetuation of systemic inequalities (Wright, 1900). Examples of ethnic discrimination are presented below:

- 1) Some of you will be going out to NYSC soon. Do not go there to marry those Hausa illiterates. We trained you, and we need you back.
- 2) Our Niger Delta people have been helping others, including Igbos, but we do not get anything in return; instead, they try to dominate us.
- 3) Stop turning your neck. All these Igbo people, you know how to cheat in everything.

Language has been used to present others as inferior to one's tribe or region. This ideology results in tensions among people who ought to live peacefully. Inculcating into the students that the Hausa tribe is illiterate or Igbos are cheating is

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unacceptable. The individuals from these tribes become objects of ridicule and receive unfavorable treatment in social settings. Addressing tribal discrimination and language abuse

requires a multi-faceted approach. It promotes awareness, education, and understanding of different cultures and traditions. Encouraging respectful dialogue, challenging stereotypes, and fostering inclusive environments are essential to combating tribal discrimination (Wright, 1900).

Additionally, legal frameworks and policies that prohibit discrimination based on tribal or ethnic backgrounds can create a more equitable society. It is crucial for individuals, communities, and institutions to actively promote acceptance, respect, and equal treatment for all, regardless of their tribal or ethnic affiliations. Tribal discrimination as a form of language abuse reflects broader societal issues related to prejudice and discrimination. By recognizing and confronting language abuse, we can work towards building a more inclusive and harmonious

society where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

## **RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION**

Religious discrimination can indeed be associated with language

abuse. Language can be used to target and discriminate against individuals or groups based on their religious beliefs or practices. This form of abuse can manifest in various ways, including derogatory language, hate speech, offensive jokes, and the use of religious stereotypes to demean or marginalize individuals. Language abuse related to religious discrimination can contribute to an environment of hostility, prejudice, and intolerance. It can perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce biases, and dehumanize individuals or communities based on their religious identity. This type of discrimination can lead to social exclusion, unequal treatment, and even acts of violence against targeted religious groups.

## **THE EXPRESSIONS THAT TARGET CERTAIN RELIGIOUS GROUPS ARE:**

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1). When I was teaching, some of you were busy making noise up and down. Even those of you who claim to be righteous like Deeper Lifers, all of you are cheats. Deeper Lifers behave like Muslims. They pretend a lot. One might take the expression above as a joke, but it has a lasting effect on the members of these religious groups. Profiling them as cheats is unnecessary and cannot be true. Addressing religious discrimination and language abuse requires a commitment to fostering respect, understanding, and tolerance. Promoting education about different religions, encouraging interfaith dialogue, and challenging stereotypes are important steps toward combating religious discrimination.

Individuals and the school community can actively counter religious discrimination by promoting empathy, respect, and inclusivity. We can work towards a more harmonious and accepting society by engaging in open and respectful conversations, challenging prejudices, and fostering interfaith understanding. It is important to remember that

freedom of religion is a fundamental human right, and everyone should be able to practice their faith without fear of discrimination or abuse. By addressing religious discrimination as a form of language abuse, we can strive for a society that values diversity, promotes mutual respect, and upholds the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs.

### **LANGUAGE EXCLUSION**

Language exclusion can indeed be considered a form of language abuse. It refers to the deliberate act of excluding individuals or groups from participating in social, cultural, or educational activities based on their language or linguistic background (Fairclough, 2001). Language exclusion can have significant negative effects and perpetuate inequality and discrimination. When individuals are excluded from social or educational contexts due to their language, it can lead to feelings of isolation, marginalization, and diminished opportunities. Language exclusion can take various forms, such as refusing to provide language accommodations, dismissing or devaluing non-



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dominant languages, or excluding individuals from conversations or decision-making processes based on their language proficiency. It also takes the form of code-switching and code-mixing. Code-switching and mixing are the common language exclusions identified in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic.

**EXAMPLES ARE:**

*I will call you one after another(translate into the local language) Obey simple instructions (translate this, too)*

Language exclusion is particularly relevant in multicultural and multilingual societies, where diverse languages coexist. It can occur in educational settings, workplaces, public services, and social interactions. Fairclough (2001) insinuates that language can be a means to display power imbalance in a society. It often perpetuates linguistic hierarchies and limits access to resources and opportunities for individuals who speak a minority or non-dominant language,(cf: Udom 2016;2012).

Speakers of Efik dominate Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. However, many people speak other

languages. Some of the staff excluded non-speakers of Efik by switching languages, as shown in the third speech event.

The addresser attacked those who did not understand the indigenous language.

Addressing language exclusion requires promoting linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and equal rights(Clark, 2004; Udom, 2013).

It involves recognizing and valuing the importance of all languages and providing language

accommodations to ensure equal participation and access to services and opportunities. Efforts to combat language exclusion include

- implementing language policies that protect linguistic rights,
- promoting bilingual or multilingual education,
- providing interpretation and translation services, and
- fostering inclusive language practices in various domains.

Creating environments that respect and value linguistic diversity is crucial, where individuals can freely express themselves and participate regardless of their language background. By addressing language exclusion as a

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form of language abuse, we can work towards building inclusive societies that celebrate linguistic diversity, promote equal opportunities, and uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their language or linguistic background.

### CONCLUSION

Effective language use is essential for communication. Users must exercise care to avoid damaging their intended message. In most cases, students in tertiary institutions are adolescents with limited exposure to life and society. As such, educators have a responsibility to help guide them toward adulthood.

The language used by staff must be purposeful, with the primary aim of facilitating growth and development. The use of abusive language is not an effective means of providing emotional and psychological support, as it has the opposite effect. The negative impact of such behaviour on students is immeasurable and can result in dropouts and poor academic performance. In some cases, students may develop phobias towards their lecturers and

other staff members, who are supposed to help them solve problems.

Language abuse has dire consequences for students, resulting in a disconnection between staff and students. Students may refrain from constant attacks from staff, leading to ineffective communication. Furthermore, many students may fear asking questions in class or attending classes altogether if the lecturer is unfriendly. Some students may verbally abuse their peers in hostels and classrooms, leading to low academic achievement. All stakeholders must work together to foster positive language use. This will eliminate tribalism, religious intolerance, verbal abuse, and profiling of students.

Moreover, it may reduce the psychological effects of stress and depression on students. Since students are already under pressure to perform academically, we must not emotionally attack them for minor reasons. In conclusion, we must exercise care when communicating with students, using purposeful language to

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facilitate their growth and development.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Nigeria should urgently produce a policy that will mandate all public schools in Nigeria to eradicate the dichotomy between indigene and non-indigenes regarding payments. The discrimination of non-indigenes begins with payment policies. Implementing clear policies and guidelines that promote respectful coexistence is key to the use of language.

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Training programs should be provided to educate employees on appropriate communication and the importance of fostering a respectful, student - friendly environment. Additionally, there should be mechanisms to report instances of language abuse, along with a commitment from management to take appropriate disciplinary action when necessary. CCTV cameras should be installed in public offices to check for misuse of power by the staff community.

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