

Teaching of English Language using Religious Values: A Conceptual Analysis of the English Language in Nigeria Schools

Veronica Yohanna and Christiana Ka'aniyang Bitrus

Department of Arts and Social Science Education,
Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria.

Received 25 June 2026; Acceptance 10 July 2026; Published 13 July 2026.

Abstract

This paper examines the role of religious narratives in Nigerian English language classrooms as resources for promoting moral development and peaceful interpersonal relationships among learners. Biblical, Qur'anic, and traditional moral stories are considered not as instruments of religious instruction but as pedagogical tools for cultivating character, fostering empathy, and encouraging ethical reasoning among ethnically and religiously diverse students. Drawing on existing literature and classroom practices, the paper argues that the careful and inclusive integration of shared moral narratives into English language teaching can support moral reflection, peace-oriented literacy, and civic responsibility. It further contends that religion, when approached objectively and respectfully, can complement English language education by reinforcing values necessary for positive social interaction in Nigeria's pluralistic society. The paper recommends the development of clear policy guidelines, culturally sensitive curriculum materials, and teacher preparation in ethics and inclusive pedagogy to facilitate the integration of moral values into language instruction.

Keywords: Religion; English Language Teaching; Moral Education; Character Formation; Peace Education; Curriculum Integration.

Introduction

Religion constitutes a powerful social force that shapes reasoning, behaviour, communication, and interpersonal relations. In Nigeria, Christianity and Islam play dominant roles in constructing moral ethics and social norms that influence both individual conduct and community life. Children are introduced to concepts of love, obedience, respect, morality, and peace through religious teachings within the home, often prior to formal schooling (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Oluwole, 2019). Because education is embedded

Correspondence addressed to Veronica Yohanna, email: yohannav@veritas.edu.ng

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within society, these religious values acquired at home inevitably permeate formal classroom instruction and contribute to students' broader worldview.

English functions as Nigeria's official language and primary medium of instruction from primary school through tertiary education. It is the language of examinations, media, and interethnic communication (Bamgbose, 2014). However, the English classroom extends beyond linguistic competence in reading, spelling, or grammar. It is a site where students encounter narratives that convey moral frameworks and ways of understanding human experience. These stories subtly influence students' behavior, shaping how they resolve conflict, demonstrate respect, and engage with concepts of justice. Thus, English instruction implicitly contributes to socialization.

In Nigeria's pluralistic context, where Christianity, Islam, and Traditional belief systems coexist, English teachers negotiate more than syntax. The classroom often represents one of the few spaces where learners from diverse religious backgrounds meet as equals. Consequently, pedagogical approaches to religious content carry significant social implications, as teachers model civic discourse and coexistence.

This paper contends that religion has a significant, though delimited, role in English language instruction in Nigerian schools, particularly concerning moral development and peace education. It does not propose that English teaching become religious instruction. Rather, it suggests that ethical values such as love, tolerance, forgiveness, honesty, integrity, fairness, responsibility, and truthfulness, drawn from Biblical and Qur'anic texts, can be carefully and objectively adapted for use in English comprehension passages and classroom activities. Through dramatization and contextualized vocabulary instruction, these values can move beyond rote learning to encourage reflection, moral reasoning, and positive social behaviour. Consequently, the English language classroom can serve not merely as a site for linguistic development but also as a modest yet meaningful avenue for fostering ethical consciousness and peaceful interpersonal relationships among learners.

Religion as a Source of Moral Values in Nigerian Society

Indigenous and Religious Foundations of Moral Education

In Nigeria, religion has historically functioned as a primary framework for moral guidance. Prior to Western education, indigenous religious systems emphasized communal living, respect for elders, and collective responsibility. The subsequent spread of Christianity and Islam institutionalized moral education through scriptures, sermons, and religious storytelling traditions, thereby establishing codified ethical codes that regulated social behavior (Falola, 2021).

Moral Values Promoted by Christianity and Islam

Both Christianity and Islam promote virtues such as forgiveness, love, discipline, sympathy, and modesty, while Islam specifically emphasizes mercy, human dignity, equal justice, and kindness. These values are intended to transcend places of worship and shape social relations and responsible citizenship (Esposito, 2018; Jackson, 2014).

The Moral Instruction Gap in Formal Education

Despite the centrality of religion in moral formation, the transmission of these values remains largely confined to churches and mosques. Consequently, public consciousness in Nigeria often delegates moral instruction to religious leaders rather than school teachers. Formal education, by contrast, prioritizes academic performance over value integration (Ogunleye, 2020). This disconnect creates a moral instruction gap, particularly for students with limited religious engagement outside school. The absence of religious-ethical content in subjects such as English language therefore represents a missed opportunity for holistic development.

Moral Challenges Facing Nigerian Youths

Contemporary Moral and Social Challenges

Contemporary Nigeria confronts pervasive vices including homicide, abuse of power, domestic violence, banditry, religious conflict, and examination malpractice. Scholars attribute these issues to a decline in moral values, exacerbated by economic hardship, social media influence, inadequate role models, and political instability (Adebayo, 2022; Falola, 2021).

Moral Development as an Educational Imperative

If unaddressed, these trends risk further societal deterioration. Nigerian education policy recognizes this reality by affirming that human development encompasses moral and civic responsibilities (NERDC, 2020). Consequently, schools have a responsibility not only to impart knowledge and skills but also to contribute to the moral formation of learners.

The Need for Value Integration in English Language Education

Despite this policy recognition, subjects such as English language remain largely focused on grammar and vocabulary acquisition, while moral instruction is primarily confined to Religious Studies. This curricular division fails to leverage the potential of language education for character formation, despite the role of language in shaping cognition, attitudes, and behaviour. Integrating moral and ethical content into English language instruction therefore represents an important opportunity for addressing contemporary moral challenges among Nigerian youths.

English Language Teaching Beyond Grammar and Examination

English language pedagogy in Nigeria predominantly emphasizes vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and examination preparation. While linguistically necessary, this narrow focus neglects the subject's capacity to transmit culture, ethics, and shared meaning (Adegbite, 2018; Woolard, 1998).

Language is not merely communicative; it shapes thought and social reality. Comprehension passages, already central to English curricula, are often narrative or descriptive texts. These could be strategically

employed to embed moral lessons on kindness, peace, and civic responsibility without compromising linguistic objectives. As Nucci (2016) argues, consistent exposure to morally salient narratives during instruction facilitates internalization, gradually influencing identity and behavior.

Use of Religious Stories in English Comprehension Passages

Religious Narratives as Pedagogical Resources

A practical approach to enriching English instruction involves adapting Biblical and Qur'anic narratives as human stories rather than doctrinal content. These texts depict universal experiences such as justice, forgiveness, resilience, and empathy. In Nigeria's current climate, such themes are pedagogically relevant beyond religious allegiance. For instance, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers can prompt discussion of restorative justice rather than theology. Similarly, accounts of Prophet Muhammad's response to antagonism can frame dialogue on empathy. Jackson (2014) and UNESCO (2023) note that this secular-pedagogical use of religious literature respects pluralism while cultivating prosocial values. The English teacher's role, therefore, is not to preach but to facilitate reflection on how narratives inform ethical living.

Promoting Higher-Order Thinking and Ethical Reasoning

As students engage with these narratives in English class, they develop higher-order thinking skills such as questioning, imagination, and ethical decision-making. They begin to understand that language extends beyond examinations and serves as a tool for living. Discussions of appropriate diction, forgiveness, speech, and silence cultivate minds that value peace, respect diversity, choose words deliberately, and communicate with civility even during disagreement. Language is power, and its ethical use is paramount.

Role of the English Language Teacher

Teacher Neutrality and Facilitation of Moral Discourse

Students observe pedagogical choices, including text selection and teacher demeanor when addressing religious concepts. Because learners imitate instructors, Ogunleye (2020) asserts that teachers must remain neutral and observant. The educator should not privilege any faith tradition. Instead, they should facilitate discussion while respecting each learner's worldview without imposing personal beliefs. This constitutes appropriate and peaceful integration of religious content in Nigerian English classrooms. The teacher's function is to guide, not dictate. When moral or religious narratives arise—whether from folktales, Biblical passages, Qur'anic parables, or local legends—the instructor should maintain balance by anchoring discussion in comprehension, communication, inference, and critical thinking. Regarding ethics, students should be permitted to construct understanding independently. The teacher should not judge or impose faith but create space for reflective thought.

Inclusive Selection of Religious and Cultural Texts

Jackson (2014) and Gay (2018) clarify that inclusion requires more than acknowledgement; it necessitates presenting diverse religious perspectives concurrently rather than marginalizing them. This means comprehension passages should not exclusively feature Christian parables or Islamic hadiths without balance. Instead, common ground should be established through universal values such as honesty, mercy, respect, and forgiveness—concepts accessible to all learners regardless of home background. Moral lessons should feel familiar rather than foreign.

Promoting Student Engagement and Classroom Harmony

Student engagement increases when learners perceive their faith traditions represented. When a Muslim student encounters a Qur'anic verse used pedagogically, or a practitioner of Traditional religion hears a folktale reflecting ancestral wisdom, participation is encouraged. The classroom becomes interactive as students contribute questions and narratives, and learning becomes dynamic. Inclusive classrooms do not merely motivate learners, as UNESCO (2023) demonstrates, but also improve academic performance, strengthen peer relationships, amplify student voice, and reduce conflict. This is particularly critical in Nigeria, where religious difference can escalate tension rapidly. Creating space for every belief system is therefore not merely beneficial but necessary.

Religion, Language, and Peacebuilding in Nigeria

Peace Education and the Nigerian Context

Peacebuilding is not optional in contemporary Nigeria; it is a survival strategy. The nation is fractured by intersecting religious, ethnic, and political tensions that have divided families, schools, and communities. Lives have been lost, trust eroded, and education remains a primary hope for restoration. UNESCO (2023) notes that schools can facilitate healing, not merely transmit academic knowledge. Peaceful coexistence is therefore non-negotiable for national unity, particularly in Nigeria's multi-religious and multi-ethnic context.

The English Classroom as a Space for Dialogue and Coexistence

Language, especially English shared in the classroom, functions as more than vocabulary. It serves as a bridge enabling a Yoruba child to dialogue with a Hausa child, and a Christian to analyze a Muslim narrative without exclusion. The English classroom thus provides an appropriate venue for moral instruction and intercultural engagement. Learners from diverse backgrounds can engage in dialogue and gradually recognize one another as equals rather than adversaries. Through speaking, listening, and understanding, differences can be transformed into collective strength, prioritizing unity over division (Esposito, 2018).

Developing Peace Literacy and Ethical Citizenship

When English instruction incorporates stories that model forgiveness, listening, understanding, and tolerance, it develops what Harris and Morrison (2013) describe as "peace literacy." For example, students

may read the Biblical account of Joseph forgiving his brothers and then examine a Qur'anic teaching on mercy after conflict not for doctrinal instruction, but to reflect on questions of empathy and reconciliation. Such activities cultivate critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility. In this way, English language teaching contributes to citizenship formation by nurturing learners who are equipped to engage constructively with diversity and contribute positively to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Religion, Memory, and Lifelong Moral Influence

Nucci (2016) explains that repeated exposure to moral narratives in English instruction—during shared reading, circle time, or text analysis—does not merely entertain. These stories contribute to the formation of an internal ethical compass. Thus, English instruction transcends grammatical accuracy or essay composition. It contributes to developing individuals who recognize that kindness is not weakness, patience is not passivity, and peace is not unattainable. Importantly, habits cultivated in primary education persist into secondary schooling. These values deepen with maturity; ethical conduct becomes habitual rather than calculated. This demonstrates why English class matters for examinations, employment, character formation, and national development.

Long-Term Impact of Moral Education through Language Learning

The purpose of education extends beyond academic achievement. It aims to produce enduring effects in learners' lives. A compelling argument for integrating moral values into English language teaching lies in its long-term outcomes: it shapes behavior and influences the adults' students become. Because English is taught continuously from primary through secondary school, consistent exposure to moral values provides sustained opportunities for internalization. These values operate not only within school but also in homes, communities, and national and global contexts. They inform how students, now and as future adults, respond to life's challenges. Furthermore, incorporating moral narratives into English instruction contributes to developing a generation of Nigerians who are more peaceful, tolerant, and socially responsible. While education alone cannot resolve all social problems, it provides a foundational framework for a peaceful society and positive change.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that English language instruction in Nigeria can contribute meaningfully to moral development and peace education when religious-ethical narratives are carefully and inclusively integrated into teaching and learning activities. Biblical, Qur'anic, and traditional moral stories, when treated as ethical rather than doctrinal texts, can promote empathy, ethical reasoning, civic responsibility, and peaceful coexistence without compromising the linguistic objectives of English education.

Accordingly, educational policymakers should develop clear guidelines that recognize moral education within subject frameworks, while curriculum developers should provide criteria for selecting culturally and religiously sensitive texts. English teachers should adopt inclusive pedagogical approaches that encourage reflection and dialogue, and teacher education programmes should incorporate training in ethics, religious diversity, and inclusive pedagogy. Although education alone cannot resolve Nigeria's social and religious challenges, the English language classroom can serve as a meaningful avenue for fostering ethical consciousness and positive interpersonal relationships among learners.

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