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## Using Discourse Hedges in School Debate: Focus on Peace and Reconciliation

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### **Abstract**

Educators agree that adequate time is not given to classroom contact hours so as to cover all much desired course materials effectively. As a result, classroom activities are often geared toward ensuring that students understand course concepts with little time left to promote an in – depth critical thinking. One of the most effective ways of utilizing instructional strategies is to actively engage students in activities outside the classroom such as debate. Debate promotes critical thinking which enables students acquire persuasive genres. Additionally, argumentative communication like debate involves studying of reasons, giving people justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes, etc. Hedges are useful linguistic repertoires that can be utilized in peace and reconciliation process because they mitigate even the harshest utterances. In this paper, the students used hedges in order to reduce the social distance in such a way that every interlocutor felt free.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis; debate; reconciliation; critical thinking; hedges

### **1. Introduction**

The argument for raising students' critical awareness of discourse has a close relationship with discourse analysis.

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In unveiling the formation of social structures and abuse of power by people in authority, and soothing the wounds inflicted as a result of mishaps and other forms of violence, discourse analysis empowers people with a virile tool of voicing out certain unacceptable practices in society, and assist in resolving crises. This can be done by exposing students to correct learning environment which enables them to understand social issues.

Additionally, discourse analysis offers students the ability to understand how language is used in various contexts; to fulfill different purposes which include applying appropriate linguistic elements in peace process, and think critically before venturing into taking any decision, because much of destructive – related violence in the world can be linked to ill – conceived decisions, emerging from wrong ideologies.

The ability to reflect critically, and analyze discourse increases a basic skill for negotiation because discourse analysis recognizes that language is not neutral, rather; it seeks to address the relationship between language and ideology using text. Consequently, political issues such as abuse of power, inequality, discrimination, etc. are often the focus authors in [1:271] argue that discourse analysis is based on the following tenets: address social problems

1. Power relations are discursive
2. Discourse constitutes society and culture
3. Discourse does ideological work
4. Discourse is historical
5. The link between text and society is mediated
6. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
7. Discourse is a form of social action

Critical thinking provides a framework, a process goal, or instructional strategies for approaching and learning specific course content. Instruction in critical thinking is to be designed to achieve an understanding of the relationship of language, and logic which should lead to the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas to reason inductively and deductively and to reach factual or judgmental conclusion based on sound inference drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief, the author in [2:3].

There wouldn't be peace and reconciliation in the absence of violence, or war. Conflict can be defined as form of competitive behavior between two or more people competing over perceived or actual incompatible goals or limited resources. Conflicts are essential ingredients of social change and do not need to be negative; but if conflicts are destructive or violent, they need to be transformed or managed.

Recently, there has been a renewed belief that destructive conflict is not inevitable or an uncontrollable aspect of human nature. Therefore, people are discovering that different means of disputing and managing conflicts can produce more satisfactory outcomes because there has been growth of interest in negotiation, mediation and facilitated problem solving as alternative means of disputes resolutions. If these attempts are to be effective measures, then specific tools should be employed to make peace.

## **2. Objective of the research**

- a. To advocate for a paradigm shift in traditional instructional method to students – centred instructional strategy,
- b. To promote critical thinking through debate in schools, and
- c. To use a specific linguistic means in making peace and reconciliation process.

## **3. Barriers in teaching Critical thinking**

Barriers in teaching critical thinking are often the result of practical constraints of a traditional classroom. Specifically, instructors have only a limited amount of contact hours with students, and the face – to-face classroom environment mandates that instruction be somewhat generalized to be applicable, understandable, and paced to large number of diverse students. This type of time – limited group setting often dictates a didactic teaching strategy in which the instructor leads students through a pre – arranged set of contents with minimal time spent on individual interaction or critical analysis of the information presented.

The challenge of the traditional classroom is compounded further by the habitual nature of teaching and learning as most teachers tend to teach the way there were taught with an emphasis on instructor – based strategy that values content acquisition over the learning process. This tendency is reinforced by the standardized assessment and readily available assessment resources with emphasis on knowledge over the thought process. As a result, students tend to gear their time and attention on concrete, factual learning that is likely to be assessed to determine their overall course grades. This habitual cycle impedes the integration of critical thinking instructional techniques as instructors may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with alternative classroom strategies, assessments, may not be in place to measure students’ mastery of critical non – factual learning, the authors in [3].

In contrast to the traditional instructional strategies, constructivist learning philosophers tend to shift the emphasis from the instructor to the learner as, the author in [4] puts: ‘it is the learner that interacts with the environment and thus gains an understanding of its features and characteristics. The learner constructs his/her own conceptualization, and finds his/her own solution to problems, mastery autonomy and independence’ author in [4:42]. According to constructivism, learning is the result of individual mental construction whereby the student learns by dint of matching new against given information and establishing meaningful connections rather than by internalizing mere factoids to be regurgitated later on. As such, instructional principles based on a constructivist framework require instructors to anchor learning activities within a larger context while supporting students in developing ownership of the task. To engage actively with course material, the instructor should design authentic tasks that reflect the complexity of the environment, then support and challenge students’ thinking while encouraging them to test their ideas against alternative views author in [5].

## **4. Pragmatic solutions for peace and reconciliation**

Many different factors are important for a process of reconciliation. They include: religious, socio – cultural, economic, political, psychological and juridical aspects of reconciliation. For instance, in 1999, a children’s

television programme called, *Nashe Maalo* meaning 'our neighbor', has been broadcast in Macedonia by an organization which searched for common grounds. *Nashe Maalo* was aimed at reducing negative stereotype and prejudice, and increase mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among children of varying ethnic groups across Macedonia. Similarly, due bombings of Beirut in 1989 – 1990, a group of UNICEF staff wrote a book for children, spending long time in refugee camps. The book was called, SAWA meaning *together* in Arabic with a sole aim to give the children stories that took them beyond the spheres of the war and emphasized equality among all ethnic groups in Lebanon. The project focused on changing the negative attitudes the Lebanese children towards destructions of lives and property and the need to appreciate co – existence regardless of differences in human endeavors. This programme continued to exist until violence ended in the country. Furthermore, the Lutheran Church in Liberia and World Service ran a trauma healing and reconciliation programme that assisted in rebuilding the country after it was ravaged by internal crisis which started in 1989 - 1997. The programme took care of all ex – fighters, military and para- military personnel's spiritual, psychological and social problems. From spiritual viewpoint in particular, trainers went round the entire country, conducting worships and disseminating awareness crusades on consequences of war and the need to avert a recurrence. While these programmes and steps taken have yielded positive results with regard to peace processes in various contexts, another process of peace and reconciliation can be seen from three societal levels: top - level, mid – range and grassroots –each with its own actors and methods. Among these levels, the one that concerns this paper is the grassroots level which comprises the school. The school is identified as a social institution and agent of change.

Research clearly supports the benefits of active learning strategies to promote enhanced understanding, retention, and critical thinking over the shallow, passive learning that results from conventional lectures. As a result, interactive classroom discussions, projects and debates are often promoted for their ability to increase students' critical thinking abilities, i.e. ability to evaluate empirical positions, apply relevant principles and formulate logical arguments. Therefore, developing critical thinking skills should be foremost among the objectives of education so that people can think for themselves and are able to prevent large – scale violence, because weakness in educational structure and contents have direct links to the outbreaks of violence that the globe expends billions of dollars in managing. Furthermore, combating the ideology of terrorism, ethno – religious violence, socio – economic, and political mishaps can be done by fighting ignorance which can be achieved through appropriate school curricula. For instance, half of the world's out – of – school population – 39 million children live in conflict affected fragile states, even though these countries make up just 13 per cent of the world's population. The aftermath of insecurity and the subsequent declaration of the state of emergency in the three northern states of Nigeria, namely: Adamawa, Borno and Yobe in 2013, and its extension in 2014 emerging from insecurity in the region has necessitated many children to attend school irregularly as most communities reported that schools were malfunctioning due to highly coordinated attacks on both teachers and students across the zone leaving roughly 300,000 out of school children, source from [6] In addition prevailing security related causes of out of school, most schools in these affected countries are underfunded by government or donors. For instance, in 2006, education received only 1.1 per cent of humanitarian need which was inadequate considering vast number of illiterate children born to parents in these countries. Education should be accorded high priority as young people overwhelmingly confessed that lack of quality education is one of their

top concerns, and behind peace, and absence of violence in their lives. They call education the top solution to the problems they face across all conflicts' authors in [7].

As a means to combat illiteracy across the globe however, many international organizations have made concerted efforts to initiate moves aimed at rescuing deplorable education situations. For instance, Save the Children Campaign, Rewrite the Future highlighted that in post – conflict Sierra – Leone, lack of access to education was the primary concern of young people.

Therefore, it is evident that education planning and resources are crucial in post – conflict reconciliation process. Furthermore, research by the Women Refugee Commission in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Uganda found out that providing quality education can help students from recovering from trauma and return to normal life. Young people overwhelmingly cited lack of quality education as one of their top concern and behind peace and an absence of violence in their lives; they called education their top solution to the problem they face across all conflicts. Education universally represents an essential prerequisite to peace and security. So, it is clear that education planning and resources are crucial even in the midst of conflict and during the initial humanitarian responses, even when where the initial emphasis is on physical reconciliation. Save the Children identifies four critical elements of quality education needed to support education's role in peace – building and conflict prevention.

- Primary school must be free and close to home and must attract all children in a community.
- Schools must be safe from attacks and must foster intellectual curiosity and respect for universal human rights
- Schools must be free of bias and use appropriate curricula and relevant educational materials.
- Schools must be accountable to children, parents and communities and managed transparency and fairly.

Education therefore has a crucial role in post – conflict reconciliation in helping to:

- Education can contribute to post conflict reconciliation by helping children, young people and adults understand societal events.
- Schools are an important focal point for reintegrating communities affected by conflicts, particularly for returning refugees, displaced and vulnerable groups such as out- of – school children, and orphaned children.

## **5. Role of Debate in Reconciliation**

In many developing countries in Africa and Asia, with complex and numerous societal demands in areas such as security, ethno – religious violence, diseases, famine, refugee – related problems, etc., solutions to these problems are often temporal and imperfect. Consequently, people do not agree on definitions or existence of both abstract and concrete things, because the general public hold different views, values, beliefs, styles, based on divergence in cultures, traditions, wants, interests, goals etc., hence the need for debating over matters of public interest so that one's opinion is not imposed on others. Debates is a common phenomenon in people's

daily life as people either consciously, or unconsciously engage in formal or informal debates of different types. In other words, debate is a contention, dispute, controversy, disagreement etc. over unresolved issues. In view of its significance to human social life, it is carried out in order to make certain laws effective and to settle disputes.

1. Generally, debate communication is characterized by the following: interaction of two or more people;
2. Face – to – face interaction (excluding internet, radio debate);
3. Social distance between: ranging from minimal to maximal;
4. Purpose is to win over the other participants;
5. Argumentation: challenging opponents' views;
6. Fields of discourse: on – specific, and highly controversial.

Debate can be used very successfully in many parts of the world as a tool in classroom discussions as competitive classroom debate serves many important objectives:

1. Debate offers unique opportunities to relate often abstract classroom theories to real world issues in areas that concern the general public.
2. Debate provides significant education experience. Obviously, students learn about the process of debate and decision – making during the activity. Additionally, debate utilizes skills such as public speaking, logic, persuasion, organization, research and other skills relevant to such complex act.
3. Debate encompasses an element of play and competition that attract and stimulates students, promote the educational process;
4. Individual skills learned through debate have a broader impact on society as well.
5. Specifically, debate can equally help fledgling democracies from wounds inflicted by oppressive dictatorships and ethno – religious mishaps by proving a forum where volatile issues can be openly discussed.
6. Also, debate teaches principles of tolerance, non - violent and respect for different point of views by closing the gap between minority and majority cultures, and other groups divided by long – lasting differences.
7. Debate serves as a way to foster international understanding, cooperation and a free and lively exchange of ideas.
8. In bringing together students from different works of life, debate offers much more than contesting of arguments. By its convention, debate breaks boundaries, showing that opposing views can be explained in a way that connect rather than divide people.
9. As a process, debate both embodies and encourages peaceful discussions rather than confrontations.

To engage in a healthy and comprehensible debate, participants should be genre and context sensitive because never in the time does one speak to the entire world; rather, people are addressed based on different classes such as racial group, political group, economic group, academic group, gender group, qualifications, locations etc. Fortunately, debate genre comprises a variety of disciplines. Consequently, acquiring debate genre entails understanding vast of the global issues. In this regard, institutions of learning should ensure that students acquire appropriate linguistic competence so that they can engage in meaningful collaboration. This state is buttressed by:

Every institution of learning has a part of its mission, preparation of articulate and critical thinking individuals who are able to speak intelligently about the issues of the day. Forensics or competitive speech activates, clearly fits within this mission of institution and indeed may have a more integral relationship with the educational mission than many other activities, authors in [8:42]

It is a truism that in every society people who are efficient in oral communication are highly regarded by their colleagues, employers, acquaintances, etc. Specifically, legislatures, and legal professionals value interpersonal communication as a requisite qualification for speakership because solid foundation for argumentation is built on quick and effective manner of speaking which are acquired through forensic skills, and debate in particular. From the above, it could be understood that there is relationship between debate and leadership probably because good debaters do not think from their own selfish perspectives, but from rational viewpoint. Arguably, people with rational mind are likely to be less corrupt, focused, dedicated, and mindful of other people's problems which are good characteristics for peace and reconciliation process.

## **6. Functions of hedges**

While language is used basically to share, or inform, it is worth noting that spoken discourse performs a variety of other functions which include social needs and this can be achieved through the device of language items that attenuate the speaker's uttering force. This is because in a social communication with people of various backgrounds in attendance, engaging in criticisms, recollecting pains inflicted by violence, peace and reconciliation process requires proper language application. Against this background, there is the need for the interlocutors to be polite. Being polite means to be a considerate conversational partner and one possible means to achieve that is through the application of a linguistic device called hedges. Hedges are particles, lexical, clausal and pragmatic idioms that are used in various manners to mitigate the force of an utterance. Hedges are crucial linguistic categories in which different people hold diverse opinions with regard their definitions and functions. In line with this assertion, author in [9].

Hedges can be achieved in indefinite number of surface forms. These surface forms range from single lexical items to syntactic structures, which is very difficult to give definition, because they can appear single, and in clutter. They get their meaning from contexts and therefore are not possible to make ant list of hedges authors in [8:167].

Nevertheless, there are words which are often used as hedges. For instance, author in [10:280] identifies the following as forms of hedges.

- I. Lexical verb (e.g. the result suggests...
- II. Probability adverbs (e.g. the result may suggest...
- III. Modal verbs (e.g. the result might be that...
- IV. Probability adjective (e.g. it is possible that the result may...

While the above explains that hedges mitigate illocutionary force of a speaker's utterance, the author in [11] argues that hedges are mostly thought to either express a lack of commitment to the truth of something, or the speaker's utterance. The author in [11] is unmindful of the function of modal 'must' which expresses obligation on the part of the speaker.

As the globe faces challenges resulting from uncertainties, conflicts, wars, peace and reconciliation, etc. indirectness, non – finality in research, people's views, etc. it is a reality that hedges might play crucial roles in argumentative discourse. the author in [12] explains that scholars do not argue, or criticize in isolation, but address the academic community as their audience. Therefore, to effectively present arguments especially those that concern sensitive issues like deaths of dear ones, destructions of property, discriminations, etc. speaker should formulate their claims in such a way that they will be acceptable to parties concern. This is what the author in [13] refers to as strengthening the argument by weakening the claims of the opponents.

The first marker of hedges used in this paper is the 'but – clause' which attenuates propositional contents of an utterance by providing an explanation of a speaker's motives for carrying out a face threatening act. This type of hedge increases politeness by expressing agreement, or at least pseudo agreement. The author in [14] argues that using hedges, there is a tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc.

The concept of face in social interaction was developed by Brown and Levinson in 1980s. Their theory of politeness includes the notion of 'face' which is something that is emotionally invested; can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction the authors in [9:61]. Another marker of hedges is *you know*. *You know* may be used to refer to either knowledge shared between the speaker and the hearer the author [14:309]; the authors in [15]; the author in [16]; the authors in [17]; or general knowledge and common experience the author in [18] *You know* is found to mark new information, but the speaker requires the hearer to resort to his/her knowledge and further raise the possibility of the hearer's acceptance of the new information the authors [15:109]. Similarly, *you know* serves the function of appealing. As noted above, *you know* is found to signal a search for lexical words or content expressions and it frequently co – occurs with pause or other discourse markers the author in [16:58].

Sometimes it is very difficult to conclude on the exact function of *you know*, but it is reasonable to assert that the speaker aims to stall for time and *you know* is used to make an appeal to the speaker to the hearer's patience the author in [19] More so, *you know*, may be interpreted as an appeal for understanding when the speaker is



unable to find an appropriate expression and to provide sufficient argument the author in [16]. Another function of *you know* is that it is found to co – occur with a critical or negative comment and the use of *you know* seems to make statement less direct and attenuates the force of the utterance the author in [19]; the authors in [20]; the term, *you know, I know, sort of, you see, ‘softens connective’* or ‘softeners’ which primarily serve to change the speaker’s speaking style to informal. While referring to the subsequent statement, *you know* can be taken as a reduced form of the question beginning, *do you know* to prepare the hearer for the coming information, the author in [14: 28] On the other hand, the author in [13] argues that, ‘politeness is manifested not only in the content of conversation, but also in the way conversation is managed and structured by its participants’. The author in [14:139]. Hedged performatives are speaker – oriented markers which merely comment on the speech acts that immediately follow. These markers most frequently hedge face – threatening acts such as requests, suggestions, apologies, etc. They contribute towards a higher degree of politeness in several ways.

## 7. Methodology

The researcher obtained the data for this research from a discourse community of Sri Lankan secondary school students. The population was considered most relevant for the research because it is vulnerable group that deserves special consideration in any policy that affects the state.

Participant observation method was used in order to gather the data because it has been the hallmark for anthropological, sociological and sociolinguistic study. As a researcher, observer, and listener, it was a fun engaging in a field recording of the secondary school debates in that the researcher came into contact with socio – cultural and linguistic studies typical of young and vast learners who demonstrated high skills of discourse strategies.

The oral discourse was transcribed into Witten form, because spoken language could not be used directly from tape a recorder, or video. The language of the debate was English. So, that solved the problem of translations.

## 8. Results/discussions

This section presents the results of the finding in qualitative form, with illustrations, and explanations to buttress any claim.

Clausal mitigators are utterances that begin with *but*. ‘But clause’ attenuates the propositional contents of the utterance by providing an explanation of the speaker’s motives for carrying out a face – threatening act. *But – clause* occurs in several typical contexts and they contribute to increase politeness by, ‘expressing agreement or at least pseudo - agreement. As (Leech1983, p.138) argues, ‘there is a tendency to exaggerate with other people and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc’. See illustrations below.

### Excerpt 1.

While that’s ok, but the problem there is a real – real--leave - these women without completely any power.

**Excerpt 2.**

We say, 'its ok, where can we empower these people?' But, you have such an ability enough to change the forces of life of these people.

**Excerpt 3.**

Margaret Thatcher may be powerful for you, but feminist movement needs to take a while glimpse of women who think women are not powerful.

**9. Subjectivity Markers**

These hedges consist of the speaker – oriented markers which emphasize the subjective attitude of the speaker towards the message and they include: *I think, you see, I mean, you know, I believe, I hope, and I guess*. The pragmatic roles of these markers lie in the fact that they attenuate the speaker's meaning by increasing the degree of subjectivity of the utterance. By using attitudinal hedges, the addresser performs an assertion into a phrase which signals a lack of certainty and high degree of determinacy on the part of the speaker. Additionally, the use of these hedges suggest that the speaker's utterance is not to be taken as something universally true, or definite, but rather as a personal opinion, belief, or assessment which is open to investigation, evaluation, questioning, or debate. See the illustrations:

**Excerpt 4.**

We don't think it is the role of the government to determine the content of discussions in society.

**Excerpt 5.**

We believe rather than being for the high class, we think that is a bad er – bad thing for the feminist movement. We believe that – like I said before, playboy was initially against feminism because feminism said being a playboy is being objectified.

**Excerpt 6.**

So, it is not something like – it is something like – they are – *you know*, elementary school children.

**Excerpt 7.**

*You see*, they make a big change in health talk that stopped rape cases.

**Excerpt 8.**

First and foremost, we learnt about how to resolve conflict in a healthy manner because it teaches parties about good communication skills. *I mean*, if you are demanding for something from your...

### **Excerpt 9.**

Like the first proposition said, insulting is subjective and we say that it tells about the roles in progression and in development, and we say it may be considered an insult at that point, *but* it helps developments.

### **Excerpt 10.**

We say there is a direct link because the government has the obligation to create law framework, but if this is the only thing that government is going to do, we can write a little law that says, *but* the problem ladies and gentlemen is not enough.

### **Excerpt 11.**

And also, er- em- the same speaker stated that she is calling Eisha an idiot, *but* they are in a conflict.

Examples (6 and 7) above, express the speaker's opinions in which they apply politeness in a defensive manner where the sides of the arguments are connected through the device of, 'but' to present the other sides of the arguments in which the speakers seem to have contrary views. The use of 'but' neither contradicts nor implies a negation of the second conjunct; rather, it provides a kind of correction for the assumption in the first conjunct.

Therefore, while engaging in conversation whether it is a peace process, or any kind of interpersonal interaction, three rules are supposed to be adhered to: 'don't impose, give options, and be friendly', the author in [21:2]

The use of these hedges by the speaker indicates the recognition of the other persons' views; showing that the speaker's proposition is a case of uncertainty, insufficiency, and non – autonomy over the proposition, which is a sign of humility. Furthermore, hedges such as, *you know, you see, I mean, I believe*, etc. as used above, make explicit appeals for confirmation or seeking for collaborations especially as they carry rising tones. Conversationally, they serve to yield turns. Furthermore, they express the speaker's tentativeness over the truth of the contents of the clause, and the subject is usually 'I' in day – to – day conversations, and 'we' in both political and students' debates, while the verb has always been in the simple present tense. Consequently, these hedges are good in peace and reconciliation dialogues.

## **10. Conclusion**

The finding provides a myriad of perspectives with which the students talked, exhibiting an excellent knowledge of hedges. This discourse strategy has increased the effectiveness of the communication. For instance, the phrases, *you know, you see, I mean*, as used above, made explicit appeals for confirmation or collaboration from the speaker which could be used as a relations – seeking mechanism – a device that could be effective in peace talks. Additionally, these hedges could be used as turn – yielding in conversation as against overlapping. Therefore, they may be perceived as listener – oriented. For instance, *you know* may signal that the speaker presupposed that the listener's views was very much valued. Furthermore, *I mean* tend to communicate the fact

that 'I am trying to communicate something'. While *I mean* is often used in specific discourse environment which could include: to introduce an argument; to introduce a story preface; and to evoke a new referent.

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