"Her Sentence Is Correct, Isn't It?": Regulative Discourse in English Medium Classrooms

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Abstract

Research on discourse in African classrooms has depicted predominance of teacher centered instructional practices. Teacher centered discourse patterns have been blamed for student passivity and disengagement in knowledge production. In this article, we investigate teachers' use of the invariant tag '*isn't it*' in Kenyan primary classrooms during English language arts and math lessons. Using Bernstein's pedagogical device theory, we submit that the tag plays a regulative function in classroom discourse. Based on our findings, we argue for greater attention to teachers' language choices and discuss implications for classroom discourse practice and research.

Key words: classroom discourse, multilingual learners, math, English language arts, tag questions, teaching

HIGHLIGHTS

- The invariant tag *isn't it* is a common linguistic feature in World Englishes, including Kenyan English.

- We examined use of *isn't it* in classroom discourse in English medium classrooms.

- Teachers across the country are familiar with use of *isn't it* in and outside the context of schooling.

- Teachers' use of the invariant tag *isn't it* played a regulative role in classroom discourse, limiting dialogue and curtailing opportunities for interaction.

Introduction

Teaching almost always involves unequal power relations and these are embodied in classroom discourse. Because teachers play a central role in promoting, regulating or curtailing discourse and thus shaping students' opportunities for learning (Liu & Hong, 2009; Westling, 2017), researchers have advocated for teachers to employ pedagogies and materials that foster dialogic, inclusive classroom environments that, in turn, support knowledge production (Cazden, 2001; Heath, 1982). Other scholars have observed that teachers are often driven by rituals and routines that work to regulate learner activities in ways that keep students silent and engaged in teacher-led activities (Sewell et al., 2013). Buzzelli and Johnson (2001) describe a dilemma inherent in teachers' commitment to more dialogical approaches to teaching, pointing out that instructional discourse is always embedded in regulative forms of discourse. Thus, in many parts of the the world, instruction and classroom talk remain predominantly teacher centered (cf. Author, 2018;

Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Vaish, 2008; Weber, 2008), and foster a "traditional" view of teachers as experts who transmit knowledge to passive learners.

In classrooms where a language of instruction (LOI) is different from the language(s) of nurture, the teacher's role in shaping discourse is even more critical because children are studying subject area content in a language they are still developing. Studies of classroom discourse in contexts where the national education system mandates instruction in a language of wider communication have suggested that knowledge transmission modes of instruction are prevalent (Shoba and Chimbutane, 2015). Based on observations in South African classrooms, Chick (1996) proposed that teachers and students engage in transmission modes of instruction as "safe talk" that allows them to save face by hiding their poor command of English, the LOI. In rural primary schools, where many children have little access to the LOI outside school, transmission modes of instruction may further limit opportunities for students to ask questions, realize their thoughts through speech, and engage in knowledge creation.

Research studies in African classrooms has shown the prevalence of teacher centered instruction (Ackers & Hardman, 2001; Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Bunyi, 2008). Ackers and Hardman studied classroom interactions in Kenyan primary schools and found that across lessons in math, English, and science, teacher recitation and teacher-led interrogation of the learners' knowledge and understanding were the most common forms of interaction, accounting for over 80% of all teaching exchanges. Students responded to questions chorally, typically with yes/no answers. The researchers argue that teachers' use of the initiation, response, feedback (IRF) discourse pattern positioned them as the sole or primary knower within the classroom, transmitting facts to students. Similar findings are reported in Pontefract and Hardman's (2005) study of teacher discourse styles in English, math, and science classrooms across primary grades

in nine Kenyan schools. They found a predominance of teacher-led recitation, with memorization and repetition constituting two-thirds of teacher talk. Across subject areas and grade levels IRF discourse was characterized by teacher explanation, interspersed with teacher-led question-and-answer sequences. The researchers attributed the predominance of IRF to students' developing English proficiency needed to engage in academic discourse.

Bunyi (2008) conducted a comparative ethnographic study of discourse in first grade classrooms in two Kenyan schools, one rural, socio-economically disadvantaged school and an urban school serving wealthier students. Teacher-dominant discourse was more common in classrooms serving children from poor backgrounds than in classrooms serving children from elite backgrounds, a pattern attributed to the legacy of British colonial schooling and class differences that continue to shape access to learning in Kenyan schools. Similarly, Ngware et al (2012), explored performance differences in a study of teaching styles in low and high performing schools in Kenya. In their analysis of classroom discourse collected from 213 lessons in 72 primary schools, the researchers found that teaching styles did not differ between low perfoming and high perfoming schools. Rather, teaching styles appeared to be discipline specific, with teachers using individual work and recitation more frequently in English and math lessons, and choral, whole class responses during science instruction. They concluded that teacher-centered discourse provides students with few opportunities to participate in critical thinking, and leads students to reproduce, rather than question or create, knowledge.

In a comparative study of classroom discourse in Nigeria and Kenya, Abd-Kadir and Hardman (2007) documented teachers' frequent use of tag questions, noting that they served as "pseudo-checks" on participation rather than as genuine assessments of children's understanding, and that children were expected to answer affirmatively or not at all. They concluded that this

form of teacher talk functioned as "ritualized participation strategies designed to keep the pupils involved" (2007, p. 5).

Recent research in African classrooms has focused on use of translanguaging to mediate learning where students are still learning the LOI. Classroom-based studies in Kenya (Author, 2016,a, b, 2017; Merritt et al., 1992); South Africa (Probyn, 2015; Makalela, 2015); and Mozambique (Chimbutane, (2013) document teachers' use of translanguaging, instruction that encourages children to use their full linguistic repertoires, to maximize access to literacy. Author (2016b), for example, shows how a science teacher in an emerging multilingual fourth-grade classroom utilized sanctioned languages to explain and elaborate scientific concepts. While this practice allowed students greater access to science content, the use of children's home languages did not cede additional speaking rights to students or result in more student talk and greater interaction. Thus, while research in multilingual classrooms suggests that the use of translanguaging can foster student talk and may, therefore, potentially disrupt teacher-dominated classroom discourse, it may be insufficient to alter the predominance of IRF in Kenyan classrooms due teachers' regulative language choices.

Our intention in this study is to contribute to understandings of EMC in multilingual schools through analysis of teachers' use of the invariant tag *isn't it*. Studies suggest Kenyan teachers use this tag question across subject areas and in different languages Author (2016a), and that students generally answer in the affirmative response or with no audible response (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007). To our knowledge, however, *isn't it* has not been the focus of research on classroom discourse.

We begin by describing the use of *isn't it* in World Englishes, Kenyan English and Kenyan indigenous languages. We review literature on how teachers' language choices shape

classroom discourse, with an emphasis on classrooms in African schools, followed by the conceptual framework that informed our research questions and guided our analysis. We describe the research setting, along with methods of data collection and analysis, and report our findings in the form of selected examples of classroom instruction and a teacher survey to illustrate how teachers use and students respond to *isn't it*. Following discussion of the results, we conclude with directions for further research and practice.

Isn't it tag in World Englishes

Research on varieties of English around the world shows that English tag questions are commonly reduced to the generalized invariant tag, *isn't it?* (Achiri-Taboh, 2015). In British English, a source language of many World Englishes, the tag has become standardized and is used across age groups and social contexts, in contrast to a parallel form, *innit*, widely in used in colloquial London dialect (Torgerson & Gabriolatas, 2009) and primarily by adolescents (Palacio Martínez, 2014). *Isn't it* is common in World Ënglishes, including Indian English (Achiri-Taboh, 2015; Columbus, 2010; Kachru and Bhatt, 1993; Meshthrie & Bhatt, 2008). The tag is also used by nonnative speakers of English in Hong Kong, possibly influenced by invariant tag forms in Cantonese (Warren & Cheng, 2001). Peña (2016) studied the distribution of question tags in corpora of Indian and Hong Kong Englishes, and found that irregular tag questions were more common in spoken discourse than in written texts, and that women and young adults were most likely to use *isn't it*. There is some evidence that speakers of World Englishes use the tag for different purposes: in Hong Kong, the invariant tag seeks affirmation and involvement, in India, it connotes politeness, while in Singapore it signals local solidarity (Bhatt, 2017).

The use of *isn't it* has also been reported as a common feature in African Englishes. Achiri-Taboh (2015) noted the use of *isn't it* in Cameroonian colloquial English, including

among highly educated English speakers. Schmied (1991; 2004) studied East African English and suggested that the invariant tag is one of the fifteen most widespread features in varieties of African English. The use of *isn't it* is usually generalized in African varieties of English whereby the tag is not adapted to the verb or the subject of the main clause. It appears to occur with all verb types, verb tenses, and subjects and is used indiscriminately in negative and affirmative clauses. Bokamba (1982) suggests that some core features in African Englishes reflect borrowing from African indigenous languages. We believe this is a plausible factor in the ubiquity of *isn't* it in Kenyan English.

Tags in Kenyan English and Kenyan indigenous languages

The invariant tag *isn't it* is frequently used in Kenyan colloquial English. Buregeya (2006) sought to determine the acceptability of features of Kenyan English among undergraduate English majors and postgraduate students of education at the University of Nairobi. Amongst undergraduate participants, 37 out of 98 (37%) and 13 out of 28 (46%) of graduate students judged the tag as acceptable. These findings suggested that slightly below half of highly educated Kenyans accepted *isn't it* as a correct feature in English.

Similarly, several indigenous languages spoken in Kenya show the use of invariant tags in daily conversation. A partial list of these languages includes Gikuyu (*tiguo*), Dholuo (*donge*), Ekegusii (*tari bo*), as well as Kiswahili (*si ndio*), the national language, and Kimeru (*tibuo*), the mother tongue of the child participants in our study. In these languages the invariant tag is used irrespective of the syntactic structure and semantic content of the main clause. Its use marks authority and power relations, for example, as a means of coercing agreement and asserting power (Harris, 1984). Kenyan languages feature the invariant tag in diverse genres ranging from evening story telling to political speeches. An example is found in political speeches delivered

in Gikuyu by Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta (Kenyatta, 2008), in which he utilized tags to seek agreement from the audience. Additionally, tags are used in indigenous Kenyan languages to affirm and confirm, including in cases where conflict or disagreement may be covert. Similar to the use of English tags, when the invariant tag is used in Kenyan indigenous languages in conversations between individuals of different social status, coercion to agree is at least potentially implicit.

To summarize, use of the invariant tag in conversations between individuals of different social status, is embued, at least potentially, with coercive power. Speakers can use tags to deny listeners and interlocutors an opportunity for dialogue or a space for questioning, thus effectively silencing the viewpoint of those with less power. Although invariant tags can carry other functions, such as requesting further information or clarification, in asymmetrical power relations, speakers may employ them in order to limit the possibility of a true dialogue.

The present study examines how the invariant tag *isn't it* is used in classroom discourse and how it functions in the presentation, interpretation, and construction of knowledge. We seek to understand classroom discourse and interaction as key factors in understanding how teaching and learning are enacted in the classroom. Because students are (potential) actors in their own knowledge production and because language is central to this work, educators' language choices may constrain or enhance such participation in the classroom. Through analysis of micro-interactions in EMC classrooms, we sought to understand how use of *isn't it* shapes knowledge production and opportunities for learning among emerging multilingual students.

Regulating Classroom Discourse

Alemany and Majo's (2000) study of instructional strategies suggests that teacher regulation of discourse is inherent to teaching and learning. In a study of secondary school

classrooms in Spain, they found that interactive patterns that foster student engagement by posing questions can play a key role in knowledge development. Allowing students to speak and argue helps them expand semantic networks and to practice and acquire forms of language related to the topic of instruction. The researchers observed that asymmetrical power relations in the classroom, based on teachers' greater knowledge of subject matter and more life experience, were reinforced or mitigated through discourse. Teachers regulated instruction using specific strategies and participation structures through the selection of tasks, sequencing, and endorsing acceptable behaviors, as well as individual vs group activities and dialogue vs monologue. Teachers decided who could talk with whom and when, and they had the power to interrupt students, for example in order to correct them. Based on their findings, Alemany and Majos (2000) called for teachers to analyze and reflect the strategies that they use for regulation.

Ernst-Slavit and Pratt (2017) examined the quality and quantity of questions asked by one teacher in a fourth-grade classroom with emerging multilinguals in a low income school located in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. The study illustrated the role of teacher questions in facilitating students' access to science content and genre specific language and highlighted the teacher's role in generating discourse norms and practices. The researchers call for greater teacher awareness of "the types of questions they are asking, their frequency, sequencing, and wait time that transpires between the time a question is asked and a student answers" (p. 9), particularly in multilingual classrooms.

Studies of how authority is linguistically encoded in classroom interaction (Cazden, 2001) show that teachers exercise power by controlling topics and taking up more turns in discourse. İnceçay (2010) studied classroom talk in a 7th grade classroom in Turkey and found that some features of teacher's language use may hinder learner involvement and thus restrict

opportunities for learning. İnceçay listed teacher echoes, extended use of IRF interaction patterns, and teacher completion of student's phrases as examples of teacher talk that can obstruct learning. Noting that the teacher discourse can foster or limit participation, İnceçay asked teachers to reflect on the kind of authoritative identity they are assuming in the classroom and how language used contributes to the kind of relationships they wish to build with their students.

Vaish (2008) analyzed pedagogic practice and teacher discourse in primary and secondary EMC in Singapore, describing them as monoglossic and teacher fronted. IRF patterns were predominant, and described by teachers as necessary for helping students to meet exam requirements. Vaish observed that students were accustomed to a transmission model of receiving knowledge and viewed teachers as repositories and arbiters of knowledge. Vaish recommended that educator preparation programs acknowledge that linguistic structures and practices are laden with power, and argued for a move to dialogue-based pedagogy and a change in question patterns to include more open-ended questions, and greater use of extended oral narratives, feedback moves, and demonstrations to encourage critical thinking.

Liu and Hong (2009) studied teachers' use of directives in English language classrooms in Singapore primary schools. Analyzing a corpus of directives drawn from fifth grade classrooms, the authors found that teachers used directives to demand authority and respect and and to convey communicative expectations. They argue that the regulating and authoritative role teachers assume is reflected in forms of classroom discourse, which can, in turn, be disadvantageous to students' learning.

Kayi-Aydar (2013) interrogated issues of power in language classrooms, and recommended that teachers redesign instruction in order to promote equal participation and

mitigate unequal power differentials. A key aspect of the redesign was positioning students as inquirers rather than recipients of knowledge. Opoku-Amankwa (2009) highlighted hierarchical relationships in teacher-student relations in Ghanaian classrooms, tracing them to colonial-subject relations. In a study of a primary level four classroom, Opoku-Amankwa found that students were positioned not as reflective learners, but rather as recipients of knowledge whose contributions were not valued or encouraged. Opoku-Amankwa's critique of classroom talk showed that teachers used their (relatively) privileged position of hierarchy to restrict students' freedom of expression and overlook students' knowledge and experience. Black (2004) examined ways in which students and teachers communicated in a classroom setting in northwest England by analyzing interactions between teachers and pupils during fifth grade math lessons. The study highlighted the importance of encouraging student participation in classroom discourse, and called upon teachers to use language in ways that foster student talk for learning.

This review of literature in EMC in multilingual settings reminds us that teacher authority is ever present in the classroom (Buzzelli & Johnson, 2001; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Vaish, 2008), and that hierarchical relationships between teachers and students are realized in no small part through linguistic choices (Liu & Hong, 2009). How teachers use language to regulate classroom activities and student interaction has been found to impact multilingual students' on-task behavior and learning outcomes (Westling et al., 2017). In African classrooms, IRF is a common pedagogical strategy (Author, 2016a; Ngwaru, 2011), and teachers regulate classroom discourse through the repetition of words and phrases such as the invariant tag *isn't it* (Abdi-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Author, 2016a).

Theoretical Framework: Bernstein's Pedagogical Device

The sociologist Basil Bernstein developed a theory about the production and reproduction of pedagogic discourse as the medium through which power relations and dominant cultural values are established and transmitted. According Bernstein, there are two dimensions of pedagogic discourse: pedagogic and regulative. The pedagogic dimension concerns the acquisition of knowledge and development of cognitive competencies, and refers to what is being transmitted (i.e., content). It governs the relations between the knowledge transmitters and knowledge acquirers, for example teachers and students. The second dimension of Bernstein's model, regulative discourse, refers to the acquisition of values, norms of social conduct and socio-affective competence. It is discourse that provides order, hierachical rules that establish the conditions for order, manner and character, and it regulates the manner in which knowledge is transmitted. According to Bernstein (1990, 2000), regulative discourses always dominate instructional discourse: "Regulative discourse produces the order in the instructional discourse. There is no instructional discourse which is not regulated by the regulative discourse" (p. 34). Bernstein (2000) further observes that, "Pedagogic discourse embeds rules which create skills of a kind or another and rules regulating the relationship to each other, and rules which create social order. ..the instructional discourse is embedded in the regulative discourse. The regulative discourse is the dominant discourse" (p. 32). Thus, Bernstein emphasizes the embedded nature of instructional discourse in the regulative discourse, noting that "often people in schools and classrooms make a distinction between what they call transmission of skills and the transmission of values…in my opinion, there is one discourse, not two" (p. 32).

According to Bernstein, the internal grammar of classroom discourse is provided by the pedagogic device, through three hierarchically interrelated rules: distribution, recontextualising and evaluation. The function of the distributive rules is to regulate the power relationships

between social groups by distributing different forms of knowledge, and thus constituting different orientations to meaning or pedagogic identities. Recontextualizing rules regulate the formation of specific pedagogic discourse. These are rules for 'delocating a discourse, for relocating it, for refocusing it' (Bernstein 1996, p. 47). Through recontextualization, a discourse is moved from its original site of production to another site where it is altered as it is related to other discourses. The recontextualized discourse no longer resembles the original because it has been pedagogised or converted into pedagogic discourse. Evaluative rules are concerned with recognizing what counts as valid realizations of instructional (curricular content) and regulative (social conduct, character and manner) texts (Singh, 2002, p. 2). Bernstein argued that pedagogic discourse acts as a recontextualizing principle, which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order (1996, p. 47). Thus, pedagogic discourse is created through recontextualizing discourse.

Bernstein's model is useful for our analysis of Kenyan teachers' use of the invariant tag, *isn't it*, in that we view the tag as a feature of the larger community discourse of power that has been re-contextualized and relocated in the classroom. Our use of Bernstein's theory is also informed by the sociocultural context in which education occurs, a setting where the use of the tag in the community has implications for the construction of power and authority and, potentially, resistance to dominant social relations and structures. Our goal in using Bernstein's notion of pedagogic discourse is to examine regulative discourse as it is embedded in instructional discourse. Research on classroom discourse in African schools over the past two decades has shown teacher centered instruction, but with little focus on educators' linguistic choices that may sustain or challenge hierarchy and power. In this study, we investigate classroom use of the invariant tag *isn't it*, which we see as a regulative linguistic feature, a pre-

condition for subject matter knowledge transmission (Bernstein, 1996). We explore teachers' use of regulative discourses through use *of isn't it,* using two dimensions of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1990, 1996), regulative and instructional discourse. We argue that the persistent IRF pattern in classrooms in emerging multilingual settings is not simply a matter of developing English language proficiency but also the language choices that teachers make and the linguistic features they employ in instruction. We argue that illuminating the regulative discourse features of classroom talk can open up spaces for student centered pedagogies that recognize the value of students' voices in meaning making and learning. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the tag *isn't it* used by teachers in classroom discourse?

2. How do children respond to the use of *isn't it* in the context of instruction?

3. How does use of *isn't it* position emerging multilingual students as learners? (e.g. as knowers and constructors of knowledge, or as passive recipients of knowledge?)

Methods and Materials

Setting

The study was carried out in a rural primary school in the Umoja (pseudonym) region of Eastern Province, Kenya, as a part of a larger ethnographic study of language and schooling. Kenya is a multilingual country with approximately 67 living languages (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2016). The majority of people in the focal community are multilingual, speaking Kimeru as a home language as well as Kiswahili, the national language and lingua franca. Other regional languages spoken in Umoja include Kiluhya and Kikuyu. Tumaini Public Primary School (all names are pseudonyms) was selected on the basis of its location in a multilingual community and rural setting. Pupils are emerging multilinguals who speak two or three languages at home and in

the community while acquiring English as an additional language. Following the national curriculum, English is introduced as a subject in kindergarten and is the LOI from fourth-grade onwards.

Fourth grade classroom context. The focal classroom in this study was a fourth-grade classroom with twenty-eight students, twelve girls and sixteen boys, ranging in age from 9-12 years old. All of the children were emerging multilinguals, learning English as an additional language and with little access to English outside school. At home, most children spoke Kimeru, with a few also speaking Kiluhya and/or Kikuyu.

Participants

Child participants were drawn from a six-month ethnographic case study carried out in a fourth-grade rural classroom by the first author. For the present study, we used purposive sampling (Ritchie et al., 2014) to select two experienced teachers in light of their potential to provide rich data for answering our research questions and thus developing a deeper understanding of the discourse practices in their fourth-grade classrooms. Discursive classroom practices across two different subjects (English language arts (ELA) and math) were observed. Both teachers were multilinguals (Kiswahili, Kimeru, and English), with experience teaching their respective subject areas in English. Our analysis does not focus on individual participants but rather on the discourse that they produced in the classroom, with particular emphasis on use of the invariant tag *isn't it*.

Complementary data on use of the invariant tag were gathered through a survey of Kenyan teachers who responded to an online survey about the use of the tag. Respondents were 55 practicing K-8 public school teachers from four regions on Kenya. We tested the case study

findings of the use of tag against the survey data, to compare and contrast our classroom observations with what practicing teachers had to say about *isn't it* .

Data Sources

Data were collected from classroom observation during instruction in two subject areas: math and language arts. Primary data sources included field notes and audio recordings of classroom discourse collected five days a week over a period of six months by the first author. This included seven math and seven ELA lessons per week, each 30-minutes long, for a total of 89 observations. Our observations made no attempt to influence which students the teacher called upon during instruction, and our notes focused on the teacher's language use in the classroom as part of our broader focus on classroom talk. All lessons were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author, providing translation into English for instances of teacher talk in Kimeru and Kiswahili. For the purpose of our analysis, we selected four extended excerpts of classroom discourse: one from language arts and three from mathematics instruction. These excerpts were chosen because each features frequent use of *isn't it.*

The second phase of data collection involved an online survey of Kenyan K-8 teachers via the online survey tool Qualtrics. We chose K-8 teachers because all teachers trained as primary school educators in Kenya may be tasked to teach different subjects in different grade levels. We developed a qualitative survey instrument to learn how, why and when teachers use the tag *isn't it* in the classroom, outside the classroom and in the community. The survey link was shared through an existing group Facebook page comprised of practicing and pre-service Kenyan K-8 teachers in Kenya's Eastern, Nyanza, Rift Valley and Central provinces. We chose Facebook as a data collection tool because this platform enabled teachers to respond to the survey via their cell phones, the primary accesss point to the Internet for many Kenyans,

especially in rural areas. The survey included open-ended questions about the circumstances in which teachers use *isn't it*, existence of an equivalent tag in their home language(s), frequency of tag use, and expected student responses. The study was granted ethics approval by two Universities the first authors are associated with. We received informed consent and approval from all study participants.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed in two phases. We began with deductive and inductive analyses of the classroom transcripts and teacher utterances using contextual cues, including prior exchanges, extracted from the field notes. Initial analysis of the data revealed frequent use of the tag *isn't it* in teacher discourse across all subjects observed, and raised our interest in terms of how and why teachers utilized the tag in the classroom. A second round of discourse analysis was performed on classroom discourse data containing the tag, *isn't it*. Discourse analysis enabled us to focus closely on 'what the language is doing' (Gee, 2014), in order to discuss the practical application of the targeted linguistic feature in the context of its use. Survey data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis. A combination of emergent codes and a priori codes were identified from the data. We then developed hierarchical arrangement of themes and subthemes based on our research questions and theoretical framework.

The transcription process. Audio recordings of all lessons were transcribed using standard orthographies of the participant languages and translated into English by the first author, where needed. Both authors then identified illustrative passages relating to the research question, and these passages were revisited from the audio recordings. Transcript passages presented in this study are a result of this process, as well as cross-referencing field notes, which

helped to contextualize the recorded utterances and to make further sense of what was going on in particular instances of classroom talk.

Transcription conventions.

T	teacher
S	student
SS	students
S-all	all students
[ ]	researchers' observations and descriptions
( )	translations
Italics	words, phrases or sentences in languages other than English
…	pause
***	skipped turns

Findings

We show the occurrence of the invariant tag *isn't it* in classroom discourse, highlighting various functions that the tag is playing, based on classroom discourse data and teacher surveys. We are treating "isn't it" and "si ndio" (the Swahili form), as equivalent forms for the purpose of this analysis. Out of the 55 teachers who responded to surveys, 66.67% said they use *isn't it* in their instruction sometimes, 11.11% of teachers said they used it often, and 22.22 said they used it always. Our analysis suggests three functions of the invariant tag in the classroom: elicitation, affirmation of information, and drawing student's attention. Although these themes overlapped in some ways in the classroom discourse data, we use distinct excerpts to illustrate and highlight each particular function.

1. *Isn't it* as an elicitation cue

Excerpt 1, from an ELA vocabulary lesson focusing on 'people in the community', illustrates the use of the invariant tag as an elicitation cue. The teacher had just completed the lesson and was reviewing the concepts presented. In the except below, the tag is a rote phrase that elicits choral responses from students as the teacher seeks to reinforce information presented during the lesson. However, it does not add meaning to the conversation and it precludes student responses other than 'yes'.

1. T: Today we have learned about people in the community and also places in the community. We have learned about a nomad and said, it is a person who moves from one place to the other, *isn't it?*

1. S-all: Yes.

2. T: We have also learned about a community, and we have said a community is a group of people living in a place. A group of people living in a …?

3. S: Place.

4. T: And also a dispensary. We have said a dispensary is a place where sick people are treated. When we get sick we go to the dispensary or hospital. A dispensary is just a hospital but a smaller one, *isn't it?*

5. S-all: Yes.

6. T: A smaller hospital that we have within the village. Is called a dispensary. So when you get sick you are taken to a dispensary and you get what?

7. S: You get treated.

8. T: We also have a manyatta. A manyatta is a kind of house that is found among the Maasai people. Mostly Maasai are called nomads, because they move from one place to

another with their animals in search of water and pasture. So they are also called the

nomads, *isn't it*?

9. S-all: Yes!

10. T: Another thing that we have learned about today is a farmer. A farmer we said is a

person who grows different types of what?

11. S: Crops.

12. T: S/he grows, maize, he grows beans, he grows vegetables, all those crops you may

think of, is called a farmer*, isn't it*?

13. S-all: Yes.

In this excerpt, the teacher reviews vocabulary items by prompting student responses with the

invariant tag, *isn't it'*as seen in turns, 1, 4, 8, 12. All students responded affirmatively to each of

these instances of whole class elicitation, with no student offering an alternative description of

the vocabulary. In turn 4, the teacher defines a dispensary and tries to rephrase it in ways that

students can understand: 'a dispensary is just a hospital but a smaller one, *isn't it*? The use of the

invariant tag after rephrasing does not provide students an opportunity to respond with counter

examples or questions, but rather to respond to the tag with a positive response. Here, the

teacher's repeated use of the invariant tag creates highly controlled instruction with a strong

focus on content transmission. Similar observations are made in turns 8 and 12, where common

knowledge is presented and the use of the tag curtails any further response from the students.

Survey responses suggested that teachers often use the tag unconsciously. Some teachers

noted that lessons became boring for students when *isn't it* is used too frequently. These

respondents viewed the invariant tag as a linguistic habit that teachers had formed and which, as

a result, held little meaning. Teachers pointed out that students were very familiar with invariant tag because they heard it all the time.

Our analysis of the use of the tag suggested that teacher/student relations in the focal classroom, including shared expectations of teacher as authority, contributed to the overwhelming proportion of affirmative responses by students (i.e., "yes" or "*ndio*"). Despite researchers' calls for dialogic classroom interaction that encourage students to participate as actors in knowledge construction, such tags can shape the content and form of interaction. Thus, tags seemed to work as a 'thinking ceiling' when used by educators, who are at a higher level of knowledge. In general, use of the invariant tag *isn't it* played a regulative role, closely centering classroom discourse around the teacher. The use of the invariant tag also limited possibilities for students to engage in horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1990), everyday or common sense knowledge, which often is oral, local and context dependent. The vocabulary items presented in Excerpt 1 (nomad, community, dispensary, *manyatta*, crops, farmer) were readily found in the area around Tumaini School. However, the regulative discourse, enabled through use of the invariant tag, helped in transmitting knowledge via vertical discourse, that is, school official discourse that is hierarchically organized with specialized vocabulary use, hence reinforcing a criteria of knowledge production. Connections between school/official/academic knowledge and local knowledge were limited, although these two sets of discourse inform each other. In this way, students were positioned exclusively as knowledge recipients. Thus, although the tag is used so frequently as to "mean almost nothing", at a deeper level its use served to regulate discourse and limit students' oral language production and classroom contributions.

2. Affirmation/confirmation of knowledge

Use of the invariant tag also served to affirm teacher knowledge that had been passed on to students, that is, as confirmation of facts. At the same time, it served as a kind of 'thinking ceiling' by limiting students' opportunities to interrogate or contest knowledge that had already been presented by the teacher, rather than opening a space for students to produce knowledge through talk. Wait time was also limited, making it more difficult for students to think beyond the facts presented, and curtailing opportunities to question them or to share opinions based on their own experiences and out-of-school knowledge. At the same time, the teacher's knowledge of the content was not subject to question, reinforcing the teacher's position of power in the classroom. The survey responses suggested that Kenyan students are expected to respond affirmatively to tag questions, if at all. One teacher noted that, 'Students never say no to the teacher', an indication that teacher knowledge is not subject to negotiation or critique.

Teachers noted that the invariant tag was often used to confirm students' understanding and that, although responses to tags can be affirmative or negative, respondents typically respond affirmatively. Several respondents commented that whenever they used the invariant tag, they expected the listener to support their statements and do as requested. One teacher noted that use of the tag in the class always called for agreement and that students 'never say no'.

While many teachers commented on how frequently *isn't it* is used in Kenyan classrooms, some also questioned its effectiveness. One teacher explained that, "I am a bit careful in the use of the words since it is not a good way of questioning during instruction because it invites yes-no answers which are not communicative of any detail'. Another teacher supported this view, pointing out that, because students always respond to the tag with a 'yes', it is misleading and, therefore, not a good way to question students. Additionally, teachers

questioned the effectiveness of student responses in 'chorus form' because, as one respondent put it, an 'agreeing response is quite unconscious'.

Teachers felt that the use of the tag was most prevalent in English instruction and during Mathematics and ELA lessons. Below, Excerpt 2 shows an example of how *isn't it* was used in the fourth-grade math classroom. The excerpt begins as the teacher asks a student to read a question from a previous math exam.

1. S: Onyango spent one thousand and two shillings and sixty cents to buy three shirts. If he spent the same amount on each shirt, what was the cost of each shirt?

2. T: [Repeating the question] So what do we going do? (repeats two times) what are we going to do to know the cost of each shirt? *Tutafanya nini*? (what are we going to do?)

3. SS: Plus!

4. T: *Eti* (you mean) plus? What are we going to do?

5. S: Minus!

6. T: Yes! [prompting for attention]

7. S: Minus!

8. T: We are going to subtract, *isn't it*?

9. S-all: Yes. [wrong but students many students respond affirmatively]

10. T: Yes? [prompting]

11. SS: Yes!

12. T: [Rethinking the question]. So what we are going to do, [realizing an error, re-reading the question again]. *Hapa alinunua shati tatu* (he bought three shirts, *isn't it*?), *si ndio*?

13. S-all: *Ndio*!(Yes!)

14. T: With this amount of money. That is Ksh 1002.60. *Halafu tunaambiwa hiyo ni pesa ile ambayo alitumia kununua shati tatu. Kwa hivyo, kila shati lilikuwa inatoka pesa ngapi*? So what are we going to do? We are not going to subtract. *Kwa sababu hiyo ni pesa ya shati tatu*. [translating the problem into Kiswahili]

15. SS: [No response]

16. T: Yes? Divide by? by *ngapi* (how many?) *Shati ni ngapi?* (how many shirts?)

17. SS: *Tatu* (three).

18. T: *Shati ni tatu* (there three shirts), *isn't it*?

19. SS: Yes!

20. T: So here we are going to write the costs of these shirts. We have 1002.60 divide by three, *Ili tuone* (so that) the cost of each shirt. *Tuone shati moja inatoka pesa ngapi* (to find out the cost of one shirt).
    ***

21. T: So, here *unaanzia wapi?* (where do you begin?) [short pause] *Utaanzia na hizi ziko huku kwanza* (You will begin with these first) . *Utamalizana na hizi ziko huku first, si ndio?* (You will complete these first, *isn't it*?)

22. . SS: No response

23. T: Yes? [prompting for a response, checking students' attentiveness]

24. SS: *Ndio!*(Yes!)

25. T: Zero divide by three. *Itaenda* (it will go) how many times? You divide by three, *isn't it*?

26. S-all: Yes!

27. T: What is 1 divide by three? [short pause] *Haiwekani*, (It's not possible) One *haiwezi* (cannot) divide three. So we drop zero to get what?

28. SS: Ten.

29. T: Ten, *isn't it*?

30. S-all: Yes!

31. T: Ten divide by three, you get what?

In Excerpt 2 above, the math teacher prompts students on how they are going to solve a mathematical problem (turn 2). Students offer two potential solutions: addition and subtraction (turns 3-7). The teacher agrees with the students who offer subtraction as the means to attain an answer (turn 8). She affirms this knowledge by use of *isn't it*, and all students agree with the teacher (turns 9-11). Later the teacher notices the error and rectifies it and guides students to solve the problem (turns 12-14). The teacher continues prompting confirmations using *isn't it* throughout the problem-solving process (turns 16-31). Students affirm the teacher's knowledge/statement, even when it is incorrect, (turns 8 and 9) apparently an unconscious response to the teacher's use of the invariant tag. Here the tag works to regulate how knowledge is transmitted and positions students as recipients of coded knowledge.

3. Drawing Attention

Analysis of classroom discourse suggested that the fourth-grade math teacher also used the tag to draw attention to previous topics, as well as the content of the day. Excerpt 3 below was taken from a math lesson on units of time. The teacher begins by reviewing the previous day's lesson.

1. T: Yesterday we learned about days of the week, *isn't it*?

2. SS: Yes!

3. T: How many days do we have in week?

4. SS: [Silence]

5. T: Yes? [Repeating] How many do we have in a week?

6. S-all: Seven.

7. T: Seven days of a week, *isn't it*?

8. SS: Yes!

9. T: Today we are dealing with time. What do you know about time?

10. S-all: [Noises/silence]

11. T: I know everybody has ever seen a watch, *si ndio?* (*isn't it*?)

12. SS: Yes!

13. T: So what do you know about time?

14. S: in the morning, afternoon, …

15. T: [Teacher interrupts] how many minutes make one hour?

16. S-all: [silence]

17. T: [The teacher writes on the board: 60 minutes =1hr]. Sixty minutes make one hour, *si ndio?(isn't it?)*

18. SS: Yes!

In this except , the teacher uses the invariant tag in turns 1-7 to draw attention to previously established knowledge. In turn 11, the tag is used to lay background and relate the lesson to students' experiences. The tag and pacing seem to limit students' responses. The use of the tag draws attention to different topics while at the same time limiting students' responses. A student offers to explain time in turn 14, by naming familiar parts of the day (in the morning, afternoon). However, the teacher does not pick up on this explanation. Instead, he regulates the student's voice and continues to transmit knowledge to which students are asked to respond via an

invariant tag. This interpretation was echoed in the survey data by a teacher who commented that the invariant tag in the classroom can mean 'pay closer attention, permit me to get on with the lesson. Do not ask questions'. Turns 2, 8, 12 and 18 suggest that the tag is playing a regulative function where students are not given space to respond to the teacher's questions with responses other than a 'yes'. Below, Excerpt 4 illustrates another example of the use of *isn't it* to draw attention during a math lesson.

1. S: [A student reads] Fill in the missing number.

2. T: 5/12 plus dash equals 12/12.

3. S: 6/12.

    ***

4. T: Which is the easiest way? *Utafanya nini?* (what will you say?) What are you going to do?

5. S: 12 minus 5.

6. T: 12/12 take away 5/12, *isn't it*?

7. S: Yes!

8. T: *Uone ni ngapi?* (what will you find?)

9. S: Seven.

10. T: So, if you add this, the answer will be what?

11. S: 12.

12. T: The answer will be 12/12 which is equivalent to one, *si ndio*? (*isn't it*?)

13. S: *Ndio!* (Yes) [Faintly, as if the student is not sure]

14. T: *Si ndio tulisema?* (Isn't that what we said?)

15. SS: *Ndio!* (Yes!)

In Excerpt 4, when students respond with a faint yes (turn, 13) to *isn't it*, the teacher repeats again (turn 14) and adds on, *isn't it* that what we said?', which is meant to draw attention to previously presented knowledge and to check students' retention of facts.

Some teachers reported that the tag was used to draw a listener's attention. Others felt that an affirmative response ("yes"), suggested that students were all paying attention and following the lesson, and, by extension, have understood the topic and questions being asked. Others felt that use of the tag makes the lesson learner-centered, because it allows an opportunity for the learner to participate in classroom. Overall, respondents viewed *isn't it* as a way to evaluate students' understanding.

Isn't it as a Classroom Discourse Regulative Linguistic Feature

The widespread and perhaps unconscious use of the invariant tag in Kenyan classrooms works to regulate and limit the frequency and nature of student talk. It seems to curtail students' contributions and to position students as acquirers of knowledge dispensed by the teacher, rather than actors engaged in knowledge production. This positioning is partly due to the strong transmission focus of the lesson (cf. Ngware et al., 2012; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005; Author, 2018) through use of regulative linguistic features such as *isn't it*. Its use is thus consistent with a unidirectional transmission of knowledge from the teacher or textbooks to the students. Whether consciously or not, teachers employ *isn't it* in classrooms and schools that are situated within broader discourses of authority and power (Bunyi, 2008), and embedded in socio-cultural contexts that are often hierarchical. As we have shown, the invariant tag in the community carries power connotations, representing the imposition of the will of those in power over those with less power. Teachers' hierarchical relationships with their students, reflecting substantial differences in age, knowledge and authority, underscore the unstated and unchallenged

agreement with all knowledge transmitted in the classroom. We see this as an example of what Bernstein referred to as re-contextualization. "In the process of constructing modes of classroom knowledge, teachers may recontextualize discourses from the family/ community/peer groups of students for the purposes of social control, in order to make the regulative moral discourses of the school more effective" Bernstein 1990, p. 199).

Regulative discourse thus comprises and reproduces the dominant principles and structures of society. The discourse produced in schools and classrooms is influenced by the relationships which characterize specific transmission contexts. It is also influenced by relations between schools and family and community contexts. In the classroom, teachers are the knowledge carriers and this power is implicit in their use of authoritative discourse that limits students' responses and cognition. While teacher dominance of talk time and teacher power in controlling classroom discourse are well documented (Alemany & Majos, 2000; Black, 2004; Buzzelli & Johnson, 2001; Ernst-Slavit & Pratt, 2017; Liu & Hong, 2009; Sewell, et al. 2013; Wesling, 2017), Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse can help classroom discourse researchers unpack the relationship between power and teachers' linguistic choices during instruction.

Use of the invariant tag in Kenyan classrooms can also be seen as an example of 'safe talk' strategies (Chick, 1996; Webber, 2008) that teachers have developed in response to language restrictions and varying levels of proficiency in the LOI in emerging multilingual classrooms (Hsieh, Ionescu, & Ho, 2018). Using *isn't it* helps the teacher to maintain classroom norms and to monitor student behavior and compliance with classroom language policy, consistent with Bernstein's notion of regulative role. Use of the tag also allows the teacher to gauge whether students are following the lesson, to assess and direct student attention. However,

as participating teachers noted, an affirmative response is the only sanctioned response available to students. Research in EMC has established that (İnceçay, 2010; Liu & Hony, 2009; Vaish, 2008), linguistic features that hinder student engagement also limit potential for learning. The use of the invariant tag thus acts within discursive rules (Bernstein, 1990) that control what transmitters and acquirers may say and do in the process of transmission-acquisition of knowledge. As part of teacher control over subject content, materials and classroom activities, the sequence of learning, pausing (or not) for students' responses, pacing, etc, Kenyan teachers use the invariant tag as a form of positional control, through appeals to knowledge and authority.

From the standpoint of learning, use of linguistic features such as *isn't it* that preclude students from participating as actors in knowledge production appears to hinder multilingual students oral language development. Suppressing student dialogue may also impede content learning and critical thinking skills. Vygotsky (2012) noted that memorization does not lead to concept formation, and that "experience teaches us that thought does not express itself in words but rather realizes itself in them" (p. 266). Thus, we can observe that repeating phrases and sentences after the teacher is not cognitively challenging, and limits students' engagement with language and content.

Conclusion

This study focused on the use of the invariant tag *isn't it* and its role in Kenyan classrooms through analysis of classroom discourse and teacher views. Central to our study was how the tag is used in the classroom and how its use positions students in the classroom, as knowledge recipients or actors in knowledge production. We described a sociolinguistic context where *isn't it* is a common linguistic feature of Kenyan English and indigenous languages that has been transferred to classroom discourse. First, this study has shown that the tag *isn't it* is a

common linguistic feature in the discourse of Kenyan from all walks of life, including politicians who use it to affirm their opinions to the masses and convince their followers. Second, our analysis of classroom discourse shows that the tag was prevalent across all lessons observed in two subject areas, and teacher views expressed in an online survey support our observation that the tag serves multiple functions in classroom discourse. Significantly, it acts as 'thinking ceiling' because students are not given time to think through the questions asked, and the expected response to the tag is either silence or a choral 'yes'. Perhaps unintentionally, emerging multilingual children are thus positioned as passive receptors of knowledge. A third function is that educators use the tag to gauge students' attentiveness and maintain their focus on the lesson. Our findings show that *isn't it* is a robust feature of Kenyan classroom discourse, is used to accomplish overlapping yet distinct purposes in instruction, and reflects and shapes relations of power and authority between the teacher and the student.

The results of the study build upon research on teacher dominant discourse patterns in African classrooms (Author, 2018; Merritt et al. 1992; Ngwaru, 2011; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). By delving deeper into the linguistic choices that teachers make, the study describes the consequences of these choices for student participation, engagement and positioning in EMC. Through analysis of the use of the linguistic feature, *isn't it*, we have tried to make a bit more visible the regulative practices that shape classroom discourse.

Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education

What are the advantages and disadvantages of developing teacher awareness about regulative linguistic choices? Education scholars argue that educators should support students to engage in oral communication with peers in order to promote and attain specific forms of discourse that enable them to participate fully in instruction (Gibbons, 2015; Fisher & Frey,

2018). Fisher and Frey refer to such language features as 'growth producing conversation,' where oral language is used to allow responding in productive ways, including as a bridge to academic language (Gibbons, 2015). We join scholars who call for greater awareness of discourse (Ngwaru, 2011; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009) and language choices (Liu & Hong, 2009; Ernst-Slavit, 2017) in classroom discourse and teacher preparation. In order to develop quality dialogues in schools, educators need to be aware of discourse opener choices to allow opportunities for talk that goes beyond the mere display of knowledge (Gibbons, 2015). Findings from the present study could be incorporated in Kenyan teacher education programs to help educators understand the effects of extensive use of *isn't it* and other regulative linguistic features on children's oral language development, content learning and critical thinking. By reflecting on regulative language features in instructional talk, teachers could learn to recognize implicit messages conveyed and reinforced by the tag. Opportunities for self-reflection through collaborative lesson planning, peer observation, and analysis of audio or video-recorded lessons might encourage teachers to experiment with other linguistic features and discourse patterns that provide students with greater opportunities to think, discuss, and critique. This may, in turn, encourage more dialogic methods of instruction in the classroom.

We view the invariant tag as a feature loaded with regulative power to limit student engagement and coerce agreement with the teacher. Based on our finding that extensive use of *isn't it* in instruction constrains thinking, oral language production, and learning, we recommend that it be used sparingly. Instead, we would like to see teachers monitor discourse closers, to balance between knowledge display questions, including tags, and other forms that encourage learners to talk more, to stretch language use (Gibbons, 2015; Fisher and Frey, 2018), and to improve students' oral skills and language production. Educators who recognize that inequitable power

relations are reflected in and sustained through classroom talk may be better able to advocate for and hopefully implement a broader range of linguistic features aimed at inviting students to grow as actors in knowledge production.

Implications for Research

This study contributes to discourse research in multilingual classrooms by showing how teachers' use of certain linguistic features can curtail or foster student contributions to classroom talk and learning. Our findings suggest several areas for further research. First, obtaining student perspectives on the use of *isn't it* would complement and perhaps complicate teachers' views of this linguistic device and how the tag structures classroom talk. We noted that the Kenyan fourth-grade students in our study were already very familiar with *isn't it* and understood how they are expected to respond to its use in the classroom. Interviews with children could provide insight into how learners come to think about this and other features of classroom discourse and, by extension, how power is encoded in language. Interviews with younger children, in combination with classroom observations in the introductory grades, could help us understand at what age and grade level children are first exposed to the invariant tag as an ubiquitous linguistic feature of schooling. In the Kenyan context, a study that explored and compared discourse at home and school for first-year students could help us understand the genesis of *isn't it* and other regulative features common in school.

Similarly, comparison of home and school discourse could add to knowledge about the origins and directionality of tag use within Kenyan English. In this study we have characterized *isn't it* as a feature of public discourse that has been relocated within schools. Given the robust presence of the tag in classroom discourse, further research could examine whether schools also play a role in reproducing and perhaps reshaping the ways *isn't it* is used and interpreted in

domains other than schooling. We have shown that invariant tags such as *isn't it* are widely

attested features of Kenyan indigenous languages, including the home languages of children

attending the Tumaini School, and we posit that the presence of the tag in English medium

classrooms may be partially the result of cross-linguistic influence from indigenous languages. A

study of *isn't it* in classroom discourse in regions of Kenya where invariant tags are not used in

the local language(s) could shed light on this issue.

Finally, this study highlights primary school teachers' interpretations of the use of

invariant tags in classroom discourse. Survey results indicated that at least some participating

teachers were aware that the use of *isn't it*, while pervasive, is ineffective for gauging student

comprehension. Furthermore, some teachers recognized the tag's potential to limit, rather than

encourage, student engagement and critical thinking. These findings invite further research on

what classroom discourse might look like following teacher training and guided reflection on the

implications of invariant tag use.

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