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**LEARNER INITIATIVES ACROSS QUESTION-ANSWER  
SEQUENCES: A CONVERSATION ANALYTIC ACCOUNT  
OF LANGUAGE CLASSROOM DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates learner-initiated responses to English language teachers' referential questions and learner initiatives after teachers' feedback moves in meaning-focused question-answer sequences to analyze how interactional practices of language teachers, their initiation and feedback moves, facilitate learner initiatives. Classroom discourse research has largely neglected learner initiative in this pedagogically crucial arena. Addressing this pedagogical issue and drawing on sociocultural theory and situated learning theory, this qualitative study focuses on meaning-focused question-answer sequences to understand whether unfolding sequences, as structured by teachers, solicit learner-initiated participation. The data come from 10 videotaped and transcribed lessons from seven English teachers and their intermediate level students, at four private language institutes in Iran, which were analyzed within conversation analysis framework. Based on detailed analysis of classroom episodes, a very small number of learner initiatives was uncovered. The analysis revealed that several interactional practices by teachers (addressing the whole class, extending wait-time, encouraging student-student interaction, acknowledging response, giving positive feedback, and using continuers) tend to prompt learners' initiation and learners can also create learning opportunities for themselves (following silence or following their own or other initiation). To characterize the findings, a typology of interactional acts that prompt solicited and unsolicited learner initiation is also provided. Some episodes are analyzed and the implications for teachers and teacher educators are also discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Students and teachers share their understanding basically through classroom interaction. Classroom interaction plays an important role in facilitating learning opportunities. These learning opportunities entail not only learners' knowledge of language usage (syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse), but also how they participate in interaction. Student participation in classroom discourse has long been considered essential for learning (Donato, 2000; Sfar, 1998). In this regard, educators and researchers may try to find ways to facilitate this participation and it appears that teachers' ability to manage learner participation largely plays an important role in this regard. Teacher-fronted interaction or lockstep initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence seems to be prevalent in language classrooms (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975); teachers control patterns of communication which is particularly evident in the turn-taking system highly constrained by teachers. This typically involves teachers' questioning practice which is one of the principal ways in which teachers initiate the interactions and control the discourse.

The prevalence of teacher-initiated interaction comes at the cost of reduced student initiation and a loss of contingency (van Lier, 1996). In light of the centrality of the role of students in their own learning, Learner initiative in particular is often considered an important factor in generating learning opportunities. L2 scholars have largely emphasized the centrality of learner initiative (e.g., Goodwin, 2007; Jacknick, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Shepherd, 2011; Sunderland, 2001; van Lier, 1988, 2008; Waring, 2009, 2012). Questioning is a common practice in language classes, especially English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Learner initiative turns, during the more constrained question-answer (QA) sequences – either in response to teachers' questions or following teachers' feedback moves – are clearly not very frequent. For example, recently Domakani & Mirzaei (2013) – in their exploration of dialogism and multivocality in L2 classroom-discourse architecture in Iran – have demonstrated how the dominance of teachers' authority and control over the classroom discourse limits the students' criticality, self-reflexivity, and

their creative knowledge co-construction. However, the data from the current study show that learner initiatives do exist, especially in meaning-focused QA sequences in which the teacher's question is typically of referential type. Referential questions, in contrast with display questions, are of open types and asks for learners' opinions (Brock, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983) and when they are allocated to the whole class for whole class discussion, they may facilitate more learner participation and in turn more learner invitations.

A few studies in general (Garton, 2002, 2012; Jacknick, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Waring, 2009, 2011) and very few studies – focusing on EFL contexts in particular (Garton, 2002, 2012; Sunderland, 2001) – have examined learner initiatives in language classrooms. Moreover, recent L2 scholarship has adopted conversation analysis (CA) methodology to explore teachers' interactive practices affecting learner initiatives (Garton, 2002; Jacknick, 2009). The purpose of this study is to explore learner initiatives and their sequential environments in classroom discourse focusing only on initiations occurring in question-answer sequences. To this end, we drew on the powerful tool of CA. The present study extends the existing CA literature to describe the nature of student-initiated contributions across QA sequences and discusses the kinds of learning opportunities they generate. Given the importance of student-initiated talk, the findings of the study have implications for EFL classroom teachers aiming to provide more interactional space for their students.

## 2. Literature Review

In classroom discourse, it is the teacher who often initiates the interaction and selects the next speaker; this leads to the most prevalent interactional system, the IRF/E sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). This rigid system of teacher-fronted interaction is incompatible with the turn-taking system proposed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). According to them, a set of rules are applied in the order of (1) "the current speaker selects the next speaker," (2) "the next speaker self-selects," and (3) "the current speaker continues."

However, by the perspective of teachers, the IRF pattern may have different functions that can facilitate students' learning (Nassaji & Wells,

2000; van Lier, 1996). Nassaji and Wells (2000) emphasized the various functions of initiation in the IRF sequence. They argued, “questions that introduce issues as for negotiation are more likely than known information questions to elicit substantive student contributions and to encourage a variety of perspectives” (p. 400). In this respect, referential questions which request unknown information have been basically identified to facilitate more learner participation than display questions which ask for known information (Brock, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983). The practitioners in Tsui’s (1996) study in Hong Kong reported several strategies to overcome reticence in the language classroom; one of them has been found to be improving questioning strategies and in particular by asking more referential questions. This type of question may occur a lot in a language class; however, the point is how the teacher judiciously implement it across the unfolding interaction to promote learners’ participation (Yaqubi, Anani Sarab & Mozaffari, 2010). Teachers’ follow-up or feedback moves across QA sequence are regarded to be important for the participation to occur (Lee, 2007; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Waring, 2008). As the teacher’s question type under discussion is open questions, if the teacher does not nominate the respondent and address his or her question to the whole class, any student may take the initiate and answer. This learner initiation may itself be considered as a participation opportunity.

On the part of learners, learning opportunities may refer to either their linguistic competence or their participation in discourse. Within the framework of sociocultural theory (Donato, 2000; Sfard, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Young & Miller, 2004), learning is, however, conceptualized as participation rather than acquisition of linguistic knowledge and learning opportunities are treated as co-constructed interactional phenomenon. The co-construction of talk, in practice, is contingent upon local contexts; Contingent talk refers to a talk which is based on the prior turn and generates strings of sequences of connected turns (Lee, 2007; Seedhouse, 2004; Schegloff, 2007). In addition, according to sociocultural theorists, at some point in the learning process, the learners’ dependence on scaffolded, teacher-driven instruction should give way to self-sufficiency (independence) and ownership of the learning. In this

regard, the teacher's role should move away from the traditional expert to one of advising and facilitating student participation.

Learner initiative, in particular, is often considered an important factor in generating learner participation. L2 scholars have largely emphasized the centrality of learner initiative (e.g., Goodwin, 2007; Shepherd, 2011; Sunderland, 2001; van Lier, 1988, 2008; Waring, 2009, 2012). van Lier (2008) explained learner initiative under the term "agency" involving the general principle that learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner. Learner initiatives perform distinct functions such as providing comments, raising questions, answering questions, correcting peers' errors, checking comprehension or requesting clarification.

Despite the prevalence of questioning practice as a common practice in classroom interaction and in light of the significant role of learner initiative in promoting participation or learning opportunities, there has been less work done on this pedagogically crucial arena, question-answer sequences. However, many studies have been done on learner initiative in language classroom discourse, in general.

Many studies have explored learner initiative in the context of pair or small group work (e.g., Mori, 2002; Ohta, 1995). Some, however, analyzed initiations during prevalent teacher-fronted interactions (Garton, 2012; Jacknick, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Shepherd, 2011; Waring, 2009). Waring (2009) showed how one ESL student managed to move out of a series of IRFs during a homework review activity in teacher-student or whole class interaction. Markee (2000) and Seedhouse (2004) discussed the interactional practices of learners' initiation in different contexts of the classroom. Seedhouse argued that different pedagogical goals entail different interactional organizations. For example, he claimed a 'meaning-and-fluency context' would entail more student contributions.

Taking into account the significant role of teachers in generating learner initiative opportunities, a few studies analyzed solicited-initiation in which the learner initiative turn is projected by the prior teacher turn (Jacknick, 2009; Waring, 2009, 2011). For example, in her study of student participation in an ESL classroom, Jacknick (2009) discussed student initiations based on the projection of initiation by the prior teacher turn. Adopting conversation

analysis and using sociocultural theory (SCT), she discussed both solicited and unsolicited student-initiated participation across teacher-fronted interactions in ESL context.

Hale's (2011) study was practical which investigated how effective he was in creating a classroom environment where meaning could be negotiated autonomously, rather than through IRF structures. Learner initiatives in his class were occurred through both teacher's continual prompts for post-expansion of sequences and through students' self-selections. In this way, students were able to autonomously engage the lesson content and co-create meaning.

Several studies have examined learner initiation in EFL classrooms or EFL contexts (Garton, 2002, 2012; Saikko, 2007; Sunderland, 2001). In this respect, Sunderland (2001), drawing on interaction analysis and Swain's output hypothesis (1985), examined EFL classroom discourse by focusing on student-initiated academic questions and student follow-up turns across IRF patterns.

Much of the research on learner initiative has been conducted within quantitative paradigm and interaction and discourse analytic frameworks and they have largely imposed pre-defined categories for analysis (e.g., Garton, 2002; Shepherd, 2011; Sunderland, 2001). For example, Chika (2012) experimentally identified the extent of students' initiation of ideas in the classroom by using three classroom interaction techniques using chi square statistics. He found that students did not initiate ideas very much in the classroom and in case they took the initiative, the initiations were contingent on teachers' techniques used.

The recent classroom-based research, however, has used turn-by-turn conversation analysis (see further discussion on CA in the Method section). Most CA studies have focused on teacher turns for analysis and a few of them have studied learner-initiated interaction in the classroom (Garton, 2002, 2012; Jacknick, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Li, 2013; Saikko, 2007; Waring, 2009, 2011). Drawing upon key insights from SCT and CA, Waring (2011) defined learner initiatives as "any learner attempt to make an uninvited contribution to the ongoing classroom talk, where 'uninvited' may refer to (1) not being specifically selected as the next speaker or (2) not providing the expected

response when selected” (p. 204). She proposed a typology of learner initiative types including initiating sequence, volunteering response, and exploiting assigned turn. Moreover, Li (2013) used CA tools to analyze student initiatives within a single IRF sequence in a foreign language translation class. He demonstrated how a student initiated a sequence following the teacher’s feedback and how this initiating action and the subsequent interaction created potential learning opportunities. He discussed the findings in reference to participants’ epistemic asymmetry and their L1 and L2 identities.

In sum, prior SLA research and CA work have produced important insights into the role of learner initiatives and teachers’ interactional practices in a variety of contexts.

### **3. The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore learner-initiated responses to teachers’ meaning-focused questions addressed to the whole class and learner initiatives following teachers’ feedback moves to understand whether unfolding sequences, as structured by teachers, solicit learner-initiated participation. The present study enjoys significance in that it can provide an insight to the exploration of learner initiatives in question-answer sequences and it can contribute further to the use of conversation analysis in SLA research and sociocultural and situated learning theories.

#### **3.1 Research questions**

Accordingly, this study aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do EFL classroom interactions across meaning-focused question-answer sequences are characterized by learner-initiated responses and learner initiatives following teachers’ feedback moves?
2. What is the nature of language teachers’ interactive practices and their manifestations on learners’ initiation opportunities across meaning-focused question-answer sequences?

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Participants

Participants of the study were seven EFL teachers and their 54 students at four private language institutes in Iran. They were all Persian-L1 speakers. The students were male and female with an age range of 17 to 30 and they were teenagers and adults. The lessons were at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. Each group was relatively small with class size ranging from 5 to 15 students. The participant teachers were at an age range of 25 to 40. They had different years of teaching experience and they did not have a background in TEFL except teacher training courses.

### 4.2 Procedure

#### Data collection

Following the framework of conversation analysis, the data consist of video and audio recordings of classes and the lesson transcriptions created. This study is part of a larger research project that set out to investigate teacher-student interactional practices across question-answer sequences in EFL classrooms. As one of the researchers was working through one lesson transcript taken from one of the participant teachers' video-recorded lessons, she noticed that a large extent of learner initiatives emerged across the QA sequences in the particular teacher's lesson. Such learner initiatives invariably followed several referential questions and teachers' follow up moves, but not all of them. This research topic of learner initiatives across QA sequences caught the researchers' attention. What was intriguing to the researchers was the orientations that the participant teachers and students displayed toward interaction and initiation. Then the researchers developed the research questions and began to work with other lesson transcripts for further analysis and results in the area of investigation.

The data for the current study contain 17 hours of video-taped EFL classroom interactions, a total of ten ninety-minute lessons from seven different teachers. Two consecutive sessions of almost each teacher were filmed through non-participant observation to mitigate the participants' consciousness of the presence of the equipment during the recording sessions. Two cameras (tripod-mounted digital video cameras with an attached wide-



angle lens) were used, one recording the teacher and one the students. The video cameras were placed as unobtrusively as possible and were not manipulated while recording. All 17 hours were then transcribed in their entirety using a simplified version of Jefferson's model developed by Have (2007) (see the Appendix).

### **Data analysis**

The transcripts along with the recordings were examined within sociocultural theory (the concepts of participation and self-regulation), situated learning theory (the concept of communication and full practice) and conversation-analytic framework.

CA uncovers the talk on the basis of three units of talk which are fundamental to the achievement of social order in talk-in-interaction; these units of talk include turn-taking, sequence organization, and repair. Turn-taking is one of the core ideas of CA (Have, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). According to Sacks et al (1978), there is only one person speaking at a time and transition to the next person occurs at any 'transition relevance place' (TRP) at the end of any 'turn constructional unit' (TCU). TRP is where a change of speakership becomes a salient possibility and TCUs are unit types a speaker sets out to construct a turn like sentential, phrasal, and lexical constructions. Turn-taking analysis refers to the consideration of how the speaker obtains the turn, the timing of initiation, any overlap or interruption, and how the turn terminates.

Sequence organization means any utterance at talk is produced after the preceding one and it creates a context for the next utterance. Repair organization deals with troubles in interaction and repair structure consists of the trouble source, the repair initiation and repair completion (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). CA shares the sociocultural view and situated learning theory of cognition as socially constituted and distributed based on which learning is conceptualized as participation. Given this conceptualization of learning, CA can detail the instructional practices that either create or inhibit the opportunities for participation or initiation and, by extension, the opportunities for learning. CA focuses on describing the fine

details of language use and interaction between participants to uncover the participants' own orientations to the unfolding talk.

One important aspect that CA methods have brought to the studies of language learning in classroom interaction is the adoption of a variable approach to classroom discourse (Walsh, 2011). A variable approach to classroom interaction takes a context-based view towards talk based on this perspective that various micro-contexts occur in classroom discourse and each is purpose-oriented. As the pedagogical purpose varies, the interactional work varies. Thus, when teachers ask referential questions in meaning-and-fluency contexts of class with the teaching goal of giving learners opportunities for expressing their own ideas, the interactional practices should construct contexts for more learner initiatives which are regarded to be learning opportunities in this type of context.

The initial stage of the analysis involved watching the recorded files many times and noting down initial observations. Then the whole single lesson was transcribed and the transcribed lesson was printed. First, all cases or episodes involving student-initiated participation in QA sequences were identified and numbered (QA1, QA2, QA3, etc).

The analysis started with the first QA sequence and a descriptive CA was done on this single sequence. The episode was worked through in terms of turn-taking, sequence and repair organization in the format of both remarks as written on the printed transcript, and analytic descriptions and finally codes and observations were added in a separate analysis notebook. A general pattern was formulated about this single QA episode. Then the next QA episode from the lesson transcript was worked on following the above procedures. The new observations were made on the basis of this new QA episode in terms of its fit with the tentative summary came up before. Then other instances of similar cases were analyzed and compared to test the strength of the initial findings. The summary was revised to make it fit with both the old and the new data. Then, the analysis was extended by repeating this procedure with subsequent parts of the data, that is, other lessons until the complete corpus was processed. Finally, the summary was reworked in terms of its generality of data coverage and the types of learner initiatives were distinguished for data categorization.

For the purpose of this study, the sources of evidence that were used for conversation analytic claims about learner initiatives include analysis of subsequent talk in the next turn, analysis of co-occurring talk within the same turn and by the same speaker, identification of alternate practices that could occur in the same sequential or turn, comparison, and incorporation of the details of the talk and nonverbal conduct (e.g. gesture, gaze, and body organization) (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013).

### 5. Results

The first research question sought to identify the extent of learner initiatives that occur in meaning-focused QA sequences. To answer this question, all cases or episodes involving student-initiated participation in QA sequences were identified and numbered (QA1, QA2, QA3, etc). The analysis of student-initiated contributions was limited to learner-initiated responses to the teacher's referential questions and learner initiatives following teachers' feedback moves in meaning-and-fluency contexts. The short initiative turns, the turns showcasing learners' display of knowledge and learner questions such as understanding check questions were excluded. Applying this stage resulted in a collection of 32 cases out of 221 QA exchanges. After working through the data and each case in detail, it became clear that the extent of both learner-initiated responses and learner initiatives was very minimal across these sequences. The result demonstrates that students, nevertheless, have taken interactional space to initiate talking.

The second research question aimed at examining the nature of language teachers' interactive practices and their manifestations on learners' initiation opportunities to categorize teachers' interactive practices and learner initiatives. The data revealed how students initiated new or post-expansion sequences across the unfolding sequential environment following the teacher's referential question as the teacher had not selected the next speaker. In the analysis, student-initiated participation in teacher-fronted QA sequences was situated on two occasions: *solicited student initiation* and *unsolicited student participation*. Jacknick (2009, p. 68) defined solicited participation as "where the teacher prompts participation" and unsolicited participation as "where students themselves initiate without a prompt from the teacher". Within

these two main categories, several distinct sequential environments were identified (see Table 1). The students in this data seem to orient to the conversational bias for the next speaker to speak after the current speaker by self-selecting when the current speaker has not continued speaking and has not selected the next speaker.

Table 1. Types of learner initiatives based on sequential environments

	Solicited Learner Initiative	Unsolicited Learner Initiative
<b>Subsequent to</b>	Teacher's whole class addressing	Silence
	Teacher's continuer or short token	Own initiation
	Teachers' extended wait-time	Other initiation
	Teacher's interactional playfulness	
	Teacher's encouragement of student-student interaction	
	Teacher's acknowledgement	
	positive feedback or surprise	

Based on the data, solicited initiation occurred following teacher's whole class addressing, teacher's encouraging student-student interaction, teacher's continuer or short token, teacher's interactional playfulness, and teacher's acknowledgement or positive feedback. The most common type of learner initiative occurred when one student exploited an assigned turn to begin a sequence after the teacher's addressing the whole class. This type of initiative represented 20 percent of all initiatives. Regarding continuers or short tokens such as *Mm-hmm*, *ok*, and *aha*, they accounted for only 5 percent in the data. Learner initiatives encouraged by playfulness were also found to create a friendly learning environment that facilitated initiation participation. This type of initiative accounted for only 10 percent of all learner initiative turns in the data. Acknowledgment tokens and positive feedback accounting 15 percent of the data were also found in the present study.

Learners also showcased their initiatives by offering unsolicited initiation. This initiation type occurred largely following silence, class interactional playfulness (accounting for 5 percent), and student's own initiation (accounting for 12 percent) or another student's initiation

(accounting for about 13 percent). Silence or extended wait-time, whether directly or indirectly prompted by the teacher accounted for a large proportion of all initiatives that occurred in the data, around 15 percent. Student initiation following another student's initiation was also occurred which contained distinct functions such as clarification, explanation and persuasion, extension and playfulness.

Episodes demonstrating how students took initiatives across QA sequences to introduce contingency into the interaction are presented below with a descriptive analysis. These analyses are then followed by a preliminary discussion of how these initiatives may create learning opportunities under the sociocultural perspective and situated learning theory. The final data for presentation here are extracted from two participant teachers' lesson transcripts. The phenomenon under investigation is marked with a horizontal arrow in the transcripts to draw attention to this feature.

**Episode 1.** Context – The class is working on a discussion exercise with a series of open-ended or referential questions aiming at prompting learners' personal ideas and experiences.

- 1 T: Number three, number four, ((he reads)):  
Are you sensitive to beauty?
- 2 LL: → yes//yes
- 3 T: aha (.) Who isn't! Who isn't? (0.3) Any ideas?
- 4 L1: → [flower], people painting, a good ( ).
- 5 T: a nice idea. No other ideas?
- 6 L4: → yes, I think all thing in the world is beauty and (0.5)  
we should see them and by this hhh... we should see  
power of the god and I think it's very beauty.
- 7 T: aha. Five, ((he reads)): Do you think it's ok if your ideas  
don't work at first?
- 8 (0.4)
- 9 LL: → yes (0.3) yes=
- 10 L1: → °yes°
- 11 T: =how? =

- 12 (0.5)
- 13 L3:→ it's
- 14 L1:→ [not problem] my idea in first (.) not ok.
- 15 L3:→ [it's] it depends on our idea. What, how much does it  
COST...it may bankrupt you it isn't fair. It isn't pleasant  
(((incorrect pronunciation of "pleasant"))) for you. =
- 16 T: =pleasant ((he corrects L3)). Many thanks for your idea.
- 17 (0.4)
- 18 L9: → I think it's good. Sometimes it's good because when all...all  
the time our ideas was good, it's our ( ) or knowledge takes  
that level, but sometimes when our ideas I guess is not  
good...we it's a, it's a good time that we use the others'  
experience... and better our idea and it's...maybe we  
can...we feel angry about that but when use others  
experience, we have a better result.
- 19 T: very good

The teacher initiates the interaction by allocating interactional space to all learners through addressing a referential or open question, "*Are you sensitive to beauty?*" to the whole class. To this, the learners may take initiative, namely, solicited initiation. By their reply, a big "*yes/yes*" in line 2, the students are seen to orient to the teacher's prompt as an invitation to reply, where the teacher indicates that any student (or several students simultaneously) may respond (Mehan, 1979). Then the teacher changes the format of his question to an invitation to bid, where the teacher indicates that students may raise their hands to be called on asking, "*aha (.) Who isn't! Who isn't? (0.3) Any ideas?*" Here, the current speaker (the teacher) does not select the next speaker and does not continue talking with another turn constructional unit; therefore, any speaker (student) may self-select at this point (Sacks et al., 1974). L1 initiates to respond, "*[flower], people painting, a good ( )*" in line 4. This initiation receives an acknowledgement by the teacher, "*a nice idea*" in the subsequent turn (Turn 5). The teacher immediately continues in his current turn by inviting more ideas, "*no other ideas?*" This invitation seems to prompt another learner's initiation in turn 6 characterized by L4's extended turn.

Next in line 7, the teacher asks the next open question from the textbook again addressing the whole class, “*Do you think it’s ok if your ideas don’t work at first?*” After a four-second silence, several learners answer, “yes”. L1 initiates a response but utters it quietly (marked by degree signs, “<sup>o</sup>yes<sup>o</sup>”). The teacher, next, asks a follow-up question, “*how?*” (Turn 11) to invite probably more extended initiative responses and ideas.

When facing with silence (five seconds in line 12), the teacher does not hold the floor; his nonverbal pause is indicating his invitation for the learners to engage in the discussion with him. In the next three lines (lines 13, 14 and 15), unsolicited learner initiation occurs following the pause; two learners (L1 and L3) launch their contributions initiating to express their ideas relevant to the current topic or question. In the next period of silence or wait-time by the teacher, L9’s initiative move occurs which in fact leads to her extended discussion on the topic.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning takes place through dialogic interaction. As this study focuses on student-initiated participation across QA sequences, the microanalysis of this segment tried to indicate how learner initiative, either solicited or unsolicited, can be a reflection of a participation opportunity. Another relevant learning theory is situated learning theory which views learning as involving all participants in a discursive practice changing their patterns of social co-participation from peripheral participation to fuller participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It seems that here the learners were involved in the discussion and had fuller participation as a result of the teacher’s interactional practices such as invitation to reply (addressing the whole class), extended wait-time, follow-up questions and acknowledgment.

**Episode 2.** Context – The teacher reads a sentence from the textbook about tourism. She then engages her students in discussing their opinions.

- 1 T: aha yeah exactly I wana tell you, I wana tell you the tip of advice that my friend gave me. ((she reads)): “If you’re worried about losing your passport, don’t carry it around with you, just keep it in your hotel room”. ok what’s your advice? Is it ok?

- 2 L2:→ =room it's ok I think. =
- 3 T: = you mean you should put your passport in a hotel room  
and don't carry it? =
- 4 L2: =of course passport is like↑ ou::r (.)=
- 5 T: =ID card. =
- 6 L2: =ID card and our driver license. =
- 7 T: =uhu↑=
- 8 L2: = I PREfer to keep my driver LICENSE at home because  
maybe it happen, may be it happens hmhm a some  
accidence or some robby ((incorrect usage of the word  
"robbery")) =
- 9 T: [aha, maybe some accident happens]  
((5 lines are omitted))
- 16 T: Erick, what's your idea about this?
- 17 L3: =<°to tell you the truth° I rather to save my passport and  
something like that in my °cell phone memory° with  
the °phone ( ) °>=
- 18 T: =aha: (.) it's a good idea↓
- 19 L1:→ I have same idea I'd like to save it in a...this program and  
I don't carry my passport or the valuable thing I have↑=
- 20 T: =so what happen-what happens if you, so what if  
in a situation, in the place your passport is needed? =
- 21 L1: = in the place my passport if needed, I will carry with  
my own↑=
- 22 T: = ok you don't know for example you put it in a hotel, =
- 23 L1: =ok I see=
- 24 T: = so you go out, a police officer ask you about your passport,  
so what would you do? =
- 25 L1: = for what? Ask me about the PASSport↑=
- 26 T: [I don't know just to check] check that you are not  
a TERRorist  
for example. =
- 27 L1: =hmhm in this=
- 28 L2:→ =going to jail. ((laughter)) =



- 29 T: =yes you can go to jail. =
- 30 L1: in this situation I should, I must change my mind and  
I wana:: say I will, I wi::ll carry my passport ((laughter))=
- 31 T: = (laughs) >change immediately<, ok good. =
- 32 L2:→ (to L1) [be sure that] be sure that the police accepted you.
- 33 L1: yes
- 34 T: ((to L2)) he will accept him for what?↑ =
- 35 L: ((to L2)) stranger?↑=
- 36 L2: = no his (.) his exCUSES=
- 37 T: =his, why?!!! He is an exception you mean?↓  
((teacher's laughter))=
- 38 L2: = he is NOT exceptional, acceptional↓  
((incorrect word usage)) =
- 39 T: =>so what do you mean? < =
- 40 L2: =because (.) all police hmhm...all police want to see  
the passport NOW↑ =
- 41 T: =>aha yeah<=
- 42 L2: = >we can't delay it< =
- 43 T: = exactly=
- 44 L2: = and you have to go to jail and after that your father (.)  
can help you. =
- 45 T: =yeah (.) with money you know ((laughing)),  
with the condition, >with some money <=
- 46 L2: =of course money under the table. ((laughter)) =

This teacher addresses her question to the whole class. Therefore, L2 initiates a response, a kind of solicited initiative, “*room it's ok I think*”. However, it seems to the teacher that this learner is not answering towards her goal. Therefore, she asks for the learner's clarification. The student latches on to the teacher's follow-up question and in this way, the QA sequence is stressed. In line 7, the discourse marker (“*uhu*”) followed by a rising intonation (marked by ↑) occurs as a marker of change of information state. This kind of short token or continuer allows L2 to proceed with the topic and to offer further information or a line of reasoning for his own initial initiation, “*I PRefer to*

*keep my driver LICENSE at home because may be it happen, may be it happens a some accidence or some robbery*". Jacknick (2009) called this type of initiative "student initiation following own initiation" (p. 85), a kind of unsolicited initiative in that this response is not projected by the prior turn.

Lines 10 to 16 of the episode are omitted because of their irrelevance to the research focus. In line 16, the teacher nominates L3 to ask for his opinion. Following her positive evaluation of L3's answer in line 18 with "*it's a good idea.*" the teacher begins to silently look at all the students around the room (the non-verbal prompt for initiation). L1 self-selects in line 19. The student initiation following another student's initiation here contains an extension of the particular topic.

L1-teacher interaction continues. When L1 is responding to the teacher's move, another learner (L2) takes initiative, "*going to jail*" (line 28) across the unfinished interactional sequence. He jokingly responds to the teacher's prior turn (Line 26) which contains a kind of playfulness, "*[I don't know just to check] check that you are not a TERROrist for example.*" While L1's initiated participation described above builds on prior teacher or student talk by extending a discussion or clarifying a point, L2's initiation is unsolicited. Later in turns 31, 41, 43, and 45, the teacher's interactional playfulness (turns 31 and 37) and interest in the discussion tend to facilitate students' initiation and contribution.

The nature of student-initiated turns in this QA sequence is interesting. The preponderance of student initiation following ones' own initiation or following other student initiation indicates students' understanding in the unfolding of the lesson. This segment shows how a teacher can his or her students the interactional space to initiate expressing opinions, clarifying and joking. This QA sequence seems to be situated in a context which seems familiar and authentic to the learners like an out-of-class real interaction. One characteristic of learning context that situated learning theory posits is authentic activities which are the ones that students can relate to their own experience and with this authentic tasks or talks occurring during QA sequences, there is a greater probability of initiation and engagement with the task as they hold the attention and interest of the students.

**Episode 3.** Context – The segment below occurs in a meaning-and-fluency context where the teacher tries to heat up the discussion about what learners excel in.

- 1 T: = Do you EXcel in many different fields?  
 2 L6: °and what that means?°  
 3 T: [means] are u the BEST in many fields?  
 4 L: [best] ((nodes to confirm))  
 5 L3: best in the fields?  
 6 T: .hhh (0.3) Are you the best in anything?  
 7 L2:→ YES  
 8 LL:→ yes...no  
 9 L3:→ = ((laughs)) I think. In everything I can, I think I can be first. =  
 10 T: =oh my God ((laughs))  
 11 L4:→ I'm not the best. I'm not excel in anything but by... practicing and by studying and by try try::ing we can be the best in the world=  
 12 T: =ok=  
 13 L4:→ =it depends in to ((grammatical error)) (1.0) our (.) trying  
 14 T: thank you.  
 ((shapes his lips in a way to confirm the learner's nice idea.))  
 15 L7:→ my best is painting and, I like to micro::o (.) microbiology.  
 ((incorrect pronunciation of "microbiology")) =  
 16 T: = microbiology ((corrects pronunciation)) wow!!!  
 17 L8:→ =I think I'm excel ((grammatical error)) in the spending money. =  
 18 T: =spending money yeah for ladies, very good ((laughter))  
 19 L9:→ I'm not good but I think I'm good to be counselor. =  
 20 T: =aha. =  
 21 L9: =for others and in cooking and (0.2) =  
 22 T: thank you. ((to L10)) Fariba?

- 23 L10: I'm good at painting, literature and cooking. =
- 24 T: =thank you↓=
- 25 (0.5)
- 26 L9:→ =I'm not sure about this, reading others' mind.
- 27 T: =yes you can read other's mind well. What am I thinking?
- 28 L1: what about my think?
- 29 T: yes, what does he think? ((learners laughing))
- 30 L3: it's secret ((laughs))
- 31 T: oh you can test it ((laughter)) ...she gets some money  
for that we could pay her then she will say that = (0.5)
- 32 L9: =no just their hmhm eye collected, it just for myself,  
don't read about the others or pa::rticipate. =

The teacher directs his referential question, "*Do you excel in many different fields?*" to all students. The teacher's whole class addressing paves the way for any kind of response even students' questions. Here L6, rather than answering the teacher's question (Response move), asks for a clarification request (Initiation move). Turns 2 to 6 are the result of this request where at the end, the teacher redirects his question, "*Are you the best in anything?*" (Turn 6). Within the generated QA sequence, learners, one by one, step in and volunteer to respond and their responses all receive either an acknowledgment (*thank you* in turn 14 and 24), playfulness (*Oh my God* in turn 10) or a continuer (*ok* and *aha* in turn 12 and 20 respectively) from the teacher.

These interactive practices or language uses by the teacher appear to offer the learners general prompts for initiation. The latched turns are resulted until line 24 where the teacher utters "*thank you↓*" accompanied by a lowered pitch. However, instead of letting that potential sequence-closing (marked by the following intonation ↓) become the actual sequence-closing, L9 launches an expansion following a lapse of five seconds, "*I'm not sure about this, reading others mind.*" (Line 26). It is important to note that students still often find ways to initiate, even when no interactional space is afforded. L9's follow-up turn, coming after her own initial initiation in lines 19 and 21, has the effect of building up a sense of student interest in the topic. This subtopic raised by L9 seems to be an interesting topic for both the teacher and other learners as

well. The teacher responds with a question in line 27 which expresses surprise, allocates a turn to L9 to develop the topic further, “*you can read other’s mind well. What am I thinking?*”. The teacher contends with the contingency initiated by the student and thus his surprise and playful talk here, “*what am I thinking?*” leads other learners to initiate and contribute to the discourse (L1 in turn 28 and L3 in turn 30); in fact, initiation following other initiation is resulted (Jacknick, 2009).

Later in turn 32, following a five-second silence signaled by the teacher’s gesture of folded arms, L9 goes beyond her assigned task volunteering extra information about the teacher’s prior enquiry. Waring (2011), in her typology of learner initiative, called this extension as “piggyback”, a subgroup of her Type C learner initiative, “exploiting assigned turn”, “where the learner seizes the opportunity of an assigned turn to advance his/her own agenda by either doing more than what is asked for (piggyback)” (p. 212).

Under the sociocultural perspective, in the interaction with the teacher as a more knowledgeable person, the learner can learn from the scaffolding that the teacher creates for her/him (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). In terms of turn-taking and sequence organization, it appears that the learners of this episode are able to take turns. And they initiate post-expansions (Schegloff, 2007) in the form of continuing their talks following the teacher’s feedback moves. The organization of the interaction produced here appears to be appropriate to the pedagogical focus of context, the meaning-and-fluency context. The last segment showcases learners’ initiation after the teacher’s encouragement of student-student interaction.

**Episode 4.** Context – In the episode below, the class is discussing an open-ended question taken from the textbook, thus the classroom context is meaning-focused to promote fluency.

- |   |       |  |
|---|-------|--|
| 1 | T:    | very good. Ok number two ((reads)): Do you often question the way things work? (.) Ladies? |
| 2 | L10:→ | yes. Why are sometimes some people are so bad?↓  |
| 3 | T:    | =why are, why are some people bad? =   |
| 4 | L3:→  | =because of business, money. ((laughs)) (.)  |

- everything is clear.
- 5 T: ((he points his hand to L10 who is gazing to L3 to show that L3 should address L10))  
((to L10)) did you get the answer? =
- 6 L10: =no.
- 7 T: ok ((to L3)) answer her better. =
- 8 L3: ((he is smiling and looking at L10)) it's not reasonable. It's in the world reasonable (.) World of business.
- 9 T: aha (0.3) ((to L10)) did you get the answer?
- 10 L7:→ for pride...for pride, for (vingins) for everything they wana ((want to)) be... be excellent in all work.
- 11 L4:→ I think.
- 12 L3:→ [they kill] they kill each other.
- 13 L4:→ I think it's their personality to we come back person in the life. Because some people hmhmm doing bad work or bad things for (.) happy to (.) bothers people and it's their (.) personality.
- 14 L4: ((looks at L10 to find out if she is persuaded.))
- 15 T: ((gaze to L10 who seems not to be persuaded yet)) no? ((to the whole class)) Ok can you make her believe, persuade her.
- 16 L3: persuade her. But what...maybe what we say that bad, other person say that good
- 17 T: uhu, very well, any other ideas?
- 18 L3: [but] it depends on that person.
- 19 L10: I say one sentence it remind ((grammatical error)) every time tha::t our God is kind Ok He create ((grammatical error)) all the people kind and good, so why some people are bad? °↓ =
- 20 T: =it's a philosophical question. ((to L1)) Mr Alizadeh::?
- 21 L1: =uh... I think some people are bad, it's correct. But sometimes it dependents, dependents to different use in other people. When I view in other people good, all the people's goo::d, when I view the=

- 22 T: =I LOOK AT the people. =
- 23 L1: =look at the people bad, (.) some people are BAD.  
Sohrab says, >“*Cheshmhara bayad shost, jore digar bayad did*”< ((part of a famous poem))
- 24 T: ((to L10)) you got your answer? =
- 25 L10: =yeah.
- 26 L3: ((to L10)) if some people weren't bad, you couldn't find good men.

After the teacher's invitation to reply, L10 volunteers to respond, “*Why are sometimes some people so bad?*” Here the learner begins a QA sequence in which she takes the position of I (initiation) within the IRF cycle. From the teacher's repetition of L10's question and his facial expression, it seems that he tries to confirm it as a good question. On the other hand, he might aim at regaining the *I* position as a teacher. Either way, the teacher addresses the learner's question to the whole class as a prompt for initiation. L3 in the subsequent turn (turn 4) tries to interact with L10 and answer her question. In the next 5 lines (turns 5-9), the teacher creates a context for student-student interaction and repeats this question, “*Did you get the answer?*” addressing it to L10 (turns 5 and 9) or “*can you make her believe, persuade her*” addressing it to the whole class (Turn 15). This leads L10's classmates to initiate in order to help her with her proposed enquiry. L3 attempts to express his idea better (Turns 8, 12, and 16); other learners also contribute to discourse without being directly nominated (Turns 10, 11 and 13). In this case, unsolicited initiation takes place, a kind of initiation following other initiation.

Following L3's initiated-participation (Turn 16), the teacher acknowledges the contributions and then again gives a verbal prompt for initiation, “*Any other ideas?*” (Turn 17). In the next turn, L3 takes the floor. The camera angles available for this talk clearly provide access to L3's face during his response to the teacher's prompt. It is clear that he feels glad having the opportunity to talk more. At the end of L3's turn (i.e., at a transition relevance place or TRP), L10 gains the floor potentially, “*I say one sentence it remind every time that: our God is kind ok. He create all the people kind and good, so why some people are bad?*” (Turn 19).

To this initiation, the teacher reacts positively, “*it’s a philosophical question*” and this time he nominates L1 for the response. After finishing his interaction with L1, the teacher asks L10 to assure that she has been persuaded, “*you got your answer?*” to which L10 responds, “*yeah*”. The nature of student-initiated turns in this last environment is interesting in that the teacher’s interest in the discussion and in learners’ contributions may project any next student turns. Without waiting for the teacher’s allowance, L3 comes in with a new sequence creating a new subtopic which again may result in student-student interaction. The transcript of the new generated sequence is not presented above because it carries similar conclusions.

This brief episode is of interest here as it shows students’ initiative turns and the interaction between students across a QA sequence without the interference of their teacher. The teacher manages to turn the classroom into a community in which students share responsibility for learning. His F-move tend to support learning opportunity which is linked to the Vygotskian idea of supporting learners’ zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

## 6. Discussion

The study explored learner initiatives in meaning-and-fluency contexts of language classroom discourse with a special focus on referential questions. Referential questions have been considered to be effective for facilitating student-initiated turns. (Alduais, 2012; Walsh, 2006). The results of this study, however, indicated that a small number of referential QA sequences promote students’ active participation and engagement in interaction. This means that teachers should consider the appropriacy of their interactive practices in relation to their intended goals. Where their pedagogical aim is to promote fluency and meaning negotiation, they should facilitate interactional space by giving adequate space for student participation and negotiation in the discourse and try to shape opportunities for learner initiations.

Sociocultural theory views learning as originating in social interaction (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Learning occurs more in interaction or collaborative dialog in which teachers can scaffold learners’ participation and learner initiation as one form of participation in the discourse. This is particularly evident in the third turn of the sequence where teachers are



encouraged to promote dialogic interaction. Moreover, based on situated learning theory which proposes a model of learning in a community of practice, it appears that language teaching is proved to be most effective and optimal only when it is performed in a setting of real communication and performance like the one in meaning-and-fluency contexts of the class. Therefore, these types of contexts have the potential to move learners from peripheral participation to fuller participation and make them initiate more.

The data presented here have shown that projected or not projected by the prior turn, learner initiatives can occur in EFL classroom discourse, though their occurrence is not prevalent. Learners of the present study appeared to have initiated more in meaning-and-fluency contexts where learner engagement and interactional opportunities are integral to the purpose of the interaction. And in these contexts, teachers' referential questions have a crucial role to move the discourse forward. Learner initiatives occurred more in response to these questions whilst learners in Garton's (2012) and Jacknick's (2009) study were found to take initiative more in form-and-accuracy contexts and in procedural contexts rather than meaning-and-fluency contexts. As learners take initiatives, they use language to participate and to create learning opportunities (Waring, 2011). This is in line with the sociocultural view of language learning as participation.

The student-initiated participation in QA sequences in the present study included both solicited initiation and unsolicited initiation. This is in line with Jacknick's (2009) study. The typology characterized by the current study findings clearly indicates that the subcategories under solicited initiation outnumber those in unsolicited initiation. This shows that a language teacher plays a critical role in creating learning opportunities for learner initiation through whole class addressing, encouraging student-student interaction, using continuers and interactional playfulness, and giving positive feedback or acknowledging the response. When the teacher does not select the next speaker to respond, any student may exploit the assigned turn to begin a sequence by self-selecting to "volunteer a response" (Waring, 2011, p. 204). Jacknick (2009) also referred to this type of initiation; however, while Jacknick considered students' initiation following teacher prompt for response and the one following teacher prompt for initiation as two separate

categories, the researchers of the present study integrated them within one category and named it the teacher's whole class addressing, either for a response or an initiation.

Regarding continuers or short tokens, not only do these tokens demonstrate listening to the speakers, but also they validate a student turn and provide the interactional space for students to continue their current turn (see Jefferson, 1984 and Schegloff, 1981 on continuers). Gardner (as cited in Jacknick, 2009) claimed that continuers "are used to pass up the opportunity to take a more substantial turn at talk" (p. 122). Learner initiatives encouraged by playfulness also create a friendly learning environment that facilitates participation (Bell, 2007; Davies, 2003; Sullivan, 2000; Waring, 2012). As Waring (2011) pointed out, "These initiatives create learning opportunities again by pushing the boundaries of participation and by exploiting the use of humor, or more generally, language play" (p. 214). When students raise a sub-topic and the teacher acknowledges the topic by using humors and prompts to move the discourse forward, these student-initiated topics can significantly impact on students' subsequent learning (Reinders & Loewen, 2013). Therefore, teachers can use humors to create a community for the learners to practice and to feel connected as they are engaged to initiate expressing their ideas freely. This is compatible with situated learning theory which posits that learning is unintentional and situated within authentic activity, context, and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Unsolicited learner initiatives may occur following silence, interactional playfulness and student's own initiation or another student's initiation. Silence or extended wait-time, whether directly or indirectly prompted by the teacher, may also constitute a significant opportunity for learning. Wait-time to facilitate student participation was similarly used by teachers in numerous studies including Anton (1999), Azubike (2000) and McNeil (2011). Student initiation following his/her own initiation or following an earlier contribution by the same student is different from traditional IRF pattern in classroom discourse. In this case, a student initiates the sequence, the teacher responds, and the student follows up on the teacher's response (the feedback move). To sum up, given the value of learner initiatives in structuring learning opportunities, these opportunities are related to those turns that engage

interaction. Learners should feel belongings to the class community for the purpose of fuller participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Likewise, according to sociocultural theory, learners gradually should move to self-regulation and independence and this is possible if teachers try to handover to learners and withdraw help to increase learner participation and initiation.

This study contributes to the sociocultural literature in two ways. First, as sociocultural theory underscores the role of interaction in shaping learning (Vygotsky, 1978), student-initiated participation can be considered as learning opportunities. Second, it highlights the importance of teachers' discourse moves in shaping learner initiation. This study contributes to previous investigations into solicited initiation in talk and question-answer sequences in EFL classrooms that are framed by sociocultural perspective (Jacknick, 2009; Waring, 2011). The study also contributes to the sequentially oriented and situated conceptualization of learning as participation as situationally embedded practices, in line with the situated learning theory. Several recent CA studies have used situated learning theory to explain their findings (Young & Miller, 2004; Hellerman, 2009).

From a methodological perspective, this study provides some insights into the benefits of adopting a conversation analytic approach to the study of verbal behavior in L2 interactions. CA transcription and analysis can provide ample evidence for understanding the role of interaction and the role of teachers in hampering or facilitating participation and initiation opportunities during interaction. The study also supports the view of CA, not as a tool to document learning, but as a powerful tool to describe and analyze learners' participation in classroom activities. The analyses demonstrated the effectiveness of teachers' scaffolding and structuring of referential questions (Yaqubi, Anani Sarab & Mozaffari, 2010; Yaqubi & Mozaffari, 2011) and teachers' creation of opportunity-rich environment conducive for language learning (He, 2004).

## **7. Conclusion**

Regarding practical issues related to learning and teaching, the study analyzed the complex ways in which teachers' interactive practices can influence the initiation opportunities that can occur. Although a lot of factors may affect

learner initiation in the classroom such as teacher's teaching style, students' learning style, learning environment and other multicultural factors, teachers often dominate instruction and thus their interactive practices seem to affect initiation significantly. When teachers employ interactive practices to facilitate interactional space, students will be more involved in the classroom by the expansion of the IRF sequence because initiating does not happen naturally; it must be carefully planned and encouraged.

Although this study is limited by the small data and duration of observation, the findings have some implications for SLA researchers, language teachers, and teacher educators. Further studies of a variety of teachers and classes of varying ability levels are needed to be done in the area of learner initiatives. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of learner voices and the relationship between classroom interaction or language use and language learning to increase learning opportunities including initiation opportunities. Teacher education programs can also help teachers to understand interactional processes through, for example, the study of classroom recordings and lesson transcripts.

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## Appendix

### Conversation Analysis Transcription Notations

<b>T:</b>	teacher
<b>L1:</b>	learner (identified as learner 1)
<b>L:</b>	unidentified learner
<b>LL:</b>	several learners simultaneously
<b>(.)</b>	a short untimed pause
<b>...</b>	a pause of about one second
<b>(2.0)</b>	timed silence
<b>[ ]</b>	overlapping utterances
<b>foo-</b>	an abrupt cut-off of the prior word
<b><u>stock holder</u></b>	stress
<b>.</b>	falling intonation
<b>↑</b>	rising intonation
<b>→</b>	focus of analysis
<b>,</b>	continuing intonation
<b>yea::r</b>	prolonging of sound
<b>WORD</b>	very emphatic stress or loud speech
<b>°word°</b>	quiet speech
<b>↑word</b>	raised pitch
<b>↓word</b>	lowered pitch
<b>&gt;word&lt;</b>	quicker speech
<b>&lt;word&gt;</b>	slowed speech
<b>=</b>	latched turns
<b>( )</b>	inaudible talk
<b>(word)</b>	transcriptionist doubt
<b>(close eyes)</b>	translation of L1
<b>((gazes))</b>	nonspeech activity or transcriptionist comment
<b><i>Present</i></b>	shift to L1