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To cite this article: Johanna van Balen, Myrte N. Gosen, Siebrich de Vries & Tom Koole (2024) Taking learner initiatives within classroom discussions with room for subjectification, Classroom Discourse, 15:2, 123-142, DOI: [10.1080/19463014.2022.2128689](https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2022.2128689)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2022.2128689>



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Published online: 07 Nov 2022.



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# Taking learner initiatives within classroom discussions with room for subjectification

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## ABSTRACT

This study shows how learner initiatives are taken during classroom discussions where the teacher seeks to make room for subjectification. Using Conversation Analysis, subjectification can be observed when students take the freedom to express themselves as subjects through learner initiatives. Drawing on data from classroom discussions in language and literature lessons in the mother tongue, the authors find that learner initiatives can be observed in three different ways: *agreement*, *request for information*, *counter-response*. A learner initiative in the form of an agreement appears to function mostly as a continuer and prompts the previous speaker to reclaim the turn, while the I-R-F structure remains visible. In contrast, making a *request for information* or giving a *counter-response* ensures mostly a breakthrough of the I-R-F-structure and leads to a dialogical participation framework in which multiple students participate. Findings illustrate that by making a *request for information* or giving a counter-response, students not only act as an independent individual, but also encourage his peers to do so.

## KEYWORDS

Classroom interaction; learner initiative; mother tongue education; subjectification; conversation analysis

## 1. Introduction

Subjectification is about the existence of the student as a subject of their own life and is in addition to *qualification*, which is the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and *socialization*, which is the (re)presentation of cultures, traditions, and practices, one of three domains of educational purpose (e.g. Biesta 2009, 2012, 2020). Subjectification concerns one's freedom as a human being "to act or to refrain from action" (Biesta 2020, 93). It does not however refer to the kind of freedom where you do exactly as you please, but refers instead to the kind of freedom that is necessary to live in a democracy. Biesta's (2020) interest in the "promotion of freedom" (p. 93) in education has a long tradition that goes back to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), which has also influenced the works of other contemporary pedagogues (e.g. Benner 2015; Simons and Masschelein 2021; Meirieu 2016; Säfström 2011).

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According to Biesta (2020), democracy has to do with the limits that our living together poses to our own freedom and he argues that “one important aspect of trying to exist as subject is to figure out which limits are real, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab) use of power” (p. 96). Subjectification is therefore about a teacher ensuring that what students express can meet the world, so that an encounter with reality can take place, resistance and limits can be experienced and students are challenged to do a so-called “reality check”: Does what I say or do, or desire to say or do, help in living well and living well together? (Biesta 2018a, 2018b, 2020). According to Biesta (2018a), the teacher’s task is to provide students with opportunities that lead them to this reality check, with the aim that the questions associated with this reality check become the questions of the students themselves. Whether students will eventually ask themselves these questions cannot be known or measured by a teacher. This implies that whether or not subjectification occurs is beyond a teacher’s control, but whether or not the students are given the freedom to act or express themselves as subjects is within the teacher’s control.

In this study, the teachers conduct classroom discussions with the aim of making room for subjectification. Within classroom discussions, students have the opportunity to take initiatives, for example, by asking questions or by making comments. With regard to subjectification, these learner initiatives are of interest because it is precisely at these observable interactional moments that a student acts as an independent individual; the student chooses freely to “act”, take their turn and to say “this” or “that”. From both an interactional and a pedagogical perspective, it can therefore be of interest to further investigate learner initiatives.

So far, learner initiatives have mainly been studied in classrooms with specific attention to language learning (e.g. Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018; Dolce and Van Compernelle 2020; Jacknick 2011a, 2011b; Käätä and Kasper 2018; Merke 2018; Sert 2017; Waring 2009, 2011). However, to our knowledge, no conversation analytic study has been done on learner initiatives with regard to subjectification, nor are there any conversational analytic studies on subjectification by studying learner initiatives. Therefore, this study investigates learner initiatives in teacher-led classroom discussions, with a focus on subjectification. We investigate how a learner takes initiative, how the interaction evolves around the initiative, and what this subsequently means for encouraging subjectification. The ability of teachers to gain insight into these moments may contribute to education in which teachers want to make room for subjectification.

### **1.1. Learner initiatives in classroom interaction**

Previous research has shown that teacher-initiated classroom discussions are often carried out using the triadic dialogue: teacher initiation (I), student response (R), and teacher follow-up (F) move (Cazden 2001; Gardner and Mushin 2017; van Lier 1996; Mehan 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Wells 1993). Within this three-part sequence, the student takes on the responding role and the teacher the initiating role, which may restrict student participation and autonomous interaction (e.g. Cazden 2001; Lemke 1990). Teacher-initiated classroom discussions however are not necessarily carried out using the triadic dialogue, but instead can be conducted through a “multilogue”, “an interaction format in whole-class settings where more than two participants are involved, either

directly or as bystanders and listeners who follow the ongoing interaction and who may take part in it" (Schwab 2011, 15). In these studied multilogues there is, according to Schwab, with regard to participation structure and contents, more interactional space for learners to contribute to the interaction for instance by taking learner initiatives (Waring 2011).

A learner initiative is defined by Waring (2011) as any learner attempt to make an uninvited contribution to the ongoing classroom talk. [...] *Uninvited* may refer to 1) not being specifically selected as the next speaker or (2) not providing the expected response when selected (p. 204). As it will be seen below, there is a considerable body of research on learner initiatives. Although most of the studies discussed are set in a context for second language learning and not mother tongue classroom interaction as is the case for the current study, they do provide us with a better understanding of what taking learner initiatives entails.

Taking learner initiatives concerns two separate but related dimensions: turn-taking and sequence. "A self-selected turn manifests initiative, and so does a sequence-initiating turn" (Waring 2011, 214). The most common type of learner initiative is when a learner self-selects to initiate a sequence, but a student can also exploit an assigned turn to begin a sequence (Waring 2011, 204). Learner initiatives can perform different type of actions such as asking for teachers' clarifications (e.g. Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018; Käätä and Kasper 2018; Solem 2016b), making potential corrections (Solem 2016b), challenging something the teacher has said (Dolce and Van Compernelle 2020), requesting confirmation of understanding (Solem 2016b) or asking questions (e.g. Dolce and Van Compernelle 2020; Duran and Sert 2021; Merke 2018).

Learner initiatives also occur in second positions, for instance when a student self-selects to volunteer a response (Waring 2011). Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann (2018) for instance demonstrate that in second pair parts contributions, students provide additional information and get involved in solving communication problems, "showing their involvement and enhancing individual and collective learning opportunities" (p. 130–131). Merke (2018) found that third position turns can create a space for students to initiate and engage in criticism of their teacher. She demonstrates how different formats of third positions are used "to express fine-grained challenges concerning the granularity of knowledge and epistemic responsibilities" (p. 298). Learner initiatives that are made in the second or third position show that students are involved in the ongoing interaction and want to participate in it, which is characteristic of a multilogue (Schwab 2011).

Taking learner initiatives appears to lead to marked changes and readjustments in the I-R-F-sequence (Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018; Waring 2011). This implies that learner initiatives can lead to a renewed participation framework, such as a multilogue (Schwab 2011) in which students respond directly to one another rather than through the teacher (Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018).

In addition to studies on learner initiative types and what taking learner initiatives means for the turn distribution and sequence organization, studies have also been done on how a teacher responds to student-initiated sequences (e.g. Kardas Isler, Balaman, and Sahin 2019; Sert 2017; Solem 2016a). Kardas Isler, Balaman, and

Sahin (2019) demonstrate how a teacher orients to student-initiated sequences and indicate that teachers facilitate and manage learner initiatives by building on learner initiatives that could potentially lead other learners to initiate and contribute to classroom discourse. This is achieved by expanding learner initiatives and shaping learner contributions through reformulation and counter questioning. Sert (2017) illustrates that teachers can create opportunities for language learning by successfully managing learner initiatives and emergent knowledge gaps evidenced through embedded correction, embodied repair, and embodied explanations. Solem (2016a) additionally studied students' assertions in classroom interactions, defined as student-initiated sequences in which the students present new topical information. She demonstrates in her study of students' assertions in classroom interactions that the teachers not once gave a minimal high-grade assessment (like "That's a good point" or "How interesting"; cf. Antaki, Houtkoop-Steenstra, and Rapley 2000). Teachers in all of the studied exchanges elaborate on the topics initiated by the students (Solem 2016a, 751).

Although these results are relevant to this study, they do not show how learner initiatives are taken in teacher-led classroom discussions in the mother tongue, designed with the primary pedagogical goal to make room for subjectification. We therefore consider this current study to be complementary to the existing body of work on learner initiatives.

## 2. Data and method

We used Conversation Analysis (CA) as method of research (e.g. Sidnell and Stivers 2013). CA is a scientific framework in the field of interaction analysis, which enables us to study the details of the actual practices of teachers and students by focusing on their observable attributions and displays (Gardner 2019; Maynard 2013; Ten Have 2007). In this way, we were able to specify what taking learner initiatives during classroom discussions in light of subjectification entails. The data used for this research stems from a project set up by the first author in the Netherlands.

For this project Van Balen supervised eleven pre-service teachers (Farrell 2012) in a teacher training course in Dutch Language and Literature and who focused their didactic design research project (Plomp and Nieveen 2013), a compulsory part of their teacher training course on the domain of subjectification. The leading question for their didactic design research was: "how can I encourage students to express themselves as a subject?"

The pre-service teachers worked as "regular" teachers at eight different secondary schools and taught students aged between 12–16 years, whose mother tongue is Dutch, during an entire school year. Five out of these eleven pre-service teachers previously obtained a teaching qualification for another subject or for primary education and have several years of teaching experience. Because they have teaching experience and are teaching independently in the classroom, we label them all as "teachers". However, as relatively novice teachers they are still developing their classroom interactional competence (Walsh 2013).

The teachers were supported in designing their didactic design through sessions organized by the researchers (1,2,4) in which they defined together with the teachers

the conditions that the didactic design should meet. The pre-set conditions were (1) to use appealing teaching materials such as a poem or video in order to encourage students to speak out as subjects, (2) to ask Information Seeking Questions (Mehan 1979) about topics that students can relate to and identify with, so that the teachers exhibit interest in students' thoughts and opinions (Nystrand 1997), and (3) to make clear to the students beforehand that the intention was for them to express themselves during the classroom discussion. The researchers did not prescribe that teachers should explicitly elicit learner initiatives, nor did they give any instructions on how to deal with learner initiatives.

The developed didactic designs were carried out in classes with an average group size of 25 students and were video-recorded mostly by the teachers themselves, using one or two cameras on tripods in the front and back of the class, or in some cases by a fellow-teacher or researcher. The dataset consists of 46 video-recorded lessons. The total duration of the video-recordings was 29 hours. For this study, a collection of 31 learner initiatives was used from thirteen different whole classroom discussions. There were certainly several more learner initiatives taken than the 31 we studied, but these were not intelligible and therefore have not been added to the collection. In selecting the learner initiatives, we used Waring's (2011) definition: "any learner attempt to make an uninvited contribution to the ongoing classroom talk, where *uninvited* may refer to not being specifically selected as the next speaker" (p. 204). We only considered learner initiatives in which a student self-selects by taking the turn and excluded the initiatives in which a student self-selects in other ways, such as by raising hands (Sahlström 2002), since by taking the turn without bidding for it, a student is observably acting as a subject. The selected fragments were transcribed in accordance with the Jeffersonian conventions (e.g. Jefferson 1986, see Appendix A). In the transcripts, the names of the students and teachers have been anonymized.

### 3. Findings

In the following, we will show how a learner initiative is taken, how the interaction evolves and what this subsequently means for encouraging subjectification. In the analyses, we discuss both turn-taking and sequential structure. The analyses reveal three different types of learner initiatives: (1) agreement, (2) request for information (3), counter-response. An agreement is shown to have no impact on the sequence, whereas a request for information and a counter-response are found to force a breaking away from the I-R-F structure. "Agreement" and "request for information" are considered in excerpt 1 and 2 and the counter-response is discussed in excerpts 3, 4, 5.

#### 3.1. Learner initiative: agreement

In nine exchanges we found a learner initiative in the form of expressing "agreement". In the data studied, "agreement" refers to a short statement indicating that the speaker agrees with the previous speaker and consists of one or more agreement tokens. An agreement usually occurs after the second pair part of a sequence

and has no further impact on the sequence organization. Examples of agreements are: “okay”, “me too”, “yes”, “no” (if the previous statement was formulated in a negative way). An example of agreement is shown below in [excerpt 1](#).

The class is engaged in a discussion based on a poem displayed on the Smartboard. The students had to read the poem silently and then think about it for a few minutes. The teacher conducts the classroom discussion by asking questions. Two other students have already given their opinion before the teacher gives Angelique the turn in line 47.

### Excerpt 1. Agreement.

---

47	teacher	<b>angelique,</b>	
48	Angelique	ik word er een beetje (.) als ik het zo allemaal	
		<b>I get a bit (.) when I ↑see it all like this</b>	
49		zie, dan (.) dan (.) denken mijn ogen dat het eigenlijk	
		<b>then (.) then (.) my eyes think that it is actually</b>	
50		dat er helemaal °niets van klopt°((woord onverstaaanbaar))	
		<b>that it is °not right at all° ((word inaudible))</b>	
51		dan gaat het beetje beetje draaien ((zwaait met haar	
		<b>then it's going to spin a little bit ((waves her</b>	
52		handen))[of zo.	
		<b>hands))[or so.</b>	
53→	Maria	[bij mij]ook.	
		[me [too.	
54	students		<b>[((multiple students react))</b>
55	Angelique	[hersenen kunnen niet bekijken hoe je	
		<b>[brain cannot see how to</b>	
56	Angelique	het kunt lezen zeg maar.	
		<b>read it so to speak.</b>	
57	teacher	ANGELIQUE VERTELT HIER WAT.	
		<b>ANGELIQUE IS SAYING SOMETHING HERE.</b>	

---

Angelique responds to the teacher’s invitation in lines 48–51 and although the original question was an opinion-seeking question, Angelique does not explicitly express her opinion, but describes her experience of reading the poem, which is shown in utterances such as: (“I get”) (line 48), (“my eyes think”) (line 49) (“then it is going to spin [or so]”) (line 51). This turn evokes a learner initiative from Maria who makes an uninvited contribution to the ongoing classroom discussion (Waring 2011, 214) by uttering agreement (“me too”) (line 53). This learner initiative is taken in overlap with Angelique’s turn, which proves to be illustrative of expressing agreement. An agreement usually follows an utterance made in the second position, as can be seen in [excerpt 1](#). Through the agreement both affiliation and alignment are shown (Lee and Tanaka 2016), whereby affiliation refers to the affective or action level of cooperation and alignment refers to the structural level of cooperation (e.g. Stivers 2011). Then Angelique takes the turn (line 55), but since schisming (Egbert 1997) occurs (line 54), which means that interaction between more than three participants breaks down into parallel interactions, not everyone listens anymore (57). An agreement does not provide for sequence expansion, but acts in most of the studied exchanges as continuers (Schegloff 1982), as shown in line 55–56.

When expressing agreement a student acts as an autonomous individual, since the student expresses that they recognize themselves in the preceding utterance. However, in these cases a dialogic participation framework does not emerge. Instead, a learner initiative in the form of agreement seems in most exchanges to trigger the previous speaker to reclaim the turn, which demonstrates that agreement can be stimulating for a student to further express themselves as a subject.

### 3.2. Learner initiative: request for information

In the studied data, five examples of learner initiatives in the form of “Request For Information” (RFI) were found. This learner initiative is designed to obtain information. Characteristic of RFI’s is that they occur in the first position of an adjacency pair (Schegloff 2007). These RFI’s either prompt sequence expansion or can be the start of a new sequence. In [excerpt 2](#) we show an example of each.

In [excerpt 2](#) the students first watched a video-clip of a song. The teacher starts the classroom discussion with the question: “Do you know this song?” After a few students have responded, she asks a second question “What is the song about?” The teacher asks Debby to answer.

#### Excerpt 2. Request for Information.

---

18	Debby	°dat ze haar ouders mist.° °that she misses her parents.°
19	teacher	dat ze haar ouders mist (.) ja:: haar ouders zijn <b>that she misses her parents yes: her parents</b>
21		overleden toen ze net zo oud als jullie ongeveer <b>died when she was about your age,</b>
22		was, (.) allebei, <b>(.)both,</b>
23→	Martijn	allebei? <b>both?</b>
24	teacher	allebei ja. <b>both yes.</b>
25		<b>[((several students respond))</b>
26		<b>(4.0)</b>
27	Frank	[MEVROUW (.) MEVROUW <b>[MADAM (.) MADAM</b>
28		<b>(1.0)</b>
29→	Frank	wat als je beide ouders uh dood zijn en je bent <b>what if both your parents uh are dead and you</b>
30		ongeveer 12 of 13 wat moet je dan eigenlijk waar <b>are about 12 or 13 years old what should you do then</b>
31		moet je dan hee[n, <b>where should you go the[n,</b>
32	Jeroen	[naar je oma of opa. <b>[to your grandmother or</b>
33	Wiebren	<b>grandfather.</b> [nee dan ga je toch nee dan ga je <b>[no then you go no then</b>
34		hebt toch meestal <b>you go you usually have</b>
35		<b>[((several students respond))</b>

---

The first example of an RFI is shown in line 23 in which Martin does a next-turn-repair initiation (Schegloff 2007) in post-expansion in response to the teacher's statement in lines 19–22. The repair initiation is done by means of a polar question (Englert 2010) and the teacher's repair follows in the next turn by repeating "both yes" (line 24). The response by the teacher makes it apparent that an RFI is considered to be an accepted learner initiative. In this instance, the repair initiation follows a turn of the teacher, but in our data a request for repair is also made after turns of students appearing in the second position. In these examples, the RFI also provokes post-expansion and if the repair initiation is aimed at a turn made by a student, in two out of three cases the repair is also done by a student (in the third case, no repair follows). After the repair by the teacher in excerpt 2 (line 24) we see an outbreak of multiple learner initiatives. This outbreak seems to be illustrative of the interactional trajectory that becomes visible after making an RFI. When a repair initiation is addressed to a student, the outbreak appears immediately after the initiation.

In one exchange, the RFI is used to initiate a new sequence (line 27). Frank says "MADAM (.) MADAM" pronounced with a raised voice, probably done to make himself heard as several students are speaking at the same time. The utterance serves as a turn-entry device (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) and although it initially appears as if Frank is bidding for the turn, he does not wait for allocation and makes an RFI after an internal pause (lines 29–32) ("what if both your parents uh are dead and you are about 12 or 13 years old what should you do then where should you go then"). This RFI is asked by means of a content question ("what"). By asking this question, the student starts a new sequence which elicits several students to select themselves and provide the response, as can be seen in line 32, 33 and 35.

With regard to subjectification, these results show that a learner initiative in the form of an RFI briefly overrides the hierarchical structure between teacher and student. This type of learner initiative leads to a more dialogical participation framework (e.g. Gosen, Berenst, and de Gloppe 2009; Nassaji and Wells 2000) in which several students are involved and where students are given more space to act as subjects.

### **3.3. Learner initiative: counter-response**

The results show that of the 31 learner initiatives studied, the "counter-response" occurs most frequently (17 times). A counter-response is a learner initiative which takes an opposing stance towards the prior utterance. The trigger for the counter-response is usually another student's personal statement, made in response to a question from the teacher, appearing in the second position. This means that, similar to the agreement and the RFI, the learner initiative is often taken in response to a completed adjacency pair. A personal statement is defined as the expression of an opinion (Balén 2022) or the sharing of an experience/emotion. In a vast majority of exchanges, a counter-response provokes sequence expansion in

which it is a new student who selects himself as next speaker (excerpt 3). However, we also found some exchanges where the teacher retains the turn after giving a counter-response. In some examples, the learner initiatives are seen as accepted initiatives (excerpt 4) and in a few other exchanges the learner initiatives are corrected (excerpt 5).

In the excerpt below we demonstrate a counter-response which elicits another learner initiative. In excerpt 3 a poem with the topic “celebration” is discussed in class. The teacher asks the class the question: “What would you do if you got a new phone or game for your PC, but a classmate never gets such expensive things?” The students first answer this question in groups and then the teacher starts a general discussion to see how students would react. The discussion has been going on for a while when the teacher gives the turn to Pelle.

### Excerpt 3. Counter-Response.

---

100	Pelle	ik zou gewoon in de pauze ik zou gewoon alleen aan <b>I would just tell my friends during the break I would only</b>
101		je vrienden vertellen anders is het zielig voor <b>tell my friends otherwise it would be sad for</b>
102		dat andere jongentje= <b>that other boy=</b>
103	teacher	=j[a. <b>=ye[s.</b>
104	Pelle	[dan (.) voelt hij zich heel alleen.= <b>[then (.) he feels very alone.=</b>
105	→Pim	=maar hoe weet je nou dat hij <u>geen</u> cadeautjes <b>=but how do you know he <u>didn't</u> get</b>
106		heeft gekregen [en <b>any presents [and</b>
107	teacher	[nou als <b>[well if</b>
108	Jan	[als die als die er dan achter komt dan is <b>[if he if he then finds out it is</b>
109		dat ook weer sneu want dan (.) <b>also sad because then (.)</b>
110	Bolke	dan is het alsof je hem buitensluit. <b>then it is as if you are shutting him out.</b>

---

In line 104, at the end of Pelle’s TCU, a slight falling phrase intonation is audible, indicating that Pelle may want to close his turn. This is when Pim self-selects in response to Pelle’s personal statement (line 105) with the counter-response (“but how do you know he didn’t get any presents [and”) (line 105–106). The use of “but” (line 105) at the beginning of the turn indicates an opposing stance to Pelle’s statement and the following utterance demonstrates that Pim has some difficulty with the assumption that Pelle is making. Our data shows that a counter-response mostly follows a turn of a student made in second position. Evidently, this learner initiative creates room for another student to respond, demonstrated by the turn-competition (line 108) which is shown, as Jan in overlap also selects himself for the next turn (lines 107–108). Jan retains the turn by repeating its beginning (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) and comes up with an assertion (“if he then finds out it is also sad because (.)”) (line 108–109).

There is some delay at the end of the turn, which gives Bolke the opportunity to select himself as the next speaker (line 110) and to finish the turn Jan started (“then it is as if you are shutting him out”). What is noticeable is that although Pim’s first counter-response is not grammatically complete, he no longer self-selects and finishes his turn. It seems that this utterance is already being elaborated on by Jan and Bolke. The students create connections by self-selection and act as subjects.

With regards to encouraging subjectification, these results show that with this type of learner-initiative a contrary tone of voice is given to the previous expression, students are held accountable for what is said and are addressed directly through a counter-response. The results indicate that giving a counter-response elicits new learner initiatives by multiple students in most exchanges studied. The learner initiative in the form of a counter-response breaks through the asymmetric structure that normally prevails in teacher-student interaction (Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018). This is of interest because by breaking through the traditional teacher-student structure students have more opportunity to emerge as subjects and thus it encourages subjectification.

In four sequences, it is the teacher who claims the turn after a learner initiative. Whereas the student in the follow-up responds more “personally” to the counter-response, by expressing his or her opinion, the teacher responds in the follow-up more neutrally by providing a non-minimal “generic” follow-up in which she does not express herself on the issue (Balén 2022). An example is shown below where the teacher responds to a counter-response.

In [excerpt 4](#), students first watched a video-fragment about the sensitivity of using swear words containing “cancer”. The video-clip shows a girl with cancer as well as her classmates who have taken an initiative to stop using the word “cancer” in swear words. Students were first asked to spend two minutes in pairs discussing what they think about the fact that the students in the video want to ban the word “cancer”. Then the teacher conducts a classroom discussion based on this statement. The teacher starts the discussion with an opinion-seeking question (Balén 2022) to Ria and Hendrika. Ria answers that she thinks it is “stupid” and the teacher asks with a follow-up for an explanation. In line 8 starts the response of Ria to this follow-up.

**Excerpt 4.** Follow-up by a Teacher after the Counter-Response.

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8	Ria	nou waar wij het over gehad hebben is dat dat we <b>well what we have talked about is that we</b>
9		het een goed initiatief vinden maar we vinden <b>think it is a good initiative but we think</b>
10		dat <u>dit</u> het begin moet zijn en <u>niet</u> dat je <u>alleen</u> <b>that this should be a start and that you should not</b>
11		het woord kanker in de ban zeg maar moet doen <b>only ban the word cancer so to speak</b>
12		want er zijn ook hee:l vee:l andere woorden en <b>because there are also lots of other words and</b>
13		ziektes en andere aandoeningen <b>diseases and other conditions</b>
14		waar nog steeds elke dag mee gescholden worden. <b>which are still used for name-calling.</b>
15		(1.0)
16	teacher	j[a. <b>ye[s.</b>
17	Ria	[dus we vinden niet dat je <u>alleen</u> kanker (.) <b>[so we don't think you should just ban the word cancer (.]</b>
18		zeg maa[r <b>(.) so to spea[k</b>
19→	Felix	[daar hebben ze het ook niet over. <b>[they do not refer to that.</b>
20→	teacher	Felix, (.) wat [wil jij dan. <b>Felix, (.) what [do you want then.</b>
21	Felix	[gewoon een deel van alles <b>[just a part of everything</b>
22	Kees	[dat is gewoon dom <b>[that is just stupid</b>
23		<b>[((several students respond)</b>
24	teacher	[EEN DEEL van alles.= <b>[A PART of everything.=</b>
25	Felix	=het is wel groter. <b>=it is bigger though.</b>
27	teacher	oké en wat vind je van het initiatief, <b>OK and what do you think of the initiative,</b>

---

In line 19, Felix produces a learner initiative in the form of a counter-response in which he makes clear that the statement of the previous speaker does not correspond to the video that has been shown (“they do not refer to that”). After Ria’s turn, Felix self-selects in second position as the next speaker in overlap with “so to speak” (line 18) which indicates a possible completion point. This example (as well as excerpt 3) indicates that the T-S-T structure of the interaction almost forces the student to take the turn in overlap. The teacher responds (line 20) to the counter-response, and thus restores the T-S-T pattern, with a follow-up question aimed at further clarifying his utterance. Halfway during her follow-up, however, more learner initiatives follow (line 22–23). It appears that a learner initiative can lead to “schisming” (Egbert 1997). Although the learner initiatives seem to be directly related to the previous turn, the teacher considers the learner initiatives to be “dispreferred” and claims the turn (line 24). She does this by pronouncing the first part of her follow-up with more volume, thus overruling the learner initiatives. It appears that the teacher is keeping the floor despite these students’ attempts at post-expansions by providing a non-minimal “generic” follow-up, referring to an utterance that could follow any opinion (Balén 2022). In the generic follow-up, the teacher repeats some or all of Felix’s responses (line 24) and asks an opinion-seeking question (line 27).

The non-minimal follow-ups extend the sequence (Schegloff 2007), however the asymmetric structure between student and teacher (McHoul 1978) is maintained. The teacher assumes a supportive “discoursal” role (Cullen 2002) in which she does not express herself on the issue. By maintaining the I-R-F structure, the room for subjectification is limited. Through the “generic” follow-up by the teacher, students do not receive a substantive response to their turn and are therefore less likely to be stimulated to learn to reflect on what they have said.

Twice the learner initiative in the form of a counter-response is followed by a correction from the teacher, thereby indicating that the counter-response is not permitted, illustrated in example 5. In [excerpt 5](#) the students have a discussion based on the question: “Have you ever experienced anti-social behavior?” The students are each given a turn, in the order in which they are seated.

**Excerpt 5.** Non-accepted counter-response.

- 
- |     |         |   |
|-----|---------|---|
| 1   | teacher | ik begin bij homer.<br><b>I start with homer.</b>   |
| 2   |         | (2.0)   |
| 3   |         | heb jij een keer te maken gehad met asociaal gedrag.<br><b>have you ever had to deal with antisocial behaviour.</b> |
| 4   | Homer   | ja.<br><b>yes.</b>  |
| 5   | teacher | <u>hoe.</u><br><u>how.</u>  |
| 6   |         | (2.0)   |
| 7   | Homer   | heel (h) vaak.<br><b>very (h) often.</b>  |
| 8   | teacher | maar hoe (.) op welke manier,<br><b>but how (.) in which way,</b>   |
| 9→  | Kay     | homer heeft het zelf ook.<br><b>homer also does it.</b>   |
| 10  | Jason   | Homer [jongen wat is jouw manier,<br><b>Homer [boy what's your way,</b>   |
| 11→ | teacher | [SHHH(.) shhh   |
| 12  | Brenda  | [hh   |
| 13  | teacher | kun je een voorbeeld geven,<br><b>can you give an example,</b>  |
| 14  | Sef     | wat had je gedaan,<br><b>what did you do,</b>   |
| 15  | Brenda  | HH  |
| 16  | Homer   | °ga terug naar je eigen land,°<br><b>°go back to your own country,°</b>   |
| 17  | Brenda  | HH  |
| 18  | Sef     | ga terug naar je eigen land,<br><b>go back to your own country,</b>   |
| 19  | Brenda  | hh dat heb jij zelf gezegd,<br><b>hh that' s what you said yourself,</b>  |
| 20  | Max     | ja homer.<br><b>yes homer.</b>  |
| 21  | Sef     | dat heb jij zelf gezegd.<br><b>that's what you said yourself.</b>   |
| 22→ | teacher | <b>MAX en SEF.</b><br><b>MAX and SEF.</b>   |
| 23  | Sef     | dat zei [je<br><b>you said [that</b>  |
| 24→ | teacher | [HOMER GEEFT EEN ANTWOORD JIJ ZOU<br>[HOMER GIVES AN ANSWER YOU SHOULD  |
| 25  |         | ER NAAR LUISTEREN.<br><b>LISTEN TO IT.</b>  |
-

In line 9, Kay takes the turn, originally assigned to Homer, with a counter-response. By means of “it” and “also”, Kay shows that this turn is a response to an earlier produced turn, but whether this is to the teacher’s follow-up question (line 8) or the response given by Homer (line 7) is not entirely clear. By taking this learner initiative, Kay makes it clear that Homer himself is displaying anti-social behaviour (“Homer also does it”) (line 9) with which he offers an opposing stance to the statement in which Homer says that he himself often has to deal with anti-social behaviour. This learner initiative elicits the following turn from Jason (line 10) (“homer boy what’s your way”). Whereas in the first learner initiative the turn is formulated in the third person, Jason’s turn is formulated in the second person. During Jason’s turn, a correction follows from the teacher (line 11) “SHHH (.) shhh”. The teacher shows thereby that this sequence expansion is not accepted. The teacher regains the I-R-F-structure and is providing Homer the opportunity to answer the question she asked in line 8 and which she repeated in other words in line 13. The requested second pair part follows in line 16. This response elicits another small outbreak of learner initiatives (lines 18–21) which is again corrected by the teacher (line 22) as is shown by both what the teacher says and how she says it, in a loud voice (line 24–25): “HOMER GIVES AN ANSWER YOU SHOULD LISTEN TO IT”. The correction is focused on the fact that the student takes the turn without being selected (line 11) (lines 24–25) and is not focused on the content of the turn, which is possibly triggered by the announcement in advance that students will be given their turn in the order in which they are seated. Yet it is plausible to assume that the content of the counter-response does play a role in making corrections as it appears in an ethnographic study by Yoshida (2007), which found that pupils’ self-expressive speech, talking outside the I-R-F-structure, is only positively evaluated by the teacher when it promotes his agenda. It is negatively evaluated when, for instance, it involves jokes or when the pupil is arguing with the teacher. In excerpt 5, it is shown that there is both laughter about a response (line 12) and a kind of dispute between Sef and the teacher (lines 22–25).

With regard to subjectification, this type of counter-response is interesting as students experience resistance: Homer is held accountable by a fellow student for *what* he says (line 9), and Max and Sef are held accountable by the teacher for the fact *that* they are saying something (line 22–24). Although the resistance in both instances differs, it can be seen that the students addressed by the counter-response in both cases are not given the opportunity to respond. The teacher repeats her earlier question in line 13 and interrupts Sef in line 24, which is emphasized by the statement of the teacher in lines 24–25 that when one student answers, the others should listen. In doing so, the teacher shows that anything can be said in this classroom discussion, but that students are not meant to react [when it is someone else’s turn], which, in view of working on subjectification, may be a missed opportunity. This is namely because the resistance shown by giving counter-responses in both situations offer a reason to do the “reality check” (Biesta 2018a, 2020) and would therefore open up opportunities for working on subjectification.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

This study reveals how learner initiatives unfold in mother tongue classroom discussions, aimed at making room for subjectification. The data studied shows that learner initiatives are prompted in most exchanges by an utterance of a peer student in second position,

and provokes more learner initiatives in the following interaction, despite attempts by the teacher to restore the I-R-F structure (excerpt 3,4,5). This is contrary to learner initiatives which are taken in a context of second language learning, which are mostly prompted by a turn of a teacher and are primarily addressed to the teacher (e.g. Dolce and Van Compernelle 2020; Duran and Sert 2021; Merke 2018; Sert 2017; Solem 2016a, 2016b). In our collection of classroom discussions, learner initiatives perform three different actions: *agreement*, *request for information*, *counter-response*. The results show that the last two prompt a multilogue (Schwab 2011). Students in our data set appear to be voicing their *agreement* by taking learner initiatives.

An agreement, similar to the RFI and counter-response, is often done in response to a completed adjacency pair. Expressing agreement is a responsive action which demonstrates both alignment and affiliation (Stivers 2011). Affiliative responses are “maximally pro-social when they match the prior speaker’s evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action” (Stivers 2011, 21). By expressing agreement, students show that they recognize themselves in what has been said by another person. Although we see in the majority of studied exchanges that an agreement prompts schisming (Egbert 1997), an agreement does not lead to sequence-expansion in which students further address each other during the whole classroom discussion. This is contrary to initiating actions by making an RFI and giving a *counter-response*.

Whereas in previous research it is the teacher who responds to a question (e.g. Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018; Duran and Sert 2021), in our data students also respond to RFI’s posed by students through learner initiatives. By making an RFI, students demonstrate their engagement in the topic and willingness to participate and invite their peers to do the same. An RFI elicits sequence-expansion, allows students to question each other on previous statements or initiates a new sequence, and thus introduces a new topic and makes room for a more dialogical participation framework (eg., Gosen, Berenst, and de Gloppe 2009; Nassaji and Wells 2000) in which several students can emerge as subjects. It is notable, however, that students in the studied data make relatively few RFIs compared to giving counter-responses.

By giving a counter-response the student from the previous turn is directly addressed. In a way the student provides additional information (Batlle Rodriguez and Murillo Wilstermann 2018) by giving a counter-response, but also appears to introduce a new perspective on the discussed topic which leads to post-expansion. It turns out that by taking a learner initiative in the form of a counter-response, the student not only takes the freedom of expressing himself as a subject, but also encourages the other to do so. This is demonstrated by the result that the counter-response is followed up three times more often by a student than by a teacher. It is evident that the counter-response makes room for a more mundane interaction organization. However, when a teacher responds to the counter-response (excerpt 4) the teacher gives a generic non-minimal follow up (Balén 2022) and the I-R-F-structure remains. With this generic follow-up the teacher facilitates and manages the learner initiatives (Kardas Isler, Balaman, and Sahin 2019) and provides the student with the opportunity to further explain their statement and elaborate on the topic initiated (Solem 2016a). However, the current study also demonstrates that there is no substantive response by the teacher to what exactly is being said, whereas subjectification is about ensuring that what students express can “meet the world” so that

a reality check becomes possible (Biesta 2020). Therefore, if a teacher wants to make room for subjectification during classroom interaction, a teacher would do better not to react to a counter-response but instead give students room to react to each other, so that students can discover what they and others have to say. The teacher then could use this opportunity to encourage students to reflect on what is said. Moreover, in the exchanges (excerpt 5) where the teacher corrects the counter-responses, it appears that the correction is focused on the fact that the student is taking the turn without being allocated, which makes us question whether conducting classroom discussion by means of a pre-arranged turn allocation is a suitable way to encourage students to express themselves as subjects.

The outcome that the learner initiatives in this dataset are, with a few exceptions, accepted by the teachers, may be related to the fact that the teachers in this study aimed to make room for subjectification and therefore respond more willingly to learner initiatives compared to what may be the case in a regular classroom discussion. On the other hand, we assume that being receptive to learner initiatives during classroom discussions is not unusual for teachers, as demonstrated in previous studies on learner initiatives (e.g. Kardas Isler, Balaman, and Sahin 2019; Sert 2017; Solem 2016a). Although the teachers were not instructed beforehand to stimulate learner initiatives, they were encouraged to think about subjectification and classroom interaction. This will have influenced how classroom discussions were conducted and the extent to which learner initiatives were allowed. This leads us to conclude that within schools and teacher training colleges it might be of value if (pre-service) teachers are encouraged to discuss with each other what role the choices within their class interaction might play in creating room for subjectification. In addition, it is important to mention that the lessons we analysed were taught by pre-service teachers (Farrell 2012). It is difficult to say exactly what the impact of this has been on the studied discussions. However, since five of the eleven pre-service teachers have been working in education for a number of years, having previously obtained another teaching qualification, it leads us to assume that the interaction we observed is illustrative of the conduct of (more) experienced teachers. We know from previous research that by gaining close understanding of interactional processes, all teachers can learn to make better “online” decisions (decisions made while teaching) and in this way promote more active and engaged classrooms (Walsh 2013). We consider this study therefore relevant for both pre-service teachers and more experienced teachers.

Finally, this study shows that taking learner initiatives involves a form of disruption, in the sense that several students react at the same time. This is illustrated by the fact that in the studied sequences the teachers asks for silence and/or attention several times after a learner initiative is taken. Evidently, taking a learner initiative not only leads to a student-student participation framework, but it also can lead to schisming (Egbert 1997). Apparently, unlike taking a learner initiative, schisming is something that teachers perceive as unacceptable when conducting a classroom discussion. In the studied excerpts the teacher takes the turn and restores the I-R-F-structure when schisming occurs. This is understandable from the perspective of wanting to maintain control of the classroom conversation and classroom management. However, it may be a missed opportunity when attempting to encourage subjectification in the classroom, as it is precisely the possibility of unexpected initiatives and the experience of resistance that are important for the emergence of subjectification (Biesta 2015, 2018a, 2018b). This makes us wonder whether classroom discussions should be

continuously held centralized if a teacher also wants to make room for subjectification, since this study shows that learner initiatives in the form of an agreement, RFI or counter-response do not cause learners to drift away from the discussion, but rather trigger students to feel addressed and to express themselves as subjects as a consequence.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the 11 student-teachers and their students who provided the data for this study. We thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their useful feedback and guidance in the revision process of this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## Appendix A

Transcription conventions (based on Jefferson 1986)

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[word	overlapping talk
[word	
word=	'latching': no gap between two turns
=word	
(1.0)	pause of one second
(.)	micro pause, shorter than 0.2 seconds
?	sharp rising phrase intonation, not necessarily a question
.	slight rising phrase intonation, suggesting continuation
.	falling phrase intonation
—	flat intonation
↑ ↓	marked rising or falling shift in syllable intonation
WORD	louder than surrounding talk
□word□	softer than surrounding talk
word	stressed syllable
wo:rd	lengthening of the preceding sound
>phrase<	faster than surrounding talk
<phrase>	slower than surrounding talk
hh	audible aspiration
.hh	audible inhalation
((points))	verbal description of (non-verbal) actions

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