

Students' Assertions and Interrogatives in IELTS Preparation Courses in Iran



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ABSTRACT

A descriptive hypothesis-testing design was employed to research students' initiations. Candidates' assertions and interrogatives were studied as two types of initiations. IELTS preparation courses were selected as the context because, unlike other EFL courses in which the main aim is to develop learners' English skills, in IELTS preparation courses the main focus is on developing students' epistemic knowledge. Eight sessions were observed to check the instances in which students initiated. A researcher-made observational checklist was utilized to count the frequencies of each candidate's assertions and interrogatives. Pearson Chi-Square analysis and Spearman rho test were used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that the number of learners' assertions was significantly higher than their interrogatives. Moreover, the correlation value between the number of assertions and interrogatives is positive and moderate, which means that when one of them increases, the other one will also increase. The findings indicate that the talk pattern of IELTS preparation courses may be different because learners who are sitting in an IELTS course might come from various academic and professional backgrounds. When classroom discussion is on a specific topic, those who have expert knowledge in that area are more likely to initiate and assert their knowledge claims.

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1. Introduction

Uncovering patterns of talk and investigating language in use can widen our horizons in second language acquisition. After analyzing classroom discourse, one can make better decisions to enhance the learning process. In language classrooms, studying speech patterns is of higher value because of the dual role of language (Seedhouse, 2010). Seedhouse mentioned that, in these classrooms, language is both the end and the means of communication. Moreover, the complexity of talk patterns increases in L2 classrooms as the students are familiar with at least two languages and are capable of code-switching.

Previous studies in this field have tried to depict different patterns of classroom talk (Estaji & Mirzaei Shojakhanlou, 2022; Cazden, 2001; Muhonen et al. 2020; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). However, they have not considered the fact that students are agents in the learning process. Therefore, their main focus, at least regarding the initiations, was on teachers (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Later research in classroom discourse scrutinized students' initiations, showing how students self-select, ask teacher's advice (Park, 2012), ask questions (Solem, 2016), question instructors' clarifications and views (Rodriguez & Wilstermann, 2018), develop ongoing topics of discussion (Dolce & Van Compernelle, 2020), and negotiate activity shifts and oppose

teachers' arguments (Jacknick, 2011a, 2011b).

In this study, student-initiated sequences are divided into two subcategories, assertions and interrogatives. Assertions are instances in which students insert their uninited knowledge claims in the classroom and interrogatives are cases in which students raise a question. Analyzing students' interrogatives and assertions is of high value because they indicate learners' agency, and according to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), one's agency can influence their learning. Furthermore, learners can investigate and express their understanding through their initiated sequence (Solem, 2016). Moreover, Merke (2018) describes student-initiated questions as a kind of learning tool that is attached to learners' emotions. Although the questions students raise in class have been researched after the first classroom discourse studies, they are relatively few (Duran & Sert, 2021). Despite all the research done in this area, the number of studies considering student-initiated sequences in the L2 context is not enough. Thus, this study examined instances in which students either assert their knowledge claim or ask questions.

This study was conducted based on a descriptive hypothesis testing design to fulfill different objectives. Learners' initiations were checked based on the number of times they asserted an uninited knowledge claim or proposed a question in class. After that, the researchers tried to see if there was a significant difference between them in student-initiated

sequences. Another important objective of this study was to see the relationship between the number of assertions and interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences.

Generally, the present study is significant because the previous studies in this area are highly few in numbers. Moreover, no research has yet studied the relationship between the number of assertions and interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences. Thus, further investigations were needed to expand our knowledge about the instances in which students initiate. The findings of this research can inform both English teachers and policymakers about classrooms' talk patterns, and as a result, better decisions can be made to enhance the process of learning.

2. Literature Review

The study of classroom discourse has been a significant area of research, with scholars analyzing the dynamics of interaction, language use, and pedagogical practices (Schiffrin et al., 2001; Solem, 2016). The study of interaction in classroom discourse has been an important area of research, with scholars analyzing teachers' initiations and the perceived passivity of students as recipients (Cazden, 2001; MacNeilley et al., 1998; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). As Jacknick (2011b) pointed out scholars studying classroom discourse have observed that teachers typically have significant control over turn-taking processes (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair &

Coulthard, 1975). This dynamic often results in limited opportunities for student participation, particularly during teacher-fronted or whole-group activities, where the teacher's authority to initiate and regulate speaking turns can restrict students' ability to engage in discussions (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) proposed a model for spoken discourse in language classrooms. They believed that classroom talk patterns are generally different from everyday discourse because educational speech is formally structured and governed by one prevailing party, the teacher. They generated this model from classroom talk in secondary school. The pattern they developed is called IRF, which stands for Initiation-Response-Feedback. This model was the very first pattern that was introduced to study classroom discourse.

Moreover, the question/answer/evaluation sequence, which takes place between a more knowledgeable questioner and a (possibly) less knowledgeable respondent (Heritage & Clayman, 2010), has neglected the students' agentive roles. In another study, Muhonen et al. (2020) focused on childhood education and studied types of educational classroom talk. They found that initiation-response-feedback (IRF) is the most used talk pattern even in classes as early as the primary school level. However, Solem (2015) utilized an alternative approach and analyzed student-initiated, question-answer sequences as the departing point.

Allwright (1980) notes, “learners are not wholly under the control of the teacher...they have some freedom concerning the nature and extent of their participation in class” (p. 166). Empirically many studies (Aberg, 2016, Amri & Sert, 2022; Copur & Brandt, 2023; Duran & Sert, 2021; Ingram, 2020; Jacknick, 2011a, 2011b; Shepherd, 2012; Solem, 2015; Solem, 2016; Tai, 2023; and Waring, 2011) have also tried to show that the organization of classroom discourse isn't limited to teachers' initiation. All the aforementioned studies were carried out in either first or second-language classes to show that students can also introduce a pedagogical focus.

The studies by Solem (2016) examined the dynamics of knowledge display and negotiation in classroom discourse. The first research study concentrated on the use of interrogatives as a means of displaying knowledge, while the second study centered on students' assertions and the negotiation of knowledge claims in classroom interactions. Both studies are highly relevant to the literature review of the present thesis as they provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which knowledge is communicated and negotiated in educational settings.

Solem's (2015) study sheds light on the significance of interrogatives in displaying knowledge within classroom discourse. The study emphasized the role of interrogatives as a tool for students to showcase their understanding and engage in knowledge demonstration. This was

crucial in understanding how students actively participate in knowledge construction through the use of inquiries.

Building on this, Solem (2016) investigated the negotiation of knowledge claims, particularly focusing on students' assertions during classroom interactions. The study provided a comprehensive analysis of how students assert their understanding and negotiate knowledge within the classroom environment. It offered valuable intuitions into the interactive nature of knowledge construction, highlighting the dynamic process through which students engage with and challenge each other's knowledge claims.

Duran and Sert (2021) conducted a rigorous investigation into the dynamics of student-initiated multi-unit questions (MUQs) within the context of whole-class interaction, employing a Conversation Analysis (CA) framework. This methodological approach is well-suited for examining the sequential organization of talk and the situated production of social actions within interactional contexts. The researchers meticulously analyzed 30 hours of videotaped classroom interactions, transcribing and scrutinizing the discourse to unveil the intricate ways in which MUQs were utilized by students. Their findings revealed that students employed MUQs as a way to introduce new topics, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of discourse management and topic transition. More importantly, the study illuminated that students employed

various strategies when using MUQs to introduce topics, including the use of cohesive ties and explicit references to preceding issues, as well as instances where topics were introduced without such linguistic devices. This nuanced understanding of how students wield MUQs to initiate topics sheds light on the complex interplay between language, interaction, and learning within educational settings.

Initiations and classroom discourse have not been neglected in the Iranian context (Babaii et al., 2017; Barjesteh et al., 2012; Chalak, 2021; Emrani & Hooshmand, 2019; Esmaeilbavili et al., 2023; Mozaffari & Yaqubi, 2015; Rashidi & Rafieerad, 2010).

In another study by Chalak (2021), the researcher tried to investigate how power relations manifest in classroom discourse and how these dynamics affect teacher-student interactions. Employing a qualitative research design and utilizing classroom observations and discourse analysis to gather data, this study explored the ways in which power is exercised by teachers during classroom interactions and identified the interactional features that characterize these exchanges. The findings of this research revealed that power dynamics in the classroom are often echoed in the teachers' control over the discourse. The teachers frequently dominate the conversation, utilizing strategies such as direct questioning and authoritative feedback to uphold control. This dominance is further reinforced by the

cultural context, where traditional views of teacher authority are prevalent. Moreover, this research study suggests that a more balanced approach to classroom interaction, where students are encouraged to participate and express their ideas, could enhance the learning experience.

In another study by Mozaffari and Yaqubi (2015), learner initiatives across question-answer sequences were analyzed. In this qualitative research study, the authors employed the CA approach not only to uncover students' initiations but also to analyze how language teachers' interactive practices, initiation, and feedback moves, accelerate learners' initiations. However, Mozaffari and Yaqubi examined learner initiatives in response to teachers' first moves and referential questions, and they did not consider students' genuine epistemic claims. Having said that, it is likely that almost anyone will respond to a direct question, but many will not continue or initiate an interaction (Barjesteh et al., 2012). Barjesteh et al. utilized a questionnaire to uncover in which instances learners are more eager to initiate. They found out that Iranian EFL learners are willing to start talking in situations they have experienced before, such as group discussions or communication with their friends.

Pourdana and Mohammadi Zenouzagh (2021) in an article titled *Feedback Types, Negotiation of Meaning, and Negotiation of Form in Multimodal and Text-based Computer-Mediated English Collaborative Writing*; showed that in the context of

multimedia and text-based interactions, learners' engagement with different types of feedback during collaborative writing is significantly different.

Rashidi and Parviz (2021) in an article titled *Participation in the EFL Classrooms: Relationships between the Functions of Teacher's Embodied Actions and Learners' Embodied Reactions*; examined the role of discourse and nonverbal behaviors in a general language class at Shiraz University and showed that the teacher's body movements and imitative behaviors help to objectify English for students.

Pourhaji (2017) in an article titled *Sustaining Meaning-Oriented Contexts in EFL Classroom Discourse: An Experimental Study*; It was shown that the semantic context development framework had a significant effect on the duration of this type of context in English foreign language classroom discourse.

The present study aimed to uncover assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences. This research examined instances in which students either assert their epistemic claims or ask questions. To this end, this investigation raised the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences?

2. Is there any significant relationship between the number of assertions and the interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences?

Based on these research questions, these null hypotheses can be formulated respectively:

1. There is no significant difference between the frequency of the candidates' assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences.

2. There is no significant relationship between the number of assertions and that of

interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences.

3. Methodology

This section deals with the methodology of the study. Firstly, the design and the setting of this study are presented. Next, the participants and sampling procedure are thoroughly pointed out. Then, the instrument used to collect the data is introduced, and the data collection procedure is explained. Finally, this section ends with a brief review of the data analysis procedure.

3.1. Design and Setting

This area of research is significant, with scholars examining interaction dynamics, language use, and teaching practices (Schiffrin et al., 2001; Solem, 2016). In this research study, the goal was to uncover the students' participation in the classroom. The descriptive hypothesis-testing design suited the objectives of the present research study because this design is within the quantitative paradigm and involves using quantitative methods to test hypotheses or theories and measure variables. This design typically follows a deductive approach to confirm or refute hypotheses generated

through inductive qualitative methods (Anwar, 2015).

The main focus of this study was to identify students' initiations regarding their knowledge claim, so IELTS preparation courses were elected as the context of this study to fulfill all the objectives and goals. IELTS preparation courses were selected as the context of the present research study due to the fact that, unlike other EFL courses in which the main aim is to develop learners' English skills, in IELTS preparation courses the main focus is on developing students' epistemic knowledge. Thus, the research was set in the context of IELTS preparation courses conducted in Isfahan, with data collection taking place at Gama Institute in Isfahan, Iran, in 2024.

3.2. Participants

Participants play a significant role in every research investigation, and it is highly necessary and influential to select them wisely and properly because according to Devposts (2021), the quality of a research study favorably relies on the participants chosen for that study. Devposts added that the first step in selecting the appropriate participants for a study is to pay attention to the research questions of that study. Therefore, by keeping the research questions of the present study in mind, the population and target population were defined and later the participants were selected.

The population for this research study was Iranian English learners who enrolled in an IELTS course. However, the target population narrowed down to students in

Isfahan. After defining the population and target population of this study, it is almost impossible to research every member of our population. Therefore, what one needs is an appropriate sampling procedure.

Due to the fact that not every institute or teacher was willing to participate in this research study, a convenience sampling technique was applied to select the participants of the study. Based on convenience sampling, various institutes, and freelancers in Isfahan were asked to cooperate in this study. Due to the delicate nature of teaching IELTS both educationally and academically, and teachers and institutes wish not to be observed, only one institute, Gama, agreed to participate. Two different sessions of four tutors were observed and audio recorded. Adding up the number of IELTS candidates in these classes, 40 students participated in this study. The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 3. 1 below. Out of the 40 participants, 19 of them were men, and 21 of them were women. Figure 1 shows the gender distribution. Figure 2 shows the language level of the participants.

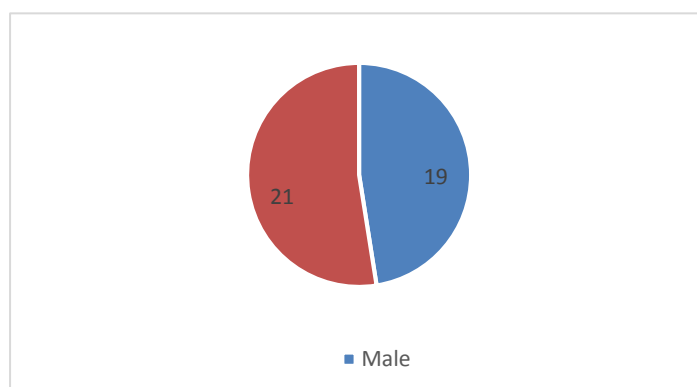


Figure 1, Gender Distribution

The participants' English proficiency was assessed by their educational institution before their registration in the IELTS course. Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to measure the participants' L2 proficiency.

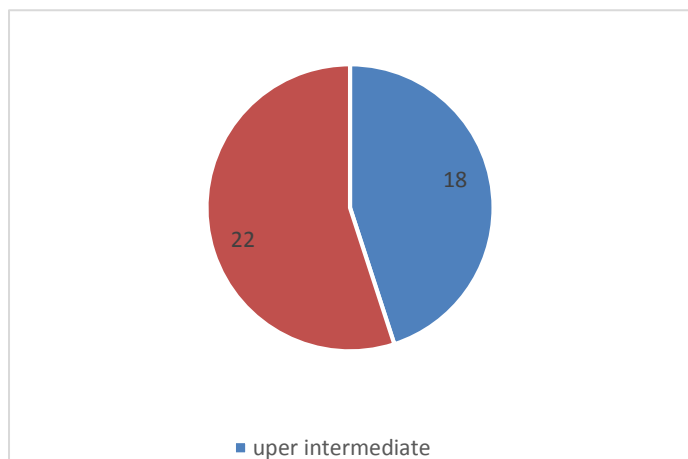


Figure 2, Language Level of Participants

Table 1 Demographic Information of the Participants

Number of Participants	40
Age	18- 45
Socio-economic Status	Various
Gender	19 Male & 21 Female
Level of Proficiency	22 Intermediate & 18 Upper Intermediate
Nationality	Iranian

3.3. Instruments

The researcher aimed to address the first and second research inquiries concerning the difference in the assertions and interrogatives within student-initiated sequences and the relation between these two sequences. An observation tool was employed to gather relevant data and

facilitate the examination of whether there existed a significant variance in the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in these sequences.

A researcher-made observational checklist was employed that allowed the observer to tally the instances in which learners either made a knowledge claim or posed a question. This checklist featured a column on the left for the participants' names, accompanied by two additional columns for each participant. One of them was designated for their assertions of knowledge claims and the other for their interrogative statements. With this observational framework, the observer marked a check next to each participant's name in either the assertion or interrogative column as appropriate. The participants' ethical issues were observed and they were informed that their names will not be used in the research.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Based on convenience sampling, various institutes, and freelancers in Isfahan were asked to cooperate in this study. Due to the fact that teaching IELTS is a delicate matter both educationally and academically and teachers and institutes wish not to be observed, only one institute, Gama, agreed to participate.

All in all, eight sessions were observed and audio recorded. While observing these classes the researcher used an observational checklist to count the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated interactions. This checklist featured a column on the left for the

participants' names, attended by two extra columns for each participant: one designated for their assertions of knowledge claims and the other for their interrogative statements. With this observational framework, the observer marked a check next to each participant's name in either the assertion or interrogative column as appropriate.

After employing this method and gathering the relevant data, it was possible to answer the two research questions and check the two research hypotheses. The first research hypothesis said there was no significant difference between the frequency of the candidates' assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences. The second research hypothesis, however, was a null hypothesis that said there was not a meaningful correlation between the frequency of the candidates' assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

For analyzing the checklist, the frequency of assertions and the frequency of questions made by each student were quantified and documented individually for

each participant. A Chi-Square analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the frequency of assertions and questions posed by the candidates. For the second research question, the researchers aimed to explore the relationship between the candidates' assertions and questions within student-initiated interactions. A correlational analysis was performed to analyze the connection between these two forms of communication. After analyzing the data and answering the two research questions, the researchers were able to reject or confirm the two research hypotheses.

4. Findings

After the observation, the number of assertions and interrogatives for each candidate were quantified to be used in later analysis. The first aim of this research was to check if the difference between the number of assertions and interrogatives was significant. Pearson Chi-Square analysis was conducted to fulfill the first goal of this study. Table 2 portrays the results of this analysis.

Table 2 Pearson Chi-Square Results

	Value	df	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		
			Significance	99% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	188.561 ^a	126	.010 ^b	.007	.013
Likelihood Ratio	87.191	126	.003 ^b	.001	.004
N of Valid Cases	40				

Note. a. 149 cells (99.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03

b. Based on 10000 sampled tables with starting seed 92208573

The frequency of each student's assertion and interrogatives was examined through Pearson Chi-Square analysis. According to Table 2, since the significance level of the Pearson chi-square test is 0.010 and this value is less than 0.05, the difference between these two variables is significant with 95% confidence. Equally, since the significance level of the likelihood-ratio chi-square test (0.003) is less than 0.05, the difference between the two variables is significant with 95% confidence. The result of this analysis indicates that the difference between these assertions and interrogatives was significant with 95% confidence. In other words, the frequency of students' assertions was considerably higher than their interrogatives. The figure 3, portrays the linier regression between the number of assertions and interrogatives.

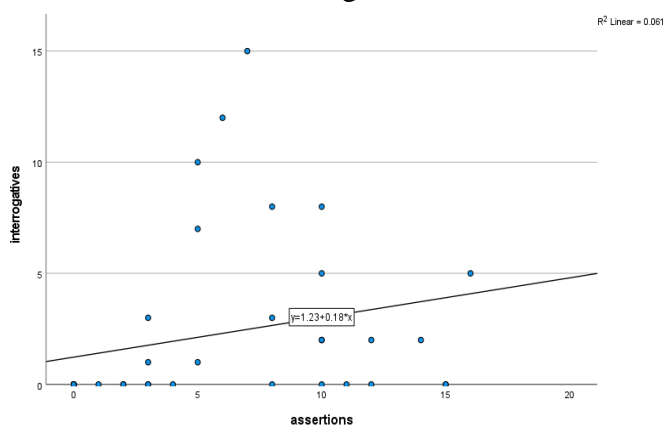


Figure 3, Scatter Plot of Interrogatives by Assertions

Based on this research question a null hypothesis was formulated which indicated that there is not a significant difference between the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences. Because the significance level of the likelihood-ratio chi-square test was less than 0.05, the difference between the two variables was significant with 95% confidence. In other words, the first research hypothesis was rejected with 95% confidence. It was highly interesting to find that the frequency of students' assertions was considerably higher than their interrogatives. This means that in IELTS preparation courses candidates' tendency to assert their knowledge claims was relatively higher than their tendency to raise a question.

Another goal of this research was to find the relationship between the number of assertions and interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences. A correlational analysis was needed to check this relationship. Since the data for these two factors, assertions, and interrogatives, was not normally distributed, the Spearman rho test was utilized to examine their relationship. Table 3 displays the result of the Spearman rho test.

Table 3 The Result of Spearman Rho Test

	Value	Approximate Significance	Monte Carlo Significance 99% Confidence Interval		
			Significance	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Spearman Correlation	.448	.004	.005	.003	.007
N of Valid Cases					
40					

According to the above table, since the significance level of the Spearman rho test (0.005) is less than 0.05, the correlation between the two variables is significant with 95% confidence. In addition, the correlation between the two variables is equal to 0.448. The correlation value is positive and moderate, which means that when one variable increases, the other also increases and as one variable decreases, the other also decreases. Based on the second research question, a null hypothesis was formulated which indicated that there is not any significant relationship between the number of assertions and that of interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences. Owing to the fact that the significance level of the Spearman rho test (.005) is less than 0.05 and the correlation between two variables is significant with 95% confidence, the second null hypothesis is rejected as well with 95% confidence.

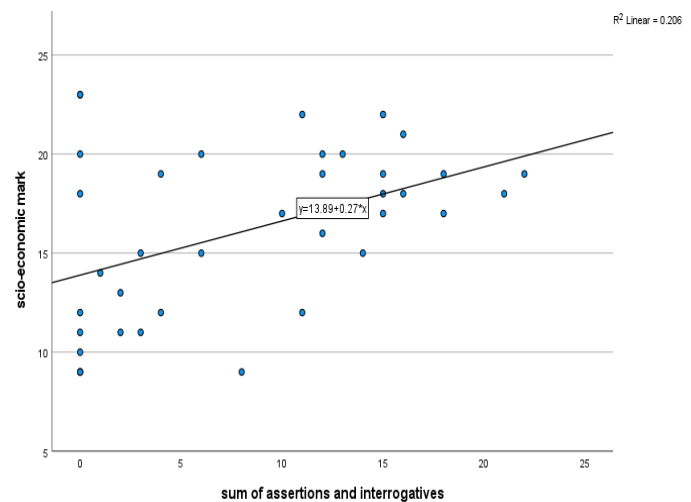


Figure 4, Scatter Plot of Socioeconomic Mark by Sum of Assertions and Interrogatives

Additionally, Figure 4 illustrates the linear regression analysis conducted between these two factors, providing a visual representation of the relationship. This graphical depiction further emphasizes the positive correlation identified in the statistical analysis, reinforcing the conclusion that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in influencing student engagement through initiated sequences.

5. Discussion

The data gathered through the observational checklist was analyzed rigorously. Pearson Chi-Square analysis and Spearman rho test were utilized to

answer the two research questions. In the first research question, the aim was to check if there is a significant difference between the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences. The data indicated that the frequency of students' assertions was considerably higher than their interrogatives. Based on this research question a null hypothesis was formulated which indicated that there is not a significant difference between the frequency of assertions and interrogatives in student-initiated sequences. The difference between the two variables was significant and the first research hypothesis was rejected. It was highly interesting to find that the frequency of students' assertions was considerably higher than their interrogatives. This means that in IELTS preparation courses candidates' tendency to assert their knowledge claims was relatively higher than their tendency to raise a question. The second goal of this research was to examine any significant relationship between the number of assertions and that of interrogatives each candidate produces in student-initiated sequences. Spearman rho test was employed to check the relationship between these two types of initiations. The correlation value between them was positive and moderate, which means that when one variable increases, the other also increases and as one variable decreases, the other also decreases. In other words, when the number of assertions rises the number

of interrogatives might increase as well and vice versa.

Comparing the findings of this research to the previous studies done in this area may not be an easy job to do. The nature of studies that are usually done in the area of discourse analysis and more importantly classroom discourse analysis is mainly qualitative. The present study, however, took an innovative step, and based on its objectives, a quantitative design was selected. It can be somehow tricky to compare the findings of a quantitative research to a qualitative one.

The findings of this research are in line with many studies (Aberg, 2016, Amri & Sert, 2022; Copur & Brandt, 2023; Ingram, 2020; Jacknick, 2011a, 2011b; Shepherd, 2012; Tai, 2023; and Waring, 2011), like the mentioned studies the present research tried to show that the organization of classroom discourse is not limited to teachers' initiation.

The findings of the present research are also in line with two other studies by Solem (2015) and Solem (2016). Like these two studies, the present study also found that students use assertions and interrogatives as a way of displaying their knowledge claims.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study are not totally in line with Duran and Sert (2021). Their findings revealed that students employed multi-unit questions as a way to introduce new topics, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of discourse management and topic transition. However, as the answer to the first research question

of this study showed, the difference between candidates' assertions and interrogatives was significant. The participants were more eager to assert their knowledge claims as a way to introduce new topics rather than ask questions.

The difference between the findings of this study and that of Duran and Sert (2021) may lie in the effect of experience. Barjesteh et al. (2012) utilized a questionnaire to uncover in which instances learners are more eager to initiate. They found out that Iranian EFL learners are willing to start talking in situations in which they have experience. It is highly important to notice that the context of this study was IELTS preparation courses. Candidates who are sitting in an IELTS course may come from different academic and professional backgrounds. When classroom discussion is on a specific topic, those who have expert knowledge in that area are more likely to initiate and assert their knowledge claims.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the circumstances in which learners initiate. Two forms of initiations, assertions, and interrogatives, were studied. The frequency of each student's assertions and interrogatives was counted and the gathered data was analyzed through rigorous analytical procedures. Examining the relationship between assertions and interrogatives can uncover patterns in which students take part in discourse and ultimately reveal the dynamics of classroom discourse.

The findings of this study revealed that the difference between the number of students' assertions and interrogatives was significant. In other words, the frequency of students' assertions was much higher than their interrogatives. The reason for that may be due to the context of this study, IELTS preparation courses. The candidates in these courses are experts in some areas of knowledge, and mainly the students who are taking IELTS courses seek to immigrate to English speaking countries. Therefore, they might try to assert knowledge claims and shift the classroom discourse. Of course, this needs to be further investigated in later research.

The results of this study also indicated that there might be a relationship between the number of learners' assertions and their interrogatives. It was shown that when one of these factors increases the other one will increase as well. Generally, studying the relationship between the abovementioned factors can uncover patterns in which students participate in discourse and ultimately reveal the dynamics of classroom discourse.

The findings of this study can be beneficial for IELTS instructors as well as IELTS candidates. These results suggest that candidates' potential expertise can be used in the classroom debates to facilitate the process of learning. The findings of this study can also advise teachers on how to approach candidates' initiations. Instead of suppressing candidates' initiations, instructors can encourage the students for planned classroom presentations.

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