Classroom observation studies suggest that the teacher-calculus is complex and sensitive to learner behaviors. In language education, this becomes particularly important due to strong emphasis on productive interpersonal interaction. This study set out to understand what constitutes positive learning behaviors in an EFL context. The construct of learner reciprocity (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, & Rand, 2002; Lidz, 1991; Poehner, 2008; van der Aalsvoort & Lidz, 2002) was employed in analyzing classroom, interview, focus group, and research journal data amassed over a 2.5-month period. Two focal students, one more reciprocal case and one less reciprocal case, provided contrasting data sets that exemplify the presence and absence of learner reciprocity. Contrasting illustrations of learner reciprocity in action as a component of understanding language teaching and learning are presented and discussed.

doi: 10.1002/tesq.205

In recent times the study of classroom language teaching and learning has come to acknowledge and consequently to accommodate the social dimensions of the enterprise, particularly how learning is manifest through interactions with others. What happens instructionally, conversationally, and relationally between and among teachers and students is seen as wholly interdependent, with relationships factoring a great deal into the successes of education (Cazden, 2001; Goldenberg, 2013; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Meskill, 2010). This view also sees classroom discourse as contextually situated with meanings and concomitant actions jointly constituted in the interest of furthering language use and its consequent development (Lantolf, 2000; Mercer,
2010; Ortega, 2011; van Lier, 2004). Finally, the roles and actions of teachers and students are seen as entailing the roles and actions of one another in relationship and within social ecologies. Whether and how learners are responsive within such ecologies is the focus of this inquiry. We examined this interactive reciprocity, a facet of all human communication, and its interactional dynamic as it was observable in two learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) as they interacted and learned in an intensive intermediate learner-focused classroom in Turkey.

Perspective

Language education has been increasingly interested in the contexts of language development beyond mere settings for instruction. Such environments are complex, dynamic, and dependent on the continuous generation of participatory actions. Language development has been clearly linked to particular structures and sequences of interaction between and among learners and teachers (Mackey, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Interactions within these environments shape and are shaped by teacher strategies in consort with learners’ responsiveness and their consequent language development.

Because interactions set up complex interrelationships and mutual dependencies among participants, instructional activities can thereby be considered in ecological terms (Duff & van Lier, 1997; van Lier, 2000), with the importance of interrelationships between teachers and students foregrounded. For this study, manifestations of these interrelationships in the form of learners’ actions of reciprocity and how these serve to further language learning in a given EFL environment comprise the central ecological element.

Learner Reciprocity

Learner reciprocity does not have a widely accepted common definition in the English language teaching field. In basic terms, reciprocity means being ready to respond to a teacher’s mediational bids during interactions, with the understanding that, when mediational effort by the teacher is not reciprocated by the learner, the experience may fail to stretch the learner’s potential and may be less meaningful for learning.

Feuerstein et al. (2002) define reciprocity as the “readiness produced in the mediatee to respond to the mediator’s intentionality” (p. 76). Of course, there are various ways for learners to demonstrate
reciprocity; for instance, showing openness to the teacher’s mediations, using the teacher as a resource (van der Aalsvoort & Lidz, 2002), or even resisting the teacher’s meditational support (Poehner, 2008).

Interactional patterns of reciprocity in the classroom can take several forms, such as teacher to learner, learner to teacher, or learner to learner. That is, reciprocity is not always initiated by the teacher. A learner reciprocates by, for instance, requesting clarification, asking the teacher to use a new vocabulary item in a different context, cautioning the teacher against a misunderstanding, or asking for approval (Poehner, 2008). When learners produce such verbal indicators, they reciprocate the teacher’s instruction in the broader sense.

A handful of scholars have explored the notion of reciprocity thus far. Among these are Feuerstein and his colleagues (Feuerstein, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979; Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, & Miller, 1980; Feuerstein, Rand, & Rynders, 1988; Feuerstein et al., 2002), Lidz (1991), van der Aalsvoort and Lidz (2002), and Poehner (2008). Feuerstein and his colleagues’ work dates back to the late 1970s and mainly focused on the cognitive development of children requiring special education. They understood reciprocity as a very important component of adult–child interaction. They labeled an adult’s purposeful attempts to guide a child as *intentionality* and the child’s level of responsiveness to these attempts as *reciprocity* (Feuerstein et al., 1979). In the 1990s, Lidz began to work with the notion of reciprocity when she developed instruments to measure the quality of the interactions of preschool children with their parents and teachers. Her definition of reciprocity paralleled that of Feuerstein and colleagues: “the level of receptivity of the child to the mediational intentions of the adult” (Lidz, 1991, p. 110). Poehner has discussed reciprocity as it applies to language learning. He has adapted the concept accordingly by claiming that learner reciprocity encompasses “not only how learners respond to mediation that has been offered, but also their requests for additional support or specific kind of support as well as their refusal to accept mediation” (Poehner, 2008, p. 40, emphasis added).

Figure 1 provides a diagram of possible actions of reciprocity that might accordingly be expected during teacher–learner interactions in the language classroom. These were derived and adapted from two major sources elaborated in the next section.

**Observing Reciprocity**

Figure 1 includes reciprocal actions from the Response to Mediation Rating Scale (RMRS). This scale, developed by van der Aalsvoort and Lidz (2002), aims to capture a child’s behaviors in an interaction
with an adult. Eight of these twelve actions are taken directly from the RMRS. The remaining four actions were derived from Poehner (2008). Because the “use of mediator as a resource” was overlapping in both studies, we adapted four actions from Poehner instead of five.

In order to empirically explore this multifaceted notion of learner reciprocity in language education, we undertook a 2.5-month study of an EFL classroom. Using the actions of a learner reciprocity scheme (Figure 1), individual students’ verbal indicators were tabulated and examined in an effort to assess levels of learner reciprocity in successful and less successful language learners. As such, we addressed the following research question: What are the verbal indicators that reflect adult EFL learners’ reciprocity?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Setting**

This study was undertaken at a small university in the Aegean region of Turkey. A 12-week, learner- and communication-centered course offered to campus faculty, staff, and students served as the context. Participants were guided by teacher design and orchestration to use the target language in communication with others. A total of 44 hours of instruction constituted the data-collection period, during which time all class activity was video-recorded.
Participants

The free EFL course and its companion research study were announced via fliers across the campus, and participants were selected by proficiency levels (pre-intermediate to intermediate), availability, and willingness to participate in both the course and the research.

We used a staged, nested case study design. Initially, the design encompassed all fourteen participants, consisting of two assistant professors, a lecturer, an information technology staff person, a public relations staff person, a graduate research assistant, a music instructor, and seven undergraduate students. The professors had not taught any of the students before or during the data collection. The classroom environment was a friendly one and none of the students reported intimidation caused by the presence of more mature and experienced classmates. Subsequently, we narrowed the focus to four of the participants for deeper data collection and analyses. The selection criteria to determine the case studies were (a) the range, (b) the quality, and (c) the frequency of verbal indicators that the learners produced. Finally, during data analysis, we selected two cases in keeping with qualitative inquiry whereby “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Our selection criteria to determine the two focal cases were, again, the range, quality, and frequency of verbal indicators the case studies produced during class time. One of the cases, the more reciprocal case, frequently exhibited the case selection criteria, whereas the less reciprocal case rarely employed verbal indicators of learner reciprocity. The following sections describe the backgrounds and motivations of both cases.

The more reciprocal case. Ayla, 37 years old, was the only participant who attended all but one class (21 out of 22 classes) from the beginning until the end of the study, which allowed for 42 hours of video-recorded data. Ayla had the largest number of verbal indicators among all participants due chiefly to attendance.

Ayla was an assistant professor of guidance and counseling at the university. She began learning English when she was in middle school. She had also attended a private course on weekends to strengthen what she learned at school. In high school, English was an elective

---

1 See Lincoln and Guba (1985) for negative case analysis and Patton (2002, p. 554) for “negative case.”
2 Ayla and Leyla were used as pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.
3 Ayla attended a regular high school, which included 3 years of education and did not offer 1-year intensive language preparation in English before the ninth grade. The schools in the latter category, called foreign language-focused high schools, used a more language-focused curriculum as compared to regular high schools.
and she took it only in ninth grade. In college, she took English only in her freshman year as a compulsory course. She did not attend hazırlık, the 1-year intensive language preparation course in English that is now the common practice in many Turkish universities. However, Ayla did attend hazırlık as a doctoral student. With regard to her experience at hazırlık, Ayla reported that this wasn’t very productive for her.

Ayla decided to join the study because she was preparing for the ÜDS⁴ (Interuniversity Board Foreign Language Examination), a requirement for promotion to associate professor. She expressed her belief that the class would help her improve her English.

**The less reciprocal case.** Leyla was a 21-year-old junior nursing student. In total, Leyla attended 16 classes, which allowed for 32 hours of video-recorded data that captured her learning reciprocity behaviors. Leyla had begun learning English as a fourth grader with 2 hours of instruction per week. In middle school, her studies continued with 4 hours per week. She did not, however, have a teacher who specialized in teaching English. Her instructor was her mainstream teacher, who, Leyla reported, was “not cut out for the job.”

She went on:

> When I began sixth grade, I realized that my friends knew much more English than me; this thought has always stayed with me and I started to fall behind in English starting from those times.

She went to a language-focused high school. At the beginning she had positive experiences because she was familiar with the initial topics, but later on there were too many subjects for her to handle and she started to fall behind. The English teacher at hazırlık discouraged the students by saying that “there are only three people in this class who are going to make it through college,” and Leyla believed he was not including her among those three. She stated that as time went by, hazırlık began to feel like torture and that she experienced hair loss as a result of the stress. However, things got better in Grade 9. The teacher was from Australia.⁵ In the summer between Grades 9 and 10, she took private lessons three times a week from a college student who was preparing to be an EFL teacher. By Grade 10 her English had improved. In Grade 11, she stopped paying attention to school subjects in order to prepare for the university entrance exams, as most 11th graders did.

---

⁴ In 2013, ÜDS was merged with YDS (Foreign Language Exam).
⁵ In Turkey, it is not common to see native-speaking English teachers in public high schools. In that sense, Leyla was lucky.
Leyla specifically selected a college where there was no hazırlık year. In her freshman year she passed the exemption test for English. Finally, in her sophomore year, Leyla took vocational English as an elective, which she didn’t find very effective because of the teacher’s loosely planned lessons. She commented, “All we learned was a few phrasal verbs concerning health issues.” When she began the free EFL course, Leyla was well aware that to improve her English she needed to allot specific time and effort. Her motivation to join the study was similar to Ayla’s: improve her English to get a higher score on the ÜDS exam to become a research assistant when she goes to graduate school.

DATA

Three data sets were compiled for analyses: classroom video recordings, participant interviews, and the research journal.

Video Data

Classes were recorded using a camcorder with a built-in hard drive. The camera was trained on the students at all times. All of the classroom instruction (44 hours) was video-recorded, thus assuring what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call “referential adequacy” (p. 313). Recorded classroom materials allowed us to go back to each classroom session to constantly compare emerging categories and subcategories (Table 1) at leisure and with greater dependability.

Interview Data

When interviewing the participants, we followed Seidman’s (2006) guidelines for the three interview series for the individual interviews. The first round of interviews both helped participants contextualize their early experiences with respect to learning English and informed focal case selection (Appendix A). Questions employed in the second interview were specifically fashioned to elicit concrete examples from the learners in relation to learner reciprocity (Appendix B). Finally, we used the third round of interviews to shed light on the learners’ meaning-making processes and perceived reasons for the presence and absence of their verbal indicators vis-à-vis the emerging categories of learner reciprocity observed (Appendices C and D). We used a small focus group session (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) to elicit
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions of learner reciprocity</th>
<th>Description of action</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Ayla</th>
<th>Leyla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner agency</td>
<td>Self-initiated verbal behaviors which lead to the enrichment of classroom interactions in favor of more efficient learning</td>
<td>Commenting</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repeating on one’s own initiative</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Suggesting</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving examples on one’s own initiative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guessing</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being persistent</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Translating into English/Turkish</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Telling the meaning of a vocabulary item on the spot</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiating with teacher/peers on shared activity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating with peers</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>696</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the teacher and peers as resources</td>
<td>Utilizing the teacher’s or peers’ knowledge and/or experiences to meet the needs stemming from lack of knowledge or guidance</td>
<td>Asking</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the teacher and peers</td>
<td>Encompasses verbal indicators carried out in order to respond to a question, a comment; in short, a verbal indicator initiated by the teacher or a peer</td>
<td>Answering</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeing</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repeating</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indicating comprehension</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving examples when asked by the teacher or peers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>587</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions of learner reciprocity</td>
<td>Description of action</td>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Occurrences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective dimensions of interacting with the teacher or peers</td>
<td>Refers to remarks which are used to ease communication with the teacher and peers, and to add an emotional aspect to this communication</td>
<td>Facilitating communication with the teacher and peers</td>
<td>Ayla: 77   Leyla: 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Making jokes</td>
<td>Ayla: 16   Leyla: 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging peers</td>
<td>Ayla: 5    Leyla: 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>总：98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulating attention</td>
<td>Showing interest in and being attentive to what is going on in the class in general and monitoring one’s attention in order to remain attentive during classes</td>
<td>Sidetracking</td>
<td>Ayla: 9    Leyla: 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contributing to a sidetracked conversation</td>
<td>Ayla: 48   Leyla: 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking aloud</td>
<td>Ayla: 18   Leyla: 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiating with a peer about a sidetracked topic</td>
<td>Ayla: 0    Leyla: 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>总：75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacting to challenge</td>
<td>Encompasses verbal behaviors which reflect learners’ attitudes toward a challenging task (positive reaction occurs if the required mental effort is spent; negative reaction occurs if the learner withdraws from the challenging task)</td>
<td>Reacting to challenge positively</td>
<td>Ayla: 6    Leyla: 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reacting to challenge negatively</td>
<td>Ayla: 0    Leyla: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking opportunities for improvement</td>
<td>Looking for opportunities for further practice in order to extend language learning beyond classroom instruction</td>
<td>总：6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Six of the categories (i.e., commenting, telling the meaning of a vocabulary item, asking, answering, agreeing, repeating) had a total of 29 subcategories, which are not listed in this table due to space constraints.*
participants’ understandings of what constituted language learning ability. Transcripts from these as well as the individual interviews constitute the second data set.

**Researcher Journal**

The first author and EFL instructor kept a journal throughout. Janesick (2004) views the researcher journal as a strong triangulation technique and “a powerful heuristic tool” (p. 144) in qualitative research. Indeed, the researcher’s notes helped maintain a broader perspective on what was occurring in the classroom in addition to serving as a record of any new ideas, feelings, and concerns that arose.

**Data Analysis**

The final data set comprises transcripts of video-recorded classes, individual and focus group interviews, and the researcher’s journal. We adopted the sensitizing concepts approach throughout analysis. As Patton (2002) writes,

> The notion of sensitizing concepts reminds us that observers do not enter the field with a completely blank slate. While the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of being open to whatever one can learn, some way of organizing the complexity of experience is virtually a prerequisite for perception itself. (p. 279)

Our opening conceptual framework was the scheme of actions of learner reciprocity (Figure 1), which steered the bulk of data analysis and interpretation. Beyond classroom interactions, Boyatzis’s (1998) thematic analysis was employed as “a way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture” (p. 5, emphasis original). Participant statements, reflections, and classroom verbal indicators of learner reciprocity converged to suggest emerging themes.

We considered any spoken, meaningful words, phrases, or sentences that were used to regulate intentions during social interactions in the classroom setting as coded verbal indicators subject to analysis; in other words, any speech that indicated learner reciprocity in action (Figure 1). Examples of verbal indicators for a word, phrase, and sentence, respectively, are really as an expression of surprise, the woman on the picture, and Is this correct? or That’s not what I meant. Metalinguistic comments (Mitchell & Myles, 2004) such as I am not sure how to say this were considered verbal indicators as well and subsequently coded. It is
important to note that any wordless messages communicated through gestures, body language, posture, facial expressions, and eye contact were kept outside the scope of the thematic analyses.

RESULTS

Based on the review of the literature, we initially compiled 12 actions for learner reciprocity (Figure 1). However, through analysis of these data, 7 observable actions of learner reciprocity emerged: (1) learner agency, (2) using teacher and peers as resources, (3) responding to teacher and peers, (4) affective dimensions of interactions, (5) self-regulating attention, (6) reacting to challenge, and (7) seeking opportunities for improvement. Each will be treated in turn.

Learner Agency

Ahearn (2001) defines agency as “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112). Learners need to show agency by involving themselves in interactions with others in order to mediate their learning. They cannot afford to wait for the teacher or a textbook to simply transmit information. In particular, language learners need to create “more tools and new ways of learning, through collaborative activity with other users of the target second language” (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 200). Each initiative a learner takes lends support to a “pedagogical moment, a teaching opportunity and a learning promise” (van Lier, 2008, p. 174). With regard to the study’s more reciprocal case, Ayla, Extract 1 provides strong evidence of agency. The context was a unit on giving opinions, agreeing, and disagreeing. After working on their own, groups formed to practice related constructions. Ayla was the first student to take the initiative to speak up in English in her group:

Extract 1

1. Ayla: My decision is about my son’s school. I think he should go to public school. I think public school is near our house, so he has extra time. He will not go to school with school bus. I think that he grows up in society. What do you think? 
2. Elif: I agree with you because … near your house. It is good thing because school bus is bad for your children. That’s all.
3. Leyla: I think time is necessary for your children. So, she … she doesn’t get up early.

6 In lengthy dialogues, we use boldface to draw readers’ attention to the portion or portions of the text that we specifically explicate.
4. Melis: What about public schools’ teachers, are they good?
5. Elif: Education ... 
6. Ayla: Yes, yes, but public schools’ class are crowded and it could be an issue about cleaning and supplying educational materials. What do you think?
7. Elif: Crowded ... bad thing, I think.

In this group interaction, Ayla not only created a new way to practice English by initiating the conversation with her peers, but also fostered the continuation of the interaction by asking “What do you think?”

Unless learners are willing to cooperate by generating learning opportunities along with the teacher and thereby express their learning potential, others may fail to see and respond to learners’ abilities. In this sense, the more reciprocal case in this study, Ayla, was quite willing to cooperate and to generate learning opportunities. She was constantly commenting on class activities, giving clues about her progress and the like.

The less reciprocal case study, Leyla, was not engaged in many reciprocating acts related to learner agency. The first bar in Figure 2 illustrates the number of verbal indicators employed by Ayla and Leyla regarding this action.

According to Table 1, Ayla was engaged in agentive verbal behaviors almost 700 times, whereas Leyla exercised agency only about 40 times throughout her 32 hours of instruction. As van Lier (2008) articulates, “The main principle involved [in agency] is that learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner” (p. 163). Leyla’s very low number of agentive verbal indicators suggests that her reciprocity was less active, thereby depriving her of learning opportunities.

![Total number of verbal indicators for learner reciprocity themes](image-url)
Using Teacher and Peers as Resources

In his study of learner reciprocity in language education, Poehner (2008) observes that autonomous learners know when they need guidance and seek it out. If they are not capable enough “to provide it [the mediation] for themselves … they turn to the mediator as a knowledgeable interlocutor” (p. 44). In this study, mediators are the teacher and occasionally the more capable peer(s). Learners used the teacher and peers as resources when initiating interactions. Only one category pertaining to this action emerged in the data: asking. Five subcategories emerged in relation to asking: (1) asking for information, (2) asking for confirmation, (3) asking peers, (4) asking in English, and (5) asking about target culture and cultural differences.

Leyla used the teacher or peers as resources a total of 14 times, whereas Ayla produced 191 verbal indicators for this action. What these numbers suggest is that Leyla preferred to be more isolated, and Ayla found ways to interact with the teacher and peers in order to use them as resources. For example, in Extract 2, Ayla asks the teacher for information regarding an informal expression for “a dollar.”

Extract 2

Ayla: Bucks ne? [What is “bucks”?]  

This extract is taken from a context in which the class was reviewing an exercise that contained a sentence in which the word “bucks” was used: “I am afraid to ________ but can I borrow a few bucks?” The item students were to place in the blank was “broach the subject”; however, by asking what “bucks” meant, Ayla created an additional learning opportunity for herself and others in the class by utilizing the teacher’s knowledge about the target language.

The second interview specifically asked participants whether they used their teacher as a resource and to provide examples. Leyla said that they certainly used the teacher as a resource because she was their “teacher.” When prompted for specific examples, she commented:

Like, you lead us, guide us about the pronunciation of words, writing, vocabulary or grammar, that is to say, you are our ultimate resource.

Overall she expressed satisfaction with these well-defined roles; i.e., that their teacher was there to be their resource by definition.
Responding to Teacher and Peers

Responding to teacher and peers has the second largest number of categories as an action after learner agency. According to Figure 3, Leyla’s first most frequent category is answering the teacher or peers, and as Figure 4 illustrates, among Ayla’s most frequent five categories are answering the teacher and peers and agreeing with the teacher and peers. The total number of verbal indicators for this action is 587 for Ayla and 77 for Leyla (see Table 1).

Responding to teacher and peers is a significant way of showing reciprocity. Although learners might experience a silent period initially, remaining passive and obedient (van Lier, 2008) suggests that learners are not sufficiently autonomous to initiate questions and comments.
regarding the shared activities in class. When there is less contribution to intermental interactions, there is less receptivity and reciprocity. Given the fact that Leyla and Ayla’s recorded instances of verbal indicators for this action are 77 and 587, respectively, it is reasonable to suggest that because Leyla had a much lower rate of reciprocity than Ayla, she had fewer opportunities for learning.

Analysis thus far has been restricted to the actions of learner agency, using the teacher and peers as resources, and responsiveness. Although these reciprocating acts are necessary for successful learning, they are not sufficient. The affective dynamics of the joint endeavors contribute to the quality of the interactions between the teacher and learners as well, an aspect of learner reciprocity attendant in the action addressed in the next section.

**Affective Dimensions of Interactions**

Verbal indicators for affective dimensions were categorized into three groups: (1) facilitating communication with the teacher and peers, (2) making jokes, and (3) encouraging peers’ participation. In total, Ayla displayed 98 and Leyla displayed 5 verbal indicators for these categories (see Table 1), suggesting that Ayla’s affective investments were more intense than Leyla’s.

The context of Extract 3 is an activity in which students listened to a song by Leonard Cohen, “Dance Me to the End of Love.” The teacher distributed the lyrics beforehand and asked students to put them in order while listening to the song. One student in the class happened to be a music instructor at the university. Ayla said to him:

```
Extract 3
```

| Ayla: Ali, senden performans bekliyoruz. [Ali, we are expecting a performance from you (meaning, we are expecting you to do well in this activity).] |

In this verbal indicator there is an affective element and Ayla’s joke made many students laugh with congenial familiarity.

**Self-Regulating Attention**

Among the categories that are related to self-regulating attention are sidetracking, contributing to a sidetracked conversation, thinking

---

7 In this study, self-regulating attention refers to controlling one’s attention in order to remain engaged throughout the class.
aloud, and negotiating with a peer on a sidetracked topic. Of these categories, thinking aloud facilitates self-regulation whereas the other three can negatively influence learners’ self-regulating attention. As shown in Table 1, Ayla displayed 18 positive and 57 negative verbal indicators, whereas Leyla displayed no positive and 15 negative verbal indicators.

At first glance, Ayla’s high number of verbal indicators for these categories might seem paradoxical due to her otherwise positive reciprocity because sidetracking refers to shifting one’s (or a group’s) attention to an irrelevant topic. We argue, however, that the majority of Ayla’s initiations were not complete digressions from the shared activity. The majority of Ayla’s sidetracking moves, rather, were rich in content and created affordances related to the topic under discussion. For example, during a follow-up vocabulary activity, Ayla shared etymological information about the verb *decide*. In this instance, even though she digressed from the planned activity, she shared relevant, additive information. Leyla displayed no positive indicators for self-regulating her attention. In the interviews, she expressed difficulty with regulating her attention in class:

> There are days when I don’t miss anything in class but there are also days I keep looking at my watch and asking myself: “Is this class going to take forever?” But this is personal…. Sometimes I am aware that you are explaining something but I am also aware that I am missing it…. I think I have an attention problem in general.

Leyla clearly perceives her ability to regulate her attention as problematic. What is paradoxical about her occasional boredom is that this class was not required; all of the students participated voluntarily. It is interesting in that she makes the effort to attend classes but she does not fully benefit. This observation accords with the claim that language learners might engage in complex, ambivalent activities while constructing their identities as a learner (Norton Pierce, 1995).

**Reacting to Challenge**

Reacting to challenge encompasses verbal indicators through which learners reflect attitudes about a challenging task or situation. In this study, learners reacted to challenge in both negative and positive ways. In some situations these learners invested mental effort, but in others they did not. In total, 10 instances of reacting to challenge were recorded (see Table 1). Six were positive reactions by Ayla, and four were negative reactions by Leyla.
In the context of Extract 4, it is Leyla’s turn to speak during a discussion activity.

**Extract 4**

1. Leyla: Hocam, ben yapmasam? [Mrs. Biyik, let me not do it?]
   Elif and Ayla try to encourage her:
   2. Elif: Konuşursun. [You can speak.]
   3. Leyla: Konuşana kadar çok zaman geçiyor. [It takes me a long time to speak.]
   4. Ayla: Leyla, ilk geldiğinde senden farklı değişildim; öyle düşünün. [Leyla, I wasn’t any different than you when I first started; think that way.]
   5. Leyla: Yok ya, konuşmayım. [No, no, let me not speak.]

Here Leyla simply refuses to talk even though it is her turn in the activity. It is important to note that this was the final class and, although other students performed surprisingly well in English, Leyla still resisted. Notwithstanding the underlying reasons behind this resistance, the outcome is that she had not benefited from all learning opportunities that had been made available to her in the language class. By avoiding the use of mediational means, Leyla not only missed the opportunity to practice the target language but also deprived her teacher of the opportunity to gauge her readiness for the next level of performance. In short, being consistently receptive and cooperative by reacting to challenge appears to positively contribute to learner reciprocity.

**Seeking Opportunities for Improvement**

Seeking opportunities for improvement is manifested through verbal indicators when a learner is actively searching for ways to extend learning beyond the classroom. Whereas Ayla sought such opportunities six times over the duration of the course, Leyla sought none. From van Lier’s (2000) ecological perspective, at the center of language learning lies a concept called *affordance*, “a particular property of the environment that is relevant—for good or for ill—to an active, perceiving organism in that environment” (p. 252). That is, language develops as learners make use of available opportunities in their environment and, ideally, as they create them as well. Among the six opportunities Ayla sought for improvement were requesting copies of the audio CDs the teacher used in class, requesting permission to make copies of the *Seinfeld* DVDs, asking for additional homework, and requesting scripts projected on the board for listening dialogues. As for Leyla, she carried out the minimum number of classroom tasks in accordance with the teacher’s instructions, and there were no instances of her seeking opportunities for improvement. Yet she exhib-
ited one interesting nonverbal learning behavior. Leyla was the only student who brought to class a small bilingual dictionary (albeit Ayla occasionally used her laptop for online dictionaries). Regarding this behavior, it is plausible to claim that Leyla prefers object-regulation to other-regulation (Vygotsky, 1987). That is, she prefers using the dictionary to the teacher for her mediational needs.

EXTENDED ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Gillette (1994) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the individual characteristics of six language learners in a required French course. The majority of Gillette’s findings are shown in Table 2. The similarities between Gillette’s findings and those of this study are presented in the Discussion section.

Teacher Perspective

In a course that depended largely on active student participation in comprehending and generating the target language, learners’ responsiveness was critical in eliciting and providing targeted, appropriate guidance.

### TABLE 2
Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Language Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Effective learners</th>
<th>Ineffective learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>View language learning as a means for personal growth</td>
<td>View language learning as other-imposed requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internally oriented</td>
<td>Externally oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get personal satisfaction in learning a foreign language</td>
<td>Report frustration and motivational difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to language study</td>
<td>Favor communicative activities in and out of class</td>
<td>More analytical and reductionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More holistic and integrative</td>
<td>Prefer formal tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy usage</td>
<td>Use guessing and inferencing and are more successful at it</td>
<td>Use dictionary very often when reading texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engage in functional practice</td>
<td>Rely heavily on translation and rote learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of involvement</td>
<td>Usually do more than required</td>
<td>Try to get by rather than get better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Show elaborate and intensive learning efforts</td>
<td>Do the minimum work to get a passing grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward negative</td>
<td>Do not let negative experiences change their basic orientations</td>
<td>Positive experiences do not change their predispositions for L2 learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from Gillette (1994).*
The entries in the teacher’s research journal indicate that Ayla’s presence—both mental and physical—in the classroom facilitated the instruction in many respects. First, the teacher knew that her teaching efforts were not in vain because Ayla was closely following what was going on in the classroom and constantly displayed reciprocity in response to the teacher’s instructional efforts. This factor increased the teacher’s motivation to elaborate more on an issue or to give more examples in different contexts.

The teacher’s comments about Leyla’s reciprocity were more critical. The fact that Leyla’s attention in the classroom was intermittent gave the teacher fewer opportunities to gauge her existing abilities. Moreover, the teacher recorded that Leyla may have been experiencing foreign language anxiety which stopped her from speaking out even when it was her turn during activities. This consequently affected her reciprocity adversely, the teacher recorded. On the other hand, Leyla was very responsive in the interviews when she interacted with the teacher on a one-on-one basis, which made the teacher think that Leyla was simply a quiet student in the classroom.

In one anecdote the teacher noted, Leyla was silent while all the other students were asking each other questions during a group activity. When the teacher approached her, Leyla instantly directed a question to her group mates. Such instances were repeated many times: Leyla simply needed more encouragement to “reciprocate.” The teacher noted: “Would she feel pressured when I encourage her to reciprocate? Or would I be ignoring her if I let her be herself in the classroom?”

Discussion

According to van Lier’s (2000) ecological view of language learning, verbal utterances are not detached from other aspects of the meaning-making process. When the teacher and learners facilitate interaction affectively, they attach semiotic means to it, and these semiotic activities play a central role in language learning. A language learning context does not offer only linguistic input; it in fact offers a “semiotic budget” (van Lier, 2000, p. 252). This semiotic budget “does not refer to the amount of input available, nor the amount of input that is enhanced for comprehension, but to the opportunities for meaningful action that the situation affords” (van Lier, 2000, p. 252). With his metaphor of a budget, van Lier suggests that the more enriched language learners’ contextual affordances are, the more developed their meaning-making processes will be. As is clear in these two contrasting cases, learner reciprocity plays a critical role in establishing and sus-
taining rapport with such environmental affordances. Moreover, we know from classroom observation studies that the teacher-calculus is complex and sensitive to learner behaviors. In language education, this becomes particularly important because so much emphasis is on spoken, indeed interpersonal interaction.

Comparing the findings of this inquiry with those of Gillette’s (1994) study examining the characteristics of six learners of French, there are striking similarities between the effective and ineffective language learners in the Gillette study and our two contrasting cases representing opposite ends of Gillette’s continuum (Table 2).

From Gillette’s perspective, Ayla clearly belongs to the effective learner group whereas Leyla belongs to the ineffective learner group. Ayla views learning English as a pursuit for personal growth, she is intrinsically oriented, is genuinely interested in learning in general, and finds personal satisfaction in learning English:

> Learning new vocabulary items in English is almost like a hobby for me. I even like it more when people show admiration for my vocabulary knowledge; it gives me more motivation to learn new ones.

Like the effective learners in the Gillette study, Ayla also has a holistic and integrative approach toward learning English. She thinks that language should be learned in its entirety with active and simultaneous involvement in all skills. As for her degree of involvement, Ayla was one of the few students in class who completed all of the homework assignments and often requested additional writing assignments.

In contrast, Leyla is more externally oriented; she often articulated that she was “obliged” to learn English and that there is “no escape” from it since getting a sufficient score (50/100) in the ÜDS language exam is a requirement for obtaining graduate assistantships. Leyla is thereby more interested in getting better at grammar, vocabulary, and reading. She limits her language learning potential by targeting “getting a sufficient score from the ÜDS” as her ultimate goal: “I am not worried about speaking and listening; they wouldn’t constrain me [on the exam].” Paradoxically, though, she acknowledged that language is best learned by active use. Where she stated that “vocabulary, grammar, and reading” took priority over “listening, speaking, and writing,” she also added, “but without speaking English at all, I wouldn’t be able to do any of these.” When asked about future plans to improve her English, she said that she had already started to compile her notes and was going to study grammar by means of a supplementary book that prepares students for the ÜDS language exam.

What these data suggest is that although Leyla explicitly recognizes the importance of social interaction in learning a language, she adopts a reductionist approach to learning English based on her extrinsic
motivations. Goal orientation and a reductionist view of language learning and the consequent degree of involvement in language learning activities both in and out of the classroom shape one’s learning reciprocity for better or for worse.

Leyla expressed a remarkably pessimistic view about herself as a language learner similar to the ineffective learners in the Gillette study. She attributed her failure to previous negative experiences and certain fixed characteristics she believed she didn’t possess:

Language learning requires aptitude; I don’t have that.

I feel intimidated in class.

I immediately and easily start thinking negatively: “Am I going to be able to do it?” And that affects my motivation negatively.

I don’t think I am an interested learner; English is sort of an obligation for me. I know that making it enjoyable is in my hands; I am also aware of that but . . .

It is important to “think fast” for language learners. I don’t think I “think fast.” Having a natural sense of musical pitch is also important.

After these questions, I realized that I am not very active in class.

Indeed, similarities between the interaction patterns we found in our study and Gillette’s research suggest possible connections between the absence of reciprocity in the classroom and being an inefficient language learner. This, of course, does not guarantee a causal relationship; however, future studies might look into the relation between the two concepts.

**Implications**

This study potentially offers teachers a spectrum of empirically established reciprocal acts language students employ in the classroom that to varying degrees facilitate teaching in communicative contexts. With such awareness teachers have guidance in orchestrating learning activities that encourage learners to take responsibility for their own actions in activities such as debates, discussions, and task-based activities (van Lier, 2008). Furthermore, by understanding the importance of reciprocity in language learning, teachers can tailor language instruction to support students’ reciprocal behaviors. They can also
use these acts as a rubric when assessing students’ oral skills. Second and foreign language learners can constantly be reminded that “the co-construction of linguistic knowledge in dialogue is language learning in progress” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 321) and that by engaging in open, productive conversation they provide their teacher with the opportunity to see both their learning and their learning potential. Where language students play well with others, teachers can be responsive to learners’ reciprocal acts by both explicitly and implicitly encouraging them to actively participate in classroom activities.

CONCLUSION

Learner reciprocity is a conceptual tool by which we can consider the dynamic composite of situated learner dispositions and their role in language learning processes. This study has examined in detail two learners’ verbal indicators through rigorous longitudinal data-collection methods and casts light on how they manifested these verbal indicators of learner reciprocity.

Learner agency, using teacher and peers as resources, responding to the teacher and peers, affective dimensions of the interactions, self-regulating attention, reacting to challenge, and seeking opportunities for improvement are observable dimensions of learner reciprocity at work in the classroom. From the two focal learners in this case study, we can see such verbal indicators clearly contributing both positively and negatively to successful language learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the Office of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Student Organization at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

THE AUTHORS

Cagri Ozkose-Biyik is an assistant professor at the Department of Science Culture at Yaşar University, in Izmir, Turkey. Among her research interests are foreign language teacher education, professional development of EFL teachers, and sociocultural approaches to language teaching and learning.

Carla Meskill is a professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany, State University of New York, where her scholarship and teaching focus on technology in language education, a topic which she has researched and published on extensively over the past 25 years.
REFERENCES


Mercer, N. (2010). The analysis of classroom talk: Methods and methodologies. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 80, 1–14. doi:10.1348/000709909X479853


**APPENDIX A**

**First Interview Protocol**

Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series is used in this study. The protocols do not contain all of the questions; the remaining questions can be obtained from the authors.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your first experiences with learning English?
2. In what sense do you think your early experiences were helpful for you to learn English? (For probing: What types of activities were you engaged in when learning English?)
3. Do you think you can apply what you learned in the classroom to real-life situations?
4. In your opinion, what kind of characteristics should a language learner have?

5. How do you view your characteristics as a language learner?

APPENDIX B

Second Interview Protocol

1. In general, what do you pay attention to when learning English?

2. Based on your own experiences, can you tell me which ones you pay more attention to among reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary? Can you put them in a sequence from the one you pay the most attention to to the one you pay the least?

3. Now, please imagine yourself when learning English in class. I am asking you to evaluate yourself and provide concrete examples as much as possible based on your own behaviors in class regarding the following behaviors:
   - Responding to teacher’s guidance
   - Communicating and commenting about the activity
   - As a language learner, regulating your learning independent from the teacher (for example, asking questions, taking initiatives)
   - Negotiating the teacher’s mediations (student to the teacher: You do X but it doesn’t work that much, if you do X this way, it might work better)
   - Asking for additional guidance or information regarding the subject being learned

APPENDIX C

Third Interview Protocol—Ayla

1. In our second interview, you said, “I spend my energy in following the class carefully and I try to take notes while learning English.” Are these true only for English or did you do these in other classes as well when you were a student?

2. In our second interview, you said, “I don’t comment on the class activities that much; I do it as inner speech.” In terms of
teacher–learner relationship, what kinds of advantages and disadvantages, do you think, might this behavior have on your learning English?

3. You said that you have an active, extroverted personality. In your opinion, what kinds of advantages and disadvantages might having such a personality trait have on learning English?

4. You said, “I am not a very active student in terms of asking questions, getting the teacher’s approval but I actively participate in the activities.” How would this situation affect your learning English? What kinds of advantages and disadvantages can it have?

5. You said, “I continue to be a learner outside the class, instead of asking additional information about a topic being covered, I go learn it myself.” What kinds of advantages and disadvantages might this circumstance have on your learning English?

6. You said, “I think I don’t have a good natural sense of musical pitch.” Can you elaborate more on that?

7. In the future, for instance, in 2 years, where do you see yourself in terms of learning English? (For probing: What do you think you will be able to do regarding English skills? What will you have accomplished? What skills will you still be trying to develop?). This question was asked of Leyla, too.

APPENDIX D

Third Interview Protocol—Leyla

1. You said, “When learning English, vocabulary and grammar are the most important elements for me, then come speaking and listening, and finally reading and writing.” Could you please elaborate more on that? Why do you place more emphasis on vocabulary and grammar?

2. In our second interview, regarding asking for confirmation, you said, “I don’t do it a lot, I feel intimidated.” What kinds of advantages and disadvantages do you think this behavior of yours might have in your learning English?

3. With regard to asking for additional material and information on the topic, you said, “After your questions, I realized that on that front I’m not very active in class.” What kinds of advantages and disadvantages do you think this behavior might have in your learning English?
4. Regarding “Complementing the interactions with the teacher through affective dimensions” you said, “I feel comfortable in class, I like your approach; however, I do not engage in oral communication too much.” In your opinion, what may be the advantages and disadvantages of this behavior in learning English?

5. You said, “I usually don’t give up when I face a challenge in learning, but I start thinking negatively immediately, I feel that I may not succeed.” Does this happen only when studying English, or do you feel the same way for other courses?

6. You mentioned that you often don’t practice what you learn; for example, you don’t watch a movie in English or speak with foreign friends. In your opinion, what may be the advantages and disadvantages of this behavior in learning English?

7. In the future, for instance, in 2 years, where do you see yourself in terms of learning English?