Primary school children and cooperative interaction: Recruitments and offers of assistance in small-group activities

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Abstract

Aimed at investigating primary school children's interactional competence and cooperation practices, this article focuses on recruitments and offers of assistance – a topic mostly studied in interactions among adults, as well as in early childhood and adolescence, but underexplored in classroom settings with children aged 8–9. Using a multimodal conversation analytic approach, the study examines two interrelated practices through which children in Italian primary schools cooperate during classroom activities carried out in pairs and in small groups: (1) explicit requests for assistance and (2) unsolicited provisions of help intended to preempt a classmate's potential difficulty. These practices occur both within the children's own pair/group and beyond it. We offer initial insights into how the *recruitment continuum* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016) is configured by primary school children, paying particular attention to the interplay between Italian syntactic formats and the range of multimodal resources children employ to accomplish recruitment and assistance.

Questo articolo analizza la competenza interazionale e le pratiche di cooperazione tra bambini della scuola primaria, con particolare attenzione alle richieste e alle offerte di assistenza – un tema già esplorato tra adulti, nella prima infanzia e nell'adolescenza, ma ancora poco indagato tra bambini di 8–9 anni nei contesti scolastici. Adottando un approccio di analisi conversazionale multimodale, lo studio esamina due pratiche con cui i bambini cooperano durante attività in coppia o in piccoli gruppi: (1) richieste esplicite di assistenza e (2) offerte spontanee volte a prevenire possibili difficoltà altrui. Queste pratiche si verificano sia all'interno che al di fuori della coppia/del piccolo gruppo. Il lavoro offre prime evidenze su come i bambini configurano il *continuum del recruitment* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016), soffermandosi sull'interazione tra strutture sintattiche dell'italiano e risorse multimodali – come gesti, postura e sguardo – che i bambini utilizzano per richiedere o offrire assistenza.

Keywords: classroom interaction; primary school; recruitments and offers of assistance; Conversation Analysis; multimodality

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Parole chiave: interazione in classe; scuola primaria; richieste e offerte di assistenza; Analisi Conversazionale; multimodalità

1. Introduction

From a Conversation Analysis (CA) perspective (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013), interactional competence is understood as the ability to jointly construct meaning by "deploying conduct in locally appropriate ways" (Berger & Pekarek-Doehler, 2018, p. 68; see also Pekarek-Doehler, 2018, p. 5; Margutti et al., this issue). This article explores how children's developing interactional competence emerges through cooperative conduct in peer interactions within the classroom – a topic that still remains underexplored in conversational studies.

As a matter of fact, for more than five decades, a constant interest towards classroom interaction has informed ethnomethodologically-inspired Conversation Analysis research, specifically as regards the description of fundamental mechanisms of teacher-led whole-class instruction (turn-taking, the IRE sequence, teachers' questions design, the management of discipline, see Mehan, 1979; Margutti, 2006; Lee, 2007; Margutti & Piirainen-Marsh, 2011; cf. also Gardner, 2019); only in recent years, though, has research started to focus on student peer interaction (both on-task and off-task) an on the thereby emerging participation frameworks (Jones & Thornborrow, 2004; cf. also Goffman, 1981 and Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). Specific attention has also been devoted to primary school (cf. for instance Thornborrow, 2003; Evaldsson & Cekaite, 2010; Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012; Cekaite et al., 2014; Niemi, 2016; Pulles et al., 2021; Nasi, 2022a, 2022b), a setting in which teacher-led instruction is often complemented by peer-group didactic activities – possibly in line with pedagogical approaches such as "cooperative learning" (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Siciliano, 2001; Lamberti, 2010; see also Koshmann, 2013) –, and children have the opportunity to acquire social and linguistic skills, and thereby develop their interactional competence (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Cekaite, 2013).

Against this background, the present article aims to address the following questions: How does primary school children's interactional competence emerge through cooperative conduct? How is cooperation orchestrated in peer interactions among children? And what verbal and embodied resources do children draw upon to request and provide assistance during practical activities in the classroom?

Following the seminal work on *recruitment* by Kendrick & Drew (2016), a substantial body of research has been by now devoted to how adults cooperate in a variety of contexts. In contrast, the (few) available investigations on children focus on early childhood (Pfeiffer & Anna, 2021; Bateman, 2024; Eilittä, 2024), while studies on recruitment in classroom settings tend to concern middle and secondary schools or adult education (cf. Kendrick, 2025 for on overview).

In this context, our article thus examines how children in Italian primary schools cooperate with one another, focusing on practices of recruitment and assistance during didactic activities conducted in pairs and small groups. Following a theoretical background (§2) and the description of the data (§3), the analysis first explores verbal requests for assistance and their compliance (§4.1), as well as how children voluntarily offer assistance to peers within the same pair or group (§4.2). It then turns to the examination of how children provide assistance to members of other groups (§4.3).

Our aim is twofold: first, to provide initial insights into the vocal, verbal, and embodied ways in which children in primary schools recruit and provide assistance in peer interactions, with a particular focus on Italian language; and second, to contribute to the investigation of how social actors cooperate across the lifespan.

2. Background

Cooperation is a defining feature of human sociality and a key driver of human cognition, manifested through highly complex and flexible forms of social organization and collaboration (Tomasello, 2009). Experimental studies comparing primate and human cognitive skills suggest that, whereas primate cognition is generally

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driven by social competition, human cognition is driven by, or even constituted through, social cooperation (Moll & Tomasello, 2007).

Research in psychology shows that social cooperation tends to emerge early in childhood (Slocombe & Seed, 2019). Children begin engaging in mutualistic collaboration as early as 14-18 months of age (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007) and demonstrate the ability to anticipate another person's needs or difficulties by around two years of age (Warneken, 2013); at this stage, children are also capable of sharing resources as a means of cooperating with others (Ulber et al., 2015).

The inherently cooperative nature of human sociality is also reflected in the organization of language and communication. Beyond the variability of forms and structures, natural languages share a set of mechanisms that support mutual orientation, alignment, and shared understanding (Sidnell et al., 2014). Research in CA has substantially contributed to identifying the core components of this *interaction engine* (Levinson, 2006), such as the turn-taking system (Sacks et al., 1974), the repair mechanism (Schegloff et al., 1977; Hayashi et al., 2013), and the organization of social actions, such as requests and offers of assistance (Drew & Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Curl, 2006), which are closely involved in the practical accomplishment of cooperation. From the perspective of CA, cooperation is approached pragmatically, focusing on members' interactional conduct within the local context of social activities.

Within this research field, the growing use of video-recorded data (Streeck et al., 2011) and multimodal analytical tools (Mondada, 2014) has enabled a more nuanced understanding of the multiple resources participants employ to collaborate with one another, leading to a distinctive line of inquiry which focuses on *recruitment* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016; Floyd et al., 2020).

The notion of recruitment is defined as the "outcome of interactional methods that elicit or solicit involvement – assistance, collaboration, or cooperation – in the realization of practical courses of action" (Kendrick, 2025). Encompassing a range of vocal and non-vocal practices through which interactants seek or offer help in addressing locally emerging troubles – and even in anticipating and preventing difficulties – recruitment provides "a general template for the expression of human cooperation" (Heritage, 2016, p. 27) in the here-and-now of ongoing interactions.

Kendrick and Drew (2016) identify a set of alternative methods of recruitment. These methods include practices through which participant A recruits participant B's assistance, such as *requests* (e.g., "Pass me a pen"), *reports* (e.g., "I don't have a pen"), *alerts* (e.g., "Oh no!"), and *embodied displays* (e.g., participant A visibly searching for a pen or reaching out for one located at a distance; see also Drew & Kendrick, 2018). They also include cases in which participant B anticipates (or *projects*) a trouble in a course of action before it becomes manifest, and volunteers assistance. An example of this would be participant B noticing the absence of a pen nearby participant A, who is about to write, and offering one.

The authors propose that methods of recruitment form a *continuum* and vary according to three basic criteria (Kendrick & Drew, 2016, p. 10-11). The first criterion concerns how the practical problem or need for which assistance is recruited becomes recognizable in interaction. At one extreme of the continuum are placed practices that do not formulate or display the trouble – namely requests such as "Pass me a pen," which implicitly indicate that the requester needs a pen. These practices differ from those that explicitly mention (e.g., the report "I don't have a pen!"), index (e.g., the alert "Oh, no!"), or display (e.g., the embodied action of reaching out for a pen) the trouble.

The second aspect upon which recruitment practices are distinguished pertains who initiates the recruitment – whether it is the participant experiencing the trouble (as in requests) or the participant offering the assistance (as in cases of anticipated troubles).

A final dimension concerns the degree of obligation to assist. In this respect, the two extremes of the continuum proposed by Kendrick & Drew (2016) are occupied by explicit requests, such as "Pass me a pen," which create a normative expectation of assistance, on the one hand, and signs of projectable troubles (e.g., the absence of a pen nearby someone about to write) that prompt others to offer anticipatory support, on the other. Alternative practices, including trouble reports, alerts, and embodied displays, lying in between these extremes, are characterized by varying degrees of obligation to assist, which may be more or less constraining for participants depending on the situated circumstances.

In a commentary on Kendrick and Drew's (2016) article, Zinken and Rossi (2016) point out that established commitments play a role in how recruitment sequences are organized through embodied interaction. They show that imperative requests (i.e., "Pass me a pen") typically presuppose compliance based on the recipient's prior commitment to a broader, mutually recognized course of action. Similarly, assistance may also be oriented toward fulfilling pre-existing commitments. Overall, their findings suggest that commitment to shared courses of action is a key factor in shaping and advancing certain recruitment sequences, in which the recipient is assumed to be contributing to the overarching joint activity.

Just as recruitment is organized in observable and systematic ways, so is the provision of assistance. Kendrick (2021) identifies a range of methods through which participants make themselves available to help others in interaction. These methods span from subtle embodied cues to overt verbal and physical interventions. For example, individuals may display attention and readiness to assist through their gaze direction, body orientation, or posture – such as a student leaning forward and monitoring a peer's progress during a group activity, thereby signaling availability to help. Assistance can also take the form of identifying troubles on behalf of a co-participant, for instance by producing an alert ("Wait, something is wrong") or reporting a problem ("This pen doesn't work"). In response to emerging difficulties, participants may formulate candidate solutions, such as giving advice ("Try turning it this way") or offering help ("Do you want me to do that part?"). In some cases, assistance is realized through direct intervention, where one participant physically steps in to help another – for example, by momentarily taking over a task to demonstrate a procedure. Finally, help may also be anticipatory, aiming to prevent trouble before it arises, such as reminding a peer of an instruction or setting up materials in a way that facilitates smoother collaboration.

However, as Kendrick (2021) notes, while the methods participants use to recruit assistance from others have been extensively studied (see Floyd et al., 2020, for a cross-linguistic investigation), the various ways in which help is actually provided during interaction have received comparatively less attention. Moreover, as noted in the introduction to the present article, CA-informed research on recruitment and assistance has primarily focused on adult interactions, as well as on early childhood and adolescence. In addition, although previous studies have mostly examined informal or everyday contexts, the institutional setting of classroom interaction – and specifically how recruitment and assistance unfold in this environment – remains underexplored.

This article seeks to address these gaps by examining how children aged 8–9 accomplish recruitment and assistance during in-pairs and in-group classroom activities. As will be shown in the following sections, these environments offer fertile ground for investigating how children navigate recruitment and assistance not only in relation to group members with whom they share specific task responsibilities, but also in relation to peers outside their immediate groups.

3. Data and methods

Our analysis draws on data taken from audio- and video-recordings of peer interactions (pairs and small groups) taking place in 3rd grade Italian primary school classes, and collected in 2024 in a middle-seized town in the north-east of Italy as part of the broader project "Children's interactional competence at school: conversational social norms, participation forms and language structures", aimed at investigating children's interactional competence (Margutti et al., 2025, this issue; cf. Acknowledgments).

Altogether, four classes (with 20-22 pupils each) were recorded during activities in subject-matters like Italian, history, mathematics, geometry, geography and science, for a total of about 60 hours of video-recordings, about 20 of which documenting children's on-task peer interactions. Recordings were made with prior approval of participating schools, teachers, and children's parents.

Data were subsequently transcribed according to CA transcription conventions, adapted from Jefferson (2004), and multimodally annotated (Mondada, 2018, cf. Appendix) to include visible components of the participants' actions such as posture, gaze and gestures. The study presented in the following sections draws on the methodological framework of CA (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) and interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018), particularly for the analysis of the temporality and the linguistic and multimodal formatting of participants' actions (cf. Margutti et al., 2025, this issue).

The extracts discussed in this article are drawn from a larger collection of 32 extended recruitment sequences, documenting diverse practices in the *continuum of recruitment* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016), namely requests (N = 7), trouble reports (N = 9), trouble alerts (N = 2), embodied displays of trouble (N = 1), as well as object offers (N = 8) and offers of help (N = 5).

4. Analysis

As outlined above (§2), the recruitment continuum encompasses methods that range from explicit requests produced by a participant experiencing a trouble on the one hand, to the spontaneous, unsolicited provision of assistance – projecting a trouble that might occur to a co-participant and offering help – on the other.

In the following, we explore the two extremes of this continuum: first of all, drawing on data from in-group and in-pair work, two cases of requests are examined, with a specific focus on syntactic formats (§4.1); we then analyse three instances of in-pair activity in which one member anticipates a trouble to be possibly experienced by the other, thus offering assistance, by looking in particular at how this is multimodally accomplished (§4.2); finally, we discuss a case in which unsolicited assistance is offered to a classmate outside the pair (§4.3).

4.1 Requests of assistance and their compliance: Syntactic formats and embodied conduct

In Italian language, as Rossi (2020) notes, explicit requests can be accomplished through formats such as imperatives, polar interrogatives – with or without the modal verb *potere* ('can') – declaratives, and utterances with no predicate. Against this background, a first illustration of how children, in the context of pedagogical peer interaction, might recruit assistance through explicit requests is provided by the following episode, taken from a class of Italian.

Five pupils – Elena (ELA), Adnan (ADN), Diana (DIA), Joumane, and Eloisa[1] – are working together on a written, illustrated story. Prior to being grouped, each of them had been given a worksheet with the story text to be individually filled in with missing words listed on the back of the same document (Figure A); as a group,

they are now asked to produce a shared version of the cloze-text, and then write the missing words, together with their names, on a new shared worksheet.

Figure A. A translated facsimile of the original worksheet

After completing the first part of the activity, pupils decide that each of them will write two missing words: Elena will be the first one, to be followed by Adnan. Here, Elena has finished writing the second word and, while disagreeing with Joumane's announced intention ('I'm going to write in italics', not shown in the transcript), she passes the worksheet over to Adnan, who is sitting in front of her (l. 1).

Extract 1 (1_A_ 02.26_5_gw_st1, 11:46) "hai una matita"

```
01 ELA    =no:o: stampatello:! ((handling sheet to ADN))
          =no    in block letters!
02 ADN    oh va be'. ((repositioning sheet))
          oh well
03 DIA    >°noi abbiamo pen[sato,<°] ((turning towards passing-by teacher))
          >°we   have    thought<°
04 ELA                   [e:::] bussa.
                          and    knocks.
05        &(0.35)&
   adn    &turns his own sheet and puts it aside&
06 ELA    [bussa de]vi scrivere.
           knocks you must write.
07 ADN    [<bussa.>]
           <knocks.>
```

```
08              (0.3)
09 ADN          bu::ssa. ((bending over the desk, preparing to write))
                knocks.
10              &(0.3)
   adn          &starts writing-->
11 ELA          *°scrivi°, (.) scrivilo [bene.]
                 write        write it  well.
   ela          *holds pencil in R-hand-->
12 ADN                                [&hai una mati-&●]
                                       do you have a penc-
   adn                                 &stops writing and places pencil on desk&
   Fig                                              ●Fig.1
13 ADN          *&hai una matita grazie.●
                 do you have a pencil thanks.
   ela          ->*passes pencil to L-hand-->
   adn            &reaches hand to ELA's pencil-->
   Fig                                 ●Fig.2
14 ELA          e scrivilo● be*&ne capito?
                and write it well   understood?
   ela                      -->*releases pencil
   adn                           &grabs pencil
   Fig              ●Fig.3
```

Figure 1   Figure 2   Figure 3

As can be seen at line 2, Adnan takes the sheet from Elena and repositions it on his desk, while producing a turn (*oh va be'*, 'oh well') which, besides expressing a mild agreement, works as a sequence-closing third (Schegloff, 2007, p. 123-124)[2] marking the transition to the next step of the activity, namely his own upcoming writing task. Elena then suggests him the word to be written (*bussa*, 'knocks', l. 4). She first introduces it, through the (lenghtened) coordinating conjunction *e::* ('and'), as the next item in a series, thereby orienting to Adnan's imminent writing as the next step in the activity at hand; after Adnan puts aside his own sheet (l. 5), she reiterates *bussa* within a directive turn ('bussa you must write', l. 6). Adnan repeats the word (l. 7), and repeats it once again while bending over the desk (l. 9), to then start writing (l. 10). Very soon, though, while ELA, who is still holding her pencil in her right hand, urges him to write 'well' (l. 11), ADN stops writing: he places his own pencil – possibly not working properly – on the desk, and addresses ELA a request displaying his need for another writing tool (l. 12). The request is uttered in overlap with ELA's turn; AND thus cuts off his turn and then reissues the request right after, this time in full form and with a thanking ('do you have a pencil thank you.', l. 13).

Adnan designs his recruiting move as a *hai x* ('do you have x') polar request, a very common format in Italian (Rossi, 2020, pp. 169-173), which asks if the recipient is in possession of an object and, even more relevantly, which projects a polar response that accepts the recruitment (Raymond, 2003). According to Rossi (2020; 2015), in adults' informal conversation this format works as a pre-request to check the availability of an object for use when this is uncertain, and does not assume compliance but makes it contingent upon the recruitee's response; if the target object is available, however, the projected request may be immediately followed by its fulfillment as a relevant, and unmarked, second action[3], optionally accompanied by a polar positive answer.

This can also be observed in the episode of children's peer interaction analysed here, in which both Adnan and Elena are visibly oriented, and in a coordinated way, toward the fulfillment of the request. As a matter of fact, while uttering his turn at line 13, Adnan stretches his hand toward Elena's pencil[4]; during the same turn, Elena passes her pencil from the right to the left hand, to then release it in such a way that her classmate can easily grab it (l. 14), while once again instructing Adnan on calligraphy concerns. Finally, Adnan's orientation to the fact that he will indeed receive a pencil from Elena – an object which is clearly visible to him, and in close proximity – is displayed also by the fact that he constructs his turn with a final *grazie* ('thanks'), this way acknowledging Elena's projected request compliance even *before* this takes place.

A further example of requests, and the syntactic formats children may use in the context of recruitment for assistance – specifically, for the transfer of objects –, is given in Extract 2, taken from a history class on evolution and homo sapiens' precursors. Following the teacher's introduction to the topic, children have received a worksheet with written information on, and a drawing of, *hominin Australopitecus*; in pairs, they have now to read and memorize the text and then ask each other questions on it, as well as color their individual worksheet, to be glued on their own notebooks.

Tracy (TRA) and Lia (LIA) are working as a pair: at this point, they are both engaged with coloring their respective sheet (l. 1), when Tracy – sitting on Lia's lefthand side – turns her gaze to Lia's notebook and points to a specific area on it (lines 2-3), as she produces an interrogative turn (l. 3).

Extract 2 [20_B1_03.20_6_gw_st1, 09:40] *"posso questo colore?"*

```
01        (10.0) ((the two girls work on their own))
02        (1.0) ((TRA turns gaze towards LIA's notebook))

03 TRA    &(0.1) posso    &questo colore?
                  may/can I this colour
   tra    &.............&points to LIA's notebook, RH-->
04        ●*       (0.4)        *       &*●
   lia     *observes notebook*reaches her pencil case*
   tra    ->points------------------------->&
   Fig    ●Fig.1                            ●Fig.2
05        *&       (0.9)              *& (0.2)●
    lia    *takes pcl and gives it to TRA*gazes at TRA-->
    tra     &retracts RH ---------------&grabs pencil
    Fig                                 ●Fig.3
06 TRA    &thank y[ou:.]&
   tra    &turns to notebook&starts colouring-->
07 LIA            [de]vi schiacchiare. (0.4)*
                  you must press
   lia    ->gazes at TRA------------------->*turns to her notebook
08        (20.0) ((the two girls work on their own))
```


Figure 1   Figure 2   Figure 3

As shown in line 3, Tracy recruits Lia's assistance by constructing her turn with the modal *potere* ('may/can') in the interrogative form, inflected for 1st person singular in simple present indicative mood (*posso*, 'may/can I'). This is followed by the indexical noun phrase *questo colore* ('this colour'), the referent of which is made clear by Tracy's pointing to a precise area in the right upper part of Lia's worksheet, which Lia has already colored. In spite of the absence of an infinitive verb after the modal *posso*, Tracy's verbal and embodied conduct (cf. footnote 4) is more than sufficient for Lia to interpret her classmate's utterance as a request for a specific colored pencil, which she promptly fulfills by first looking at the area Tracy is pointing to, to then reach her pencil case (l. 4-5) and finally take the requested object and hand it over to Tracy (l. 5).

Let us now reconsider Tracy's turn design more thoroughly: similarly to Extract 1, the recruiting move is *not* accomplished through an imperative request, typically used to "to solicit actions that contribute to an already established joint project" (Rossi, 2020, p. 169; cf. also Rossi, 2012); nor it is constructed with the quite common interrogative form *puoi x* ('can you x'), which in Rossi's data was found not only to involve "a departure from what the recruitee is currently doing", but also to anticipate the recruitee's possible unwillingness to comply (Rossi, 2020, p. 171).

In a quite subtle way, rather, Tracy uses a modal interrogative which can be employed in Italian to ask for permission – *potere* in the first person singular (*posso*, 'may I') –, to perform an action that is about to disrupt Lia's solitary, ongoing coloring activity. Furthermore, the fact that the verb phrase does not entail an infinitive form (as for instance 'have' or 'take'), leaves it up to Lia to interpret the very nature of Tracy's action and shape her responding move correspondingly.[5]

As shown above, Lia treats it as a request for one of her pencils, and complies with it: a manual action which is made easier by Tracy herself, who, soon after Lia starts reaching to her pencil case (line 5), retracts her right hand so as not to stand in the way of Lia's hand movement.

The two girls' orientation to mutual co-operation and assistance, though, extends beyond 'simply' delivering the requested object on the one hand, and receiving it, on the other: as a matter of fact, Tracy acknowledges Lia's fulfillment of her own need by thanking with an extended form (*thank you:!*, l. 6), while, even more relevantly, Lia, for her part, also instructs Tracy on how to use the pencil ('you have to press', l. 7), and monitors her classmate's coloring for nearly half a second, before returning to her own activity.

4.2 Volunteering assistance: Helping a co-participant with a projectable difficulty

Drawing on three extracts from in-pair activities, this section analyzes instances in which one child volunteers assistance to help the other with a projectable difficulty. These cases lie at the opposite end of the recruitment *continuum* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016) from the requests analysed in the previous section, since children offer their assistance anticipating potential troubles in their partner's ongoing course of action.

In Extract 3, Alan (ALN) and Darren (DRR) are working on a shared task during a history class on the topic "The historian's assistants". In the previous lessons, the teacher introduced the professional figures involved in the production of historical sources, such as the anthropologist, the paleontologist, the geologist, and the archaeologist. In the current class, children, working in pairs, are asked to complete a worksheet similar to the one shown in Figure B.

The worksheet is divided into three sections. In the top section, a description is provided, based on which each pair must identify the relevant professional figure. The central part of the worksheet is intended for the graphical representation of the identified figure. At the bottom of the worksheet, there is an empty space where the children are expected to write the name of the professional (in this case, *geologist*).

Figure B. A translated facsimile of the original worksheet

Before the extract begins, Alan and Darren have decided that the character described in their worksheet is an archaeologist. They wrote the corresponding word in the bottom section of the worksheet and started working on a related drawing. At this point, the teacher approaches their desk and asks whether they are entirely sure that the professional figure described is indeed an archaeologist, as they have written. She then walks away, leaving the children to reconsider their answer. The boys reflect together, and Darren initially treats the teacher's question as a reference to a possible mistake in their spelling of the word "archeologist". He repeats the answer ('archeologist') aloud a few times before asking Alan to say it as well, which Alan does at line 1.

Extract 3 [8_A_02.28_4_gw_st2_09:59]

```
01 ALN      °archeologo.°
              archaeologist
02         (1.5) ((ALN and DRR gaze at each other))
03 ALN      argeologo? ((gazing at DRR))
              argeologist
04         (0.8)
05 DRR      geologo, ((facing ALN and lunging twd him))
              geologist
06 ALN      °geologo,°● ((opening his pencil case))
              geologist
   Fig              ●Fig.1
07         &*(1.6)●&*
   aln      &closes pencil case&
   drr       *turns to desk and grabs a pencil-*
   Fig             ●Fig.2
```

```
08  ALN      *>mi dai una matita (scu-)<*&●
              >can you give me a pencil (sor-)<
    drr      *extends pencil twd ALN----*
    aln                                    &grabs pencil
    Fig                                      ●Fig.3
09           (0.5)
10  DRR      geologo forse. ((while ALN starts writing))
             geologist maybe.
11           (0.6) ((ALN writes; DRR monitors him closely))
```


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

After Alan tentatively repeats the word 'archaeologist' in a soft voice (l. 1), the two boys gaze at each other in silence (l. 2). Alan then proposes a possible alternative by altering the second syllable in the previous word, resulting in *argeologo* ('argeologist'), which he utters with interrogative intonation and maintaining eye contact with Darren, as if seeking his confirmation. Notably, 'argeologist' blends elements of the original 'archaeologist' and the target word 'geologist'. This appears to serve as a cue for Darren, who then proposes the word *geologo* ('geologist') (l. 5). He delivers the word with slightly rising intonation and an abrupt body movement toward Alan, both of which suggest that it is a tentative solution that has just occurred to him.

Alan promptly repeats 'geologist' to acknowledge and confirm Darren's suggestion, while simultaneously beginning to open his pencil case (l. 6). This embodied action projects a transition to the next step in the joint activity – writing the newly identified term 'geologist' in place of the previous 'archaeologist' in the bottom section of the shared worksheet.

As shown in Figure 1, both Alan and Darren look toward the pencil case, visibly orienting to the relevance of finding something to write with (a pencil; see below). In this context, Darren's visible attentiveness to and monitoring of Alan's ongoing search anticipates his *incipient assistance* (Kendrick, 2021), which becomes apparent between lines 7 and 8.

While Alan gradually closes the pencil case without having found a pencil, Darren turns towards his right and retrieves his own pencil from the desk (line 7; Figure 2). This action projects an early embodied response (Mondada, 2021) to Alan's emerging verbal request which eventually remains only partially uttered: in line 8, Alan halts his turn-at-talk orienting to the requested action as already fulfilled by Darren who is at that point extending the pencil to him (line 8; Figure 8). Then, in the final part of the extract, the boys proceed to correct the name on their worksheet.

The following extract illustrates a situation in which a prospective issue becomes recognizable, prompting one child to offer assistance. Arisa (ARI) and Manuel (MAN) are engaged in an activity that involves completing a fairy tale. The task specifically requires the children to first agree on a shared continuation of the story and then write it down. Since each child is using their own exercise book, once they have decided what to write, each must write the same text into their respective book. Prior to the start of the extract, the children had already agreed on a part of the story's continuation, which they both began to write. When the extract begins, Arisa, having already finished writing, assists Manuel, who writes less fluently due to learning-specific difficulties[6].

Extract 4 [17_B1_03.20_1_pl_gw_doc_08:01]

```
01    ARI    la marmellata,● ((dictating to MAN))
             the jam,
      man    >>writes-->
      ari    >>looks closely leaning over MAN's excs. book-->
      Fig                    ●Fig. 1
02           (0.3)
03    ARI    ma::: (.) mə?
             ja       jə?
04           (0.6)+
      man    -->writes-->
      ari    -->leans back looking at MAN's book+
05    MAN    me-,&((spelling))
             ja-,
      man     -->&suspends writing
06    ARI    +se non ci sta allora+● vai +sotto● >okay<?●
              if it doesn't fit then go  below  okay?
      ari    +leans over MAN's book+stands up+points pen at book -->
      Fig                    ●Fig. 2      ●Fig. 3         ●Fig. 4
07    ARI    &+marm-+&
              jam-
      man    &moves pen&
      ari     +moves pen away+
08           &+(0.3) ●
      man    &moves pen off the book
      ari     +bends over MAN's book preparing to write-->
      Fig          ●Fig. 5
09    ARI    +°ma:r: me:: lla::°ta,+
              jam,
      ari    -->+writes--------------+
```
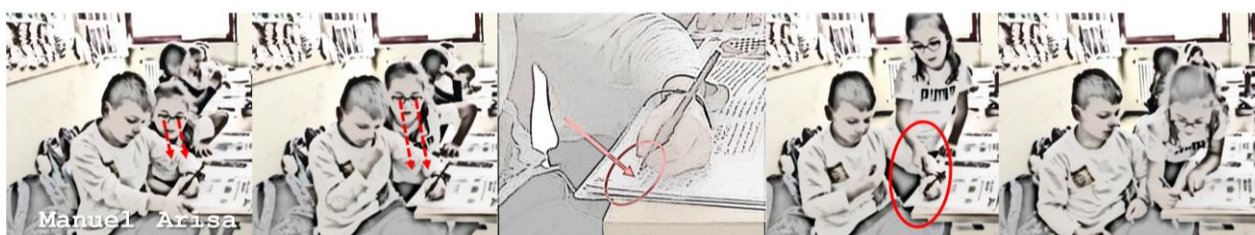


```
 Figure 1       Figure 2        Figure 3        Figure 4        Figure 5
```

Arisa helps Manuel by initially dictating the word *marmellata* ('jam'), which he still needs to write (l. 1). Then, she spells out the first syllables of the same word (l. 3), offering moment-by-moment guidance as Manuel continues writing. Arisa's verbal support is complemented by embodied conduct – her posture and visual orientation – that displays her ongoing attention to and monitoring of Manuel's writing (lines 1-4; Figure 1).

At line 5, Manuel suspends his writing of the word *marmellata*, vocalizing the partial syllable *me* before stopping. Arisa promptly intervenes (l. 6), both vocally – by saying 'if it doesn't fit then go below okay?' – and in an embodied way, by leaning over Manuel's book to better inspect it (Figure 2) and then standing up beside Manuel and pointing to his page with her pen (Figure 4). The immediacy of her response (there is no gap between lines 5 and 6) indicates that she has visually identified an emerging issue: the residual space where Manuel has paused writing appears insufficient to accommodate the rest of the word *marmellata* (Figure 3).

Furthermore, Arisa's assistance unfolds progressively. At line 6, she formulates the trouble as a possible contingency (*se non ci sta*, 'if it doesn't fit') and immediately proposes a solution (*allora vai sotto*, 'then go below'),

instructing Manuel to continue writing on the next line. The appended *okay?* functions as a tag question mobilizing Manuel's acknowledgment or display of acceptance – an uptake which, however, Manuel fails to provide. In line 7, Arisa reads aloud the portion of the word Manuel has already written (*marm-*), displaying her close attention. At this moment, both she and Manuel are holding their pens on Manuel's book. When Manuel eventually lifts his pen (l. 8), creating space, Arisa escalates her involvement: she leans over (line 8) and writes the complete word *marmellata* in Manuel's book (line 9; see Figure 5). Notably, Arisa's potentially intrusive intervention – momentarily taking over Manuel's role in carrying out the writing task – is not treated as problematic by Manuel, who silently accepts her assistance.

In addition to illustrating a case of spontaneous assistance in anticipation of a problem, this extract also demonstrates how various methods of assistance are deployed and organized incrementally. These include, in Kendrick's (2021) terms: attending to and monitoring the partner's ongoing activity (from line 1 onward); positioning oneself nearby and ready to act (line 6); identifying the trouble (line 5); offering advice (line 6); and finally, directly intervening to implement a solution (line 9).

While in the previous extracts children's assistance is mobilized early with respect to a projectable need or difficulty, in the following extract, it is provided preemptively – anticipating and aiming to avoid a potential future difficulty. Elena (ELA) and Diana (DIA) are working together on a Word document. Their task is to compose a recipe which they must complete collaboratively using the same device and taking turns as they write. Prior to the start of the extract, the girls had asked the teacher for help with inserting pictures into their document. After the teacher left, the sidebar containing the images remained open. When the extract begins, the girls resume typing.

Extract 5 [11_A_02.29_2_gw_doc_ricetta burro pc_coppia, 23:32]

```
01    DIA    ora posso girare che sto (0.3) facendo io.
             now I can rotate since I am (0.3) the one doing it.
             ((rotating the screen twd herself))
02           (0.7)
03    DIA    fres:,= ((reading from screen))
             fres:=
04    ELA    +&=spetta che ti tolgo questi,=●+
               =wait I'll remove these for you,
      dia    +types (3X)--------------------+
      ela     &drags cursor twd the sidebar -->
      Fig                                   ●Fig.1
05    DIA    =ca. (0.6) la panna fresca.
             =sh.        the fresh cream.
06           (0.6)
07    dia      &la panna fresca.& ((reading from screen))
                 the fresh cream.
      ela    ->&drags cursor twd the sidebar&
08           &(0.5)●
      ela    &clicks and closes sidebar
      Fig          ●Fig.2
```
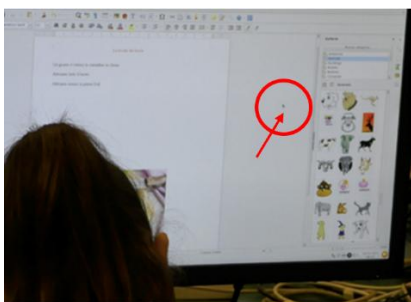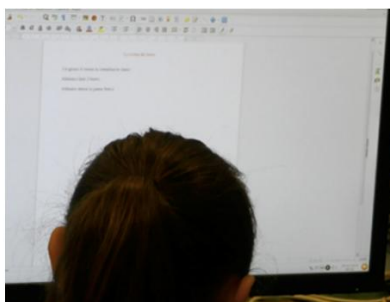
Figure 1

Figure 2

As Diana explains while turning the screen toward herself (l. 1), it is her turn to type. She then reads aloud the word *fresca* ('fresh') which appears only partially written (l. 3: *fres:*) and proceeds to complete it by typing the remaining letters (l. 4). While she is focused on the left side of the screen, where the Word document is displayed, Elena, seated to her right, asks her to stop (l. 4: *spetta*, 'wait') and immediately announces that she is going to remove the pictures in the sidebar (l. 4: *che ti tolgo questi*, 'I'll remove these for you'), as she simultaneously moves the cursor toward the sidebar (Figure 1).

Elena's multimodal action demonstrates a direct intervention in Diana's ongoing activity in a preemptive manner – that is, to prevent potential problems or inconveniences in the document writing process, possibly caused by the sidebar's presence. By saying 'I'll remove these for you', Elena frames her action as both agentive and supportive, positioning herself as the *benefactor* and Diana as the *beneficiary* of her assistance (cf. Clayman & Heritage, 2014).

In the following lines, Diana reads aloud the complete phrase she has just typed, twice (ll. 5-7), without continuing to type. Meanwhile, Elena carries out the previously announced action by clicking and closing the sidebar (l. 8; Figure 2: the sidebar has disappeared).

While in the previous extract the boy receiving assistance holds back from the task and silently accepts the help, in this extract the girl who receives help continues to carry out her own course of action (reading aloud the text typed so far on the screen) while her peer assists her with the sidebar. In both Extracts 4 and 5, by not explicitly acknowledging their partner's assistance, the recipients treat such help as an integral part of collaborative work and therefore as contributing to the joint activity (cf. Zinken & Rossi, 2016), rather than as an action from which they individually benefit.

4.3 Projecting troubles and providing assistance as an overhearer

As discussed above, children provide assistance to each other, when they work in pairs or small groups, not only when requested to do so (§4.1.), but also in anticipation of one another's needs (§4.2.).

Such anticipation is not confined within the own pair or group: on the contrary, and remarkably, in our data it crosses this boundary to extend to other groups' members. What implications does this have in terms of children's orientation to solving troubles their peers may be faced with, and how does this momentaneous "stepping in" into another pair/group's work reconfigures the participation framework at hand?

Let us examine the following interactional episode, illustrated in Extract 6 (part 1, part 2), in which two girls, Rama (RAM) and Giada (GDA), are working in pair at an Italian grammar task. According to the teacher's instructions, the task involves writing ten complete sentences that include qualifying adjectives, as a way to recap previous whole-class work on the topic. Sentences are to be agreed upon within pairs, and written by each pupil in their individual notebook.

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Since activity beginning, Rama has repeatedly proposed sentences (e.g. 'the girl is good', 'my mother is nice', 'my mother cooks well', not shown in the transcript), without getting any vocal reaction by Giada, who 'just' stared at her; at Rama's fourth attempt (l. 1), Giada finally displays her availability to engage in interaction, albeit with a refusal accomplished through a head shake (l. 2).

Extract 6, part 1 [54_C_12.03_4_5_gw_st1, 01:06] "e allora cosa vuoi fare"

```
01    RAM    la mia mamma è brava a cucinare.
             my mother    is good at cooking
02           (3.4) ((GDA shakes her head))
03    RAM    e allora cosa vuoi fare!
             then what do you want to do
04           (3.0) ((GDA shrugs, staring ahead))
05    RAM    cioè >posso aspettare< così, anch'io aspetto così.
             I mean I can wait like this I wait like this too
             ((with her arms hanging by her sides))
06           &(1.4)          &(1.4)
      gda    &gazes at RAM  &briefly gazes left, then back at RAM->
07    RAM    io scrivo. ((placing her hands on the desk and grabbing a pen))
             I'm going to write
08           (18.6) ((RAM writes; she gazes at GAI for a few seconds, then
                      resumes writing; GDA remains sitting, still and silent))
09    RAM    è,
             is,
10           (0.7) ((RAM erases then resumes writing))
11    RAM    è brava a cucinare.
             is good at cooking
12           (16.8)((RAM writes; GDA remains still staring ahead))
13           (2.0) ((RAM ends writing, crosses her arms and stares at GDA
                      with a serious facial expression -->))
```

As can be seen throughout lines 2-13, upon Giada's embodied refusal the interaction between the two girls escalates: Rama's question at line 3, which, though uttered forcefully, does open up a space for a proposal by Giada, is responded to with a shrug, leading the girl to complain for her partner's lack of collaboration (l. 5). Then, in the absence of any uptake by Giada, Rama decisively announces her upcoming activity ('I'm going to write', l. 7), and will be engaged writing her last proposal ('my mother is good at cooking') for more than thirty seconds, with Giada staring ahead. Once finished writing, Rama reorients to Giada, crossing her arms and gazing at her with a serious facial expression (l. 13), which she will keep almost uninterruptedly for another four seconds (lines 14-17, not shown in the transcript).

While keeping staring at Giada, finally, Rama urges her to write: a directive which is explicitly, and verbally, refused by her classmate, as can be seen in the second part of the extract shown below (lines 18-20).

Extract 6, part 2 [54_C_12.03_4_5_gw_st1, 01:53] "vuoi la mia?"

```
18    RAM    scrivi! ((to GDA))
             write!
19           (0.6)
20    GDA    no! io non: non la voglio.
             no! I don't I don't want it.
21           ● (1.5)*(1.3)*●
      cle           *body torque twd GDA gazing at her face*
      Fig    ●Fig.1        ●Fig.2
```

```
22   RAM    +*allora ●falla farla tu!+*
              then     do it you do it yourself!
     ram    +gesticulates holding pen+
     cle     *gazes at RAM's hands----*
     Fig            ●Fig.3
23          *(0.9)*
     cle    *gazes at pens on GDA's notebook*
24   CLE    *vuoi la mia? ●
             do you want mine?
     cle    ->*reaches out to GDA with a pen in her hand-->
     Fig                 ●Fig.4
25          (1.3)
     cle    ->holds pen gazing at GDA's face-->
26   GDA    no.
             no
27            *(2.8)
     cle    ->*retracts hand and turns back to own desk
```


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

As it is hearable from the videorecorded data, both Rama's and Giada's turns at lines 18 and 20 are uttered loudly enough to be possibly heard by nearby children: that seems to be the case with Clementina (CLE), who, working with her classmate Filippo, sits on a desk located on the left-hand side from Giada's one (see Fig. 1), and who, a second and a half after Giada's refusal, turns to the latter while gazing at her (Fig. 2).

Her gaze, though, is soon redirected toward Rama's hands (Fig. 3), who gesticulates passing her pen from the right to the left hand as she replies to Giada's rejection ('then do it do it yourself!', l. 22). Thereafter, once again Clementina turns her gaze toward Giada – this time gazing down at the girl's notebook, on which two pens are placed (l. 23) –, and she then proceeds to offer the classmate her own pen, both verbally (*vuoi la mia?*, 'do you want mine?') and non-verbally, in that she reaches out to Giada with the pen she was previously using (l. 24, Fig. 4). Remarkably, she holds it there for more than one second before Giada – whose refusal *non la voglio* is related to the sentence (It. *frase*, feminine noun) proposed by Rama – rejects it.

What is the ground of Clementina's offer? Obviously, we do not know what she might have captured from the two girls' interaction up to this moment; as soon as she turns to the pair through a body torque, however, her

embodied conduct reveals how she is trying to make sense of what is taking place next to her. She does so by assembling heterogeneous audible and visible material that progressively becomes available to her, first of all possibly as an overhearer (Goffman, 1981) of the ongoing conversation, and then through full aural access. These resources are: a turn-at-talk which refers to writing (*scrivi!*, 'write!'), a disagreement token (*no!*) after which CLE turns to Giada, a full refusal (*io non: non la voglio*) which entails the feminine personal pronoun *la* ('it') – here implicitly referring to the feminine noun *la frase* ('the sentence') –, and a further utterance similarly comprising *la* (*allora far*la *fa*lla *tu!*). What is more, as already mentioned, throughout this interactional stretch Clementina seems to visually perceive writing objects, namely Rama's pen at line 22 and Giada's pens at line 23: considering that in Italian 'pen' (*penna*) is also feminine-gendered, and in view of Clementina's subsequent offer, it becomes now clear how Clementina has come to interpret the pronoun as referring to a pen, and has acted accordingly, from her own perspective.

Together with further similar cases in our collection, the episode neatly documents how children may be oriented not only to local contingencies within the specific participation framework of the peer work they are engaged in, but also to possibly emerging troubles beyond it, thus suspending their own course of action to help other groups' members. In doing so, they are seen to organize their help based on the situated interpretation of what is happening and to respond accordingly. This is the case for Clementina in Extract 6 (part 2), who interprets the difficulty between Rama and Giada as being caused by a problem with a pen, and who thereby relies on momentary, on-the-spot cues. Finally, worth mentioning here – and to be further explored in the data – is how Clementina's assistance to Giada reconfigures the participation framework at hand across the two pairs (Tracy/Giada, and Clementina/Filippo) just for a few seconds, before interaction continues within them: a trace of the (apparent) fluidity with which children accomplish their interactional roles as members of a specific pair/group, and which possibly goes beyond institutional, normative expectations (cf. §2) on what it means to "work together".

5. Conclusion

In this article, we examined the way in which Italian primary school children coordinate, request, and offer assistance during small-group and in-pair classroom activities: by shedding light on their interactional practices, we aimed at advancing our understanding of how 8-9-year-olds navigate, negotiate, and calibrate their interactions, showing how cooperative engagement is dynamically constructed within the institutional classroom environment.

Through the fine-grained, multimodal analysis of interactional episodes in which children work with their classmates, it was possible to observe how they coordinate assistance and manage both emerging and potential difficulties in collaborative tasks, by combining verbal and embodied resources. Our analysis focused specifically on practices situated at the two opposite ends of the *recruitment continuum* (Kendrick & Drew, 2016): (1) explicit requests for help and their multimodal responses, and (2) unsolicited offers of assistance aimed at preempting a classmate's potential trouble.

The analysis showed that, in requesting assistance, children draw on a range of linguistic formats, including polar interrogatives (e.g., *hai x* – 'do you have x?'), and interrogatives with modals (e.g., *posso x?* – 'may/can I x?'). The use of pre-requests or of mitigated forms (e.g., modal expressions possibly requesting permission) instead of imperative directives reflects children's orientation to preserving the recipient's agency and adapting to local contingencies, such as minimizing interruption of a peer's ongoing action. Unlike imperatives, which project an obligation to assist and prompt immediate compliance, requests anticipate the possibility of refusal

(while still potentially implying a preference for acceptance), thus placing less restrictive constraints on the recipient. Furthermore, these requests integrate vocal and embodied resources such as gesture and gaze, which allows for precise timing and coordination. Responses to requests typically go beyond fulfilling the immediate demand: children monitor, support, and guide one another's activity, often offering additional forms of assistance, such as practical instructions.

As our study shows, their assistance, however, is not only reactive but also frequently anticipatory – provided before a difficulty becomes explicit – and even preemptive, designed to prevent a problem altogether.

This anticipatory dimension is especially evident when children volunteer help during shared tasks: such instances reveal how peer assistance is layered and incremental – involving close monitoring, verbal scaffolding, spatial positioning, and even direct intervention –, and reflect children's moment-by-moment tracking of their partner's ongoing and projected action trajectories.

Finally, and notably, children's cooperative behavior is not confined to their own pair or group. They occasionally intervene across group boundaries, offering spontaneous assistance based on partial, overheard cues, and piecing together audible and visible elements of nearby interactions. These moments of unsolicited, cross-group help momentarily reconfigure participation frameworks, and hint at children's practical orientation beyond institutional expectations of fixed group roles, toward a more dynamic and responsive understanding of peer cooperation in the classroom.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Here, as in all extracts, participants' names are replaced by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.
2. While the Italian expression *va be'* has not been investigated from a CA perspective yet, Veronesi (2020) has shown how related discourse markers as *bene*, *va bene*, *benissimo*, similarly to the English 'okay' and 'good', and Spanish *bien* and *muy bien*, may be used as pre-closing and activity-transition resources in interaction. On *be'* as a stand-alone cf. Pauletto (2016).
3. Cf. also Zinken (2020, p. 313), who points out that fully non verbal compliance is common "when a recruited action can be performed quickly and easily".
4. As Rossi (2020, p. 158) observes, recruiting moves in Italian – as in other languages (Floyd et al., 2020, p. 36) – may involve a combination of verbal and non-verbal elements, "reaching out to receive an object" being one of them. According to Rossi (ibidem), additional embodied resources used in such "composite recruiting moves" are pointing, holding out an object for someone to take, iconic gesture depicting the shape of the target object/action, and placing an object in a meaningful location. Although Rossi does not refer to Mondada (2014) in his work, such an interplay between talk and embodied conduct may be also conceptualized in terms of "complex multimodal Gestalts", that is, as "complex multimodal actions, which are progressively shaped through time and which mobilize multimodal resources in a way that is finely distributed" (Mondada, 2014, p. 142).

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5. While CA studies on bare uses of the format *may I/can I* without a predicate are still scarce, the full format is typically associated with requests for permissions and requests for actions (i.e., object transfer) (Deppermann & Gubina, 2021, p. 5). According to Zinken (2015), with a 'can I have x'-request related to a "shared good" (for instance, the pepper grinder on the dinner table), often produced with a reaching-out gesture, speakers treat recipients as being in control over it, with the obligation to make the object available. This is not the case with Tracy, though, who not only targets an object owned by Lia, but also 'omits' the infinitive form considered obligatory in normative grammars, thus producing a turn which can be interpreted both as a request for permission and a request for action.

6. This information derives from fieldwork observations and from conversations with the teachers.

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Appendix: transcription conventions (multimodality)

Multimodal details have been transcribed according to the following conventions:

* *   each participant's actions are delimited by the use of the same symbol

---->*   described action continues until the same symbol is reached

*--->   described action continues across subsequent lines

>>--   described action begins before the extract's beginning.

......   action's preparation.

(( ))   description of action concurrent with talk, or during a long pause, in italics

ela   participant doing the action is identified in small characters

Fig   image; screen shot

•   indicates the exact moment at which the screen shot has been recorded

An indicative translation is provided line per line, in Roman type.

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