Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education 20, 2 (2025). ISSN 1970-2221.

Responding beyond the informative content: Pupils conforming their answers to question expectations in whole-class interaction

Piera Margutti
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Daniele Urlotti
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Elisa Rossi
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Abstract

The article explores a type of pupils' answers to teachers' questions in whole-class instruction activities in three primary schools in one Northern Italian region. Our aim is to document the pupils' competence in overcoming situations when, owing to the highly competitive setting of plenary classes, they realise that the projected answer is not anymore consistent with the requirements of the question. The research is based on a corpus of video-recorded classes that we collected in third-year class groups, with children aged 8-9. The analysis focuses on a specific set of answers: those that go beyond the mere provision of the requested information. By looking at the material that children add to the informative item, the analysis shows how children master a sophisticated interactional competence enabling them to designed appropriate answers in situations where, owing to unexpected contextual conditions, they do not align (anymore) with the expectation of the question they aimed to respond.

L'articolo esplora un tipo di risposte degli alunni alle domande dell'insegnante nel contesto di attività organizzate in forma plenaria in tre scuole elementari di una regione dell'Italia del Nord. Il nostro obiettivo è di documentare la competenza degli alunni nel risolvere situazioni in cui, a causa del contesto altamente competitivo nelle lezioni frontali, accade che la risposta non sia più in linea con le richieste della domanda. La ricerca si basa su un corpus di lezioni video-registrate in tre classi terze, con bambini di 8-9 anni. L'analisi si concentra su un tipo specifico di risposte: quelle che offrono più della mera informazione richiesta. Osservando il materiale aggiuntivo, l'analisi mostra come i bambini mostrino di possedere una sofisticata competenza interazionale che permette loro di confezionare risposte appropriate in situazioni in cui, a causa di sopravvenute condizioni contingenti, queste non siano (più) in linea con le richieste espresse nella domanda a cui aspiravano di rispondere.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

Keywords: children interactional competence; classroom interaction; whole-class sessions; children answers; self-repair

Parole chiave: competenza interazionale dei bambini; interazione in classe; lezioni plenarie; risposte dei bambini; auto-riparazione

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

1. Introduction

This article explores children's interactional conduct in pedagogic activities that are organised as whole-class sessions (plenary classes), in which the teacher alternatively addresses questions to the class group or to one selected individual pupil, soliciting their participation through series of pre-planned questions, usually shaped as known-answer questions (Mehan, 1979), also known as "requests for display" (Labov & Fanshel, 1978). Since the teacher knows the answer to the question, the purpose of these sessions is clearly not merely that of gaining specific information, but rather to lead the class to perform tasks, to acquire new notions, or to exercise skills, as well as to assess children's knowledge. The study focuses on one specific type of answers to these questions, having observed that often the design of these answering turns is not limited to the mere informative content. Our hypothesis is that these extra components of turn design show how pupils orient to the goal of the question and to the activity in which the question arises, beyond its mere content. Our starting point is that the extra material that children's produce when answering – be it a repair strategy, or a preface, an epistemic disclaimer or a downgrading device, is a window on the children's work to identify any possible clue that might be useful to arrive at their understanding of the "right" answer, both in terms of its content and of the pedagogical actions which these questions and their answers might serve. The complexity and subtlety involved in answering argues for the sophisticated level of the interactional competence of children of this age.

Our interest for the details of the pupils' answering turns and for what these might reveal about the children's interactional competence at school distinguishes our approach from other perspectives in prior research on classroom interaction. In the next section we provide a more accurate literary review of these investigations. However, in terms of positioning our study within the broader issues characterising classroom interaction research, we would like to highlight that, with few exceptions, pupils' answers have been mainly studied as part of the I-R-E (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979) and considered in relation to their information-giving function. In other words, these studies have hardly considered pupils' answers in their full meaning; one that includes the pupils' interpretation of the purpose of the question, beyond the informative content and consistency with the request of the teacher's question. A further interest of research on classroom interaction, stemming from the abovementioned studies, concerns the cognitive effort required on pupils to provide the expected answer (Wells, 1993; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Mercer et al., 2008; Nystrand et al., 2003; Youngju & Mable, 2012).

By using Conversation Analysis our aim is not to measure or classify pupils' answers on their cognitive value, but to find out what children understand about teacher questions, their function in the course of action in which they occur, beyond displaying to know the information requested. This interpretive work emerges in the design of the answer, by means of all the features of delivery (prosody, silence, vocal and visual resources) as well as all the linguistic elements used to build the answering turn. The study is based on a corpus of classroom interactions in 10 third-year groups from 3 primary schools, that have been videorecorded in 2022 in 2 cities in the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy.

2. Literature review on pupil responses to questions

The studies we revise here do not cover all previous research on interactional competence in general or on children's competence. For these more general issues, we refer readers to the methodological article in this special issue (Margutti et al., 2025, this issue: "What authentic data tell us about pupils' interactional competence: a video-based interdisciplinary study"), which includes a more extensive review on classroom interaction and on children's competence in this setting. In this section we will review works that focus exclusively on the theme of

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

the article: children's responses to teacher questions during pedagogic activities. We also highlight a further restriction of our focus on a specific age span (8-9 years of age), recalling that children's linguistic, pragmatic and interactional competence undergoes significative changes across their development. Another caveat concerns the exclusion from this review of the studies on children's interactional competence in L2 (foreign or second language) since this domain of phenomena is beyond our research interest, involves specific mechanisms and, more crucially, this issue did not emerge as relevant in our data.

Although research focusing specifically on children's responses is relatively limited, it draws from diverse fields such as ethnomethodology, psychology, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, educational studies and sociology. Therefore, we organised this review in three main sections of studies. Each group represents a distinct perspective on children's responses: from interactional analysis, to sociological approaches to the correctness of the answer, to broader institutional contexts. A first set includes research that originated in the fields of conversation analysis, discourse analysis and ethnomethodology. In these fields, classroom interaction with its three-part model (I-R-E) has become a primary object of study, resulting in a wide body of literature spreading also in psychology and educational studies. The second group consists of studies from educational sociology that examine how pupils determine correct answers. The final group includes articles focusing on how children within the selected age range respond to adult questions in both ordinary and institutional contexts, other than classroom.

Studies of the first group mainly investigated pupils' answers at school as the result of the impact of teachers' questions, as well as in relation to the third-evaluative turn, within the well-known three-part (I-R-E, Initiation-Response-Evaluation) sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979; Heath, 1983). The pupils' voice that finds its way in the responsive action has been overlooked and considered almost only for its referential meaning (wrong/correct) and cognitive value (Wells, 1993; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Mercer et al., 2008; Nystrand et al., 2003; Youngju & Mable, 2012). Regarding the cognitive dimension, by adopting the social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978), research in the psychology field established the impact of teacher questions on student answers. These works report that known-answer questions (known also as close-ended or test questions) are less cognitively challenging than open-ended ones (Youngju & Mable, 2012) because in the former the purpose is that of eliciting information that is known or evident to the recipient, such as "descriptions of what students were observing, feeling, or thinking at the time of the question" or "recitation and report of old information" (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 148), to be assessed by the teacher. By contrast, open-ended questions solicit responses that require more abstract cognitive processes such as generalization, analysis, inferences or other types of speculation, also allowing digressions and narratives. One consequence of this approach is that it overlooks the most fine details of the construction and delivery of the answering turn, offering descriptions that miss the interactional work in which pupils are engaged to meet the requirements of the questions not only as far the content of the question are concerned, but also in terms of their interpretation of the reason why that specific question is being asked and in that way. By focusing solely on the correctness or on the cognitive value of pupil responses, researchers may overlook important aspects of student agency and participation in classroom discourse.

In contrast to these studies, by adopting a conversationalist approach, this article does not focus merely on the *content of the answer*, as the result of the children's cognitive competence, inner knowledge, or categorising skills, but focuses on how pupils display their understanding of the question in relation to the activity in which it occurs. By taking into consideration *the design of the turn* as a whole, including all the verbal and non-verbal resources that children mobilise to publicly display what they judge it is the correct answer to the question, the article will account for the pupils' interactional competence in a specific, long and extensively studied setting, contributing a perspective from the angle of the pupils' voice.

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Around the same period when the studies of the first group were issued, another approach to the study of question-answers between pupils and teachers was adopted by sociologists working within the classroom tradition. These scholars investigated the methods used by pupils to arrive at the "right" answers. They identified some of the most common strategies, all related to the practice of referring to prior talk. For instance, Mehan (1974) shows that when offering their answer, children might repeat one that was *previously offered by another pupil*; another strategy is to offer as a response an item that occurred in the *teachers' prior talk* (MacLure & French, 1980). These practices are described as displaying pupils' understanding that what has been said might be relevant for future talk. Hammersely (1977) claims that these practices are similar to the procedure that adult interactants use to maintain a sense of social action, whereby the listeners' interpretive actions have to do with a "retrospective-prospective interpretation" of others' talk (Garfinkel, 1967). However, although it is clear that children are aware that the issues treated in talk are interrelated (MacLure & French, 1980, p. 77) and that what is mentioned in prior talk is relevant for the progression of the activity in some ways, it is not equally clear whether they have a perception of *how* these facts and issues are related to one another, and to the activity proposed by the teacher (ibid.).

Building on the claims of this second branch of studies, and on the observation that children refer to prior talk as a resource to understand the action that is carried out by the question and to arrive at the "right" answer, this study will show precisely *how* this is actually achieved by pupils in their answers. By using the notion of *sequential organization* of talk and that of the *ordered structure of turns* (Schegloff, 2007), the analysis will show that children are aware that all turns are contingent on the constraints posed by the prior turn, as well as posing themselves constraints on what recipients will do in the next one (Heritage, 1984). Through the 'next position' linkage of utterances, the analysis will show how children's answers display "the understanding and appreciation of the prior turn" (Heritage, 1984, p. 256). In other words, by looking at the pupils' answering turns from this perspective it will be possible to provide evidence of their interpretation of the interaction in which they are actively participating. Consequently, when we consider pupils' answers, we do not mean to find out whether they know or not that information expected by the teacher; rather our purpose is to document and prove what they *claim to know*, how they *display their knowledge* of the answer, and, ultimately, what they treat as the expected or "right" answer.

Finally, we think relevant reporting some further results of studies that investigated the interactional competence of children of the age on which we focus upon, when responding to questions in the context of ordinary interaction at home and with peers and in some institutional settings, other than the classroom (Ervin Tripp, 1979; Mueller, 1972; Casillas et al., 2016; Stivers et al., 2018). According to the studies on peer interaction and ordinary conversation with adults, school-aged children seem to respond to questions less often than older speakers; they also rarely initiate new discursive sequences through questions, requests, assessments, explanations, directives, explicit reference to norms, formulations or narratives. Other studies in developmental psychology that focused on children's responses in interviews in courtrooms and maltreatment investigations, focused on the accuracy of the responses, on the children's ability to recall and their suggestibility (Gee et al., 1999; Davies et al., 2000; Fritzley & Lee, 2003; Krähenbühl & Blades, 2006). Interestingly, these studies claim that in these settings children tend to respond accordingly to what they interpret as being required of them and to avoid claiming lack of knowledge; thus, displaying sophisticated interpretive skills. These apparently conflicting results, as compared to those emerged in studies on ordinary conversation, confirms this reflexive relationship between the context features and the participants' inferences, on one side, and speakers' interaction conducts, on the other, with the participants displaying a variety of skills and practices accordingly to the requirements

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

posed by the questions in each setting. This argues for an in-depth investigation of children's responses in the context of classroom interaction and against generalisation of results.

The analysis presented here applies CA to a collection of answers whose components include *other elements beyond the mere information item that has been asked*. In the examples presented in the central analytic section, in fact, these turns are very often assembled out of a range of multimodal, verbal and non-linguistic elements that indicate self-repair (Schegloff et al., 1977; Drew et al., 2013), such as hesitations, reformulations, re-starts and other forms of disfluency. Owing to the close exploration of turn design that is one of the core dimensions of talk in the CA's analytic framework, the phenomenon of repair has been described as the organised methods that speakers use to deal "recurrent problems of hearing, speaking and understanding" (Schegloff et al., 1977, p. 361). In our work we will refer to self-repair, which includes all practices that speakers adopt to change what they are saying, while they are talking. As Drew et al. (2003) claim, "so frequently speakers are in some way changing what they are in the course of saying, or have said, not in order to correct a mistake, but for some other interactional 'purpose'" (p. 72). From this point of view, all the elements indicating hesitation, uncertainty, delay and which are treated as uninfluential and secondary by other analytical approaches, in our study are extremely relevant to displaying the children's ongoing effort to produce an answer. These features show how children struggle to align with the request posed by the questions and with the action that is implemented through the question-answer sequence, beyond the mere information content that is requested and offered.

This article shows a selection of these types of answers. Findings offer a portrait of the interactional competence of children of this age range from their own perspective and based on the details of their conduct. The analysis distinctively shows that for children themselves the work of answering these questions is not limited to the knowledge of informative elements. The information is packaged and delivered in an answering turn, whose design conveys how children understand the role of the information not only in terms of its abstract truth-value, but also with regards to the way in which it is requested.

3. Data and method

This article draws from a corpus of about 60 hours of video-recorded classes in different disciplines that took place in 3 primary schools in the Emilia-Romagna Region in the Spring of 2024. The schools differed significantly in terms of their location, the population they served and the organization of their activities. One school serves the population of a small provincial town and adopts a traditional organization of activities. In this school we video recorded two classes and the video recordings took place in the two rooms where children and teachers spent most of their daily time. The other two schools belong to the same "Istituto comprensivo" and are located in the outskirts of a town of middle dimensions. According to the discipline here are taught, children change classrooms which are referred to as "lab". We were allowed to record the lessons that took place in the natural science and in the computer sciences labs. During the week of the recordings, 8 groups attended their lessons in these rooms.

This article uses the methodological framework of Conversation Analysis, whose main objective is to identify the structures and organization of social actions in interaction. This approach moves from the idea that talk "does things" (Austin, 1962) and that speakers do that in an orderly and organised way; consequently, it emphasizes the social nature of language and the communicative, multimodal (verbal and nonverbal) resources that contribute to the production of social actions (Heritage, 2022). It adopts an empirically-based method of investigation of authentic data. These are video or audio recorded, transcribed and repeatedly observed with the purpose of searching for the methodical and orderly practices that speakers adopts in the course of their everyday

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

activities, and through which they show how they make their conducts understandable for the others, as well as how they understand those of others (Sacks, 1995; Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 2007; Robinson et al., 2024).
One of the main objectives of our unit was to explore the interactional resources and skills that children of this age employ to participate meaningfully in the specific setting of whole-class instruction sessions. In contrast to the focus of other units within the project, our primary interest was that of observing children's behaviour in the competitive context of this setting: that is, how they publicly display their knowledge of the topic under discussion, of the rules governing turn-taking in this context, and how they demonstrate their understanding of the pedagogic activity.
To this end, our unit concentrated on two main types of actions: children's spontaneous initiatives and their responses. In this article, we present the results of our analysis of a particular type of responses—namely, those in which the turn goes beyond the mere provision of the requested information. For each of the class groups recruited by our research unit, we selected two extended sequences and analysed the pupils' responses, identifying those that exhibited this feature.
In the first part of the next analytic section, we illustrate the main criteria we followed to identify the type of answers we focused upon and on which we built a collection of cases, from where we selected the most relevant ones for this article.

4. Analysis

In this section we propose a selection of the clearest cases of children's answers, where they realise that their projected answer is not anymore attuned to the expectations conveyed by the teachers' question and start to modify its trajectory. Before moving to the analysis, we clarify with some examples the criteria we followed to select the more representative cases and exclude others.
The following extract is an example with two occurrences (arrowed lines) of the type of answer that we excluded because they do not present any indication of revision in the child's answer. The answering turns (ll. 6 and 16) contain the exact information that is requested.

Extract 1 [MO_SD_03.21_L1_C3] Geometry lesson: angles
The activity consists in the revision of the notion of angles the teacher introduced in one of the earlier geometry lessons. She selects one pupil in a round, after having invited them to bid for answers (l. 2).

```
1     T:          come si chiamano le semirette
                  what are half lines called
                  ((addressing the other side of the room))
2     T:          ^per alzata [di mano
                   raise your hands
3     STs:        ^((raise hands))
4     Mat:                    [↑uh::: uh.
                                uh    uh
5     Ste:        ↑lo so!
                  I know it
5     T:          Stefano
                  Stefano
6     Ste: →      lati?
                  sides
7     T:          la:ti. (0.2) un lato  due lati. bene.
                  sides        one side two sides good
8                 ^come si chiama il [^punto di ori^gine
                  what  is the   origin point    called
```


DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

```
9     Ste:        ^((raises hand))
10    St:                           [>uh<
                                     uh
11    Ste:                          [↑lo so!   ↑lo so!
                                     I know it I know it
12    Sts:                          ^((4 pupils raise hands))
13    Sts:                                          ^((7 pupils with raised hands))
14    T:          ((points to Caty))
15                (0.8)
16    Cat: →      vertice
                  vertex /((the majority of children who had raised their hands
                            now lower them))
17    T:          vertice. molto bene.
                  vertex   very good
```

Children display their willingness to answer and their orienting to the rule of other selection by bidding in various ways: raising hands (ll. 3, 9, 12, 13), non-linguistic vocalizations as summons (ll. 4, 10), claims of knowledge (ll.5. 11). In this extract, the answering turns of the two selected pupils are restricted to the informative content of the answer. By contrast, let us consider the extract below, where Matteo revises his answer while responding.

Extract 2 [MO_SD_03.18_L1_C1] Grammar: classifying names

The interaction is from an Italian grammar lesson. The teacher engages children on the classification of common names. The transcript captures the interaction at the beginning of the lesson. The teacher poses a very general question on children, asking to compare the three common names he wrote on the whiteboard ("cow", "police officer" and "chair"/ "*mucca*", "*poliziotto*", "*sedia*"), finding out what these names have in common and on what they differ (l.1). Our focus is Matteo's answer in line 9.

```
01    T:          ^proviamo a ragionare. su che cos'hanno (1.2) in COMUNE:::, (0.8)
                  let's try  to reason   on what ((they)) have  in common
                  ^((turns slightly to the board))
02                queste tre parole, e  che  cos'hanno di differe^nte.
                  these three words  and what they have ((which is)) different
03    LU:                                                        ^((raises hand))
04                (2.4)/((some simultaneous talk))
05    MAT:        ((raises hand))UH!
                              uh ((summoning/asking to be selected))
06    T:          vai Matte  cos'hanno       in comune.
                  go on Matte what do they have in common
07                (0.4)
08    MIA:        ((raises hand))
09    MAT: →      che:: la mucca è un anima- d-A::H! in comu:ne,
                  that  a  cow  is an anim- d-ah     in common
10    T:          ^ah vu-   tu vuoi già dire:::   ^una cosa di differente?
                  ah d'you- you already want to say  one thing that is different
                  ((left hand palm open facing forward))
11    MIA:        ^((shakes the hand that she had raised before))
12    PAO:                                          ^((raises hand))
13    MAT:        sì  [(se  )
                  yes (if   )
14    T:              [vai quali sono le differenze
                      go on what are the differences
```

The design of the question in lines 1-2 allows the children to choose between either similarities or differences as acceptable answers. After the bids to answer and the children's comments that follow (ll. 3-5), immediately after selecting Matteo, the teacher reformulates the question, proposing only the first part of the original question

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(l.6). By starting the answer with "*che*" / "that", Matteo makes his turn recognizable as a response, with the conjunction "that" linking the projected answer back to the question. From the first turn component, in which he indicates the referent of the first name ("a cow is an animal"), it is clear that he will refer to the differences concerning the referents (extralinguistic features) of these names and that he is orienting to the second "horn" of the original question. In this, Matteo also conforms to a standard conversational mechanism: i.e., the preference for contiguity (Sacks, 1987).

Crucially, before reaching the full completion of the utterance, he self-interrupts the delivery of the last word of the sentence, produces another self-interruption, and finally a change-of-state token (Heritage, 1984; in Italian "*ah*"). Self-interruptions and the "ah" mark the beginning of a repair sequence. The turn continues with "*in comune*" ("in common"): a repetition of the key-element in the teachers' reformulated question. This construction in Matteo's turn shows that he has identified the inappropriateness of his response to the second version of the question and, with the repetition of the teachers' last question ("in common") he is checking what the expected answer is. The extract shows that, in this setting, knowing the content of the answer is not sufficient. Pupils need to master the ability to monitor the progression of the sequence moment-by-moment and revise the projected turn to align to the contingencies of the interaction. In this example, the self-repair provides evidence of Matteo's competence in revising his turn, to give an answer that adapts with the changes involved in the progression of the activity, whatever the teacher's purpose for reformulating the question was.

In his regard, it is worth observing that Matteo's self-repaired answer in Extract 1 clearly shows the child's awareness that answering entails not only having understood the possible content of the question, but also organising the answer delivery in line with the request. In this case, when Matteo shows his willingness to answer in line 5, as the first part of his answer shows, he is orienting to the preceding question (ll, 1-2). Indeed, the teacher has directed an open-ended question to the whole group. When Matteo gets the turn, the first part of his answer, before the self-interruption, shows that he is proffering one difference between the three names, which is one of the requests included in the question. However, he promptly shows that he is aware that now his answer no more fits the second version of the question produced by the teacher in line 6. Matteo's behaviour evidences that he has heard and understood the second question and that he is willing to go along with it, repairing the trajectory of his earlier production.

Further evidence is provided in the continuation of the extract, where it is clear that Matteo, indeed, knew the correct answer regarding one of the options:

Extract 3 [MO_SD_03.18_L1_C1] Grammar: classifying names (continuing from Extract 2)

```
10   T:          ah vu-   tu vuoi già dire:::      ^una cosa  di differente?
                 ah d'you- you already want to say one thing they have that is different
                 ((left hand palm open facing forward))
11   MIA:        ^((shakes the hand that she had raised before))
12   PAO:                                        ^((raises hand))
13   MAT:        sì [(se  )
                 yes (if  )
14   T:             [^vai   quali sono le differenze
                      go on what are   the differences
15   EL:            ^ ((raises hand for a second))
16   MAT: →      che la mucca è un ^animale il poliziotto può essere (0.2)=
                 that the cow is an animal  the police officer can be
18   T:                           ^((T starts writing Luca's assertions on the board))
19   MAT:        =sia::, (.) un::ə, (.) un animale sia un umano, ^(.) e la=
                  both       an         an animal   and a human       and the
20   SS:                                                          ^((indistinct talk))
```


DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

```
21    MAT:      =sedia è un oggetto.
                ***chair is an object***
22                (1.0)
```

This time, Matteo delivers his answer in a more confident way, without interruptions, or hesitation or other disfluences, as well as other linguistic, prosodic or verbal materials. The sentence fulfills the informative request of the question in line 14, asking "what are the differences".
Now that we illustrated the cases of self-repair in the children's answering turns that build our collection, in what follows we present a selection of similar cases which we have grouped according to the dimension of the initial trajectory of their answer that the child displays to understand as not fitted anymore with the question. These dimensions refer to the temporal, content and evaluation mismatch between question and answer.

4.2 Temporal mismatch: When the answer doesn't match the question

The temporal gap between the moment in which children bid for answering and the actual moment when they actually answer, which we have seen in extracts 2 and 3 above, is a very frequent condition in whole-class interaction. Indeed, owing to the extreme competitive environment, the number of potential next speakers (between 20 and 25 pupils in each group), and other possible intervening contingencies, when the moment to answer comes, the premises for the answering activity might have changed. Therefore, selected respondents often find themselves caught between the answer they came up with at first and the new circumstances. The extract below is another case in point.

Extract 4 [MO_RK_05.17_L1_C1] Natural sciences: the evolution.
The lesson focuses on the notion of evolution. It takes place in the science lab. The teacher (Clara) is introducing the activity she designed for the children, describing it as an investigation on how to discover animals' dietary habits. Then, she invites children to recall what they did the previous time they were in the lab.

```
1          Clara:    ^a::::- ^(.) abbiamo parlato l'ultima volta dI
                      ***a***  ***we talked***  ***last time***  ***of***
                     ^((looking at the desk))
                             ^((turning to the class))
2                     che co:sa esattamente [^di:::,
                     ***what***  ***exactly***  ***of***
3          S?:                              [(      )
                                             ***(      )***
4          Fede:                             ^((raises hand))
5          Clara:    ((points to Fede))/(1.0)
6          Fede:     di::[:, dei- degli animali cosa ^mangiano:::,
                     ***of***  ***of***  ***animals***  ***what they eat***
7          Al:           [.h::ah::!((raises hand))   ^ ((lowers hand))
                          ***ah***
8          Clara:    mhm mhm esatto,(.) quindi, ci siamo soffermati
                     ***mhm mhm exactly***  ***so***  ***we focused***
9                     sull'alimentazione.^<okei? creando      un po'   quella=
                     ***on  nutrition***  ***okay  creating/drawing*** (MIT.)***that***
10         AL:                            ^((raises hand again))
11         Clara:    =che chiamavamo? (0.2) Alberto?
                     ***which we called***  ***Alberto***
                                  [FIG.1]
12   →     Al:       boh    io speravo di dire (un attimo/anche) un'altra
                      (INTERJ.) ***I hoped  to say*** (MITIG.) ***/also)  something***
13                    co[sa.
```


DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

```
                        else
14          Clara:      [vai °vai di' quell'altra cosa°=
                        go on go on say the other thing
```

The question asked by the teacher in lines 1-2 has a different format and different requirements than the one in Extract 1. Here the expected "right" answer can be only one and, typically, made of only one word. This requirement is further emphasised by the adverb "exactly". Furthermore, the right dislocation of "what" at the end of the interrogative sentence and the repetition of the preposition "of" with stretched vowel sound, leaves the utterance designedly incomplete (DIU, as in Koshik, 2012; Margutti, 2010), soliciting completion through the production of the missing word, thus narrowing down the options to provide the fitting answer.
Two pupils simultaneously display their willingness to answer in lines 3 and 4, at the completion of the dislocated wh-interrogative and in overlap with the preposition "of". The answer produced by Fede, the selected pupil, is characterised by a false start, but the answer he manages to deliver is endorsed by the teacher in line 8 as correct. In the meantime, however, Alberto produces an emotionally loaded bid to answer: he raises his hand while producing a lengthened non-lexical vocalisation, characterised by emphasis and emotion. He delivers it approximately 1 second after the first two pupils' bids to answering. Thus, Alberto's offer to answer occurs when Fede has already started to speak. He maintains his hand raised until the end of Fede's turn, to raise it again when the teacher reformulates Fede's answer, after the positive evaluation ("exactly"), with the word "nutrition". In other words, Alberto's visual bids indicate that he is still orienting to the teachers' earlier question.
However, in the meantime, the teacher moves from "nutrition" on to the next step in her agenda, unknown to pupils. In lines 9-10 she produces a second designedly interrupted utterance to elicit from pupils exactly the next linked notion she wants to draw their attention on: that of "food web". In that moment, Alberto is the only pupil with his hand raised and the teacher selects him.

Figure 1 – Alberto's raised hand

(Line 11, Extract 4)

Alberto finds himself in a position where there is a mismatch between question and answer and between the teacher's and his own plan. Alberto's response in lines 12-13 deals with such mismatch with a brief, general and colloquial expression of lack of knowledge about the teacher request ("*boh*")[1] followed by a statement about his

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

own agenda: "I hoped to say something else". Alberto withholds the progression of the teachers' agenda and obtains the right to say what he raised his hand for, as illustrated in the following extract.

Extract 5 [MO_RK_05.17_L1_C1] Natural sciences: the evolution (continues from Extract 4)

```
14        Clara:     vai °vai di' quell'altra cosa°=
                     go on go on say the other thing
15        Al:       =che ci avevi dato dei fo^gli    e  c'avevi suddiviso
                     that you gave us   sheets of paper and you divided us
16        Clara:                          ^((nods repeatedly looking towards Al's))

17        Al:       prima del-
                    before th-
18        Clara:    sh:::: ((addressing children talking on her right))
                    ((hushing))
19        Al:       che ci avevi suddivi[so tipo
                    that you grouped us     like
20        Clara:                        [ascoltia:mo
                                         let's listen
21                  (0.4)
22        Al:       che=mhm (2.6) quelli  che facevano tipo e::rba^::,=
                    that mhm      those who  did      like   grass
23        Clara:                                                ^((nods and smiles))
24        Al:       =o  che mangiavano gli erbivori ^ (0.8) poi:, (.)
                    or  who ate           herbivors         then
25        Clara:                                  ^((nods more emphatically))
26        Al:       quelli che disegnavano erbivori carnivori,
                    those who  drew       herbivors carnivors
27        Paolo:    e la mia?
                    and mine
28        Al:       e onnivori.
                    and omnivors
29        Clara:    okei. e quindi? [in base a n'((nods to Alberto))
                    okay  and so     based on n'
30        Al:                       [e poi    ci siamo collegati col film.
                                     and then we linked back  to the film
31        Clara:                      ((nods repeatedly stopping for a  moment))
32                  (0.2)
33        Clara:    col  film.
                    to the film
```

Unlike Fede's concise answer (a sentence unit, in extract 4, line 6), Alberto's is a lengthy one (the answer tells the story of what they did). Alberto's answer displays that his interpretation of the teacher's request ("last time we talked of what exactly") is a recollection of the activities they actually did during the previous lesson in the lab. Similarly to Matteo's answers in Extracts 1 and 3, also this answer begins with the conjunction "that", that characterises the turn as a second part of a couple of actions and precisely an answer to a question. Furthermore, while Fede's answer has a level of abstraction, Alberto's is more referential, in that it reports the facts he recollects. Alberto's language presents other features that show his endeavour to build a syntactically correct sentence. A first quite typical instance of this occurs between lines 19-22, where he struggles to find the continuation of the sentence after the verb "to group": he begins a self-repair trajectory producing the word "*tipo*", which in Italian is a filler word, frequently used as substitutive term (sometimes for referential mitigation, as in Caffi, 2007), followed by the conjunction "*che*"/"that", which is also very frequently used in colloquial Italian as a filler word (Berruto, 1998) and by another non-lexical vocalisation "mhm", before an extended pause.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

The extracts also show very clearly, on the one side, the perfect match between the teacher question and Fede's (the first pupil) answer in the service of the progression of the activity (extract 4); on the other, concerning Alberto's answer in extract 4 and 5, we see that the delay in the selection produces a mismatch, which anyway Alberto manages with a response that justifies the fact that his forthcoming answer is not in line with the sequential development of the activity. In terms of interactional competence, this extract shows that Alberto is efficiently monitoring the ongoing interaction, and he understands the sequential relevance of answers with respect to questions. Furthermore, by avoiding a mismatched answer and instead producing an account for failing to offer a regularly fitted answer to the question, he displays his orientation to the cohesion rule between question and answer.
Similar instances where pupils find themselves caught in the wrong slot in the answering round are very frequent in this setting, because of the contextual aspects of the whole-class participation framework.

4.3 Content mismatch: When the answer is divergent from the previous ones

Under some circumstances, pupils might have to face the gap between their candidate answer and the main line established by the chain of their peers' previous answers. In the two following extracts we will consider cases in which pupils propose candidate answers that do not belong to the same category of the preceding responses. In these cases, the offer of the answer implicitly treats prior ones as having some inadequacy. As we will see, these examples show how pupils tackle the challenge of expressing disagreement, countering and sometimes correcting their peers and, eventually, even the teacher.
Extract 6 captures the interaction that follows Extract 3. Matteo has just answered by classifying the names according to the categories to which the names' referents belong (animals, humans, and objects), with the specification that a police officer can be either a human or an animal. The teacher responds to this by announcing that he will change one word (ll. 23 and 26). He substitutes "police officer", which, according to Matteo, falls into two distinct categories, with "electrician"; he then selects Matteo again to provide the answer, in light of this substitution.

Extract 6 [MO_SD_03.18_L1_C1] Grammar: classifying names (continuing from Extract 3)

```
23   T:          allora sia un umano, allo-   ti    cambio  parola.
                 so     both a human     so-  ((for you)) I change the word
24   CAR: →      ma  il polizio[tto è un lavO:::ro
                 but police officer   is a job
25   S2:                        [↑no:: (    )
                                  no
26   T           ti cambio parola
                 I ((for you)) change the word
27               (9.00)/(( pupils talk simultaneously while T erases the word
                 "poliziotto/police officer" and children suggest replacing it with "dog"
                 or "cat"; Carla repeats that "police officer" is a job. T substitutes
                 "police officer"
                 with "electrician"))
28   GIO:        E:::lettricista::! (reading from the whiteboard))
                 electrician
29   T:          vai.((to Matteo))
                 go
30   MAT:        l'elettricista [è::: un uma[::no.
                 electrician     is   a human
31   T:          ((writes "person" besides "electrician"))
32   MAR:                       [elettricista      è mio padre ((turning to Matteo))
                                   electrician is my father
33   LE:                                    [anche- anche il mio
                                             also   also mine
```


DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

```
34                (5.0)//((SS commenting))
35    MAT:        >è una [persona?< e la sedia   è un oggetto.
                  it's a person      and the chair is an object
36    T:          ((writes "object" besides "chair"))
37    CAR: →             [ma è un lavoro!
                          but it's a job
38    LE:         anche il mio è elettrici[sta
                  also mine    is ((an)) electrician
39    CAR: →                               [ma è un lavo:ro!
                                            but it's a job
40                (2.4)
41    PAO:        Lucio::!/((summoning the T by his name and raising both hands))
                  Lucio
42    T:          okey
                  okay
43    SIL: →      ma è un lavo::ro:!
                  but it's a job
44    T:          ho capito        ho capito.
                  I've understood   I've understood
45                (0.2)
```

Matteo's answer is uttered in lines 30 and 35. However, the focus of our analysis here are the arrowed lines, where other non-selected pupils offer their alternative categorisation; first, that of the name "police officer" and then of "electrician". Indeed, these turns differ from Matteo's conduct, as far as these are autonomous and spontaneous initiatives, rather than solicited answers. However, the pupils' interventions here respond to the teachers' original request to classify these names and contribute to the ongoing project. First, Carla comes up with an observation regarding the word "police officer": she claims that it is the name of a job. Therefore, she proposes to assign this word to another category. This proposal is designed as alternative to Matteo's prior categorisation of "police officer" as falling into the set "human beings", through the coordinative conjunction "*ma*"/"but" that here is used with an accumulation of interactional functions, especially when deployed in turn-initial position. As illustrated in Bazzanella (2010) "*ma*" is used to signal that the speaker is taking the turn; thus, working as a request for attention and a summons for the interlocutors. It also has an adversative meaning (Ippolito et al., 2022), linking the utterance it introduces to the preceding one with the same subject. In other words, in line 24, Carla argues for an alternative view. The delivery of this turn and the subsequent ones where this noticing is repeated, is also characterised by prosodic features that convey the speakers' stance on the information as worth registering (sound stretching, animated delivery, stressed pronunciation). The first instance in line 24 is unnoticed by the teacher. One of the reasons, at this point, can be that he is writing on the whiteboard and still attending to Matteo, whom he addresses in line 29. However, it is worth observing that while the teacher writes Matteo's categorisation of the words on the whiteboard, he does not pay any attention whatsoever to the further repetitions of the same observation by Carla and Silvia (ll. 37, 39, and 43). He disregards the observation until after the last repetition in line 43, he replies plainly "I have understood".

Our focus here is not to analyse teachers' conduct, but rather to observe how children qualify their answers not only in relation to the immediately prior question, but also in relation to the series of prior answers offered by their peers in the larger sequence. One aspect that emerges is that often teacher questions have more than one "right" answer; understanding which is the answer that is expected in that precise moment is an arduous task, especially when the overall design or purpose of the activity is not transparent for children. As it is clearly visible in Extract 6, although both categorisations can be considered correct, the teacher treats as relevant only those proposed by Matteo. Children do not have any clue regarding their answers' adequacy other than the teacher's

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verbal and non-verbal conduct and, under some circumstances, the grammatical constraints posed by the question, as, for instance, in designedly incomplete utterances, which we have seen in Extracts 4 and 5, which are designed to elicit the word left out in the teacher's turn.

Thus, the activity of arriving at the "right" answer is guided by the children's ability to draw clues from the design of the question and the timing of their answer, as well as from what has been answered in prior talk by their peers. The children's orientation to these features of talk is visible in the interactional work they do in the construction of their answering turns, and particularly in the material and resources they use beyond the information content of the answer. On the other hand, however, it is also clear that children of this age understand their participation as one in which "answering", in terms of providing information on the topics touched on in the teachers' talk, is paramount, proper and expected.

The way in which these two conditions (their "being in the dark" regarding the activity goal and understanding teachers' talk as eliciting their contribution) work to enable children to take the initiative in this context is clearly visible in the following extract. The teacher is engaging the class in demonstrating that there are angles all over the place in the room. She has just explained that angles are visible when there are perpendicular lines as, for instance, in the outline of the whiteboard, posters, windows, etc. Now she is focusing on the teacher desk.

Extract 7 Broken line [PM:LT:5.geometry/angles][2]

```
1    T:        i:nfa:tti se ↑no:i guardia::mo il pia:no   della?- (0.6)
               indeed    if we    look at     the surface of the
2              'l pia[no   della  cattedra,
               the surface of the teacher's desk
               ((stretching both arms over the desks' surface))
3    St1: →          [è'na li:nea spezza::ta![3]
                      it's a broken line
4    T:        quanti   angoli ha      il [piano
               how many angles are in the  surface
5    St2:                                 [uhn' qua:[ttro
                                           uhn' four
6    Sts:                                          [quattro
                                                    four
7    Sts:      quattro
               four
8    T:        qua[::ttro. uno, due, tre?-
               four        une  two  three

9    Sts:         [quattro
                   four
10             (0.8)
```

In line 1 the teacher is providing a demonstration about this notion. She begins with "*infatti*"/"indeed": an adverb projecting that what will be said next will corroborate prior statements. Furthermore, the first part of a conditional sentence (protasis) that begins with "if" announces that the main clause, expressing the consequences (apodosis), will follow. Our focus is the turn in line 3, where the child enters right away, in overlap with the last-item of the protasis with a spontaneous observation. Studies on ordinary conversation have demonstrated that turns that include sentences formed with more than one constituent, and the "if X then Y" format is one of such compound sentences, can be jointly produced (Lerner, 1991, p. 445). The structure of these sentences enables recipients to anticipate the completion, bringing the turn to it. By entering in that point, where completion is expected, the child shows his anticipation of where the teacher's demonstration is heading to; that is, to provide another example of broken line: a topic treated in prior talk. In other words, it is evident here how

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the child uses prior talk to elaborate his own contribution. This turn shows similarities with the children's contributions we observed in the prior extract, particularly for its emphatic prosody (sound stretches, animated delivery), that convey the child's stance on his observation as worth being considered. However, as the extract shows, the teacher chooses another line, ending her turn asking the number of angles in the surface of the desk. By waiting till the end of the teacher's turn, the other children provide the expected answer, for which the question is designed. The extract shows how children use different resources to arrive at the "right" answer, which not always involve having to remember or having that knowledge beforehand. Here we see that pupils can anticipate what the teacher will ask by referring to prior talk and exploiting the design of prior talk to enter the conversation.

However, children do not exploit the relevance of the teacher's prior talk only to the purpose of answering appropriately the teacher's request. Sometimes they use their answering turn to disalign[4] with and revise the teacher's evaluation of a prior answer.

4.4. Being disaligned with the teachers' evaluation

The extract that follows reports other answers in the Italian grammar class (previously we saw extracts 1, 3, and 6) about what the three names the teacher wrote on the whiteboard have in common. In extract 8, we see multiple answers provided by children to the same question. First, Paolo reports features that the referents of the words have in common and which the teacher does not endorse (ll. 85-88). Then, after a few omitted lines in which another child offers the observation that all names end with the vowel sound "a" – thus, shifting to a more grammatical level of analysis, Elly is selected to answer. Our focus is Elly's answer in the highlighted lines below. In her response, Elly actually contradicts the teacher's assertion that electricians do not have four "legs" or limbs (l. 88), as Paolo is about to affirm in line 85.

Extract 8 [MO_SD_03.18_L1_C1] Grammar: classifying names (continuing from Extract 6)

```
80   PA:      [Lucio ((with hand raised))
              Lucio [THE NAME OF THE TEACHER]
81   T:       [ho capito.
              I've understood
82            (3.00)/((SS's talk))
83   T:       dimmi, (0.4) Pa
              tell me      Pa
84            (0.8)
85   PA:      okey. (0.2) la SEDIA ha quattro gambe la [mucca ha quattro gambe.
              okay        a chair   has four  legs  a cow      has four  legs
86   LE:                                                [come si chiama tuo
                                                         what is the name of your
87            (1.4)/((SS's talk))/((T gazes on desk and smiles))
88   T:       e l'elettricista? (.) no.
              and the electrician    no

[a few lines omitted]

111  EL:      ↑I::o! ↑I::o!
              me     me
112  T:       Elly
              Elly
113  EL:  →   [cioè che-    l'elettricista ha ^due braccia e::  e- du-=
               that is  that an electrician  has two arms   and and tw-
```


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```
114  CA:                                          ^((raises hand))
115  S?:        [↑uh!
                  uh
116  EL:        =due braccia e due gambe,.hh con  e:: cioè mhm
                 two arms and two legs        with and well mhm
117             facciamo tipo     sì [va be' ((laughter))
                let's say sort of yes alright
118  S:                              [due gambe [anteriori
                                     two front legs
119  T:                                         [mhm.
                                                 mhm
120  EL:        poi l- la mu:cca? ha quattro- ^ha quattro [(.) zampe,=
                then a- a  cow    has four    have four        legs
121  LE?:                                                  [uh!
                                                            uh
122  LE:                                      ^((stands up with hand raised))
123  EL:        =(da- da-  sì  va)
                  t- to-   yes that
124  LE:        uh! uh!
                uh  uh
125  T:         quindi han tutti quattro [gambe dici [tu.
                so    they all have four legs  you say
126  LE:                                 [↑i:::::h((jumping with raised hand))
                                          [((FIRST VOWEL SOUND OF "IO"/"ME"))]
127  EL:                                          [sì.
                                                   yes
128  T:         okey. quatr- okey.
                okay  fou-   okay
```

One aspect that characterises the delivery of this answer is the tentative way in which the pupil constructs the turn. To begin with, she starts the turn with the coordinative explicative conjunction "*cioè*" (meaning "that is", "or rather", "in other words"). This turn-initial element can be heard to accomplish a number of actions: first, it projects a re-formulation of some prior talk, establishing a connection with it; second, it delays the content of the answer, displaying Elly's stance on what she is about to say as having a potential face-threatening valence, as with disagreement or resistance. As we can see, in her list of three (the three names), she begins with "electrician", which Paolo left out in his prior answer (l. 85), but which the teacher (l. 88) mentions claiming that he does not have the same feature ("having four legs") as the other two. Elly chooses to begin with exactly this item. She delivers the first part of the turn "the electrician has two arms" quite fluently (l. 113), but she self-interrupts when mentioning the two legs (ll. 113 and 116-117). This information is prefaced by prosodic elements (sound stretching, self-interruption) that indicate hesitation and possibly self-repair, and it is followed by a series of linguistic formulations and elements that display mitigation ("well", "mhm", "let's say sort of"), downgrading her claims. In other words, Elly manages to propose her view on the fact that Paolo's prior answer wasn't inappropriate and, in fact, countering the teachers' evaluation. As a matter of fact, Elly claims that the electrician too has four "legs", if we consider arms and legs together. Note that a child in line 118 offers her support to Elly, with the formulation that presents human arms as "front legs", in analogy with animals. Elly then continues the delivery of her answer mentioning the cow. Also, this part of the turn is delivered with some hesitation (ll. 120, 123), with other children's bids in overlap. However, in line 125, before Elly's mentions the third item (the chair having four legs), the teacher comes to the conclusion in line 125, formulating a confirmation check to which Elly responds positively in line 127, followed by the teacher's positive evaluation in line 128.

This extract shows how children of this age and in this context master a number of linguistic, verbal and visual resources, including reference to prior talk, even not in the immediate vicinity, to pursue their course of action,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

also when this implies non-preferred actions, such as correcting the teacher. As Elly's response displays here, she adopts a number of strategies such as linguistic mitigation, prosody, downgrading formulation, delay and other forms of hesitation to pursue her action and, at the same time, convey her stance on that.

5. Concluding remarks

The article has focused on a set of responses produced by children during whole-class sessions in which the teacher invites students to answer questions in turn, following a selection procedure that requires them to bid for gaining the opportunity to respond. The analysis has examined a particular type of responses: those which do not include only the informative content requested by the question (extracts 2-3), but other linguistic, verbal, prosodic or visual elements which display the students' stance on the response, both related to the question itself or to the whole activity (extracts 1, 4-8). On these occasions, children find themselves delivering a response that is not any more in line with the question, for a number of different reasons. We have identified three main sources of mismatch. One occurs when, in the round, the child is selected to answer but the teacher has moved on to the next question. This situation is quite frequent, owing to the large number of students in the class. In these circumstances, children provide an account for the temporal mismatch, displaying their awareness of the rule of being consequential and in line with the question request (extracts 4-5). A second occasion occurs when the response diverges from the main argumentative line of the activity. The analysis shows that children convey this awareness of their disalignment through features concerning both the design of their turn, such as contrastive turn-initial conjunctions, animated prosody, stressed delivery, and the sequential position of the answer with regard to prior turns (extracts 6-7). The third and final occasion concerns the circumstance when children disagree with the teachers' position (extract 8): the example presented here shows the way in which the child artfully exploits a number of resources to convey her stance on her response as dis-preferred, thus countering the position expressed by the teacher in prior talk.

In conclusion, the article gives evidence that children of this age display and enact a rather sophisticated interactional competence and pragmatic skills, enabling them to design their responses so as to show both their knowledge of the answer and their awareness relative to its in/appropriateness, with regard to the contingencies that might arise in the moment-by-moment progression of the activity. As shown in the analysis, they master verbal, linguistic, prosodic and visual resources to make their response fitted to the circumstances in which they happen to have the turn. To this purpose, they show that they are continuously monitoring the talk underway and exploiting the unexpected circumstances that might occur to make their answer appropriate to the question requests and to the expectations operating in the context.

These findings have some important practical implications for teaching. One first implication concerns the fact that they provide evidence of the pedagogic importance of question-answers sequences, also those typically initiated by known-answer question, to implement what is known as "interactive formative assessment" (Allal & Pelgrims Ducrey, 2000), to scaffolding students' learning in their zone of proximal development (ZPD, Vygotsky, 1978). The analysis confirms that large part of these answer-question sequences consists in the continuous practice of making sense of the teacher's question beyond the mere content, as well as to align their behaviour to the requirement of prior talk, in general. A second implication regards the fact that these findings argue for a layered notion of knowledge and of linguistic competence: that is, one in which factual knowledge is necessarily interwoven with the ability to display it in the flow of talk appropriately. Awareness of these complexities should inform teachers' assessment. Third, these findings provide evidence for children's orientation to the teacher's

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

pedagogic agenda, showing their continuous work of monitoring teachers' and peers' talk, with the aim of understanding their expectations. In line with Heritage and Heritage (2013), this confirms the importance of mutually understood interactional goals between teachers and pupils to support effective learning.

Notes

1. "Boh" is an interjection used to convey a general lack of knowledge.
2. Extract 7 is part of another corpus of one of the authors, with homogeneous recordings in terms of year-group classes and type of settings: i.e., third-year classes and whole-class instructions activities.
3. In Italian, the expression "*linea spezzata*" indicates a type of line that is made of a series of joined segments, in contrast to a straight line or a curved line. When this line is closed, it is a polygon. Here we use the translation "broken", which appears to be the most appropriate to the domain of geometry, in comparison to the other alternative translations, all referring to this type of line: "crooked" or "zigzag line".
4. We use here the term "disalign/ment" according to Stivers (2008) with the meaning of actions that do not support or undermine the main course of action.

Acknowledgements

This article presents the results of the project "Children's interactional competence at school: conversational social norms, participation forms and language structures" (ChICaS), financed by the European Union, Next Generation EU, Mission 4, Component 1, CUP E53D23008730006. Piera Margutti is Principal Investigator of the research team.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

APPENDIX: Transcription conventions

Transcription of vocal conduct follows the Jeffersonian conventions used for Conversation Analysis (Jefferson, 2004; Hepburn & Bolden, 2017).

A. Some aspects of the relative timing of utterances

[ ] square brackets	Overlapping talk
= equals sign	No discernible interval between turns
(0.5) time in parentheses	Intervals within or between talk (measured in tenths of a second)
(.) period in parentheses	Discernible interval within or between talk but too short to measure (less than 2 tenths of a second)

B. Some characteristics of speech delivery

Punctuation symbols are designed to capture intonation, not grammar and are used to describe intonation at the end of a word/sound, at the end of a sentence or some other shorter unit:

. period	Closing intonation
, comma	Slightly rising intonation (a little hitch up on the end of the word)
? question mark	Fully rising intonation
- dash	Abrupt cut off of sound
: colon	Extension of preceding sound – the more colons the greater the extension
<u>here</u> underlining	Emphasised relative to surrounding talk
CAPS	Increased amplitude (loudness)
↑↓	Marked change in pitch
°	Softer delivery
.hhh	Audible inbreath (number of h's indicates length)
( ) empty single brackets or words enclosed in single brackets	Transcriber unable to hear words or uncertain of hearing
(word)	Transcriber's best guess at uncertain speech
(word/ward)	Possible alternatives
((word)) words enclosed in double brackets	Transcribers' comments
^	Beginning of visual or vocal behaviour in relation to talk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567

Piera Margutti is Associate Professor of Linguistics and Conversation Analysis at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Her research spans from the study of talk in classrooms, clinical encounters and mundane interaction. She investigated both teachers' conducts such as questioning, evaluating and reproaching, and students' responses and initiatives. She studied medical interaction in various settings. She studied interaction among family members in telephone calls and face-to-face encounters, focusing on word-searches, teasing, apologies and invitations
Contact: piera.margutti@unimore.it

Daniele Urlotti is a research fellow and adjunct professor at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. His work focuses on Conversation Analysis applied to institutional interactions in healthcare and education, including monolingual contexts and cases in which intercultural mediators assist service users with limited proficiency in the service language.
Contact: daniele.urlotti@unimore.it

Elisa Rossi is Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, where she teaches sociology courses focused on gender relations, conflicts and dialogue. She carried out extensive research on dialogic facilitation of children's agency and gender narratives in educational contexts. She participated as author at several local, national and international conferences; she is author of two monographs and (co)author of several essays in books and reviews.
Contact: elisa.rossi@unimore.it

DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22567