

Introduction to the Special Issue

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This introductory paper to the special issue of *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica. Journal of Theories and Research in Education* illustrates the overall design of the project ChICaS (*Children's Interactional Competence at School: Conversational Social Norms, Forms of Participation, and Language Structures*) and revises the first results of the research presented in the articles here included. The project was coordinated by Piera Margutti and carried out by four research units across Italy (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, University of Bologna, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, University Roma Tre) over more than two years (October 2023-February 2026). The object of the project was the pragmatic and interactional abilities of primary school children, which were studied by analysing authentic video-recorded data. By establishing the children's visible conducts in the class as the analytical focus of the research, the project, and this special issue, pay close attention to the often overlooked and neglected party in the classroom, offering a more complex picture of classroom interaction than portrayed in prior research. In fact, the perspective we adopted here looks at the classroom from the point of view of pupils: what they do, their agency, their inferences, the rules with which they display compliance, the initiatives they take and the actions they perform beyond responding to the teacher's initiatives and solicitations, discovering new dimensions and interactional dynamics. The initial section introduces the overall purpose and methodologies of the project, while the following section reviews the contributions, highlighting the main themes across the articles.

ⁱ The paper, in its final form, is the result of a collaboration between the three authors. Piera Margutti is responsible for writing the original draft and its conceptualization. Daniela Veronesi for writing Section 1, reviewing and editing. Rosa Pugliese for writing Section 2, reviewing and editing. The article introduces this Special Issue, which is entirely dedicated to present the results of the PRIN-22 project "Children's interactional competence at school: conversational social norms, participation forms and language structures", financed by the European Union- Next Generation EU, Mission 4, Component 1, CUP E53D23008730006. Piera Margutti is Principal Investigator of the research team.

1. Exploring primary school children's interactional competence through authentic data: The ChICaS project

The main aim of the project was to explore the interactional conducts of children at school with their teachers and peers while taking part in everyday pedagogic activities in two settings: plenary classes and small groups. The project moved from the premise that being competent interactants in all aspects of our social life implies using a range of abilities, such as being able to implement actions that are recognisable by co-participants, as well as understanding the actions of others and what they require as a suitable response. This reflexive relationship between the production of one's own actions and the interpretation of those of others is *context specific*; that is, it is affected and it affects the expectations speakers have of each other (Heritage, 1984, Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011). Drawing from this premise, we believe that the classroom is a perspicuous setting for observing how children put these abilities into practice.

More precisely, our main hypothesis was that the institutional requirements of the classroom regarding children's participation and learning advancement, the way in which teachers solicit responses or, vice versa, constrain unrequested actions, are all relevant conditions that affect children's awareness of what it is involved in participating appropriately and how to comply with the classroom rules of conduct. Furthermore, the presence of a high number of potential speakers in plenary contexts, as well as the way children are asked to work in pairs or in small groups autonomously, are conditions that create competition. The multiparty setting of classroom interaction maximises the development of children's ability to monitor other speakers' talk to identify when the suitable time comes for them to enter the floor, take new initiatives or respond to their interlocutors. All these circumstances contribute to promoting the growth of children's pragmatic and interactional competence. The project aimed at exploring these types of conduct in the classroom setting, through the observation of children's forms of talk and of the verbal and multimodal resources they draw upon in accomplishing their interactional goals.

We designed the project to be interdisciplinary, to use an inductive and empirical approach, and to rely on a homogeneous corpus regarding setting, participants, and activity types. A solid interdisciplinary approach, the homogeneity of the data and a relatively large size of the corpus, as detailed below, are the main innovative features of the project. As for the first characteristic, four disciplines and their theoretical and methodological perspectives were applied to the data: conversation analysis, linguistic pragmatics, variational linguistics and sociology. For a more in-depth explanation of theories, approaches and the methodological relationships between them, we direct readers to the first paper of this special issue by Margutti, De Roberto, Pugliese and Veronesi ("What authentic data tell us about pupils' interactional competence: a video-based interdisciplinary study"), where we illustrate the rationale of the project. For the moment, we would like to foreground that the project was designed to maximise collaboration: each unit coordinated their analysis with that of the other units, actually bringing its specific competences and knowledge to the shared discussion of the same data excerpts.

As for the corpus on which the project is based, we collected audio and video recorded data of naturally occurring interactions in whole-class and peer-group sessions, thereby addressing a generally underexplored area in classroom interaction research, which has traditionally focused on teacher talk. In this regard, it is worth highlighting that, following the seminal works by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), McHoul (1978) and Mehan (1979), a large body of literature has been devoted primarily to general features of classroom interaction, as well as of teacher talk (cf. Gardner, 2019 for an overview). On the contrary, investigations within conversation analysis, ethnography and sociolinguistics, which specifically address *students'* pragmatic and interactional competence, and moreover the competence of primary school pupils, as well as their participation forms, are

not so abundant, although the interest for these aspects has been growing over time (cf. for instance Philips, 1972; Schulz et al., 1982; Thornborrow, 2003; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 2004; Gosen et al., 2024). Furthermore, children's peer interaction in the classroom – one of the two settings examined in the ChICaS project – remains largely underexplored from a CA perspective, and particularly for Italian contexts (but see Nasi, 2022a, 2002b). However, the available studies in this field highlight the fundamental role that peer interaction plays in pupils' acquisition of social and linguistic skills as well as in the negotiation and co-construction of their social organisation (cf. Kyratzis & Goodwin, 2017; Nasi, 2022a); a claim which also our project endorses.

Another aspect that distinguishes our study from prior research in the field is the specific focus on students: that is, the party that has been traditionally less investigated, as compared to teachers. A further significant distinction concerns the age of our subjects (8-9) and, consequently, their year group (3rd) in primary school. In the Italian school organisation, the age between 8 and 9 coincides with a fundamental step in children's learning process: i.e., after two initial years, children are expected to have acquired knowledge and awareness of the formal educational context and its social-participatory norms, initiating a profound change in the acquisition of pragmatic competence, as compared to the preschool period. By focusing on Italian primary school pupils in the 3rd grade, the project's corpus maintains a significant internal consistency and offers valuable insights both into this age group and into the forms and varieties of the Italian language used by pupils.

The consistency and the comprehensiveness of the corpus is a further element of the project's innovation. Following field work, each research team collected audio and video recordings in their assigned geographical area: Emilia-Romagna, South Tyrol, and Lazio. Each unit gathered their data in up to three different schools, including three to ten different 3rd grade primary school classes in the recordings and spending over a week on site. This approach ensured that at least 60 hours of classroom interaction were documented by each unit, resulting in a total of approximately 240 hours of recorded data, and 19 classes involved. The large size of the corpus and its balanced distribution across the Italian territory add comprehensiveness and makes it reliable for the analysis of Italian language uses. Data collection was approved by privacy and ethics committees of the respective institutions, with permission granted by the participating schools and teachers, and by the pupils' parents. Data were gathered using audio and video recordings, which were then transcribed and anonymised.

As mentioned above, an important benefit for the project's robust interdisciplinary approach was the shared analytic process among different units and disciplines. After collecting and transcribing the data, the whole research team met regularly over two years. During these meetings, each unit selected fragments from their corpus that represented specific phenomena and proposed them for collective analytic sessions. Each unit contributed its own disciplinary expertise to these discussions.

After the methodological article that opens the Special Issue, the other contributions present the first results of each unit. Each article explores children's interactional competence from a unique angle. So, for instance, the Modena and Reggio Emilia Unit presents here their results concerning the structure of the pupils' answering activity in whole-class interaction, when the answer includes extra-material besides the information requested and pupils change the design of their answers while the activity is ongoing (Margutti, Urlotti and Rossi); the Bolzano Unit offers a glimpse into how children's developing interactional competence emerges in peer interaction when dealing with recruitments and offers of assistance in the context of pair/small-group classroom activities (Veronesi and Simone); the discursive resources used by pupils in the context of plenary teaching activities to handle the conversational relevance of their contributions and their coherence with the sequential environment in which they are engaged is the set of practices investigated by the Bologna Unit (Pugliese, D'Altoè and Colla); finally, the Unit of Roma 3 investigates the children's sociolinguistic competence by looking at the ways in which they switch between different varieties of Italian in whole-class and in

small-group peer activities, highlighting the communicative functions of these uses in context (De Roberto and Rizzello).

However, as detailed in the following section, some common themes cut across each contribution. These recurring themes not only highlight the interconnectedness of the studies but also underscore the broader implications for understanding children's communicative development.

2. Some common themes across the articles in the Special Issue

Despite each article having a specific subject of inquiry and a distinctive methodological approach, owing to the shared analytic process illustrated above, there are a few common threads intersecting them all.

One of these common themes concerns the identification of *pupils' initiatives*; that is, various spontaneous and unsolicited actions whereby children initiate sequences or courses of action with the teacher or with their peers, according to the context. Since students are the focus of the project, it is not surprising that several contributions included here describe actions that pupils carry out during their everyday interactions, other than answering the teacher's questions.

Certainly, responding to the teacher's questions is one of the most frequent actions observed among pupils in our data. However, as shown in the paper by Margutti, Ullotti and Rossi, in the context of whole-class interaction, while pupils are engaged in answering the question posed by the teacher, as the turn-by-turn inspection of data shows, they actually carry out this activity in myriad nuanced ways, often verging on other distinct actions such as expressing resistance to the teacher's feedback to prior answers or disagreeing with a peer's prior answer. By not restricting our analysis only to those turns that fulfill the exact answer to the teacher's question but taking into consideration all the actions that pupils produce in the course of the answering activity, both solicited and unsolicited, in response to the teacher's questioning, the article documents other actions belonging to the pupils' own individual projects, such as comments, evaluations.

The way in which pupils accomplish independent actions is also evidenced in the contribution by Pugliese, D'Altoè and Colla. For example, a pupil may explicitly mark a side question that does not fit the ongoing talk by using a preface. Alternatively, a pupil might add a metacommunicative formulation to a second story she has just told, evaluating it as not tightly connected to the previous topic.

Other actions that pupils implement in the classroom, which have not been described in prior literature, are those that belong to the spectrum of recruitment and occur when pupils are engaged in peer activities. As the article by Veronesi and Simone shows, in the context of work in pairs and in small groups, children accomplish explicit requests for assistance and unsolicited provisions of help intended to preempt a classmate's potential difficulty. The in-depth analysis of the way in which children multimodally construct these actions reveals their ability to coordinate their participation by cooperatively addressing emerging troubles, and their pragmatic competence in selecting the most appropriate linguistic form (from the most direct to the more mitigated) to their ends, in relation to the contingencies of the course of action in which they are involved.

Also, the shifting between varieties of Italian or style shifting is a resource that children use to self-select or introduce playful or humorous topics, interrupting the flow of talk, as described by De Roberto and Rizzello. Style shifting toward a variety that is more markedly regional can, for example, accompany attempts to explain or clarify abstract disciplinary topics by referring to situations or contexts that are more everyday and closer to the pupils' own experience, whereas in small-group activities it appears in the formulation of assessments and requests aimed at directly directing classmates' behaviour. As the authors show, the choice of style-shifting by

pupils, both towards a more formal or informal register as compared to the teacher's style, is a way of distancing themselves from the teacher and realises a pro-active function, asserting their agency.

Another recurrent aspect characterising pupils' talk, which emerges immediately in the design of their answer and of their initiating actions is their orientation to *relevance*. With regards to answers, one aspect of this dimension emerges in their effort to design a response that complies with the explicit and implicit implications of the teacher's question. The article by Margutti, Urlotti and Rossi and that by Pugliese, D'Altoè and Colla document a series of practices whereby pupils exhibit their continuous monitoring and interpretation of teachers' and their peers' talk. In both papers, the analysis has shown how pupils manage to conform to teachers' request, or to display their distance from their peers' answers by also manifesting a direct criticism, and, sometime, from the teacher's evaluation of those answers. The analysis has evidenced that children master a range of resources that allow them to revise their talk, modify it during its production. These practices include forms of hesitation (Lerner, 2013), repair (Schegloff et al., 1977; Drew et al., 2011), accounts, and other linguistic and verbal clues indicating their effort to downgrade their own unexpected responses or actions.

Finally, another common thread, which is also strictly linked to the two addressed above, is the ability to construct their actions using *indirectness*. In comparison to previous literature where children's talk is described as characterised by more direct and less complex structures and forms, and as being less aware of politeness conventions (see Margutti, De Roberto, Pugliese, Rossi and Veronesi, section 3.ii.), our analysis has shown that in the context of classroom interaction children master a vast range of linguistic options and various resources enabling them to design their actions along a continuum with varying degrees of directness. We have already mentioned their ability to mitigate their requests for assistance (Veronesi and Simone), the way in which they humorously use style-shifting to distance themselves from the teacher's project (De Roberto and Rizzello), the hesitation tokens and self-repair practices to resist to the teacher's evaluation of answers (Margutti, Urlotti and Rossi), or to negotiate the content of a prior contribution by a classmate (Pugliese, D'Altoè and Colla).

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