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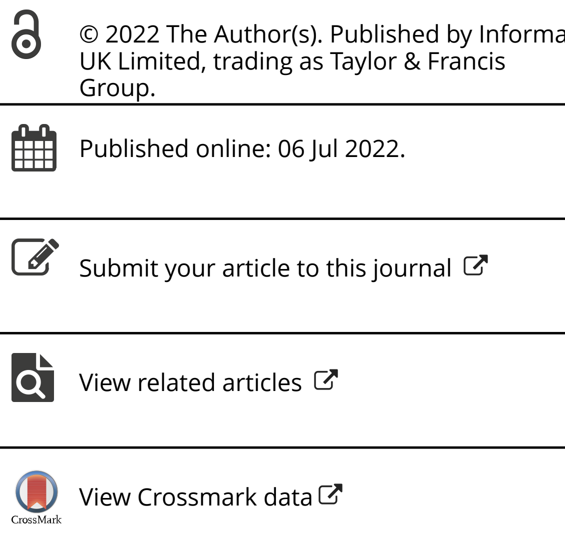

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Managing students' insufficient answers in oral examinations

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ABSTRACT

What happens when students cannot answer teachers' questions in oral examinations? This study investigates how teachers manage students' insufficient answers in disciplinary oral competence exams (DOCEs) in the secondary school context. Using conversation analysis, we show that teachers either pursue an answer by reformulating it and providing more topic information or abandon the original question and move on to a new sequence by creating contiguity and defusing negative implications. *Pursuing* provides additional opportunities to answer but does not necessarily enable students to provide quality answers. *Abandoning* means that students lose a chance to display knowledge, but it does provide an opportunity to answer another question. The study contributes to the understanding of managing trouble displays in non-standardized test talk and specifies interactional practices used to manage insufficient responses. It also reveals the dilemmas that teachers must solve in real-time examinations.

KEYWORDS

Oral examination; test talk; conversation analysis; displays of trouble; insufficient answers

1. Introduction

Every year, thousands of students in Norwegian secondary schools take oral exams as part of their final assessment. These exams consist of an oral presentation, followed by a subject conversation between an examiner, who is usually the student's teacher, and the student. Finally, the student is graded by the teacher and an external examiner. The main goal of these final exams is to provide information about the student's oral and subject competence at the end of the school term. The result of the exam – the final grade – is recorded on the student's final diploma and can be consequential for their further education and future career opportunities (Ministry of Education and Research 2019a). Despite the high stakes of these exams, we know very little about their quality and how they are carried out empirically (Skovholt et al. 2021).

In this study, we use conversation analysis (CA) to investigate teachers' elicitations of students' responses in disciplinary oral competence exams (DOCEs) in secondary schools. More specifically, we examine what happens when students cannot respond to teachers' questions in DOCEs. How do teachers manage students' displays of trouble when responding to test questions, and how do their follow-up moves affect students' opportunities to display knowledge?

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Displays of trouble include delayed second pair parts (SPPs), which are typically followed by hesitations, and implicit and/or explicit disclaims of epistemic access (cf. Lindstöm, Maschler, and Pekarek Doehler 2016), such as claims of insufficient knowledge (CIK; e.g. 'I don't know', cf. Beach and Metzger 1997; Sert 2015) or claims of not remembering (e.g. 'I don't remember', cf. Laury and Helasvuo 2016). These are treated by teachers as insufficient answers.

Norwegian DOCEs are carried out in year ten (age 15) in lower secondary school and in year three (age 18) in upper secondary school. The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research provides general guidelines for the subject conversation within the exam:

> The aim of the oral presentation and the *subject conversation* [emphasis added] is that the student shall have the opportunity to show competence in as large a part of the curriculum as possible. Hence, the examiners must *ask questions that allow the student to demonstrate the broadest possible competence in the discipline* [emphasis added]. (Ministry of Education and Research 2019b; authors' translation from Norwegian)

However, Norwegian DOCEs are not standardized tests, and there are no common national guidelines that prescribe the kinds of questions students should answer in the subject conversation. Additionally, local school districts are not required to prepare common guidelines or assessments, although they are encouraged to do so (Ministry of Education and Research 2019b). The lack of general guidelines implies that there are no official guidelines for the management of interactional trouble in DOCEs. However, teachers are instructed to

> look for the competence the student has and not look for what the student does not know. (Ministry of Education and Research 2019b; authors' translation from Norwegian)

Based on the above, oral examinations in Norway are open to substantial variation in practice within and among schools and between students in the same class. When students display trouble answering questions, teachers are likely to face a dilemma regarding their next move. Should they pursue an answer or abandon the question and move on with the examination? Following the guidelines, teachers need to ensure that students have an opportunity to display their competence, and while a student's response may display trouble answering a particular question, it does not necessarily mean that the student is unable to answer with some help. It is also widely recognized that CIK (e.g. 'I don't know') are used even when the speaker can provide information in cases when initiating actions are framed differently (Beach and Metzger 1997; Sert and Walsh 2013; Sert 2015; Tsui 1991; Weatherall 2011). At the same time, the guidelines imply that teachers should avoid creating situations in which the student's lack of knowledge is exposed.

Not being able to answer a question is generally considered dispreferred and socially problematic. It breaks the conversational norm of an answer being conditionally relevant following a question (Stivers and Robinson 2006, 369) and fails to provide the information the questioner is seeking, subsequently halting sequential progressivity (Lindstöm, Maschler, and Pekarek Doehler 2016, 75; Lindström and Karlsson 2016, 129; see also Clayman 2002; Keevallik 2011; Stivers 2010). Insufficient answers are even more sensitive in high-stakes settings such as DOCEs, where students' responses are not just answers but displays of knowledge and skills. Their answers are observable displays of their competence, which are measured against the (teachers') assessment criteria at the end of the examination. Previous CA research on oral testing has shown that tests are co-constructed and that questioners' conduct is consequential for candidates' opportunities to display

their knowledge and competence (Kasper and Ross 2007; Skovholt et al. 2021) and, thus their performance. Nevertheless, there is still a dearth of empirical research on how questioners deal with students experiencing potential trouble in non-standardized testing. Consequently, it is timely to carry out detailed observational analyses of teachers' conduct in potentially problematic moments in DOCEs and scrutinize the interactional consequences of their management of students' insufficient answers.

2. Managing trouble displays in response to questions

How speakers deal with interactional trouble following a question has been thoroughly examined in the conversation analysis literature, both in everyday conversation and institutional interaction. We know from research on everyday conversations that questioners use a range of interactional resources to pursue an answer when respondents delay their response or give an inadequate or insufficient answer. One common practice is to reformulate the question as a new turn construction unit (TCU) (Davidson 1984, 104; see also Pomerantz 1984). The reformulation may be synonymous with or constitutive of a specification of the original question, providing an additional opportunity for the question recipient to answer (Davidson 1984). Questioners also launch response prompts, which constitute a more generalized invitation to respond again (e.g. 'Do you know?') (Heritage 1984, 248; see also Bolden, Mandelbaum, and Wilkinson 2012; Lerner 2004). Questioners also pursue answers by adding increments to their previously possibly completed TCU. Increments are viewed as a continuation of the prior TCU rather than a new one (Schegloff 1996, 74). As such, they could convert an inter-TCU gap into an intra-TCU pause (Bolden, Mandelbaum, and Wilkinson 2012) or, in cases where the question recipient has attempted to answer, prompt them to say more than they have already done (Lerner 2004, 162).

Similar resources have also been found in institutional interactions. After a recipient has failed to answer a question, broadcast news interviewers may add an increment to their turn to sharpen, reformulate or provide new focus to the previous question (Heritage and Roth 1995). To enhance understanding and elicit responses in second-language conversations, questioners have been found to reformulate questions using candidate answers (Svennevig 2012) and expand the original question by adding new information in multi-unit question turns (Gardner 2004). Several studies have observed how questioners may also pursue an answer over several turns. Svennevig (2018) examined how questioners in second-language conversation 'decompose' the original question into instalments. Similarly, a study by Linell, Hofvendahl, and Lindholm (2003) on different genres of institutional interactions reported that questioners added multi-unit question turns to narrow down questions when no sufficient answer was given. In interviews between care staff and people with learning disabilities, Houtkoop-Steenstra and Antaki (1997) observed that interviewers sometimes reworded a question in a simpler yes-no format when respondents had trouble answering, thereby minimizing potential trouble and encouraging positive and optimistic responses.

In educational settings, studies have shown how teachers may pursue student answers by providing model answers, adding 'designedly incomplete utterances' (Koshik 2002) to their TCUs and using multi-modal and embodied resources. These can help students display and demonstrate knowledge, even after they have responded to a question with a CIK (Duran and Jacknick 2020; Sert 2011; Sert and Walsh 2013). Verbal trouble displays have also been shown to be successfully managed by means of scaffolding: by providing additional cues, teachers may facilitate students' understanding and guide them towards resolving their trouble themselves to at least some degree (Aldrup 2019).

Studies in educational settings have also shown how questioners may pursue an answer by turning the original question into subsequent 'easier' questions. Lee (2007) described how teachers 'parsed' questions into smaller components following 'problematic' responses from students. By breaking down the initial question into more manageable sub-questions, teachers can steer students towards a particular interactional trajectory in a step-by-step fashion. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) showed that when students have trouble responding to a tutorial task, university tutors may reformulate the task into shorter and more manageable ones. A similar resource has been identified in the field of test talk, where interviewers use multiple questions (i.e. questions across several TCUs) after a sequentially or topically inapposite candidate turn to pursue an answer or proffer different response alternatives (Okada and Greer 2013; see also Kasper and Ross 2007; Skovholt et al. 2021).

Most of the above-mentioned resources for managing displays of trouble proceed on the basis of the original question. However, a study by Antaki (2002), on interviews with persons with learning difficulties showed that interviewers may also establish an alternative basis for a new question in inserted sequences. Instead of moving directly to pursue an answer, the interviewer can introduce something else that can form a new basis for questions. A study by Okada and Greer (2013, 289) on oral proficiency interview (OPI) role-playing also showed how interviewers use silence to flag a candidate's response to a test question as 'inapposite'. Delaying repair initiation can imply trouble with the candidate's response and give them time to enact self-repair (Okada and Greer 2013).

While several studies on standardized oral language testing allude to interviewers' accommodation and treatment of trouble in student answers (Filippi 1994, 2015; Seedhouse and Egbert 2006; Ross 1992; Brown and Hill 1998; Egbert 1998), there is a lack of research focusing on trouble management in non-standardised test talk (Nyroos, Sandlund, and Sundqvist 2017; Sandlund and Sundqvist 2011). Furthermore, previous research on everyday conversations and institutional interactions has generally focused on the interactional resources questioners use to *pursue* an answer. The present study narrows this research gap by examining both teachers' pursuit of answers and question abandonment following a student's display of trouble with answering a question. By doing so, the study specifies the practices used to manage insufficient responses to questions. The study also contributes to the understanding of how management of trouble displays is achieved in non-standardised test talk, a type of institutional interaction that until now has received little attention.

3. Data and methodology

The data for this study comprise video-recorded oral examinations of thirty-six students by six teachers in two lower secondary schools and two upper secondary schools. The data also include video-recorded oral test examinations of seven students with one teacher in a lower secondary school. All students were examined in the L1 Norwegian subject. The teachers were recruited via email provided by contacts from schools with which the university collaborates with and master's students. The participants who agreed to join were from schools in the same part of the country and were comparable in terms of socioeconomic status. The data comprise 18 hours of recorded examinations, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of data.

Lower secondary school	Hrs	Higher secondary school	Hrs
School West (Teacher 1): 17	8.0	School East 1 (Teachers 3 + 4): 5	2.5
School East (Teacher 2): 7	3.5	School East 2 (Teacher 5): 4	2
		School East 2 (Teacher 6): 4	2
SUM: 23	**11.5**	**SUM: 13**	**6.5**

Students take final oral examinations in one of their subjects after year ten in lower secondary school (age 16) and year three in upper secondary school (age 18). The participants were the students, their internal examiner (i.e. the students' teacher or teachers in the discipline being tested) and an external examiner (i.e. a teacher from another school in the county). In this paper, we refer to the internal examiner as 'teacher' and the external examiner as 'examiner'. The teacher lead the questioning in the subject conversation, and the examiner had the final say in the grade-placing conversation.

A few weeks before their final oral examination, the students participated in practice oral examinations. While one goal of the practice examinations was to prepare them for the finals, they were also an assessment of the students' competence. The students received a grade on their performance in the practice examination, but it did not go on their diploma as a separate grade. However, the practice oral exam was still a high stakes situation, as the grade was consequential for the final grade they received in the Norwegian subject, and could as such affect their grade point average. The practice oral examinations were otherwise identical in form to the final exams; thus, we decided to use both data sets in the analysis.

During the subject conversation, the participants were seated around a table. The student was sat on one side, directly facing the two examiners seated on the other side. The examinations were recorded using a camera to capture the activity from a distance. All parts of the examinations were recorded, but student presentations and grade-placing conversations were omitted as data for this article. The participants signed a consent letter, and the project was approved by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD). The data were transcribed using the Jefferson (2004) and Mondada (2019) transcription conventions and analysed using a conversation analytic approach (Sidnell and Stivers 2012).

The analysis was conducted by establishing a larger collection of sequences where the students displayed some kind of trouble in the turn following a question. A distinction was made between three types of trouble, one of which involved instances where the student displayed trouble answering the question, either explicitly (e.g. 'I don't know', 'I don't remember', 'I'm not sure') or implicitly (e.g. long silences and hesitation markers). The second type included examples where the student answered the question, but incorrectly, and the third type comprised instances where students initiated repair due to problems with hearing or understanding the question. In this article, we focus on the sequences where students had trouble answering a question. Sequences containing the second and third types of trouble were therefore, omitted from the final collection.

The remaining collection consisted of 31 sequences in which the student displayed trouble answering a question. After a preliminary analysis focusing on how teachers followed up on the students' trouble displays, the sequences were divided into two groups, as seen in Table 2. The first contained sequences where the teacher kept pursuing an answer to a question that the student initially failed to answer, and the second contained sequences where the teacher abandoned the question and moved on in the examination.

Table 2. Teachers' moves following student displays of trouble.

Teachers' follow-up moves	Cases
Pursuing an answer	20
Abandoning the question	11
SUM	**31**

The nine sequences chosen for the analysis are representative of the larger collection.

4. Analysis: teachers' resources for managing students' insufficient answers

Getting students' knowledge 'on the table' is essential in DOCEs. As mentioned above, when students display trouble answering a test question, our data reveal that teachers either *pursue* the answer or *abandon* the question. In the analysis below, we first demonstrate different interactional resources teachers use to *pursue* an answer to a question. We then show extracts where the teacher *abandoned* the attempt to elicit an answer and used different interactional resources to create contiguity and minimize the potentially problematic scenario of the student not being able to answer. In both sections, we consider the consequences of the two strategies for the students' opportunities to display their knowledge.

4.1. Pursuing an answer

When students display trouble answering a test question, teachers typically initiate additional questioning in pursuit of an answer. As we demonstrate below, this happens in cases involving both a *sequence-initiating question* (topic-initiating question) and a *sequence-expanding question* (follow-up question). Extract 1 shows the student's insufficient answer to the examiner's sequence-initiating (topic-initiating) question. In this recording, only the teacher's back is visible from the camera angle. The student's face and body is visible, but not their eye-gaze. We enter the examination immediately after the student has finished her oral presentation, and the teacher initiates the subject conversation (part two of the DOCE) by referring to three novels the student has read. Then, in line 4, she asks a multi-unit question (see Skovholt et al. 2021):

Extract 1: Parsing the question

```
01 TEACHER:       Og du har gjort en undersøkelse på en måte,=Eller hvert
                  And you have done an examination on a way=Or      each
                  And you did an examination sort of,=Or at least
02                fall utforma hvordan man-hva=noe man kunne undersøke,
                  case designed how one-what=something one could examine,
                  designed how one- what=something one could examine,
03                (.) Da du leste (.) tre romaner.
                  (.) When you read (.) three novels.
                  (.) When you read (.) three novels.
04                      (0.7)
05 TEACHER:       E:h me_n: eh vil du fortelle litt om (.) hva du
                  E:h bu t:   eh want you tell little about (.) what you
                  E:h but eh do you want to tell a bit about (.) what you
06                leste og hva du tenkte at det kunne være interessant å
                  read and what you thought that it could be interesting
                  read and what you thought could be interesting to
07                undersøke videre?
                  to examine onwards?
                  examine further?
08                      (1.5)
09 STUDENT:       A:v fordypningsemnet?
                  O:f immersionsubjet?
                  O:f the specialisation study?
10 TEACHER:       +Ja,
                  +Yes,
                  +Ye,
   teacher:       +nods
11                      (1.0)
12 STUDENT:       *Asså,
                  *Well,
   student:       *looks up at ceiling--->
13                      (2.0)
14 student:       --->*
15                      (2.0)
16 STUDENT        *Ehm.
```

student: *smiles, looks down at table--->
17 (2.0)
18 TEACHER: → Du leste- (0.3) *av en eh forfatter som er mye lest?
You read- (0.3) *of an eh author who is much read?
*You read- (0.3) *of an eh author who’s been read a lot?*
student: --->*
19 STUDENT: Ja.
Yes.
20 TEACHER: → Ja, Som heter_
Yes, Who named_
*Ye, who is called_*
21 STUDENT: Jojo Moyes.
22 TEACHER: → Ja. Og hva slags type bøker er det hun le- skriver.
Yes. And what kind type books is it she le- writes.
Yes. And what type of books is it she re- writes.
23 STUDENT: For det meste romaner.
For the most novels.
Mostly novels.
24 TEACHER: +Romaner. [Ja?]
+Novels. [Yes?]
+Novels. [Ye?]
teacher: +nods
25 STUDENT: [Ja.]
[Yes.]
[Ye.]
26 TEACHER: → Og temaet i de romanene o::g hva kan det være for
An theme in those novels a::nd what can it be for
And the theme in those novels a::nd what could it be
27 → noe som hun #har som tema i romanene sine.#
something that she #has as theme in novels hers.#
that she #has as theme in her novels.#
28 (1.1)
29 STUDENT: Ehm:: (0.7) asså: hun skriver veldig mye om (.)
Ehm :: (0.7) she writes very much about (.)
Ehm:: (0.7) well: she writes a whole lot about (.)
30 familier og forelskelse,
falling in love,
families and *families and falling in love,*
31 TEACHER: +M-m,
teacher: +nods
32 (0.8)
33 STUDENT: Det kan være litt forskjellig,
It can be little different,
It can be different things,
34 (0.2)
35 teacher: *nods*
36 TEACHER: → Hvilket kjønn er det vanligvis på hovedpersonene.
Which gender is it usually on mainpersons.
What is the usual gender of the protagonists.
37 STUDENT: °Kvinnelige.°
°Female°
°Female°
38 TEACHER: Det er kvinnelige hovedpersoner. +[M-m,]
It is female mainpersons. +[M-m,]

```
                  It is female protagonists.        +[M-m    ,  ]
   teacher:                                         +nods
39 STUDENT:                                          [Noe som]får
                                                     [Some which] gets
                                                     [Something ] that
40                at de stiller (det i-) jeg hvert fall tenker at hun
                  that they stand(it i-) I   every case think that she,
                  makes them stand (that i-) I at least think she
41                stiller i et bedre lys, for det at den ene boken jeg
                  stands in a better light, because that the one book I
                  stands in a better light, because the one book I
42                leste så var det veldig at hun var (0.6) ehm (0.7)
                  read so was it very that she was (0.6) ehm (0.7)
                  read there was very that she was (0.6) ehm (0.7)
43                selvstendig.
                  independent.
```

The examiner's sequence-initiating questions in lines 6–7 ('*but eh do you want to tell me a little bit about (.) what you read and what you thought could be interesting to examine further?*') set the agenda wide and invited an elaborate answer (see Skovholt et al. 2021). First, there is a 1.5-second gap of silence (line 8). The student is facing the examiners, but no embodied action is visible at this point. Then, the student initiates repair with an insert expansion, which shows their candidate understanding of the questions and requests a confirmation ('*O:f the specialization study?*', line 9). The teacher confirms with rising intonation (line 10), invoking an answer to the original question as the relevant next action. In response, the student produces hesitation markers, and there are several gaps of silence (lines 11–17). As a confirmation of the student's understanding of the question has already been answered, these cues of trouble can be heard as displays of an inability to provide an answer. This is underscored by the student's embodied behaviour. While the student's gaze at the ceiling (line 12) may suggest that she is thinking, her smile and look at the table following another gap of silence may be interpreted as signs of embarrassment due to the lack of an answer (Ambadar, Cohn, and Reed 2009). In response, the teacher pursues of an answer by transforming the original question into a declarative with rising intonation ('*you read- (0.3) of an eh author who is read a lot?*' (line 18). By doing this, she 'parses' (cf. Lee 2007) or 'decomposes' (cf. Svennevig 2018) the original question, focusing on one component (the '*what you read'* part). The declarative takes the form of a 'statement about B-event' (Labov and Fanshel 1977, 100), which is usually used as a confirmation request. Confirming the declarative arguably presents a much easier task for the student than answering the original question. It also takes the form of a candidate answer to the previous question and, therefore, could function as a hint to the student to continue speaking. The construction '*an eh author who is read a lot*' conceals the reference, and the teacher avoids identifying the author explicitly. However, the question does not succeed in eliciting more than the confirmation 'Yes' from the student (line 19).

Continuing, the teacher keeps 'parsing' by posing specific questions which all touch on parts of the overarching theme of the original question. First, she keeps focusing on the '*what you read'* part of the question by enquiring about the name of the author with a response prompt in the form of a designedly incomplete utterance (cf. Koshik 2002) (line 16). She then acknowledges the student's short answer ('*Jojo Moyes*', line 21), from which she draws her next question ('*Yes. And what type of books is it she re- writes*', line 22). After another correct but short answer from the student in line 23 ('*Mostly novels*'), the teacher moves on to pose questions related to the second part of the base question, ('*what you thought could be interesting to examine further')*. First, she asks about the theme of the books (line 26–27), followed by the gender of the protagonists (line 36). These questions receive more complete answers, with the student finally taking a more independent and elaborate turn (lines 40–43).

What we see in Extract 1 is that the teacher, upon not receiving an answer, simplifies a complex task by breaking it down into components (cf. Sidnell 2012, 80). The first multi-unit question (lines 5–7) involves two questions and thereby projects an answer composed of two SPPs and, as such, contains a broad topic and action agenda and requires a complex task for the student. By contrast, the elicitations (lines 18, 20, 22, 36) invite the student to answer parts of the initial question. In this new line of questioning, each question is much more specific and, therefore, more manageable as its scope is more clearly defined, which might help the student to provide sufficient answers. However, because short, non-elaborative answers are relevant next actions in the new line of questioning, they might not provide much assessment 'data' for the teachers. The student does not treat the answer slots as opportunities to provide independent and elaborate responses, and continues to provide short answers (lines 19, 21, 23, 37). As such, this strategy constricts the student's answers, and she appears to take little initiative. There seems to be a sort of progression by means of a step-wise scaffolding trajectory that starts from basic information (the author's name, types of books and genre). This roughly corresponds to the first part of the multi-unit question ('*tell a little bit about (.) what you read'*). The teacher then moves on to more elaborate parts (the theme in the novels and the gender of main characters), which can be taken to address the second part of the multi-unit question ('*what you thought could be interesting to examine further?'*). As such, this gives the student a chance to display at least some topic knowledge. Eventually it leads to the student finally taking a longer and more elaborate turn where the information she provides about the characters correspond to at least some level of analysis of the novels (line 40–43).

In the case of sequence-initiating questions, such as the teacher's question in Extract 1, the problematic aspect of not being able to produce an answer is substantial since it displays a lack of knowledge about a substantial curricular topic and, thus, could thus lead to a lower grade. In contrast, one could expect that not being able to produce answers to follow-up or subsequent questions would be less problematic since the student in such cases has already displayed some knowledge on the topic. However, our data show that examiners also pursue answers to follow-up questions. Extracts 2 and 5 below show how the teacher pursues follow-up questions in different ways to secure a relevant answer.

In Extract 2, the student is talking about writers in the literary period of modernism, and the question in focus here is a subsequent (follow-up) question. Both the teacher (TEACHER) and the external examiner (EXT.EX) participate in this extract.

Extract 2: Pursuing an answer with a response prompt

01 STUDENT: Realismen kom jo etter en tid hvor de skrev mye
Realism came ((jo)) after a time where they wrote a lot
Realism came after a time where they wrote a lot of
02 romantikk og alt skulle være så bra og sånn,
of romance and all should be so good and like that,
romance and everything should be good and stuff,
03 og i realismen var de veldig opptatt av å
and in realism were they very occupied of to
and in realism they were very preoccupied with
04 skrive hvordan ting egentlig var.
write how things really were,
writing how things really were.
05 TEACHER:→ Hvorfor gjorde de det, da?=Hva ville de med det?
Why did they that, ((da))?=What wanted they with it?
Why did they do that, then?=What did they want?
06 STUDENT: M:::
07 (3.0)
08 STUDENT: Eh Jeg er ikke sikker på <hvor fo:r?>
Eh I am not sure on <why?>
Eh I'm not sure <why?>
09 EXT. EX:→ Hvis du skulle gjette da,
If you should guess ((da)),
If you were to guess then,
10 (0.5)
11 STUDENT: E::m=
12 EXT: EX:→ =Satse. (.) bittelitt +heh heh
=Bet. (.) +heh heh
=Take a chance.(.) a little bit +heh heh
ext.ex: *+signals 'small' with two fingers*
13 (0.5)
14 STUDENT: E::h
15 (2.5)
16 STUDENT: Jeg vet ikke men det er liksom de skrev realistiske
I know not but it is like they wrote realistic
I don't know but it is like they wrote realistic
17 tekster, så da kan jo liksom andre folk relatere,
texts, so then can ((jo)) like other people relate,
texts, so then other people can like relate,
18 TEACHER: Mm.
19 STUDENT: Fordi. det er jo faktisk det som.
Because. it is ((jo)) that which.
Because. It is actually that which.
20 Eller de skriver om ting som faktisk skjer.
Or they write about things that actually happen.
Or they write about things that actually happen.
21 TEACHER: Mm.
22 STUDENT: Istedenfor om fantasi og (.) sånn.
Insteadof about fantasy and (.) that.
Instead of fantasy and (.) such.

In Extract 2, the student gives an elaborate answer, telling the teachers about the writers of the realistic period (lines omitted from transcript). The student concludes that they were '*occupied with writing how things really were*'. The teacher poses a multi-unit follow-up question ('*Why did they do that, then? What did they want to do with that?*') (line 5). The student does not give an immediate answer but, instead, displays trouble with hesitation markers and a gap of silence (lines 6–8) before claiming uncertainty ('*I'm not sure why?*') (line 8). In line 9, the external examiner poses a response prompt, asking what the student would answer if she '*were to guess*', which invokes an answer to the original question as the relevant next action and, as such, the pursuit of an answer. At the same time, it can be interpreted as a sign of encouragement, as this indicates that it is okay to 'guess'. Thereby, it downgrades the epistemic status that one needs to answer a question. After a gap of silence (line 10) and a hesitation marker (line 11), the external examiner self-selects and keeps pursuing an answer with another response prompt, asking the student to '*take a chance*' and producing laughter tokens (line 12). As with the prompt in line 9, this downgrades the epistemic status. After signs of trouble in lines 13–15, the student first delivers another CIK ('*I don't know*', line 16) before continuing to deliver an elaborate answer over several turns (lines 16–22). While the CIK in line 16 in form signals a lack of knowledge, it works as a preface to her response and, therefore, marks uncertainty about her next-positioned guess rather than a literal CIK (see Beach and Metzger 1997, 564, Weatherall 2011). As such, the CIK here shows the student's alignment with the epistemic downgrades used in the response pursuits.

In Extract 2, when the student provides an insufficient answer ('*Eh I'm not sure <why>*"), the external examiner pursues an answer by allowing the student to guess. This respecifies the grounds for answering the question. She opens the projected response up from a complex multi-turn answer to '*a guess*' and finally '*taking a chance*'. This reduces the epistemic status and lowers the threshold for answering. The student is not answering on account of being unsure and thereby shows an orientation towards certainty as a requisite when answering a question during an examination. The examiner's suggestion that the answer can be based on a guess displays an orientation towards guessing being a legitimate strategy during an examination. This allows less precise answers and consequently minimizes the potentially negative implications of a wrong answer. At the same time, this also raises issues in terms of assessment: how can a teacher assess students" answers that are simply guessed?

However, it gives the student another chance at independently displaying the requested knowledge without the teacher and external examiner revealing more information related to the question. In this case, it leads to the student giving an independently produced answer. Extract 2 demonstrates how teachers may pursue an answer by simply re-actualizing an answer to the test question as the next relevant action without providing any information that might support the student. In other cases, however, teachers give more information in their subsequent pursuit to assist the student, as we show in the next Extract 2.

In Extract 3, the student answers questions about the movie *Skylappjenta, which is adapted from a picture book. The movie has been watched and discussed in the student's class.*

Extract 3: Providing a hint

```
01 TEACHER:        Når vi bruker noe fra-
                   When we use something from-
                   When we use something from-
02                 og det her er et litt sånn konkret fagspørsmål.
                   and this here is a bit like concrete subjectquestion.
                   and this is a somewhat specific technical question.
03                 Men hvis vi bruker noe fra andre tekster i en tekst,
                   But if  we use something from other texts in a text,
                   But if we use something from other texts in a text,
04                 et spesifikt fagbegrep,
                   a specific subjectterm,
                   a specific technical term,
05                 husker du hva det heter?
                   remember you what it called?
                   do you remember what that is called?
06                       *(2.0)
   student:              *gaze turns away from the teacher-->
07 STUDENT:        M når *man tar-
                   M when *one take-
                   When   *you take-
   student:          -->*
08 TEACHER:        Hvis man tar inn noe fra en tekst, da-
                   If one take in something from a text, ((da))-
                   If one takes in something from a text, then-
09                 si at man bruker for eksempel
                   say that one use for example
                   say one uses for example
10                 m: eh Askeladden i en tekst om Skylappjenta?
                   m: eh Askeladden in a text about Skylappjenta?
                   m: eh Askeladden in a text about Skylappjenta?
11 STUDENT:        Ja.
                   Yes.
                   Ye.
12 TEACHER:        *Ja, jeg vet at du kan det [egentlig,] *men eh-
                   *Yes, I know you know   it [really,  ] *but eh-
                   *Yes, I know you really know it,       *but eh-
   student:        *widening smile                        *looks down-->
13 STUDENT:                                   [    m:   ]
14                       (1.0)
15 TEACHER: →      Det begynner på a.
                   It    starts on a.
                   It starts with an a.
16 STUDENT:        A:: (.) *Å, jeg- å, jeg har lest det.
                   A:: (.) *Oh, I- oh, I    have read it.
                   A:: (.) *Oh, I- oh, I have read it.
   student:              -->*
17 TEACHER:        Ja, jeg vet at du kan det. Vi tenker på allusjon.
                   Yes, I know that you know it. We are thinking on
                   allusion.
                   Yes, I know you know it. We're thinking about allusion.
18 STUDENT:        Å, allusjon.
                   Å, allusion.
                   Oh, allusion.
19 TEACHER:        Ja. Og det har jo dere sett på i mange andre tekster.
                   Yes. And that have  you looked on in many other texts.
                   Yes. And you have looked at that in many other texts.
```

In Extract 3, the teacher requests a literary term by asking a specific question (lines 1–5). First there is a 2.0 second gap, where the student looks away from the teacher, before she reformulates part of the teacher's question (*'When you take-'*, line 7). The teacher then reformulates her previous question, inferring the student's repetition as the start of a request for clarification (line 8). She then exemplifies the literary device through a hypothetical scenario with two texts (*'say one uses for example m: eh Askeladden in a text about Skylappjenta?')* with rising intonation, which makes it hearable as a reissue of the question (line 9–10). The student's *'Yes'* in line 11 could be a receipt or continuer and indicates a confirmation of the phenomenon described by the teacher. However, the student does not provide the name of the literary device, and retracts her gaze from the teacher, looks down at the table, and starts smiling. Subsequently, the teacher launches a statement about the student's epistemic state (*'Yes, I know you know it [really,]'*) (line 12). The statement indicates that the teacher has understood the student's acknowledgement token as a recognition of the literary device and could work as a response prompt. After another 1.0-second gap of silence (line 14), the teacher pursues an answer by providing a hint (*'it starts with an a'*). The hint gives away parts of the answer without giving the actual answer. In this case, however, it does not lead to the student answering, and the teacher subsequently provides the answer herself (line 17).

Extract 3 illustrates how essential it is to get an adequate answer to test questions 'on the table'. The teacher manages the student's insufficient answers by providing different types of pursuits. First, she reformulates the question (lines 8–10), then she tries with a response prompt (line 12). When these two strategies fail to lead to an adequate answer, she pursues an answer by using a hint that partly gives the answer. The hint in this extract might help the student remember a literary term that *'starts with an a'* but not independently providing an answer. In fact, the student does not provide an answer at all. Rather, the teacher ends up doing a great deal of interactional work without getting a 'rateable' reply. She also displays affiliation and reverses the negative implications associated with not remembering, stating twice that she *'knows'* that the student *'really'* knows the answer (lines 12, 17).

4.2. Abandoning the question

In this section, we examine how teachers abandon a line of questioning. Teachers move on in the examination, however, not without somehow commenting on the lack of answers. Our analysis shows that teachers use various strategies for creating transitions and minimizing the potentially problematic scenario of the students being unable to provide answers. In our data, as opposed to pursuing an answer, a teacher's abandonment of a line of questioning never followed a topic-initiating question.

In Extract 4 the student answers a question using texts by the Norwegian author Amalie Skram as examples. In this examination, an additional teacher is present (TEACHER 2). However, he is not verbally active in this extract. They are about to close the sequence when the teacher asks the student whether he has any other texts he wants to talk about '*in relation to love*' (line 1–2):

Extract 4: Affiliative laughter

```
01 TEACHER:      Ja, er det andre tekster som du har lyst til å si
                 Yes, is it other texts that you have want to say
                 Yes, are there other texts that you want to say
02               noe om, i forhold til kjærlighet.
                 anything about, in relation to love.
                 anything about,in relation to love.
03                     *(3.0)
   student:            *looks at teacher 2 and then back to teacher
04 STUDENT:      +E:h nei, jeg har jo lest *veldig lite bøker, så::=
                 +E:h no, I have      read *very little books, so::=
                 +E:h no, I have read      *very few books, so::=
   teacher 2:    +broad smile--->
   student:                                *growing smile--->
05 TEACHER:→     =Ja, heh heh [heh heh ]heh heh*.h =
                 =Yes, heh heh [heh heh]heh heh*.h=
                 =Yes, heh heh [heh heh]heh heh*.h=
06 STUDENT:                   [ heh heh]
07 student:                                ---->*
08 TEACHER:→     =[+Men eh ] hvis vi holder oss til eh til Amalie Skram,
                 =[+But eh  ]  if  we hold  us to eh to Amalie Skram,
                 =[+But eh  ] if we stay at eh Amalie Skram,
09 STUDENT:       [+men eh]
                  [+but eh  ]
                  [+but eh  ]
   teacher 2:   -->+
10 TEACHER:→     da o:g for å gå litt videre der i forhold til eh
                   a:nd for to go little further there in relation to eh
                 then a:nd to go a bit further there in relation to eh
11               litteraturhistorien.
                 literaturehistory.
                 literature history.
12 TEACHER:→     E:h husker du:: hvilken periode vi gjerne knytter (1.0)
                 E:h remember you:: which period we gladly tie   (1.0)
                 E:h do you remember:: which period we often tie (1.0)
13               Amalie Skram sine tekster til?
                 Amalie Skram their  texts  to?
                 the texts of Amalie Skram to?
14                     (1.5)
15 STUDENT:      Bli- (0.5) Nat-uralismen [tror jeg.]
                 Become- (0.5) Nat-uralism [think I.]
                 It's- Nat-uralism [I think.]
```

The teacher's question in line 1–2 is a general follow-up question with a wide agenda, inviting the student to talk about texts 'in relation to love' but of his own choosing. The question is followed by a 3.0-second gap of silence where the student quickly looks at the two examiners, which could a indicate negative response. In line 4, the student declines the opportunity to set the agenda on the account that he has '*read very few books*'. He ends his turn with an elongated '*so::*', inviting an inference that links back to the initial declination. With

this, he invokes an institutional identity of a student who has not read many books, and turns it into an excuse for declining the teacher's request. The teacher immediately accepts the student's account in a latch and erupts into laughter (line 5). The student's excuse is problematic in a test setting, and the accompanying smile may be aimed at mitigating this dispreferred response by marking it as humorous. The teacher's laughter can then be seen as a recognition of the student's account, treating it in a humorous manner. The student joins in the laughter in line 6. Following this, the teacher does not try to secure an answer from the student to the initial question. Instead, she returns to the topic of the author Amalie Skram in a latch ('*=[But eh] if we stay at eh Amalie Skram*') (line 8), which the student previously talked about, and poses a new question (lines 12–13). However, she introduces a new context, the literary period the author belonged to, which the student manages to answer (line 10).

In Extract 4, the teacher abandons the question by directing the student back to a previously discussed topic ('*Amalie Skram*'). To manage the potential conversational discontinuity of not providing an answer, she mitigates and does affiliative work. By engaging in laughter, she treats the student's excuse as something humorous, and, as such, defuses the negative implications of not providing an answer. Instead, she directs the conversation back to the topic of Amalie Skram in a new sequence; she abandons the previous context ('*texts about love*'), introduces a new one ('*literary periods*') and connects the topic to something the student has already mentioned. This makes her able to move on more seamlessly in the examination without marking the student's response as dispreferred or misplaced. She does not attempt to pursue an answer to the original question in line 1. However, the student has clearly signalled his inability to answer the question, indicating several different signs of trouble and effectively blocking any further pursuit of the teacher's request with his excuse. In addition, the question occurs in a topic-closing environment, where conversational norms prefer a 'no' answer. By moving on, she gives the student an opportunity to display knowledge on the previous topic within a new context and avoid using valuable time to force an answer that the student, by his own admission, is unable to provide.

Our last example on how teachers abandon questions is provided below. In Extract (5), the student talks about the development of the Norwegian language, and the teacher poses a follow-up question seeking further information:

Extract 5: Claiming knowledge on behalf of the student

```
01 TEACHER:      Hvem [var hvem er      ] det som er særlig er
                 Who  [was who is       ] it which is especially is
                 Who  [was who is       ] it that is particularly
02 STUDENT:           [(det er egentlig)]
                      [ (it is really)  ]
                      [ (it’s really)   ]
03               relevant der?
                 relevant there?
                 relevant there?
04               Akkurat det husker jeg +ikke.
                 Just      that remember I +not.
                 Precisely that I don’t +remember.
   student:                             +smile
05 TEACHER: →    Jo, det vet jeg du vet. Han (.) gikk rundt og er
                 No, that know I you know. He (.) walked around and is
                 No, I know that you know. He (.) walked around and is
```

```
06          →   eh (0.6) eh (0.5) Ivar Aasen?
07                    (0.5)
08 STUDENT:     +.hh [Å:]
                +.hh [Å:]
                +.hh [Oh:]
   student:     +opens mouth in an o-shape and quickly glances upwards
09 TEACHER: →        [Ja,] heh heh. Det kunne du egentlig?
                     [Yes,] heh heh. That knew you really?
                     [Yes,] heh heh. You knew that really?
10 STUDENT:     [Det kan godt hende.]
                [That can well happen.]
                [That may well be.    ]
11 TEACHER:     [   ja.               ]ja.
                [   yes               ]yes.
                [   ye                ]ye.
12 STUDENT:     (Det blir sånn) som sitter ganske langt bak.
                (It becomes such) that sits quite   far    back.
                (It becomes something) that sits quite far back.
13 TEACHER:→    Det sitter ganske langt bak ja, akkurat. Eh for at vi
                It sits quite far  back yes, right. Eh because that we
                It sits quite far back yes, right. Eh cause we
14          →   har (jo) to skriftspråk,
                have two written languages,
                have two written languages,
15              som du var inne på i stad?
                that you were in on earlier
                which you touched on earlier?
```

The teacher poses a specific follow-up question (‘*who is it that is particularly relevant there*’) in line 1–3. In line 4, the student claims insufficient memory by stating, ‘*precisely that I don’t remember*’. She ends her response with a smile, which could be oriented towards the problematic aspect of the lack of an answer. In response, the teacher explicitly challenges the student’s claim with the epistemic adverb ‘*Jo*’ (Heinemann 2005; Heinemann, Lindström, and Steensig 2011), stating that she knows that the student knows the answer (line 5). Here, incongruence emerges between their epistemic stances; the student claims she does not remember, while the teacher claims that the student does, in fact, know the answer. While the student treats this as a problem of memory, the teacher treats it as problem of knowledge. In the same turn, the teacher starts to give a vague hint (‘*he went around and is eh*’) before continuing to provide the answer herself (‘*Ivar Aasen?*’ line 6). If this was seen as a designedly incomplete utterance (Koshik 2002), then the teacher would finally provide an answer due to the lack of a forthcoming response from the student. However, the pauses in the teacher’s turn do not appear at a transition-relevant place, and the student does not perceive them as opportunities to respond. By claiming knowledge on behalf of the student, she also implicitly redefines the question as less important to answer – she already knows that the student knows the answer. The turn ends with rising intonation, which makes it hearable as a request for confirmation. However, in line 8, the student instead produces a ‘change of state token’ (Heritage 1998), which indicates that she actually does not know the answer. Her embodied conduct (o-shaped mouth and upward gaze) seems to correspond with this. In overlap, the teacher produces a sign of confirmation and laughter tokens before inserting another knowledge claim, with rising intonation, on the student’s behalf (‘*You knew that*

really?' Line 9), challenging the student's previous epistemic stance. The question is designed with a strong preference for a confirmation from the student. The student, however, does not confirm that she knows but responds with the much less certain '*may well be*' (line 10). She then produces an account that this is the type of knowledge that is '*sitting quite far back*', meaning knowledge that is difficult to recall (line 12). The teacher confirms the student's account by repeating it, treating it as sufficient, and moves on in the examination, posing a new question (lines 13–15) that connects back to something that the student had previously talked about. This gives the student a new opportunity to display a knowledgeable answer within the same general subject.

In Extract 5, the student's explicit display of insufficient memory is delivered very quickly, without additional signs of trouble. The teacher directly abandons the question, claiming knowledge on the student's behalf and providing the answer herself instead of pursuing one. The teacher's first knowledge claim on the student's behalf (line 5) works as an account that retrospectively redefines the student's epistemic stance and the importance of answering. The next knowledge claim (line 9) is produced with rising intonation and is designed in a way to strongly prefer a confirmation from the student. If the student had provided an unambiguous confirmation, the student's claimed lack of memory could be concealed, but instead it becomes marked as the student hedges her confirmation, using the modal markers '*may well'*. When the teacher abandons the original question (line 1–3), the student misses the opportunity to display knowledge. However, the repeated knowledge claim on the student's behalf could have mitigated the potentially problematic claim of insufficient memory as the answer is so obvious that it is redundant. The teacher moves on to a new question-answer sequence, thus providing the student with a new opportunity to display knowledge within the same general subject.

5. Discussion

In this article, we examined what happens when students cannot answer teachers' test questions during DOCEs. Our first aim was to identify the interactional resources teachers use to manage students' insufficient answers. We showed that following a student response displaying trouble answering, teachers use interactional resources either to pursue an answer or abandon the question and move on in the examination. Teachers typically follow up on these trouble displays by attempting to *pursue a student answer*. They use a range of interactional resources, including parsing the original question into more narrow questions (Extract 1), deploying a response prompt (Extract 2) and providing hints (Extract 3). These resources all stress the relevance of providing an answer to the original base-pair question. As participants can then continue talking about the same topic, pursuing an answer avoids creating abrupt transitions and maintains continuity.

While previous CA studies on the management of troublesome responses have focused on the pursuit of an answer, this study also highlighted how teachers manage insufficient answers by *abandoning the question* and moving on. Abandoning the initial base-pair and starting a new sequence may create disruption and discontinuity in the interaction. Our analysis shows how teachers use different interactional resources to create smooth transitions and mitigate the potential problematic scenario of a lack of a sufficient answer. This is done by engaging in laughter (Extract 4) or claiming knowledge on the student's behalf (Extract 5).

Our second aim in this article was to examine the consequences of teachers' management of students' insufficient answers and how they impact students' opportunities to display knowledge. When teachers *abandon* the initial base-pair and initiate a new sequence, the student subsequently lose the opportunity to display their knowledge in regard to that particular question. However, in abandoning the initial question, the teacher can let the student show knowledge and competence on another question. We found no examples of teachers abandoning topic-initiating questions, arguably suggesting that they treat such questions as essential to answer and that abandoning them would infer no topic knowledge, which is institutionally risky. Abandoning subsequent questions, in contrast, does not involve the same risk as the students have already shown some knowledge on the subject at hand. By *pursuing an answer*, the teachers gives the candidate another chance to produce the answer with rateable information, thus displaying knowledge.

In our analysis, we observed how the different resources vary in how much additional topic information they provide to enable the student to give an answer. Response prompts offer no additional information. While they encourage the students to 'guess' or 'take a chance' (as in Extract 2), they simply 'lower the bar' and suggest no negative implications for wrong answers. Other ways of pursuing, such as parsing the question and offering hints, provide students with information that may work as implicit hints or guidance towards a relevant answer. These resources may secure answers that at least provide some basis for assessment. However, the answer they secure may not necessarily contain much 'assessment data' for teachers. They are often designed to interactionally prefer confirmations and short answers. Thus, they restrict the student's opportunities to answer both thematically and interactionally, thus minimizing their opportunities to display knowledge independently.

Our findings raise the question of whether strategies offering more additional topic information actually help the students or whether they are a consequence of implicit conversational norms, that is, 'a question needs an answer'. As we saw in the analysis, the strategies offering the most topic information do not necessarily enable the student to provide an answer. Furthermore, it is not possible to measure or prove that the answers the students provide after getting help have any positive influence on their grade. On the contrary, what this analysis *does reveal* is how far the teachers are willing to go both in order to adhere to the conversational norms and the institutional goal of receiving answers as well as maintain social relations and reduce the sensitive aspect of not being able to answer.

The dilemma of pursuing or abandoning a question seems illustrative of what Antaki (2002, 426) describes as a 'long-running struggle' between literal and sensitive interviewing (cf. Antaki 2001). On one hand, DOCEs have an institutional goal of collecting answers to test questions so that the student's responses may be measured against assessment criteria. In addition, conversational norms prefer an answer as the next action following a question (Clayman 2002; Stivers and Robinson 2006). On the other hand, another goal for interviewers in sensitive settings is to encourage, support and at least not 'face down' the respondent (Antaki 2002, 426). This again brings forward the dilemma teachers face when students fail to produce the sort of answers that teachers are aiming for in a test situation, that is, assessable answers. Should they move forward? Alternatively, do they believe that the students have the requested knowledge and therefore pursue an answer

by providing some help? This dilemma has many dimensions in DOCEs, where both time and student knowledge are important factors. Teachers and students have only 10 to 15 minutes to cover as much of the curriculum as possible. If a great deal of time has been spent pursuing an answer to a particular question, which ends in failure, it might create a sensitive situation for the student. Similarly, if the teacher uses a great deal of time and resources minimizing the potential problematic aspect of the student's insufficient answer and creates smooth transitions in order to move on, this might create an equally sensitive situation, where the potential lack of knowledge becomes significantly more marked than is desirable.

To conclude, pursuing or abandoning a line of questioning has interactional consequences in DOCEs, but it may also have consequences beyond the conversation. *Pursuing* an answer gives the student an opportunity to display knowledge but may also reveal a lack of knowledge. It also deviates from the guidelines in terms of looking 'for the competence the student has and not look[ing] for what the student does not know' (Ministry of Education and Research 2019b). *Abandoning* the question deprives the student of the opportunity to display knowledge on the topic. However, DOCEs are time-constrained, and abandoning a line of questioning that gives the student little chance of displaying knowledge provides an opportunity to pose a new question in which students' knowledge may be displayed. Balancing time spent on a line of questioning versus an assessable outcome on the student's behalf is the dilemma that examiners are facing and have to deal with contingently during DOCEs. An important question concerning fairness and exam quality in this regard is *who gets a chance to have another go and who does not?*

This study brings into view a vast array of interpretative works and contingent methods of actions by the teachers. The teachers perform complex analytic work, estimating what a student knows and does not know, identifying specific problems with a student, repairing what is problematic, steering the discourse in particular directions and exploring alternative interactional trajectories in the course of action. The study may contribute to reflection among teachers on the consequences of different ways of handling situations in which students display trouble answering questions during oral examinations. Increased awareness may also guide teachers to avoid conversational contributions that create an unnecessary focus on what the student does not know or that does not really enable the student to display knowledge. The materials presented in this paper would also be suitable for use in teacher education for training future teachers on how to manage displays of trouble in oral examinations, for instance via methods such as the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM) (Stokoe 2014).

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