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Mobilising assistance via complaints in digital skills courses for adults

Within a rapidly digitalising society, it is important to understand how the learning and teaching of digital skills play out *in situ*, particularly amongst older adults who acquire these skills later in life. This paper focuses on participants engaged in the process of learning digital skills in adult education courses. Using video recordings from adult education centres in Finland and Germany, we explore how students mobilise their teachers' assistance when encountering problems with their smartphones, laptops or tablets. Prior research on social interaction has shown that assistance can be recruited through a variety of verbal and embodied formats. In this specific educational setting, participants can use complaints about their digital skills or mobile devices to obtain assistance. Utilising multimodal conversation analysis, we describe two basic sequence types involving students' complaints, discuss their cross-linguistic characteristics, and reflect on their connection to this educational setting and digital devices.

Keywords: multimodal conversation analysis, adult education, digital skills, mobilising assistance
Asiasanat: multimodaalinen keskustelunanalyysi, aikuiskoulutus, digitaaliset taidot, avun mobilisointi

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1 Introduction

The increasing digitalisation in our daily lives, including the pervasiveness of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, presents a potential challenge for our society in general and for some sections of the population in particular (cf. Peine et al. 2021). Specifically, older adults who, due to their date of birth, did not have the opportunity to grow up in a technological environment, must use their own initiatives to acquire digital skills. This article will provide insights into specialised courses in the field of adult education, one of the settings in which 'non-digital natives' can learn how to manage everyday technologies from scratch. Based on video recordings of digital skills courses in Finland and Germany, we will demonstrate how the field of applied linguistics can contribute to a better understanding of how older adults manage everyday technologies. Using multimodal conversation analysis, the article will focus on the role of complaints about digital devices and how the course participants used these to mobilise assistance. Thus, complaining about a smartphone, for example, does not simply provide a description of one's learning difficulties or a self-evaluation of one's own digital skills as, in our data, these complaints typically resulted in the teacher handling and manipulating the requester's mobile device.

Adult education represents an important tool for intellectual, professional and societal empowerment, particularly in the domain of digital skills (e.g., Sawchuk 2003; Selwyn et al. 2006). Existing research has focused on the positive effect of digital skills courses on older participants' motivations and attitudes towards digital technologies (e.g., Dunnett 1998; González et al. 2015), and on the need to offer customised training to participants aged 60+ (e.g., Selwyn 2004; Vacek & Rybenska 2015). Most studies concerning digital skills or digital education for older adults have relied on data from interviews and surveys (e.g., Quan-Haase et al. 2016, 2018), while few studies have also considered the situated handling of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (e.g., Freddolino et al. 2010; Jensen et al. 2018), or even the embodied dimension of teaching and learning how to use digital devices (e.g., Weilenmann 2010; Råman 2022). As older adults represent a somewhat heterogeneous group of learners and users of ICTs (Quan-Haase et al. 2018), a detailed observation of situated technology use will improve our understanding of digital skills and learning in the later stages of life.

This study employed multimodal conversation analysis (Mondada 2013; Nevile 2015) to closely examine the micro-level details of assistance-mobilising sequences (Betz et al. 2020) in video recordings of digital skills courses. Complaints about the usability, design or complexity of technological devices represent a mundane practice, particularly from the perspective of less experienced users. Accordingly, the presence of such complaints in our data set (digital skills courses for adults) does not come as a surprise. Within conversation analytical research, however, complaints have mainly been analysed as being related to affectivity or culpability, and in quite

different social settings (Section 2.1). Therefore, our aim is to investigate the role of technology-related complaints in this specific institutional setting from a cross-linguistic perspective. More specifically, we explore the link between complaints and social actions that mobilise assistance; that is, those that are aimed at obtaining help from a co-participant to carry out a practical course of action (Section 2.2). Following a description of our data set (Section 3), we provide an overview of the two main types of complaint sequences that we identified in our data (Section 4), namely *teacher-initiated sequences* and *student-initiated sequences*. In the former case, a student's complaint is in response to a teacher's previous action, typically a question (Section 4.1). In the latter case, a student produces a complaint independently as a first action (Section 4.2). Finally, we will compare and discuss the distinctive sequential, grammatical and multimodal features of both sequence types and how they can be used for mobilising assistance across languages (Section 5).

2 Background

2.1 Complaints in social interaction

As Edwards (2005: 7) stated, complaints tend to "elude formal definition and remain a normative and vernacular, rather than technical, category". Consequently, they have been used, sometimes interchangeably, with concepts such as troubles-telling, criticising and accusing. Pillet-Shore (2015: 186) defined *complaining* as expressions of suffering or discontent when experiencing a problem. The social action of complaint has been shown to be connected to issues of affectivity (e.g., Selting 2010) and culpability (e.g., Laforest 2009). Complaints can therefore be seen as a means of expressing "feelings of discontent about some state of affairs for which responsibility can be attributed to 'someone'" (Heinemann & Traverso 2009: 2381). While instances of complaints with no clear responsible party can be found (Pillet-Shore 2015: 186), most cases of complaints can be classified as oppositional moves (Dersley 1998) and are inherently negative (Edwards 2005: 8).

Complaints are generally thought to be either direct complaints (e.g., Dersley & Wootton 2000) or indirect complaints (e.g., Drew 1998). In the case of the former, the target of the complaint is the recipient. In the latter, the target of the complaint is typically a non-present third-party (however, see Heinemann 2009). On one hand, the present study discusses complaints that the participants directed at themselves (which could be termed *first-party* complaints), and *third-party* complaints directed at the speaker's own digital device on the other.

In the case of first-party complaints, the complaint is targeted at the complainer's own perceived lack of skills or attributes, specifically in relation to the use

of digital devices (such as "*I can't find it*", "*I don't see anything*"). Within conversation analysis, the social actions of self-criticising (Tracy et al. 1987) and self-deprecation (e.g., Kim 2014; Speer 2019) are also closely related to the phenomenon of first-party complaints examined in the present study. To draw a distinction between these concepts, we first refer to Pillet-Shore's (2016: 54–55) comparison of criticising and complaining, in which criticisms are defined as negative evaluations of a person or their actions when the party providing the criticism does not explicitly position themselves as the wronged party, as opposed to instances of complaints in which the complainer is positioned as the one who is wronged. In the examples of the first-party complaints examined in the present study, the complainer positioned themselves as the wronged party; that is, their own actions or attributes (or lack thereof) caused them to experience discontent. With regard to the social action of self-deprecation, Kim (2014) noted that it could be examined from three analytical approaches: dispositional, situational and interactional. As the purpose of the present study is not to delve into personality traits or extensive cultural considerations (the first two analytical approaches), we have opted to use the term first-party complaint to avoid such connotations. In this way, we hope to specifically highlight the interactional purposes of the target action in question (the third analytical approach).

The third-party complaints in our data that were directed at the digital devices resembled "factual declaratives" (Rossi 2018), in that they described some dysfunctional state of the phone or its interface (such as "it has completely disappeared" or "now it's gone"; see also Schegloff 1995). However, they were different in the sense that they usually did not lead to informing (no change-of-state token was produced in response; Rossi 2018: 383-387). Instead, the responses to these turns displayed a straightforward orientation to providing assistance, thus indicating that the descriptive turns in our data are not composite (that is, dual) actions such as those analysed by Rossi (2018). Accordingly, we also glossed them as complaints, particularly as they displayed the participants' orientation to the state of the device as being complainable. These turns typically described the absence or disappearance of an element on the display, attributed some agency to the device, and were accompanied by multimodal displays related to complaints (such as prosody/negative emphasis, cf. Niebuhr 2010; Ogden 2010, or other embodied trouble alerts and displays such as frowns or a steady gaze at the device, cf. Kendrick & Drew 2016, Section 2.2).

Sequentially, complaints have been shown to occur in the first position, the second position or even as "pre-emptive" actions (Schegloff 2005). In our data, the students' complaints occurred in two sequential environments: The first-party complaints typically functioned as responses to questions and/or offers of assistance from the teacher, while the third-party device complaints clearly occupied a sequence-initial position. Most of the complaints in our data set featured the teacher as the recipient of the complaint, and typically occurred when assistance was sought

from or offered by the teacher. Here, we seek to highlight a clearly pragmatic function of the complaining action, namely that of mobilising assistance.

2.2 Assistance and recruitment in social interaction

Within conversation analytic research, the notion of assistance applies to situations in which a participant obtains help from (an)other co-participant(s) in order to implement a practical task or course of action. Assistance can be provided with or without the assister's shared commitment to the task at hand; in other words, "help" versus "contribution" (Zinken & Rossi 2016). Assistance does not refer to the solving of any kind of interactional trouble, such as problems related to the production or understanding of a turn ("conversational repair", Schegloff et al. 1977), but has a clearly empractical dimension. In other words, providing assistance or mobilising another's assistance is often connected to practical, immediate, embodied, and mobile activities and actions (Kendrick & Drew 2016; Cekaite et al. 2021), such as when a participant visibly struggles when moving a heavy item, or when an object cannot be easily found or reached. Recruiting and providing assistance has been investigated as a recurrent activity among peers in everyday settings (Curl 2006; Kendrick & Drew 2016), as well as in highly asymmetrical settings, such as parent-child interactions or professional care settings, in which one party is clearly less physically able or entitled to carry out a given task (see e.g., Lindström 2005; Cekaite 2010; Goodwin & Cekaite 2019; Cekaite et al. 2021).

Assistance can be mobilised by various turn or action formats depending on the type of setting, the participation framework and the course of action for which assistance is needed (cf. Drew & Couper-Kuhlen 2014; Taleghani-Nikazm et al. 2020). Conversation analytical research on requests and directives has illustrated that different syntactic formats can express varying degrees of entitlement (e.g., Lindström 2005; Curl & Drew 2008), and that both a request and an offer of assistance can be explicit or implicit in their formulation (Curl 2006; Pino 2016). Requests for assistance can thus take the form of syntactical questions, imperatives, descriptions, statements and so forth. Moreover, and with reference to more recent studies concerning video data, assistance can be recruited not only through verbal/lexical reports, but also via other multimodal resources, including interjections and non-lexical sounds ("trouble alerts", Kendrick & Drew 2016), or by embodied actions such as aligning one's body in a specific position in relation to a given object ("embodied trouble display", Kendrick & Drew 2016). According to Kendrick and Drew (2016: 11), an explicit verbal request for assistance implies a stronger obligation on the co-participant to assist, whereas an embodied display of trouble is less assistance-implicative and merely provides an *opportunity* for assistance.

While interactional research initially focused on the lexical forms used when asking others for help (typically requests, but also declaratives, cf. Rossi 2018), the

concepts of recruiting or mobilising assistance also take the embodied dimension into account: Betz et al. (2020: 2) suggested considering the role of activity and participation structures in shaping "the design, placement, and understanding of turns which mobilize others to act". Unlike previous research on the mobilisation of assistance, the setting we investigate in this contribution is neither mundane nor clearly asymmetrical (for example, with regard to the participants' interactional skills). Moreover, the problems with which the participants needed assistance in this setting related both to understanding (for example, of a technological fact) and to practical matters (such as manipulating a mobile device). Therefore, we will not focus only on the verbal turns that the participants used to mobilise assistance, but will also consider their embodied actions and displays of trouble.

3 Data

The two data sets used in this contribution consisted of video recordings of digital skills courses for adults in Finland and Germany (2019–2020). While the adult education centres did not necessarily provide a specific age range in the course descriptions, most of the participants were actually 60+, and were retired or close to retirement. This observation is based on our discussions with the participants, the field notes that were taken during the data collection and, for one of the settings, a short survey (the age range was between 60 and 83 years at the time of the recording, with a mean of 74 years). The Finnish data consisted of three recorded sessions (nine hours in total) of a 12-session course that introduced the participants to different topics related to digital devices in general, such as social media, text editor and email. Two teachers and a tutor instructed a group of 15 to 22 participants. The sessions were recorded using an audio device, a static camera and a handheld mobile camera, and the teachers were equipped with chest- or shoulder-mounted GoPro cameras. The German data consisted of two different introductions to Android smartphones: A second session of a two-part course (one teacher, eight participants), and the second and third sessions of a three-part course (one teacher, seven participants). The settings were recorded using an audio recorder and three fixed cameras, resulting in nine hours of data. The participants gave their consent and agreed to the use of the data for scientific purposes prior to the recordings. The participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms, and the video stills have been partially anonymised. The data were transcribed according to Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions and, for the embodied conduct, according to Mondada's (2018, 2019) conventions.

4 Analysis

Negative statements relating to either the participant's own device or to their own digital skills occurred frequently in both data sets. These turns were declaratives (not interrogatives) using first- (the speaker) or third- (the device) person singular pronouns, and describing a (vague) form of incapacity or dysfunction (such as 'I don't understand', 'now it's gone'). We glossed these as complaints (cf. Section 2.1), as they possessed complaint-like features regarding their multimodal design and were responded to by the provision of assistance. In both languages (Finnish and German), the majority of the students' declarative first-person and third-person complaints appeared to be deployed according to two distinct types of sequences. The student participants could either produce a complaint as a responsive action (that is, a *teacher-initiated sequence*), or use a complaint to initiate an assistance-mobilising sequence themselves (that is, a *student-initiated sequence*). These patterns appeared to be consistent in both the Finnish and the German data sets, and are represented schematically in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Two main complaint-related sequence types in our data set.

A) Teacher-initiated sequence
• First pair part by teacher (question) • (Response and) responsive complaint by student: 1st party complaint • Teacher offers assistance
B) Student-initiated sequence
• First pair part by student: 3rd party complaint • Teacher offers assistance (or not)

In the teacher-initiated cases, a student used a question or other type of first pair part produced by the teacher as an opportunity to place a complaint, which then led to the teacher providing help. In the student-initiated sequences, the student self-selected in order to produce a complaint spontaneously. In these cases, the teacher could either assist the student, or could disregard the complaint and pursue another course of action. In the following sections, we provide detailed multimodal analyses of both sequence types by providing one example for each language (Sections 4.1 and 4.2). According to our preliminary findings, the Finnish data set contained five cases of teacher-initiated sequences and six cases of student-initiated ones. In the German data set, 17 teacher-initiated instances and 23 student-initiated sequences were identified. As our study is still at an exploratory stage, these numbers should be understood as first estimates. The differences in quantity between the Finnish and the German data sets were probably related to differences in the participant num-

bers and seating arrangements, and thus to the overall visibility of their conduct in the recordings. Moreover, as the student-initiated complaints were often minimally formatted and could be responded to or not by the teacher, some of these cases may not have been captured (see also the discussion in Section 5).

4.1 Teacher-initiated assistance-mobilising sequences

In digital skills courses, as well as in educational settings in general, the teacher/instructor regularly enquires about the accomplishment or the understanding of a previously given task. As both Excerpts 1 and 2 illustrate, these enquiries provided the students with opportunities to mobilise assistance.

In Excerpt 1, which was filmed in Finland, the students were introduced to an application (app) called *112 Suomi*. When this app is used to call the emergency telephone number in Finland, the emergency response centre operators will also receive the precise coordinates of the caller. The students were tasked with downloading and installing the app on their smartphones from the app store. Prior to the analysed segment, the teacher had shown everyone in the class how to find and download the app. While the students were engaged in this task, the teacher, who was carrying a shoulder-mounted GoPro camera, walked around the class and answered questions.

Excerpt 1

```
1  TEA   löytyykö sinulla +se #1yks yks  [kaks?
         are you finding   that  one one  [two?
   tea   >>walks to STU---+
2  STU                                   [ei * löyvy.
                                         [I am not finding it.
   stu                                       *uses pen to bring
         phone to apps screen->
3        minulla ei löyvy mittää ku *emmä ymmärrä#2* tämän
         päälle mittää.
         I am not finding anything because I don't understand
         anything about this.
   stu   >-------------------------*waves pen-----*brings
         phone to apps screen->
4  TEA   aha (.) okei.
         oh  (.) okay
5        öö nyt oll*aan kartalla,
         umm now we are progressing,
   stu   >---------*
6        elikkä yks yks kaks sovellus,
         so     one one two  application
7        se pitäs asentaa play kaupasta-
         it has to be installed from the play store-
```

```
8        uusi sovellus puhelimeen.
         new application for the phone.
9        elikkä siellä missä tuota,
         so there where umm,
10       on noi    (.) sovelluskauppa.
         are those (.) application store.
```

FIGURE 1. Fig. #1, Excerpt 1.

FIGURE 2. Fig. #2, Excerpt 1.

The excerpt begins immediately after the teacher (TEA) had finished helping another course participant. As TEA turns around, a student (STU) can be seen sitting in front of her laptop. What potentially draws TEA's attention is STU's notable inactivity, as STU is holding her smartphone in her left hand while looking at a blank Google search page (Figure 1). STU neither moves nor addresses TEA verbally as TEA begins to walk towards her. TEA then asks STU whether she has managed to find the app (line 1). STU, in partial in overlap with TEA's polar question, provides a type-conforming negative response (line 2, Raymond 2003), and then responds with an explicit complaint directed at her own lack of skills (line 3, 'I am not finding anything because I don't understand anything about this'). This lengthy turn serves to highlight the fact that STU is not only unable to find the relevant app, but that she is in fact incapable of finding anything on her device due to her general lack of understanding of the device. By keeping the formulation of this complaint relatively vague, STU avoids producing an implicitly face-threatening act (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987), which may have suggested criticism of the quality of the teaching. While producing the response to TEA's question and the complaint, STU also physically associates the complaint with the smartphone by touching the screen with her pen (lines 2-3, Figure 2) and producing the deictic expression *tämän päälle* ('about this'). She uses the pen to open the screen displaying the installed apps on her phone, potentially revealing the source of her problem to TEA: STU may not have understood that the app must be downloaded from the app store. Instead, she had been searching for it in her installed apps. From the perspective of securing assistance from TEA, the complaint

appears to be superfluous, which is also reflected in TEA's response: She produces the change-of-state token *aha* (Heritage 1984), followed by a micropause and a confirming *okei* (line 4), which seems to indicate her surprise about STU's complaint. TEA then responds to STU by bringing up the apps on her phone, indicating that she has understood the problem ('now we are progressing', line 5), and then starting to resolve it by directing STU to the app store (lines 6–10).

Excerpt 1 features a teacher-initiated sequence in which the polar question 'are you finding that one one two' creates a strong preference (Levinson 1983; Pomerantz 1984) for a positive response from the student. A direct negative response follows this question, which is in turn followed by a responsive, self-deprecating, first-person complaint from the student, which recycles the syntactic structure offered by the teacher's turn: 'I am not finding it – I am not finding anything'. In keeping with prior studies of dispreferred second pair parts (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987), further interactional work is also required from the responding participant in this case. The complaining turn, while possibly superfluous for the pragmatic purpose of securing assistance, provides an account for the dispreferred response and aims at saving the teacher's face.

The teacher-initiated sequence in the second example, which was taken from the German data set, unfolds over a longer stretch of time. Here, the teacher BEN explains different connection modes and their icons, such as Wi-Fi or mobile data. BEN introduces the location/GPS, and explicitly asks the students if they can identify it on their mobile phone displays (lines 1, 3). While some participants answer in the affirmative, KLE responds negatively (line 9) and later formulates a complaint (line 54) that is directly related to BEN's initial question in line 3.

Excerpt 2

```
1   BEN   so:; (.) standort oder gps:;
          so   (.) location or   gps
2         (1.0)
3   BEN   sehen sie das;
          do you see that
4         (0.2)
5   ZAN   °ja°
           yes
6   HRU   °ja;°
           yes
7   THI   °°wo is der denn;°°
            well where is it
8         (0.7)
9   KLE   °nee;°
            no
    kle   >>gaze SP display->
```

```
10  BEN  *das is in der regel so n tropfen* da;
          as a rule   it's  a kind of drop
    kle  *shakes head & grimaces----------*
11       (0.4) so_n +umgedrehter tropfen.
         (0.4) a kind of reversed drop
    ben             +..gets up/to board->
12  THI  °okay;°
13       (1.1)
14  FRU  +((whispers))
    ben  +writes/draws on board->

   ((44 seconds later))

49  BEN  wenn ich navigiere, (0.3) dann brauch ich
         when I'm navigating (0.3) then I need the
50       standort, (1.3) .h wenn ich zum beispiel
         location  (1.3) .h when I for example open
51       so App-M, oder bahnapps, aufrufe brauch
         the (M-App) or train apps    I need
52       ich standort aber ansonsten nicht.
         the location but otherwise I don't
    ben  >gaze THI----->
53       (1.5)+(0.7
    ben  >THI-+..gaze to right->
54  KLE  +ich habs *gar nicht drin;*#3
          I  don't have it at all
    kle  >gaze BEN->
    kle             *shakes head---*
    ben  +..gaze KLE->
55       (0.8)
56  BEN  +doch
          yes (you do)
    ben  +gets up & walks to KLE->
```

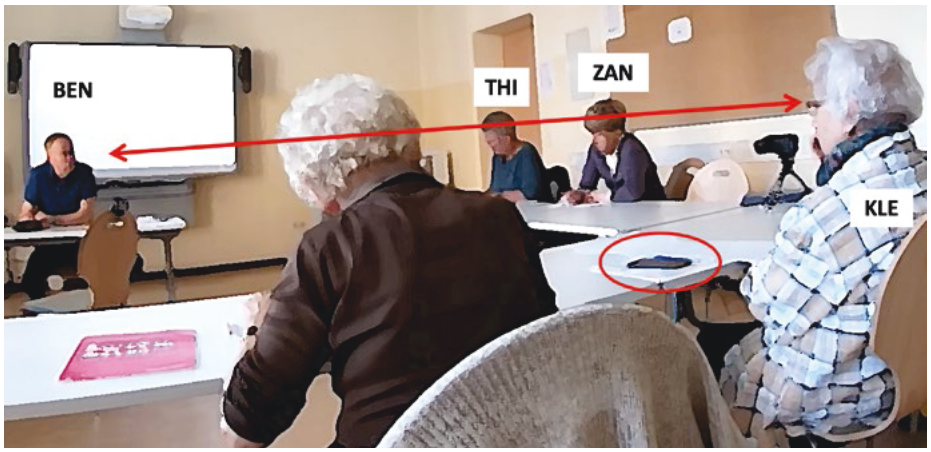

FIGURE 3. Fig. #3, Excerpt 2.

```
57        (0.5)
58  KLE   he_he_he_he,hE,hE;he_[he;
59  BEN                        [es is manchmal
                               [it's sometimes
60        n bisschen versteckt;
          a bit      hidden
61        (0.4)
62  KLE   <versteckt;☺> (.)*na gut dann dreh
          <hidden ☺ >   (.) well okay then I'll
    kle                     *turns SP to BEN->>
63        ich ma-  die  sache hier ma um.
          tu- turn this thing here around
64        (2.8)
    ben   >walks to KLE & bends down to her SP->>
65  BEN   so::#4da isses nich kann man das seitlich
          so    it's not there can one shift it
66        verschieben, dann geh ich ma hier auf den
          to the side   then I'll go here on the
67        stift das sind die einstellungen, und dann
          pen   that's  the  settings       and then
68        werden die noch größer, (1.3) und dann
          they become  even bigger (1.3) and then
69        [zieh ich den stand]ort ma:; (0.9)&
          [I'll drag the loca]tion like this (0.9)&
70  KLE   [°aber ich will ja keine-°]
          [  but I don't want any-  ]
71  BEN   &hier nach oben, und dann
          &here to the top and then
72        ham sie_s oben drin.
          you'll have it here at the top
73  KLE   vielen dank.
          thank you very much
```

FIGURE 4. Fig. #4, Excerpt 2.

While also having responded in a type-conforming way (Raymond 2003) to BEN's initial polar question (line 3, 'do you see that'), KLE does not seem to find the icon in question. She continuously gazes down at her smartphone ("SP" in the transcript), shakes her head, and displays a sulky expression. As BEN further describes the GPS icon, then gets up and starts writing and drawing on the smartboard at the front of the class (lines 10-14), he does not respond to KLE's display of trouble (Kendrick & Drew 2016). In the following 44 seconds, other participants pursue the task and ask questions, but KLE does not modify her visible orientation towards her smartphone. After BEN has finished a lengthy answer to THI (when to activate the location services, lines 49-52), he allows his gaze to wander to the other participants (line 53). This represents a good opportunity for KLE to finally address her complaint about not having the icon in question on her phone to BEN: At around the last transition-relevance place in BEN's turn, KLE had looked up and front towards BEN; thus, they were engaged in mutual gaze at the moment KLE started speaking (line 54, cf. Figure 3), offering her turn in a somewhat loud and emphatic format (cf. Ogden 2010; Niebuhr 2010). The pronominal reference to the drop-shaped location icon displays that KLE's turn – 'I don't have it at all' – is indeed connected to the initial task, *seeing* the icon, and to her negative response to BEN's initial question (see also her repeated headshake). BEN first contradicts KLE's statement about the absence of this icon on her device (line 56), thereby challenging her complainable (see also KLE's subsequent laughter line 58). Nevertheless, BEN simultaneously stands up and walks over to KLE, thus having been successfully mobilised by her turn. Despite KLE's doubts about the icon being simply hidden and retrievable (lines 58-62), she turns her device around to BEN in preparation for it to be inspected and handled by him when he arrives at her seat (cf. Figure 4). BEN then provides the requested assistance by swiftly dragging the icon from the settings to the top menu and simultaneously describing his phone-related actions (lines 65-73).

Excerpts 1 and 2 show how students could respond to the teachers' first pair parts by formulating a complaint, thereby mobilising the teacher's assistance. These teacher-initiated sequences exhibited the following pattern:

- The teacher formulated various types of first pair parts; for example, a polar question that enquired about the students' success in locating or activating an element on their mobile phone displays.
- The student could use this as an opportunity to mobilise assistance by first providing a short, type-confirming (negative) response, then, in a second turn-constructional unit (TCU), a complaint (either immediately afterwards in a dyadic setting, as in Excerpt 1, or at the next opportunity in a multi-party setting, as in Excerpt 2). A complaint in the second position was usually formulated in the first-person singular, and therefore referred to the participant's *own* actions. This turn could also make use of the syntactic construction of the teacher's preceding turn, but usually in reverse (that is, typically negative) polarity.
- The teacher then approached the student or drew closer, inspected the student's device, and provided individual assistance.

4.2 Student-initiated assistance-mobilising sequences

The course participants did not need to wait for the teacher to create a slot for requesting assistance (cf. Section 4.1). Instead, and as Excerpts 3 and 4 demonstrate, they could choose to produce a complaint independently. However, these self-selections resulted in a different format for mobilising assistance.

The following Finnish excerpt presents an instance of a student-initiated complaint. The students were working on their laptop computers and tablets to practice the use of text editors. They had been tasked with writing a segment of text, giving it a header, and experimenting with the margins by increasing or decreasing the indent.

Excerpt 3

```
1   STU   °aha°,
    tea   >>walks twd back of the class-->
2         joo,
          yea,
          (0.8)
3         no ny*+thän tää mulle*#5tekikin temp+un-
          well now this has done me dirty-
    tea   >----+stops & turns twd STU---------+
    stu        *glances at TEA-*
4         nyt-
          now-
5   TEA   [nonii?
          [alright?
6   STU   [tää pisti] takasinpäin-
          [this set ] it backwards-
7         mistäs    mää:   nyt-
          from where can I now-
          (0.7)
8   TEA   elikkä,
          so,
          (1.1)
9         +no nythän sulla on #6siinä + avoin,
           well but now you have there an open,
    tea   +LH points at screen--------+
10  STU   nii on jo[o tämä.
          it is  ye[ah this.
11  TEA            [dokumentti.
                   [document.
          (1.0)
12  STU   tämä-
          this-
```

FIGURE 5. Fig. #5, Excerpt 3.

FIGURE 6. Fig. #6, Excerpt 3.

Prior to this segment, TEA had been standing in front of the class, observing the students and responding to an email. The excerpt begins with TEA walking towards the back of the class. As TEA approaches the first row of students, STU (sitting closest to TEA in Figure 5) can be heard producing a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984) in a lower volume of voice (line 1). This, and the following *joo* in line 2, prompt TEA to stop moving and turn towards STU. In line 3, STU produces the complaint *no nythän tää mulle tekikin tempun* ('well now this has done me dirty') in a mumbling quality of voice. This idiomatic expression places culpability on the device which, evidently, has done something unexpected and unwanted. During this complaint, STU also glances at TEA, potentially ensuring that he has her attention. STU then begins to verbalise the issue more precisely while TEA, in overlap, confirms her availability to offer assistance (lines 5–6). The camera does not reveal the precise cause of the problem, but STU states that the word editor has 'set it backwards' and that he is looking for a way to undo whatever caused this (lines 6–7). The camera eventually reveals an empty word editor which, together with TEA's turns in lines 9–11, appears to indicate that STU has accidentally deleted some previously written text. TEA disregards the problem to some extent, and goes on to state that STU now has an open document in which something could be written (cf. Figure 6). STU also appears to disregard the issue by confirming TEA's assessment of the situation (lines 10–12).

The student's self-initiated complaint in this example could potentially be classified as an instance of self-talk (cf. Keevallik 2018), as indicated by the lower volume of voice in line 1, the mumbling voice quality of the complaint proper, and the fact that the student only produced a quick glance at the approaching teacher. As Figure 5 shows, he also held his left hand in front of his mouth, thus displaying intense focus on the device. Furthermore, the verbalisation of the encountered issue (line 6)

was also relatively vague. The same is true for what could be considered an explicit request for assistance in line 7: The student truncated his question *mistäs mää nyt-* ('from where can I now…'). The *mistäs* variant of the question *mistä* also conveys a certain connotation of self-reflection. The teacher also appeared to treat the student's turns as instances of self-talk. She waited for the student to continue his question (0.7 seconds), which he did not, and ultimately chose to disregard the issue.

The interactional purpose of the complaint in line 3 may thus have been to allow the teacher time to make a coordinated entry into the situation (see, e.g., Keevallik 2020). By producing a vague announcement of trouble, the teacher could physically arrive at a location from where the issue could be addressed; that is, once she had gained visual access to the device. Hence, another purpose of the complaint may have been to show the teacher that the student was actually making progress despite the laptop screen indicating otherwise. The student's verbal and embodied conduct appeared to indicate a focus on *resolving an issue* with which the teacher may choose to assist or not.

In the last example, which was taken from the German data set, the task involved verifying WhatsApp settings, which are accessible in the app's top right menu indicated by three dots. Instructor JUN had previously provided a description of this new task and was currently at the far left of the row of seats, where he attempted to solve participant MEM's difficulty with launching and configuring the app. JUN resolves this individual problem by tying it back to the initial task, namely accessing the 'three dots' (*drei punkte*, line 1). While JUN is returning to group instruction, participant BEC seeks to mobilise his assistance.

Excerpt 4a

```
1  JUN   und da   wollen wir jetzt   auf die drei [punkte.
         and there we want to now go on the three [dots
2  KRU                                             [(°is ja
                                                   [(°it's
3        das was er auch hat,°) ach=*das ist das#7
         what he has as well°)   oh=that is the
   bec   >>-----------------------SP*...gaze JUN->
   jun   >>gaze SP@MEM/MEF----------------------->
4        [auch; ja:        ]
         [same right       ]
5  JUN   [*°und dann° +hier] auf die drei punkte,
         [ and   then  here] on  the three dots
6  BEC   [*.ts
   bec   -*,,,gaze down/SP->
   jun   > SP@MEM/MEF-+...gaze SP@FIS----->
7        (0.5)+(0.2)
   jun        +...lHand ppp to SP@FIS
```

```
8   JUN    genau wie da,+ einmal auf die drei +PUNkte=
           exactly like here (tap) one time on the three dots=
    jun    >pppppppppppp+,,,,
    jun    >gaze SP@FIS----------------------+,,turns to front>
9          dann öffnet sich wie gesagt dieses *extrafenster,*
           then as already mentioned an extra window will pop up
    bec    >gaze down/SP---------------------*...up/board--*,,,
10  BEC    mhm:;_mh,
11         (0.4)
12  JUN    und dort ein*mal auf          ein(.)#8ste*llungen
           and there (tap) one time  on  se(.)ttings
    bec    >down-------*..up/board-----------------*,,,,
```

FIGURE 7. Fig. #7, Excerpt 4.

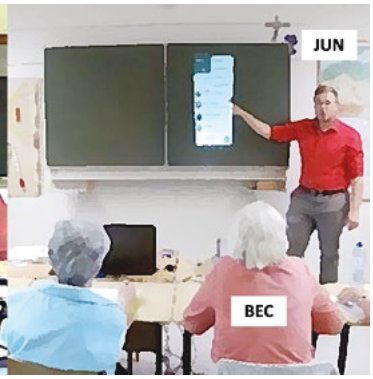

FIGURE 8. Fig. #8, Excerpt 4.

JUN now verifies that the participants are ready for the task by looking at their phone displays and by reformulating the first step of the next task, *tapping on the three dots*. He begins with MEM's and MEF's phones, and explains the first step to each of them (lines 1, 5). BEC, who is holding and looking at her phone, looks up at JUN briefly (line 3, Figure 7). This occurs after an audible transition-relevance place (see the falling intonation and syntactical completeness of JUN's previous turn, line 1). Shortly afterwards, BEC looks back at her phone and produces a lip-smack, thereby projecting a possible next turn (line 6, cf. Ogden 2013). JUN is indeed now moving towards FIS and BEC. However, he looks and points only at FIS's phone (lines 5-8), which is lying flat on the table in front of her; thus, he does not appear to perceive BEC's self-selection. Moreover, during the repeated directive in line 8, JUN turns back to the blackboard and shows the next step in the app (lines 9, 12, Figure 8). As BEC cannot establish mutual gaze with JUN at this moment, she aligns with his continued (cf. lines 9-10) instruction and then looks back down at her phone.

From his central position, JUN then moves to the right, and checks on the course participants KRU and EWE. The transcript (Excerpt 4b) continues some 10 seconds later. As EWE is not using WhatsApp, JUN formulates an account for having accidentally looked at his phone, returns to the middle of the room, and describes the next

step to the entire group (lines 23-28, cf. Figure 10). BEC uses JUN's movement in her direction as a new opportunity for mobilising his assistance:

Excerpt 4b, continuation of Excerpt 4a

```
23  JUN   [macht] der gewohnheit
          [the  ] force of habit
24        g(h)uck ich immer auf alle *t(h)ele[fone;
          I'm  always looking at all the  pho[nes
25  EWE                                       [ja::;
                                              [yes
    bec   >gaze down/SP--------------*...gaze t/left->
26  EWE   [(°kein problem°)
          [ (no problem)
27  JUN   [*.HF ähm denn#9 einmal auf* acCOUNT,#10 (0.4)
          [ .HF erm then      go to    account     (0.4)
          >*...gaze JUN--------------*,,,
28        wo quasi in klein auch datenschutz drunter steht;
          where in small below it also says data protection
```

FIGURE 9. Fig. #9, Excerpt 4. FIGURE 10. Fig. #10, Excerpt 4.

```
29  KRU   ja:,
          yes
30        (0.3)
31  JUN   [da: (.) bitte genau]so  ein[mal drauftippen,]
          [there (.)  as well ]please [tap on it       ]
32  BEC   [(°jetzt is weg°)   ]       [jetz   isses    ]+weg.#11
          [(now it's gone)  ]       [now it's        ] gone
    jun                                                 +..gaze&
                                                   step to BEC->
33        (0.2)
```

```
34  MEM   °accou:nt, ja:,°
          °account yes°
35  MEF   °mhm;_mh°
36        *(0.3)#12 (0.3)*
    bec   *...gaze up/JUN*,,down/SP
37  KRU   +°hab ich,°
           °got it°
    jun   +..leans to SP@BEC->
```

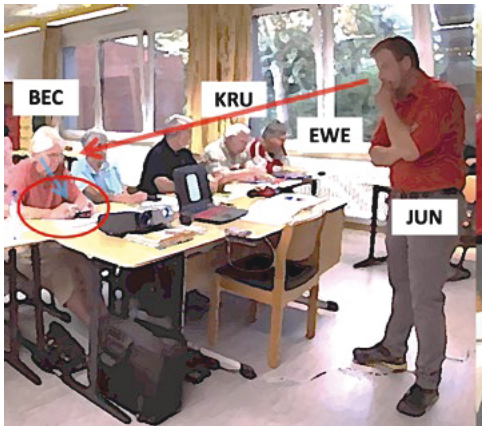

FIGURE 11. Fig. #11, Excerpt 4.

FIGURE 12. Fig. #12, Excerpt 4.

```
38        (0.2)
39  JUN   denn nochmal#13 auf zu:rück,
          then  again (tap) on  return
40        (2.0)
41  KRU   °zurück hab ich hier nich.°
          °return I don't have here°
42  JUN   °und denn einmal [auf a:ccount,°]
          °and then  again [on account    ]
43  BEC                    [°ah, da;°     ]
                           [°oh there°    ]
44        (0.8)+(1.0)
    jun   >----+,,,straightens up & turns to MEF/MEM
```

FIGURE 13. Fig. #13, Excerpt 4.

As JUN is moving back to the middle of the room, BEC stops looking at her phone and monitors his movement by gaze (lines 24-27, Figure 9). Again, JUN is not engaging in mutual gaze with her, but looks at his teaching documents on the table and then back at the board (Figures 9-10). BEC then looks back at her phone and, as soon as a next transition-relevance place in JUN's talk is manifested (see the end of lines 28-30), self-selects again (line 32). BEC now formulates a third-party complaint about her mobile device, on which something seems to have disappeared ('now it's gone'). Both the tone of her voice, with a specific emphasis (cf. Niebuhr 2010) on the final item (*weg* 'gone'), and pulling down the corners of her mouth while simultaneously minimally lowering her shoulders, convey a sense of disappointment and thus the presence of a complainable. While this first TCU is formulated at low volume and with BEC's gaze turned towards her phone (cf. Figure 11), the fact that she recycles it immediately and in a louder voice indicates that it is nevertheless addressed to JUN (see also her gaze at JUN afterwards, line 36, Figure 12). In fact, immediately after the overlap resolution, JUN looks up at BEC and walks to her seat (end of line 32, Figures 11-12).

JUN's gaze and pointing to BEC's phone (Figures 12-13), as well as his trouble-fitted solution, display his perception and understanding of her complaint as a request for assistance (line 39, see also the adverb *denn* 'then', linking syntactically back to her complaint turn). During the second step of JUN's customised instruction, BEC indicates having found the relevant element on the display by producing a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984, lines 42-43), which closes the assistance sequence.

Excerpts 3 and 4 showed how students could seek to mobilise assistance through device-related complaints. These student-initiated sequences typically exhibited the following pattern:

- The student monitored the instructor (by gaze and hearing) and thus their potential availability (that is, their position in the room, their direction of movement or their involvement with others).
- The student self-selected at an (audible) TRP in the instructor's talk and/or when they were perceived to approach.
- The student formulated a complaint related to the mobile device and usually looked down at its display.
- The complaint consisted of an impersonal construction (such as using third-person singular pronouns and verb forms) that related to the agency of the device or to some external element. These complaints often remained vague and were produced with a low, mumbling voice quality, thus resembling self-talk (Goffman 1981; Keevallik 2018).
- The instructor either responded to these complaints by approaching the student and providing assistance, or by disregarding these complaints and pursuing the overall course activity. There was usually no (at least not immediate) pursuit of the student's request.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study identified two types of complaints that were used when mobilising assistance in digital skills courses that took place in Finland and Germany, and which mainly involved older adults. The first type of these technology-related complaints occurred in a teacher-initiated sequence: The student's complaint often reflected the syntactic structure of the teacher's initial turn and usually provided a type-conforming response, albeit in reverse, typically negative, polarity (Section 4.1, Excerpts 1 and 2). These complaints tended to be more personal in that they were usually produced in the first-person singular and referred to the student's own actions or attributes. By contrast, the student-initiated sequences featured complaints in the third-person singular that were directed at the device (Section 4.2, Excerpts 3 and 4). They often resembled instances of self-talk, in that they were – at least initially – produced in a lower or mumbling quality of voice that made the precise cause of the complaint somewhat unclear. Furthermore, the student's embodied conduct tended to display a clear orientation towards the device instead of toward the teacher. It should be noted that the complaint sequences did not appear to be culture specific, but sequence specific, as similar constructions were found in both the German and the Finnish data sets (see the table in the appendix).

When used to mobilise assistance in these educational settings, complaints appeared to have less or more negotiable response relevance than did other forms of seeking assistance. Teacher-initiated, 'responsive' first-party complaints structurally

responded to a prior turn, exploited the opportunity slot created by the teacher, and thus mobilised assistance *indirectly*. Self-initiated third-party complaints tended to be formatted as independent self-talk. Accordingly, they could either be followed by rendering assistance (Excerpt 4) or, as shown in Excerpt 3, by the teacher disregarding the encountered problem in favour of advancing the overall course activity. This was largely due to the nature of the participation framework, in which the teacher usually addressed all or several students simultaneously, and could only interact with individual students and provide customised assistance at specific moments. The students also oriented towards the asymmetrical nature of the setting (Drew & Heritage 1992). The way in which they formulated their complaints allowed the teachers to decide on the urgency and relevance of the problem that the students had encountered. This was also why some of the student-initiated complaint sequences may not have been captured for the analysis.

Of course, complaints in assistance-mobilising sequences can serve multiple pragmatic purposes. Through complaints, students can also display an acknowledgement of the fact that they have monopolised the teacher's attention and, in a sense, jeopardised the advancement of the class as a whole (Excerpt 1). Excerpts 3 and 4 show that vaguer complaints also allowed for the teacher's coordinated entry into the assistance-rendering sequence. In our setting, complaints were typically not jointly extended across multiple subsequent turns into complaints proper (cf. Traverso 2009). Instead, the complaining, affective aspects of these turns were disregarded or only received minimal responses from the teacher (as in Excerpt 1), who prioritised discovering and resolving the encountered issue.

Complaints are not always easy to differentiate from other social actions (cf. Section 2.1). For example, technological complaint stories, in which the students recounted problems they had encountered with their devices (such as 'Yesterday I did this on my phone and since then I can't do anything anymore') or WH-questions (such as 'Why does this lock me out?') often occurred in similar sequential positions and could display strong affectivity. However, these instances were disregarded in the present study, as these turns did not seek to secure empractical assistance from the teacher on the device, but rather factual or theoretical knowledge about how the digital devices worked. Thus, they were responded to via the provision of informative answers and verbal explanations. In future, these and other formats of troubles-telling could also be examined in relation to mobilising assistance in educational settings.

Finally, it should be stressed that the data examined in the present study strongly suggested that complaining about technology was not a category-bound activity that was somehow specific to older adults. Instead, it was used and oriented towards as a pragmatic tool for mobilising assistance. Even the more affectively laden instances of complaints (see Excerpt 1) ultimately served this purpose. This study sought to shed light on the learning of digital skills amongst a growing

user group of digital devices that is often problematised in relation to technology (Alexopoulou 2020). Instead of treating older adults as being particularly challenged in all things technical or categorising them as begrudging *digital deniers*, empirical examinations of naturally occurring interactions can reveal how the learning and teaching of digital skills actually unfold at later stages in life.

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Appendix: Comparison of complaint types in the Finnish and German data sets.

Teacher-initiated assistance-mobilising complaint sequences (examples)		
Finnish data (cf. Ex. 1)	TEA	löytyykö sinulla se yks yks [kaks? are you finding that one one [two? STU [ei löyvy. [I am not finding it. minulla ei löyvy mittää I am not finding anything ku emmä ymmärrä tämän päälle mittään. because I don't understand anything about this.
	TEA	onko teillä hommat kunnossa täällä (kuinka). do you have everything under control here (how). STU ei oo lähelle[kkää. not even remotely.
German data (cf. Ex. 2)	TEA	sehen sie das; do you see that STU °nee;° (...) ich habs gar nicht drin; no (...) I don't have it at all
	TEA	hat jeder gesehen? has everyone seen (it) STU nee. (..) ick seh bloss irgendson rad; no (..) I just see some kind of wheel
Student-initiated assistance-mobilising complaint sequences (examples)		
Finnish data (cf. Ex. 3)	STU	no nythän tää mulle tekikin tempun- well now this has done me dirty-
	STU	ku tämä ei tottele tämä- cause this doesn't obey this-
	STU	mut tää oli tämmönen että, but this was like this that, se::- me pantii nyt vähän etteenpäin tätä it::- we put this now a bit forward this mut se ei anna mun kaikkee, but it won't let me everything,
German data (cf. Ex. 4)	STU	[(°jetzt is weg°)] [jetz isses] weg. [(now it's gone)] [now it's] gone
	STU	bei mir hat es sich richtig aufgehängt. mine got really stuck [lit.: *with me it hung itself really up*]
	STU	bei mir macht er gar nichts; mine does not do anything [lit.: *with me he does not do anything*]