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‘She’s [the] only fish!’: Investigating the idiom topic transitions of elementary-to-intermediate proficiency Japanese learners of English

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ABSTRACT

In conversation, speakers routinely bulldoze through to a new topic using idioms such as ‘plenty more fish in the sea’, which invoke clichéd, proverbial truths. This study investigates what happens when second language (L2) learners are given the keys to the proverbial bulldozer. To further understand the quality and nature of this aspect of L2 metaphoric competence (MC), 40 first language (L1) Japanese L2 English learners of elementary-to-intermediate proficiency completed receptive and productive idiom topic transition and other MC tests, and a subset of 25 participated in prompted discussions as part of a topic transition classroom role-play activity. Extending previous research to this L1 and proficiency of learner, descriptive statistics and regression analysis showed that as elicited abilities, receptive and productive idiom topic transition were among the easiest and most difficult areas of MC respectively, while thematic analysis revealed rich linguistic and conceptual themes in both datasets, including many skilful idiom topic transitions. Discussion, limitations, and implications for future research and pedagogy are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to comprehend and produce idioms, proverbs, and sayings such as ‘plenty more fish in the sea’ and ‘no use crying over spilt milk’ to smoothly move between conversation topics (hereafter *idiom topic transition*) is an indispensable part of first (L1) and second language (L2) metaphoric competence (hereafter *MC*). From language- and communication-focused perspectives, MC involves the (skilful) comprehension, production, awareness, and retention of metaphor in speaking, writing, reading, and/or listening, in and across the languages one knows (O’Reilly and Marsden 2021). From a cognitive perspective, MC involves the ability to perceive similarities between different entities encountered via the different senses, shaped by bodily experience, culture, environment (e.g. Kövecses 2010), and numerous other factors. While maintaining a distinction between L1 and L2 MC is important due to the (sometimes vast) differences in L1 and L2 knowledge, proficiency, acquisition, learning, and teaching, they are not completely inseparable, and come into contact both in real world interactions and the minds of language users (Littlemore and Low 2006). Although different languages construct linguistic metaphor differently, ‘the underlying mapping process of metaphor is a basic human skill’ (Cameron 2003: 270).

Idiom topic transitions, the area of MC under focus in the current study, concern both linguistic and cognitive aspects, but also have important pragmatic functions. Idiom topic transitions provide generalized summaries, draw out moral lessons, and signal a desire to talk about something else (Drew and Holt 1988, 1998; Littlemore and Low 2006). As textual and pragmatic mechanisms, idiom topic transitions are often clichés, rich in concrete imagery, that detach the conversation from previous factual detail, shift it to a generalized truth that is hard for other interlocutors to resist. Grievances are a hotspot for such usage, as Antaki (2007: 529) summarizes, ‘if I end my tale of complaint about (say) a hotel’s poor treatment of its guests with the cliché “it’s gone to pot”, that makes it difficult for you to do other than go along with my tale, disarming your objections and all but bulldozing you into agreement’.

Two *topic shift* sub-types have been described, *topic transitions*, which have typically high(er) coherence with preceding discourse, and *topic changes*, which have typically low(er) coherence (Morris-Adams 2014). In topic transition, idioms comprise one linguistic strategy (others include branch out questions and announcements), alongside propositional strategies (e.g. anecdotes), and interpersonal strategies (e.g. intercultural comparisons).

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For L1 speakers, idiom topic transitions are easily interpreted as salient and requiring a response, leading either to a smooth shift or complexity, if the other speaker resists (Littlemore and Low 2006). Such resistance may involve a response that counters by drawing on the initial idiom (e.g. ‘there’s only one fish for me!’) and/or by introducing a new idiom, metaphor, or other figurative expression (e.g. ‘she’s tailor-made!’, ‘she’s one in a million!’).

For L2 learners and educators, idiom topic transition is an important MC aspect. First, L2 learners and their interlocutors will inevitably want to shift topic and conversations naturally run or change their course (Morris-Adams 2016). Second, equipping L2 learners to skilfully enact and resist topic transitions helps redress L1-L2 power imbalance (Jenkins et al. 2017; Littlemore and Low 2006). Third, crosslinguistic differences suggest that L2 learners stand to benefit from instructed input here, especially when idioms are more opaque, cannot easily be transferred from the L1 (e.g. ‘to wear a cat on one’s head’ [Japanese idiom for feigning friendliness], Batt and Torgovnick May 2015), and/or may be misunderstood (e.g. English ‘over the hill [someone old/obsolete]’ as a false friend for the German ‘über den Berg sein [past a critical or difficult phase]’, Cambridge Dictionary 2025).

In the current study, I provide new evidence on L2 idiom topic transition, analysing both test-elicited idiom topic transition comprehensions and productions and classroom role-play data from UK-based L1 Japanese L2 English learners of elementary-to-intermediate proficiency, i.e. A2-B1 levels on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), a set of guidelines for measuring foreign language learning achievement widely used by institutions and employers in Europe and elsewhere (for a critique, see Hulstijn 2007). The study aims to show how, for this kind of learner, elicited comprehension and production of idiom topic transition compare with other areas of MC, and what kinds of idiom topic transitions that learners produce and resist during ‘prompted discussions’ (Martín-Gilete 2024: 59) as part of a classroom-based, role-play activity. In the context of wider research, the study contributes further evidence for Applied Cognitive Linguistics approaches to fostering MC (e.g. Boers, 2013; Littlemore 2023; MacArthur, 2010), in particular Communicative Language Teaching approaches with this goal, and adds further evidence to the recent body of research on naturally-produced spoken data from L2 learners (MacArthur 2020; MacArthur and Alejo-González 2024; Martín-Gilete, 2024).

In the next section, I begin by reviewing relevant literature, unpacking unresolved questions on the levels and nature of elicited L2 idiom topic transition in relation to other MC aspects, on idiom topic transition in naturalistic L1-L1 and L1-L2 interactions, and the findings

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of a small-scale attempt to introduce idiom topic transition into L2 English classroom pedagogy. After summarising the current study’s research questions, I present the methods, results, and discussion sections, before reflecting on limitations, drawing together future research directions, and providing a brief conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Elicited MC and idiom topic transition

In recent years, elicitation methods have been used to target receptive and productive idiom topic transition and other MC abilities (O’Reilly 2017; O’Reilly and Marsden 2021, 2023), as operationalisations of constructs described by Low (1988) and Littlemore and Low (2006). Here, scores from an MC test battery taken by mixed-proficiency (CEFR A2-C2) L1 Mandarin L2 English learners showed that T5-Topic Transition-R, the test measuring the (receptive) ability to recognize idioms in topic transition via four-option multiple-choice, were highest in the battery of fifteen tests ($M = 69.9$, $SD = 26.9$), whereas T5-Topic transition-P, the test measuring the (productive) ability to recall such idioms, were among the lowest, ranking twelfth ($M = 40.4$, $SD = 28.7$) (O’Reilly and Marsden 2021).

Although this research did not report MC test scores by different CEFR levels, for comparative purposes, scores for the A2-B1 subgroup can be ascertained using CEFR proficiency data provided in a later study by the same authors (O’Reilly and Marsden 2023). This (re)analysis shows that while both receptive and productive scores were lower for A2-B1 than B2-C2 subgroups (for T5-Topic transition-R: $M = 61.76$, $SD = 30.92$ vs $M = 73.99$, $SD = 23.93$; for T5-Topic transition-P: $M = 27.57$, $SD = 23.19$ vs $M = 47.30$, $SD = 29.28$) the relative ease or difficulty of these tests within the battery (i.e. their ranks compared with other tests, based on average scores) did not change. While raw test scores and rankings are informative, inferential statistical comparisons of MC tests-within-battery have not been conducted, which would enable generalisation about the ease or difficulty of idiom topic transition relative to other MC aspects.

In addition to quantitative patterns, limited descriptions of T5-Topic transition-P productions have been provided for the learners in O’Reilly (2017), although more extensive analysis is needed. These descriptions show a variety of response types including linguistically well-formed idioms (e.g. ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’) and those with inappropriate syntactic modification typically at the morphological level (e.g. ‘do as Romes do’, ‘do as Rome does’, ‘do in Romes as Rome does’), which may suggest compositional processing in the

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production of idioms (i.e. processing of individual words within an idiom), ‘since it is the overt manifestation of syntactic analysis’ (Fan and Wang 2024: 10). In other research, O’Reilly and Yan (2025) conducted a more extensive analysis involving idioms, observing that even for exclusively advanced L1 Mandarin L2 English learners, communicatively successful idiom adaptations and re-literalisations within a Metaphor Language Play construct had variable linguistic accuracy (e.g. [his comment, didn’t just take the cake it] ‘ruined the whole party’, ‘won a dessert shop’ vs ‘takes all the desserts’, ‘take the cake pan, too’). However, their study did not explore idiom topic transitions.

While the above examples demonstrate ill-formed modification, the boundaries of idiom (and indeed metaphor) acceptability and syntactic flexibility have been of interest to researchers for a long time (e.g. Gibbs and Nayak 1989; Low 1988). In recent research, Fan and Wang (2024) provided a helpful classification of formulaic sequence variation in L1 Chinese L2 English writing, via analysis of learner productions and self-reflections on these. The study had various foci, but relevant to the current study are the different kinds of *syntactic modification* described, which occurred in about a third of all formulaic sequences produced, accurately or inaccurately, in the morphological aspect such as participle (e.g. acceptable adaption of ‘originate from’ to ‘originating from’ when required (p. 9)), person, tense, and determiner, or in the lexical aspect including substitution (e.g. ill-formed collocation ‘I’m appreciate to share...’ instead of ‘...glad to...’ (p. 9)), addition, and omission of words within the FS, or in both.

Idiom topic transition in naturalistic L1-L1 interactions

To understand the kinds of idiom topic transitions that speakers produce, numerous studies have looked to naturalistic discourse. In psychotherapeutic sessions and business and sales meetings, Drew and Holt (1988) found idioms more frequently used for complaint than praise or extolment, serving to realign complainant and (hitherto) unsympathetic interlocutor, and remedy interactional trickiness. In a later study, these authors found third person idioms appearing in topic transition sequences, directed at people outside the interaction, such as ‘I suppose she must have come to the end of her tether [a wife leaving a husband]’ (Drew and Holt 1998: 500).

By contrast, higher-power speakers routinely threaten face by directing topic transition idioms at, and even putting them in the mouths of, interlocutors. Littlemore and Low (2006: 146) provide an example of the first kind, from Cameron’s (2002) data on doctor-patient

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dialogue in which it was usually the doctor making remarks such as ‘there’s no magic wand for that one’. Examples of the second kind were analyzed by Antaki (2007: 531), who found a marriage counsellor directly attributing ‘it may be that you say “Ok somehow I’ll bite my tongue”’ to his clients to advance his own institutional agenda of encouraging further counselling. Similarly, in business negotiations, figurative summaries afford vagueness, allowing speakers to hide behind perceived shared meanings (Charles and Charles 1999; Littlemore and Low 2006).

Despite power imbalances, even lower-status speakers are known to resist idiom topic transitions in L1-L1 interactions. Poignant examples are provided by Kitzinger (2000), who found women with breast cancer resisting the ‘think positive’ mantra favoured by pop-psychology authors. Strategies included pauses and token, symbolic agreements (‘mmm’ in response to ‘you’ve got to think positive a’n’t you?’ 130), competing idioms (e.g. ‘[rather I] take every day as it comes’ 137), and particularisation to attack the idiom’s applicability (‘Oh I think [the doctor] says it to everybody’ 142).

Idiom topic transition in naturalistic L1-L2 interactions

The available research on idiom topic transition in naturalistic L1-L2 discourse reveals some interesting distinctives. For example, although Eerdmans and Di Candia (2007) found a particular transition sequence (idiomatic comment, alignment, new topic introduction) in both L1-L1 and L1-L2 interactions, extended alignment stages eliciting increasing interlocutor agreement characterized L1-L1 interactions only. Alternatively, negotiative metatalk sequences, in which misunderstandings requiring pre-topic shift clarification, arose in L1-L2 interactions only.

More recently, L2 topic transition research has emphasized learner achievements and competence marking a shift from more difficulty-focused enquiries including, for example, Chinese learners’ problems starting English conversations (Xiao and Petraki 2007), Japanese learners’ reluctance to initiate and develop topics in contexts with English as a Second Language (Iwata 2010; Viswat and Kobayashi 2008) and English as a Foreign Language (Itakura 2002), and American study-abroad learners’ problems recognising topic initiation statements and overreliance on French hosts (Wilkinson 2002). In this vein, Morris-Adams (2014) explored successful topic shift strategies and procedures used by UK-based, intermediate-to-advanced, L2 English learners of mixed L1s in casual conversations with L1 English-speaking peers, although she did not document any successes involving idioms.

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Idiom topic transition in L2 English classroom pedagogy

In perhaps the most pedagogically informative investigation to date, Littlemore and Low (2006) present the development of an idiom topic transition activity sequence, and its piloting with advanced L1 Japanese L2 English learners. The sequence uses a telephone conversation scenario in which one speaker complains about a recent break-up, while the other tries to end the conversation and head out for a prior engagement. Learners are first exposed to an idiom topic transition example (e.g. the doctor-patient extract from Cameron 2002), are then shown the structure (closing summary via idiom, agreement, confirmation of agreement, next topic introduced), which they identify in the example discourse. They then match various possible topic transition idioms and meanings before planning and performing a role-play involving cue cards for heartbroken and impatient friends.

Piloting was partially successful. In the extract reported, one participant used ‘it’ll iron itself out eventually’ then the paraphrase ‘so you can find another girl’ before explicitly stating ‘I’m in a hurry because I want to watch a film’, while their interlocuter made some (but not much) attempt at topic transition resistance (Littlemore and Low 2006: 148). The authors’ main critique of their activity was that it elicited an uncaring and dismissive tone from the speaker trying to end the conversation, which although partly due to task design, could, they suggest, be mitigated by instructing learners to embed idioms within more sympathetic language and use tuning devices (e.g. ‘I understand, you must feel terrible, but...’ 148), or deflecting blame by mentioning the prior engagement. As a practical application, the authors conclude that to master idiom topic transitions, L2 learners of English require a variety of input (e.g. the discourse framework, idioms list, authentic usage exposure, tuning device examples), and may benefit from choosing their own idioms (e.g. using an online corpus with expanded concordances) and exposure to pre-role-play intonation models (Vanlancker-Sidtis 2003).

Summary and research questions (RQs)

Elicited MC research to date suggests a disparity between receptive and productive idiom topic transition, which appear to be among the easiest and most difficult MC areas respectively. However, the generalisability of these patterns to L2 learners of English from other L1s and proficiencies remains unknown. Similarly, to inform research and pedagogy, further evidence is needed on linguistic themes within L2 English idiom topic transitions such as the range of idioms that learners use, either in linguistically intact or modified form, and from an Applied Cognitive Linguistics view, on conceptual themes including the metaphors and mappings that

underpin usage. In naturalistic interactions, research affirms that idioms lie at the heart of intricate battling between L1 interlocutors. However, questions on how well L2 learners can invoke and resist idiom topic transitions (e.g. via adaptations and/or new metaphorical framings) and the nature of these freer productions require further investigation. Finally, while a single piloting run has shown that advanced L2 learners of English enjoyed some success with an idiom topic transition classroom activity, the extent to which lower proficiency learners can engage in such an activity is unknown.

In the current study, I address these gaps via two research questions (RQs):

1. How does L1 Japanese L2 English learners’ elicited idiom topic transition compare with other areas of elicited MC?
2. What kind of idiom topic transitions do these learners produce and resist during prompted discussions as part of a classroom-based activity?

The present study is limited to focusing on university age learners both as an extension of Littlemore and Low’s (2006) investigation, and since the available instruments and activity framework were designed for and are better suited to adult learners (e.g. the idiom topic transition classroom activity uses the scenario of relationship breakup). As such, the more complex question of how idiom topic transition abilities, and pragmatic competence more generally, develop in younger learners is not addressed here.

METHOD

For transparency and reproducibility, all data collection materials, data, and analysis scripts are available on the study’s Open Science Framework (OSF) page: <https://osf.io/kq4gy/>.

Participants

Participants were 40 L1 Japanese L2 English learners (22 females, 18 males) aged 19-24 ($M = 20.15$, $SD = 1.12$), of elementary-to-intermediate proficiency corresponding to CEFR A2-B1, who had learned English since primary school (M starting age = 10.35, $SD = 2.82$). The group’s proficiency was estimated from a subset who reported these data. Specifically, 7/11 participants reported TOEIC overall scores all corresponding to CEFR level A2 (550-705, $M = 630.57$, $SD = 63.08$) (Tannenbaum and Wylie 2024); 2/11 reported Visualising English Language Competency (VELC) Test overall scores both corresponding to CEFR level A2 (560 and 573, equating to TOEIC overall scores of approximately 525 and 541 respectively: <https://www.velctest.org/outline/>); and 2/11 reported TOEFL IPT scores both corresponding to

CEFR level B1 (490 and 530, ETS 2023). Participants were undergraduates at a Japanese university studying various subjects (Business and Economics-related programmes, English and American Literature, Image Art and Science, International Relations and Communication-related programmes, Law, Bachelor of Letters, Policy Science, Psychology, and Sociology-related programmes), and were six weeks into a four-month, English, creativity and academic skills programme at a UK university, running September 2019 to January 2020.

For some classes, participants were streamed into high, medium, and low groups based on arrival diagnostic test scores, while other classes were mixed, including those from which the RQ2 data were obtained. At the point of data collection participants were acclimatized to daily classroom learning, but it seems unlikely that their idiom topic transition abilities would have substantially benefitted from out-of-class language contact over the six weeks already spent in the UK, given that other studies have observed no pragmatic comprehension gains after even longer study abroad periods for Japanese learners of similar proficiency (e.g. four months in Taguchi, 2008).

Classroom activity data were available for a subset of 25/40 participants with a similar profile to the wider sample (i.e. 12 females and 13 males; aged 19-24, $M = 20.16$, $SD = 1.14$; CEFR A2-B1, TOEIC listening and reading totals 525-705, $M = 614.88$, $SD = 72.38$, available for 8/25 participants), since one participant in class 2 (P35) did not speak during the prompted classroom activity discussions and one tutor did not remind their class to audio record (i.e. classroom activity data comes from only two out of three classes). The challenge experienced in this aspect highlights the potential complexities of research in classrooms compared with controlled labs, and exemplifies a specific issue that can arise, despite careful briefing, when simultaneous classes require teacher involvement in data collection (Llopis-García & Piquer-Píriz, 2024; see also Low 2020).

Data collection instruments

MC Test Battery

To provide data on test-based idiom topic transitions alongside other MC aspects, participants completed shortened and optimized MC Test Battery versions (O’Reilly and Marsden 2021). In brief, the MC Test Battery operationalizes MC-related skills and competences describe by Low (1988) and Littlemore and Low (2006) via fifteen tests: nine receptive (-R) tests comprising 4-18 items scored 0-1 (unsuccessful-successful), and six productive (-P) tests comprising 4-6 items scored 0-1-2 (unsuccessful-partially successful-successful) (see scoring

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criteria in OSF materials). Tests (Ts) measure the following abilities (for a detailed overview, see O’Reilly 2017, O’Reilly and Marsden 2021):

- T1-Phrasal verbs-R/-P - recognising/recalling metaphorical phrasal verb particles;
- T2-Metaphor layering-R - understanding and recognising relevant linguistic metaphor meanings and meaning aspects, and garden-path pun endings;
- T3-Vehicle acceptability-R - rating Vehicle semantic exploitations and word class acceptability;
- T4-Topic/Vehicle-R – rating Vehicle-Topic analogies;
- T5-Topic transition-R/-P – recognising/recalling idioms, proverbs, and sayings in topic transition;
- T6-Heuristic-R/-P – recognising/recalling heuristic functioning similes;
- T7-Feelings-R/-P - recognising/recalling metaphors conveying feelings;
- T8-Idiom extension-R/-P – recognising/recalling idiom literal sense extension;
- T9-Metaphor continuation-R/-P - recognising/recalling metaphor continuations in discourse.

Importantly, as in previous administrations of the MC Test Battery (O’Reilly and Marsden 2021), the focus of scoring was on communicative success. Spelling and grammar issues were not penalized provided the meaning was decipherable, rather, issues related to linguistic accuracy are covered in the thematic analysis of T5-Topic transition-P responses (see Data analysis below). For example, participant (P) 21’s response “[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] The onest person can get the luck (P21)” was credited with 2 for its overall communicative success, which was not impeded by the incorrect spelling of ‘honest’. In practice, indecipherability due to spelling and grammar did not really manifest in scoring, and the only attempts of this kind were short letter sequences that were probably typed to enable the learner to skip to the next item (e.g. ‘[Q8_9_beat_around_bush_P] da (P5)’, ‘[Q8_11_mountain_out_of_molehill_P] g (P14)’). Given its centrality to the current study, scoring for T5-Topic transition-P responses was conducted via a first and blind-scored, second and final pass, which showed ‘almost perfect’ agreement (weighted kappa = 0.87) (Landis and Koch 1977).

Idiom topic transition classroom activity

These data came from a specially-designed role-play activity adapted from Littlemore and Low’s (2006) piloted activity, further discussed by O’Reilly and Yan (2025), completed at the

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beginning of the first of two metaphor-focused sessions (see Participants). Students received printed handouts and tutors were provided with PowerPoint slides and a lesson plan with suggested answers. As such, these data were prompted discussions with characteristics of naturalistic, freer production, since learners could choose how to use the role-play cue cards and where to take their conversations (Martín-Gilete 2024; O’Reilly and Yan 2025). To enable the further pedagogical application of these materials, tutor slides and lesson plan and student activities and role-play cards are all provided via the study’s OSF page.

Pre-activities. The tutor first introduced the relationship breakup topic with a picture of two female friends sat facing one another in a café, one head in hand, the other holding her friend’s arm, and elicited students’ thoughts on what had happened. After the tutor confirmed that one friend had recently experienced a breakup, students worked in pairs or threes to discuss what they would and would not say to this friend. The class then read the researcher-created dialogue below, which for these lower-proficiency learners was preferable to more challenging, authentic input (e.g. O’Reilly and Yan 2025):

Karen: Did I tell you that my partner and I broke up last week?

Emma: No! Oh that’s so sad, how come?

Karen: We just weren’t right for each other. I’m so down; I just don’t feel like I’ll ever meet the right person

Emma: I’m sure you will, I know this last relationship was great, but don’t worry, you know what they say, _____

In pairs and threes, students then evaluated the appropriateness, efficacy, and meaningfulness of different ways for Emma to respond (see RQ2 activities in OSF materials). Before moving to the main production activity, with the tutor’s help, the class discussed Emma’s remark ‘but don’t worry, you know what they say...’ as an example of where an idiom can be used to summarize the moral of an experience and signify the desire to transition topic.

Main production activity. Following the pre-activities, students were divided into groups (11 pairs, one three) and instructed as follows: ‘(1) read the instructions on your role-play card (don’t show your partner!); (2) spend one minute thinking about what your character will say; (3) start the conversation with your partner!’. Cue cards are shown in Figure 1:¹

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Role play - Speaker A

You’re meeting a friend for a drink. You haven’t seen this friend for a while.

Last week, your boyfriend/girlfriend left you. You’re quite upset and are looking forward to talking about this problem with your friend.

Your friend doesn’t know about the breakup yet.

Tell your friend about everything that has happened. Keep complaining to them about this problem and the hopelessness of the situation. You have a lot to tell them!

Whatever your friend says, **don’t change topic!**

Role play - Speaker B

You’re meeting a friend for a drink. You suspect their boyfriend/girlfriend has recently left them, and they want to tell you all about this problem.

Unfortunately, you secretly think your friend’s love life is very boring and you usually try to change the topic whenever they try to talk about their boyfriend/girlfriend.

You are hoping they won’t want to talk about this topic now. If they do, you should try to change the topic as soon as possible, but without offending your friend.

Try responding to your friend with the following sayings/proverbs to see if they get the hint

...don’t worry, there’s plenty more fish in the sea!

...don’t worry, every cloud has a silver lining!

...don’t worry, there’s a shoe for every foot!

...don’t worry, after all, you’re quite a catch!

Whatever your friend says, try to **change the topic of conversation!**

Figure 1. Role-play cards for idiom topic transition classroom activity

The lesson plan suggested tutors allow around 20-minutes for these prompted discussions (including feedback), that students be given one minute to prepare, that pairs and threes role play simultaneously while the tutor listens, noting down feedback to be provided afterwards as appropriate.

Procedure

Data were collected (in the UK) in November 2019, from two 90-minute, metaphor-focused sessions within participants’ programme. In the first session all participants completed the MC Test Battery in a computer-lab while supervised. In the second session participants worked in three simultaneous classes with their regular tutors, audio-recorded their idiom topic transition role-plays and, in this and a third session, completed other learning linked to MC Test Battery aspects, which are not the focus of the current study (specifically, heuristic similes for

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explaining new concepts to young learners and Japanese culture to foreign visitors, and playing with idioms). Participants were thanked and, after the three sessions, emailed MC Test Battery answers and feedback to support their future English learning.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using R programming language (R Core Team 2024) with various packages and scripts, and Microsoft Excel.

To address RQ1, MC Test Battery means and standard deviations were calculated per test and item (as percentages) and a simple linear regression analysis run modelling percentage score (continuous outcome variable) as a function of test (categorical, fifteen levels, deviation-coded, switching the non-compared level to obtain all estimates). For focus, the regression results section visualizes estimates, with the R^2 value interpreted as small (.18), medium (.32), or large (.51) (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018), estimates, corresponding 95% confidence intervals, and statistical significance at the .05 (*), .01 (**), and .001 (***) levels, while the specific beta values, interpreted as small (<.2), medium (.2), and large (.5) (Fey et al. 2023), standard errors, degrees of freedom, Wald t values, and p values are provided as additional RQ1 results on the study’s OSF page, as are instrument reliability and item analysis data.

To provide qualitative insight, T5-Topic transition-P responses were thematically analyzed using an adapted version of the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006), intended as a flexible framework for use in psychology and other disciplines, encompassing (but not specific to) analysis of metaphor themes. In summary (see the OSF page for full details) data were first read through for familiarisation, then two types of code were generated for each response: (1) a *figurative language code*, i.e. URL links to dictionary phrases or keyword meanings or example occurrences in popular culture to help identify idiomaticity, other figurativeness, or literality; and (2), a *concept code*, i.e. keywords within response to help identify metaphorical mappings and meanings. Finally, the figurative language codes and concept codes were searched iteratively for overarching themes, which were then reviewed, defined, and named as:

Figurative language themes (to group figurative language codes):

1. ‘idiom_original’ = intact phrase in Collins Online Dictionary (2025).
2. ‘idiom_adapted’ = phrase in Cambridge Dictionary (2025), Collins Online Dictionary (2025) or Wiktionary (2025), but modified relative to the codified entry, whether accurately or inaccurately, in the morphological aspect (person, tense, participle,

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determiner etc.) and/or lexical aspect (word addition, substitution, or omission) as defined in Fan and Wang (2024).

3. ‘figurative_proverbial’ = proverbial, generalized truths, figurative language detected (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole) but response uses a single or compound noun or verb in a dictionary or a popular culture metaphor not codified in a dictionary (URL with example provided), possible L1 idioms categorized within this theme.
4. ‘literal_proverbial’ = proverbial, generalized truths, figurative language not detected.
5. ‘literal_paraphrase’ = non-proverbial, *potential* literal paraphrase of idiom in Collins Online Dictionary (2025).
6. ‘literal’ = non-proverbial, literal description or advice.
7. ‘non_response’ = no response, N/A etc.

Concept themes (to group concept codes):

1. Underlying conceptual metaphors or metonymies (pertaining to idiomatic or figurative responses, including literal paraphrases of idioms) and stand-alone concepts (pertaining to literal and literal proverbial responses).

To address RQ2, audio-recorded conversations were transcribed using uninterrupted utterance as the unit of analysis and coded for: class (1, 2); pair or three (1-12); speaker role (A, B); participant (P1, P3, P4, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P24, P26, P31, P32, P33, P34, P36, P38, P40); gender (male, female); and utterance number (1-46, varies by pair or three). As shown in Table 1, following data familiarisation, each utterance was then assigned a theme, main code, sub code, and topic code (-1 = break-up, 0 = transition phrase, 1 = new topic). Among other sub codes were:

1. ‘new metaphor/idiom’ – usage of a new, non-cue card metaphor or idiom (e.g. ‘she was a star’);
2. ‘idiom (extended)’ – language play with a cue card idiom’s literal sense (e.g. ‘do you like fish? [plenty more fish in the sea]’);
3. ‘idiom (adapted)’ – morphological or lexical adaption of cue card idiom, whether grammatically accurate (e.g. ‘there's more fish in the sea [omitting plenty]’) or inaccurate (e.g. ‘you quite a catch [omitting verb form 're]’);
4. ‘original idiom’ – idiom used as on cue card (e.g. ‘every cloud has a silver lining’);

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5. ‘literal paraphrase (idiom)’ – meaning paraphrase of cue card idiom, idiom detected in lexical or syntactic patterning (e.g. ‘plenty more nice girls in the world [fish in the sea]’);
6. ‘literal paraphrase (no idiom)’ – meaning paraphrase of cue card idiom, idiom not detected in lexical or syntactic patterning (e.g. ‘another girl you can find [plenty more fish in the sea]’)

This process was also conducted iteratively, with additional notes taken on other metaphors and tuning devices used. The thematic analysis had a qualitative focus, and again, issues with spelling and grammar were noted but not quantified. To further contextualize the data, each interlocutor’s arrival proficiency stream (low, medium, high), test-based T5-Topic transition-R and -P ability (z scores, showing the number of SDs above and below the group average) are provided. Following conversation flow visualisation, key examples showing different kinds of topic transition attempts and rejections are reported.

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Table 1. Coding framework for idiom topic transition activity

Theme	Main code	Sub code	Explanation	Topic code ^a
break-up	conversation	conversation	conversation about break-up	-1
	other	greeting	greeting, break-up default	-1
		intention to leave	conversation end, within break-up topic	-1
		[no response]	long interruption/laughter, within break-up topic	-1
Topic transition	attempt	idiom (extended)	via extended role-play card idiom	0
		idiom (adapted)	via adapted role-play card idiom	0
		original idiom	via original role-play card idiom	0
		literal paraphrase (idiom)	via literal paraphrase of role-play card idiom, recognised by formulaicity	0
		literal paraphrase (no idiom)	via literal paraphrase with no specific idiom detected	0
		other (various)	via various other topics	0
	pending	various	‘A’ responds after topic transition attempt, success still unclear	0
	success	various	‘A’ continues with new topic	1
	rejection	new metaphor/idiom	via new metaphor/idiom	-1
		idiom (extended)	via extended role-play card idiom	-1
		literal paraphrase (idiom)	via literal paraphrase of role-play card idiom, recognised by formulaicity	-1
		other (various)	via other means	-1
	failure	break-up	rejection consolidated via B’s return to break-up topic after A’s rejection	-1
Topic resumption	attempt	break-up	‘A’ attempts to resume break-up topic after successful topic transition	0
	pending	break-up	‘B’ responds after topic resumption attempt, conversation direction still unclear	0
	rejection	various	‘B’ rejects break-up topic resumption	1
	success	break-up	‘B’ resumes break-up topic	-1

^aTopic code: -1 = break-up, 0 = move attempted/pending, 1 = new topic.

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RESULTS

RQ1: Elicited idiom topic transition compared with other MC areas

Descriptive statistics

Figure 2 shows the averages (means) and spread (standard deviations) for the fifteen MC Test Battery tests and their constituent items. Overall, MC test score averages were generally at the lower end (< 50%). T5-Topic transition-R ranked second highest, with participants attaining around half marks on average ($M = 49.38$, $SD = 27.44$), and T5-Topic transition-P ranked eleventh, with only one quarter of marks attained on average ($M = 24.38$, $SD = 26.85$). T5-Topic transition-R scores were exceeded only by T6-Heuristic-R, while the only tests with lower averages than T5-Topic transition-P were T1-Phrasal verbs-P, T8-Idiom extension-R and -P, and T9-Metaphor continuation-P (see Data collection instruments).

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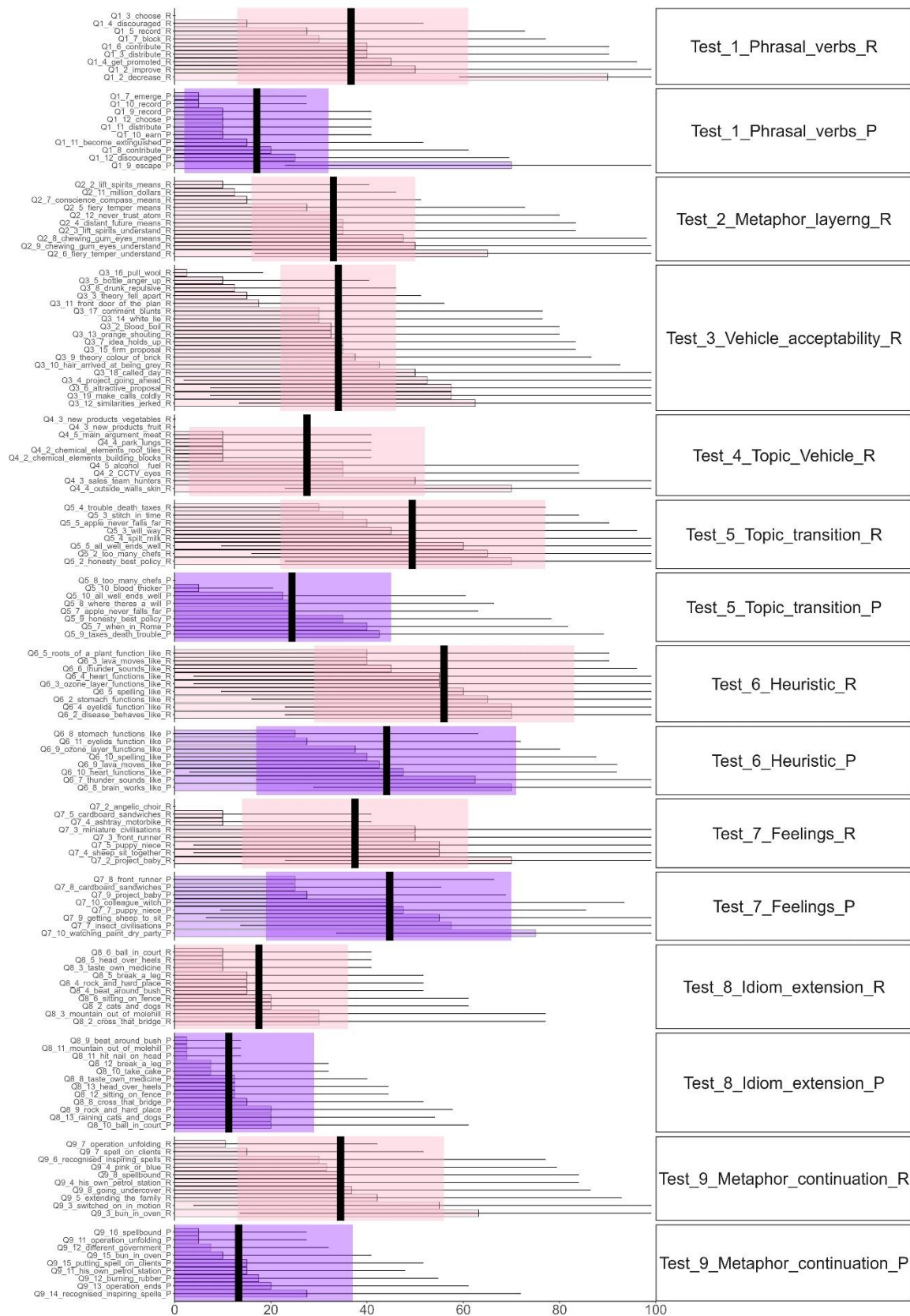


Figure 2. Percentage averages (means) and spread (standard deviations) for 15 MC Battery Tests and their constituent items, vertical bars = test average, rectangle shading = test spread, horizontal bars = item average, horizontal lines = item spread, N = 40.

Regression

Figure 3 visualizes the regression results. Overall, test predicted a small, significant amount of variance in scores. Compared with the MC Test Battery grand mean, scores were significantly higher for T5-Topic transition-R (medium effect), as well as T6-Heuristic-R (medium effect) and -P (small effect), and T7-Heuristic-P (small effect). Scores were significantly lower for T5-Topic transition-P (small effect), as well as T1-Phrasal verbs-P (medium effect), T8-Idiom extension-R (medium effect) and -P (medium effect), and T9-Metaphor continuation-P (medium effect).

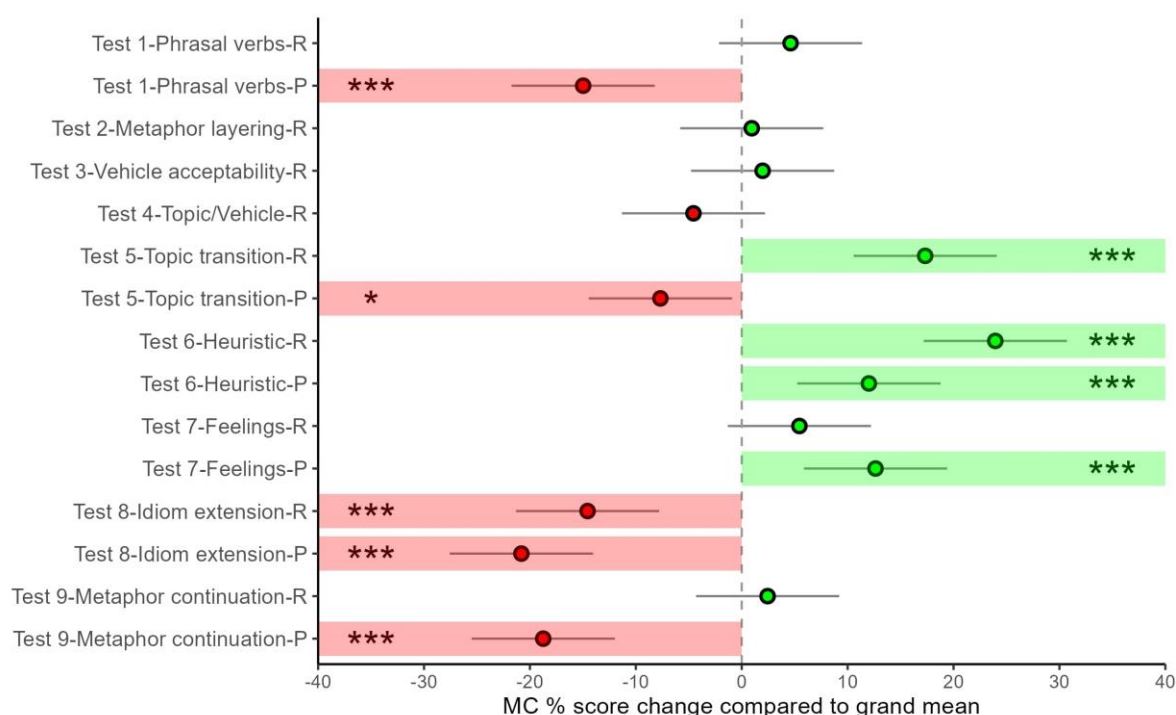


Figure 3. Dot-and-whisker plot showing regression estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (whiskers): x-axis = predicted MC percentage score (outcome) change for given test compared to the grand mean; y-axis = deviation-coded test (predictor); asterisks/shading = significant effects at .05 (*), .01 (**), and .001 (***) levels.

Themes in T5-Topic transition-P responses

Thematic analysis of the T5-Topic transition-P productions showed that 2.5% (4/160) of responses were coded ‘idiom_original’, 5% (8/160) ‘idiom_adapted’, 23.75% (38/160) ‘figurative_proverbial’, 12.50% (20/160) ‘literal_proverbial’, 4.38% (7/160) ‘literal_paraphrase’, 45% (72/160) ‘literal’, and 6.88% (11/160) ‘non_response’. ‘Idiom_adapted’, ‘figurative_proverbial’ and ‘literal_proverbial’ responses spanned the whole scoring range (0, 1, 2), ‘idiom_original’ and ‘literal_paraphrase’ responses were unsuccessful

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or partially successful (0, 1), while ‘literal’ and ‘non_response’ productions were all unsuccessful (0).

Idiom_original. Productions of unamended dictionary phrases included three instances of ‘take it easy’, used for Q5_8_too_many_chefs_P (P1, P5) without success, since this sentiment did not fit well in this context, and for Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P (P8), with only partial success. The only other idiom used in dictionary phrase form was ‘again and again’ in ‘[Q5_10_all_well_ends_well_P] do check again and again until you feel it is good (P38)’, which was partially successful.

Idiom_adapted. Productions of this type were mostly communicatively successful, but the various morphological and lexical modifications had mixed accuracy at the linguistic level. The idiom ‘piece of cake’ occurred twice, once successfully, ‘[Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P] our life is not piece of cake (P11)’ but with an omitted indefinite article, and once partially successfully, ‘[Q5_10_blood_thicker_P] its a piece of cake problem (P12)’ in which the idiom functions adjectivally. For Q5_7_when_in_Rome_P, FITTING IN was conceptualized as BECOMING FRENCH in ‘you are likely to be French range (P22)’, a possible play on ‘free range’, and via ‘You should live as Roman when you go to Rome (P21)’, an adaption of ‘when in Rome do as the Romans do’ showing both morphological modification (e.g. ‘Roman’ vs ‘Romans’) and lexical modification (e.g. ‘live’ vs ‘do’, indefinite article omitted before ‘Roman’). Similar patterns appear in ‘[Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P] Life is variety of chocolates in the box [like a box of chocolates] (P4)’ with both morphosyntactic modification (e.g. ‘chocolates in the box’ vs ‘box of chocolates’) and lexical modification (e.g. indefinite article omission before ‘variety’), and in ‘[Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P] Never rains but it pours (P17)’, which leading ‘it’ truncation, and ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] Honest is the best way to apologize [honesty is the best policy] (P32)’, with an adjectival rather than noun form and lexical substitution (‘way to apologize’ in place of ‘policy’).

Figurative_proverbial. LIFE IS A JOURNEY OF HIGHS AND LOWS formed one prominent concept theme here, drawing on nature: ‘[Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P] the life has mountains and valleys (P10)’ with inappropriate definite article use; and roller-coaster imagery via simile: ‘[Q5_9_taxes_death_trouble_P] Life look like roller coaster (P15)’ with third person-s omission; and metaphor: ‘life is a roller coaster (P20)’. Elsewhere, successful productions used other similes: ‘[Q5_7_apple_never_falls_far_P] the relation between you and your dad is like twins (P5)’, ‘[Q5_7_when_in_Rome_P] That is like you are in heaven (P29)’. For this latter item, the concept theme FITTING IN IS BECOMING FRENCH was used with

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success: ‘You must be French! (P36)’; or due to ambiguity, partial success: ‘you are french exactry people (P30)’.

At least one potential L1 transfer was successful: ‘[Q5_8_where_theres_a_will_P] if you trumble 7times, you should stand up 8times (P29)’, a likely rendering of ‘七転び八起き [fall down seven times, stand up eight]’; whereas other culturally-marked responses were partially successful: ‘[Q5_7_apple_never_falls_far_P] two cukanba [cucumbers] (P6)’, ‘The son of the frog is a frog (P10)’, ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] Honest person gets a golden axes (P23)’; or unsuccessful: ‘[Q5_10_blood_thicker_P] the relationship between a manky [monkey] and a dog (P7)’, ‘[Q5_7_when_in_Rome_P] It’s like that zebra which knows taste of meat (P28)’.

WAR and COMPETITION framings were also observed, with success: ‘[Q5_8_where_theres_a_will_P] Efforts is the best way to a conquer (P23)’ with a verb agreement issue; partial success: ‘[Q5_8_too_many_chefs_P] I want to be a hero to beat them (P4)’; or were unsuccessful: ‘[Q5_10_blood_thicker_P] You should become the referee (P4)’. Finally, the theme of lying leading to stealing was successfully utilized: ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] person to lie is person to steel (P31)’, ‘lie become steel (P39)’; as were references to supernature: ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] The god is looking you (P29)’, with definite article misuse, and ‘[Q5_8_where_theres_a_will_P] there are someperson who look you (P38)’, with a verb agreement issue.

Literal proverbial. This type involved generalized truths on the more literal end of the spectrum, and ranged in success. Successful responses included: ‘[Q5_10_all_well_ends_well_P] Human being can solve everything (P21), with singular ‘being’ and ‘[Q5_7_apple_never_falls_far_P] We are completely family (P4)’, appropriate if ventriloquized and possibly drawing on proverbial idea ‘we are family’. Less successful responses included the partially successful: ‘[Q5_7_when_in_Rome_P] it likes not the first time visit (P35)’, in this case for potential semantic ambiguity (did P35 intend ‘likes’ to mean ‘likely’?); and unsuccessful: ‘[Q5_10_blood_thicker_P] Get along with each other (P1)’, which missed the point of conflict and choosing family over friends.

Literal paraphrases. The most common idiom meaning paraphrased was ‘honesty is the best policy’, where responses had partial success and the latter part of the idiom was rendered using ‘best way’: ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] the best way is to be honestly (P27)’, with inappropriate adverb use, and ‘it is the best way to tell the truth (P38)’. Two ‘When in Rome’ paraphrases were also observed: ‘[Q5_7_when_in_Rome_P] If you are in a village,

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you should follow habit of village (P32)’, which seemed to resemble an L1 phrase ‘郷ごうに入
いっては郷ごうに従したがえ [enter the town, follow the town]’ and ‘when people on other
countries, they should based on other culture (P39)’ with preposition and verb issues. Other
responses were unsuccessful, invoking incorrect meaning: ‘[Q5_8_too_many_chefs_P] a
group of people who have same thought leads things broke down (P10)’ with tense issues,
‘[Q5_10_blood_thicker_P] family is important but friends are sometimes more important than
family (P20)’.

Literal. These responses tended to be descriptions, of varying lengths, of the specific
situation and characters in the dialogue but which did not attempt to invoke a more generalized,
proverbial truth: ‘[Q5_7_apple_never_falls_far_P] Similar look (P1)’,
‘[Q5_8_too_many_chefs_P] You guys need a person with high arrangement skills in meetings
(P16)’, ‘[Q5_9_honesty_best_policy_P] telling truth is a good things for you and boss (P25)’,
with article omission and phrasing issues.

RQ2: Idiom topic transitions produced and resisted during the classroom activity

Turning to the classroom role-play data, Figure 4 shows the topic transition activity
conversation flow for the 12 groups (pairs and threes), where utterances coded as ‘break-up’
or ‘new topic’ are plotted below and above the dashed, horizontal line respectively, and
transition and resumption attempts are on dashed line. Shades denote where topic transitions
and rejections contain a new metaphor/idiom, extended idiom, adapted idiom, original idiom,
literal paraphrases of idiom meanings with and without linguistic patterning from the idiom, or
none of these (no shading).

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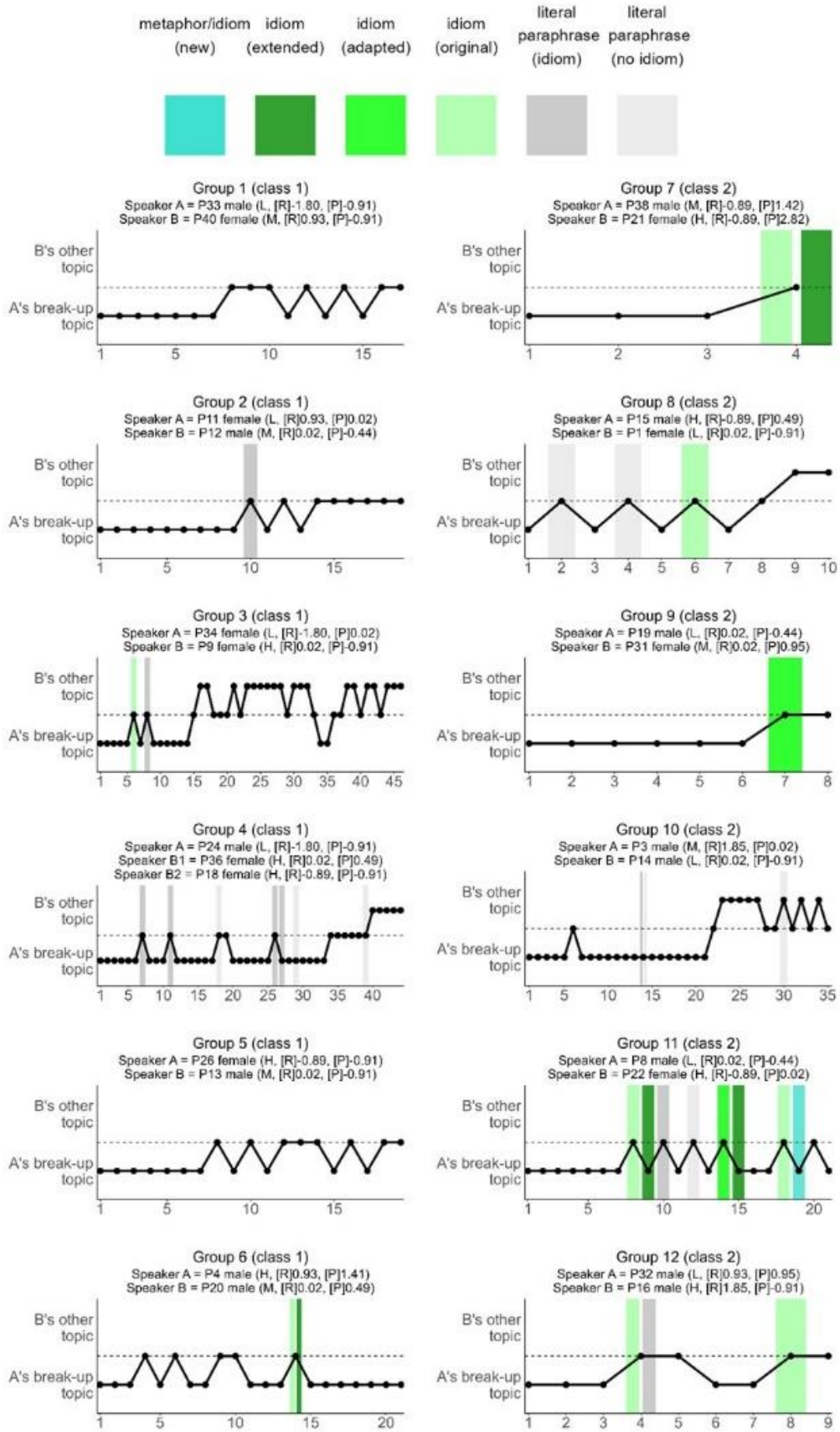


Figure 4. Topic transition activity conversation flow for 12 groups show via black dots/lines, x-axis = utterance, y axis = topic (break-up, transitioning, other), shading = idiom type.

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As Figure 4 shows, conversations ranged 4-46 utterances per group, topic transition attempts of at least one kind were observed in all conversations, which were successful in 4/12 conversations. In the following sections, four illustrative examples are analyzed.

Extract 1: Group 11 - ‘she’s [the] only fish...she was a star, looks like Pegasus!’

In this example, Speaker A (P8, male, low, [R]0.02, [P]-0.44) and Speaker B (P22, female, high, [R]-0.89, [P]0.02) navigated skilful transitions involving different kinds of idiom, literal paraphrasing, and a newly introduced metaphor. The extract begins at B’s first topic transition attempt:

- [8] B: mmm that's too bad [laughs] no worry you're quite a catch
[9] A: I'm very worried, in the future, I will no able to catch the girl
[10] B: no no no no you can find the best girlfriend in the future
[11] A: my girlfriend was very kind but she is not in, I'm very sad
[12] B: so let's find a girl
[13] A: not [indecipherable] I'm very sad, she's only one
[14] B: no no, there's more fish in the sea
[15] A: she's only fish
[16] B: [laugh]
[17] A: I'm very sad
[18] B: don't worry, there's a shoe for every [laughs]
[19] A: she was a star, looks like Pegasus
[20] B: anyway, let's drink and you should forgot the girl [laughs]
[21] A: I don't forget it

Here, B uses one of the role-play card idioms, ‘you’re quite a catch’ but omitting the preceding ‘after all’ (utt. 8), and in rejecting the attempt, A extends ‘catch’ (line 9), continuing its usage as a verb rather than noun, before B re-attempts, switching to ‘find’ as a paraphrase of ‘catch’ (utts. 10, 12), both of which A then rejects (utts. 11, 13). B then reattempts via another role-play card idiom, ‘there’s more fish in the sea’ (utt. 14) adapted to omit ‘plenty’, which A rejects via a clever extension, ‘she’s [the] only fish’ (utt. 15), resulting in laughter. B then attempts a final role-play card idiom, ‘there’s a shoe for every [foot]’ (utt. 18), which is cutoff by laughter before A’s culminative rejection employing a new metaphor, ‘she was a star, looks like Pegasus’. The extract finishes with B’s non-metaphorical offer to drink to forget, which A flatly rejects.

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Extract 2: Group 6 - ‘do you like fish?’

In this example, Speaker A (P4, male, high, [R]0.93, [P]1.41) and Speaker B (P20, male, medium, [R]0.02, [P]0.49) portray conflicting characters. The extract begins at the first utterance:

[1] A: long time no see

[2] B: hello [name of interlocutor], how are you today?

[3] A: not good, I broke up with my girlfriend, our relationship was good before but one day I went to her house, then I was really surprised one man and my girlfriend were in my house but I didn't know him, I never meet him, anyway

[4] B: what did you do yesterday?

[5] A: what are you talking about

[6] B: you should answer my question

[7] A: I just want to know my story, I broke up with my girlfriend yesterday, what do you, are you trying to transition topic? Are you sure?

[8] B: yes

[9] A: are you friend? [laughs]

[10] B: I should focus on different topic, you with [indecipherable]

[11] A: no I think I need more time to get over and to talk with my friend

[12] B: don't worry

[13] A: so if you were me, what do you think, you know if you broke up your girlfriend before but I tried to transition another conversation topic you must be mad and angry

[14] B: no, I'm very, don't worry there's plenty more fish in the sea, do you like fish?

[15] A: I can't trust person any more, including you, you are not trying to listen to my story

Here, B's first attempt, ‘what did you do yesterday?’ (utt. 4), is a non-metaphorical gambit which leads to a playful exchange in which A acts out annoyance at B's attempted transitions, which both soon address explicitly via ‘are you trying to transition topic?’ (utt. 7) and the out-of-character remark ‘I should focus on different topic’ (utt. 10). While the first half contains the formulaic ‘long time no see’ (utt. 1) and metaphorical phrasal verbs ‘broke up’ (utts. 3, 7, 13) and ‘get over’ (utt. 11), the only role-play card idiom occurs in B's later attempted topic transition (utt. 14), in which ‘there's plenty more fish in the sea’ is then skilfully extended with ‘do you like fish?’, which may be intended literally and/or figuratively. Unsurprisingly, A rejects this invitation, tarring B with the same brush as his former girlfriend, ‘I can't trust person any more, including you’ (utt. 15).

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Extract 3 – Group 7 ‘there's a shoe for every foot, so let's go shopping!’

In this brief example, the conversation by Speaker A (P38, male, medium, [R]-0.89, [P]1.42) and Speaker B (P21, female, high, [R]-0.89, [P]2.82) leads to a single topic transition attempt involving idiom:

[1] A: I have tell you that I broke up with my girlfriend last week

[2] B: oh

[3] A: because she was so selfish people and she always overslept and I have to, I was her for a long long time and always I pay a bill and yes so selfish

[4] B: don't worry, there's a shoe for every foot, so let's go shopping [laughs]

Here, the patterning resembles that of B’s attempt from Example 2, but here uses ‘there's a shoe for every foot’ (utt. 14). After invoking the role-play card idiom form, B uses a skilful extension, ‘let's go shopping’ (utt. 14), introducing a potential blend of meanings.

Extract 4 – Group 4 ‘girls in the world [fish in the sea]’

In this extract, Speaker A (P24, male, low, [R]-1.80, [P]-0.91), Speaker B1 (P36, female, high, [R]0.02, [P]0.49), and Speaker B2 (P18, female, high, [R]-0.89, [P]-0.91) undertake several exchanges with similar patterning:

[7] B1: that's so sad, but don't worry, there's plenty more nice girls in the world

[8] A: no I want to, this girl

[9] B1: why?

[10] A: she's so good character and face

[11] B1: but I think, I guess other, a lot of many nice and gentle girls in the world, so you should not attach this girl

[12] A: no I want this girl, I love this girl

[13] B1: you are blind when you fell in love, felt in love, fell in love

[14] A: I am twenty years, but she is the most, she is the best girl my life

...

[26] B2: [laughs] you should see other girls in the world, you should not decide to marry that one person

[27] A: yeah, no, I want married because she is so [Japanese] domestic, she is, good at housework and she is adapt me, no girls in the world adapt me

[28] B2: no no, you are very kind boy and we love you, so [laughs]

Specifically, three clusters of topic transition attempt-to-rejection-to-failure are observable, as attempts by B1 (utts. 7, 11) and B2 (utts. 26) are rejected by A (utts. 8, 12, 27), and break-up discussion prevails in favour of transition to a new topic (utts. 9, 13, 28). Here,

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all speakers use literal paraphrases of the role-play card idiom ‘plenty more fish in the sea’, recognisable by lexical (‘plenty’) and/or formulaic (‘in the world’) patterning. Specifically, B1’s attempts employ paraphrases with ‘plenty’ and without it (utts. 7, 11), while B2 and A omit ‘plenty’ in their attempt and rejection (utts. 26, 27).

DISCUSSION

Idiom topic transition and other areas of elicited MC (RQ1)

RQ1 asked how idiom topic transition compares with other areas of elicited MC for these learners. Analysis of the fifteen MC tests showed that the receptive idiom topic transition ranked second easiest, with around half marks attained, whereas productive idiom topic transition, ranked eleventh, with only a fifth of the marks attained. As an applied implication, these results provide benchmarks that language educators might refer to when selecting which of these tests to employ as measures of the MC of their learners, especially those of elementary-to-intermediate proficiency. While these patterns align with those observed for both the whole sample (A2-C2) and A2-B1 and B2-C2 subgroups in O’Reilly and Marsden (2021, 2023), the current study extends previous enquiry from description to inference, showing that receptive and productive idiom topic transition stand out as *significantly* easier and more difficult areas of MC respectively, relative to other tests, at least for this L1 and proficiency of learner. The underlying reasons here are likely to be complex, but borrowing from wider L2 idiom research (e.g. Carrol et al. 2018), probably revolve around the interplay between item properties (familiarity, frequency, transparency, salience etc.) and learner attributes (thinking style, strategy use, memory etc.), which future research could explore for idioms used with this particular pragmatic function.

While test rankings are similar between studies, it is noticeable that these L1 Japanese L2 English learners scored around 12% lower than O’Reilly and Marsden’s (2021, 2023) A2-B1 Mandarin subgroup on the receptive test (T5-Topic transition-R), but only 3% lower on the productive test (T5-Topic transition-P). To explain this, two possibly overlapping scenarios can be suggested. First, O’Reilly and Marsden’s (2021, 2023) learners may have performed especially well on the receptive test, (e.g. via effective guessing, strategy use, possible crosslinguistic advantage). Second, the current study’s participants may have unduly struggled, for the same reasons in reverse, or other reasons. Since, from a statistical point of view, the receptive test seemed to function similarly well in both studies (see RQ1 results in the OSF materials) there is no obvious indication of a systemic issue with item discriminability or

distractor efficacy. Ultimately though, further corroboration is needed to understand whether this difference is an anomaly of these samples, or indicative of an MC area particularly prone to L1 variation, and the nature of this influence.

Despite these differences, the cumulative findings suggest that productive lags behind receptive idiom topic transition, which aligns with other MC aspects and vocabulary knowledge trajectories more broadly (Laufer et al. 2004; Schmitt 2010), although two possible exceptions require further probing: T7-Feelings-R and -P in the current study and T8-Idiom extension-R and -P in O’Reilly and Marsden (2021), for which productive scores were higher than receptive. Generally, though, the test data reflect the well-established disjunct between the ability to deal with ‘incoming L2 metaphor’ (Low 2008: 222) and to produce one’s own metaphor.

In the wider context, the TOEIC-CEFR mapping table (ETS 2024) states that, learners scoring 350 (approximately B1), but not 250 (approximately A2), on the reading component ‘can sometimes [but not consistently] understand...idiomatic usage’. The current study’s results somewhat fit this description with two important nuances. First, they emphasize the importance of distinguishing different kinds of idiom competence; as described above, learners have more success recognising idiom topic transitions than producing them, and recognising and (least of all) recalling idiom literal sense extensions (i.e. see T8 scores). Second, the current study’s results do not reveal substantial idiom topic transition differences between participants with different TOEIC scores within the A2-B1 range, as far as could be ascertained. As such, although proficiency descriptors are by necessity generalized statements, the claim that learners with TOEIC reading scores of 250 ‘do not understand...idiomatic usage’ seems rather pessimistic in relation to the kind of idiom topic transitions elicited and measured in the current study, and probably needs revising.

Building on the limited idiom topic transition examples in previous MC test administration (O’Reilly 2017), the current study’s results reveal that learners were most reliant on literal description, a finding paralleled in circumlocution-heavy textual competence counts in ESL writing (Kathpalia and Carmel 2011) and general tendencies towards idiom avoidance (Laufer 2000). Where figurative language was produced, most commonly, metaphorical and other figurative themes were invoked, rather than prefabricated idioms in prototypical or adapted form. Despite linguistic issues (discussed below), considering their proficiency level, learners’ communicative and conceptual success here is notable, showing that even at this level,

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either deliberately or through by accident, learners are testing out the semantic and syntactic boundaries of figurative language, and it is well worth them doing so (Low 1988).

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the scoring approach was intentionally generous, and expectedly, linguistic accuracy, even in otherwise communicatively successful productions, was more variable (for recent evidence and discussion of successful use, misuse, and overuse, see Martín-Gilete 2024). While TOEIC speaking and writing tests do not contain topic transition tasks, *if* they did, the kinds of productions in these data would probably fare better on evaluation criteria linked to quality and variety, vocabulary, and relevance, and worse on grammar, while oral role-play productions might be less problematic on vocabulary, cohesion, and relevance, and again, more so on grammar and, although not examined in the current study, probably also pronunciation, intonation, and stress. The practical application arising from these points is for teachers to ensure that Communicative Language Teaching approaches, and their various benefits for fluency and motivation, are balanced with sufficient attention to the morphological and lexical accuracy (Fan and Wang 2024).

Possible crosslinguistic influence including transfers of Japanese proverbs and more obscure metaphorical expression (involving frogs, golden axes etc.) was also observed. On occasions when these L2 learners of English appeared to resort to their L1 when an obvious idiom or metaphor candidate came to mind (Littlemore and Low 2006), such attempts had mixed success. In future research it would be interesting to test how far the positive relationship between crosslinguistic overlap and untimed idiom meaning recognition (Hubers et al., 2020; Soto-Sierra & Ferreira, 2024), meaning recall (Deignan et al., 1997), and form recall (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2002; Irujo, 1986; Laufer, 2000) apply to idiom topic transitions specifically, especially because they are usually embedded within discourse context in which pragmatic considerations are important, unlike the kinds of decontextualized stimuli often used in L2 idiom research generally.

Idiom topic transition production and resistance in a classroom-based role-play (RQ2)

RQ2 asked what kind of idiom topic transitions that learners would attempt and resist during a classroom-based role-play. The overview of conversations showed different and skilful productions across the conversations. Thus, and again, despite their proficiency level, the group demonstrated remarkable capability with idiom topic transitions, which adds to understanding of L2 learners’ successes observed in previous research on non-idiom topic transitions (Morris-Adams 2014).

Expanding on Littlemore and Low’s (2006) piloted activity with advanced Japanese L2 English learners, in the current study’s prompted discussions interlocutors framed their topic transition attempts, rejections, and reattempts using all four role-play card idioms in their original forms (although ‘every cloud has a silver lining’ did not appear in the four extracts, it appeared group 8’s and 12’s conversations), innovative idiom adaptations employing possible literal and figurative blends (extracts 2, 3), alternative metaphors (extract 1), and paraphrasing of both idiom and non-idiom meanings (extract 4). Moreover, speakers sometimes shifted from one linguistic strategy to the next, not only from idiom to literal paraphrase (as in Littlemore and Low 2006), but also in more complex ways (e.g. extract 1), reminiscent of idiom manipulations documented in purely naturalistic interactions such as (L1-L1) text messaging (Tagg 2013). By design, the activity tended to elicit extended closing sequences, which had been previously observed in L1-L1 but not L1-L2 interactions (Eerdmans and Di Candia 2007), although interestingly, these did not manifest in all exchanges (e.g. extract 3), suggesting a certain amount of between-group (pair and three) variation in this respect.

Skilful topic transition resistance was also noteworthy. In these conversations, speaker A’s idioms were directed *at* speaker B as framings of them and/or their situation but were presented in a descriptive manner, similar to Cameron’s (2002) doctor-patient interaction, and not as more risky ventriloquisms, in the manner of Antaki’s (2007) marriage counsellor. Nevertheless, formidable figurative and non-figurative resistance was observed in several exchanges. Some approaches overlapped with those documented in L1-L1 interactions (Kitzinger 2000), extending these to the L2-L2 domain, and providing evidence of their suitability for inclusion in L2 pedagogy. For example, speaker B produced competing metaphorical framings and attempted to dismantle topic transitions via particularisation (e.g. the fish exchange in extract 1). In contrast, the current study’s speakers did not seem to offer token, symbolic agreements (cf. Kitzinger 2000), but typically pushed back more forcefully and explicitly, probably due to the role-play context and amenable interlocuter relationships. Nevertheless, L2 sensitivity to (and uptake of) more subtle topic transition resistance strategies, which also include pausing and tone of voice, present possible directions for future research and pedagogy.

Finally, Littlemore and Low’s (2006) criticism of speaker A’s uncaring and dismissive tone and the need for hedging also apply to the current study. For example, although basic softening was built into the role-play card idioms (‘don’t worry...’), speakers adopted this with mixed consistency, suggesting the need for more tutor-led awareness raising in this respect. In

application though, instructors drawing attention to these aspects would need ensure sufficient practice, given the well-known problem that knowledge *about* metaphor does not always easily translate into successful production *with* metaphor (Low 2008). On the other hand, in extract 2, speakers were not only aware of their insensitivity, they skilfully harnessed and foregrounded it to enact meta-level sparring (cf. Eerdmans and Di Candia 2007). Here, one could argue that where participants are free to imagine their specific scenarios and character relationships, a more direct dialogue may actually be desirable, a dilemma that serves to highlight some pedagogical trade-offs with communication-focused tasks such as these (i.e. freedom vs focus, creativity vs convention). Where more creative freedom is afforded, in practice it might be helpful to encourage learners to define the specific parameters of their role-plays beforehand and to engage in post-activity reflection on their exchanges (e.g. in relation to wider societal norms, their own subjective experiences and friend circles).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As a first limitation and area for further research, the areas of idiom topic transition similarity and discrepancy uncovered between Japanese and Mandarin learners, and indeed extending to other L1s, could be further explored. In particular, to what extent do receptive and productive idiom topic transition remain relatively easy and difficult areas of MC, respectively, as competence increases? Similarly, approaches used in studies investigating (more) naturalistic metaphor production in written tests sampled cross-sectionally (e.g. Littlemore et al. 2014) and longitudinally (e.g. Nacey 2022), and longitudinally in both speech and writing (Martín-Gilete, 2024), could be applied to understand how idiom topic transitions emerge and develop as proficiency increases.

Where testing is involved, given the slipperiness of MC constructs, replication and larger samples than in the current study would be beneficial, since this would enable better understanding of test and item functioning via more robust techniques grounded in Item Response Theory (IRT), which although not novel in Applied Linguistics research, are starting to emerge within L2 metaphor studies more generally. For example, using Rasch analysis, described by some as ‘a subset of...IRT’ (Knoch and McNamara 2015: 275) and others as distinct from but resembling certain IRT models (e.g. Fisher 2010), Ma (2022) recently found that L1 Mandarin L2 English learners reported lower awareness of the textual functions of metaphor (including idiom topic transition) compared with interpersonal and ideational functions, which compared with the line of research addressed in the current study, suggests a

potential mismatch between real and perceived knowledge in this area. This, too, requires further study.

Second, while some examples of likely crosslinguistic influence were observed in the T5-Topic transition-P responses, the role of the L1 and indeed other known languages (Pitzl 2016) requires more systematic investigation than was possible with the current study’s design. For example, it would be useful to experimentally manipulate crosslinguistic equivalence at the linguistic and/or conceptual levels, and use introspective methods (e.g. think aloud) to understand test-takers’ strategies given different idiom stimuli. With spoken-mode idioms, future research may also explore areas not probed in the current study, such as how far L2 learners of English from different L1s are sensitive to phonological (idiom) topic transition indicators (e.g. pitch register, see Riou 2017).

Third, the tricky notions of ‘target’ and ‘norms’ present another area for future research in terms of learner preferences and attitudes. As Low has discussed at several points (e.g. 1988, 2008), compared with metaphors encountered in listening and reading, L2 learners have considerably more freedom with the metaphors they, themselves, produce in speaking and writing. In developing their L2 identity, learners may aspire to mimic patterns of L1 usage (itself, not a straightforward concept) or choose to use metaphor in a more individualized way, characterized by their affiliated culture(s), other known language(s), personality, and other factors. With topic transition, if learners consciously and creatively transfer from their L1 or other known languages, then empirical questions remain about whether, when, and why such productions are received as innovative or clunky in the eyes and ears of recipients. As O’Reilly and Marsen (2021: 53) have argued, future MC test developers might consider using more localized ‘norms’ in their operationalisation, ‘whether...L1, L2, ELF, Bajan English, Geordie, or any other’. However, since it is not well known how idiom topic transitions manifest across different varieties of English, more research on the peculiarity and/or generalisability of this phenomenon seems a logical first step.

Finally, although the current study triangulated test and the prompted discussions in the classroom-activity at the group level, quantitative analysis of the relationship between the two was not attempted beyond straightforward indexing of conversations with speakers’ arrival proficiencies and relative test-based receptive and productive idiom topic transition (i.e. z-) scores. One reason for imposing this limitation was because classroom activity data represented an incomplete subset of participants who completed the MC Test Battery, another was to allow for more in-depth, thematic analysis of the various figurative language and moves within the

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conversations. Although a glance at the current study’s conversations do not suggest an obvious connection between test- and classroom-based performance, and evidence from other MC areas involving idioms suggests a disparity between written- and spoken-mode competence (O’Reilly and Yan 2025), it remains for future research to statistically model idiom topic transition performance across different contexts and modalities.

CONCLUSION

The current study provides new evidence on how, and how well, elementary-to-intermediate L1 Japanese L2 English learners recognize and produce idiom topic transitions in test- and classroom activity-based settings. On test-based measures, the study affirms their respective ease and difficulty relative to other areas of MC and provides new insight into the linguistic and conceptual nature of learner productions, while the prompted discussions from the classroom-based activity expand previous piloting to show, in detail, that learners of this proficiency have surprising potential. Alongside implications for future research, the findings are relevant to language educators seeking to measure their learners’ MC development, and to empower them with new ways to attempt and resist topic transitions as they take control of the proverbial bulldozer.

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NOTES

1 The following cue card idioms (Figure 1) are attested in Collins Online Dictionary (2025): ‘(there are) plenty more fish in the sea’ (phrase), ‘every cloud has a silver lining’ (phrase), and ‘quite a catch’ (an example phrase listed for the noun ‘catch’), while ‘(there’s) a shoe for every foot’, is attested in sources from popular culture including Hyde (2014) and Stewart-Evans (2018). Concerning the first of these, the cue card presented ‘there’s plenty more fish in the sea!’ instead of ‘there are/’re...’ because this variant is more easily pronounced in speaking and is well attested in language corpora and popular culture, for example, in enTenTen21 corpus in Sketch Engine (2021), of the 366 hits for ‘plenty more fish in the sea’, 90 are preceded by ‘there’s’, 151 by ‘there are’, ‘there’re’, or ‘are there’, and 125 contain neither as a lead in.

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