ARTICLE

Topic management in L2 task-based written interactions

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Abstract

How online interactants advance their talk in written interactions has been extensively investigated in different areas, including language learning. Applying a conversation analysis technique, this study examined how second language (L2) learners managed topics in L2 task-based text-chat interactions and the effects of L2 proficiency on their interactional practices. Participants were 53 dyads, comprising 106 Japanese learners of English across three proficiency levels. The findings demonstrated that only high-proficiency learners jointly constructed differences in topicality between on- and off-task interactions, by implementing resources available in the textual communication medium. Mid- and low-proficiency learners tended to recycle similar formats to create new sequences. In addition, low-proficiency learners never showed orientation to topic transition in an observable way; mid-proficiency learners did show an indication of such an orientation to topic transition, although they failed to achieve it interactionally. The findings were partially verified by quantifying the question format How about you?*, which was predominantly used by low- and mid-proficiency learners. Based on the findings, this study proposes a hypothetical developmental pathway and pedagogical implications for teaching and assessment of interactional competencies in L2 written interactions.*

Keywords: Topic Management, Text Messaging, Interactional Practice, Conversation Analysis

Language(s) Learned in This Study: English

Introduction

The use of written or text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is widespread in online communications embedded in various web-based platforms. Written communication is often utilized as a principal or supportive function integrated within a single platform, affording multimodal communication cues. Its generic interactional nature allows interactants to agentively adopt strategies to manage medium-specific interactional features (Hung & Higgins, 2016). These strategies include universally observable textual resources such as abbreviated spellings (Freiermuth, 2011) and ones found in more recent media, such as categorizing strategies for hashtags seen in Twitter interactions (Sykes, 2019). Research on written CMC has explored how online interactants advance their talk in an orderly manner through medium-specific affordances (e.g., Meredith & Stokoe, 2014). The details of such affordances and competencies to manage them have drawn much attention, especially when tasks are involved (e.g., Li et al., 2018; Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio, 2014).

This study examines how L2 learners manage topics when working on text-based discussion tasks. To investigate L2 learners' interactional practices of and resources for topic management as demonstrated during text-chat discussions, this study explored the relationship between participants' repertoires of interactional practices and their L2 proficiency (advanced, intermediate, and beginner). The study employed a cross-sectional approach to explore a possible L2 developmental trajectory of interactional competencies for topic management. This study applies Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyze how L2 learners shift

topics in observable ways through implementing resources contingent on the task and the CMC medium, as well as on the ongoing interaction itself.

Interactional Practices and Their Development

Decades of research on L2 interactional practices covers how L2 speakers display their understanding of prior turns to others and conduct social actions by deploying interactional resources as they work toward accomplishing interactional goals (e.g., Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011). Interactional competencies refer to the practices, actions, and resources that can only be constructed with other interactants by orienting to turn-taking and sequence organization. Interactants make their actions recognizable as meaningful to others so that recipients of said actions can ascribe the meaning those actions communicate to prior turns. By examining these interactional practices, analysts can understand which systematic aspects of conversation interactants are oriented toward, which is a basic principle of CA as it is concerned with participants' own categories of interactional phenomena rather than those of researchers.

Researchers studying L2 interactional competence using CA principles generally take either *non-developmental*, *longitudinal*, or *cross-sectional* approaches. The non-developmental approach examines interlocutors' interactional practices and notes the resources they use to construct social actions (e.g., Kasper, 2004). The longitudinal approach documents changes to participants' interactional practices over time (e.g., Balaman & Sert, 2017; Hellermann, 2008; Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2016), where identification of specifiable and comparable interactional phenomena, in terms of contexts, participants, and speech exchange systems, is necessary (Wagner et al., 2018). Cross-sectional studies examine relationships between features of particular interactional practices and external variables such as proficiency (e.g., Abe & Roever, 2019, 2020; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012, 2018; Galaczi, 2014; Kim, 2009; Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2011). These studies tend to be motivated by research questions tailored to the concerns of applied CA. Cross-sectional studies often aim at exploring hypothetical developmental pathways by comparing sets of data involving L2 learners at different proficiency levels by focusing on specific actions instead of tracking the changes in an individual (Pekarek Doehler & Fasel Lauzon, 2015). Cross-sectional studies with a certain sample size can more widely investigate participants' practice repertoires than when tracking one focal participant as they change practices. A cross-sectional design with a certain sample size and an external variable such as proficiency also enables quantitative examination of interactional features across different proficiency groups to provide hypothetical developmental perspectives. This study thus adopts a cross-sectional design to investigate the repertoires of interactional practices and resources that are associated with participants' different proficiency levels.

Topic Management

Topic (its construal and management) has been conceptualized as an interactional achievement in CA. For instance, when one speaker offers a polar question, and another provides an affirmative answer, the first speaker offers *oh* (and a silence occurs), a sequence-closing, possible closure of an ongoing topic (Schegloff, 2007). Thus, as Schegloff (2007) demonstrates, a new sequence can implicitly carry a new topic, which suggests that we do not always have sufficient resources to analyze the previous and following sequences as two different topics with no interactional practices or resources to signal topic transition, such as using *oh*, *okay*, or other markers in the third position following a question–answer sequence. Topic transition can also be delayed by inserting sequences for clarification check between base sequences such as question–answer sequences (Schegloff, 2007).

The CA literature has been investigating how participants mark topic transition (including offering *oh* or *okay* in the third position) (e.g., Bolden, 2008; Button & Casey, 1984, 1985; Kim, 2013; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Park, 2010; Schegloff, 1997, 2007; Stokoe, 2000). The discourse markers for topic transition include the expression *anything else?* (Button & Casey, 1984), *so*-prefaced questions for topic initiation (Bolden, 2008), the change-of-state token *oh* in the second position (Heritage, 1984), and the minimal acknowledgment token *right* (Stokoe, 2000). Non-verbal cues such as reciprocating laughter can mark, for example, changing the nature of topics from non-serious to serious (Holt, 2010). Thus, use of

transition markers is a core interactional competency necessary to meticulously manage topics and maintain the progressivity of social interaction and intersubjectivity among participants, since otherwise topics do not have clear boundaries (Stokoe, 2000). This is true in all social situations, including language learning settings.

Topics in language learning and testing are often referred to as pre-determined (e.g., Dolce & van Compernolle, 2020; Galaczi, 2008, 2014; Gan et al., 2008; Seedhouse & Supakorn, 2015). For instance, investigating how topics are extended between two candidates in a Cambridge paired-speaking test format, Galaczi (2014) found that more advanced learners extended other-initiated topics—originally chosen from several topic candidates (e.g., "park," "football stadium," "coffee bar," and "disco" for the prompt "Things that make living in a city enjoyable")—than did low-proficiency learners. Under testing conditions where ideas invoking topics are provided, there is no opportunity to topicalize unprovided ideas. Seedhouse and Supakorn (2015) claim that a topic inherently has "dual personalities" in language testing and teaching contexts and that topics should be divided into *topic-as-script*, the talk that is supposed to happen in terms of task prompt, and *topic-as-action*, or what happens in actual interaction.

However, learners can ignore such assigned topics, indicating that generic conversation and routinized exchanges of turns for language learning co-exist in task talk (Abrams, 2008; Kasper, 2004; Markee, 2005). Based on CA's epistemology, how preceding and following sequences are topically different needs to be observed in interactions; that is, marked by participants rather than discourse-externally determined. When tasks are involved, topics can be shifted from on-task to off-task (and back to on-task again), and how they are managed is observable to analysts by learners' joint behaviors, visibly or audibly marked (Stokoe, 2000).

Research Questions: Topic Management in Task- and Text-Based L2 Discussions

How interactants manage topics to sustain the progressivity of task talk has been researched in investigations of openings and closings in L2 text-chat interactions (e.g., Abe & Roever, 2019, 2020; Abrams, 2008; Gonzales, 2013; González-Lloret, 2008, 2009, 2011). In González-Lloret's (2011) study, learners increased the practice of offering emphatic moves to take up interactants' serious topics when starting interactions between native and non-native speakers of Spanish. Words and expressions for initial topic elicitors and topic-closure are similar between text-based interactions and spoken conversations (Gonzales, 2013). Additionally, the variety and complexity of practices of interactionally opening and closing task talk via text chat are sensitive to L2 proficiency (Abe & Roever, 2019, 2020). However, how topic transition occurs during the topical talk (i.e., after opening and before closing) in task-based interactions as interactional achievement, and details of such competencies and resources available in textual interactions possibly associated with learners' proficiency levels, have not been investigated. In this vein of research on how interactants manage topics in L2 task-based interactions, I propose the following research questions:

(1) How do L2 learners treat topics differently in task-based text-chat interactions?
(2) How do L2 learners treat on-task and off-task talk differently?
(3) What is the relationship between interactional practices for topic management and proficiency levels?
(4) What are the possible task and medium effects on interactional practices for topic management?

This study uses a cross-sectional approach to explore further interactional practices from a large number of participants.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 106 Japanese speakers learning English, aged 19 to 23 years, with various majors (e.g., law, economics, foreign studies, medicine, and engineering) at a university in Japan. Participants were divided into three groups—high ($n = 34$), mid ($n = 36$), and low ($n = 36$)—based on their reported Test of

English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores (high: 800–990; mid: 600–795; low: 400–595). Their performances in this study were not assessed and did not affect their grades in the English courses in which they were enrolled.

Recruiting was conducted by the teachers of English courses, who were asked by the researcher to distribute an information sheet about the study. I contacted 53 students and asked them to invite a classmate of a similar proficiency level to participate in a dyad. Thus, participants in a dyad were already connected via their social networking mobile application (*LINE*). In other words, it was not necessary for them to create a new LINE account for participating in this study. I gathered information about their TOEIC scores and experiences using LINE messaging, through an online survey tool. According to the participants' survey responses, all participants used LINE messaging on a daily basis.

Tasks

To elicit interactions for analysis, three close-ended discussion tasks were employed, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Task Prompts

Task	Prompt
1	You two are students studying in the same university. You two are planning to go overseas for five days. Where do you want to go?
2	You two are opening a new stylish cafe. It is a small cafe having only four tables. What do you want to paint on the wall?
3	Define "success."
Common instruction	Each task prompt ends with: "Discuss and raise several ideas but decide one answer in the end. You have 10-20 minutes to discuss."

To explore the effects of task prompts, three tasks with common instructions were used. As answers were not provided, participants were instructed to generate ideas for task accomplishment and reach an agreement on one final answer. Each task prompt provided the possibility for a different degree of imagination. Running a cafe (Task 2) is less likely to occur, while planning for a holiday trip (Task 1) is more likely, as the majority of the dyads were classmates in their universities. In Task 3, no contextual frame was expressed in the prompt.

Procedures and Communication Medium

Each data collection session was scheduled for a different day and time for each dyad. All data collection sessions proceeded as follows:

- Researcher created a LINE group to invite each dyad of participants
- Researcher and the dyad of participants exchanged greetings, followed by researcher's self-introduction
- Researcher explained the session in L1 Japanese
- Participants discussed Task 1 to Task 3 in L2 English
- Participants individually answered the online questionnaire
- Participants individually provided an e-signature on consent forms

An information sheet for data collection was provided prior to each data collection session. In the information sheet, the researcher asked the dyads to separate physically and maintain this distance while working on discussion tasks; during the explanation of the session, the researcher confirmed that they were

staying in different places. As there was no training session for participants, they had to demonstrate their adaptive skills to manage their online L2 discussion via text chat.

LINE was selected as a communication medium because participants were familiar with its functionality, and thus troubles in interaction could be more reasonably attributed to their interactional skills rather than the unfamiliarity of the medium. To use LINE chat in this study, all participants used their smartphones rather than (desktop or laptop) computers. Participants were allowed to use all typing functions, including the voice-recognition system, autocomplete, and spell checker, since these tools may reflect their generic competencies managing text-based interactions. Restrictions were placed against dictionary functions to focus the investigation on the participants' interactional skills rather than language accuracy and other linguistic aspects such as the size of their vocabulary. Although directions about non-linguistic symbols such as emojis, emoticons, and stickers (larger emojis available in each participant's LINE account) were not provided, some participants used them. When a user sends a message in LINE by touching the "enter" key on the on-screen keyboard, the sender's messages appear in green balloons, and the interactant's messages appear in white balloons (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Screenshot of Text-Chat Discussion in the LINE System
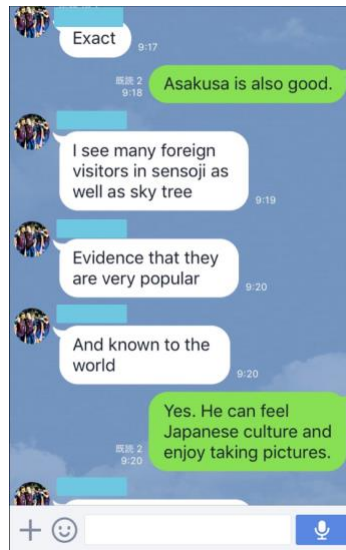
The text-messaging system offered in LINE does not indicate to others when a message is being composed (unlike, for instance, *Facebook Messenger* or *Google Hangouts*). However, once a message is received by a user's smartphone (or more precisely the Internet server), it simply appears on-screen, thus making it virtually impossible for interactants to receive cues regarding each other's writing or any other behaviors. The timing of users' on-screen operations and the timing of the appearance of a note displaying "…is typing…" were found to be random in a pilot study using Facebook Messenger and Google Hangouts. As the participants are familiar with LINE, and the presence of such a message was found to be irrelevant, this study used LINE consistently to elicit participants' natural use characteristics for text-based communication.

Scripts for Analysis

The researcher—as a member of the LINE group created for participants—had access to all dyads' text-chat logs. Scripts for analysis were created by adding time stamps (by second)—taken from video-captured data—to the chat log downloaded from the researcher's LINE account. The timing of messaging was considered to be accurate to the second and consistent on all interactants' screens (these assumptions were confirmed in a pilot study). The whole chat message is referred to as a "post" rather than separating what

each participant utters into "lines," as is common in CA conventions, as the whole architecture of the message appears at once in the LINE messaging application. Each stamp displays the time elapsed since the task was initiated by the researcher's call to start the discussion. The number for each post indicates how many posts (messages) have been sent. This numbering was adopted instead of the line-by-line numbering commonly used in CA literature to visualize whether the talk is occurring at the beginning or the middle of the task talk. Other than the time stamps, the order of appearance and message composition (as each participant typed and spelled) were not modified (thus, scripts can have typos). Regarding this, see Excerpt 1, which demonstrates one mid-level dyad's talk. Use of a line break within a post is indicated by "↵" (i.e., "↵↵" indicates that two lines within a post are vertically separated with a blank line).

Excerpt 1

Task 1: Holiday Trip

		Res	Task 1↵↵You two are students studying in the same university. You two are planning to go overseas for five days during the semester break in March. Where do you want to go? Discuss and raise several ideas, but decide one place in the end.↵↵You have 10-20 minutes to discuss. Call the examiner once your discussion is done.↵↵Let's start!
1	0:00	Kyo	Where do you want to go, Sho?
2	0:41	Sho	I wanna go to Australia!! How about you, Kyo??
3	1:47	Kyo	Actually, I wanna go the US and UK.
4	2:08	Kyo	why Australia?
5	2:30	Kyo	You went to there this summer.
6	5:48	Sho	That's great!!↵Because I went to Sydney in Australia during summer vacation. But I went there in winter season…↵I wanna enjoy swimming in the sea in summer. ↵And I wanna go to Keanzu because there is beautiful sea
7	7:38	Kyo	Ah, that is make sense! I wanna swim too, like that beautiful sea!

Note. "Res" indicates the researcher.

The post at the beginning of the excerpt was sent by the researcher as a task prompt. The excerpt demonstrates that the first post was sent by Kyo, when the time stamp indicates "0:00." In the post for the task prompt and the sixth post (hereafter called "post 6"), line breaks are used, as the symbol ↵ indicates. Further, these two posts are long enough to run over multiple lines in the excerpt as typeset in this paper, but the lines do not necessarily indicate how each post looked on the participants' and researchers' own devices due to different screen sizes (though it should be noted that the varying appearance of a message did not affect this study's analysis).

A primary focus of CA is how talk is sequentially constructed by participants jointly, which also makes analyzable under what contexts participants can be accountable for their responses. For instance, in the excerpt above, "I wanna swim too" (in post 7) is analyzable as a response to "I wanna enjoy swimming in the sea" (in post 6). The following section analyzes how new sequences of first actions (utterances) and second actions (responses) are constructed, and how new and previous sequences are treated differently by

participants.

Results

The data set includes 159 task talks (i.e., 53 dyads' conversations over three tasks). First, the data were examined in terms of how learners managed topics through sequences of two actions and which predominant features learners in each proficiency group displayed in executing these tasks. The study focused on how each dyad created sequences of actions and marked a new sequence as a new topic. One format—*how about you?*—was counted to examine proficiency differences (especially between the high-proficiency group and the two lower-proficiency groups) that emerged in the analysis.

Low-Level Learners

Low-level learners' practice of topic management was limited, and topic transition markers were rarely used. Instead, the recurrently observed practice was to recycle prior question–answer sequences with similar formats. Excerpt 2 shows an example of a low-level dyad's task talk. This excerpt starts with post 1, which was immediately preceded by the task prompt provided by the researcher.

Excerpt 2

Task 1: Holiday Trip — Reciprocation of Sequences with Similar Formats

1	0:00	Gon	Where do you want to go?
2	0:25	Eita	I want to go to Australia.
3	0:46	Gon	Why?
4	2:16	Eita	Because south hemisphere is hot in December.
5	2:50	Eita	And I like koala
6	3:40	Eita	I want to watch wild koala.
7	3:53	Eita	How about you?
8	4:05	Gon	I want to go America.
9	4:12	Eita	Why?
10	5:41	Gon	I think there are various persons.
11	6:42	Gon	So, I think that I can learn various english intonation.
12	7:19	Eita	I see.
13	7:59	Gon	And I want to go times square.
14	8:50	Eita	What is Times Square?
15	10:03	Gon	Times square is a famous building in America.

In post 1, Gon, the first speaker, offers a question in a *where*-question format, specifically designed for Task 1: "Where do you want to go?" This question elicits a "want to go" answer from Eita. After the

question–answer sequence with the format tying (Sacks, 1992) in post 3, Gon offers another question, a stand-alone *why* token with a question mark. Eita's response, composed over the next three posts (posts 4, 5, and 6), prefaced with "Because," offers an answer to the previous *why* question. Before Gon's response to Eita's suggestion (going to Australia), which constitutes the previous *why–because* sequence expansion, "How about you?" is offered by Eita in post 7. This mobilizes Gon's "I want to go America," which displays Gon's understanding of "How about you?" as a question asking "Where do you want to go?" This "How about you?" also displays Eita's stance that there is no further extension to his response. "Why?" is also recycled by Eita in post 9, displaying Eita's alignment with the reciprocation of previous sequences of actions. After a similar question–answer sequence used for expansion, Eita's utterance offers a minimum display of understanding ("I see"). In post 13, Gon initiates a new sequence, while Eita's post 14 ("What is Times Square") initiates an expansion with his information request. Here, possible topic transition is not marked by specific lexical items such as *all right* or *anyway*. "So" is used to display causality between two posts in post 10 and 11 rather than as a topic shifter (Bolden, 2008). Ultimately, this dyad reaches a consensus to go to America (not provided in the excerpt).

In the entire data set, sequence expansions inserted between sequences seemingly managing different topics can be observed, but how a newly launched topic is different from the immediately prior topic is not explicitly marked by the low-level dyadic participants. Low-level dyads predominantly recycled similar formats in question–answer sequences by swapping roles between questioner and answerer (or teller), and their contributions to the progression of the topical talk became symmetrical. This tendency was later confirmed in the quantitative tendency of a particular lexical item to reciprocate sequences: *How about you?* was the most frequently and saliently observed expression for sequence reciprocator in the entire data set.

Mid-Level Learners

Mid-level learners, like low-level learners, also showed sequence reciprocation, especially in the early stage of task talk. To expand sequences, more varied formats were available to mid- and high-level groups than low-level groups—a substantial difference.

What *only* mid-level learners showed was a possible indication of topic transition. Excerpt 3 is an example. Up to this point, responding to Task 1's prompt, Shige and Ino offered talk about "Bali" and "Australia"; this continues until post 11.

Excerpt 3

Task 1: Holiday Trip — Incomplete Topic Transition

7	2:19	Ino	because Australia is warm
8	2:55	Shige	That's sounds goood. 👍
9	3:09	Ino	you?
10	3:15	Shige	But I want to go
11	3:29	Shige	Bali this vacation!
12	3:51	Ino	oh...
13	4:13	Shige	What's the matter?
14	5:17	Ino	but there are few people
15	5:35	Shige	In the island?

16	6:37	Ino	your English skill is not enough to talk
17	6:54	Shige	Wait
18	7:20	Shige	This isn't the case we have to talk now
19	7:59	Ino	besides Australia↵has many sightseeing
20	8:23	Shige	I see

In post 12, Ino offers *oh* with an ellipsis, to which Shige responds, "What's the matter?": a clarification request that suggests a lack of mutual understanding in this moment. Subsequently, Ino offers a *but*-prefaced post. Shige then puts forth a possible understanding check for what Ino is trying to say by offering syntactic continuation ("in the island") with a question mark. After about a minute, Ino sends post 16 saying, "your English skill is not enough to talk." In posts 17 and 18, Shige offers the one-word imperative "Wait" and then refers to the ongoing talk as "This isn't the case we have to talk now." This seems to display Shige's understanding of Ino's previous talk (and his response to it) as irrelevant to what they are supposed to do; that is, as off-task talk. However, Ino does not show any relevant responses, alignment, or stances to this ostensibly off-task talk of Shige's; in other words, topicality as off-task is not jointly constructed (Stokoe, 2000). Instead, Ino and Shige simply create a new sequence of telling and responding. Note that Ino prefaces his responding post with "besides," which does not mark a clear boundary of topics. Thus, this excerpt indicates a possible move to temporally disengage from talk about the task and shift into an off-task topic, but that is not jointly achieved enough in their interactional practices to jointly mark topic transition.

From the perspective of interactional achievement with participants' mutual orientation to topicality instead of solely lexico-syntactic repertoires, mid-level learners did not show interactional practices to distinguish on- and off-task topics. However, it is important to note in this context that only mid-level learners demonstrated an indication of such topic transition and they ultimately achieved seemingly limited intersubjectivity, whereas intersubjectivity was interactionally achieved by high-level dyads.

High-Level Learners

Only high-level learners jointly marked topic transition; they also demonstrated reciprocity with question–answer sequences. Three examples illustrate their interactional practices to distinguish on- and off-task talk in Excerpts 4, 5, and 6; each shows different transition-marking practices and different topicality between preceding and following topics, achieved through the implementation of resources only available in text-based interactions.

The first excerpt exemplifies joint topic transition in Task 2. Previously, this dyad generated ideas for the imaginary wall of a cafe, such as "black-and-white style," "brown and woody(?) style," and "cool style."

Excerpt 4

Task 2: Cafe Wall — Joint Topic Transition to Construct Off-Task Talk

12	3:33	Aki	But, for me
13	4:14	Kana	KAWAII style?
14	4:34	Kana	For example animals or princess
15	4:50	Aki	YES! Why do you know my opinion!?

16	5:08	Aki	I was surprised!
17	5:19	Kana	Lol
18	5:33	Kana	I know everything of you(⌒‿⌒)
19	6:20	Aki	you like a monster🙈
20	6:55	Aki	By the way,
21	7:02	Kana	Well, what do you want to draw on wall
22	7:30	Aki	yes! I want to talk that things!

In post 12, Aki seems to project the telling of another idea with the preface "But." The next post is Kana's possible completion of what Kana expects Aki to convey (Lerner, 1996) with examples of "KAWAII style"; this Japanese word *kawaii* is an adjective meaning "cute, adorable, and loveable" (Burdelski & Mitsuhashi, 2010, p. 65). Aki's following posts are oriented to Kana's knowledge or ability to anticipate a coming message rather than an assessment of "KAWAII style." What follows is Kana's laugh token ("Lol" and a smiley emoticon "(⌒‿⌒)") and alignment with Aki's stance (claiming that Kana knows Aki's opinion) with greater explicitness ("I know everything of you"). In the following post, Aki responds with an upgraded assessment ("you like a monster") with emoji of see-no-evil monkey, which is used in a jocular situation (König, 2019). After 30 seconds, Aki provides "By the way," which is (with a smaller gap of 7 seconds) followed by Kana's *well*-prefaced post talking about "wall." Kana's response with *well*-prefacing, a typical marker for topic shift (Heritage, 2015), suggests that Aki's "By the way," was treated as the initiation of a new topic. Note that no more virtual laugh tokens or possible humor-generating cues are used in this sequence (posts 20 and 21); thus, this sequence of two posts can be seen as joint marking of topic transition, which co-constructs different topicality from the previous humorous interaction about Kana's knowledge and, thereby, more off-task interaction.

Excerpt 5 is another case of joint topic transition in a different dyad working on the same task. Up to post 15, the dyad discussed leaving the wall "white" or making it "all black" (not included in the excerpt), responding to Task 2's prompt. Compared with Excerpt 4, this dyad seems to proceed to a more relevant topic to the task by using words such as "drawing" (post 23) or "wall" (post 25) before the joint transition is marked (in posts 28–30).

Excerpt 5

Task 2: Cafe Wall — Joint Topic Transition to Construct Off-Task Talk

15	4:50	Yuko	I feel reluctant to go inside of black cafe though
16	5:35	Risa	Oh really then white is okay
17	5:49	Risa	What we have to decide is painting on the wall
18	6:05	Risa	I have a friend who can paint
19	6:13	Yuko	Who
20	7:01	Risa	Nani

21	7:03	Risa	Mami
22	7:19	Risa	She's my friend at school
23	7:35	Risa	She's sooo good at drawing
24	7:39	Yuko	Is she good at painting nature things?
25	7:47	Yuko	Cuz I want nature taste on the wall
26	7:48	Risa	Yea she's good
27	8:06	Risa	I can ask her
28	8:12	Yuko	Please
29	8:19	Risa	Okayyy I will do that later
30	8:46	Risa	so what color for plants?
31	8:59	Yuko	I have no idea what to paint
32	9:12	Yuko	Planta should be green..?lol

In post 18, Risa talks about her "friend at school" named "Mami." This is taken up by Yuko, who starts a question–answer sequence (although "Who" is not accompanied with a question mark), which is structurally reminiscent of a *guess what–what* sequence for topic initiation (Schegloff, 1997). After directly answering Yuko's *who*-question with the name of her friend, Risa adds further information that only she can access ("She's sooo good at drawing"). In post 24, Yuko initiates another sequence to request relevant information. In this question, Yuko recycles Risa's "She's … good at" format by using "Is she good at," which displays Yuko's stance of being okay with extending the same topic. This stance is further clarified with the subsequently offered post 25 ("Cuz I want nature taste on the wall"). In post 26, this question is affirmatively answered. Posts 27 and 28 constitute a sequence, where Risa provides "I can ask her" and Yuko responds with only "Please." Yuko's one-word response is notably short and does not initiate a new sequence. After this sequence, Risa offers post 29, saying "I will do that later" prefaced by an *okay* token with a letter repetition. Note that in post 27, where Risa still talks about "her" (Risa's friend Mami), the topic could be taken up into a new sequence. Yuko's "Please" displays her stance that sequences of talk about Mami should not be further expanded; this is understood by Risa, who displays her understanding with "Okayyy," an expression to signal an upcoming sequence closure (Schegloff, 2007; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). To further confirm this jointly constructed topic shift, Risa offers a *so*-prefaced *what*-question, typically used to initiate topics (Bolden, 2008). This interactional marking of topic transition signals that the previous talk is off-task, even though these interactants' previous posts consistently used the words and expressions originally contained in the task prompt. More specifically, in that the post initiating a new sequence, referring to "so what color for plants?," is linked to post 3 (not included in the excerpt) saying, "Hmm i want the wall to stay mostly white, but with some plants or something," this topic transition appears to start afresh their previously on-task interaction, which is slightly different from Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 and Excerpt 5 demonstrated interactionally constructed off-task talk during the interaction, although ostensibly different in the degree to which it is off-task. This type of topic transition is also observed in the beginning stage of their task-based interaction. Excerpt 6 shows that both participants directly mention the task prompt for Task 3 ("Define 'success'"). Yui starts their dyadic interaction, and Ami responds with an information request.

Excerpt 6

Task 3: Defining Success — Joint Delay of Initiation of the First Sequence

		Res	Task 3↵↵Define "success". ↵↵You have 10-20 minutes to discuss. Call the examiner once your discussion is done.↵↵Let's start!
1	0:00	Yui	Success!
2	0:15	Ami	sorry what's define
3	0:24	Yui	Success
4	1:04	Ami	???
5	1:07	Yui	What is a success for us?
6	1:25	Yui	Maybe i think it's this theme
7	1:42	Ami	I want to know the meaning of define 😭
8	1:51	Yui	Ok!
9	2:47	Yui	Difficult...
10	3:00	Ami	but we can't use dictionary↵can you tell me?
11	3:16	Yui	Define "success" =What is a success for us?
12	3:24	Ami	ok!
13	3:30	Yui	Good!
14	4:03	Ami	success...
15	4:22	Ami	it's very difficult
16	4:25	Yui	I think success is a being fulfilled.

Here, words such as "success" and "define" are used in the sequences between post 3 and post 11, where Ami claims her insufficient knowledge about what the word *define* means and Yui attempts to provide it. In post 11, Yui describes the meaning of success using the equal sign, to which Ami responds by displaying her understanding with a stand-alone *okay* token with a single exclamation mark. Likewise, Yui offers the one-word response "Good," a typical sequence-closing third, with a reciprocal exclamation mark. A new sequence is initiated by Ami with one word, "success," and an ellipsis followed by her assessment of the task, rather than her insufficient knowledge. This is taken up by Yui and a new topic is constructed. It is also possible to conclude that the sequences for transferring knowledge between posts 2 and 11 constitute sequence expansion, and, thereby, Yui's post 1 ("Success!") and Ami's posts 14 and 15 ("success..." and "it's very difficult") construct a base sequence. More importantly, however, whether Ami's "success…" is tied to Yui's previous posts 1 and 3 or to the task prompt, the dyadic participants jointly construct off-task talk, which delays the initial launch of a sequence for topical talk.

Throughout the data set, only high-level learners were found to be able to demonstrate interactional

practices to conduct joint topic transition to construct off-task talk. As the three excerpts show, learners at this proficiency level are capable of marking different topics and their deviation from the on-task talk with different practices.

Quantitative Tendencies of *How About You*?

As the finding presented above shows, what distinguished the high-level group from the lower-level groups was an indication of possible joint construction of on- and off-task topicality; in terms of how two learners create new sequences, the analysis for the whole data set did not find any salient proficiency-sensitive differences. Although it was possible to analyze the degree of similarity of posts between prior and following sequences, that type of analysis could result in an investigation of lexico-syntactic varieties. Instead, this study focused on one type of question format, *how about you?*, which was the most frequently used expression in creating question–answer sequences. The frequencies are summarized in Table 2. In total, 36 *how about you?* tokens were found, all of which served a single function: reciprocating a prior sequence. Other discourse markers (e.g., *so*, *okay*, *alright*, etc.) served multiple functions, and the study did not count their frequency.

Table 2

Total Number of How About You? *Tokens*

	Low (18 dyads)	Mid (18 dyads)	High (17 dyads)	Total (53 dyads)
Task 1	7	8	3	18
Task 2	3	8	2	13
Task 3	1	3	1	5
Total	11	19	6	36

Regarding low-level learners' ($n = 11$) and mid-level learners' ($n = 19$) *how about you?* tokens, all instances were used in the early stage of task talk to swap the roles of questioner and answerer (see Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 2), when a stretch of talk created two question–answer sequences in a reciprocal manner.

High-level learners least frequently employed *how about you?* ($n = 6$); in addition, only some high-level learners (2 of the 6) used this format in closing task talk (see Excerpt 7). In the following high-level dyad's talk, they have just agreed on a final answer for the task (to paint a logo design like "Starbucks"), and after this excerpt (in post 29, not presented in the excerpt), in their L1, Japanese, Yu addressed the researcher, noting that they had finished talking.

Excerpt 7

Task 2: Cafe Wall — Joint Disengagement from Topical Talk

25	10:20	Yu	Similar to that of Starbucks.
26	10:26	Yu	Do you agree?
27	11:29	Moto	Yeah ↵↵ How about you?
28	11:44	Yu	I do.

In post 27, Moto offers an agreement with a straightforward "Yeah." In the same post, another sentential unit "How about you?" is used, which displays Moto's stance that further response is needed to confirm that they are in the same boat, entering into closure of the talk. Yu offers his response with "I do" to achieve full agreement on the final answer and accomplish the task. As the excerpt shows, this *how about you?* thus

functions as a sequence/task closer as well as sequence reciprocator in earlier stages of task talk.

The proportion across the three tasks also differs strikingly. In all proficiency groups, among the three tasks, Task 1 was the most productive in terms of frequency of *how about you?* tokens, while Task 3 was the least productive.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focuses on interactional practices for topic management, namely, how language learners in a dyad create new sequences and how they observably mark topic transition in creating new sequences when working on L2 tasks in text-based interactions. The findings suggest that there were differences in practices between proficiency levels, which was partially confirmed by quantitative analysis. Several interactional phenomena were identified only at certain proficiency level(s).

Low- and mid-level learners' dependency on reciprocation of question–answer sequences with identical formats suggests their orientation to institutional aspects of task talk, as typified by their frequent use of the *how about you?* format. This suggests their orientation to task prompts. If participants strictly follow the task instructions ("Discuss and raise several ideas but decide one answer in the end"), they should raise multiple possible answers. A question in the *how about you?* format makes relevant an answer including reciprocation of prior talk. Such symmetrical topical contributions are often seen in language assessment settings (Galaczi, 2008). Another explanation is that *how about you?* may be their method of providing mutual help by referring to prior talk and making their own contribution to earlier talk relevant (Arminen, 2004). In any case, what these learners exchanged using *how about you?* at these proficiency levels was a reflection of a shared normative orientation to accomplish the task.

It is possible that low-proficiency learners' symmetrical contributions through the repetition of prior sequences with similar words to construct posts may stem partially from a lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge. Mid-level learners' frequent use of *how about you?* may indicate their limited variety of pragmatic formulae to initiate new sequences. Thus, reciprocation may be a strategy used to minimize the burden of engaging in generic conversations in L2 while simultaneously advancing their on-task talk.

Some mid-level learners' practices suggest a halfway point in development prior to engaging in the more advanced interactional practice of jointly marking topic transition, which only high-proficiency learners observably demonstrated. As Stokoe (2000) says, the process of constructing topicality is not necessarily a straightforward, interactional achievement of topic transition under the present study's conditions (e.g., task- and text-based online communication); instead, these conditions may make it difficult and require interactional competencies to adapt to contingencies in interaction (and such competencies need to be demonstrated by both dyadic participants).

This study demonstrated that only high-proficiency dyads can manage on- and off-task interaction through both managing communicative needs and showing orientation to institutional needs, including prescribed task requirements. The comparison of high-proficiency dyads' practices in the current cross-sectional design showed joint achievement of topic transition through the use of multiple resources available in the LINE chat system, with no breakdown in intersubjectivity. There was no frequently observable format to reciprocate sequences that high-proficiency learners seemed to employ, which indicates the diversity of their interactional practices. Therefore, *how about you?* was less required as a method to follow suit or seek mutual help. High-proficiency learners were interactionally competent at signaling on- and off-task talk by employing a variety of resources associated with topicality, which indicates that they can maintain routinized exchanges of turns for language assessment and engage in generic conversation at the same time.

Task prompts may have impacted the induction of different courses of action for topic management. The sequence reciprocator *how about you?* was most productive in Task 1, where participants in a dyad needed to choose countries they wished to go to, but seldom produced in Task 3, where participants in a dyad needed to jointly define a word. One possible explanation is that the prompt for Task 3 was more open-

ended in terms of what could be an answer accomplishing the task, possibly allowing for asymmetrical contributions during task talk. Different task prompts led to different aspects of task requirements to which participants could direct their orientation, an issue that requires further investigation.

As an implication for language learning, Stokoe (2000) indicates teachers' or researchers' preconceptions of topics may inhibit learners from having the opportunity to adapt themselves to the local contingencies of interaction; yet this is required in order to acquire the interactional competencies to jointly construct topicality. Learners' competencies in written CMC environments can be monitored by examining their interactional competency development systems through checking chat logs. It is also noteworthy that interactional competencies include the management of resources found only in text-based communication, such as punctuation, letter repetition, and emoji and other visual elements. While monitoring learners' use of text-based resources, teachers can promote their students' development by focusing on unique repertoires and recurrently used formulae, whose frequency of use is instantly known, and, where necessary, by considering explicit instruction in pragmatics in L2 written communication.

This study is limited in scope in that it only includes Japanese college students. As all the dyadic participants in this study were already connected LINE "friends," their relationships might have impacted the content and expandability of off-task talk, as the different dyads might have been acquainted with one another to different degrees. Future studies could investigate second language learners in other age groups, from other language groups, and/or from varying cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds and include details of their human relationships to compare results. A further limitation of the study is that the chat discussion activity was extracurricular for participants; real-world stakes, such as knowing that performance on tasks can be assessed and affect their final class grades, may also impact topical structure. In future studies, the development of L2 learners' interactional competence in managing textual talk will ideally be explored in a wider range of instructed contexts to examine further the educational potential of text-based CMC tools and encourage language learners to express their words, utterances, and views actively online.

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