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Topic Management in Chinese L2 Natural Conversations

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ABSTRACT

Topic management plays a crucial role in the smooth and coherent flow of natural conversations, particularly in second language (L2) interactions where learners must navigate not only linguistic forms but also complex interactional structures. This study examines the interactional practices and sequential structures deployed by Chinese L2 learners across three proficiency levels to initiate, develop, change, and close a topic in informal occurring conversation. Drawing on the methodology of Conversation Analysis (CA), the research focuses on how learners utilize specific linguistic and interactional resources—such as preliminary actions, the [formulation + confirmation-seeking marker] format, and content-marked closures—to manage topic progressivity and mark topic boundaries. Findings reveal systematic differences in the frequency, complexity, and sequential placement of these practices across proficiency levels. Higher-level learners demonstrate a greater ability to collaboratively sustain topic development, prepare for disjunctive transitions, and manage topic closures with nuanced, recipient-oriented strategies. In contrast, low-level learners tend to adopt more direct, speaker-centered approaches. These interactional differences reflect varying degrees of L2 interactional competence and point to the developmental nature of topic management skills. The study offers pedagogical implications by identifying teachable practices that contribute to conversational coherence and social alignment. It also contributes to our understanding of how L2 learners mobilize familiar linguistic resources more sophisticatedly to fulfill interactional goals.

Keywords: Topic Management; Interactional Practices; L2 Interactional Competence; Natural Conversation; Conversation Analysis

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1. Introduction

Topic management has recently emerged as a field of growing importance in second language (L2) research. It is commonly understood as the process through which participants manage the progressivity and continuity of conversations, such as collaboratively developing new topics. This increasing attention has led to investigations in variety of contexts, including classrooms[1–5], paired or group speaking assessments[6, 7], and computer-mediated communication[8–11].

While these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of how L2 learners manage topics, notable research gaps remain. One such gap concerns the management of topics in natural conversations. This is an important area of inquiry, as topic management in real-world interactions poses distinct challenges for L2 learners. Moreover, the ability to maintain or change topical talk in natural settings is a crucial component of interactional competence beyond classroom or task-based contexts. Indeed, how L2 speakers use conversational resources to maintain progressivity and continuity in such interaction provides important evidence of their developing interactional competency[6, 7, 12]. Nevertheless, studies on topic management in natural settings remain limited, especially in the exploration of sequential structures within topical talk, and the relevance between L2 proficiency levels and the linguistic resources utilized to maintain topic progressivity or indicate topic transition.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a Conversation Analysis (CA) inspired, moment-by-moment approach to investigate how Chinese L2 learners manage topics in informal conversations. It also explores the relationship between L2 learners' topic management practices and their language proficiency. This will deepen our understanding of progressivity in natural L2 interactions and how linguistic resources relate to interactional competence. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) How do L2 speakers initiate, develop, change, and close topics in natural interaction?
(2) What are topic management practices related to L2 speakers' interactional competence?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Topic Management within CA

"Topic" is an elusive notion, and its definitions depend highly on the research perspective adopted. Rather than being treated as a content concept, "topic" is regarded as a dynamic, multifaceted entity in CA, meaning its establishment and maintenance invariably involve not just speakers but also their recipients; in this sense, topic management is very much a collaborative achievement[13].

From CA perspective, research on topic management focus on how participants methodically accomplish topical talk through moment-by-moment interaction. This involves identifying topic boundaries and employing a variety of interactional practices to initiate, develop, shift, and close topics[14].

A key concept in this line of research is "topic transition", which refers to changes in topical direction of conversation. Topic transitions are typically divided into two types[15]. The first type, stepwise transition or "topic shift" involves the introduction of new topics that are contingently tied to prior utterance. Such transitions are characterized by a sense of continuity and coherence, as topics appear to "flow" naturally from one to another[16]. In contrast, disjunctive or marked transitions (i.e., "topic change") occur when new topics are not fitted to the preceding talk. These transitions are often explicitly signaled, making the boundary between old and new topics recognizable to participants[15, 17].

A substantial body of CA research has explored how topic transitions are marked and accomplished in interaction[18–22]. Linguistics resources used for these transitions include "touch-off marker" such as *actually*[20], polar interrogative questions or *so*-prefaced questions for topic initiation[21, 22], and freestanding particles *okay* and *alright* in the responsive position for topic closure[18]. Non-verbal cues such as laughter can also mark the change in the nature of topics[23].

These micro-analysis investigations highlight the procedural nature of topic management and the crucial role of transition marker in maintaining both the progressivity and intersubjectivity of interaction. This skill is particularly rele-

vant in L2 contexts, where learners must not only produce grammatically correct utterances but also navigate the sequential organization of talk. The ability to manage topic effectively is thus a key component of L2 interactional competence.

However, existing research has primarily examined topic transitions in institutional or highly structured settings. Relatively little is known about how L2 speakers manage topical talk in natural, informal conversations, particularly regarding the sequential structures they use and the types of linguistic and interactional resources they draw upon. Addressing these gaps is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of how topic management contributes to L2 interactional development.

2.2. Topic Management in L2 Interaction

In classroom-oriented or task-based L2 interactions, topics are often pre-determined, which may constrain learners' opportunity to adapt to the local contingencies of interaction[1, 2, 11, 19, 24]. This has led researchers to describe topic as having a "dual personality" in such contexts: topic-as-script, pre-established by teachers or examiners before the interaction; and topic-as-action, referring to how a topic is developed or talked into being during the course of the interaction[25].

Notably, L2 speakers are not passive recipients of these pre-assigned topics. Studies have shown that learners may deviate from scripted content to pursue locally relevant concerns, demonstrating the coexistence of task compliance and emergent, participant-driven interaction[26–28]. Performance in topic development, especially with regard to topic-as-action, has also been linked to L2 oral proficiency, highlighting the need to examine learners' topic management strategies in more naturalistic environments[25].

A body of research has explored how L2 speakers manage topics to maintain the continuity of interaction, particularly during opening and closing sequences. For instance, in text-based task interactions, participants often begin with greetings or preliminary inquiries before introducing a main topic, frequently using topic-shifting markers such as *so*[22, 29]. Similar structural patterns have been observed in L2 text chats, where pre-sequences mirror those found in everyday conversation[30]. In group talk, Hellermann and Cole (2009)[24] found that topic-closing practices differ by proficiency level: lower-level learners typically close a topic directly, whereas higher-level learners tend to engage in pre-closing extensions, such as summarizing or expressing gratitude. These findings suggest that even in structured settings, interactional resources used for managing topics may vary systematically across proficiency levels.

Recent studies have shifted attention to learners' ability to collaboratively construct and extend topics. For instance, Galaczi (2014) claims that in paired speaking assessments, high-proficiency learners are more capable of expanding other-initiated topics than lower-proficiency peers. In classroom interactions, Dolce and van Compernolle (2020) observed that advanced learners frequently develop topics initiated by teachers through various interactional means—asking follow-up questions, offering explanations, or even challenging the teacher's assertions with counter-examples—demonstrating a higher level of topic negotiation skill. In written task-based interactions, Abe (2023) also concludes differences in topic management practices between proficiency levels. While low- and mid-proficiency learners preferred to recycle similar expressions, such as "How about you?" to create new sequences, high-proficiency learners are able to use the more advanced interactional practices to mark topic transitions. Abe and Roever (2019, 2020) argue that both the variety and complexity of these practices in task openings and closings are strongly influenced by L2 learners' proficiency.

Despite these findings, most existing studies focus on classroom or task-based contexts, where interactional trajectories are often shaped by institutional agendas. In contrast, relatively few studies have examined how L2 speakers manage topics in spontaneous, natural conversations. When natural interactions are considered, the primary focus has been on the deficits of L2 users in comparison to native speakers, emphasizing their communicative limitations[31–33]. However, Cook (1999)[34] argues that L2 learners should be evaluated based on their success as L2 users rather than being assessed solely in comparison to native speakers.

From this perspective, it is more meaningful to investigate how L2 speakers manage topics on their own terms in informal, non-instructional interactions, and how their practices reflect varying degrees of interactional competence. As Nakamura (2008)[35] points out, examining natural or non-instructional talk provides a distinct insight into how talk is

co-constructed in real time. Investigating topic management in such settings therefore enhance our comprehension of both topic management practices and interactional competence.

3. Data and Methodology

A total of 13 Chinese learners at a university in China participated in the study. The participants came from diverse academic backgrounds, including psychology, international politics, economics, and world history, and ranged in age from 21 to 37. Based on their oral placement tests results conducted by their university, participants were divided into three groups: high (n = 5), mid (n = 4), and low (n = 4). Participant recruitment was conducted by Chinese language teachers, and background information (such as oral scores and majors) was collected through an online survey tool.

Each recording group consisted of 2 to 3 participants who shared the same proficiency level. For each recording session, participants were free to choose different conversational partners within their group. As a result, most participants interacted with two different partners across multiple recordings, with a maximum of three different partners. Participants were given full freedom to choose topics of their own interest. No specific tasks or prompts were provided by the researcher, aside from procedural instructions. The researcher was not present during any of the recording sessions.

All recordings were scheduled at the participants' convenience. The video recordings varied in duration from 50 to 65 minutes, with a total of 9 hours of talk, covering diverse subjects such as major, Chinese language, politics, and diet. The researcher was not present during the recording and did not give any topics or tasks to the participants except for informing them about the details of the process and video recording device. To ensure the naturalness of the data, the initial five minutes of each recorded conversation were excluded from the analysis.

All participants were thoroughly briefed on the research objectives, methodologies, and potential implications. Participants were solicited to provide written informed consent for their involvement in the study, emphasizing that they possessed the autonomy to withdraw from the study at any juncture without incurring any adverse repercussions. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

After data collection, we systematically segment each recorded video into small talks based on topical coherence, especially according to the degree and nature of topics' coherence relations[36, 37], which is the main perspective for analysis. The most distinguishing feature is whether topic initiations demonstrate a connection to previous discourse. If there is no connection at all, indicating a disjunctive move to another topic, it will be considered the initiation of a new topic in this study.

Our corpus contains 97 topic chains, and each complete topic sequence comprises the initiation, development, and transition (or closure) of a specific topic. Based on the chat transcription, we analyzed the "line-to-line" sequential unfolding of actions under the framework of CA, which provides a fine-grained method for examining how participants co-construct social actions through talk. Specifically, we employed the 'next-turn proof procedure'[38, 39] commonly used in CA to analyze the participants' ascription of the social action executed in the prior turn. The conversations are transcribed using the GAT-2 transcription system[40], with modifications adapted to Mandarin to better demonstrate the prosodic features (see **Appendix A**).

4. Findings

As we examined, we identified a total of 97 instances of topical talk, which exhibited neither sequential nor referential connections between consecutive topics. In comparison, elementary learners exhibit a noticeably higher frequency of significant topic changes in conversation compared to advanced learners. The mean number of changes we found in low-level groups is 21.3 per conversation, with an approximate interval of 2.8 minutes. Mid-level learners, on the other hand, average 6.7 topic transitions per conversation, with an interval of around 8.9 minutes. Advanced students, on average, experience 4.3 instances of disjunctive topic transitions per hour, with an interval of approximately 13.9 minutes. This indicates that in natural conversations, the higher the proficiency level of L2 learners, the stronger their abilities to expand and extend specific topics, leading to greater coherence in topical conversations.

The following two subsections will concentrate on distinct aspects. Section 4.1 will focus on the linguistic practices utilized by L2 learners in various stages of topic management, and Section 4.2 will explore the relationship between

these practices and the language proficiency levels of the participants.

4.1. Interactional Practices And Sequential Structures Within Different Stages Of Topic Management

This section discusses the interactional practices and sequential structures employed by L2 learners at different phases of topic management. The examination of topic management will be organized based on the features they exhibit. But rigid categorizations are rare within the complex processes of topic management, and there are some instances in which more than one feature is evident to see[13].

4.1.1. Topic Initiation

The sequential environments for topic initiations are divided into two types: opening a topic with topic initiators and initiating a specific topic after using preliminary actions. Nearly all levels of learners tend to employ the first type, especially elementary participants. In contrast, intermediate to advanced learners sometimes utilize preliminary actions before initiating a topic, especially when introducing a topic unconnected to the previous talk suddenly or in interactions with less familiar interlocutors. The excerpts shown below are cases of these two methods of topic initiation.

(1) Open A New Topic with Topic Initiators

In most cases, participants always open a topic directly with a topic initiator, such as *na* ('that') *ai* ('eh') *guanyu* ('about') *jiushi* ('that is') and *suoyi* ('so')[41–43]. Among these, the discourse marker *suoyi* ('so') plays a prominent role in many marked topic transitions, especially in proposing a new topic. Some researchers pointed early on the role of *so* as a turn-initiation device, and suggest that "*So* often prefaces utterances that function as proffers of various addressee-centered topics"[44]. In Excerpt (1), we can see how Rui in line 1 uses *suoyi* to initiate a new topic.

Excerpt 1_That thing
(The previous talk is about the traditional food in Changsha, China.)

01	→	Rui:	suoyi So *So*
02		Min:	a Ah *Ah*
03		Rui:	nage:(.) nage shiqing(-) That that thing *That thing*
04			zenme fasheng de ya How happened DE PRT *How did it happen?*
05		Min:	en Umm *Umm*
06		Rui:	riben de nage shiqing Japan ASSC that thing *The thing that happened in Japan*
07			nide zhuanye shi guoji guanxi Your major be interactional relation *You're majoring in international relations*
08			suoyi So *So*
09			ni(.) keyi(.) gaosu women yixia You can tell us PRT *You can tell us something*

10			zhege(.)zhege shi(.) guanyu zhege shiqing This this thing about this thing *About this thing*
11		Yan:	keneng shi:: taoyan(.) taoyan Probably be dislike dislike *Probably be dislike*

Rui's use of *suoyi* in line 01 is combined with a question that occurs in lines 03-04 to initiate a new topic in the provided extract. According to Morris-Adams (2016), this combination can be a method of linguistically marking a topic change, of "explicitly indicating to the hearer that a new topic is being proposed". This practice signals "other-attentiveness"[44], through which the speaker can show their concern to the interlocuters by proposing a topic that is related to the participants.

We can see that in line 02, Min provides an immediate minimal response *a* ('Ah'), indicating a shift in attention. Following this, in line 03, Rui introduces a new topic through a question containing the demonstrative pronoun *nage* ('that one'). Since the topic is presented at the first time, the pronoun here is unclear. To address this issue, Rui initiates a repair in line 06, and in line 07, he supplements the reason for proposing the topic, showing that it is motivated by a concern for the hearer's perspective. From Yan's response in line 11, it is evident that he accepts the establishment of the new topic and engages in the following elaboration process.

(2) Initiate a Topic After Preliminary Actions

In interactional conversations, speakers may employ different resources to cue the listener about the upcoming topics. Sometimes, they employ discourse markers such as *suoyi* 'so' to help hearers save "the effort in searching for an appropriate context"[45] when introducing a new topic, while at other times, preliminary actions are taken by the speaker to provide additional information prior to a topic-initiation turn. Especially when the topics are somehow delicate or when the speaker abruptly transfers from the current topic to another unconnected one. The strategy in which a new topic is introduced shows the speaker's consideration of the contingency in the interaction.

An example can be seen in Excerpt (2).

Excerpt 2_Do you like your major
(The previous talk was about how to find a job after graduation.)

01		Ran:	dui(.) wo juede a Right I think PRT *Right, I think*
02			zheyang de:(-) fanzheng keyi (-) This ASSC anyway possible *In this way, anyway, it's possible*
03		Ke:	zheyang de:: lingyu ni xiang zhao gongzuo This ASSC field you want find job *You want to find a job in this field*
04		Ran:	en enheng Yes yeah *Yes*
05	→	Bu:	na: wo:: IP I *Well, I*
06	→		Wo xiang <u>wen</u> <u>ni</u> yi ge I want ask you one CL *I want to ask you a (question)*
07		Ran:	dui Sure *Sure*

08	→	Bu:	fanzheng jiushi Anyway just *Anyway, it's just*
09	→		na(.) ni xianzai xue de shi guoji IP you now study ASSC be interactional zhengzhi dui ba politics right PRT *Now you are majoring in international politics, right?*
10		Ran:	dui Right *Right*
11		Bu:	dui Right *Right*
12			na(-) ni xihuan zhege zhuanye ma IP you like this major PRT *So, do you like this major?*
13		Ran:	en: wo xihuan zhege zhuanye PRT I like this major *Umm, I like this major*
14		Bu:	< <p>o xihuan a>= PRT like PRT *Oh, you like it?*
15		Ran:	=dui danshi:(-)((click)) Yes but *Yes, but*
16			xue:: zhongwen zhege zhuanye Study Chinese this major *Studying this major in Chinese*
((13 lines omitted, about Ran's complain that studying international politics in Chinese is difficult.))			
30		Ran:	suoyi nage zhuanye hen hao So that major very good *So, that major is very good*
31			danshi:(.)((click))yi bufen dou ting bu dong But one part all listen NEG understand *But, I don't understand a part of it at all*

Following Ran's acknowledgment in line 04, the coherence of the current topic 'How to find a job' appears to diminish. Subsequently, Bu starts with *na* to highlight a shift in topic, which is accompanied by a lengthening in prosody (line 05). This transition becomes more explicit with the production of *wen* ('ask') in line 06. Interestingly, even after receiving Ran's confirmation (line 07), Bu does not ask his question immediately but produces another pre-sequence (lines 08–09), which is termed as "extended preliminaries" by Abe (2019). The information conveyed by the extended preliminary is introduced by Ran himself in the previous talk but does not develop to be a specific topic. Until the context is established, he asks a question related to this context, thus proposing a new topic, i.e., the major.

In fact, Bu's way of introducing this topic through the use of incomplete utterance (line 06) is somewhat delicate[46]. In a previous talk, Ran emphasizes the difficulty of writing his thesis and expresses uncertainty about finding a job after graduation. These complaints indirectly reveal Ran's negative assessment of his major. Therefore, Bu attempts to shift the topic to an evaluation of the major itself, hoping Ran can provide more details. It can even be said that Bu proposes the topic of 'liking or not liking one's major' at this moment to elicit a negative assessment from Ran regarding his major. This is evident in Bu's response following the unexpected answer received in line 13, as well as in Ran's

subsequent explanations. The decrease in volume and the usage of a change-of-state token *o* ('oh') indicate a change in Bu's epistemic status[47]—from thinking Ran dislikes his major initially to realizing that Ran actually likes his major. Ran also provides an explanation for the contrast in his attitudes in the next few turns (lines 15–16, 30–31).

Thus, Bu deploys pre-sequences as contextual information in preparation for asking a question, thereby mitigating the sensitivity of posing the new topic. It is a way to manage interpersonal relationships and showing high topic management skills.

4.1.2. Topic Development

Once a new topic is established, participants engage in collaborative efforts to construct and further develop the topic. In this sense, all topic development is collaborative, while the contribution of each participant to the continuity and coherence of the topic is different. Topics can be broadly categorized into two primary types based on the role of the speaker: self-initiated and other-initiated. Specifically, self-initiated ones are those that do not have a clear origin in the other speaker's turn, while other-initiated ones do[48]. In this study, our primary focus lies on the strategies employed by the hearers when facing the development of other-initiated topics. The strategies are primarily categorized into passive recipiency and active recipiency. *Passive recipiency* means the listeners' right to elaborate on the current topic is allocated by others, which is preferred by elementary learners. *Active recipiency*, on the other hand, refers to listeners proactively participating in the development of a topic initiated by someone else, which occurs more frequently in advanced learners' conversations.

(1) Passive Recipiency

In natural conversations among elementary learners, the development of topics exhibits a monologue-type trajectory[49]. In this type, one speaker introduces a topic and provides elaboration, while other participants are listeners, encouraging the speaker to continue by producing continuers, such as *en* ('umm') in Chinese. Followed by the conclusion of the discourse, the current speaker transfers the role to expand on the topic to others through questioning, with the most common format "*Ni ne?* (How about you?)" and its variants. Upon obtaining the floor, another participant then expresses their views or provides further elaboration on the ongoing topic. The listener engages in the topic only because it is allocated by others, and from the listener's perspective, their participation in the development of the other-initiated topic is passive. This is illustrated in Excerpt (3).

Excerpt 3_How about you

01	Rui:	nage:: That *That*
02		(xx)shuo shi tamen de Say be they ASSC *(xx) say that's theirs*
03		shi yige <ENG organi-organization ENG> Be one organization *It is an organization*
04		ye bu shi ta ziji de Also NEG be 3S oneself ASSC *It is not his own, either*
05		shi yige <ENG organization ENG>= Be one organization *It is an organization*
((6 lines omitted, about Ran' talk with Yan.))		
12	Min:	=((click))[en:: Umm *Umm*
13	Yan:	[en:: ((cough)) Umm *Umm*

14	→	Rui:	ei IP
15	→		suoyi So *So*
16	→		nimen na bian Your that place *In your country*
17		Min:	en Umm *Umm*
18	→	Rui:	((click)) <ENG maybe ENG>: Maybe *Maybe*
19	→		nongcun na bian rural that place *In the rural areas*
20	→		you mei you: Have NEG have *Is there such a (situation)?*
21		Min:	women nong(.) women nongcun ren Our countryside our countryside people *In our countryside, people*
22			You hen duo Have very many *There are many*
23			danshi(.) But *But*
((conversation continues))			

In extract (3), Rui introduces the issue of land ownership in his country. After several turn-takings, both Yan and Min produce the *news receipts* 'en' at almost the same time (lines 12–13), indicating that they have been informed of something new and also proposing that the informing is complete and does not need to know more[50]. In other words, it implies a diminishing coherence in the ongoing topic. Consequently, in the next turn, Rui allocates the right to develop the topic to Min unilaterally, asking about land ownership in his country (lines 14–16). This turn is initiated with discourse markers *ei* ('hey') and *suoyi* ('so'), which serve to signal an upcoming shift in awareness in order to achieve joint attention and solicit identification of referents[48]. However, Rui's first question does not smoothly conclude, instead, an incomplete syntactic utterance emerges. Min's use of *en* ('umm') in line 17 signifies both a shift in his attention due to Ran's asking and serves to encourage Rui to continue and complete his inquiry. After Rui explicitly specifies the reference of her question (from country to countryside), Min takes over the topic and provides an elaboration in the subsequent turns (from line 21).

There is a clear boundary between Rui's and Min's elaboration of the topic 'land ownership,' which is Rui's question from lines 14–20. We treat this question as a variant form of "*Ni ne?* (How about you?)", because both of them are perspective-shifted forms. According to Abe (2023, p.7), in the conversations among low-level learners, participants mainly "recycled similar formats in question-answer sequences by swapping roles between questioner and answerer (or teller)", and the typical format is "how about you." We also found the same format in Chinese, i.e., "Ni ne?" in low-level conversations, even though the most frequent forms are its variants. Both the typical format and its variants signal the change of the speakers' roles, and through

this kind of questions, listeners become the next speaker and contribute to the progression of the topical talk passively.

(2) Active Recipiency

In conversations among advanced learners, we have identified another type of developing a topic initiated by others. In this approach, participants actively engage in the ongoing topic by reformulating others' opinions and asking for confirmation with tag questions such as *Shiba*, *Duiba*, *Shibushi*, and *Duibudui*. They then express their own views or initiate another connected topic, thereby taking control of the conversation. In this way, participants employ a progressively organizational strategy, starting from a context familiar to the speaker and introducing new relevant information. This method acknowledges others' contributions to the current topic, avoiding the potential disruption of topic shading on topical coherence and enhancing the listener's receptivity to new information, thereby advancing the conversational process[49].

The following excerpt illustrates how interactional practices are deployed by advanced learners to shape and develop a specific topic actively. In Excerpt (4), Bu effectively contributes to the ongoing topic by incorporating a confirmation sequence, showing the speaker's proactive efforts to advance the conversational process.

Excerpt 4_Chinese class.

01	Rui:	[< <f>dui(-) women(-)wo ye (-)> wo ye yudao guo zhege wenti ya: Yes we I also I also meet EXP this problem PRT *Yes, I have also encountered this problem*
02		jiu: xuexi(.) hanyu(.) yi nian(.) IP study Chinese one year wo juede bu gou (.) wo juede(-)((click))(1.3) I think NEG enough I think *I think that studying Chinese for one year is not enough*
03		zhuanye de(.) du(.) zhuanye de shihou Major DE study major DE time *When studying a major*
04		tamen yinggai: They should *They should*
05	Ma:	you hanyu ke Have Chinese class *Have Chinese classes*
06	Bu:	a: suoyi= IP so *Ah, so*
07	Rui:	=you hanyu ke Have Chinese class *Have Chinese classes*
08	Ma:	[lingwai de Additional PRT *Additional*
09	Bu:	[suoyi So *So*
10	Rui:	[dui Right *Right*
11	Bu:	[suoyi So *So*

12	→		nimen de yisi jiushi:(-) You ASSC meaning be *You mean that*
13	→		ruguo wo de zhuanye shi:(.) jiaoyuxue dui ba If I ASSC major be education right PRT *If my major is education, right?*
14		Ma:	en Umm *Umm*
15		Bu:	huozhe(-)biru shuo (-) wo de zhuanye shi(-)(click)(-) e Or for example I ASSC major be PRT *Or, for example, my major is*
16	→		jiao zuo(-)[zhege jiao shenme xinlixue dui ba Call this call what psychology right PRT *It's called, what is this, psychology, right?*
17		Ma:	[en: Umm *Umm*
18		Rui:	[en: Umm *Umm*
19		Bu:	zhengzhi xue(–) Politics *Politics*
20			ranhou: shuxue(-) And math *And mathematics*
21	→		suoyi jiushi (–) butong(-) butong de zhuanye de (.) xuesheng(–) So JIUSHI different different ASSC major ASSC students *So, students from different majors*
22	→		tamen(-) zai du:(.) na zhege yuke They ZAI study this foundation course ye: xuyao zai(-) butong de ban also need in different ASSC class *They also need to be in different classes while studying the foundation courses*
23	→		haishi(-)< <p>ni de yisi shi shenme > Or you ASSC meaning be what *Or, what do you mean?*
24		Ma:	o:(.) wo de yisi shi = Oh I ASSC meaning be *Oh, what I mean is*
((conversation continues))			

In the previous talk, the speakers Rui, Ma, and Bu are talking about the Chinese classes. But actually, the primary speakers are Rui and Ma, while Bu predominantly shows a listener's role, producing the discourse with acknowledgment markers. This is also visible from the opening several turns in the above excerpt: Rui and Ma engage and exchange opinions with each other, reaching an alignment (lines 01–05, lines 07–08, and line 10), whereas Bu endeavors to interject into the ongoing topic from the line 06 and producing three consecutive stand-alone *suoyi* ('so'), serving as a proffer of an addressee-centered topic[44]. Nevertheless, it is only in line 13 that Bu receives a response from Ma. The asymmetrical roles in turn-taking imply that Bu does not initially occupy a central position in the topical conversation. The co-construction of Rui and Ma (lines 04–05), the repetition (line 07) and the pre-closing device *dui* ('right') (line 10),

together put the current topic in a "state of attrition." However, with the insertion of Bu's confirmation sequence, the topical coherence persists until the introduction of the next connected topic.

In this segment, Bu shows his topic management skills on several levels: he effectively employs the discourse marker *suoyi* ('so') to signal a shift of attentiveness, reformulates others' views to provide relevant contextual information in preparation for requesting confirmation, and maintains the topic in spite of an initially unsuccessful attempt at developing it.

Most importantly, as we can see in Excerpt (4), during the phase of reformulating others' utterances, speakers extensively employ discourse markers such as *duiba* and *shiba*, which serve as confirmation-seeking devices [51, 52].

By employing the format of [formulation + confirmation-seeking marker], participants in a conversation can achieve or negotiate mutual understanding [53], indicating that advanced learners are more attentive to the relationship between current and preceding utterances. In the process of topic development, they make efforts toward the negotiation of interactional semantics, thereby achieving intersubjectivity in interaction [54]. Here is another example with a similar strategy. We can see that Ke reformulates Bu's previous utterances and requests for confirmation in lines 02–03, and after receiving Bu's response (lines 04, 06), Ke then shifts to ask another connected question to promote the conversation's progress (line 10). Although the question that Ke initiated shows a difference from the previous topic, it is connected to earlier talk through reformulating, thereby contributing to a sense of global coherence.

Excerpt 5_Desserts

01		Ke:	shi de Yes PRT *Yes*
02	→		ranhou:(.)ni shuo nimen na bian (-) And you say your that place *And then you said over there*
03	→		chide bijiao (.) tian de bijiao duo shi ba Food relatively sweet ASSC relatively many right PRT *The food is relatively sweet, right?*
04		Bu:	e:(.) keyi zheme shuo ba Uh can so say PRT *Uh, you can say it like that*
05	→	Ke:	suoyou de yinshi doushi you: tian de(.) [tian youguan All ASSC food all have sweet PRT sweet relate *All the food is related to sweetness*
06		Bu:	[en:(.)shide shide Mmm yes yes *Umm, yes*
07			(1.4)
08			[suoyi: So *So*
09		Rui:	[OK
10		Ke:	[na weishenme nimen ni meiyou name (.)[zhang pang ((laughter)) IP why you you NEG that gain weight *Then why aren't you getting fat?*
11		Bu:	[pang a Fat PRT *Fat?*
12			[wo bu zhidao I NEG know *I don't know*

The usage of format [reformulation + confirmation-seeking marker] indicates that advanced-level learners, when elaborating on specific topics, do not present their own viewpoints separately but pay attention to the coherence of the topic, and to make sure the following expression is based on the correct understanding of the previous talk from their interlocutors, so that they need to seek acknowledgment and agreement from the participants. Moreover, the deployment of confirmation-seeking markers, such as *shiba* and *duiba*, is uniquely observed in conversations among advanced learners, which can be used to separate them from learners at other proficiency levels. Section 4.2 will provide a detailed explanation of this.

4.1.3. Topic Transition

As previously mentioned, topic transitions can be categorized into two types: change topic disjunctively (or marked topic transition) and shift topic stepwise (or collaborative topic transition).

In the first type, there is a noticeable boundary between the previous and new topics. A new topic often occurs when the preceding topic has run out of steam, and no further useful contributions can be made[55]. In other words, topic change is kind of a two-stage process, including topic closure and topic initiation[13]. On the other hand, in topic shift, there are no explicit markers for the closure of the previous topic and the initiation of the new one. Instead of characterizing the new topic as being 'introduced' into the conversation, it is more accurate to describe it as emerging through the 'topic-negotiating process'[56].

The following two excerpts can be taken to illustrate these two types.

(1) Marked Topic Transition

This type of topic transition occurs frequently in conversations among elementary learners. Typically, a new topic is introduced by a specific speaker after the 'shading' of the previous one, and then the recipients express their ratification of it, leading the conversation into a positive developmental trajectory. The transition between conversational roles is quite distinct during this process.

In Excerpt (6), we can see how Rui proposes a new topic and how other participants orient to it.

Excerpt 6_Cha Yan Yue Se

01		Rui:	[bu yao zhege dongxi NEG want this thing *I don't want this*
02		Yan:	[((laughter))
03		Min:	[((laughter))
04		Rui:	[bu yao zhege NEG want this *Don't want this*
05	→	Yan:	[((laughter))
06	→	Min:	[((laughter))
07	→	Rui:	ni kan you see *You see*
08		Min:	enheng PRT *uh-huh*
09		Rui:	ai::(.) zenme shuo ne IP how say PRT *Hey, how to say it*
10		Yan:	<EGN story(.)story ENG> *story(.)story*
11		Rui:	zhege:: This *This*

12	Min:	en Umm *Umm*
13	Rui:	Chayan Yuese PN *Chayan Yuese*
14	Min:	enheng PRT *uh-huh*
15	Yan:	en en Mm mm *Mm*
16	Rui:	zhende(-) Really *Really*
17		you you you yi duan shijian (.)feichang huo Have have have one period time very popular *It was very popular for a period of time*

In the previous talk, Rui asked Yan about the specialty in his country. Yan's answer is 'beauty,' which is obviously presented in a joking manner, thus eliciting laughter from all participants and contributing to a collective sense of amusement. After laughing together (lines 05–06), Rui proposes a totally disjunctive topic to the current conversation, which is Chayan Yuese (line 13), a special milk tea from Changsha in China. The introduced topic 'jumps into' the ongoing conversation without any connective context, and it is marked by a noticeable boundary—laughter in lines 05-06 and a joint attention shifter *nikan* ('you see') in line 07. According to Stewart[57], "laughter helps with the management of conversation serving as a turn-taking cue or a topic-ending indicator". Thus, after laughing together, a new and unconnected topic becomes legitimate to introduce. As we can see, from line 01 to line 06, there are several overlaps between Rui's utterance and Min and Yan's laughter, which imply that Rui has been talking continuously until the production of the topic initiation marker in line 07. Therefore, it can be considered that it is the current speaker who initiates the change of topic, which is treated as unilaterally driven[13].

(2) Collaborative Topic Transition

Comparing to introducing an entirely new topic directly within the ongoing conversation, in informal talk among intermediate to advanced, particularly advanced learners, the transition between topics is more seamless, constituting a chain-like progression[58]. Participants endeavor to fit what they want to say (the introduced topic) to what has just been said (the preceding topic), rather than abruptly concluding the prior topic—a phenomenon termed 'topic shading'[59]. There are no discernible pauses or distinct boundaries between topics, as participants tend to navigate the transition through collaborative negotiation.

In Excerpt (7), we can see that although Guo clearly "raises" the topic, it becomes as a new topic for extended talk through the work of the other participants.

Excerpt 7_Games V.S. Phones (adapted)

01		Guo:	wo ye: bu da youxi I also NEG play game *I don't play games either*
02	→		wo kandao bieren qiuqiuqiu((hand gesture)) I see others ONO *I saw others (palying games)*
((6 lines omitted, about Guo's description of playing phone games.))			
09		Yue:	wo jiushi [na zhong ren I be that kind person *I'm that kind of person*

10		Xia:	[wo ye shi I also be *Me too*
11		Yue:	< <all>yinwei> wo da nage youxi yao: da diren ma Because I play that game need beat enemy PRT *Because in the game I play, I have to defeat enemies*
((4 lines omitted, Yue provides an example to illustrate that she is very focused when playing games.))			
16			erqie wo jiu hen jizhong jingshen zai da [youxi And I very focus attention on play game *And I really focus my attention on playing games*
17		Guo:	[wo juede wo I think I *I think*
18			ruguo wo bushi(.) zai waimian fuqian If I NEG in outside payment *If I'm not spending money outside*
19			ranhou zuo ditie de shihou And take subway DE time *And when taking the subway*
20	→		wo keneng yidian wo bu kan shouji (–) I might a bit I NEG look phone *I won't check my phone at all*
21			wo de shouji ke yi tian ye bu kan I ASSC phone can one day also NEG look *I can go a whole day without checking my phone*
22	→	Yue:	o: en oh umm *Oh umm*
23	→	Xia:	wo yiban(.) shouji shang [jiu zhiyou yong wan youxi I generally phone on just only use play game *I generally use my phone only to play games*
((3 lines omitted, detailing Xia's complaint that checking WeChat on the phone is troublesome.))			
27			shi rang wo (.) wan youxi(xx) jiushi zheyang Be let I play game be this *But when I playing games, that's how it is*
28		Yue:	[jiushi zheyang de ((laughter)) Be this PRT *Exactly like that*
29		: Guo	[ruguo wo you ge huodong zuijin If I have CL event recently *If I have an event recently*
30	→		wo keyi jingchang wan kan shouji I can often play look phone *I can frequently check my phone*
31	→		meiyou huodong meiyou zhexie dongxi bu kan shouji NEG event NEG these thing NEG look phone *Without any events, I won't check my phone*
32		Xia:	((click))wo ye juede xianzai(.) kan shouji tai duo I also think now look phone too much *I also realize that I play on my phone too much now*
((conversation continues))			

In first 20 minutes of this conversation, "games" emerges recurrently as a prominent global topic. Then, the topic transition from "games" to "phones" is facilitated by collaborative topic-bounding exchanges that enable participants to mutually display their orientation to a topic in progress as possibly closed.

At the beginning of the excerpt, Guo indicates that many people are too engrossed in playing games on their phones, making it difficult to hear friends talk. At this point, the term "phones" is not explicitly mentioned by the speaker, instead, it is conveyed through gestures and is positioned in the predicate statement, serving as background information without topicality. Consequently, Yue only acknowledges Guo's opinion in the subsequent turn and shares her own gaming experience without elaborating on "phones". If the subsequent talk continues with participants sharing their gaming experiences, it would be a normal trajectory for topic development. However, in the subsequent discussion, Guo does not provide an assessment or a relevant response to Yue's gaming experience. Instead, he further elaborates on the implicit topic of phones mentioned earlier (line 02). According to Tannen[60], "a topic emerges when comments are picked up and developed by the group". From an information structure perspective, compared to the initial wordings, "phones" has been transitioned from background information to foreground information, moving from the predicate position to the subject, hence enhancing its topicality. Moreover, the topic is introduced by the typical topic marker *wojuede* ('I think') in line 17[49]. Yue and Xia both ratify this topic in subsequent turns (line 22 and line 23), collectively assigning topicality to "phones".

Nevertheless, it is noted that when Xia mentions phones in subsequent discourse, she still associates it with games, indicating that both phones and games are the speaker's focal points. Nevertheless, from the word order, it can be inferred that "games" are gradually shifting from foreground information to background information. Until the end of the excerpt, both Guo and Xia's turns revolve around "phones", and Yue also expresses agreement, concluding the transition from the global topic of "games" to "phones". The three participants engage in a subsequent discussion on this new topic for an extended 15 minutes.

Compared to the marked topic transition, this type of topic transition is jointly negotiated, thereby "talking a topic into being"[25]. In this way, the contributions of high-level learners in initiating new topics are competently managed. In a nutshell, higher-level learners are more concerned with global topic management, while lower-level learners give more focus on local topic management.

4.1.4. Topic Closure

Based on our observations, the interactional practices for topic closure among L2 learners can be classified into two types. The first type is *format-marked closure*, which can be illustrated in terms of explicit linguistic structures or forms, including minimal responses such as *en* ('umm') and non-verbal signals like silence and laughter. The other type is *content-marked closure*, whose format is not specifiable in terms of linguistic forms. Rather, it involves using a conclusion or assessment to propose a possible closing of the topic.

(1) Format-marked Closure

An instance of concluding the preceding topic through minimal response and audible laughter can be found in Excerpt (8). Silence is one possible signal implying topic closure, which is often accompanied by the minimal responses, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 8_Where have you been

01		Rui:	ya(.) Wuhan:(.)<ENG about eleven million ENG> haishi <ENG forty million ENG> PRT Wuhan about eleven million or forty million *Wuhan about eleven million or forty million?*
02	→	Min:	en en zheyang(1.0) wo jiu(-) Umm umm like that I just *Umm, like that. I'm just*
03	→		o(.)<ENG ok ENG> (.)haha Oh ok haha *Oh, ok, haha*

04	Rui:	en Umm *Umm*
05	Min:	ni qu guo na ge difang You go EXP which CL place *Which places have you been to?*
06		e:(.) na ge guojia ne Um which CL country PRT *Um, which countries?*

In this excerpt, Rui and Min participate in a multi-turn discussion comparing the areas of Laos (Min's country) and Wuhan. After several turns, this topic reaches a possible completion, indicated by Min's production of various non-topic-propulsive elements, such as silence, break, and laughter in line 02 and Rui's minimal response in line 04. These elements make no substantive contribution to topical talk but can serve as generic devices for proposing to "bound" off a topic[14]. Subsequently, in line 05, Min initiates a new topic in the form of a question.

(2) Content-marked Closure

Different from using minimal responses or other non-topic-propulsive elements, sometimes participants deploy some conventional strategies to prepare for topic closure. Such strategies are treated as "closing implicative environment", indicating "sets of actions after which closing may be a relevant next activity"[61]. Conclusion and assessment are routinely used to set such a closing implicative environment[14]. With a conclusion or an assessment, the preceding talk can be presented as "a thing which is potentially complete to the point where it can be now talked about as a bounded event"[61]. Therefore, these strategies can be treated as a proposal the talk could be concluded.

In Excerpt (9), we see that Ke produces several turns to conclude the preceding topic and then disjunctively changes the topic to another one.

Excerpt 9_Chinese dialect

01	→	Ke:	zhen de(.) tai nan le [tai nan le Really PRT too difficult PRT too difficult PRT *It's really too difficult*
02		Ma:	[zhen de Really PRT *Really*
03	→	Ke:	danshi (-)tingqilai ganjue(—) But listen feel like *But, it sounds like*
04	→		liang ge niao zai chaojia [< <laughing>yiyang>hihihi Two CL bird ZAI quarrel like *Two birds quarreling, hihihi*
05		Ma:	[hihihi hihihi
06	→	Ke:	[< <laughing>liang zhi niao zai chaojia > gagu gagu((laughter)) Two CL bird ZAI quarrel ONO ONO *Two birds quarreling. Gagu gagu*
07		Ma:	[((laughter))
08	→	Ke:	hh ting you yisi de Quite have interesting PRT *Quite interesting*
09		Ma:	ni shi na yi nian lai zhongguo de You be which one year come China PRT *Which year did you come to China?*

Similar to the standard topic transition sequence proposed by Drew and Holt[62], the topic transition in this excerpt exhibits a sequence characterized as "assessment-agreement-confirmation-introduction of a new topic".

In line 01, Ke assesses Chinese dialects as "too difficult", receiving Ma's acknowledgment in the next turn (line 02). Subsequently, Ke provides a non-metaphorical assessment of the current topic (lines 03–04 and 06), suggesting that Chinese dialects sound like birds quarreling. This assessment elicits laughter from Ma (lines 05 and 07), as laughter can serve as a form of agreement (Holt, 2010)[23]. Following this, Ke reaffirms this evaluation in the subsequent utterance (line 08), providing Ma with a warrant to initiate a new topic in line 09.

4.2. Quantitative Tendencies and Proficiency Level

Our findings indicate that there are differences in both interactional practices and sequential features of topic management between advanced and elementary learners. When initiating an entirely new topics, especially being sensitive to the recipient, advanced learners tend to employ preparatory actions, while low-level learners typically create new sequences directly with topic initiators. In terms of topic development, advanced learners use more collective strategies to advance topics initiated by others, particularly when competing for the conversational floor. A characteristic of this sequence involves transitioning to personal opinions after the acknowledgment of others' contributions, typically adhering to a format that includes [formulation + confirmation-seeking marker]. In contrast, low-level learners often passively engage in the development of the current topic, which is typically initiated by the question format of "*Ni ne?* (How about you?)" and its variants that are most frequently used to create question-answer sequences. Regarding the conclusion of topics, advanced learners show a greater emphasis on the completeness of topics, frequently employing content-based closing strategies, such as expressing assessments or providing conclusions. By contrast, low-level learners often use simple confirmation markers or display recognizable signs of silence or laughter as specific cues to mark the closure of the current topic.

To examine whether there is a systematic difference in the features of topical sequence and linguistic formats of interactional practices in managing topical talk, and their relevance with L2 learners' interactional competence, a quantitative approach is adopted. We compared the occurrence and frequency of preliminary sequences, confirmation-seeking markers, and content-based closure across different proficiency levels.

Table 1 demonstrates that high-level learners can produce preliminary sequences most frequently, followed by mid-level learners. It was not observed in the low-level groups. **Table 1** displays the frequency of preliminary actions presented by L2 learners.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis.

Sequence Type	Low (64 segs)	Mid (20 segs)	High (13 segs)	Total (97 segs)
Pre-Sequences	0	7	8	15
Percent	0	35%	61%	15%

Moreover, high-level learners can deploy different types of actions such as questions or announcements to construct preliminaries and expanded them into extended sequences (see Excerpt 2).

Considering that the majority of preliminaries are produced to ensure the understanding of a reference or establish background knowledge for the upcoming action, serving as a device to prevent dispreferred actions[14], it is evident that higher level learners prioritize their orientation to the recipients' collaboration and social relationship over the expression of their own preferences when initiating an entirely new topic. In this way, participants can achieve a smoother transition between different topics, and thus demonstrating higher interactional competence.

Table 2 shows that higher-level learners can not only employ the [reformulation + confirmation-seeking marker] format more frequently but also utilize a more diverse range of confirmation-seeking markers compared to the low-level groups. Especially, it is high-level learners who exclusively utilized the confirmation-seeking markers *duiba* and *duibudui*, whereas low- and mid-level learners have never produced these two markers.

Table 2. Frequency of the interactional format [formulation + confirmation-seeking marker].

Confirmation-Seeking Marker	Low (64 segs)	Mid (20 segs)	High (13 segs)	Total (97 segs)
+shiba	1	7	11	19
+duiba	0	0	31	31
+shibushi	5	7	17	29
+duibudui	0	0	6	6
Total	6	14	66	96

One possible reason for this distinction lies in the fact that conversations occur in the low-level and mid-level groups often involve factual statements, leading to higher usage of confirmation-seeking markers containing *shi* ("be") when seeking affirmation. In contrast, the high-level groups engage more in expressing opinions, thereby showing a preference for opinion-oriented confirmation markers containing *dui* ("right").

Given that formulation is a self-reflexive practice used to check an understanding or infer meaning from the prior talk[14]. By doing so, participants can make their interactions accountable and mutually intelligible[53]. Hence, in contrast to lower-level learners, high-level learners give more concern on understanding other participants' utterances and establishing connections between their own subsequent talk and the preceding context, which indicates their higher interactional competence in negotiating the topic development.

As is apparent from **Table 3**, low-level learners produced fewer content-based closures than mid- and high-level learners. Furthermore, almost exclusively mid- and high-level learners utilized conclusion to mark the closure of the current topic.

Table 3. Frequency of content-based closure.

Type of Closure	Low (64 segs)	Mid (20 segs)	High (13 segs)	Total (97 segs)
Assessment	6	3	2	11
Conclusion	1	9	9	18
Total	7 (11%)	12 (60%)	11 (85%)	30 (31%)

It seems that assessments and conclusions can serve as effective devices for proposing closure as they do not connect to the preceding turns only but encompass the entirety of a prior stretch of talk[14]. This emphasizes the ability of higher-level learners to summarize topics and seamlessly transition from one discussion to the next, demonstrating their heightened focus on the fluency of topic transitions and reflecting their advanced interactional competence.

5. Discussion

This study focuses on the interactional practices and sequential structures employed by L2 learners in topic management across different language proficiencies. Specifically, we investigate how language learners use resources to maintain topic progressivity and how they mark topic transitions when initiating a disjunctive topic in natural conversations. The results suggest that differences are obvious in both practices and sequential patterns among proficiency levels, which is partially confirmed by quantitative analysis.

Compared to low-level learners, advanced learners exhibit a noticeably lower frequency of disjunctive topic transitions (i.e., topic changes) in conversation. This suggests that the majority of talks in high-level groups maintain topic continuity, displaying a sequential connection to prior utterances. It also indicates that L2 learners' high proficiency is associated with their enhanced abilities in improving topic progressivity as well as using a broader range of devices to achieve the interactional goal.

The use of preliminary actions reveals a clear pattern across proficiency levels: as learners' proficiency increases, so does the frequency and complexity of these pre-sequences. Extended preliminary moves are particularly characteristic of high-proficiency learners. This observation is consistent with previous findings in classroom-based and computer-mediated interactions, where learners employ pre-sequences to manage task openings or topic shifts[1, 2, 9, 29]. However, unlike the structured, task-driven preliminaries commonly observed in task-based settings, preliminaries in natural, informal conversations tend to occur in contexts involving

sensitive topics or disjunctive topic changes. This may be due to the fact that such a disjunctive action generally requires participants to put more efforts in ascertaining the newsworthiness of the upcoming topic or the contingency of implementing subsequent actions successfully.

By deploying preliminary actions, speakers can implicitly test whether recipients are willing to collaboratively engage in the projected sequence. These moves help mitigate potential interactional risks, maintain affiliative alignment, and preserve participant solidarity. In this sense, preliminaries not only facilitate smooth topic transitions but also reflect participants' sensitivity to interactional contingencies and social accountability—skills that appear to develop with increased language proficiency. The frequent occurrence of preliminaries and extended pre-sequences in high-level groups signals a higher degree of recipient design and a growing sense of solidarity among participants, indicating the learners' advanced interactional competence in deploying nuanced devices to "prepare the field" for the interlocutor[1, 9, 63]. By contrast, due to the challenge of participating in an interaction with fine-tuning devices toward the recipient, low-level learners often initiate a topic directly and avoid producing preliminary actions[5]. This tendency suggests a preference for self-expression over the collaborative grounding of interaction, highlighting an important developmental trajectory in L2 learners' interactional competence.

Beyond topic initiation, learners also differ in how they maintain alignment during topical development. In particular, the use of the [formulation + confirmation-seeking marker] format emerges as a fine-tuning device that enables participants to negotiate mutual understanding and sustain collaborative talk. Comparing the frequency of this format across different proficiencies and the range of linguistic forms to construct it, the result suggests that higher-proficiency learners possess diversified resources to make their interactions accountable and mutually intelligible. Furthermore, it indicates that they prioritize shared understanding over communicative efficiency[64].

The progressive organizational strategy employed by higher-proficiency learners for developing the current topic is both retrospective and prospective within the ongoing topical conversation. By formulating, the speaker summarizes or explicates the sense or key point of the preceding utterances (i.e., "Formulations of the gist"[53]), thereby affirming others' contribution to the current topic. By asking for confirmation, the speaker invites a mutual negotiation of understanding from the recipient. Through this format, participants not only demonstrate the local fitness between upcoming sequences and actions and the preceding turns but also display their efforts in meaning-making in interaction[54]. Consequently, intersubjectivity is achieved between interlocutors, contributing to the constant development of the current topic. However, summarizing previous utterances and employing precise resources to deploy more locally adapted actions is a challenge for low-level learners, which may be attributed partially to the limitations in linguistic forms. Consequently, low-level learners tend to contribute to topic progressivity through the reciprocal exchange of question-answer sequences using the format "ni ne? (How about you?)" and its variants. This simple method is used to shift the role of questioner and answerer, as well as making a relevant response including the reciprocation of prior talk.

Furthermore, our examination of the distribution of confirmation-seeking markers such as *duiba*, *duibudui*, *shiba* and *shibushi* in the HSK syllabus revealed that the constituents of these markers, namely, *dui, shi, ba* and the "X *bu* X" structure all appears in grammatical syllabus as early as HSK levels 1–2. This indicates that advanced learners do not necessarily require more complex linguistic forms or structures, rather, they reorganize the linguistic resources they have mastered. That is, the way they exploit the linguistic resources have changed. This observation aligns with previous findings, suggesting that the re-construction of resources by learners to manage the sequential organization of actions is an indicator of the development of their interactional competence[3, 5, 63].

In terms of topic change or topic closure, using content-marked or format-marked closure is a significant indicator for distinguishing learners' different proficiency levels. The number of content-marked closures increase with learners' proficiency levels, and almost exclusively mid- and high-level learners can utilize conclusion to mark the topic change or closure. Through these devices, the preceding topic can be considered as potentially completed and can now be discussed as a bounded event[61], thus making the initiation of a new topic relevant. High-level learners employ summary assessments more frequently to mark transitions between topics, indicating an emphasis on the progressivity of

topic chains and the seamlessness of topic transitions. Furthermore, in terms of sequential organization, compared to simple acknowledgment of information such as producing minimal response markers followed by the initiation of a new topic, i.e., adopting the "informing-minimal response-new topic initiation" format, the use of assessment to pre-close the current topic makes the recipient's affiliative response relevant, i.e., adopting the "summary assessment-agreement-confirmation-new topic initiation" format. In this way, learners collaboratively mark the topic closure[21]. This practice illustrates how advanced learners not only organize talk more coherently but also manage stance alignment at transitional boundaries, a key indicator of interactional competence in CA frameworks. This finding supports Doehler and Pochon-Berger's (2015) notion that the improvement of learners' interactional competence involves not only the diversification of linguistic resources but also changes in the sequential organization of actions. The subtle changes made by advanced learners at the termination of a topic imply their considerable skills in different aspects of topic closure, including interpersonal and content levels[13].

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has provided a comprehensive analysis of topic management in Chinese L2 natural conversations. Our findings demonstrate the generic interactional practices and sequential structures used in natural conversations by Chinese L2 speakers. This will enhance our comprehension of progressivity in natural L2 interaction and the relationships between linguistic resources and interactional competence.

From a theoretical perspective, due to the relationship between specific interactional features and participants' growing L2 interactional competence, we propose that besides the preliminaries[5, 9], the usage frequency of [formulation+ confirmation-seeking marker] format and the diversity of linguistic forms to construct it, as well as the amount of content-marked closure should be regarded as indicators of learners' interactional competence. Moreover, it is necessary to incorporate these resources into speaking tests, such as HSK, given the fact that proficient topic maintenance and seamless topic transition are pivotal aspects to acquiring high scores in speaking tests[65, 66].

Regarding language teaching, the recurrent resources and special formats can be used by teachers to promote students' language development. For instance, when teachers design role-playing tasks or conversational games, they can require students to use specific linguistic resources to maintain or transition topics, such as topic initiators, summary assessments, and confirmation-seeking markers. Alternatively, they can use conversation resources like films, TV dramas or talk shows to help students understand the interactional devices functioning as developing specific or sensitive topics. If necessary, teachers can introduce some metapragmatic concepts to students, such as recipient design, sequence structures, cooperativity, etc.

However, there are some limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the current study did not examine the influence of participants relationships and topic familiarity on topic management, which may influence the linguistic resources deployed by participants. Secondly, the study did not explore the role of multimodal resources during topic transitions. Therefore, future studies should differentiate participants relationships and topic types, examine their systematic relevance with recurrently used topic management resources, and include multimodal resources such as gestures and gaze into the analytical framework.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.Y. and Y.H.; data analysis, Y.H.; resources, S.Y.; investigation, Y.H.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.H.; writing—review and editing, S.Y. and Y.H.; project administration, S.Y.; funding acquisition, S.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. Authorship must be limited to those who have contributed substantially to the work reported.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to REASON (Participants were solicited to provide written informed consent for their involvement in the study, emphasizing that they possessed the autonomy to withdraw from the study at any juncture without incurring any adverse repercussions.).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Appendix A

The transcription conventions for vocal (GAT-2, Selting et al., 2011, modified) and visual behaviors used in this article:

[ ]	overlap
(.)	micro-pause
(-),(–)	short, middle pauses
(1.0)	pauses of 1.0 second
:,::,:::	lengthening of ca.0.2–0.8 seconds, up to ca. 1 second
=	latching
Haha,hihi	syllabic laughter
((laughter))	description of laughter
< <laughting>XX>	laughter particles accompanying speech
((click))	Non-verbal local actions and events
((...))	omission in transcript
→	specific line in the transcript which is referred to in the text
?	final pitch movement: high rise
< <p> >	piano, soft
< <h> >	breathing in

Glossing conventions:

ASSC	Associative *(de)*
IP	initial particle *(na)*
CL	classifier
NEG	negatives *(bu, mei)*
3SG	third person singular pronoun
EXP	experiential aspect *(guo)*
ONO	onomatopoeia *(qiuqiuqiu)*
CRS	current relevant state *(le)*
PRT	particle
JIUSHI	*jiushi*
DE	*de*
ZAI	*zai*

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