

'Good' extensions of re-literalised idioms: Evaluating and comparing the creative productions of L2 and L1 language users

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Theme: Metaphor and creativity; 'what constitutes a 'good' metaphor in terms of creativity?'

Introduction

- Creatively playing with word forms, meanings, sounds etc. is important for both first (L1) and second language (L2) learning.
- This process allows speakers to perform social functions and shape their language identity (Wray, 2012), and offers various L2 learning gains (Bell, 2005; MacArthur 2010).
- Concerning idioms, language users frequently 'resuscitate' literal senses, as in 'I've been sitting on the fence so long my bottom is beginning to hurt!' = [am being very indecisive!]
- Eliciting such creative productions from (even advanced) L2 learners is generally hard (Littlemore & Low, 2006), and little is known about the types of responses that might be produced, which idioms tend to be easier/more difficult to extend, and how this ability relates to other aspects of Metaphoric Competence (Low, 1988; Littlemore & Low, 2006).
- Evaluating the quality of any L2 production is made harder by the absence of a robust scoring procedure and, for example, L1 response data, although other 'target' forms exist (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011).
- The research presented aims to address these gaps.

Test items (MED 'phrases'): 'Please extend the idiom...'

Methodology

Participants

- 112 x adult L1 Mandarin speakers of L2 English, 31 x adult L1 English speakers.

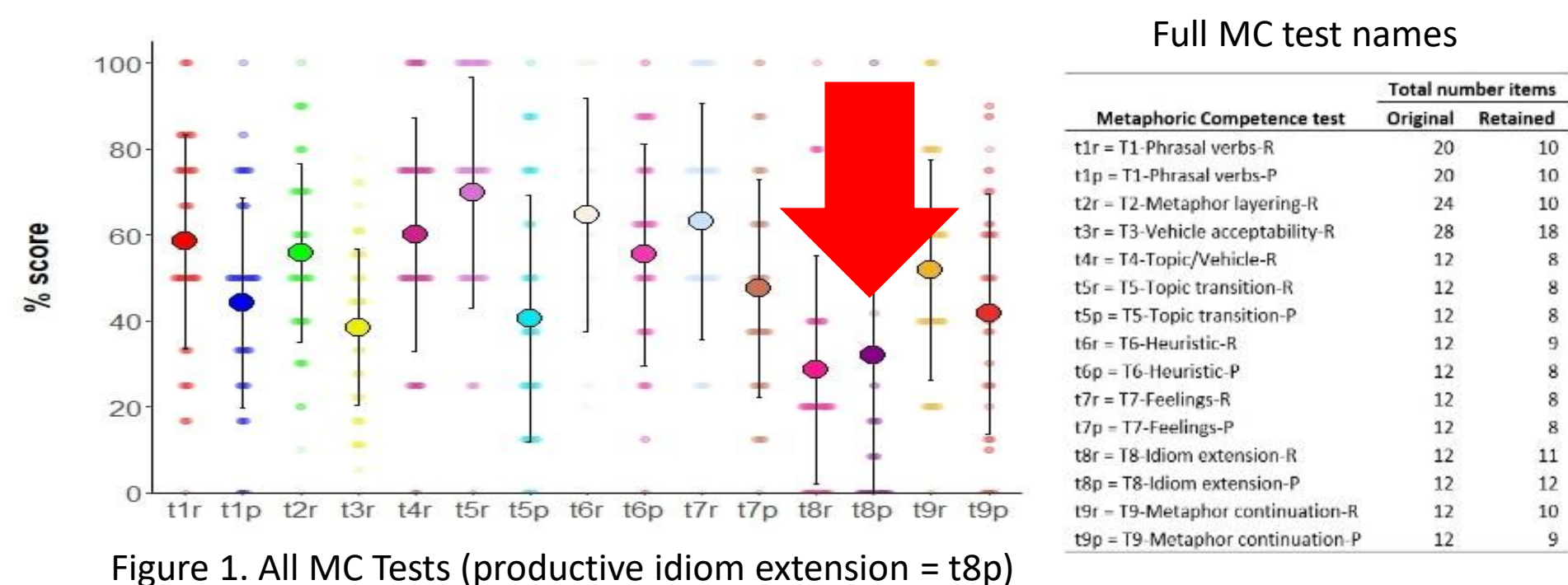
Data collection instruments

- **Test eliciting idiom extensions:** Designed to engage imaginative (illocutionary) functions of metaphor (Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 129-132), part of a larger battery of Metaphoric Competence tests designed to operationalize Low (1988) and Littlemore and Low's (2006) metaphor-related skills/sub-competences (O'Reilly, 2017; O'Reilly & Marsden, under review). This test is publicly available in: www.iris-database.org.
- The productive test followed a receptive (multiple-choice) test. Instructions contained an illustrative example and explanation, leaving test-takers to infer the types of responses required.
- **Scoring criteria:** Adapted from Azuma (2005) developed via piloting: 0 ('incorrect'); 1 ('partially correct'); 2 ('correct')
- **Test validity/reliability:** Maximized through 6 data cleaning stages. Internal consistency of items was high: ordinal omega (ω) = .92 (McNeish, 2018).

Results

RQ1: How does a productive re-literalised idiom extension test relate to other Metaphoric Competence tests, and which idioms are particularly easy/difficult to extend?

Descriptive statistics How does this MC test compare with 14 others?



Key finding: This test (+ its receptive/multiple-choice counterpart) = most difficult!

Which idioms were comparatively easy/difficult?

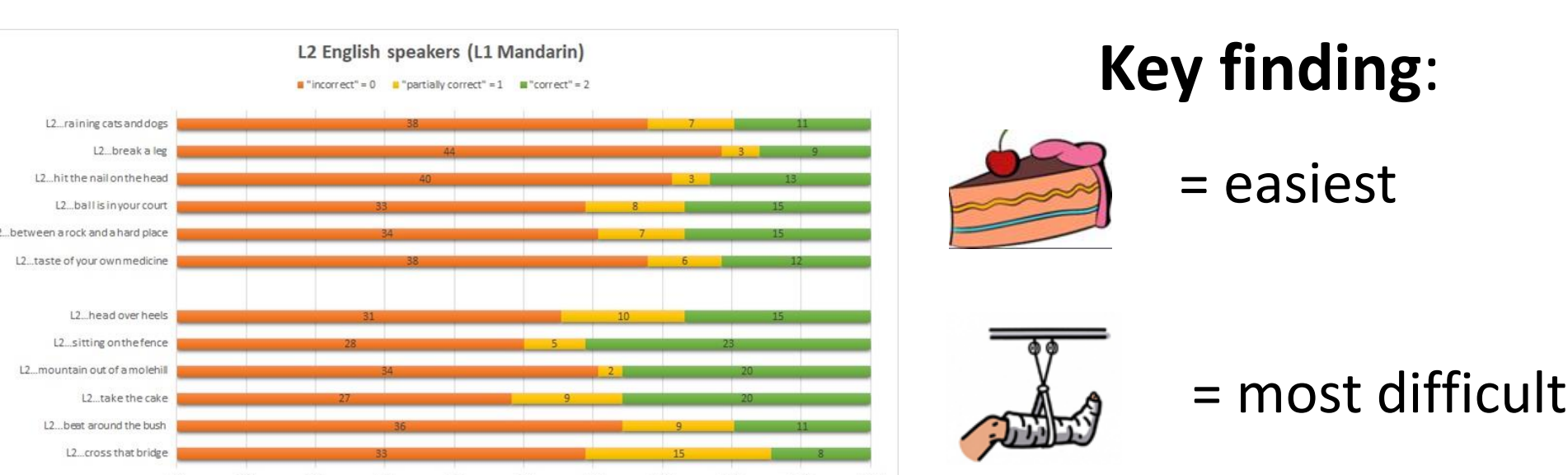


Figure 2. L2 participants, proportions of 2, 1, and 0 scores

Key finding:

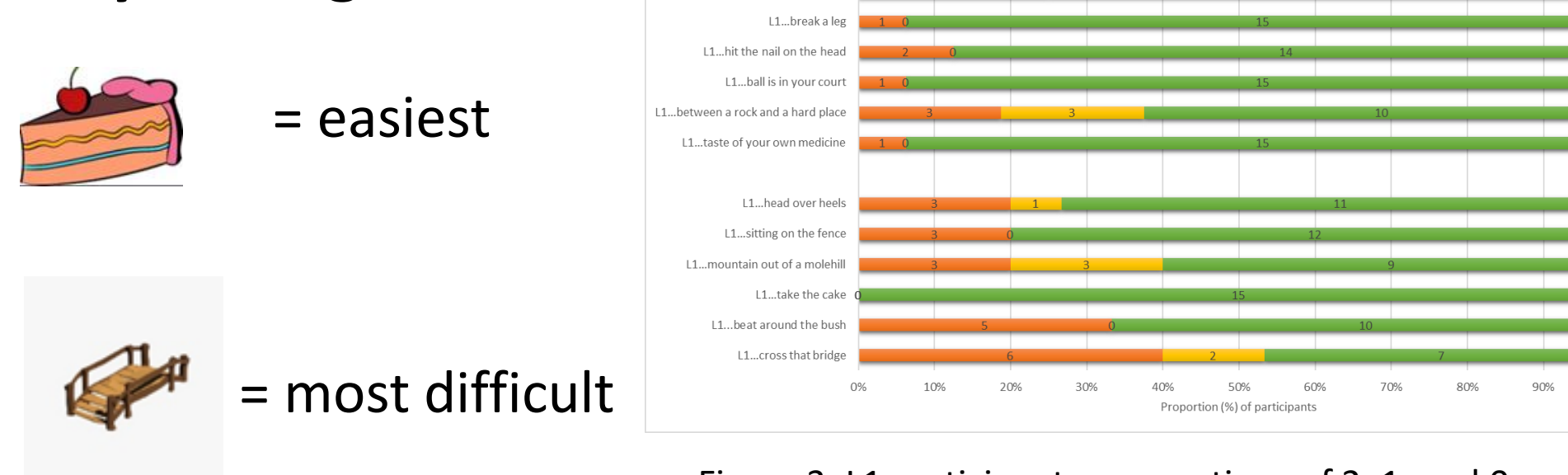


Figure 3. L1 participants, proportions of 2, 1, and 0 scores

RQ2: To what extent is the ability to produce re-literalised idiom extensions a central aspect of L2 Metaphoric Competence?

Exploratory Factor Analysis

MC factors and test loadings (34% total variance explained)

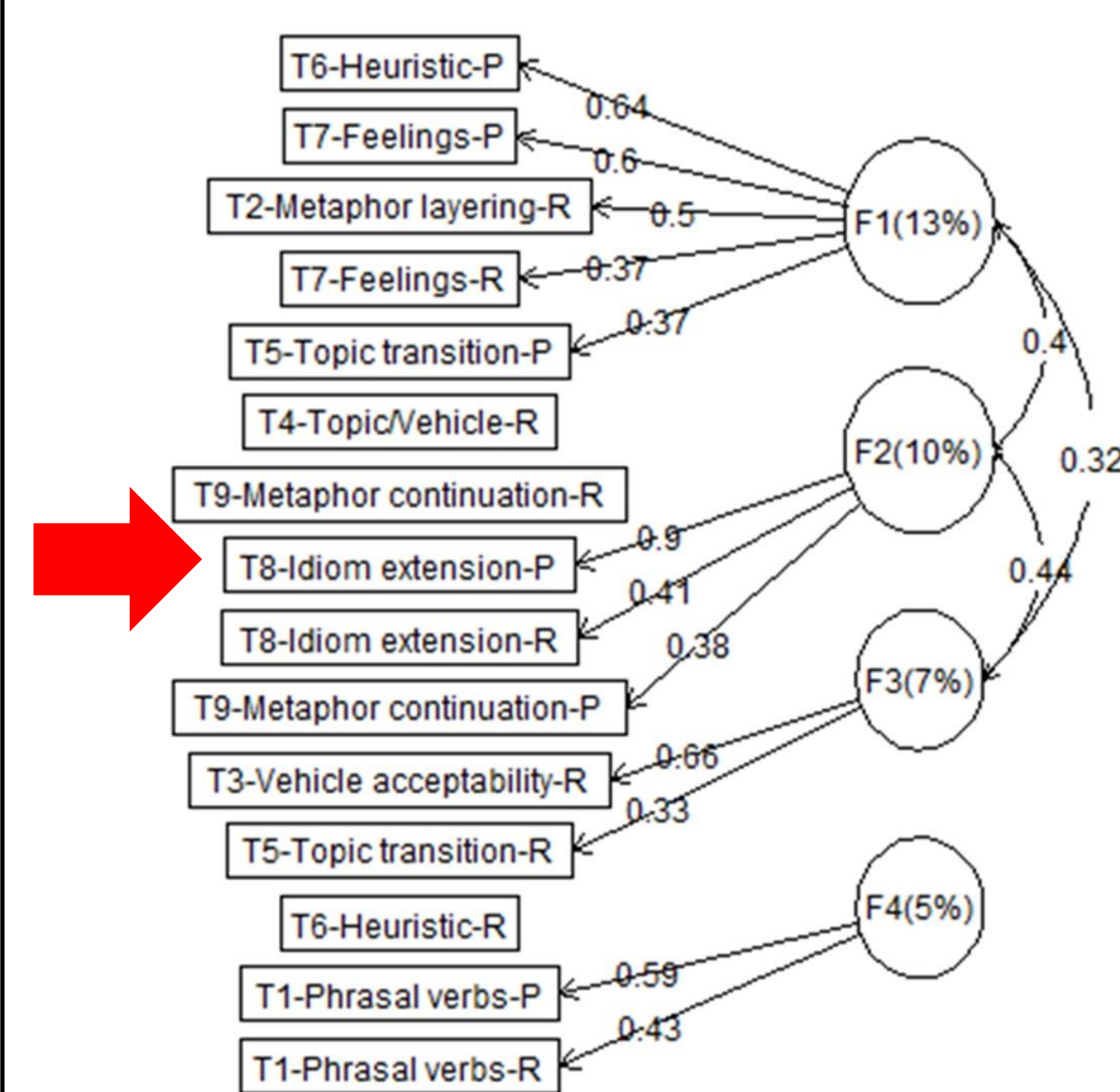


Figure 4. EFA diagram, showing 'underlying' MC factors and test loadings

Key finding: For the L2 participants, the ability to re-literalise idioms was a key marker of the most creative L2 metaphoric competence dimension uncovered in the test battery data, (F2) **Metaphor Language Play**. Other dimensions include (F1) **Productive illocutionary MC**, (F3) **Topic/Vehicle acceptability**, (F4) **Grammatical MC**.

RQ3: What types of re-literalised idiom extensions do L2 and L1 language users produce, and how do they compare?

Creative response patterns

Typical for...

L2 English creative responses

Pattern type	Idiom	Example response	Comment: The response data tended to suggest...
Lexico-grammatical	...find a bridge to cross (2)	...find a bridge to cross (2)	<< L2ers made more use of "cross/across", "walk...", and "deal..."
	...take all others' cakes (2)	...take all others' cakes (2)	<< Only the L2ers used present tense "take(s)" (with some examples of "took...")
	...the birthday cake (2)	...the birthday cake (2)	<< Only the L2ers started the extension with "it/was"
	...don't know how to kick the ball back (2)	...don't know how to kick the ball back (2)	<< Proportionally more high scoring L2ers produced the word "ball"
Specific metaphor/feature	...the moles are scared to death (2)	...the moles are scared to death (2)	<< L2ers more commonly focused on moles
	...the cats and dogs are starting to make babies! (2)	...the cats and dogs are starting to make babies! (2)	<< L2ers focused more on what the cats and dogs were doing
	...it hurts so much (1)	...it hurts so much (1)	<< Comparatively more L2 focus on the pain of the litter
Diversity of metaphors	...bring your crutches back (2)	...bring your crutches back (2)	<< The L2ers suggest more violent breaking!
	...break your leg to paralysis (2)	...break your leg to paralysis (2)	

L1 English creative responses

Pattern type	Idiom	Example response	Comment: The response data tended to suggest...
Lexico-grammatical	...back a table for lunch on the other side (2)	...back a table for lunch on the other side (2)	<< Only the L1ers produced extensions that referenced food/drink
Specific metaphor/feature	...the bush ended up twice the size! (2)	...the bush ended up twice the size! (2)	<< L1ers focused more, and in more detail, on what happened to the bush
	...he has splinters (2)	...he has splinters (2)	<< Only the L1ers extended with "splinters"
	...she did about 20 backflips (2)	...she did about 20 backflips (2)	<< L1 focus on motion (e.g., backflips)
	...he broke the hammer (2)	...he broke the hammer (2)	<< The hammer breaking is relatively L1 specific
Diversity of metaphors	...the ducks will be nesting on the roof (2)	...the ducks will be nesting on the roof (2)	<< The L1ers extend with a wider variation of animals

Both L2/L1 creative responses

Pattern type	Idiom	Example response	Comment: The response data tended to suggest...
Lexico-grammatical	...[L1] Break both (2)	...[L1] Break both (2)	<< Pluralising "leg" was common; L1ers preferred the alliterative "both" over "two"
Specific metaphor/feature	...[L2] the mountain is higher than Mount Everest (2)	...[L2] the mountain is higher than Mount Everest (2)	<< Mount Everest/Himalayas used by both
	...[L2] he became the doctor in the pharmacy (2)	...[L2] he became the doctor in the pharmacy (2)	<< Both L1/L2ers refer to mastery
	...[L1] I feel like I'm in a zoo! (1)	...[L1] I feel like I'm in a zoo! (1)	<< Both mention zoos and animal shelters
Diversity of metaphors	...[L1] She'd hit an ace (2)	...[L1] She'd hit an ace (2)	<< L1ers = mostly racquet sports; L2ers = throwing sports, football, and baseball

Examples of responses scoring 0 ('incorrect')

Response	Scorers comment
...deal with it now (0)	<< Does not clearly extend the literal sense of the idiom
...breaks the cake (0)	<< Attempt at extending the literal meaning but does not make logical sense, convey clear meaning etc.

Key finding: L2 and L1 specific response patterns, examples above show similarities/differences for **lexico-grammatical aspects** (e.g., a preferred collocation), **metaphors/metaphor features**, and the **diversity of metaphors** produced.

Take home message: For these learners, producing creative, re-literalised idiom extensions was a central but highly challenging aspect of L2 Metaphoric Competence, but still, many appropriate responses were produced, suggesting L2 learners can engage in this skill given the right kind of test design. Unsurprisingly, the L2 and L1 creative productions were found to be different in several respects, which future research might seek to use for metaphor-based teaching interventions.

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