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Leveraging Backchannel Responses to Augment Listening & Speaking Proficiency: A Study Conducted at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to use backchannels as a means of improving listening and speaking abilities. For this experimental study, a pre-post group design was employed. The study had two groups— 24 female students were in the experimental group and 23 female students were in the control group. The control group's students received traditional instructions. In the experimental group, however, backchannelling strategies were taught. The researchers prepared the topics, which centered on three types of backchanneling, both verbal and nonverbal: (1) expressing interest and agreement, (2) expressing understanding, and (3) expressing sympathy. The students were trained to use these backchanneling strategies, working in groups and pairs with the instructors who worked as facilitators. The posttest scores using SPSS from students who had used backchannels in their listening and speaking were compared to those students who followed the traditional way using the assigned coursebooks. The control group's listening and speaking improvement was significantly better. The students in the group using the backchanneling strategies demonstrated favorable attitudes toward backchanneling. The study concludes with recommendations for increasing the use of backchanneling strategies among EFL students in listening and speaking classes to enhance their proficiency in English.

Keywords: Backchanneling, Listening, Speaking, Strategies, Students.

Introduction

To make conversation work, there are certain things that people need to fill in. Feeling at ease with one another is the foundation of any successful conversation between two or more people. Backchanneling is crucial for anyone hoping to be a cooperative, supportive listener. Backchannels (BCs) positively contribute to fluency in social interactions (Sbranna et al., 2023). According to the definition in the Cambridge Dictionary, 'back channel is a **sound** or **sign** that someone makes to show that he or she is **listening** to the **person** who is **talking**.' It is also one of the ways to have a successful conversation. Backchannels are English words like "mhm," "uh huh," "wow," "yeah," "really," "okay," which show that the addressee has understood the speaker and that they do not want to take a full turn (Fox Tree, 2016). Other names for them include accompaniment signals, response tokens, acknowledgment tokens, and active listening responses (Simon, 2018). After Tolins and Fox Tree, we refer to them as BCs (2014, 2016). We designate the individual supplying them as the addressee and their partner as the speaker. Both regular turns and BCs are referred to as contributions in our terminology.

According to Li et al. (2010) and Knight (2009), a backchannel is a channel produced by the listener to signal attention, interest, and understanding to the speaker. It does not disturb, interrupt, or influence the current speaker to stop speaking. Verbal communication produces short vocalization, response, and visual behavior, such as gestures and facial expressions. When a person interacts with another person,

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s/he expects that there should be signs or indications that the other person is listening. If there is no indication from the other side, the speaker can interpret it as a signal that either the listener is not interested in hearing or cannot get or understand the message. Backchannels can be verbal or nonverbal. Using lexical items as a backchannel is a way for a listener to convey their concerns or other feelings. According to Lammi's (2010) theory, backchanneling is a straightforward way for a listener to demonstrate interest and comprehension to persuade the speaker to carry on with the conversation.

However, the techniques or strategies of backchanneling are not formally taught in everyday language classrooms. In a classroom, some teachers take it for granted that students are familiar with the backchanneling strategies. When given any situation or context to carry out a conversation, learners will automatically use several of the strategies. Also, it should be considered that not everybody reacts to a backchannel in the same way. Therefore, some backchannels are not included in the spoken conversations or might have backchannels that do not happen. Backchannel communication is frequently employed in casual conversations, consciously or unconsciously, because these types of conversations have a broad enough communication spectrum to use gestures, intonation, and grammar to gauge the listener's interest in the speaker's topic (Ike, 2010).

In the process of teaching and learning, backchanneling in casual conversation is also possible. Yazdfazeli et al. (2015) discuss a study that suggests that backchanneling in teaching and learning can occur at any stage and affect each stage. Backchanneling can help students define roles during practice, be aware of and sensitive to the conversation process during the presentation stages, and support independent interaction and discussion among students during the production stages.

Theoretical Framework

There are several research studies on the use of backchannels in a language classroom. Ward & Tsukahara (2000) studied the prosodic features of cue backchannel responses in English and Japanese. Lammi (2010) analyzed how back channeling and repetition are used in the communicative interaction in English as a lingua Franca (ELF). Similarly, Sharif and Azadmanesh (2012) investigated the lexical, grammatical, prosodic, and semantic factors involved in the backchanneling of Persian conversations.

Hence, it is evident that backchannels are necessary for a smooth and effective conversation. It is an essential skill to support and engage listeners in a conversation (Fitriawati & Suhatmady, 2020). A study by Doi (2012) states that back channels are used by English learners to communicate effectively in English and to confirm and clarify the content of their conversation. It consists of lexical items or vocalization/ verbal responses and non-lexical or nonverbal responses. It is an effective tool to show politeness and less politeness based on the formal and informal context. As stated by Koudelková et al. (2019) and Zhang et al. (2021), one way to create a successful conversation is through backchannel, which is important for people wishing to be able to function as supportive, cooperative listeners. Therefore, the role of back channeling cannot be denied to carry out a smooth conversation.

Significance of the Study

In a real-life conversation, people back channel to show interest, agreement, disagreement, surprise, disappointment, and so on when they talk. It is believed that backchannels are used in all conversational English, yet many L2 listeners are unaware of them or their importance. When we expose L2 listeners to backchannels and draw attention to them, learners should then be able to notice them in subsequent spoken input. By drawing learners' attention to these phenomena while listening, the hope is that they will also be able to (eventually) produce them appropriately in spoken production. The various strategies of backchanneling are best used while training learners in a Listening and Speaking class. Hence, the

researchers were interested in investigating how exposing learners of L2 to backchanneling can ensure the proper functioning of conversation.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to

1. Demonstrate the effectiveness of backchanneling for improving first-year EFL students' listening and speaking skills.
2. Incorporate backchanneling strategies to enhance the listening and speaking skills of L2 learners.
3. Discover the notable distinction in developing listening and speaking skills in EFL freshmen using the backchanneling strategies and those using the traditional way.

Review of Literature

The term "backchannel" originated in the study of linguistics, where it describes the listener's verbal and nonverbal responses during a communication event. Most backchanneling research focuses on linguistic and nonverbal communication, especially about second language learners. The backchannel is a way for listeners to express interest or comprehension and is distinct from the front or main channel, where the speaker conveys information. By emphasizing the listener's significance in the meaning-making process, the backchannel thus recognizes the dialogic character of communication (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Ward (2007) emphasizes that backchannels are known as "response tokens," "reactive tokens," "minimal responses," and "continuers".

Most studies on backchannel show how educational environments have become backchannel's main focus, mainly to boost interaction and engagement in big spaces (Pohl et al., 2011; Aagard et al., 2010). Knight (2009) claims that backchanneling is the process through which a listener sends a signal to a speaker indicating their interest, attention, and comprehension. It does not annoy, cut off, or persuade the person speaking to stop (Li et al., 2010). Short vocalizations, responses, and visual behaviors like gestures and facial expressions are produced by verbal communication.

It is essential to select the correct BC for the message they want to convey because different languages have different forms and meanings for their BCs. BC planning is similar to that of other utterance planning in this regard. Still, a language has a limited number of common BCs that are frequently used and have generally simple phonological forms. In contrast to most content words, this should ease their selection and phonological planning (Poucke et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2019).

Most crucially, the addressee who produces a BC reacts to the speaker's message rather than creating and encoding new conceptual content. Selecting and encoding a BC is less complicated than producing another utterance, and planning them during another utterance requires little linguistic dual-tasking because no new message is generated. Ward & Tsukahara (2000) opine that, in particular, there is the mystery of how 'coordination' is achieved — when two people are talking together, their utterances seldom interfere with each other, despite the lack of any fixed protocol for who may speak when. Moreover, they also stated that longer backchannel utterances tend to interfere with the speaker or at least require him to pay attention.

However, it is still up for debate whether backchannels are necessary for speaker-listener communication. The backchannel is thought to be the sole alternate course of action. For instance, it has been discovered that there are differences among speakers. Different people react differently to a backchannel. As a result, not all of the spoken conversations may have included backchannels or might have nonexistent backchannels in it.

Backchanneling is frequently employed in informal conversations because these types of interactions

have a broad enough communication spectrum to allow the speaker to gauge the listener's interest in the topic using gestures, intonation, and grammar (Ike, 2010). Backchannels are essential for people wishing to function as supportive and engaged listeners in a conversation. Moreover, it is also a signal of attention, supporting the agreement, ideas, and awareness assessments, and continues, respectively, produced by the listener's current speaker (Sungkaman, 2006; Striver, 2008). The process of teaching and learning can also involve backchanneling in casual conversation.

According to one study discussed by Yazdfazeli et al. (2015), backchannel in teaching and learning can occur in all stages and impact each stage. It can help students define roles in practice, be aware of and sensitive to the conversation process during presentation stages and support them in independently interacting and discussing ideas during production stages. Backchannel can, in essence, offer "assessments" that indicate a listener's comprehension and interest and "continuers" that urge and prod the speaker to continue. However, more complex reactions can be on a deeper level.

According to Toledo & Peter's (2010) study, backchanneling raises student engagement because it gives them "a greater sense of ownership over [their] learning". After conducting interviews with the participants in this qualitative study involving 17 education professionals, including teachers, librarians, and IT directors, the researchers concluded that the digital environment offered a secure space where students who tend to blend in with the background could find their voices and participate in class discussions. However, the fact that students could draw connections between texts and their own lives using the backchannel may have been their most pertinent finding regarding our research.

The lexical, grammatical, prosodic, and semantic elements of backchanneling in Persian conversations were studied by Sharifi and Azadmanesh (2012). Like English tag questions, they discovered that pseudo-tag questions in Persian conversations are crucial lexical cues indicating backchanneling time. Moreover, the grammatical completion points—where the semantic content is nearly complete—are more likely to be the locations of non-overlapping backchannels.

Further research on Persian backchannel responses in formal and informal contexts was conducted by Sharifi and Azadmanesh (2012). Persian backchannel responses "yes" and "right" are used to establish a formal context or polite verbal communication, while "ok" is used to denote an informal or less polite situation. They further divided the backchannels into four categories: (1) lexical utterances, like "yes," "right," "yeah," "excellent," "perfect," "okay," and "really"; (2) short utterances, like "laughing me," "100 percent"; (3) more extended expressions, which are used for repetition, anticipation, or completion; and (4) non-lexical, which refers to sounds like "aha," "hmm," "ha," "ee," and "vay".

However, there are contradictory views regarding using back channeling during a conversation. Not all signal attention; some signal boredom. Not all signal agreement; some signal skepticism. Not all signal understanding, often because there is nothing to understand, as in cases of disfluencies (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000). Therefore, it depends on the speaker to pick up the cues of the listener and decide if the conversation should continue or not.

All these studies have focused mainly on the uses and advantages of incorporating backchanneling during conversation and how the strategies used help run a smooth conversation. However, these studies have not discussed how back channeling strategies can be incorporated in a Listening and Speaking class at the tertiary level to beginners and if incorporating back channeling strategies improves the speaking skills of freshmen students.

Therefore, the current study focuses on how backchanneling can be incorporated into a listening and speaking course class at the tertiary level to improve the listening and speaking skills of freshman students. The study answers the following questions:

1. How can backchanneling strategies be incorporated into a Listening & Speaking class for the freshman students?
2. How effective is backchanneling for improving first-year EFL students' listening and speaking skills?
3. What are the notable differences in the development of listening and speaking skills among the EFL freshman learners after using the backchanneling strategies?

Method

For this study, the mixed-methods approach was 'chosen because of its strength of drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research and minimizing the limitations of both approaches' (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although the mixed methods posed some challenges for the researchers, they helped answer the research questions that needed exploration and explanation. Besides, this study would have a gap if a single approach was used.

Participants

In this study, a total of (N= 47) female students who had enrolled in level 2 (first year second semester) in the B.A. program in English at the Faculty of Languages & Translation at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia participated. Their ages ranged from 18 to 20. They had been studying English for over eight years. Their L1 was Arabic. The students (N= 24) were in the experimental group, whereas (N= 23) were in the control group. They were all first-year students.

Instruments

The researchers prepared a backchannel program, exams, an answer key, and a rubric. Besides, a questionnaire (consisting of five open-ended questions) was administered to the students of Listening & Speaking 2. Double-barreled and ambiguous questions were avoided in the questionnaire. Because of the anonymity offered by the questionnaire, the researchers used this as an instrument. The Kuder-Richardson 21 formula (KR-21) was also used to measure the test's reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

At the Faculty of Languages & Translation at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, for the B.A. English Program, the Department has prescribed the textbook "Trio Listening and Speaking 2" Blass (2017) to be used in the course Listening & Speaking 2 (ENG114). The comprehensive course is designed to deepen students' knowledge and abilities in listening and speaking in English. The course equips students with the skills to comprehend and articulate various subjects. The curriculum emphasizes the enhancement of both listening and speaking abilities. The book consists of three units and nine chapters in total. The focus is on understanding various career-related topics, jobs, lifestyles, places, sports, health and well-being, teamwork, travel, and tourism. Through interactive tasks and practical exercises, students explore predicting meanings of new vocabulary and engage in varied and diverse conversational contexts related to the topics and themes in the textbook. The book enhances students' ability to interact in English comfortably, bridging previous knowledge with newly introduced subjects and actively participating in diverse communicative situations. This textbook serves as a natural progression from basic to more advanced listening and speaking competencies. The coursebook focuses on certain strategies, such as:

1. Syllable and sentence stress
2. Question intonation
3. Reductions in English
4. Focus on correct pronunciation
5. Focus on using correct grammatical sentences

6.Focus on fluency

7.Learning to speak naturally

The researchers prepared the backchannel program, the exams, an answer key, and a rubric. Five EFL experts in the Saudi context evaluated them. The speaking posttest assessed EFL freshman learners' English-speaking proficiency and was believed to have content validity. The test's validity was established by correlating the students' posttest scores and final course grades. The validity coefficient (0.62) was obtained by comparing the students' pre-and posttest results on the final speaking assessment. The coefficient validity for the listening-speaking exam was (0.71). It must be mentioned that the researchers performed the roles of teacher and scorer for the listening and speaking pre-test and posttest—these required inter-rater reliability estimates.

Consequently, two scores were assigned to 50% of the randomly selected answer sheets from both groups' pre- and posttests. The samples were graded by another instructor teaching the same course alongside other college groups. It was explained to him how the scoring worked. The researcher's marks and those of the second rater were compared. The two raters agreed upon everything to a 94 percent degree. Additionally, the Kuder-Richardson 21 formula was used to calculate examinee reliability. The examinee's reliability coefficient was (0.75) for the listening-speaking posttest.

The researchers carried out a pilot study that lasted one month. Assuring instruction clarity was the goal of the study. In addition to the assigned textbook and a few current affairs topics, the researchers also applied the first unit. The pilot research also received the study's instruments. Three weeks were spent on this study—three hours a week, which was carried out during the first term of the 2023–2024 academic year. The listening and speaking class met for three hours each week. For ethical considerations, the informed consent of the respondents was ensured. The participants' names have been kept anonymous. The participants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained. The survey would only be utilized to gather and process data. If the questionnaire were left blank, there would be no pressure.

The researchers divided the freshman students into the control and experimental groups. The researcher gave instructions to them. Both the groups studied 'Trio Listening and Speaking 2'. The experimental and control groups completed all the required tasks in the listening and speaking exercises and related tasks on the subskills, along with two listening and speaking assignments each week. In a single session, the two groups practiced some listening and speaking tasks based on some new topics outside the topics from the textbook. They were encouraged to listen and speak. The researchers worked as facilitators for both groups, instructing them about the following things:

The researchers familiarized the students with the various backchanneling strategies in different contexts. They introduced the meaning and function of BC. They trained the experimental group on how to use the backchannelling strategies. They encouraged the learners to collaborate and give their feedback and comments. The researchers also guided the learners and offered them individual support, such as pointing out the mistakes in the learners' speech. The researchers stimulated both self-correction and peer-correction. They researchers offered positive feedback, appreciating the slightest improvement. Students in both groups completed a speaking test before the experiment. However, the subskills covered in the textbook were covered in the posttest.

Tasks on the posttest included the following instructions:

The posttest consisted of a task in speaking that the learners had never seen nor experienced in the lecture or the assignments. The instructions were given to the students to read the questions and prepare themselves and not to stop and continue their speech. The focus was on the fluency and not on accuracy. The topics selected by the researchers, were related to the topics in the textbook. The following

conversation questions were asked to the students based on the following topics. The students were asked questions and each question led to the other as follow:

Topic one: Team Work

Do you prefer to work alone or in a team? Why/ why not?
What are the benefits of working as part of a team? Give some examples.
How do you feel when a team member does not contribute much? Explain.
How would you handle a disagreement or conflict with your team? Explain.
Is working in a team necessary for you? Why/ why not?

Topic Two: Leadership

Do you like to work or study with others or just by yourself? Give reasons for your choice.
Do you like to be a leader? Why or why not?
What are the skills needed to be a good leader? Mention at least five skills.
When you work with others, do you follow orders mindlessly or give your opinion?

Topic Three: Jobs and Occupations

What are some common occupations/ jobs in your country?
Who are the people who do these jobs?
What skills and qualifications are needed to find a good job these days?
Can men and women both do the same types of jobs? Why/ why not?
What is your dream job?

The researchers scored the speaking pre and posttests using a standard rubric. The learners wrote the ID numbers instead of the real names. The questions were marked one at a time for all the learners in the two groups. Each researcher graded the learners separately, and then the two researchers' scores were added and divided by 2 for each student.

For the experimental group, backchanneling was used for extensive speaking tasks. Students in the experimental group performed the tasks independently. They worked in pairs or groups of three or four. Members of each group were randomly chosen and were reorganized and re-assigned for each new task so that each member had a chance to share. The instruction with the backchanneling (BC) passed through 3 phases.

Phase one: Introducing the students to the various BC strategies.

For example

1. Expressing interest or agreement.
2. Expressing understanding
3. Expressing sympathy

Phase two: Showing the difference between the three types.

1. **Expressing interest and agreement:** These nonverbal cues can take the form of forceful smiling and nodding combined with hand gestures like the thumbs-up sign or holding up both empty hands to indicate that you don't know either, among others. Additionally, they can be expressed vocally, such as: "Yes, indeed ↗ Right!"
2. **Expressing understanding:** Since there is not a single gesture or facial expression that indicates the listener has understood what has been said, these kinds of backchannelling techniques are nearly always verbal, such as: Ah Huh → Yes, I see → Alright →Correct.

3. **Expressing sympathy:** These could be expressions of support or empathy. Additionally, they differ in intensity, with some displaying relatively strong emotional responses and others displaying far weaker ones. These are some examples of constructive, sympathetic remarks: Fantastic! ↗ Greetings! ↗Whoa ↗Indeed! ↗Well done ↗Great work ↗; these may also consist of nonverbal cues.

Four situations were created with and without applying the BC strategies, and the students were asked to use them in real-life conversations. The students had to work in pairs for this task. The following are the samples:

Situation one: Expressing Dissatisfaction

Two Students Discussing After an Exam

Speaker A: How did it go?

Speaker B: Not so good. Couldn't understand Question no 2.

Speaker A: The one which asked to use the vocab in sentences?

Speaker B: That's the one.

Speaker A: I also thought we never practiced that in class. How come it was included in the exam?

Speaker B: I don't know, but I thought I was the only one confused about it.

Speaker A: Let's see that happens. I am dying for a cup of coffee. I am going to the café. Do you want to come?

Speaker B: Why not?

With Back Channeling Strategies

Speaker A: How did it go?

Speaker B: Uh! Not so good. Couldn't understand Question no 2.

Speaker A: Hmm? The one which asked to use the vocab in sentences?

Speaker B: Yes. That's the one.

Speaker A: Ah. I also thought we never practiced that in class. How was it included in the exam?

Speaker B: I don't know, but I thought I was the only one confused about it.

Speaker A: Hmm. Let's see what happens. I am dying for a cup of coffee. I am going to the café. Do you want to come?

Speaker B: Yeah! Why not?

Situation Two: Showing Sympathy

A Friend Meets His Friend After a Long Time in the College Library

Speaker A: How are you? It has been a long time since I saw you.

Speaker B: Fine. Thank you. I was sick.

Speaker A: Sorry to hear that. What happened?

Speaker B: I had Covid 19. My temperature was high, and I had a problem in breathing.

Speaker A: I didn't know that.

Speaker B: I had to stay in the hospital. Could not tell you because of the infection.

Speaker A: It must have been difficult for you. How do you feel now?

Speaker B: Much better. But I still need rest.

Speaker A: That's absolutely needed.

Using Backchannelling Strategies

A Friend Meets Her Friend After a Long Time in the College Library

Speaker A: How are you? It has been a long time since I saw you.

Speaker B: Fine. Thank you. I was sick.

Speaker A: Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. What happened?

Speaker B: I had Covid 19. My temperature was high and I had a problem in breathing.

Speaker A: Really! What a pity! Didn't know that.

Speaker B: Yeah, I had to stay in the hospital. Could not tell you because of the infection.

Speaker A: Yes, yes. It must have been difficult for you. How do you feel now?

Speaker B: Uh... much better. But I still need rest.

Speaker A: Right! That's absolutely needed.

Situation three: Showing interest (Two friends discussing about shopping)

Speaker A: That's gorgeous! Where did you get that from?

(Points to a pendant Speaker B is wearing)

Speaker B: From Rashid Mall.

Speaker A: How much was it?

Speaker B: 100 SAR. You can still get it. There was a sale.

Speaker A: I will try to see if the sale is still going on.

Speaker B: You should.

With backchanneling strategies

Speaker A: Wow! That's gorgeous! Where did you get that from?

(Points to a pendant speaker B is wearing)

Speaker B: From Rashid Mall.

Speaker A: Really! How much was it?

Speaker B: Mmm.. Not much. 100 SAR. You can still get it, I think. there was a sale.

Speaker A: Oh, I will definitely try to go and see if the sale is still going on.

Speaker B: Yup! You Should.

Situation four: Expressing Understanding (A Mother and a Daughter Discussing About Traveling)

Mother: I don't see why you always insist on visiting that shopping mall every month.

Daughter: It's huge and has a large collection of clothes.

Mother: But you get the same stuff in any other mall.

Daughter: Getting my stuff from there makes me happy. It just does. Besides I like the food court there.

Mother: I don't know. You always have your arguments.

Daughter: I do.

With Backchanneling Strategies

Mother: I don't see why you always insist on visiting that shopping mall every month.

Daughter: Mum... it's huge and has a lot of collection of clothes.

Mother: But... but you get the same stuff in any other mall.

Daughter: I know... I know... but getting my stuff from there makes me happy. You know... it just does. Besides, I like the food court there.

Mother: Uff... I don't know. You always have your arguments.

Daughter: Yup!

Phase three: Checking their experiences of using BC strategies

The third phase consisted of a questionnaire consisting of five open-ended questions which were given to them. After the students in the experimental group had completed conversing using the BC

strategies, they were asked the following questions.

- (1) Did you enjoy using the backchanneling strategies? Why or why not?
- (2) What did you enjoy about the backchanneling activities?
- (3) Did using the backchanneling strategies improve your speaking skills?
- (4) What issues or challenges did you face when using the backchanneling strategies?
- (5) Would you participate in any other backchanneling-related activity? Why? Why not?

Analysis of Data and Findings

Learners in both groups took a pretest before the beginning of the study. They took the same pretest, which asked them to speak about given topics. (Df = 23; T = .642).

There were no noticeable variations in the students' speaking proficiency levels.

Table 1: The Control and the Experimental Group (Pretest).

Table 1. The Control and the Experimental Group (N=1000).								
		Paired Differences					T	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
					Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Pre- C. group							
	Pre-Ex. Group	.173	1.202	.275	-.387	.736	.64223	.527

The findings of the independent T-test had no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in their speaking. Analysis of the qualitative pretest showed numerous weaknesses in English speaking skills: The students had difficulty expressing, forming, and creating ideas. They paused several times and made many grammatical mistakes. They did not know how to use proper intonation while speaking English.

Table 2: Pre-Posttest the Control Group.

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 0						
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest/control group	18.725	24	.000	4.800	4.24	5.36
Posttest / control group	33.797	24	.000	6.680	6.27	7.09

Table 3: Pre-Posttest the Experimental Group.

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 0						
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest Ex. group	21.834	24	.000	4.640	4.18	5.10
Posttest Ex. group	62.865	24	.000	7.920	7.66	8.18

Table 4: Pre-Posttest the Control and Experimental Group.

Paired Samples Test								
		Paired Differences					T	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
					Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Posttest / C. group	-1.240	1.012	.202	-1.658	-.822	-6.149	.000
	Posttest/Ex. group							

To find out if the students in both groups achieved progress in the EFL speaking as a result of the most extensive speaking activities that every group got (the use of textbook only vs. the use of the textbook in addition to backchanneling), the researchers used paired T-test, i.e., the pre and the posttest. They calculated the scores for each group separately.

In answer to the first research question of how back channeling strategies can be incorporated into a Listening and Speaking class, it can be said that introducing the students to the various BC strategies and contextualizing the freshman learners to the different utterances is how BC strategies can be incorporated in the lessons.

To find the answer to the second question, tables (2,3 and 4) show that students in the experimental and control groups in the present study got higher on the speaking posttest than in the pretest (T. test = 62.86 and 33.79 respectively), with lower variations among the learners' scores on the pretest than posttest (SD =10.61 and 09.18 respectively). This proves that EFL students in both experimental and control groups improved after getting familiar with backchannelling strategies. However, the median and the mean scores need to show whether this improvement in speaking scores was significant or not. Consequently, pre and post-test speaking scores for each group were compared using a paired T-test Table 4. The results of the paired T-test showed a significant difference between pre and post-test mean scores of the experimental group at the (.01) level, suggesting that the experimental learners' speaking skills significantly had improvements as a result of using backchannelling (T. test =21.834/ 62.865 respectively). Similarly, the significant difference between the speaking pretest and posttest mean scores of the control group was found at the (.01) level, signifying that the speaking skill of the control group students significantly showed improvements as a result of studying a speaking course (T. test = 18.725/ 33.797 respectively).

The comparisons of post-test speaking for the experimental and the control groups using the independent T-test displayed a significant difference between the two groups in speaking skill improvement (T = -6.149). This shows that students in the experimental group improved their speaking skills significantly compared to students in the control group.

The experimental students' significant improvement in their speaking skills resulted from the student-centered activities, active involvement, intensive training, communication among the students, a safe atmosphere for making mistakes, and teacher and peer response and support, as shown by students' replies to the questionnaire. In this way, the first research question is answered. The notable difference that the researchers noticed in the development of listening and speaking skills was that the learners using the BC strategies could effectively run a smooth conversation with proper intonation and were fully engaged using the BC signals correctly. As for the students' views, they are summarized below:

Students in the BC group found that BC tasks were useful and considered them an active and advanced way of practicing speaking skills. Backchannelling activities stimulated them to speak more without feeling that speaking is a chore. The strategies inspired them to speak and created a warm learning

environment among the students and their teachers. They found backchannelling helpful, as they got to observe and work with others. Consequently, they improved their speaking skill accordingly.

The backchannelling environment was safe for making mistakes and modifying their speech numerous times. They opined that using the back-channeling strategies kept the listener and the speaker more engaged. The speakers emphasized that an approving nod or sound from the listener boosted their confidence to carry on the conversation. They opined that understanding and using the right BC strategies for appropriate context is very important to give the correct signal. All the students stated that they would participate in similar backchannelling activities in the future.

Discussion

The above findings show that the pretests involving the participation of both the control and the experimental group indicated that they lacked the skills of speaking fluently and did not know how to use the BC strategies, so the results were almost the same. Since they were unaware of the importance of the strategy to carry on a smooth conversation hence, verbal and non-verbal responses were not effectively used. When familiarized with the different BC strategies, the learners could use them effectively. The findings suggest that the speaking skills of the learners in both the experimental and the control groups increased to a great extent after being familiarized with the BC strategies. This is supported by the study of Toledo & Peter (2010), who claim that BC strategies raise students' engagement because it gives them a 'greater sense of ownership over their learning.' The fact that students were able to draw connections between texts and their own lives proved to be effective to incorporate BC strategies during their conversations. It also goes with the study of Fox Tree (2016), using sounds like "mhm," "uh huh," "wow," "really," "okay," "yeah," which show that the addressee has understood the speaker and that they do not want to take a full turn. Moreover, the findings also showed that the experimental group had improved significantly in their speaking skills than students in the control group.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the use of backchanneling strategies enhances the speaking skills of Freshman learners in various ways. Based on the learners' views, it can be interpreted that the use of the strategies kept them engaged and active in the conversations. This view is shared with the study of Knight (2009) which claims that backchanneling is the process through which a listener sends a signal to a speaker indicating their interest, attention, and comprehension. It also shows that the listener and speaker are engaged (Li et al., 2010).

The learners in the findings supported the view that when they used the BC strategies, it did not seem to be tedious. In fact, it made them continue the conversations smoothly, which goes with the study, which states that selecting the right BC is important to convey and receive the message clearly (Li et al., 2010). They also stated that the listener's approving nod or sound boosted their confidence level to carry on the conversation. This is supported in the study by Yazdfazeli et al. (2015) that backchannel can, in essence, offer "assessments" that indicate a listener's comprehension and interest as well as "continuers" that urge and prod the speaker to continue. The learners emphasized the importance of understanding the BC strategies to convey the message. This is supported in the study by Li et al. (2010), who argue that selecting the correct BC for the message they want to convey is essential because different languages have different forms and meanings for their BCs. BC planning is similar to that of other utterance planning in this regard.

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations. The study was carried out among freshman learners (Level 2) at only one university in Saudi Arabia (King Khalid University). Only (N=47) Level 2 (second year-first semester, 2023) students from that university participated in the study. The findings and the results might have been different if the study had been conducted with more freshman learners from different universities.

Conclusion and Implication

Verbal and non-verbal communication skills are the essence of any interaction between the speaker and the listener. When a speaker conveys a message, it becomes the listener's responsibility to either receive and understand the message or ignore the message, failing to comprehend it altogether. Successful conversations start when two or more people feel comfortable talking with each other. The conclusion drawn from this research is that backchannelling serves as a vital mechanism for enhancing mutual understanding, rapport, and information exchange in diverse communication contexts. Its absence can lead to misunderstandings, disengagement, and hinder information flow. Moreover, the adaptability of backchannelling across cultures and its integration into digital mediums underscores its universality and relevance in modern communication. Implications of this research are manifold. Understanding the role and impact of backchannelling can inform communication training programs, emphasizing its importance in effective dialogue, conflict resolution, and relationship building. Additionally, in digital and AI-mediated communication, integrating backchannel cues can enhance the user experience and foster more natural and engaging interactions. Furthermore, considering cultural variations in backchannelling behaviors can aid in intercultural communication and global collaboration efforts. The study highlights the importance of BC strategies in a Listening and Speaking class at the tertiary level to enhance the listening and speaking skills of freshman students. It therefore recommends incorporating the following steps in the class to familiarize the students with the BC strategies.

1. Familiarizing the students with the various types of verbal and non-verbal signals in communication in addition to the cultural context to produce meaningful signals.
2. Familiarizing the students with different situations and contexts.
3. Paying attention to body language when a speaker says something.
4. Maintaining eye contact and staying engaged with the speaker.
5. More role- playing activities should be incorporated in a Listening & Speaking class to practice BC skills effectively.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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