

EXPLICIT BACK-CHANNEL STRATEGY TRAINING AND IMPROVEMENT OF SPEAKING SKILL: CASE OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: This study explores the effect of explicit back-channel strategy training on Iranian EFL language learners' success in speaking skill. Back-channels are turn taking responses uttered by the listeners. Forty homogenous learners (20 male, 20 female) were randomly assigned to four groups (2 experimental, 2 control). They were at intermediate level in terms of general English proficiency based on the results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and pre-test oral Proficiency Interview. After 18 sessions of treatment of back-channels for experimental groups, that were based on the methodological theory of English language teaching suggested by Doff (1990) and Harmer (1991), post- test oral proficiency test was administered for experimental and control groups. The findings of pretest and posttest oral exams revealed that EFL language learners' oral performance (speaking) in experimental groups improved. The result revealed that females employed back-channels more often than males when they were participating in a conversation. The type of back-channel both genders employed the most was short utterances, such as 'yes', and the most used function of back-channel was request for clarification. The results of this thesis will provide language teachers, EFL language learners, researchers, material developers, and readers, useful information about the types and functions of back channels that are needed to develop speaking ability appropriately through explicit teaching.

Keywords: *back channel strategy, communication strategy, explicit training*

INTRODUCTION

Usually we believe that speakers are controlling each conversation and they play an active role, but actually their partners-listeners do not listen to speakers' words passively; on the contrary, they have to digest those words within the context using their cognitive knowledge, and to think about what they must answer next. Thus, we may say in a collaborative conversation, listeners also play a big role Tao & Thompson (1991).

Tao & Thompson (1991) believed that listeners have to show that they are listening, they ask questions about the content of the speaker's talk, and they make contributions that are relevant to the content of the speaker's talk. Eye contact, head nods, smiles, and body alignment all help to tell us whether

or not the recipient has answered our summons and is attending to our message. Among them, Back Channeling (BC) is one of the well-used communication strategies.

Based on Sharifi and Azadmanesh (2012), participants of a conversation give and take back channels as a way of transforming information about the state of communication, for instance to show attention, understanding, misunderstanding, acceptance or non-acceptance, in order to make communication more efficient.

According to Wannarak (1997), the phenomenon of BC was first studied by Fries in 1952. He identified BC as conversational signals of attention to continue discourse. He analyzed a corpus of telephone conversations and recognized them as series of 'listener

response'. About two decades after Fries, Yngve (1970) was the first person who coined the term back channel to describe this phenomenon. As a result of these findings, particular attention was paid to the scientific examination of these back channel responses or short utterances.

According to Petchrat (2009), researchers defined BC variously. For example, Duncan (1972, p.14) defined it as "short expressions, such as uh-huh or mm-hm, uttered by listeners to convey that they are paying attention, and to encourage the speaker to continue". However, Yule (1996) believe that Back Channel refers to those vocalizations in a conversation, short words and phrases such as yeah, no, right, and sure (Yule, 1996). Among these several definitions, the essential shared characteristic of a back channel is that it originates from the person who is playing the role of a listener.

Tao & Thompson (1991) expressed that in all language communities, listeners are expected to provide appropriate back-channeling signals for interlocutors to indicate that they are listening. In face-to-face communications, listeners' back channeling is virtually continuous in verbal, non-verbal, and semi-verbal ways. Without appropriate back channeling, a conversation is likely to break down or simply stop, since the speaker is unsure that the listener is actively attending to and interpreting the discourse.

As a result of reviewing these, we can consider the lack of a study on BC in Iranian EFL classes. Thereby, the researchers try to investigate the effect of employing BC strategy on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill by explicitly teaching them this strategy. The goal is to provide qualitative data for the speaking skill improvement of EFL learners who employed BC strategy. This research also aims at providing quantitative data comparing the use of back channeling with success in speaking skill by male and female learners.

In human communication behavior, back channel responses are pervasive phenomena. Participants of a conversation give and take back channels as a way of transforming information about the state of

communication. The study of back channel is a new investigation of spoken language. Fries (1952) is the first author who has noticed and described some of the communicative behaviors that nowadays we call them "back channels". He analyzed a corpus of telephone conversations and recognized as series of "listener response". Yngve (1970) was the first person who coined the term back channel to describe these tokens. As a result of these findings, particular attention was paid to the scientific examination of these back channel responses or short utterances.

Researchers have identified that there are differences in the frequency, type, usage, and placement of back channels across languages. Tao & Thompson (1991) in their study found that English speakers had a higher frequency of back channel responses than Chinese speakers. White (1997) examines the effects of Japanese versus American culture on the production of back-channel responses. White (1997) finds that fundamental cultural differences between the United States and Japan, regarding politeness and face concerns, are responsible for the differences he finds among the usage and functions of back-channel responses by the members of the two cultures. These differences are not confined to unrelated languages, even in languages with similar cultures and histories, these differences are obvious.

Inversely Li (2006) studied Chinese and Canadian speech and reported that listener made more back channel responses, whether the Chinese talked with another Chinese or with a Canadian. He found that Chinese/ Chinese group exhibited the highest frequency of back channel responses, the Canadian/ Canadian group the lowest, with the two inter-cultural groups in between. Kim (2009) discussed the importance of comparative studies of Korean and Japanese linguistics behavior and examined the usage of back channel responses and pause fillers in these groups. He concluded that while Korean speakers used pause fillers more frequently than back channels, the Japanese speaker used back channels more frequently than pause fillers. He concluded that the role of the listener is more important in Japanese while

the role of the speaker is more emphasized in Korean.

Li et al. (2010) extended his previous studies and examined the types of back channel responses and their relationship with speaker presentation, listener recall, and participants' perceived enjoyment of the inter-cultural conversations. They found a negative correlation between the frequency of back channel responses and enjoyment of the conversation.

According to Sharifi & Azadmanesh (2012) scholars addressed the transfer of back channel behaviors in bilingual speakers within the accommodation theory framework. Accommodation theory offers a sound framework for the study of conversational strategies in interpersonal encounters. Therefore, the balanced bilingual speaker tends to converge with other native speakers of their first language when they are engaged in a friendly conversation.

Heinz (2003) examined the differences of back channel behavior in interactions between monolingual and bilingual Germans. He found significant differences in the frequency and placement of back channel responses among monolingual German speakers and monolingual American English speakers. The author also reported that native Germans, who have become proficient in American English, use more back channel responses and more often in overlapping positions than monolingual Germans do. These results show a contradiction of accommodation theory, but the findings of Li (2006) study provided a support for accommodation theory, which stated that Chinese and Canadian speakers had a tendency to converge their linguistics codes in conversation. Also, Tao & Thompson (1991) earlier had reported that native Chinese who were fluent in English had a tendency to switch codes, using English back channel responses.

Numerous linguistic researchers, such as Mott (1995), have examined the effects of gender on the production of back-channel responses. Forbes and Cordella (1999: 282) define back-channeling in the following way: "...a participant communicates agreement with the speaker without interrupting their

turn. These short utterances reflect appreciation of what is being said."

Bilous (1988: 186) defines back-channel responses as follows: "...brief vocal responses ('uh-huh', 'yes', 'I see', etc.) by the nominal listener, which do not constitute an attempt to take the conversational floor." (p.186) In his study, Bilous (1988) finds that female undergraduate students at Columbia University have a higher frequency of back-channel responses than do male undergraduate students at Columbia University (p.188).

Coates (2003), in summing previous research works states that women are said to be more polite, more cooperative and made use of more back channels in conversation than men. Men, on the other hand, are said to follow strategies of non-cooperative, including interruption and less back channels. Previous studies of gender differences were in disagreement with the claims of Coates (2003). Dixon & Foster (1998) reported that men use more supporting back channel signals than women do when addressing a female audience in South Africa.

Besides the effects of language, culture and gender, different communicative context or different styles of speech had an influence on the back channel behavior. Accordingly Kok & Heylen (2010) compared the listeners' behaviors elicited by procedural and narrative tasks. The results of this study showed that long procedural tasks elicited more responses than the short tasks, due to the cognitive load of the interlocutors. Furthermore, Angles et al. (2000) referred to the influence of the level of formality and asserted that Japanese tokens *hai*, *ee*, and *un* are used in different context, *hai*, and *ee* are used in informal context, while *un* is used with casual speech style.

Therefore, back channel responses are a pervasive feature of conversations and as a listener; we must have the ability to produce back channels timely and appropriately. It has been long assumed that there are some places in the dialog where back channels are welcomed. For example, Ward & Tesukahara (2000) have truly claimed that speakers' cues accounted for about half of the occurrences of back channels, suggesting that back channel

responses are not elicited whenever the listener liked them, but are encouraged by the current speaker. Ward (1996) believed that a low pitch region is an important cue for back channeling production in Japanese.

Accordingly, he suggested a well-made system, which produces a back channel item after a low pitch region of a certain frequency. Ward & Al Bayyari (2007) have also introduced various prosodic features in the speakers' speech signaling the appropriate times of back channeling in Egyptian Arabic, including a pitch upturn at the phrasal end, low flat pitch associated with a lengthened vowel at dis-fluency points, and a sharp pitch downslope.

There are a large number of studies of back channeling focusing on back channels in cross-cultural conversations, in the same cultural context but different situations, in different cultural contexts, genders and channels. We can consider the lack of a study on BC in Iranian EFL classes. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the effect of employing BC strategy on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill by explicitly teaching them this strategy. The goal is to provide qualitative data about the speaking skill improvement of EFL learners who employed BC strategy. This research also aims to provide quantitative data and finding salient differences in back channel behavior and success in speaking skill by male and female learners.

To find answers for the above mentioned problems, the following research questions were posed:

- Q1: Does explicit teaching of back-channel strategy have any significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill?
- Q2: Are there any significant differences between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive explicit teaching of back-channel strategy and employ it?
- Q3: Are there any significant differences in back-channel behavior between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners before and after treatment?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research

questions, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

- H01: Explicit teaching of back channel strategy does not have any significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill.
- H02: There are no significant differences between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive explicit teaching of backchannel strategy and employ it?
- H03: There are no significant differences in back channel behavior between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners before and after treatment.

METHOD

In this study, the researchers selected 40 intermediate EFL learners (20 male, 20 female) from Dar Al- Elm Language Center in Mashhad, Iran. Then both male and female participants were divided into four groups. As a result of this division, the researchers had 2 experimental groups which included 20 learners (10 male, 10 female). And the other participants (10 male, 10 female) were in two control groups.

Before the selection based Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the numbers of participants were 80. All of them took the test which was administered by the institution in order to place them at the stage of the educational program most appropriate to their abilities but 40 proved to be proficient enough to be included in the study. Therefore, researchers were sure of the homogeneity of the participants. As a result, all of the participants who took part in this research were at the same level of proficiency (Intermediate Level).

Since OPT just consists of listening, vocabulary, reading and grammar sections, it was necessary to run interviews to ensure the learners' homogeneity with regard to oral performance. Therefore, all of the students were interviewed to make sure that they were in real homogeneity of speaking skill. The D.L.C supervisor interviewed all of the participants, which was done face to face in ten minutes for each individual. She used the questions which were made by Tavakoli (2011) for intermediate EFL language

learners. The questions had high frequency in everyday conversations, such as family, free time, hobbies, field of study, etc. The evaluation process of students' speaking ability was based on D.L.C guidelines.

Then, with regard to the methodological theory of English language teaching suggested by Doff (1990) and Harmer (1991), back channel strategy was taught according to the following procedures:

In presentation stage students were introduced with clear instruction about the BC strategy that they were going to study, including its meaning, its forms, and its use. Information handouts that contained phrases and samples for the employment of the strategies studied were given to the students. In this phase, based on Richards (1990) and Dornyei and Thurrell (1994), (as cited in Ahmad and Tarannum, 2011), the researchers planned a conversation program around this strategy, and processes that were involved in fluent conversation to teach and employ back channel strategies as a conversational strategies directly and explicitly. Therefore, they tried to foster the students' awareness of conversation and to increase their sensitivity to the underlying processes. In this way, the students are likely to make much faster progress towards becoming relaxed and polished conversationalists.

Practice stage was the next step that students were asked to do some tasks to practice using the strategy either in isolation or in given contexts. First of all, the researchers asked students to watch Farsi movies or listen to their family conversations and transcribe and highlight its back channels. In this way, they became completely aware of this strategy in their native language and casual conversations. Then the researchers created situations for EFL learners of experimental groups to repeatedly listen to audio files and also watch English native language movies to observe and also discover the patterns of back channeling. They also asked the students to transcribe and highlight the back channels as their homework. They also created opportunities for learners in experimental groups to practice both roles: active listening by producing back channels

appropriately, and engaging talk by providing clear opportunities for the listener to back channel. In other words, they let the students that they themselves choose a topic based on their interest for their class discussion and conversations. Most of the speaking tasks which the students undertook were those relevant to every day situation such as introducing oneself to other people, shopping, talking on the phone, talking about last night party, technology, and living abroad. As a result of this part, the participants became relax and could practice and take both roles. In this phase, the students could use the information handouts for reference.

In production stage, the students were required to manage the tasks either through interacting with fellow candidate or through discussion by themselves without any help from the teacher or the handouts. In this stage, the students were encouraged to do their best to use the language as individuals.

As for the participants in the control group, no special material was designed for handling the class and the teachers, who were the researchers themselves, went through the normal routine procedure of teaching the materials available for the course in the institute.

After 18 sessions of treatment (each session one hour) oral proficiency test was administered by another teacher for experimental and control groups. It was in conversational form with fellow candidates in order to elicit language that is more appropriate. According to Hughes (2003), an advantage of having candidates interact with each other is that it should elicit language that is appropriate to exchange between equals. As he adds, it may elicit better performance in as much as the candidates may feel more confident than when dealing with a dominant, seemingly omniscient interviewer. The average time for oral proficiency interview which was administered at the end of the research was about 10 minutes. The teacher used topics which were in relation with textbook materials.

Finally, the researchers recorded all of the conversations and transcribed them in order to achieve her goals. The researchers compared the scores which were obtained

through DLC guidelines for evaluating students in order to find out whether employing back channel strategies have any significant effects on success in speaking skill of language learners or if there is any significant differences between success in speaking skill of male and female EFL intermediate learners when they employ back channel strategies, and whether employing back channel strategies among male and

female language learners are different based on their types, functions, and frequency of use.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the research questions the SPSS software was run to carry out the analyses. Results obtained from the analyses are demonstrated as follows, and the researchers have tried to address research questions and research hypotheses.

Table 1. Group statistics for male control and experimental groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
control	10	71.00	5.676	1.795
experimental	10	80.00	6.782	2.145

Table 2. Independent samples test for male control and experimental groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.000	1.000	-3.218	18	.005	-9.000	2.797	-14.876	-3.124
Equal variances not assumed			-3.218	17.458	.005	-9.000	2.797	-14.889	-3.111

As table 1 and 2 reveal, using an alpha level of .05, an independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate whether male control and experimental groups differed significantly or no. The test was significant, *t* (17.458) = 3.21, *p* = .05. The 95% confidence interval of the difference ranged from -14.889 to -3.111. An examination of the groups means indicate that experimental group (*M* =

80.00, *SD* = 6.782) performed significantly better than did control group (*M* = 71.00, *SD* = 5.676). As the results show, research question number 1 was accepted because training back channel strategy explicitly could improve Iranian male EFL intermediate learners' speaking skill and it had significant effect on their success. And therefore, null hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Table 3. Group statistics for female control and experimental groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
control	10	75.70	7.543	2.385
experimental	10	83.20	7.997	2.529

Table 4. Independent samples test for female control and experimental groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.200	.660	-2.157	18	.045	-7.500	3.476	-14.804	-.196
Equal variances not assumed			-2.157	17.939	.045	-7.500	3.476	-14.805	-.195

As shown in table 3 and 4, the test was significant, $t(17.939) = 2.157, p = 0.045$. The 95% confidence interval of the difference ranged from -14.805 to -.195. An examination of the groups means indicate that experimental group ($M = 83.20, SD = 7.997$) performed significantly better than did control group ($M = 75.70, SD = 7.543$). Because of this, the researchers concluded that there were statistically significant

differences between the two groups. This means that the differences were due to the changes. As result shows, research question number 1 was accepted because training back channel strategy explicitly could improve Iranian female EFL intermediate learners' speaking skill and it had significant effect on their success. And therefore, null hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Table 5. Group statistics among male and female experimental groups (oral proficiency score)

	Score	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Oral proficiency score	male	10	80.000	6.7823	2.1448
	female	10	83.200	7.9972	2.5289

Table 6 Independent samples test among male and female experimental groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.708	.411	-.965	18	.347	-3.2000	3.3160	-10.1666	3.7666
Equal variances not assumed			-.965	17.532	.348	-3.2000	3.3160	-10.1799	3.7799

As shown in table 5 and 6, the test was significant, $t(17.532) = .965, p < .348$. The 95% confidence interval of the difference ranged from -10.1799 to 3.7799. An examination of the groups means indicate that female ($M = 83.200, SD = 7.997$) performed significantly better than did male

($M = 80.000, SD = 6.7823$). Because of this, the researchers concluded that there were statistically significant differences between the two groups. This means that the differences were due to the changes. As result shows, research question number 2 was accepted because training back channel

strategy explicitly could improve Iranian female EFL intermediate learners' speaking skill and it had significant effect on their

success. And therefore, null hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Table 7. Significance of differences among total categories of types of back channels

Type	Male and female	Expected frequency	df	Sig.	χ^2
Short utterances	83	36.4	4	.000	179.154
Sentence completion	3				
Short questions	78				
Brief restatement	8				
Laughing and sighing	10				
<i>Total</i>	<i>182</i>				

As can be seen in Table 7, there were significant differences between total categories of types of back channels used by male and female EFL language learners ($\chi^2=179.154$, Sig= .000, $p < .05$). The table indicated that short utterances and short questions (N= 83, 78) were used more than expected (N= 36.4). The finding revealed that while short utterances and short questions were used more frequently; laughing and sighing, brief restatement and sentence

completion (N= 10, 8, 3) were used with few frequency. Sentence completion was the least used types of back channels by both male and female language learners.

Short utterances > short questions > laughing and sighing > brief restatement > sentence completion. Therefore, based on this aspect of back channel behavior, research question number 3 was accepted. And the third null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 8. Significance of differences among total categories of functions of back channels

category	Male and female	Expected frequency	df	Sig.	χ^2
Continuer	22	39.6	4	.000	93.162
Display understanding the content	5				
Request for clarification	84				
Agreement	34				
Display emotional response	53				
<i>total</i>	<i>198</i>				

According to Table 8, there were significant differences among total categories of functions of back channels used by male and female EFL language learners ($\chi^2=93.162$, Sig= .000, $p < .05$). The table revealed that display understanding the content, continuer, and agreement functions of back channels (N= 5, 22, 34) were used fewer than the expected frequency (N= 39.6). But display emotional response and request for clarification (N= 53, 84) were used more than expected (N= 39.6). In other words, they were used more frequently. While request for clarification (N=84) was used with highest frequency, display understanding the content (N=5) was the least used function of back channels. In this way, research question number 3 was accepted. The null hypothesis 3 was rejected.

CONCLUSION

The present investigation has shown that back channels represent integral part of the English speaking. Back channels are of various types which indicate the listener's attention performing several functions. Focusing on any accessible source of information mentioning back channels such as Petchrat (2009), the researchers have found a few indexes in them profoundly dealing with back channels themselves. Several books mention them only marginally, mostly presenting a definition of back channels, usually categorized in turn-taking system articles, and various authors discussing some issues connected with back channels such as Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994) and Richards and Schmidt (2002). It has been discovered that there is no comprehensive insight on teaching back channels. In other

words, the researchers do not found indexes in books and internet articles in relation to the explicitly teaching back channels which involve directing student's attention toward learning back channel strategy in a highly structured environment. It is teaching that is focused on learning outcomes (improvement in speaking skill).

The present work analyzes the effect of explicit teaching of back channels from various viewpoints. Different aspects have been taken into account during the examination, namely the effect of explicit teaching of back channels on EFL language learners' success in speaking skill, differences between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they employ back channel strategy, and differences in back channel behavior (in term of types, functions and frequency of use) between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners.

Concerning to the teaching of back channels explicitly and its effect on the EFL language learners' success in speaking skill, the analysis of the collected data showed that it had significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' speaking skill and improvement of this ability. This finding is in line with that of Dornyei (1995), Faerch and Kasper (1983). According to Dornyei (1995), making learners more conscious of strategies that already exist in their repertoire could be very helpful for them when they are lack specific vocabulary items. Faerch and Kasper (1986) also stress the need to increase learners' "meta-communicative awareness" concerning strategy use.

With regard to the second aspect of this examination, the results of the analysis of the data indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female experimental groups when they employed back channel strategy. The finding of this study revealed that both male and female participants in experimental groups improved in speaking skill after explicitly treatment of back channel strategy.

The classification of types and functions of back channels in the present work were based on Hopper (1992) (as cited in Petchrat, 2009), Maynard (1986) and Ohira (1994).

Concerning the frequency of types of back channels, the present study showed that the most frequently used back channels were short utterances (Male=37, female=46), followed by short questions (Male=42, female=36), while less frequently used back channels were sentence completion (Male=2, female=1), laughing and sighing (Male=3, female=7), and brief restatement (Male=4, female=4). The investigation showed that there was almost no difference in the choice of types of back channel devices used concerning the gender of the EFL language learners. On the other hand, concerning differences between total categories of back channels types used by male and female EFL language learners, there were significant differences between them.

In the case of back channels functions, the present study indicated that the most frequently used back channels were request for clarification, followed by emotional response, while less frequently used back channels were such as understanding the content, continuer, and agreement. There were no significant differences between male and female in term of frequently used function except for continuer and agreement respectively. Therefore, male EFL language learners used this function of back channel more than females.

Based on the results, it can be stated that back channels mainly serve as request for clarification. Back channels, serving as display emotional response, play an important role in English speaking as well. Back channels as agreement represent the third most frequently used function of all back channels. According to the results, continuer functions of back channels were used fewer than the expected frequency. And finally, display understanding of the content was least used function of back channels. But, in the case of differences among total categories of functions of back channels used by male and female EFL language learners, there were significant differences between them.

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