

A Research on Back Channels in English Conversation by Japanese English Learners

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キーワード

[あいづち] Back channels ・ [発話権] Floor ・ [発話順番] Turn

In this report, some influential researches on back channels are reviewed together with the data adopted from natural English conversations by Japanese English learners of college level. And some suggestions for future English education are proposed.

1. Introduction

Usually we believe that speakers are controlling each conversation and they play an active role, but actually their partners—listeners don't 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. Rost (1990) calls the listener using the word of "interpreter". They have to show that they are listening and acknowledging the speakers' right to the floor (see glossary): they provide prompts for the speaker; they ask elaborative questions about the content of the speaker's talk; and they make contributions that are relevant to the content to 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 channels (see glossary) is one of the well-used techniques in a conversation, such as "umhmm," "yeh," "yerright". When it is not our turn (see glossary) to talk, we may nod or make noises like these. Back channel feedback which encourages the speaker to continue does not take the turn away from the speaker.

There are some linguistic means of not taking the floors when one has the opportunity, or simply of making it clear to the speaker that we are attending to the message. These are usually referred to as back-channel responses. In this study, I am going to investigate what kind of back channels Japanese EFL learners' are applying in a natural English conversation with their Japanese peers in the classroom and how they make use of those expressions to smooth the

conversation. Then some pedagogical suggestions will be made as well.

2. Literature Review

What is back channel

Back channel refers to those vocalizations in a conversation, short words and phrases such as yeah, no, right, sure (Yule, 1996). In all language communities, listeners are expected to provide appropriate back-channeling signals to 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.

How to classify back channels

Coulthard, Montgomery, and Brazil (1981) classify back channel cues as supportive moves. They say that there are three supporting acts: *Acknowledge*, whose typical exponents are *yeah, uhuh, mmm* with falling tones and low key; *Accept*, whose exponents are *yeah, okay, yeah I know, oh I see*, etc.; *Endorse*, examples of which are *yeah that's a point or you're quite right yes*.

Stenstrom (1982), in her discussion of back channeling feedback, distinguishes between follow up and support moves, the latter having the following characteristics :

- ...they are not turns in their own right and thus do not involve speaker-shift
- ...they may be inserted almost anywhere in the ongoing speech
- ...they are often uttered simultaneously with part of the ongoing talk (overlap)
- ...they are mostly uttered fairly low, often with characteristic intonation
- ...they may be accompanied by body-motion
- ...they are replaceable by body-language

Hayashi and Hayashi (1991) distinguished the main channel whose primary function is to maintain and claim the floor, with back channels, whose function is to support and yield the floor.

Characteristics of back channels of Japanese people

Ellis (1991) points out that Japanese are inclined to use more back channels in comparison to Australians and Americans. Maynard (1993) compares back channels used by Japanese and American people and finds that Japanese overwhelmingly use them a lot, and the frequency is much higher than their partners.

According to Coulthard, Montgomery, and Brazil (1981), Japanese participant's back channels are predominantly prompters, whereas the American's tend to be reinforcers. Their conclusion is " the Japanese use prompters to acknowledge that they attending to the message more often than Americans do. It may well be that Americans, on the other hand, use more total back channel signals. Our impressionistic observation is that Americans may use a greater variety of

back channel devices with the feature compared to the Japanese, who avoid using judging expressions.”

3. Present Study

3 · 1 Aim

This study is aiming for finding the way Japanese EFL learners use back channels and how they apply them in a natural English conversation.

3 · 2 Method and Procedure

8 dyads of university students whose major is English literature or English education (including 4 males and 12 females) took part. They had been studying English as a foreign language for 8 years. Each pair is grouped by themselves, i.e. they are friends or quite familiar with each other. 5-minute-conversation of each pair was recorded and transcribed by the author. As for there is no set method for transcription of such data, the examples throughout this research use the transcription convention developed by Ochs, Schegloff, & Thompson(1996) (see appendix 1).

With reference to their transcribed conversations, the author asked participants more detailed questions to have further understanding of their thinking about back channel expressions. In this study, all of the dyads are friends and classmates, and conversation topics suggested by the author, are normal topics such as plans for summer vacation, part time job and lessons they chose together. Each recording was held in a classroom with which they're familiar and in which they can be relaxed.

3・3 Analysis

Here are back channeling expressions and fillers applied by participants in this research :

Table 1. Back Channeling Expressions

Nasal sounds (Countless times)	Sounds and words (14 times)	Words (many times)
Ehhn (enn), ahh, ehen, hunhunhun, hunhun, yeah, yeahyeah, oh, uhun, sou (Japanese), hahaha, sousou (Japanese) wow, haha, heiheihei	Wow beautiful (1), Yeah I think so (2) Yeah ahh I think so too (1) Oh, really, (1) Yeah like kimono (1), Yeah like a seminar (1), No I don't think (1) Ohh I'd love to go there (1) Oh, Why (2) Oh yes (1) Uhun I see, (1) Okayokay I see (1) No I don't think so. (1)	okay, well, yes, soso, so, then, great, why, yeees,

(1) Forms of Japanese EFL learners' back channels

According to the classification of Coulthard, Montgomery, and Brazil (1981), Japanese back channels tended to be acknowledge acts, full of 'uhun, hunhun'. Among these back channels, "uhn, hunnhunn, so" three of them are the most often used in the Japanese language, which are also seen as the most popular supporting words when they speak English in this research. Because of strong influence from their native language, Japanese EFL learners still use Japanese back channels unconsciously when they speak in a foreign language.

In this research it is not difficult to find participants never use "*I think, what I mean is, I don't think I agree with you*" and so on. Japanese' showing acknowledgement always seems to keep the harmony of the conversation. As we all know that in Japanese society '*wa*' is required. Since it is important to try to keep relationships harmonious, Japanese language tends to emphasize expressions that acknowledge after others, to ignore ones that might hurt others, and to avoid denying as much as possible. This can be clearly understood from Table 1.

As for the characteristics of support moves Stenstrom (1982) mentioned, Example 1 shows the detail.

Example 1

S.W. : 16S : yes why why I am going to go to [England
17W :[enn
18S : because I like music
19W :=enn hunhun
20S : I like people

(2) Functions of back channels in this research

a. to acknowledge the speech

Backchannels used in example 1 doesn't take the turn away, and most of them are inserted almost anywhere in the ongoing speech, or even uttered simultaneously with the part of the ongoing talk. But since the recording is only auditory, it is impossible to observe the body motion and body language together with back channel expressions.

Japanese participants in this research obviously made great use of back channeling. But as Coulthard, Montgomery, and Brazil (1981) mentioned (also see Table 1), most of their back channels are *Acknowledge* acts, such as uhun, mmmm, hunhun, and so on. As for the *Accept* and *Endorse* ones, some participants in later interview pointed out that they never learned such expressions before and they are new words to them. And even though some of other participants admit that they've known some expressions, but to be able to use them freely will take a long time and more practice. Furthermore, since back channels are not the focus of the conversation, they have to concentrate on the content and flow of the conversation, so they can't devote time to them consciously.

b. to avoid the embarrassment between turns

Sometimes, back channels are used for avoiding the embarrassment of the silent time between turns, like in example 2 and example 3.

Example 2

S.M 24S : ehnn
25M : enn
26S : ehnn
27M : uhhhh uhhh ((laugh))
28S : what are you going to do in summer vacation
29M : summer vacation this year ↑
30S : ((laugh))

In this example, it seems that neither S nor M couldn't have further discussion about the topic at hand, therefore after several times' back channel exchanges, S suggested another topic by raising a question.

Example 3

N.M: 12N: do you come school every day

13M: yes I have several classes and I go to class so almost every week I have to come
++here

14N: hunhun

15M: hunhun

16N: then have you already finished the teaching practice kyouikujisyu (in Jap)

17M: yes last year

After 13M answered the question, 14N seemed confused, because she maybe thought the question of 12N can give 13M lot more things to say, but 13M answers her question with only one sentence, which in certain degree disappointed 14N, so she has to start a new topic wishing to have more discussion.

4. Pedagogical Implication

According to the result from Table 1, back channels Japanese learners applied in this study are full of “hunhun, yeah” such monotonous nasal sounds. The following are some possible reasons for the explanation.

English as a Foreign Language

Most of the participants claimed that it took a longer time for them to understand the partner's words in English than in Japanese. It is for sure, because the level of English proficiency of the participants is not high enough to let them use English as freely as their native tongue, Japanese. Therefore, apart from the natural nasal sounds, training for some back channel expressions such as “*yeah, I agree with you, exactly like what you said*” can not be separated from foreign language grammatical learning.

Improvement of Textbook Design

Strategies used by English speakers for natural turn-taking have not been the focus of many teaching materials. In other words, there are few materials available at present which teach learners how to use back channels to smooth the conversation, especially when problems are encountered in the process of transmitting information. Nunan (1987) claims that using authentic texts and communicative tasks as part of form-focused activities in communicative language teaching is the best way of teaching. Bringing about a breakthrough in the teaching methods of English in the classroom by applying strategic aspects to oral communication is something to aim for in the near future.

And at the same time, we have to notice that because of the strong influence of the source language (native tongue), it is also necessary to consider the native culture and language and try

to find the suitable translation from Japanese expressions.

Classroom Instruction and Curriculum Development

The lack of teaching material I discussed above may unconsciously result in conventional teaching and enforcement of traditional roles played by teachers and students in the classroom.

Partly due to the dominance of teachers, students are accustomed to the question-answer way of speaking English. They don't even know to use back channels to continue the conversation. Conversation for them is an answer toward teacher's questions. Thus, learners should be encouraged to use mechanisms to smooth or fill gaps in conversation when performing tasks in pair/group work or when talking directly to the teacher.

Heighten Students' Awareness of Target Language

Some participants in this research told the author in their interview that they realized something important for their oral English. And even some of them asked the author for suggestion on how to improve their oral skill in English conversation and also they would like to have a list of back channels as references for future self-study. So from this aspect, by being involved in this kind of academic research, learners can become autonomous and aware of a more suitable way of foreign language study.

5. Future Study

The analysis of back channels presented so far is clearly over simplistic, certainly not exhaustive and omits some other important aspects of the conversation. These following things need to be considered in further research:

First, in some degree the conversation recorded in this research is not completely the same natural conversation. In the interview, some participants said that they felt an obligation to continue the conversation, while in daily life, especially with friends they don't have to find topics purposely instead of keeping silence.

Second, back channels used between only two partners is analyzed here, which should be quite different from the conversation with several participants. So future studies need to be carried out on a wide variety of participants, especially the conversation between native speakers and non-native speakers.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed back channel expressions by Japanese EFL learners in a natural conversation setting, and analyzed the factors which influence their way of communication in a target language and finally indicated future applications for English education. As I stated, back channel expression is one of the most important parts in a conversation, if our students are able

to apply them well, to a certain degree, they will be able to communicate with others more easily and fluently.

Notes

1. Floor: The right to speak
2. Turn: Having control of the floor at any time is called turn. Or it is the opportunity to speak at some point during a conversation.
3. Turn-taking: The change of speaker during conversation.
4. Back channels: Vocal indication of attention, e.g. 'uh-hum', 'hmm' expressions, when someone else is talking.

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Appendix 1 Method of transcription

Referenced from Ochs, Schegloff, & Thompson, 1996, pp461-465

[] indicates overlapping

=shows latching, there is no gap between utterances

+ short pause, ++little longer pause, +++ long pause inside a turn

(3sec) 3seconds between turns

Uppercase type is used for stress: BOY

((laugh)) ((whispered)) indicates nonverbal sounds

(...)uncertainty of accuracy

↑ ↓ show rise and fall of intonation

>turn takings