

The Backchannels on English as a Foreign Language Teaching Classroom Discourse Analysis of Lecturer and Students' Interaction of Borneo University Tarakan

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate; the types of backchannels and why the research participants in this study used backchannels in their classroom interaction. A case study involving a female lecturer and a female selected student met the criteria. The data were gathered from the research participants in the form of observation and interviews. This study revealed that (1) the types of backchannels used by the participants in the classroom interactions were backchannels vocal and backchannels silent. The backchannels vocal consisted of words form, phrases form, sentences form, and sounds identification; meanwhile, the backchannel silent concerned on head nods, the facial expression of the smile, gestural signal, and eyes movement; (2) the reasons why the participants uttered and produced both backchannel vocal and backchannel silent were to show the continuers signal, the statements signal, the social conditions, and the emotional signal.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Classroom Discourse, Backchannels

1. INTRODUCTION

The spoken discourse of English as a Foreign Language Teaching context is crucial to be investigated since lecturers and students actively used a language in their classroom interaction all the time. When a lecturer is speaking, it does not mean students as listeners are passive listeners. However, they are supposed to provide silent feedback, such as head nods, smiles, eyes-glances even oral responses [1]. It sometimes does not stop and disturb the current speaker/lecturer that is being spoken. This phenomenon is called backchannels, commonly occurred in a conversation regardless of language use system and culture [2].

Backchannel is a channel produced by the listener at signaling attention, interest, and understanding to the speaker [3]. It does not disturb, interrupt, and influence the current speaker to stop speaking [4]. Verbal communication produces short vocalization and response and visual behavior, such as gestural signals facial expressions [5].

There are many researchers concerning the backchannels in English as a foreign language and second language (L2) in the conversation context. Indeed, some of the researches that are related to backchannels in the classroom discourse are presented. Ward and Tsukahara (2000) conducted a study about the prosodic features of cue backchannel responses in English and Japanese. They found that backchannel responses in English are *yeah*, *uh-huh*, *hm*, *right*, and *okay*, while *un* and *hai* are backchannel responses in Japanese. Further, they mentioned that the lexical item such as words, phrases, and non-lexical vocalization such as laughter, coughs, and sniffs are categorized as the two characteristics of backchannel responses.

Heinz (2003) analyzed the backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers' conversation found the characteristics of backchannels; verbal and non-verbal backchannels. Short verbal utterances, assessments, sentence completion, brief requests for clarification, restatement, short question and answer, exclamations, and attempted interruptions are included as the verbal backchannels. Lammi (2010) analyzed how

backchanneling and repetition are used in the communicative interaction in English as a lingua franca (ELF). Her research was focused on vocational education, especially a hairdressing program at a Finish Vocational College. She found her informants did not only self-regulate their language and establish a group norm for use but also the interaction that appeared to result from the working environment and the particular professional field of hairdressing.

Sharifi and Azadmanesh (2012) investigated the lexical, grammatical, prosodic, and semantic factors involved in Persian conversations' backchanneling. They found that pseudo-tag questions in the Persian conversations, like English tag questions, are essential lexical cues showing backchanneling time. Besides, the grammatical completion points are more plausible points for occurring non-overlapping backchannels because, at these points, the semantic content is almost complete. Moreover, in 2012, Sharifi and Azadmanesh studied the Persian backchannel responses in formal and informal contexts. It found that the Persian used backchannel responses 'yes' and 'right' to place the formal context or polite verbal communication; meanwhile, the backchannel response 'ok' is used to indicate an informal situation or less polite. Further, they also classified the backchannels into; (1) lexical utterances, such as *yes, right, yeah, excellent, perfect, okay, and really*; (2) short utterances, for examples: *kidding me, 100 percent*; (3) more extended-expression, that is used as repetition, anticipation or completion and short question for clarification; and the last is (4) non-lexical refers to sound such *aha, hmm, ha, ee, and vay*.

Doi (2012) investigated English learners' communication patterns in conversational interaction, explored the communication styles, and studied the essential elements and effective communication strategies in a second language. It showed that backchannels are used by English learners to communicate in English effectively and to confirm and clarify the content of their conversation.

The above researchers investigated and analyzed the backchannels in the conversation backchannels types, such as lexical items or vocalization/ verbal responses and non-lexical or non-verbal responses. It is used to create and establish effective communication [10] and shows politeness and less politeness based on the formal and informal communication context [9].

Backchannels are an essential skill 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 [11], assessments, and continues, respectively [12] produced by the listener's current speaker.

This current study was conducted by investigating the use of backchannels in the classroom discourse that

involved lecturer and student interaction. English speaking was taught and studied as a foreign language to get more information about the types and why lecturers and students used the backchannels.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study focused on an exploratory investigation of the use of backchannels of EFL classroom interaction between lecturer and her students. A case study approach was used to determine the types of backchannels and why they used backchannels in their classroom interaction. In this study, the data were collected from multiple sources; observation and interview.

This study was conducted at the Speaking Course classroom of the English Department of Borneo University Tarakan in North Kalimantan (well-known as Borneo), Indonesia, where English is taught and studied as a foreign language. In conducting both observation and interview, the researcher used the observation and interview guides. The researcher adapted and developed the backchannel types from Pipek (2007) study, namely *backchannel vocal* and *backchannel silent*. Finally, the data were analyzed using content analysis in which its procedures of analyzing the qualitative data presented by Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtli (2010).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the researcher presented the two points of findings; the types and the reasons why the lecturer and the student in this study used backchannels in their classroom interaction.

The Types of Backchannels Used by the Lecturer and the Students in their Classroom Interaction

The research participants in this study produced similar backchannels; backchannels vocal and backchannels silent. To make a clear description of the findings, the researcher presented them in the following section.

Backchannels Vocal

The backchannels vocal in this study consisted of word form, phrases form, sentence form, and sound identification.

a. Words Form

Backchannel vocal of word form refers to the backchannel of vocalization or verbal expression in the lexical word form or mono-syllable utterances produced by the current speaker. The followings were the extracts of conversation that indicate backchannel vocal of words forms uttered by the English lecturer as follows:

Student: Correlation between time management, stress, and then doing the task at night. And then the teacher

always gives the task without explanation. Maybe, I would like to try...

Lecturer: ***Ok...ok... Yes. Come on!***

Student: *The first is, the teacher or lecturer always gives the task so much, and then it is not just one teacher; all of the teachers give more than one task.*

The context of the extract conversation above had occurred when the lecturer asked the student to keep going at giving her argument. She pleased her student by saying, “ok..ok... yes, come on!” during her student is delivering the argument. In this context, the bold words above are categorized backchannel.

Next, other backchannels vocal of words form produced by the lecturer, where she helped her students to continue the argument by correcting it, as shown below:

Student: *It could be or maybe. However, her mom or her parents said that she is not doing anything. However, she was doing the task and did not do anything, just doing the task as usual like the.. like the night before, she just doing the task, it is just usual because she is in, what is that... Ehm.... Kedokteran*

Lecturer: **Doctor.**

Student: **Yes, Doctor Faculty.**

Lecturer: *Faculty of medicines.*

The bold word “**doctor**” above that the English lecturer utters is a word functioning backchannel response to correct or translate the student’s statement in English. The student directly responded to her lecturer’s correction by saying, “**yes**,” indicating the backchannel vocal of words form.

Moreover, the following is the data related to backchannels vocal of words form, where the selected student missed at pronouncing the sentence “the science material.” It makes the English lecturer corrected it. Then the selected student aware and said, “**yes**.” Here, the word “**yes**” uttered by the selected student is a word functioning as a backchannel response concerning the English lecturer’s correction.

Lecturer: *So, when we are having sex, we have a problem with HIV/AIDS?*

Student: *Yes, because it is one way that we are affected.*

Lecturer: *Only one?*

Student: ***No... no.. no...** (Nodding head/ right and left sides)... It is one of the... what it is? The way to affected HIV Virus.*

Lecturer: ***Ok.** (Nodding head/up to down). So, when we talk about HIV in Tarakan, do you know that 304*

people are affected by HIV in Tarakan, or you know from me?

Student: ***Yes... yeah.. It is from you, Miss.***

Lecturer: *So, you never know before?*

The words “Yes,” “Ok,” and “No” the selected students pronounce are the words functioning as a backchannel response. Based on the conversation context between the English lecturer and the students, they keep their communication without disturbing each other.

b. Phrases Form

The backchannel vocal of phrases form is double lexical items or repeated two or more short utterances of backchannels. It can be seen from the following extract, where the lecturer asked her students to speak loudly in order to give their opinion that can be seen below:

Lecturer: *Okay. Andre, ya. Ok. Please, Andre, time is yours. What do you know about homework is harmful.*

Student: *I have many... aaa*

Lecturer: **Louder, please!**

Student: ***Ok, Mom,** I have many notes about the homework advantages. Homework makes the students learn a lot; first.*

Lecturer: **Yeah, very good.**

Student: *Make the students remind again of the material from the teacher or lecturer, and homework will make students have time management because of task from the teacher or lecture in the quick deadline.*

The phrase “Louder please!” is uttered when the student speaks and his voice is not clear enough to listen. The phrase “yeah, very good” is also uttered to appreciate the student’s opinion who spoke loudly. These phrases are said without stopping the student from speaking. Indeed, The bold phrases “louder please” and “Yeah, very good” above that the English lecturer utters are phrases functioning as a backchannel response.

Besides, the selected student responded to her lecturer’s question where her response was identified as backchannel as shown bellows:

Student: *So, I think the curriculum must be consistent and not always change when the ministry changes.*

Lecturer: *So you think the curriculum is also influenced, Why?*

Student: ***Yes, of course.** Because one of the curricula sets about anything for the students.*

The phrase “Yes, of course” that is simultaneously uttered by the selected student is a phrase functioning as a backchannel response concerning the English lecturer’s question.

c. Sentences Form

The backchannel vocal of sentences form refers to the utterance used to support the idea and indicated the sentence form's agreement and clarification. The finding can be seen:

Student: That is all the vision and mission from the Prabowo-Hatta. We are from the success team. Thank you.

*Lecturer: **That is all?***

Student: Yes. That is all my vision and mission. Thank you.

The sentence “**That is all?**” is categorized as a vocal backchannel of sentence form produced by the lecturer spontaneously at asking or responding to the student's ending statement in the form of a question.

Besides, the lecturer simultaneously corrected the student's utterance without stopping her from speaking when words order found on the student's speaking;

Student: The people who still low did not get the scholarship because the other person who still can pay also they have the scholarship, the people poor will get the scholarship because the poor people can get the scholarship.

*Lecturer: **The poor people get the scholarship.***

Student: Yes. The poor people get the scholarship.

The lecturer's correction above indicated a backchannels vocal of sentence form since it did not disturb the student's speaking.

Finally, the selected student produced the backchannel vocal of sentence form in order to respond to her lecturer's question concerning her ending speech, as shown:

Lecturer: Additional opinion, please! Enough?

*Student: **It is enough.***

Lecturer: The most comfortable opinion has been said, and it is similar, right?

The sentence “**It is enough**” uttered by the student is a sentence functioning as a backchannel response concerning the English lecturer's question. The selected student simultaneously utters it during the communication with her lecturer.

d. Sounds Identification

The backchannel vocal of sound identification is a backchannel that concerns sounds produced by the speakers. It occurs in the lecturer's and students' interaction in their classroom. This sound is not disturbed their speaking during the communication. It can be seen below:

Lecturer: Dangerous virus? Ok. Next, any other? Any idea about HIV/AIDS? Ok. Let's.. What is wrong with you? It is so different. It is not you today.

Student: Yes.

*Lecturer: **Ah...** Ok. Let me show one picture.*

*Student: **Yeah.** Oh No.*

*Lecturer: **Hahaha,** Ok, I will see the second picture.*

The English lecturer produces the sound “**Ah**” when the students answer and respond to the lecturer's statement. Then, the lecturer also laughs since her students' response makes her laughing. In this context, the sound identification “**Ah**” and the laughing “**hahaha**” can be categorized backchannel since they do not stop the communicant (lecturer and student) from keeping speaking.

A similar sound identification of backchannel was also identified on the selected student's statement. It can be seen below:

Lecturer: Ok. What about you, T (name of student)? What do you have?

*Student: **Aaa...** tested negative for HIV tested infected.*

Lecturer: Ok, what is your opinion?

The sound “**Aaa**” is a reaction sound of the student's speaking in which it did not disturb the English lecturer's statement. In this context, the selected student seems to think before giving her argument.

Another sound of backchannels can also be presented below:

Lecturer: Ok. Because it is not easy to check this virus, yeah... we cannot yet quickly someone to check HIV, yeah. So, what do you think about your statement?

*Student: **Hmm.** So we have to aware of this virus.*

Lecturer: Ok.

The sound “**Hmm**” produced by the selected student is a sound functioning backchannel response concerning the English lecturer's question. It seems that the student thinks before she answers the question.

Backchannels Silent

The backchannel silence is non-verbal or non-speech utterances produced by the speakers in the speech situation. It found that the lecturer and the students have similarly produced the backchannels silent. They are head nods, a facial expression of a smile, gestural signal, and eye movement.

The Reasons Why the Lecturer and the Student Used Backchannels in Their Classroom Interaction

To know the reasons why the lecturer and the student used and produced both backchannels vocal and silent, the data were gained from two sources: their talks in observation and the interview transcript results. Their

reasons were classified into four; to show the continuer signal, the statement signal, the social condition, and the emotional signal.

To Show the Continuer Signal

The backchannel has a function as the continuer signal; it means to keep the floor open for the current speaker to continue speaking. The English lecturer produced the backchannel vocal of word form “**next**” to ask students to continue her statement. Indeed, the selected student continued her argument. The student also produced the backchannel in order to keep the communication useful. The word “*never*” is a backchannel response uttered by the student. They were uttered to respond to the English lecturer’s statement since the lecturer wanted her student to explain the topic discussed clearly.

To Show the Statement Signal

Another function of the backchannel is the statements signal. It concerns the current speaker’s utterances regarding the information or the message received. It can be an acknowledgment, agreement, disagreement, clarification, etc. The following are the conversation extracts indicating why the English lecturer and the student acted the backchannel to show the statement signal.

The phrase “Yes, of course” that the selected student utters the phrase functioning as a backchannel response concerning the English lecturer’s question and states her agreement. The phrase “**The since material**” that the lecturer uttered is a phrase functioning as a backchannel response. It is used to clarify or to correct the student’s error pronunciation.

To Show the Social Condition

The backchannel has a function to show the social condition signal. It deals with the participants’ way of speaking with their communicant by considering their culture and habit. Here, the student responded to her lecturer’s statement using a suitable response since she knew that she was younger than her lecturer. The word “yes” that the student uttered is a word of backchannel response that showed politeness. This word is identified as a polite response since the student did not use slang language to her lecturer.

Besides, the backchannels are used to respond to the lecturer’s appreciation of her student. It occurred when the student finished giving the argument. The lecturer appreciated the student, and the student responded by saying, “thank you.” This condition created good interaction, attitude, and a good habit for the student.

Moreover, when the lecturer is speaking, the student’s eyes were focused on the English lecturer. On the contrary, when the student delivered the statement, the English lecturer’s eyes were also concerned with the

selected student. It means that they were appreciated each other when speaking.

A similar opinion was also uttered by the student at using eye contact in speaking. She was severe to see her lecturer’s speaking in order to get the point of understanding.

To Show the Emotional Signal

The emotional signal refers to the participants’ signal or communication (speaker and hearer) without using verbal language. However, it uses emotional expression or body language to express the messages or the needs. The backchannel silence of facial expression produced by the English lecturer and the selected student showed their emotional signal. It means that when they were speaking, they smiled and felt happy.

The English lecturer’s extracts and the selected student’s interview showed that the Speaking Course was engaging designed by the English lecturer that created a good atmosphere. Indeed, the emotions of the participants of the classroom were joyful.

4. CONCLUSION

The current research findings reported the types and reasons why the lecturer and student-produced the backchannels in their classroom interaction at Borneo University Tarakan. The types of backchannels used by the participants in the classroom interactions were backchannel vocal and backchannel silent. The backchannel vocal consisted of words form; phrases form, sentences form and sounds identification. Then, the backchannel was silent about head nods, facial expressions of a smile, gestural signal, and eye movement. The participants uttered and produced both backchannel vocal and backchannel silence to show the continuers signal, the statements signal, the social conditions, and the emotional signal.

By understanding the existence of backchannels in English as a Foreign Language teaching, it was expected that this research could give some contributions, particularly for the educational context. For lecturers, backchannels can create the students’ initiation in speaking in their classroom interaction to keep the communication and interaction actively, meaningfully, and effectively. The students were suggested to understand the backchannels in the English classroom interaction. As a result, the communication and interaction could be understood among the participants. This study also recommended future researcher(s) investigate and analyze backchannels in the English for Special Purpose (ESP) classroom interaction.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Fitriawati contributed to data collection, data analysis, and writing the article draft. Bibit Suharmady contributed to article review, proofreading, and editing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the English Education Department of Universitas Borneo Tarakan. The researcher would like to thank the lecturer and the students who participated in this research

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