



Listening to Real-World English, Part 3: Backchanneling

by [Linlin Wang](#), [Mark R. Emerick](#), and [Elvis Wagner](#)

This article is the third in a three-part series on developing language learners' ability to listen to real-world spoken English. The [first article](#) discussed connected speech, the [second article](#) discussed filled pauses, and both provided lesson plans.

The previous two articles in this series on helping second language (L2) listeners comprehend real-world spoken English focused on teaching learners how to comprehend connected speech and hesitation phenomena in the aural input. But an active listener has to do more than just process the input; an engaged listener must also indicate that he or she is listening to the speaker. This is usually accomplished through the use of backchannels, such as *uh huh*, *mhmm*, *okay*, and *yeah*, which are uttered by the listener with no intent to “take over the turn” (Carter & McCarthy, 1997, p. 12). Advanced listeners backchannel automatically and unconsciously. Backchannels have many functions, including acknowledging the speaker's prior talk, displaying interest or understanding in the talk, or even inviting the speaker to continue talking. Listener backchanneling is so pervasive in spoken conversations that a lack of backchanneling can be perceived by the speaker as indicating the listener is not interested, not paying attention, or even being rude (Truong, Poppe, & Heylen, 2010).

Backchannels are ubiquitous in virtually all conversational English, yet many L2 listeners are unaware of them or of their importance. By purposefully exposing L2 listeners to backchannels and by explicitly drawing 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.

Rationale

In real-life interactions, people use backchannels to show interest, understanding, and a willingness to have the speaker continue talking. Therefore, this 45- to 60-minute lesson is designed to develop English as a second language learners' awareness of the use of backchannels as a necessary part of interactive conversations. One challenge that backchannels present to L2 learners is that some learners will expect the other speaker to take over the turn once they hear a verbal backchannel. At the other extreme, the conversation can be awkward if one of the participants is listening to his or her partner but makes no sound at all. By exposing students to a

video of an authentic, interactive conversation and asking them to pay explicit attention to the content and function of backchanneling, you are making students more aware of how backchannels are utilized to make conversation natural and fluent, with fewer awkward moments.

The use of backchannels varies by culture. In some cultures, it is considered polite to gaze at the speaker and say no words. Asking students to compare the use of backchannels in the video with their use in students' first-language cultures can make the knowledge learned in the classroom salient, meaningful, and interesting because it is closely related to students' lives and experiences.

Comprehensible input, pushed output, and noticing are involved throughout this lesson, and they are considered ingredients of optimal L2 development (Ortega, 2014). In this lesson, input flooding is provided through multiple pathways, including videos, explicit instructions, and peer production. The continuous and coherent exposure to backchannels is useful in eliciting learners' noticing of the timing and content of backchannels. Students also produce output throughout the lesson, especially in the interview that focuses mainly on producing backchannel feedback in interactive conversations. Learners pay attention to both the meaning that their backchannels convey and the form and appropriateness of their output. By doing so, learners' ability to both comprehend and use backchannel feedback is enhanced.

Lesson 3: Understanding Backchannels

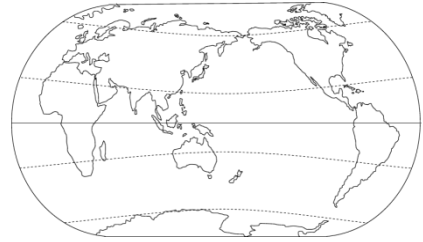
Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Printed world map• Videotext: “Advanced English Conversation About Travel [The Fearless Fluency Club]” (2:02 to 3:56)• Appendix: Clean Transcript
Audience: WIDA level 2 and 3; CEFR A2 and B1
Objective: Students will be able to identify backchanneling in real-world speech.
Outcome: Students will <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss reverse culture shock,• watch a video text (to identify backchanneling strategies and answer and create comprehension questions based on the videotext),• compare use of backchanneling in different cultures, and• engage in an interview role-play to notice and assess use of backchanneling.
Duration: 45 minutes–1 hour

Procedure

Pre-Viewing Activity

1. Print out a world map and put it up on the wall.
2. Students mark their home countries using markers and briefly introduce their home countries to the rest of the class.

3. Lead a whole-class discussion about students' experiences of culture shock in the United States, tapping into learners' background/contextual knowledge.
4. Introduce the class topic "reverse culture shock" and ask students to predict what it means.



While-Viewing Activity

1. Illustrate that students will be watching a short video (from 2:02 to 3:56) about reverse culture shock between Vanessa and Sherice. This video is from the YouTube channel [Speak English With Vanessa](#), which is a great resource for authentic conversations between two speakers. In this video, the two female speakers talk about reverse culture shock, with optional scaffolding subtitles provided to make the text accessible to students with lower proficiency levels. Students can take notes while watching the video, and will answer the following questions after viewing, focusing on overall comprehension:
 - What is reverse culture shock? How is it the same as or different from your prediction?
 - Have you experienced any reverse culture shock?
2. Depending on students' proficiency levels, students can share their ideas in groups first and with the rest of the class, or directly share them individually with the rest of the class.

Postviewing Activity

1. Students watch the video again, with the following comprehension questions in mind:
 - What makes reverse culture shock especially difficult compared to traditional culture shock?
 - How did Sherice cope with her culture shock when she moved to a foreign country?
 - Which country have both Vanessa and Sherice been to?
2. Have students come up with one additional comprehension question based on the video for their peers after answering these questions.
3. After sharing the answers of the three questions in a whole-class discussion, students read and answer each other's questions either as a relay or as a rapid-response game.
 - a. *Relay*: One volunteer asks his or her original question to one student he or she points to. This second student needs to answer that question, read his or her own question, and then point to another student to answer, etc.
 - b. *Rapid Response*: After a volunteer asks his or her question, the student who raises his or her hand the fastest can answer it and then asks his or her question to the rest of the class, etc. Every student needs to ask and answer one question only (Once the student has answered a question, he or she should no longer raise his or her hand). The last student's question will be answered by the original volunteer.

Focus on How to Maintain a Conversation

1. Students view the video one more time, focusing specifically on the verbal and nonverbal strategies the speakers use to maintain an effective conversation. Students should take notes using the following graphic organizer (the "backchanneling table"). Instruct them to

pay special attention to the types, functions, and cultural norms of backchannels, without yet referring to backchanneling specifically.

The strategy used in the video	The function of the strategy	How about in your culture?

2. In pairs or groups, students discuss their observations using their notes. They are expected to first identify both the verbal and nonverbal strategies, explain what information these strategies convey to the speaker, or the functions of these strategies, and then compare and contrast these strategies used in an American English context with their use in the students' first-language cultures.
3. Make the expectations clear before discussion and circulate and facilitate students' discussion. Also, model the communicative strategies and provide hints for students to explore the issue in more depth.

Whole-Class Discussion

1. Lead a whole-class discussion of what students have found. Make a big backchanneling table on the board, still without having mentioned backchanneling.
2. Students volunteer their responses, and you fill in the table.
3. Then, explain that verbal backchannels (e.g., *yeah*, *mm*, and *okay*) and nonverbal backchannels (e.g., nodding and smiling) are produced by the listener to indicate his or her understanding of and interest in what the speaker is talking about, with no intent to take over the turn.

Transcript Discussion

1. Hand out a clean transcript (Appendix) of the video without backchannels and ask students to watch the video for the last time and note down all of the verbal and nonverbal backchannels on the transcript.
2. Students then work in groups of three to compare and contrast their answers, discuss whether they think these backchannels are used properly, and suggest instances in which they think the speakers should have used more backchannels. Depending on the students' proficiency, additional viewings of the video may be needed.

Rotating Interview

Students then work in the same groups of three and complete a rotating interview. Students could ask for each other's experiences or opinions about culture shock, different cultural norms, and their favorite cultures. Depending on students' proficiency levels, some interview questions may have to be provided for students. Two students first perform the interview with the third student taking notes about the types and appropriateness of the interviewer's use of backchannels. Then, as an awareness-raising activity, the interviewer assesses his or her own performance, and the other two group members provide their comments. Students will then change roles and do another interview.

Wrap-Up

Ask students to reflect on what they have learned or what they consider the most useful aspect of the lesson, and also urge students to “eavesdrop” on some conversations outside the classroom, focusing on how the listeners backchannel.

Conclusion

These lessons are not asking students to produce connected speech, filled pauses, or backchannels in their own speech. Instead, these lessons are serving as consciousness-raising activities (Ellis, 2002). This consciousness-raising serves a number of functions. By hearing and seeing just how common these phenomena are in real-world spoken English, the learners recognize what they sound like, which promotes their ability to process and comprehend them. The consciousness-raising also helps learners notice and attend to these features in subsequent spoken input that they are exposed to. It should also assist learners in realizing that these phenomena are natural and necessary components of spoken language and not something to be avoided in their own speech. Ultimately, the longer term goal of these lessons is for this consciousness-raising to lead learners to eventually incorporate these phenomena into their own spoken language.

References

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