

Silent Listeners: Investigating Iranian EFL Learners' Awareness and Use of Backchanneling in English Conversation

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Abstract: Native speakers use various brief verbal or nonverbal responses to signal attention, understanding, and involvement in spoken interactions. Known as “backchanneling”, such responses are conspicuously absent in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners’ conversations even though they are crucial in maintaining conversational coherence and rapport. This study looks into Iranian EFL learners’ awareness of backchanneling and the extent to which they employ such signals in English conversation. Twenty-seven undergraduate English major students participated in two audio-recorded peer discussions separated by a backchannelling-focused consciousness raising (CR) task. The conversation analysis performed on the collected data revealed that learners began to use backchannelling devices more frequently in the post-consciousness raising peer discussions. The findings suggest that most – even highly advanced – EFL learners lack awareness of interactional features present in native speaker conversations and that pedagogical intervention in the form of explicit instruction and modeling of backchanneling is needed to improve learners’ interactional and pragmatic competence. In the end, some pedagogical implications are discussed in relation to communicative classroom practices that can promote active listening and more natural conversational engagement.

Keywords: Backchanneling, EFL Learners, Interactional Competence, Iranian Context, Spoken Communication

Introduction

Backchanneling devices are the brief verbal cues (e.g., uh-huh, yeah, right) and nonverbal signals (e.g., nods, gaze) used by listeners to show attention, comprehension, and engagement (Sadeghi et al., 2023). As a universal feature of discourse (Goffman, 1974), such devices emerged in the past few decades as an important part of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners’ pragmatic and/or interactional competence (Lakew, 2025). Appropriate deployment of backchanneling devices in conversations can oil the wheels of conversation, keep the flow of interactions, and prevent potential breakdowns in rapport (Nebieridze, 2025). Cross-cultural studies have revealed that native speakers of different languages show different backchanneling behaviors. For example, Japanese listeners’ backchannel up to three times more frequently than American listeners, and Chinese and Finnish speakers favor silence as a mark of respect (White, 1989). In EFL contexts, mismatches between the backchanneling conventions of learners’ mother tongue and the newly learned second language (L2) might render them disengaged or uncooperative, even when their grammar is flawless.

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Despite this growing recognition, a quick survey of English courses in ESL/EFL settings reveals that instruction in backchanneling is almost non-existent even in communicative syllabi (Vu & Tran, 2021). Iranian EFL learners, in particular, like many Asian learners, tend to transfer mother tongue listening norms, which privilege silent attentiveness, into English, and this often results in monologic and one-way peer talk devoid of listener support. Even advanced conversation courses focus primarily on turn-taking and propositional content rather than active listenership, resulting in conversations that native speakers perceive as abrupt or impersonal (Taghavi & Aladini, 2018). Despite this knowledge, few studies have examined how remedial action in the form of, say, consciousness-raising (CR) intervention can address this issue and help L2 learners incorporate the backchanneling conventions of the target language in their conversations.

The present study, therefore, attempts to address this gap by examining Iranian EFL learners' awareness and use of backchanneling during English conversation. Specifically, the study investigates (1) how much learners know about the forms and functions of English backchannels after a backchanneling-focused CR task, and (2) how this awareness is reflected in their subsequent conversational behavior. In this study, *awareness* refers to learners' metapragmatic understanding of backchanneling, operationalized through guided noticing activities during the CR task, learner comments and observations collected during whole-class discussions, and their ability to identify backchannels in model input. The research therefore asks two main questions: (a) To what extent are Iranian EFL learners aware of the forms, functions, and conversational roles of English backchannels? (b) How, if at all, is this awareness displayed in their conversational performance during peer discussions?

Literature Review

Backchanneling in Spoken Interaction

Backchanneling is an integral part of face-to-face communication. It signals to speakers that what they say is being understood and thus maintains the flow and cohesion of talk. Yngve (1970) was probably the first researcher who used the term to describe the short responses such as *uh-huh*, *yeah*, *right*, *mhm*, or *I see* that listeners produce while the speaker holds the floor. Such tokens show sustained attention and listener engagement. The concept was later expanded by discourse analysis and conversation analysis research, which demonstrated that backchannels play an important role in co-construction of discourse. A particularly illuminating study was Duncan (1974) who identified several cues that elicit backchannels. These backchanneling inviting cues include intonation, pausing, and syntactic completion points, suggesting that speakers *expect* listener feedback at specific moments.

Backchanneling can be used to show a range of interactional functions including agreement, understanding, surprise, empathy, and eagerness to keep listening to the speaker (Paierl et al., 2025). In a comparative study of Japanese and American English conversations, Clancy et al. (1996) revealed that backchannels vary not only in frequency but also in their pragmatic force. More specifically, while English backchannels tend to be more frequent at narrative junctures, Japanese backchannels are deployed to harmonize and maintain relational alignment. In another illuminating study, Maynard (1997) showed that backchannels are deeply tied to cultural norms of

participation and engagement. Japanese interlocutors, for instance, provide a greater number of listener responses than American English speakers in identical conversational tasks.

Backchanneling can be verbal, nonverbal, and paralinguistic. Verbal backchanneling includes tokens like *yeah, I see, right, or really?*. Paralinguistic ones include sounds such as *mhm* or *uh-huh*, and nonverbal backchannels include nods, eye gaze shifts, head tilting, or facial displays. Years of research in conversation and discourse has revealed that backchanneling is not a peripheral feature of speaker interactions. They are rather part and parcel of the collaborative multichannel system that supports natural dialogue, where listeners co-produce meaning through gaze, gesture, and alignment behaviors (Bavelas et al. 2000).

A key aspect of backchanneling and its appropriateness is timing. Goodwin (1986) and Ford and Thompson (1996) demonstrated that backchannels tend to occur at transition relevance places, where the structure of the turn makes a brief listener response acceptable. Inappropriate or ill-timed backchannels that occur too early, too late, or at structurally inappropriate positions may disrupt the speaker or lead to miscommunication. There is also evidence that there are cross-cultural variations in backchanneling norms. For instance, Cutrone (2010) showed that Japanese EFL learners underuse English backchannels and tend to rely on Japanese equivalents, which sometimes appear unnatural or overly frequent to English native speakers. Studies carried out on other languages, such as Swedish, Arabic, Spanish, and Mandarin, have also shown that cultural norms can greatly impact how often and how enthusiastically listeners should signal engagement.

Taken together, the existing research demonstrates that backchanneling is not optional; it is a structured, culturally shaped component of listener behavior central to the co-construction of meaning in conversation. However, despite its importance, many second-language speakers struggle with the frequency, form, and timing of backchannels, suggesting a need to examine how these skills develop and how they can be taught.

Backchanneling as Part of Pragmatic and Interactional Competence

Backchanneling is increasingly discussed within broader frameworks of pragmatic competence and interactional competence in SLA (Qi & Chen, 2025). According to Kasper and Rose (2002), pragmatic competence constitutes the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts and to interpret the intentions of interlocutors. To fully achieve this aim, learners need to use backchanneling appropriately because it enables them to assess when and how to display understanding, involvement, or stance. To illustrate, too strong (e.g., *Wow!* when the speaker expects quiet acknowledgement) or too weak (e.g., silence when response is expected) backchanneling tokens may create pragmatic tension or misunderstanding in conversation.

In a separate strand of research, backchanneling tokens are categorized as part of interactional competence, which goes beyond individual skills to include the moment-by-moment co-construction of talk. Interactional competence is the ability to co-construct turns, activities, and participation frameworks through linguistic and non-linguistic resources (see Young, 2011 for a comprehensive overview). In this light, learners can use backchanneling devices to “display” their participation and orient to the structure of the ongoing activity. Similarly, Hall et al. (2011) argue that interactional competence is distributed across participants and activities. Backchannels, therefore, are signs that listeners are aligning with the speaker’s trajectory and actively participating in meaning-making.

Another important point worth mentioning is that backchanneling integrates a wide range of modalities including verbal tokens, prosody, gaze, and gesture. This is illustrated in Goodwin (2000), who emphasized the embodied nature of interaction. Given that successful backchanneling requires attention to prosodic contours (e.g., rising vs. falling intonation), speaker cues, and non-verbal signals, many L2 learners, unfortunately, lack the necessary multimodal cues, which results in their limited ability to recognize appropriate entry points for listener feedback.

Pedagogically speaking, instruction in pragmatic and interactional skills, including backchanneling, has historically been overshadowed by grammar, vocabulary, and accuracy-focused instruction. The emergence of communicative language teaching approaches raised awareness about the importance of authentic interaction (Li & Xu, 2025), but many classrooms still fall short of explicitly addressing listener behavior. There is ample evidence today that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop through exposure alone (Taguchi, 2009), and that learners benefit from explicit instruction, modeling, and opportunities for practice. Studies on pragmatic instruction, such as Ishihara and Cohen (2010), provide evidence that explicit training enhances learners' ability to use L2 pragmatics more appropriately. Backchanneling, therefore, should be seen not merely as a conversational "extra," but as a central component of interactional competence that requires awareness, exposure, and guided practice.

EFL Learners' Use of Backchanneling

A quick survey of the literature shows that there is relatively limited research on EFL learners' backchanneling compared to other pragmatic features, and the few available studies consistently report underuse, delayed use, or culturally transferred use of backchannels in L2 interactions. Cutrone (2010) is one of the most cited studies in this domain, examining Japanese learners of English. He found that learners produced fewer backchannels than native speakers, often mistimed their responses, and relied on Japanese listener signals even when speaking English. These transferred patterns sometimes created pragmatic misunderstandings or led native speakers to perceive the learners as unresponsive or impolite. Similarly, Ha et al. (2018) investigated Vietnamese learners of English and showed that they used backchannels significantly less frequently than native speakers, which reduced the perceived naturalness and reciprocal flow of their conversations. The study showed that learners often avoided affective or stance-indexed responses such as *really?*, *exactly*, or *oh wow* and tended to employ a limited range of backchannel types. Studies in European contexts have reported similar issues. For example, Aijmer (1996) examined Swedish learners of English and found that they used fewer acknowledgment tokens and had difficulty employing the full pragmatic range of English backchannels. Similarly, research on Spanish learners (e.g., Romero-Trillo, 2002) showed that their conversational behavior included reduced backchannel frequency and limited use of multifunctional items such as *yeah*, *right*, or *okay*.

A theme that keeps emerging in these studies is that EFL learners rarely receive explicit instruction in English backchanneling conventions, and, as a result, they tend to rely on L1 norms, which may not transfer smoothly to their L2 performance. Also, learners are often too much preoccupied with producing their own turns, and give minimal cognitive space to monitor and respond to the speaker in real time. There is also evidence from some studies that learners may not fully understand the communicative functions of backchannels, especially those that do more than simply mark attention, such as expressing sympathy, encouragement, or evaluation (Zellers, 2021).

While the above studies offer important insights, research on backchanneling in EFL contexts remains limited and is dominated by Japanese, Korean, and some European settings. There is relatively little work on Middle Eastern contexts or on Persian-speaking learners specifically, which underscores the need for studies exploring how Iranian learners understand and perform backchanneling in English.

Backchanneling in the Iranian EFL Context

Pragmatic competence has gained attention in Iranian EFL research and pedagogy over the past decade or so (Taghizadeh, 2017). Most of these studies, however, have focused on speech acts (e.g., requests, refusals, apologies), discourse markers, and politeness strategies (Arabmofrad & Mehdiabadi, 2025). What is noticeably missing is focusing on listener-oriented interactional skill such as backchannelling. In terms of pedagogy, the typical Iranian classroom discourse is often characterized as teacher-fronted, with limited opportunities for extended, naturalistic peer interaction, so Iranian learners have few chances to practice the subtle elements of interaction such as backchanneling, turn-taking management, etc.

SLA research on Iranian EFL learners also shows that learners often have limited exposure to authentic oral input, show a heavy reliance on textbooks, and may not be familiar with the informal, spontaneous features of spoken English (Taghavi & Aladini, 2018). What makes the situation even more complicated is the fact that Persian backchanneling conventions differ substantially from English ones in terms of timing preferences, the frequency of nodding or minimal responses, and the use of specific verbal tokens, which can influence how learners interpret and produce backchannels in English (Sharifi & Azadmanesh, 2012). However, none of the existing Iranian studies have examined learners' backchanneling behavior directly, nor have they explored how raising learners' awareness might shape their real-time conversational performance. The present study addresses this gap by combining an awareness-focused CR task with an analysis of actual peer interaction, an approach that has not yet been applied in the Iranian context.

Gaps in the Literature and Purpose of the Present Study

Previous studies have shed some light on the nature of backchanneling in general, cross-linguistic differences, and challenges of learning these tokens in L2. Notwithstanding these insights, several important gaps remain in the literature. First, very few studies have examined the relationship between learners' *awareness* of backchanneling and their *actual performance* during spontaneous interaction, despite evidence suggesting that declarative knowledge does not necessarily translate into online pragmatic behavior (Watson et al., 2021). Second, most of the research conducted thus far focused on East Asian (e.g., Ha et al., 2018) and European contexts (e.g., Nebieridze, 2025), ignoring settings such as Iran, where classroom interaction patterns, cultural norms, and exposure to natural conversation may shape learner behavior in unique ways. Third, most studies rely either on questionnaires or production data alone (Li & Xu, 2025; Taghavi & Aladini, 2018), resulting in limited understanding of how learners perceive backchanneling and how this perception relates to their conversational practices. In addition, backchanneling has received minimal attention in pedagogical discussions, leaving open questions about its teachability and the extent to which instruction can support learners' interactional competence. To address these gaps, we need

research that integrates awareness measures with conversational data in underrepresented EFL contexts such as Iran.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates Iranian EFL learners' awareness of backchanneling and the degree to which this awareness is reflected in their use of backchannels during English conversation. To address this aim, the study looks into the performance of 27 undergraduate English major students who participated in two audio-recorded peer discussions separated by a backchannelling-focused CR task. By examining their metapragmatic understanding alongside their observable interactional behavior, the study seeks to clarify how Iranian learners orient to the listener's role in conversation and how they display engagement, alignment, and understanding in real-time talk through backchannelling devices. The findings are expected to deepen our understanding of the awareness–performance gap in pragmatic and interactional competence while offering pedagogical implications for integrating backchanneling into speaking and listening instruction in EFL classrooms.

Method

Participants and Context

The participants were 27 undergraduate students enrolled in a four-year TEFL program at a large public university in central Iran. They were all in their seventh semester and had already completed a sequence of core skills courses, including conversation, oral-aural skills, and an introductory linguistics course that included discussions of pragmatics, culture, and sociolinguistics. Their proficiency level, based on the courses they had already passed and their nationwide entrance exam rankings, fell between upper-intermediate and advanced. None of the participants had lived in an English-speaking country, and most reported between six and ten years of formal English study. Participation was voluntary, and students received no course credit or grade incentives for taking part in the study. Written consent was obtained from all of the participants before data collection, and they were all reassured that pseudonyms would be used in reporting the results of the study. The study took place in the students' regular classroom where they met each other two hours every week for a course called *Translation of Media Texts*. Because students were accustomed to pair-work activities in this classroom, the environment contributed to a relaxed, conversational atmosphere and minimized observer effects during recording.

Research Design

The study employed a simple but powerful within-subjects design: each pair of students participated in two recorded conversations on comparable discussion prompts, one before and one after a backchanneling-focused CR task. This pre–post arrangement made it possible to examine not only the frequency of backchanneling tokens but also potential changes in their distribution, timing, and diversity. Importantly, the CR task did not involve production practice alone; rather, it integrated explicit modeling, guided noticing, and metapragmatic explanation to heighten learners' awareness of the forms and functions of English backchannels. Although the design resembles typical pre-test/post-test formats, the goal was not to measure short-term learning in a strict experimental sense. Instead, the design allowed for a close look at learners' real-time interactional behavior and provided a window into how newly raised awareness may be reflected

in spontaneous speech. Finally, given the modest sample size, the exploratory nature of the study, and the focus on interactional patterns rather than population-level generalization, the analysis deliberately prioritizes descriptive statistics, which are more appropriate for capturing meaningful changes in conversational behavior.

Instruments and Materials

Two sets of materials were used. The first consisted of discussion prompts designed to elicit sustained, two-way interaction rather than information exchange. Topics such as “the role of technology in education,” “experiences of difficult conversations,” and “life decisions that changed you” were chosen because they typically encourage extended turns and narrative elaboration—conditions in which backchanneling plays a natural role. The prompts were tested in advance with a separate group of students to ensure they were neither too short nor excessively complex. The same type of instrument was used for the post-treatment measurement: a 10-minute audio-recorded peer conversation based on a parallel discussion prompt. The post-test prompt was similar in structure and communicative demands to the pre-test topic but differed in content to avoid practice effects. The recording procedure, pairing arrangement, and discussion format were kept identical to the pre-test so that any differences in performance could be attributed to changes following the CR task rather than to task variation.

The second set of materials formed the basis of the CR intervention. For this purpose, a short, two-minute video clip of a naturally occurring conversation between native speakers was used along with a worksheet guiding learners to notice where backchannels occurred and what functions they served as well as a brief handout summarizing common English backchannel tokens (e.g., *yeah, right, exactly, really?, I see*). The CR task was deliberately compact (90 minutes in total) to ensure any changes observed in the post-discussion task could reasonably be attributed to heightened awareness rather than long-term proficiency gains.

Procedure

Data collection comprised three stages spanning two consecutive class sessions. First, students were placed in self-selected pairs and given five minutes to look over the discussion prompt. They were then asked to record a 10-minute conversation on their mobile phones, with devices placed on the table between them. The researcher remained in the room but refrained from any interaction once the recording began. Immediately following the first set of conversations, the CR task was introduced. Students watched the video clip twice: the first time without guidance, and the second time while marking the backchannel tokens they noticed on the worksheet. A whole-class discussion followed, during which students compared observations and considered why certain tokens appeared where they did. The researcher then highlighted common English backchannels, explained their pragmatic functions, and demonstrated, through brief role-play, how they can encourage speakers to elaborate, signal alignment, or express stance. Students practiced producing a range of verbal and paralinguistic backchannels in controlled exchanges, though no direct instruction was given on the specific discussion prompt used in the upcoming post-test. In the second session, held the following week, participants completed the post-CR task discussion, again in pairs and on a comparable but not identical topic. This prevented familiarity effects while still ensuring similar conversational conditions. Recordings were collected immediately after completion and were then transcribed for analysis.

Transcription and Coding

All conversations were transcribed manually by the researcher following a simplified conversation-analytic notation system. Because the focus of the study was on backchannel behavior rather than the fine-grained phonetic details of talk, the transcription conventions included pauses, overlaps, intonation contours where relevant, and nonverbal backchannels such as nodding when these were clearly audible. Ambiguous cases were replayed multiple times, and in a few instances where the audio quality was inadequate, those segments were excluded from the analysis.

White's (1989) criteria for identifying backchannel tokens were used in this study. In this framework, a token was counted as a backchannel if it occurred while the other speaker held the floor, did not initiate a competing turn, and served to signal attention, understanding, or alignment. Tokens were classified and coded into the three categories of verbal, paralinguistic, and nonverbal, although the quantitative analysis focused primarily on verbal and paralinguistic items, as these were the most reliably measurable. For each conversation, total tokens were counted and then normalized by dividing by the length of the interaction (tokens per minute). To gain insight into the quality of tokens, token variety and their sequential placement within turns were coded qualitatively to capture any shifts in learners' interactional behavior.

The help of a second trained coder was solicited to enhance reliability; a fellow researcher specializing in classroom conversation analysis independently coded 20% of the transcripts. Inter-coder agreement for identifying backchannel tokens reached 89%, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion. Because the study was exploratory in nature, the analysis combined descriptive statistics with qualitative remarks derived from close readings of the data.

Analytic Approach

The quantitative data, i.e. token frequencies and normalized counts, were analyzed using paired comparisons to examine changes between the pre- and post-discussion recordings. A decision was made to prioritize descriptive statistics over inferential testing considering the modest sample size and the nature of the data. At the same time, the transcripts were read holistically to identify patterns in the functions and positions of backchannels. In other words, the researcher wanted to see whether they tended to cluster at narrative junctures, appear after speaker pauses, or accompany assessments and evaluations. This dual approach allowed the analysis to address both aspects of the research question: students' awareness, inferred from the intervention discussion and learner comments during the CR activity, and their use, reflected in their conversational performance. Rather than treating awareness as an isolated construct, the analysis considered how learners oriented to listener role obligations in real time and how this orientation shifted, expanded, or remained unchanged following instruction.

Results

The analysis of the pre- and post-CR task recordings revealed clear shifts in how learners oriented to the listener's role in conversation. Although students differed in how readily they incorporated new backchanneling behavior, almost all pairs showed noticeable changes in both the quantity and

the quality of the tokens they produced after the CR task. What follows is a synthesis of the patterns that emerged from the numerical counts and from close, sequential reading of the transcripts. The results are organized into subsections that reflect the major dimensions of the analysis: first, a comparison of the overall frequency of backchannel tokens in the pre- and post-discussion recordings; second, an examination of changes in the range and type of backchannels used; third, an analysis of their sequential placement and timing; and finally, qualitative observations illustrating how learners reacted to backchanneling-focused instructions. This structure allows quantitative patterns and qualitative insights to be presented in a complementary fashion.

Overall Frequency of Backchannels

A descriptive comparison of the two recording sets showed that learners produced significantly more backchannel tokens after the CR task than before it. In the pre-discussion conversations, the 27 participants produced a total of 216 verbal and paralinguistic backchannels, which, when normalized for time, amounted to an average of 0.8 tokens per minute. In contrast, the post-discussion data contained 646 tokens, or roughly 2.4 tokens per minute, representing a threefold increase in listener responses (see Table 1 for summary). Although not every learner increased at the same rate, none showed a decline, and even those who were initially quiet listeners demonstrated some improvement in the post-task recordings.

Table 1.

Descriptive Comparison of Backchanneling Use in Pre- and Post-CR Task Discussions

Measure	Pre-CR Task	Post-CR Task	Change
Total number of verbal + paralinguistic backchannels	216	646	+430
Mean tokens per minute	0.8	2.4	Threefold increase
Range of token types	Limited (mostly <i>yeah</i> , occasional <i>hmm/okay</i>)	Expanded (e.g., <i>yeah</i> , <i>right</i> , <i>exactly</i> , <i>really?</i> , <i>wow</i>)	Greater lexical variety
Sequential placement	Often delayed or placed at structurally inappropriate points	More alignment with transition-relevance places (pauses, clause endings, assessments)	Improved timing
Affective/stance-related tokens	Rare or absent	Occasional <i>wow</i> , <i>oh wow</i> , <i>really?</i>	Emerging use

These frequency gains were not distributed evenly across pairs. Some students, particularly those who were already relatively talkative, began to punctuate their partner's turns with frequent *yeah*, *right*, *mhm*, and *really?*. Others adopted a more modest increase but nonetheless shifted away from silent, head-nodding participation to more audible forms of feedback. In other words, even incremental changes were audible in the recordings, and they created a different conversational texture: longer turns were no longer delivered into silence; instead, the speaker was accompanied by a steady series of acknowledgment.

Changes in Range and Type of Tokens

The conversations also displayed changes in the variety of backchannel forms used by learners. Before the CR task, the repertoire was narrow and heavily reliant on a single token (usually *yeah*) with occasional appearances of *hmm* or *okay*. Many pairs produced stretches of talk in which no token other than *yeah* appeared. In the post-discussion recordings, however, learners employed a more diverse set of verbal and paralinguistic responses. New items such as *right*, *exactly*, *I see*, *wow*, and rising-intonation *really?* appeared with increasing regularity across pairs.

A few students also drew on multi-word acknowledgements or short evaluative comments, such as *that's interesting* or *oh, that makes sense*. Although not counted as pure backchannels for quantitative purposes, these utterances nevertheless signaled a richer sense of participation in the unfolding talk. Crucially, no pair relied exclusively on a single token in the post-task conversations. Even participants who initially preferred silence produced a wider mix of items, showing a shift not just in frequency but in repertoire breadth.

Sequential Placement and Timing

Beyond the raw counts, the transcripts revealed shifts in how learners placed their backchannels within the speaker's turn. In the pre-task recordings, tokens were often ill-timed: some appeared too early, cutting off the speaker mid-clause, while others came after noticeably long gaps, giving the impression of delayed processing. A common pattern was that learners waited until the end of long turn-constructive units before acknowledging what they heard, resulting in wide stretches of uninterrupted monologue.

In the post-CR conversations, placements became more aligned with recognizable transition-relevance places. Learners were more likely to insert *yeah* or *right* after a speaker pause, a falling intonation contour, or the completion of a narrative micro-segment. Several instances showed learners picking up subtle cues: a pause before a personal story, a change in pitch as the speaker expressed an assessment, or a slowing tempo near the end of a clause. Not every token was well-placed—some interruptions still occurred—but overall, timing became more sensitive to conversational structure.

One illustrative excerpt from the post-task data features a student telling a story about a difficult phone call. In the pre-task version of a similar narrative, the listener stayed almost silent, producing a single *yeah* close to the end. After the CR task, the same listener responded with *right* after the speaker completed a clause, then *really?* with rising intonation when the speaker disclosed a surprising detail, and finally *exactly* as the speaker evaluated his own reaction. These shifts gave the interaction a noticeably more dialogic feel.

Emergence of Affective and Stance-Driven Backchannels

Another noteworthy change was the appearance of affective backchannels, which were almost entirely absent before instruction. Items such as *wow*, *oh no*, *seriously?*, or softly delivered *oh wow* emerged in the post-task conversations. These tokens tend to carry interpersonal warmth and signal empathy or shared stance rather than mere acknowledgment. They were not abundant, but their presence marks a qualitative expansion in learners' interactional resources.

Several pairs, for instance, produced *oh wow* or *really?* during personal anecdotes. Others used *exactly* to signal alignment or to "lean in" to the speaker's perspective. While these stance-

taking tokens were not the focus of the CR task, students appeared to generalize the idea that listener behavior is not limited to mechanical acknowledgments. This shift, though modest, suggests early signs of a more nuanced awareness of the interpersonal side of conversational listening.

Nonverbal Backchannels

Because mobile-phone audio captures gestures only when accompanied by audible cues, the analysis of nonverbal backchannels was limited. Even so, a few traces could be detected. Some learners whispered *mm-hmm* while nodding or made soft clicking sounds associated with agreement. These were rare in the pre-discussion recordings but slightly more frequent afterward, suggesting that heightened awareness may have spilled over into embodied participation, even if the analysis could not document it in detail.

Individual Differences and Uneven Development

Although the group trend was unmistakable, individual trajectories varied. About six students made dramatic gains, producing more than five times as many tokens in the post-task discussion as in the first recording. Others improved modestly, relying on familiar items but placing them more appropriately. A few remained cautious and used backchannels sparingly, though even their limited additions created more responsive conversations than before.

Interestingly, students who self-identified as “quiet” or “slow processors” during the CR discussion tended to make the smallest gains. Their recordings suggest that adopting new listener behaviors requires not only awareness but also attentional flexibility in the form of being able to monitor a partner’s talk while planning one’s own next turn. For these students, the shift may require more sustained exposure and practice.

Taken together, the results show that a single 90-minute consciousness-raising session can improve the quality of EFL learners’ conversational participation. Participants, quite interestingly, produced more backchannels, a wider range of forms, and better-timed responses after the instructional intervention. The qualitative shifts in repertoire diversity, sequential placement, and occasional stance-taking also suggest that learners were not simply “adding tokens” but were beginning to reconceptualize the listener’s role in interaction. While the changes were not uniform across participants, the overall pattern is clear: explicit, focused attention to backchanneling can reshape the rhythm and interpersonal texture of peer talk in meaningful ways.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how Iranian EFL learners understand backchanneling as a conversational practice and how this awareness is reflected in their actual interactional behavior. The results indicate that even a brief, targeted intervention can make a visible difference in the way learners take up the listener’s role in conversation. The findings resonate with earlier observations that backchannels function as essential resources for maintaining conversational flow, signaling reciprocity, and displaying alignment (Duncan, 1974; Gardner, 2012; Yngve, 1970). In many ways, the learners in this study reproduced the same trajectory that has been described in prior work on interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis: greater noticing leads to more active listener participation, and this, in turn, reshapes the texture of talk.

A closer look at the quantitative results reveals that the learners' overall frequency of backchannels increased sharply after the CR task, and this is consistent with the idea that listener behavior can be developed once learners are invited to attend to the subtle cues of real-time interaction (Wong & Waring, 2010). In fact, the increase in tokens, both in number and variety, points to a shift in the learners' understanding of what it means to "listen" in English. The narrow, repetitive repertoire that dominated the pre-task conversations mirrors what Cutrone (2010) observed among Japanese learners of English: without explicit attention to interactional norms, EFL students tend to rely on a limited set of backchannels or remain silent altogether. After the CR task, however, learners in the present study drew on a wider range of responses, including affective and stance-related tokens, suggesting that they were beginning to appreciate the interpersonal and pragmatic functions of backchanneling highlighted by Gardner (2012).

The qualitative analysis supports this interpretation. Several participants started to place their backchannels at points that align with recognizable transition-relevance places, an observation that echoes the argument made by Wong and Waring (2010) that timing is often more consequential than the token itself. When a learner offers *right* or *really?* precisely at the end of a clause or in response to an assessment, that response does more than confirm hearing; it participates in building the sequence. Such behavior reflects the foundational insight in the interactional competence literature that conversational skill is not solely about producing turns but about coordinating them with others (Young, 2011; Kasper & Rose, 2002). In this sense, learners' improvements after the CR task can be seen not simply as an increase in backchannel production, but as early evidence of the co-construction of meaning that defines interactional competence.

At the same time, the results highlight the importance of distinguishing between "awareness" and "performance," a distinction repeatedly emphasized in pragmatic studies. Many participants were able to articulate, during the CR task, the functions of common English backchannels, yet their pre-task recordings showed sparse or mistimed responses. This mismatch aligns with earlier arguments that declarative knowledge alone does not guarantee pragmatic performance in moment-to-moment interaction (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The present findings also sit comfortably within observations made by Young (2011), who notes that interactional competence is built gradually and requires opportunities for practice in authentic, or at least semi-authentic, conversational settings.

The Iranian context adds another layer to the interpretation. Classroom interaction in Iran often follows patterns in which the teacher holds the floor for extended stretches and students are expected to listen quietly, a pattern that may shape learners' assumptions about what appropriate listener behavior looks like in English. The very low frequency of backchannels in the pre-task data suggests that learners may transfer L1-based expectations about passive listening into L2 interaction. After the CR task, however, several learners produced responses that demonstrated a willingness to assume a more participatory listener role, aligning with the interactional norms described in English conversation by Gardner (2012) and Wong and Waring (2010). Although not all learners made equally dramatic progress, the direction of change was consistent across the group, indicating that awareness-raising (even without extensive practice) can begin to shift entrenched habits.

A broader look at the data points to a simple but important conclusion: when learners are encouraged to pay attention to backchanneling, their ability to participate in the give-and-take of conversation improves. This is hardly surprising if we recall how earlier pragmatic and CA work has emphasized the role of these small signals in shaping the flow of talk (Gardner, 2012). A well-

timed *right* or a quiet *mhm* does more than acknowledge hearing; it keeps the speaker moving, shows investment in the unfolding story, and reinforces the sense that the interaction is being jointly built. In our recordings, post-task conversations had precisely this quality; they felt less like two parallel monologues and more like shared activity. The gains are not dramatic, and no one would claim that a short intervention creates full pragmatic sophistication, yet the shift is unmistakable. Learners began to participate in a manner that aligns with the collaborative construction of talk described by Young (2011), and even modest steps in that direction matter for developing interactional competence.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate Iranian EFL learners' awareness of backchanneling and the extent to which that awareness would manifest in their conversational performance. The results show that even a brief, focused intervention can raise learners' sensitivity to the subtle listener actions that support English conversation. After participating in a short CR task, learners used more backchannels, a wider variety of forms, and placed them more appropriately within ongoing turns. The shift was not uniform across participants, but the overall trend was clear: learners moved from largely passive, minimal responses toward more engaged, timely, and interactionally meaningful listener behavior.

These outcomes reinforce the broader view that interactional competence is learnable and responsive to pedagogical attention. When learners are guided to notice how conversation works both in terms of speaking and listening, they are better equipped to participate in the co-construction of meaning that defines naturalistic talk. The study also underscores the need to bring backchanneling into the EFL classroom more deliberately. Given the limited exposure many learners have to authentic spoken interaction, opportunities to develop listener behavior may be especially valuable.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that the present study has its limits. The work was conducted with a relatively small group of advanced learners and focused on short, paired conversations, so the findings represent more of a snapshot than a long-term developmental trajectory. Future studies could build on this work in several ways. First, research involving larger and more diverse proficiency groups would help clarify whether similar gains occur among beginners or lower-intermediate learners, who may require different types of scaffolding. Second, longitudinal designs that track learners across multiple instructional cycles could offer insight into the durability of backchanneling gains and the conditions under which learners internalize these behaviors. Third, incorporating multimodal data, such as gaze, gesture, and embodied signaling, would provide a richer picture of how learners coordinate verbal and nonverbal backchannels during real-time interaction. Finally, comparative studies examining different instructional approaches (e.g., consciousness-raising vs. explicit modeling vs. interactional feedback) could help determine which pedagogical techniques most effectively support the development of listener-oriented skills in EFL settings. By pursuing these directions, future research can expand our understanding of how interactional competence develops and how it can be more systematically supported in language classrooms.

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