



# International Journal of Current Research and Academic Review

ISSN: 2347-3215 (Online) Volume 7 Number 5 (May-2019)

Journal homepage: <http://www.ijcrar.com>



doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2019.705.005>

## Assessing the Use of English Backchannels in Learners Speaking Tasks with Special Reference to TESFA English Club in Boditi Secondary and Preparatory School

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the use of different conditions of listener back channels on the fluency of L<sub>2</sub> speakers. It also aimed at the use of the utterances: yeah, ok, uh, huh and mhmm. The participants of the study were selected by using availability sampling techniques. Qualitative approach was used to conduct this study. In order to attain the objective and research questions, the researcher used Speaking tasks and interview as data gathering instruments. Data were analyzed and interpreted through thematic ways. The main findings for this study indicated that each participant performed speaking task twice in two different back channel conditions. One was a situation where student's task was back channeled with verbal and non-verbal response. The other involves no back channeling meaning that student oral task was followed by no back channels from the researcher (from the teacher) Fluency was assessed two temporal measures. In addition to this, the results showed that Tesfa English club learns were more fluent in verbal and non-verbal back channel condition and less fluent in no back channel condition. This result lends support to that back channels may make learners able to speak the language for long period of time and facilitate the fluency of learners during oral task.

### Article Info

Accepted: 25 April 2019

Available Online: 20 May 2019

### Keywords

Back channel, verbal and non-verbal, Fluency, speaking tasks

### Introduction

Learners' involvement is widely recognized as important in the learning process. It is reflected mainly in active participation such as listening to presentation, expressing opinions, asking questions, and working on assignment. However, the idea of being embarrassed in front of peers and the feeling of being reluctant to annoy their peers can often be intimidating for many students, and might even prevent them to ask questions during class discussion. For this reason, scholars tried to investigate some relevant alternative methods and approaches to enable learners actively participate in classroom activities.

Thus, there are different approaches and teaching methodologies of language learning- teaching process. One of these methodologies is communicative language teaching, simply acronym as CLT. Brown (1994), states that the field of second language pedagogy has developed and matured over the past few years. Though the origin of this approach was from abroad, communicative language teaching is now being used in Ethiopian schools. The new education and Training policy NEIP (1994) clearly indicated that true education is that promotes active learning. This implies that language learning is effective only when it is meaningful to the students when they can use or actively participate

in it. Language teaching must encourage students to communicate effectively about what they are doing and what they are learning (Richards and Rogers 1986p.69)

However, the language teaching methods which implemented in most of Ethiopian high schools were mainly based on grammatical structures and rules. The traditional methods of language teaching gave due emphasis to writing and reading rather than speaking. However, Hymens (1972), Browi (1994), Little wood (1981) and others emphasized that the spoken form rather than written was needs to be the primary form of language. In relation to this Richards and Rogers (1986) expressed that speech patterns rather than grammar rules are the fundamental elements of language.

Thus, EFL fluency will be defined as an automatic procedural skill (Schmidt, 1992) several researchers have attempted to find factors that affect EFL speakers' fluency during speaking tasks. Some researchers found that task characteristics themselves, like task types (Skehan and Foster 1999; Dewing *et al.*, 2004). Others have examined how task conditions, such as preplanning and on line planning affect EFL fluency (E.g. Crookes, 1989; Foster and Skehan, 19996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortego, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003) other than the tasks themselves researchers have investigated the effect of EFL speakers performance and speech variables, such as self monitoring (Kormos, 1999) and intonation Wenner Storum, 2000), still other researchers have studied how time spent in on EFL learning context may affect fluency (Freed, 1995; Freed *et al.*, 2004).

In general fluency can be investigated with respect to different variables: Task characteristics, EFL speaker characteristics, Learning context, Social factors, Cultural factors, Language (linguistic) related factors. Then that at least one important variable that may affect EFL (L2) speakers fluency during speaking tasks is the listener behavior of response. When L2 speakers perform speaking tasks teachers are always present in front of the students and respond to their production with a verbal and nonverbal messages. Verbal messages may include, for example, uh – huh: mm – hm: and yea: while nonverbal messages might include, head nodding or simples While the students talk is ongoing (Walf. P. James. 2007). This technique of scaffolding aspect is called back channeling and verbal and non verbal cues used in these situations are said to be backchannels. However, in an English L<sub>1</sub> context to assess how interviewer backchannel cues affect interviewees' verbal productivity in L2. Some studies Walf P. James (2007)

found verbal and nonverbal back channels to facilitate verbal productive.

Understanding how back channels might affect EFL learners of fluency is especially important for teachers who interact and negotiate meaning with them in the target language as well as language teachers who evaluate learners' oral production. There for, this study aimed to assess how English back channel cues facilitate Boditi preparatory School EFL learners' fluency during speaking tasks.

### **Statement of the problem**

English is an important language in the Ethiopian education system. This is primarily because the language is the medium of instruction in high schools and higher institutions. Ethiopian curriculum and the syllabus before the emergence of communicative language teaching did not give much consideration to fluency and speaking activities the syllabus under lying the situational and audio lingual methods consider of list of grammatical saturations and constructions often together with an associated list of vocabulary items.

Fries (1991) and Alexander (1975) teaching activities that focus on grammatical accuracy may be quite different from those that focus communicative skill" this shows that the primary emphasis of the new approach (CLT) is on oral proficiency and speaking competence.

However, there are a number of factors that make EFL learning complex. EFL class room is open to various factors that may result despair or nervousness on the learner during their speaking task. Some research findings claim that one of these threatening factors is teachers' response while learners perform speaking task. On the other hand, there are several ways by which English teachers can try to develop their student's oral skills some researchers e.g. Wlaf P. James (2007) suggests that verbal and nonverbal English book channels cues can facilitate learner's fluency during oral tasks. However backchannels as a strategy for to improve students oral of fluency have not been investigated well. Back channeling is a part of conversation and speech that the majority of us do not think about or notice unless a person's back channeling varies from what is expected. It is the part a listener plays in a conversation. There are both verbal and non-verbal back channeling signals. A non-verbal example of back channeling is a head nod. Throughout a conversation, the listener may nod their head periodically to show that they are listening. Another

way to indicate attentiveness is through verbal signals such as *yeah, ok, uh huh, and mmmm*. As an English teacher, the researcher usually faced challenges in improving the students English language skill in general and their oral communication skill in particular. Therefore, this study is intended to assess the effect of using back channels in learners' speaking tasks.

### Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to assess the use backchannel cues in oral tasks. Under this broad objective, the study has the following specific objective

- To identify the effects of back channeling on oral fluency and length of time on oral task.
- To distinguish the changes in learners' oral fluency at different task situations.

The research questions to be answered by the study were the following

- Are Tesfa English club learners able to speak for a long period of time when they receive different backchannels while they perform speaking tasks?
- How is Tesfa English club EFL learners' fluency affected by the absence of verbal and non verbal backchannels during speaking tasks?

### Materials and Methods

#### Research design

In order to achieve the intended objectives of the study, qualitative research design was required because it aimed to describe in detail the complex social phenomena according to participants' views (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). Thus, qualitative research paradigm was suitable to examine the use of some backchannels cues in speakers' speech learners' oral task because it helped the researcher to show the listener when time is proper for back channeling in English classes. Moreover, qualitative research method helps to collect information which allows by using data gathering tools like speaking tasks and interview.

The methodological frame work of this study is interpretative method. Interpretative method was preferred over the other as it enabled assessment with prediction, narration of events, comparison, drawing conclusions based on the information obtained from the representative sample population.

### Participants of the study

This study was conducted in Boditi preparatory school grade eleven. The school is found SNNPR, Wolaita zone. There were thirteen nine male and four female grade eleven preparatory students ranging in age 18-21. In addition to this, all the participants were grade eleven students who joined Tesfa English club in Boditi preparatory school. The school was selected because the researcher has been teaching in this school for more than thirteen years. The other reason for the selection was due to his anticipation for getting more cooperation and necessary support in gathering authentic, valid and reliable data.

### Sample and sampling techniques

#### Sample of the study

The study was conducted at Boditi preparatory school in Tesfa English club. The area is convenient for the researcher to conduct the study, since the researcher used the advantage of proximity to get collaboration from the school community. Moreover, there is no study that has been conducted on the topic understudy at the school. As the primary concern of the current study was to examine the use of some backchannels cues in speakers' and learners' oral task, the participants of the study were Tesfa English club members in Boditi preparatory school. This was because the use of some backchannels cues in speakers' speech learners' oral task in English classroom.

### Sample and Sampling techniques

In order to select the required sample, availability sampling was used because the total number of English club members in Boditi preparatory school. For the purpose, Tesfa English Club of Boditi preparatory school was taken as samples; and availability sampling was employed to select both the setting and participants of the study to make the activity manageable.

### Instruments of data collection

The data for this study was obtained from Tesfa English club grade eleven students through speaking task performed and interview. The study is single- factor with in- participants design with two levels of back channel condition (verbal/non verbal and no back channels).

**Table.1**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Backchannels</b>	<b>Length of time able to speak</b>	<b>Expected would be time able to speak</b>
Speaker 1	Comparing school	BC	0:06:49	5 minutes
		NB	0:03:08	5 minutes
Speaker 2	>>	NB	0:05:25	5 minutes
		BC	0:03:1	5 minutes
Speaker 3	>>	BC	0:03:10	5 minutes
		N.B	0:02:10	5 minutes
Speaker 4	>>	NB	0:02:08	5 minutes
		BC	0: 04:8	5 minutes
Speaker 5	>>	BC	0:03:22	5 minutes
		NB	0:03:08	5 minutes
Speaker 6	>>	NB	0:05:05	5 minutes
		BC	0:05:51	5 minutes
Speaker 7	>>	BC	0:04:53	5 minutes
		NB	0:03:55	5 minutes
Speaker 8	>>	NB	0:01:08	5 minutes
		BC	0:01:11	5 minutes
Speaker 9	>>	BC	0:01:19	5 minutes
		NB	0:03:08	5 minutes
Speaker 10	>>	NB	0:03:15	5 minutes
		BC	0:02:49	5 minutes
Speaker 11	>>	BC	0:01:58	5 minutes
		NB	0:02:6	5 minutes
Speaker 12	>>	NB	0:04:30	5 minutes
		BC	0:03:2	5 minutes
Speaker 13	>>	BC	0:02:21	5 minutes
		NB		5 minutes

**Table.2**

Participants	Backchannels	Gr 5-1	pro 5-1	Com 5-1	Con 5-1	fue 5-1	Conf 5-1	Out of 30
1	BC	4	4	4	3	3	4	22
	NB	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
2	NB	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
	BC	3	3	3	3	2	3	17
3	BC	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
	NB	2	2	2	3	2	2	13
4	NB	2	2	2	3	1	1	11
	BC	3	3	3	4	4	3	20
5	BC	4	4	3	4	3	3	21
	NB	3	3	2	3	3	3	17
6	NB	2	3	3	3	2	2	15
	BC	4	4	4	4	3	2	21
7	BC	3	3	4	4	3	2	19
	NB	3	3	3	2	2	2	15
8	NB	2	2	1	2	2	1	10
	BC	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
9	BC	2	2	3	3	3	2	15
	NB	2	1	2	2	2	2	11
10	NB	2	2	3	2	3	2	14
	BC	3	2	3	3	3	2	16
11	BC	3	3	2	3	2	2	15
	NB	2	2	1	2	2	1	10
12	NB	2	3	3	2	2	2	14
	BC	3	4	4	2	4	4	21
13	BC	4	3	3	4	4	2	20
	NB	2	3	2	3	2	3	15

**Table.3**

Interview questions	Participants	Participants response for backchannels	
		Verbal/ nonverbal (V/NV)	NB (No backchannels)
How did you feel at the time I used verbal/non verbal backchannel and NB (No backchannel)?	1	- I felt happy - Initiated to continuous speaking - Assumed that the teacher gave me attention	I felt discomfort I felt that I'm talking wrong words
	2	I was generating new ideas	I missed the idea I am going to talk Thought that I'm not being listened
	3	BC backchannels made me continue my speech	I feared to speak
	4	- Helped me bring idea Helped me say the language	I started to forget what to say next
	5	Helped me talk openly	I felt that my speed is not good
	6	I felt that I was talking correctly	I thought that I was using wrong grammar I'm making mistakes
	7	It seemed for me that I was being listened	Spent asking myself why the researcher kept silent
	8	I felt relax I was interested to speak more	Speech become difficult to continue
	9	I felt nothing	Helped me talk confidently
	10	Helped me to express my idea all in all	I couldn't express my idea Stopped me to talking more
	11	Helped me talk more	I felt nothing I didn't realize that you are silent
	12	Helped me generate new idea	Made me stop talking
	13	I felt free I could generate language	Feared to continue my speech Forced to stop talking

The participants were asked whether they are volunteers to participate in the study. Then, the researcher introduced herself for all the participants. The participants were told the purpose of the study. They were told that they will practice speaking on a certain speaking task. They were also clearly informed they will be video recorded while they were performing the speaking task. That will help the researcher for later transportation; however no information was given about the independent variable, back channels.

### **Task material to collect data**

The material for speaking task was taken from grade eleven students English text book speaking section. The participants were required to orally narrate the task. They were asked to talk about their primary school comparing it with the school they go to now. They are told to compare the schools in terms of: the number of pupils, the number of teachers, the size of the building, the facilities, the subjects they studied, the sport they did and how convenient the location was for them.

### **Task procedures**

To perform the instructions, the tasks were given in Amharic by the researcher. The participants were told what they will do one day before they start to perform the task. Each of the participants was given two minute times with limitation to plan before the task. They were each expected to talk about five minutes. Each of the participants made to perform the task alone. Only one participant comes to the researcher the others wait outside of the room. Therefore, no any participant knows what he/ she would be interviewed after the task is completed.

### **Task condition**

Back channels were operationalized at two levels (a) verbal non verbal (BC) (b) no backchannels (NB) to ensure internal validity, these two conditions were restrictively randomized in a counter balanced design in which experimental control was achieved by entering all participants in to all treatments as it is shown in table 1. If the first speaker started the task being helped by verbal/ non verbal backchannel the next speaker performs his first task with no backchannel and finishes the second task being helped by verbal/ non verbal back channels.

Backchannel (BC): Both verbal and non verbal backchannels were given. The verbal backchannels included 'mm'- 'hm', 'OK', alright 'uh'- 'huh' good and nice and the nonverbal backchannels involved head nodding. No attempt was made to control how the backchannels were given rather, it was desired they be given in a manner that felt as natural as possible to the researcher. On the other side; no backchannels (NB): Neither verbal nor nonverbal backchannels were given, when the learners were performing the oral task the researcher was not looking to words the speakers.

### **Interview**

After the participants performed the task, each participant was interviewed to know what he/she felt when the researcher shows him/her different listening behavior (when the researcher uses backchannel for one of his/her talk and when she keeps silent on the other talk. There for, the researcher's thought that the participants' response on the interview will help to supplement the data collected during speaking task. For this reason, similar questions were raised in interview for each of the participant.

### **Methods of data analysis**

The researcher described the qualitative data by recording the length of time the participants talked for and evaluating the proficiency level. Following on that tables were prepared for each variable to record the length of time, minutes and seconds presented in tables and finally the discussions followed. Information obtained through structured interviews was analyzed after the responses reduced to the meaningful chunks.

### **Results and Discussions**

In this chapter, results obtained from the thirteen participants talk when the two backchannels performed and interview results were presented and analyzed. The result from the participants talk and response for the structured interview were presented consecutively. Moreover, the feedback gained through interview from the participants was analyzed and how they felt at the time the two backchannels used was discussed.

### **Analysis on the length of time learners able to use**

To measure the period of time that the participants were able to speak, was recorded when the learners perform the task by the two backchannels. Each participant has

performed the task twice. Once they did the tasks with the verbal/non verbal backchannels; and they performed with NB (No backchannel). There for, table 1 shows that the participants, the task, kind of backchannel and the length of time when the participants were able to speak were put accordingly.

Table 2, shows the information which was taken while the participants perform speaking task. The participants were asked to talk about their primary school comparing it with the school they got now (grade 11). They were told to compare the schools interims of the number of pupil, the number of teachers, the size of building, facilities, the sport they did and how convenient the location of the school for them. As it is shown on the table, the researcher has used both two back channels while the participants perform the task; and compared the actual time at which the participants were able to talk and the expected time that the participants would able to talk. Finally, the researcher calculated the amount of time that the participants were able to talk at both the back channels.

The data on table 3 reflected using backchannel makes learners able to speak for a long period of time. Therefore, the recorded information while the learners perform speaking task showed using different backchannels enables learners to speak for a long period of time. In addition, using verbal/ nonverbal backchannels plays a great role in enabling the learners speak for a long period of time while they perform speaking task.

The findings on table 3 have shown different ability on speaking for expected period of time with different backchannels. The expected time that the learner would be able to speak was five minutes while the researcher uses both two backchannels.

At the time (verbal/ Nonverbal) backchannels were used: 2 (15.38%) participants were able to speak for five munities, 9 (69%) of participants were able to continue their speech 3 to 4 minutes and only 2 (15.38%) of participants limited their speech below 3 minutes. As this result indicates, using verbal non verbal backchannel enable learners speak for a long period of time while they perform speaking task. On the other hand, at the time the researcher kept silent (no backchannel) only 1 (8%) of the participants could able to speak for five minutes; and 4 (31%) of participants able to speak 3-4 munities, but 8 (62%) more than half participants continued their speech below 3 minutes.

From this point of view, what the researcher realized was that when listener keeps silent and doesn't show any facial expressions while learners perform speaking task they won't be able to speak/ continue their speech for a long period of time.

### **Analysis on participants' proficiency level**

Speaking fluency in two backchannels during learners perform speaking task was analyzed in this part. There for, the grammar structure, pronunciation, content and knowledge; fluency and confidence of speaking were evaluated when the two backchannels used while the participants were performing the oral task twice.

Each obverted question ranked score from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) and six questions with total out of 30 for both the two backchannels while learners perform speaking task. These questions are closely examining the key issues that the speaking fluency achievements in EFL class will support the real speech that require similar languages and contents. Table 2 shows each participants score out of all six proficiency measuring questions.

The first finding is that the overall proficiency is increased specially the speaking fluency when verbal/nonverbal (V/NV) channels were used. But as the result on table 2 shows that the participants' proficiency decreased when the researcher keeps silent (NB) at the time learner performing oral task.

### **Interview result**

The aim of this interview was to explore the use of the two back channels while the participants perform speaking task. Each participant was interviewed as soon as he/she has performed the oral task twice. The participants were asked how they felt when the researcher shows the two different listening behaviors (V/NV and NB).

All most all participants' response showed that verbal/non verbal backchannels facilitated their speech. Only 2(15%) of the respondents said that they felt nothing when the researcher keeps silent (NB). But the others 11(85%) of the participants responded that they had felt different negative feelings when the teacher/researcher keeps silent (NO back channel) while they were performing the oral task.

The main concern of this study was to investigate the use of different verbal/nonverbal backchannels for

communicative language teaching (CLT) in English language classrooms. To fulfill this purpose, Tesfa English club was selected from different clubs in Boditi secondary and preparatory school in wolaita zone. All the students in that selected English club were the focal point of the study. Moreover, the participants' interview responses were used to cross-check what is observed while learners perform speaking task.

Combined interview response of the participants of the study and the results found during the oral task are briefly presented in this part. Even if the research was done in only one club with less number of participants and was for limited time, the findings have reflected the partial reality that verbal/ non verbal backchannels facilitated English language communication.

The findings from this research generally indicated that the participants were more fluent and could speak for a long period of time in the BC conditions. Thus, the result obtained in the BC condition supports this line of reasoning.

Furthermore, the overall scores the participant couldn't speak for a long period of time and less fluent in NB condition compared to the BC condition, less fluent when verbal/ none verbal backchannels removed. The number of the participants was somewhat limited rather than indicating equality between the BC and NB conditions. The significant differences of results likely reflected. Moreover, the less ability to continuous speaking for expected time and less fluency result obtained in NBC conditions make sense. Walf P. James (2007) found that verbal and non verbal backchannels to facilitate verbal productive understanding.

## **Conclusions**

The communicative approach requires teachers to have good teaching competence and skills. It also needs teachers to have good classroom management skills and arranging a suitable teaching learning environment. This approach also requires students to have good language skill and positive attitude towards their learning. As a result, using English backchannels is also what is at each teacher hand. Meaning that it doesn't ask for money, and also doesn't need anything especial, rather it can be performed by teachers themselves and from themselves.

The data generally suggested that using different backchannels facilitates oral communication. So it would be good if any English language teacher use these

backchannels to improve learners' speech. Also the findings of this research gave evidence to conclude that using backchannel facilitates oral communication. Based on the objective of the study, the research questions and the findings of the study, the following conclusion has been reached.

- Using English verbal/ nonverbal backchannel cues makes learners able to speak for long period of time, and facilitates the environment in which learners to speak fluently.
- When learners don't receive any verbal/ none verbal responses they can't continue their speech, and they would be forced to stop speaking.
- When language teachers use different backchannels cues during learners perform oral tasks learners: feel happy and assume that they are being listened, able to generate idea feel confidence and relaxed and would be interested to speak for a long period of time
- On the other hand, when learners can't receive any backchannel while they perform speaking task learners: feel discomfort, can't express their idea freely, think that they are using wrong word construction, and may forget what to say next.

## **Recommendations**

From the discussions given on summary and conclusions, the researcher forwarded the following recommendations:

The study provides some support for the backchannel output hypothesis for Tesfa English club EFL learners.

The present study suggests that verbal/ non verbal English backchannel cues can facilitate their fluency during oral task.

English teachers should use different verbal/ none verbal backchannels while learners perform oral tasks in the classroom.

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**How to cite this article:**

Temesgen Tora Kacho. 2019. Assessing the Use of English Backchannels in Learners Speaking Tasks with Special Reference to TESFA English Club in Boditi Secondary and Preparatory School. *Int.J.Curr.Res.Aca.Rev.* 7(5), 28-38. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2019.705.005>

**Appendix**

**An evaluation of the proficiency level**

**Question 1 – Grammar structure**

5. The use of grammar accuracy is close to a native speaker
4. The grammar structure is quite clear with few errors
3. Occasional errors, but able to maintain the conversation easily
2. The grammar structure is acceptable but with some ambiguous structures
1. Only have very basic grammar knowledge and process very simple structure of stence

**Question 2- pronunciation**

5. The pronunciation is close to a native speaker
4. The articulation of content is mostly understood by the audiences
3. To clearly and coherently pronounce the words and collocations
2. Some accent, the pronunciation is understood by the same ethnic members
1. Strong accent, it is diffuclt for others to understand

**Question 3- content and knowledge**

5. Is bale to talk with the native speaker sufficiently?

4. Intelligibly to be participated in the social communicates
3. Be able to involve in the daily conversations
2. Only for very basic information exchange, fore example, the survival communication
1. The communication with English content and knowledge is impossible

**Question 4- Comprehension**

5. To understand the conversation easily like a native speaker
4. be able to catch and interpret most of the comprehension
3. struggling with the comprehension, follow up the content with careful concentration
2. Only understand verysimple and slow sentences
1. Failed to understand the content

**Question5- fluency**

5. speaking very fluently like a nature
4. Speaking with little pauses and hesitations
3. Speaking with some hesitations, not struggling but self-motivated
2. Speaking slowly and unable to make long sentences because recall words and grammar structure
1. Lack of fluency development: only speaking with single words and short expressions

**Question 6- confidence of speaking**

5. Very confident to speak in public
4. to attempt in many speaking activities in class
3. A little fear about the error making, but put effort in speaking
2. Try to speak and produce meaning, but worried to make mistakes
1. is not willing to speaking in class