

Explicit Back-channel Strategy Training and Speaking Skill: Does Gender Matter?

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Abstract

This study explores explicit Back-channel strategy training and effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill. In Yngve's (1970) view, Back Channel refers to short messages such as 'yes' and 'uh huh' which the person who has the turn receives without relinquishing his/her turn. Twenty homogenous learners (10 male, 10 female), who were at intermediate level in terms of general English proficiency based on the results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and pre-test oral Proficiency Interview, were selected as the participants of this research. After 18 sessions of treatment of back-channels that were based on the methodological theory of English language teaching suggested by Doff (1990) and Harmer (1991), post- test oral proficiency test was administered for both groups. The researchers recorded all of them in order to transcribe and analyze them. The findings of pretest and posttest oral exams revealed that EFL language learners' oral performance (speaking) in both groups improved. The Chi-square (χ^2) formula was then conducted to find out whether there were any significant differences in performing back-channels among male and female EFL language learners. The result revealed that females employed back-channels more often than males when they were participating in a conversation.

Keywords: Back Channel Strategy; Explicit Training; Sex; Iran

1. Introduction

According to Wannarak (1997), the phenomenon of Back Channeling (BC) was first studied by Fries in 1952. He identified BC as 'conversational signals of attention to continue discourse'. About two decades after Fries, the field of study was first mentioned by Yngve (1970) and after this many scholars took up the study of turn-taking responses, or back channeling or minimal response. Back channeling has been defined in different ways. Duncan (1972, p.14) defined a backchannel as 'short expressions, such as uh-huh or mm-hm, uttered by listeners to convey that they are paying attention, and to encourage the speaker to continue'. Yule (1996, p.75) defined it as a 'feedback which the listener provides to the current speaker (to show) that the message is being received'. Among these several definitions, the essential shared characteristic of a backchannel is that it originates in the person who is playing the role of listener.

There are a large number of studies of back channeling focusing on back channels in cross-cultural conversations, in the same cultural context but different situations, in different cultural contexts, genders and channels, back channels in casual telephone conversation, and back channels in business telephone conversation. We can consider the absence of a study on BC in Iranian EFL classes. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the

effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive back-channel strategy explicitly. The goal is to provide qualitative and quantitative data about the speaking skill improvement of EFL learners who employed BC strategy and salient differences in back channel behavior and success in speaking skill by male and female learners.

2. Review of Literature

In human communication behavior, back channel responses are pervasive phenomena. Participants of a conversation give and take back channels as a way of transforming information about the state of communication. The study of back channel is a new investigation of spoken language. Fries (1952) is the first author who has noticed and described some of the communicative behaviors that nowadays we call them "back channels". He analyzed a corpus of telephone conversations and recognized as series of "listener response". Yngve (1970) was the first person who coined the term back channel to describe these tokens. As a result of these findings, particular attention was paid to the scientific examination of these back channel responses or short utterances.

In the area of studies in gender and English back channeling, it has found that women used back channels

more frequently than men. For example, Roger and his associates (Roger & Schumacher, 1983; Roger & Nesshoever, 1987; Roger, 1989) found that women used back channels more than men. In Roger and Schumacher (1983), a total of 36 pairs (18 male and 18 female dyads) were grouped into three groups, high-low (complementary) and high-high and low-low (non-complementary) pair groups, based on their scores in the Dominance subscale of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (cited in Roger and Schumacher, 1983). Each pair was told to discuss social and political issues which the members of the dyads were known to disagree on and they were instructed to try to convince their partners of their own point of view. Roger and Schumacher found that female listeners provided significantly more verbal back channels than did male listeners in three conditions. Therefore, they concluded that women tended to use a more empathetic speech style.

In Roger and Nesshoever (1987), and Roger (1989), an experimental format in Roger and Schumacher (1983) was adapted and used to investigate how gender and dominance preposition were related to the frequencies of interruption and back channels (short and long). A total of 28 male-female pairs were grouped into four groups, high male -low female, high male -high female, low male - high female, and low male – low female. They found that women used significantly more back channels than men across all dominance conditions. Again, the results implied that women used a more empathic interactional style than men do; women indicated to the speaker that they were attending to what was being said with the frequent use of back channels.

Some researchers pointed out that contexts where back channels occur might be different between men and women. According to Zimmerman and West (1975), men used more delayed back channels which were preceded by at least one second of silence and occurred infrequently in mixed-sex conversation, compared to single-sex conversation. Furthermore, these back channels were preceded by pauses and most of them were followed by perceptible silences for the following speaker. Besides, these delayed back channels were less likely to occur in the single-sex conversations, compared to the mixed-sex conversations. They argued that delayed back channels by men might be indicators of a lack of understanding or disinterest in and inattention to the current talk (Zimmerman & West, 1975, p. 123). They also argued that men used such back channels to restrict women in developing the topic of conversation and so they then could control the topic of conversation on their own (Zimmerman & West, 1975, p. 124).

Fishman (1983) also reported a similar finding as in Zimmerman and West (1975). She found that men tended to produce back channels at the end of a long utterance by a female speaker, whereas women tended to frequently produce back channels not only at the end but also in the middle of utterances. Fishman (1983) argued

that the frequent use of back channels by women were indications of their attention to the speaker, participation in the conversation, and interest in the interaction and the speaker. These back channels were inserted to support the speaker. On the other hand, she believes that use of back channels at the end of an utterance by men displayed a lack of interest. Thus, contrasting to women's use of back channels, these were inserted to discourage interaction.

Fellegly (1995) found gender differences in the use of backchannels manifested not at a grammatical location but at a discourse level. She used tape-recorded conversational data of six white-middle class, single-sex groups in different contexts (three female and three male single-sex conversations including those between gays) and analyzed the patterns and functions of backchannels of American English. She found that women's backchannels were spread throughout, at the end of turn, at the end of sentence, within a turn, at phrasal boundaries other than the end of sentence, and after "ya know". In contrast to this, men's back channels were mainly produced at the end of a turn. She predicted that these differences in back channeling patterns might cause problems between women and men in communicating with each other in mixed-sex conversations.

Mulac et al. (1998) used the interpretations of the observers of conversations to find the more plausible theory for the explanation of gender differences in the use of back channels and questions. They had 268 student observers assess back channels and questions in terms of (a) the meaning they associated with the utterance and (b) the traits exemplified by the speaker of the utterance, according to rating scales. Sixteen conversations were transcribed and given to the observers, and during the ratings, the observers listened to eight conversations read by a male person and eight conversations read by a female person. They found that men and women differed in the interpretation of back channels; male observers interpreted back channels as more controlling such as giving information, stating an opinion, and leading the conversation while females considered back channels to have a different function such as showing interest or agreement, and seeking clarification. In addition, male observers judged back channels as an indication of uncertainty more than female counterparts. Furthermore, they found that both male and female observers perceived back channels as more controlling when the back channels were produced to a female partner than when they were produced to a male partner. Besides, both male and female observers considered the speaker more dominant when the partner was female than when the partner was male. In both cases, no significant relationship was found between the speaker's gender and their perceptions.

As a result of reviewing this literature, the researchers considered the absence of a study on gender and BC in Iranian EFL classes. Thereby, the researcher tried to

investigate the effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive back-channel strategy explicitly.

3. Research Questions

To find answers for the above mentioned problems, the following research questions were posed:

Q1: Does explicit teaching of back-channel strategy have any significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill?

Q2: Are there any significant differences between male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive explicit teaching of back-channel strategy and employ it?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The subjects for conducting the study were selected from EFL learners at Dar Al-Elm Language Center (D.L.C) in Mashhad, Iran. Twenty language learners (10 males, 10 females) participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 14 to 18 years old. All the EFL learners were Farsi native speakers; no one had ever lived in an English speaking country. No special criteria were used for selecting them except their language. The participants were assigned into two groups.

4.2 Instrumentation

The data were collected in a way to accomplish the intended purposes. To collect the data, the researcher used the below instrument in this study:

4.2.1 Oxford Placement Test

In order to make sure that all participants were at the same level and in real homogeneity, before starting the new semester, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered. The OPT consists of listening and grammar sections. Each section consists of 100 items and produces a total score of 200.

4.2.2 Pre-Test Oral Proficiency Interview

OPT mostly measures learners' listening, vocabulary, reading and grammar and does not indicate the learners' oral proficiency. Therefore, the researchers' administered oral proficiency interview and used oral proficiency questions which were made by Tavakoli, M. (2011) for intermediate EFL language learners.

The interviews were audio-recorded to be later transcribed in order to compare and find the effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive back-channel strategy explicitly.

4.2.3 Post-Test Oral Proficiency Interview

After treatment, an oral proficiency interview was administered for both groups. This test was administered in order to find the effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive back-channel strategy explicitly. It was in the form of interacting with fellow candidates. Therefore, the researchers assessed the students' speaking skill by starting a discussion conversation that was in relation with the textbook's topics and also contains the pre-test questions. In this phase the researchers recorded them to use their transcription for final evaluation.

4.3 Procedure

In this study, the researchers selected 20 intermediate EFL learners (10 male, 10 female) from Dar Al- Elm Language Center in Mashhad, Iran. In order to make sure that all participants were at the same level and in real homogeneity, before starting the new semester, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. As a result, all of the participants who took part in this research were at the same level of proficiency (Intermediate Level).

Since OPT just consists of listening, vocabulary, reading and grammar sections, it was necessary to run interviews to ensure the learners' homogeneity with regard to oral performance. Therefore, all of the students were interviewed to make sure that they were in real homogeneity of speaking skill. The researchers used the questions which were made by Tavakoli(2011) for intermediate EFL language learners.

Then, with regard to the methodological theory of English language teaching suggested by Doff (1990) and Harmer (1991), back channel strategy was taught according to the following procedures:

At presentation stage in which the students were introduced with clear instruction about the BC strategy that they were going to study, including its meaning, its forms, and its use. Information handouts that contained phrases and samples for the employment of the strategies studied were given to the students.

Practice stage was the next step that students were asked to do some tasks to practice using the strategy either in isolation or in given contexts. In this way, they became completely aware of this strategy in their native language and casual conversations. In this phase, the students could use the information handouts for reference.

In production stage, the students were required to manage the tasks either through interacting with fellow candidate or through discussion by themselves without any help from the teacher or the handouts. In this stage, the students were encouraged to do their best to use the language as individuals.

After 18 sessions of treatment (each session one hour) oral proficiency test was administered for the two groups. It was in conversational form with fellow candidates in

Table 1 Tests of Normality among Male and Female Groups (Interview score)

score		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Interview	male	0.215	10	.200*	0.926	10	0.408
	female	0.181	10	.200*	0.872	10	0.106

Table 2 Group Statistics among Male and Female Groups (Interview score)

score		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Interview	male	10	70.5	6.8516	2.1667
	female	10	75.3	6.3779	2.0169

Table 3 Independent Samples Test among Male and Female Groups (Interview score)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.107	0.747	-1.622	18	0.122	-4.8	2.9601	-11.019	1.419
Equal variances not assumed			-1.622	17.908	0.122	-4.8	2.9601	-11.0212	1.4212

Table 4 Tests of Normality among Male and Female Groups (Oral proficiency score)

score		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Oral proficiency score	male	0.2	10	.200*	0.894	10	0.189
	female	0.226	10	0.16	0.859	10	0.074

Table 5 Group Statistics among Male and Female Groups (Oral proficiency score)

score		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Oral proficiency score	male	10	80	6.7823	2.1448
	female	10	83.2	7.9972	2.5289

Table 6 Independent Samples Test among Male and Female Groups (Oral proficiency score)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.708	0.411	-0.965	18	0.347	-3.2	3.316	-10.1666	3.7666
Equal variances not assumed			-0.965	17.532	0.348	-3.2	3.316	-10.1799	3.7799

Table 7 Significant of Differences of Each Individual Category of 5 Types of Back channels between Male and Female

category	Male	Female	Expected frequency	df	Sig.	χ ²
Short utterances	37	46	41.5	1	0.323	0.976
Sentence completion	2	1	1.5	1	0.333	0.564
Short questions	42	36	39	1	0.497	0.467
Brief restatement	4	4	4	1	1	0
Laughing and sighing	3	7	5	1	0.206	1.6
<i>total</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>94</i>	-	-	-	-

order to elicit language that is more appropriate. The researchers used topics which were in relation with textbook materials.

Finally, the researchers recorded all of the conversations and transcribed them in order to achieve their goals. The researchers compared the scores in order to find out the effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill when they receive back-channel strategy explicitly.

5. Results

In order to answer the research questions the SPSS software was run to carry out the analyses. Results obtained from the analyses are demonstrated as follows, and the researchers have tried to address research questions.

According to Table 1, conducted Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests showed significance because .408 and .106 are greater than 0.05. This implies that female and male groups are normal because the p-value was greater than $\alpha=0.05$. To check for any significant statistical difference independent samples t-test was applied.

The result in the above table shows that there was a significant difference in interview scores among male and female groups. The Means were 70.500 and 75.300 and the Standard Deviations were 6.8516 and 6.3779 for male and female groups respectively.

According to Table 3, it is concluded that variances of interview scores were equal for both male and female groups. Therefore, the two groups were homogeneous. It means that the Sig value for male and female groups in interview was 0.747. As seen in Table 3, because Sig (two-tailed) was more than 0.05 ($\alpha=0.05$), there was no significant differences between male and female groups interview scores indicated. Both groups had the same value in Sig (two-tailed) meaning that it was 0.122 and their Mean Differences were the same (Mean Difference = -4.8000).

After explicitly teaching back channel strategy, the researchers wanted to know whether there were any significant differences between Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill based on their gender when they employed back channel strategy. Therefore, the researcher used the t-test to account for the probable statistical difference. The results of the descriptive analysis are presented in Tables 4, 5, 6.

According to Table 4, conducted Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests showed significance because .189 and .074 are greater than 0.05. This implies that female and male groups are normal because the p-value was greater than $\alpha=0.05$. To check for any significant statistical difference independent samples t-test was applied.

Due to the Table 6, Levene's Test for Equality of Variance lead to variance of two male and female groups

in oral proficiency test which was homogeneous, meaning that level of significance was 0.411. It showed that the two groups were homogeneous, because it was greater than 0.05.

Based on the Table 6, Sig (two-tailed) was more than 0.05 ($\alpha=0.05$), meaning that it was .348, there was no significant difference between male and female groups. According to the above table, both male and female participants improved in speaking skill after explicitly treatment of back channel strategy.

According to Table 5, the results indicated that both male and female groups had improvement in speaking skill after explicitly learning back channel strategy. The means were 80.000 and 83.200 respectively (It shows that the speaking skill has improved) and the Standard Deviations were 6.7823 and 7.9972 in oral proficiency exam, while before training, the Means were 70.500 and 75.300 and the Standard Deviations of data collected from male and female groups were 6.8516 and 6.3779 respectively.

Considering the 5 types of back channels, Table 7 reveals that female EFL language learners applied most of the back channels in the data (N= 94, out of 182). While male EFL language learners applied 88 back channels (N=88, out of 182).

Based on the table, there were no significant differences between each type of back channels. With regard to the short utterances, there were no significant differences between male and female participants ($\chi^2= .976$, Sig= .323, $p > .05$). The second greatest Chi-square number relates to this category. This showed that both male and female EFL language learners used it equally.

Relating to sentence completion, there were no significant differences between them ($\chi^2= .564$, Sig= .333, $p > .05$). In other words, both male and female used sentence completion with almost similar frequency. Male and female EFL language learners used short questions with similar frequencies ($\chi^2= .467$, Sig= .497, $p > .05$). As it is related to brief restatement, the researcher did not observe any significant differences between male and female ($\chi^2= .000$, Sig= 1.000, $p > .05$). As the table showed, the lowest Chi-square number belonged to this category. Based on the table, the last types of back channels is laughing and sighing. Regarding to this type, both male and female performed equally ($\chi^2= 1.600$, Sig= .206, $p > .05$). The greatest Chi-square number was obtained for this category which showed the range of discrepancies in using this type of back channel.

Conclusion

The present investigation has shown that back channels represent integral part of the English speaking. Back channels are of various types which indicate the listener's attention performing several functions.

It has been discovered that there is no comprehensive insight on teaching back channels. In other words, the

researchers do not found indexes in books and internet articles in relation to the explicitly teaching back channels which involve directing student's attention toward learning back channel strategy in a highly structured environment. It is teaching that is focused on learning outcomes (improvement in speaking skill).

The present work analyzes the effect of explicit teaching of back channels and learners' gender from various viewpoints. Different aspects have been taken into account during the examination, namely the effect of explicit teaching of back channels on EFL language learners' success in speaking skill, and differences in back channel behavior male and female Iranian EFL intermediate learners. Concerning to the explicit back-channel strategy training and effect of sex on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' success in speaking skill, the analysis of the collected data showed that it had significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' speaking skill and improvement of this ability.

The classification of types of back channels in the present work were based on Hopper (1992) (as cited in Petchrat, 2009), Maynard (1986) and Ohira (1994). Concerning the frequency of types of back channels, the present study showed that the most frequently used back channels were short utterances (Male=37, female=46), followed by short questions (Male=42, female=36), while less frequently used back channels were sentence completion (Male=2, female=1), laughing and sighing (Male=3, female=7), and brief restatement (Male=4, female=4). The investigation showed that there was almost no difference in the choice of types of back channel devices used concerning the gender of the EFL language learners. On the other hand, concerning differences between total categories of back channels types used by male and female EFL language learners, there were significant differences between them.

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