Finnish upper secondary school students' use of backchannels in an English spoken performance test

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan lukiolaisten minimipalautteiden (*backchannels*) käyttöä, joka tapahtuu valtakunnallisen englannin suullisen kielitaidon kokeessa. Tutkimuskysymyksiä on kolme: (1) Minkä tyyppisiä minimipalautteita näiden lukiolaisten puheesta löytyy? (2) Kuinka yleisiä ne ovat suhteessa toisiinsa? (3) Mikä voisi selittää mahdolliset erot minimipalautteiden käytössä eri oppilaiden välillä? Lähestyn kolmatta tutkimuskysymystä kolmen eri näkökulman kautta: selittääkö eron taitotaso, tehtävätyyppi vai onko kyse yksilöllisistä eroista? Tutkielmani tukena on Anni Sivukarin pro gradu -tutkielma vuodelta 2015, jossa hän tutki samaa ilmiötä HY-talk-projektissa kerätyllä aineistolla. Vertaan tuloksiani Sivukarin tuloksiin tutkielmani lopussa.

Aloitan teoriaosuuden käsittelyn isommasta kokonaisuudesta vuorovaikutustaidot (*interactional competence*), minkä jälkeen käyn läpi vuorovaikutustaitoihin kuuluvaa vuorovaikutuksellista kuuntelemista (*interactional listening*), ja erityisesti minimipalautteita. Käsittelen minimipalautteiden jaotteluperusteita sekä eri kieliyhteisöjen eroja minimipalautteiden käytössä. Kuvaan lyhyesti myös puhutun vieraan kielen arviointia ja eurooppalaisen viitekehyksen taitotasoja (EVK) vuorovaikutuksen näkökulmasta.

Käytän aineistona FUSE-korpusta (*Finnish upper secondary school corpus of spoken English*), joka on kaikille avoin verkossa toimiva korpus. Korpus on toteutettu yhteistyössä Helsingin yliopiston kanssa, ja sen tarkoitus on kehittää puhutun englannin kielen opettamista ja arviointia. Korpus koostuu lukiolaisten valtakunnallisen englannin suullisen kielitaidon koesuorituksista. Analyysissa käytetään 20 kokeeseen osallistuneen parin koesuorituksen äänitettä, litteraattia ja oppilaiden suoriutumisesta tehtyä arviointia.

Tuloksista käy ilmi, että kaikki minimipalautteiden eri tyypit (*minimal responses*, *reactive expressions, collaborative finishes, repetitions,* ja *resumptive openers*) löytyvät aineistosta. Näiden lisäksi analyysiin on otettu mukaan suomeksi tuotetut minimipalautteet (*Finnish occurrences of backchannels*). Minimipalautteiden tyypit yleisimmästä vähiten yleisimpään ovat: *reactive expressions*, *minimal responses*, *resumptive openers*, *repetitions*, *collaborative finishes* ja *Finnish occurrences of backchannels*. Selitettäessä oppilaiden eroja minimipalautteiden käytössä tulokset osoittavat, että suomeksi tuotetut minimipalautteet esiintyvät vain heikoimmiksi arvioiduilla puhujilla. Myös tehtävätyypillä näyttää olevan vaikutus siihen, kuinka paljon kukin puhuja tuottaa minimipalautteita: jos tuotettujen minimipalautteiden määrä puhujalla on 31 tai enemmän, on hän silloin ottanut osaa keskusteluun, jonka tehtävätyyppi on ollut ajatuskartta. Yksilölliset erot osoittavat, että alhaisemman taitotason opiskelijat tuottavat enemmän minimipalautteita kuin ylemmän taitotason opiskelijat, mikä on sekä alustavan hypoteesini että Sivukarin tuloksien vastainen. Tulokset liittyen kolmanteen tutkimuskysymykseen eivät osoita olevan kovin selväpiirteisiä.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
minimipalautteet (backchannels), vuorovaikutus, FUSE-korpus

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Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

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1. Introduction

A fact that is very often forgotten is that spoken interaction is really an interaction – it requires not just the speaker, but also the listener. Whereas conversation analysts have studied second/foreign (L2) language spoken performance from both the speaker's and the listener's side (see e.g. Sert, 2015; Jenks, Seedhouse and Walsh, 2010; Hellerman and Lee, 2014; Sidnell and Stivers, 2013), second language acquisition (SLA) studies have tended to focus on the speaker. To acknowledge SLA studies that have focused on the speaker and the listener, see for example Galaczi and Taylor (2018), and Lindemann and Subtirelu (2013). Consequently, the participation of the listener cannot be dismissed, because all of the participants in an interaction need to have interactional competence in order for it to be successful (Galaczi and Taylor, 2018). In Finland, spoken interaction has gained a greater emphasis in the latest National Core Curricula, which should be seen in the teaching as well as assessment. In addition, the plan is to have a spoken component in the matriculation examination in this decade, which naturally requires background research. Hence, in order to secure that teachers are provided with adequate knowledge of spoken performance assessment, studies on the matter are needed.

The University of Helsinki has an ongoing project called "Development project for teaching spoken performance" (shortened "Väiski" in Finnish), which is a development project dedicated to the improvement of teaching spoken language proficiency, led by Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen (see https://blogs.helsinki.fi/vaiski-projekti/). The project examines spoken interaction as a bigger entity that includes both the speaker's and the listener's side. Väiski is connected to the Finnish matriculation examination, because it provides background research for the spoken component that will be included in the exam in the future. Accordingly, Väiski is in need for research in the field of spoken interaction. Inspired by the project, this master's thesis examines one of the focus areas of spoken interaction, which is interactive listening.

To narrow down the fairly vast focus area a bit further, the aim of this thesis is to examine verbal backchannels that Finnish upper secondary school students exhibit in an English language oral exam. Consequently, the focus of this thesis is on the listener, not the speaker. The research questions are:

1. What types of backchannels occur in Finnish upper secondary school students' speech in an English language spoken performance test?
2. How frequent are the different types of backchannels in relation to each other?
3. What could explain the possible variation in the use of backchannels between the students?

Firstly, the aim is to determine what types of verbal backchannels, or short utterances that indicate to the speaker that the listener is following, Finnish upper secondary school students use in an English language spoken performance test. Secondly, the frequencies of these types will be counted. Lastly, a more profound aspect in this thesis is to examine what could explain the possible variation in the use of backchannels between the students. Are there any differences or not? To approach the third research question, I have chosen three perspectives that could explain the possible variation: proficiency level, task type, and individual variation. The data for this thesis comes from an online corpus called *the Finnish Upper Secondary School Corpus of Spoken English* (FUSE) that consists of transcribed recordings of students who have taken part in the national Oral Examination of English.

My study draws on Anni Sivukari's master's thesis that was completed at the University of Helsinki in 2015, in which she analyzed backchannels that Finnish students exhibit in the HY-talk corpus, a corpus that is a bit older and bigger than FUSE. In addition, HY-talk includes videos of the situations as well as upper comprehensive school pupils' performances, which FUSE does not. It is necessary to acknowledge Sivukari's thesis, because I compare the results of this thesis to hers, which is why I need to replicate her study to some extent – this includes the same amount of data, i.e. number of pairs, as well as the same definitions of backchannels. I will briefly introduce Sivukari's study in chapter 2 but will return to discuss her study in relation to the findings of this study in section 5.1. Hence, my thesis will be a similar study but on a newer set of data. In addition to being more recent, the testing situations and tasks in the FUSE corpus have a high probability of being similar to the ones in the forthcoming spoken component of the matriculation examination.

This thesis will begin with a review of the necessary literature, after which the data and methods will be introduced. After that, this thesis will move on to the analysis by describing the results followed by discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

This chapter explains the key concepts and terms related to this field of study, beginning with a general overview of interactional competence and its elements followed by definitions of backchannels and its types. In addition, backchannels will be discussed in a cultural light, since there might be differences between different speech communities and their use of backchannels. As this is a thesis that analyzes students' oral performances, literature on the topic in question needs to be reviewed as well as the issues it might have. I will review Sivukari (2015) and her definitions of backchannels in section 2.1.2.

2.1 Interactional competence

Interactional competence (IC) stems from Chomsky's (1965) term *competence* and from Hymes' (1974) *communicative competence* that Hymes created as a revised version of the prior. *Communicative competence* refers to the ability to use utterances in different speech situations appropriately, thus, Hymes' focus is on sociolinguistic competence (Byram, 1997). Indeed, interactional competence is constructed from theories that precede it; however, Young (2011) states that "it is a very different notion" (p. 429) from what has come prior. Young, who has studied interactional competence widely, has created a definition of this construct:

> a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of certain lexis and syntactic patterns specific to the practice, a knowledge of how turns are managed, a knowledge of topical organization, and a knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself. (2011, p. 249).

The definition by Young (2011) is quite restrictive, because it only describes the knowledge of these different competences; it should also explain the abilities to ace such competences. Galaczi and Taylor (2018) have also studied the construct of interactional competence, which according to their definition is a comprehensive term for all the elements that occur in a spoken interaction. They note how crucial it is to identify these different elements of interactional competence, because "spoken interaction in a second/foreign (L2) language has assumed greater importance in the last two decades, in light of the growing role of the communicative approach to language teaching, learning, and assessment" (Galaczi and Taylor, 2018, p. 219). In general, speaking tests have evolved into the direction of "captur[ing] interaction" (Galaczi

and Taylor, 2018, p. 219), which is why it is important to really understand what spoken interaction is, and what is meant by interactional competence.

As spoken interaction in a second/foreign (L2) language has increased its significance, Galaczi and Taylor (2018, p. 219) state that "a need has developed to more accurately understand and describe the construct of interactional competence." According to them, interaction is constructed from different elements that are flexible and dynamic in nature rather than causal and hierarchical. Interactive listening, the focus area of my study, is one of the elements that is included in this bigger entity of interactional competence. They explain the construct as follows:

> …interactional competence is the ability to co-construct interaction in a purposeful and meaningful way, taking into account sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions of the speech situation and event. This ability is supported by the linguistic and other resources that speakers and listeners leverage at a microlevel of the interaction, namely, aspects of *topic management*, *turn management*, *interactive listening*, *breakdown repair* and *non-verbal or visual behaviours.* (Galaczi and Taylor, 2018, p. 226).

To have a perhaps better understanding of this definition, Galaczi and Taylor (2018) have depicted this concept in a form of a tree:

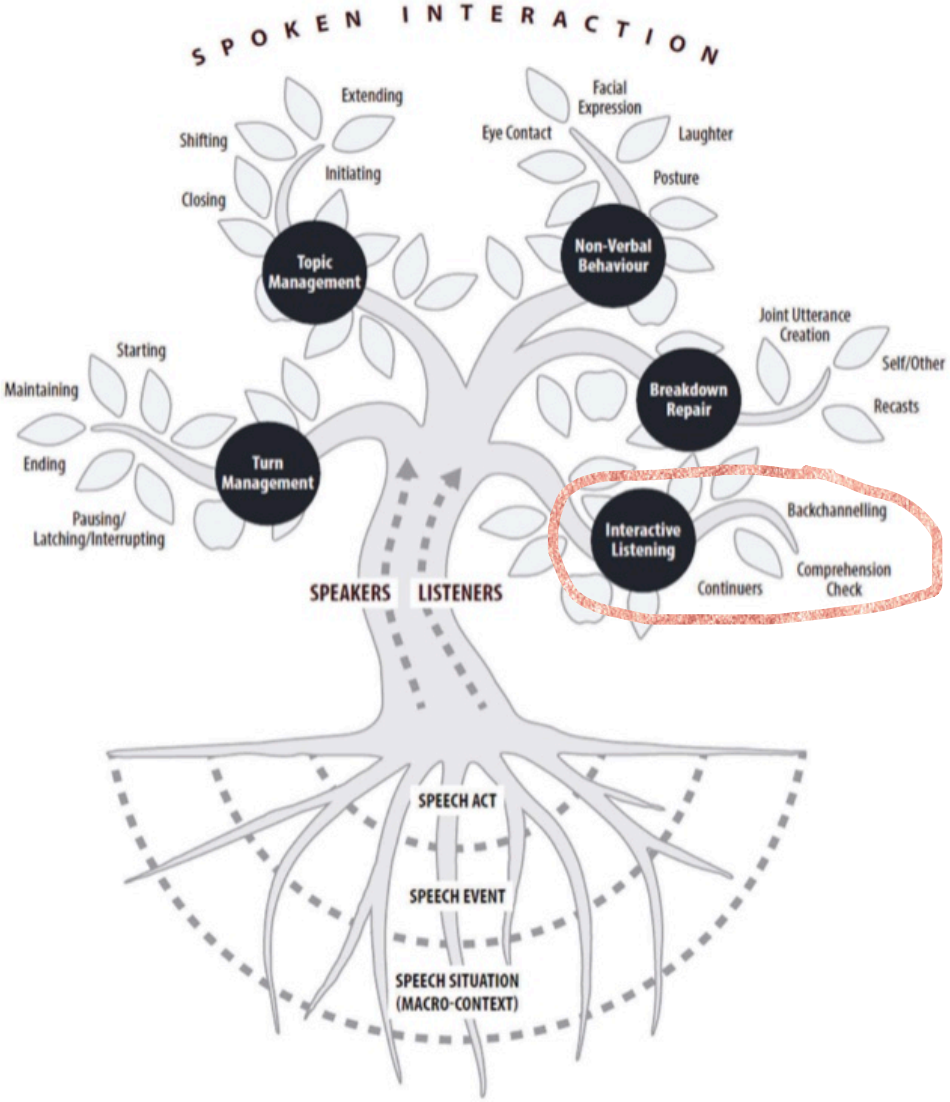

Figure 1. Defining interactional competence. (Galaczi and Taylor, 2018, p. 227)

Consequently, this definition of interactional competence includes the speaker and the listener, in addition to the different elements that a spoken interaction includes. It is divided into the five main categories (the branches) continued by their own sub-categories (the leaves). The focus of this thesis is circled on the right. There are other elements in interactive listening than just backchannels; however, backchannelling is the aspect my thesis concentrates on.

2.1.1 Interactive Listening

According to Galaczi and Taylor (2018), interactive listening consists of backchannels, comprehension checks, and continuers. Even though the latter two are not in the focus area of this study, a brief introduction of them is appropriate. Comprehension checks particularly refer

to the cases in which the listener has to confirm that s/he has understood what the speaker has just said. An example situation would be:

> Speaker A: Mexican food have a lot of ulcers?
> Speaker B: Mexicans have a lot of ulcers because of the food?
> (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 184).

Continuers, on the other hand, refer to situations in which the listener shows the speaker acceptance to continue with his/her turn. As will be seen in section 2.1.2, the definitions of backchannels might overlap to some extent with the ones other scholars have introduced, as well as the ones used in this particular study, because backchannels can be further divided into different types.

Other scholars have studied the importance of interactive listening as well. For instance, Lindemann (2006) has studied interactional competence, which she has done through analyzing non-native and native speakers' conversations. Lindemann (2006) emphasizes that conversation is "always a collaborative achievement" (p. 25). In addition, she introduces a model in which both the speaker and the listener are required to ensure that the listener has understood what the speaker has said, so that the responsibility of the conversation lies in both of the participants' shoulders (2006). From a slightly different perspective than of teaching, Bjørge (2010) has studied the importance of interactional competence from an international business contexts' perspective. Bjørge (2010) argues that in negotiating situations minimal responses such as *yeah* and *ok* are crucial to indicate understanding. Therefore, she emphasizes how the exclusion of listening skills in EFL programmes "may thus have negative consequences" (Bjørge, 2010, p. 192). It is easy to understand that this is an important set of skills in theory, but it is also crucial to understand that this set of skills is important in practice as well.

To maintain coherence, I am going to use the terminology used by e.g. Clancy at al. (1996) to refer to speakers as "primary speakers" and to listeners as "non-primary speakers" henceforth. The reason for this is the restrictive nature of the term 'listener' that indicates that the interlocutor is quiet and listens, which is not entirely the case.

2.1.2 Backchannels

The act of conversation including two (or more) people requires participation from both sides. Even though one is talking (primary speaker), the non-primary speaker(s) usually produce short words or utterances of some kind to indicate that they are listening, which has been proved crucial in the preceding section. In addition to indicating that the non-primary speaker is paying attention, the words and utterances can show the primary speaker understanding and/or support, among other things (Pipek, 2007). Heinz (2003) suggests that verbal backchannels can be a range of expressions, which consist of "assessments, sentence completions, brief requests for clarification, restatements, short questions and answers, exclamations, and attempted interruptions" (p. 1117). These short utterances are called "backchannels" that are a universal phenomenon varying according to a speech community. In addition to short utterances of some kind (such as *uh huh* or *mhm*), backchannels can be gestures such as head nods, laughter, and smiles. Indeed, there are two different dimensions to backchannelling (verbal and non-verbal), however, I focus on the verbal instances of backchannelling in this thesis because the FUSE corpus does not include videos of the test situations.

Studies discussed in Heinz (2003) show that backchannels are acquired through the speech community's cultural and/or linguistic system, and that they are "predominantly unconscious behaviour" (p. 1125). Heinz (2003) also discusses how backchannelling behaviour can be explained through Grice's Cooperative Principle (1989) that suggests the act of interaction should be comprised of "co-operative efforts" (Heinz, 2003, p. 1114). It is important to emphasize at this point that even though backchannels are seen as a natural cause of humans' turn-taking activity (Brunner, 1979), they are not turns. However, Heinz (2003) does note that researchers have different views about whether backchannels are turns, non-turns or non-primary turns (p. 1117). Non-primary turn is a term Schegloff (1982) used to refer to backchannels, and the term non-turn indicates that scholars are not certain whether to treat backchannels as turns or not. In general, backchannel responses are nonetheless considered "not to challenge primary speakership" (Heinz, 2003, p. 1117). To briefly explain the phenomenon of turn-taking, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 201) explain that turn-taking "refers to both the construction and distribution of turns: what shapes turns take, where they start and end, what their content is, how they are acquired and given away, and how long they are." A turn, briefly, is the act humans take to talk (Drew, 2013, p. 131).

Backchannels have been named in various different ways by different scholars. Clancy et al. (1996), who have defined the term basing on previous studies (e.g. Yngve, 1970; Schegloff, 1982; Oreström, 1983), suggest that "utterances made by a non-primary speaker" are "reactive tokens" (p. 356). Other researchers who have studied this phenomenon introduced in Clancy et al. (1996) have proposed terms such as "backchannel communication", "back-channel items" and "continuers" (p. 356). The main principle in all of these terms is the same; however, the definitions vary a bit according to the functions. For instance, the term "continuer" specifically refers to the situations in which the non-primary speaker indicates that he/she understands and wants the primary speaker to continue talking (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 356). The term this current study will use to refer to the utterances made by a non-primary speaker is "backchannel", because it is the most widely used one.

Bjørge (2010) has studied backchannels in English as a lingua franca (ELF) situations and also gives this phenomenon a definition: "The term backchannel refers to verbal and non-verbal listener feedback in spoken interaction that does not involve a speaker shift, but functions as a turn-continuer" (p. 193). Bjørge (2010) continues that "verbal backchannelling may be expressed by means of items at the non-lexical, lexical, phrasal and syntactic levels" (p. 193), after which she provides a concrete list of what backchannels can be, including words such as: *ah*, *aha*, *fine*, *good*, *good heavens*, *I see*, *mhm*, *no*, *of course*, *oh*, *oh my goodness*/*dear*/*God*, *ok*, *quite*, *really*, *right*, *so*, *sure*, *that's nice*/*right*/*not bad*, *yes*/*yeah*, *yes I know*, *absolutely*, *brilliant*, *certainly*, *cool*, *definitely*, *exactly*, *excellent*, *fine*, *good*, *gosh*, *great*, *lovely*, *marvellous*, *perfect*, *quite*, *really*, *right*, *sure*, *true*, *wonderful* and *wow* (p. 193). As can be seen, adjectives and adverbs can function as backchannels, too (Bjørge, 2010, p. 193). To define this list of words a bit further, I will continue to talk about how these can be categorized.

Consequently, backchannels can be a variety of short phrases, words or utterances, which makes it a very broad and ambiguous phenomenon. To make some sense of this disarray, a division is in order. The way how these backchannels are divided in this thesis is concordant with the division by Sivukari (2015), in order for the comparison to be possible in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

The term Sivukari (2015) uses to refer to this phenomenon is **Backchannels (Bs)**, which can be further defined. In this thesis, following Sivukari, backchannel will serve as an umbrella term for the following sub-terms: **Minimal Responses (MR), Reactive Expressions (RE)**,

Collaborative Finishes (CF), **Repetitions (Rep)** and **Resumptive Openers (RO)**. These terms will serve as the defining terms for this thesis. These definitions are based on the work by Clancy et al. (1996), but the terms have been slightly adapted.

Backchannels (Bs): An umbrella term for all the following (Clancy et al.'s 1996 reactive tokens).

Minimal Responses (MR): If the backchannel is a non-lexical vocalic form and serves as a 'continuer' (Schegloff 1982), display of interest, or claim of understanding.

Reactive Expressions (RE): "If the 'non-primary' speaker utters a short non-floor-taking lexical phrase or word" (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 359).

Collaborative Finishes (CF): "When the non-primary speaker finishes a previous speaker's utterance" (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 360).

Repetitions (Rep): "If the non-primary speaker reacts by repeating a portion of the speech of the primary speaker" (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 361).

Resumptive Openers (RO): "[A] type of non-lexical element which is used at turn-initial points. These forms would be coded as Backchannels if they weren't followed by full turns" (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 362). Some characteristics listed by Clancy et al. (1996):

1. They are realized in short (typically monosyllabic), non-lexical vocalic forms.
2. They tend to appear as a separate intonation unit.
3. Normally only short pauses appear after a resumptive opener.
4. They appear at the beginning of a new turn.

(pp. 362-363).

To maintain clarity, one characteristic needs to be added to the definition of backchannels, and therefore to all of its subcategorizations: a backchannel is feedback that does not bring any new topics into the conversation. Furthermore, there needs to be a division between turn-internal and turn-external backchannels, which are discussed for example by Kjellmer (2009): a turn-external backchannel "contains cases where a backchannel follows a completed turn (where of course the speaker resumes his speech after the backchannel)" (p. 86) whereas a turn-internal one "contains cases where the speaker continues his/her turn across the backchannel" (p. 86). This thesis focuses on both turn-internal and turn-external cases of backchannels. To concretize the phenomena, examples of both turn-internal and turn-external occurrences are presented from the data:

1) An excerpt from Pair 16.

4	**M18**: er I think... most people around the world know F- Finland for sauna
5	**F21**: **Mhm** [minimal response]
6	**M18**: and erm for kind of shyness...
7	**F21**: //**Yeah**// [reactive expression]
8	**M18**: //and// alcoholi- al- alcoholism in stereotypes.

Excerpt 1 indicates turn-internal backchannel occurrences. The primary speaker M18 continues his turn even though the non-primary speaker F21 answers him by uttering a minimal response and a reactive expression.

2) An excerpt from Pair 20.

6	M24: Well er I think this party is er very good er... there's good- good music... playing and... people are having fun, they are chill
7	M23: **Alright** [reactive expression]
8	M24: What's your opinion of the party?

Excerpt 2 from the data presents a turn-external occurrence of backchannels. As can be interpreted, the primary speaker M24 resumes his speech by introducing a new topic, however, he does not continue his turn.

2.1.3 Speech communities' differences in backchannelling

Different speech communities exhibit different customs, which applies to communication as well. This observation is also noted by Galaczi and Taylor (2018), who explain that communication "varies in different interactional practices" (p. 226), and by Heinz (2003), who states that "specific backchannel behaviours are particular to language and culture" (p. 1113). Consequently, it is important to acknowledge these differences in order to successfully converse in a foreign language. Smith (1987) who has studied discourse across cultures even states that communicative competence and the understanding of cultural differences are more important than e.g. grammar in order to have a successful interaction:

> There is no doubt that a good command of English grammar, lexis, and phonology is helpful in effective cross-cultural communication. What is not so commonly realized is that this is not enough (Krishnaswamy and Aziz, 1983). Recognition is needed that such things as the place of silence, appropriate topics of conversation, forms of address and expressions of speech-acts (e.g. apologies, requests, agreement, disagreement, etc.) are usually not the same across cultures and that these are perhaps more important to effective cross-cultural communication than grammar, lexis, or phonology. (p. 1).

Considering the Finnish language and culture, Finns are said to communicate in a rather direct manner. Stereotypically, Finnish people are depicted as silent, and Finnish conversations as "monologues without any interruptions, simultaneous speech or feedback" (Tiittula, 1994, p. 95). Hence, concluding from this statement backchannels are not likely to occur in Finnish conversations, because it is considered to be rude to interrupt the speaker (even though backchannels are not interruptions). These claims, however, are exaggerated stereotypes and do not tell the whole truth, as Tiittula (1994) also points out. In her article, Tiittula (1994) explains that Finnish conversations do include backchannels, but the turns primary speakers hold, after which the possible backchannels occur (p. 99), tend to be a bit longer on average compared to conversations in English. Thus, Tiittula's (1994) view suggests that backchannels do not appear as often in the speech of a person whose native language is Finnish as in the speech of a person whose native language is English.

Since there are no studies specifically about Finnish speakers' use of backchannels when speaking English, a study by Heinz (2003) is discussed as an example in which she studies the use of backchannels between American speakers (speaking English) and German speakers (speaking German). In addition to introducing her own study, Heinz (2003) acknowledges the research done prior to hers between different languages (e.g. Japanese vs. American English, Chinese vs. Japanese), which all show that "all participants engage in some form of backchannel response" and that "both verbal and nonverbal backchannel responses are used" (p. 1118). Heinz (2003) also states that "research indicates linguistic and cultural differences in regard to the frequency, type, and functions of backchannel responses" (p. 1114). Considering her own study, Heinz's (2003) initial hypothesis is that Germans produce fewer backchannels due to their direct communication style, which was confirmed through the study. The other hypothesis that she also suggests is that Germans produce fewer overlapping backchannels, which was confirmed as well. Heinz's (2003) conclusion is that foreign language backchannel

behaviour “need to be incorporated into the teaching and understanding” of those specific languages, and that “individuals who learn a foreign language also need to acquire native listening skills” (p. 1125). Because Germans are considered to have similar communication strategies as Finnish people do (directness, no small talk), Heinz’s (2003) study is better suiting as a case in point for this particular study than e.g. studies between Chinese vs. Japanese backchannels.

Consequently, the discussion in this section endeavours to support the assumption that L1 communication patterns (i.e. the use of backchannels) influence the communication patterns when speaking a foreign/second (L2) language. The assumption is that Finnish backchannelling behaviours influence the way Finns exhibit backchannels when speaking English. As Cheng and Baldauf (2011) state in their article, “listening instruction is a relatively neglected skill in EFL teaching” (p. 31). Based on my own experience and observations, that is the case in Finnish schools as well. Since interactional skills are clearly essential, it would be important to make the students aware that English communication situations are slightly different from what Finnish people are accustomed to. Based on the discussion thus far it can be stated that interactive listening is an important part of communication, therefore it should be added to the teaching more consistently. Heinz (2003) as well as Smith (1987) both note that interactional competence (and therefore interactive listening) should be added to foreign language teaching.

2.2 Oral performance assessment

The chapter thus far has discussed how essential role interactional competence holds in foreign/second (L2) language teaching and learning. As Galaczi and Taylor (2018, p. 219) note, “spoken interaction in a second/foreign (L2) language has assumed greater importance in the last two decades, in light of the growing role of the communicative approach to language teaching, learning, and assessment.” Luoma (2004, p. 1) also points out how “speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching, and this makes them an important object of assessment as well.” Indeed, interactional competence is one of the learning objectives in Finnish National Core Curricula for both basic education and for upper secondary school (POPS, 2014; LOPS, 2015). The new forthcoming curriculum for upper secondary school (LOPS, 2019) that will come into effect in 2021 also emphasizes the importance of communication in foreign languages by stating how students will be “encouraged to improve

their communication strategies" (p. 180). Since it is an important learning outcome that pupils/students are expected to have at the end of their education, it is something that will be assessed by teachers. Furthermore, since oral performance is challenging to assess, studies are needed to increase knowledge that aids the teacher training.

As Luoma (2004) points out, "assessing speaking is a process with many stages" (p. 4). More specifically, it is a cycle that "starts from a need for speaking scores and finishes with the use of the scores for this purpose. In between, there is a test development process and a two-step testing process, where the test is first administered and then scored" (Luoma, 2004, p. 170). To guarantee the best assessment results, the cycle should be followed. What is also important in assessment design is the task itself; Luoma (2004) reminds us that the task should be designed carefully, because the students are assessed based on the produce the task has assigned them. This is an eternal headache for teachers, who would like to use tasks that capture an interaction situation that would be as authentic as possible. Ideally, tasks would mimic authentic situations, which they unfortunately rarely do. This issue is discussed in Itkonen's (2010) thesis that cleverly proposes a question in its title: "Spoken Language Proficiency Assessment: assessing speaking, or evaluating acting?" Indeed, situations in which spoken performance is assessed are usually roleplays.

There are several ways to assess a student's spoken performance: individually, or through paired or group tasks. This thesis discusses the paired alternative, because the students in FUSE perform in pairs. Even though paired speaking tasks are advantageous testing mechanisms, they also come with challenges that need to be made aware to the assessors. These challenges are discussed in inter alia Luoma's (2004) work. Luoma (2004, p. 1) explains how assessing speaking faces various difficulties "because there are so many factors that influence our impression of how well someone can speak a language." She lists three main aspects: Firstly, the testing situation itself is usually very distressing for most students, which obviously can have an effect on the result. Secondly, even the choice of the speaking partner could have an impact on the interaction: "the examinee's talk is almost inevitably influenced by the other participant's personality, communication style and possibly also language level" (Luoma, 2004, p. 37). Thirdly, each assessor is an individual, and their assessment is always their interpretation; different assessors take into account different features of interaction. Furthermore, assessors might have distinct views on these features, e.g. how they perceive fluency.

Concepts that are crucial to any assessment are *validity* and *reliability*. The terms are particularly important in spoken performance assessment, because every interaction situation is different even though the test takers and the task(s) would be the exact same each time (Luoma, 2004). This particular issue elevates the question of reliability that suggests that results should be the same if the test is repeated. Validity, on the other hand, implies that results should be applicable to any other similar situations. Both of these concepts introduce a challenge, because every assessor is an individual who evaluates based on their own interpretation, which may cause differences in assessment. To maximize validity and reliability, Luoma (2004) indicates it is crucial that the "development and use of speaking tests is a cyclical process" (p. 170) that was discussed earlier. Other approaches of maximizing validity and reliability are carefully prepared assessment criteria, and sufficient rater training.

2.2.1 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The students in FUSE are graded based on *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) i.e. CEFR, which is an assessment guideline for learners of foreign languages provided by the Council of Europe. For clarification, there is a companion volume that includes an updated version of the scales released in 2018, but the students in FUSE have been assessed with the 2001 one. The students whose performances are in FUSE are given both the CEFR proficiency level (e.g. B2) and a school grade as a final assessment of the examination. Because CEFR is used as a guideline to assess the students in FUSE and because Finland uses CEFR to assess speakers' proficiency levels in many occasions, a more detailed analysis of the different scales is appropriate.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) includes assessment scales meant for different areas of language – reading, writing, and listening. In addition to these areas of language, the CEFR supports learners to develop competent skills in interaction as well as in spoken performance (Galaczi, 2014). Consequently, one of the assessment scales in CEFR (2001) is "Table 3 – Common reference levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (pp. 28-29) meant for spoken performance assessment. The features that students are graded on in the "Table 3 – Common reference levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (CEFR, 2001, pp. 28-29) are *Range*, *Accuracy*, *Fluency*, *Interaction*, and *Coherence*. The students' performances in FUSE are assessed based on these five different features, therefore the "Table 3 – Common reference levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (CEFR,

2001, pp. 28-29) is examined. Since this is a study that concentrates on interactional competence, the scale *Interaction* is the most relevant for my analysis. The "Table 3 – Common reference levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (CEFR, 2001, pp. 28-29) can be found in Appendix B.

Even though I will concentrate only on the aforementioned "Table 3 – Common reference levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (CEFR, 2001, pp. 28-29), it is important to note that there is a section in CEFR (2001) devoted to spoken interaction that provides illustrative scales for nine different situations of spoken interaction that are quite specific (e.g. *understanding a native speaker interlocutor*, *informal discussion*, and *transactions to obtain goods or services*). There is also a section "Interaction strategies" that specifies further three more illustrative scales: *Taking the floor*, *Co-operating*, and *Asking for clarification*. Even though this thesis will not examine these scales in detail because they were not used in FUSE, they are important to acknowledge.

This thesis has discussed the crucial role of interactive listening and its increased importance in second language assessment. Hence, the CEFR (2001) scales would supposedly reference non-primary speakers' performance by providing guidelines for interactional competence as well. Indeed, CEFR (2001) states that "in interactive activities the language user acts alternately as speaker and listener with one or more interlocutors" (p. 71), which indicates that the non-primary speaker's part is acknowledged. However, this does not mean it is apparent from the scales. Galaczi (2014) poses an important question in her article considering the CEFR scales: "What features of interactional competence in test-taker discourse are salient at different oral proficiency levels?" and "Which criterial IC [interactional competence] features distinguish between adjacent proficiency levels?" (pp. 554-555). Since CEFR is an assessment guideline for assessors all around Europe, the scales should be quite precise per each proficiency level. Considering Galaczi's (2014) questions, the proficiency levels that somehow indicate non-primary speakers' performance from the scale *Interaction* are discussed here to examine whether or not interactional competence is being referenced (emphasis added):

> A2: Can answer questions and *respond to simple statements*. *Can indicate when he/she is following* but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.

> B1: Can initiate, *maintain* and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. *Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding*.
>
> B2: Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he/she needs to, though he/she may not always do this elegantly. *Can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension,* inviting others in, etc.
>
> (CEFR, 2001, pp. 28-29).

The italicized texts reference the non-primary speakers' parts in a conversation. Thus, only some descriptors of the scale reference non-primary speakers' performance briefly. The descriptors and CEFR (2001) are discussed from a similar perspective by Galaczi and Taylor (2018) who also emphasize excerpts from the proficiency levels. They mention the following parts that indicate the non-primary speakers' performance from the scale *Interaction*: "initiating, maintaining and closing conversations; taking turns; confirming comprehension; inviting others in; keeping the floor; and relating contributions to those of other speakers" (Galaczi and Taylor, 2018, p. 228). They conclude how interactional competence is situated in assessment scales "only partially" (2018, p. 228). Consequently, the observations made above are concordant with the ones Galaczi and Taylor (2018) have made.

The discussion in this section has endeavored to demonstrate the deficiency of the CEFR (2001) scales considering assessment of interactional competence, which has been noticed by scholars as well. The issue with the scales in CEFR is that the descriptors are rather vague and generic and need further classification (Galaczi, 2014). This can be seen from the scale *Interaction* that does not specify the difference between B1 and B2: "Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation" vs. "Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he/she needs to" do not indicate much of a difference (Galaczi, 2014, p. 555). *Taking the floor*, *Co-operating*, and *Asking for clarification* are also rather vague and need to be defined further, because none of them include a descriptor for level A1. One of the descriptors are even labelled "Same as B2", which should not be the case in the "native-like" level of C2. Galaczi's (2014) research provides more specific descriptors for each level, which has not yet been provided by the Council of Europe. In conclusion, more specific descriptors are needed to refer to non-primary speakers' performances as well, because it is an important

element of successful communication, and because the scales are used quite considerably across Europe.

3. Data and Method

This chapter describes the data and methods used in detail. First, I introduce the FUSE corpus, after which I explain the methods of analysis. This chapter also reviews the limitations the data has, addresses ethics of the data collection, and underlays the forthcoming analysis by providing examples of what has been included and omitted from it.

3.1 The Finnish Upper Secondary School Corpus of Spoken English (FUSE)

The Finnish Upper Secondary School Corpus of Spoken English (FUSE) consists of recordings of Finnish secondary school students who have taken part in the national oral exam of English in Finland (usually at the end of "Course 8" that is an oral course), which was mentioned earlier in this study. The corpus can be found online (https://fusecorpus.eu) and it does not require any signing in; it is accessible to everybody. The site's administrator is Lasse Ehrnrooth, who coordinates the data collection. Ehrnrooth is a doctoral student at the University of Helsinki, whose co-taught course on L2 spoken interaction I attended in 2018. The FUSE corpus was used as data in that course, which is one of the factors I got intrigued by this topic. The corpus is connected to the "Development project for teaching spoken performance" (i.e. "Väiski") that was mentioned earlier, in that it provides the project the data it needs; the corpus is partly made in order to meet the needs of the project. The main focus of the "Väiski" project is to examine interaction in order to be able to provide improvements to the teaching of foreign spoken language proficiency. Consequently, the context of the project is comprised of Finnish students who are performing an oral test in English. According to the site, the Scottish Corpus of Texts & Speech (SCOTS, https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/corpus-details/) has been the main source of inspiration to the FUSE corpus.

At the moment, there are 28 conversations in the FUSE corpus that have been transcribed and graded. Since the corpus is an on-going project as well as rather recent (the recordings have been collected since the beginning of the academic year of 2014), it is not very substantial yet with 20,392 words. This is noted by the site itself by encouraging teachers to contribute into the making of it. The possible contribution is made rather straightforward, because the site provides specific instructions on how to send in a recording in a form of an audio. Therefore, any teacher nationwide could participate, which also means that the data can come from

anywhere. However, it is not stated from which part of Finland the data originates from. Other instructions that aid the use of this corpus are the transcription conventions provided by the site, e.g. how overlaps and pronunciation difficulties are marked. The transcription conventions can be found in Appendix D.

I chose 20 pairs out of the 28 to be a part of my analysis, because I wanted to have the same number of pairs as Sivukari (2015) had in her thesis in order to maintain my results comparable to hers. The 20 pairs I chose form a data of 18,448 words. The pairs are selected purely based on the length of the conversation – the longer, the better. The tasks used in the conversations analyzed are "Newspapers" (debate-like), "Eating out", "Mind map" (various different topics), "Call to a mail order company", "An unsuitable present", and "At a party", which can be found in Appendix C. Because the 20 pairs are selected based on the length of the discussion, the pairs and conversation numbers in the analysis do not add up (e.g. conversation 5 in FUSE is not pair 5 in this thesis). However, the speaker codes are stated (e.g. F1 and M1), so that the conversation could be traced down if necessary.

The ethics of this data has been considered; the website is really transparent about how the data is collected and treated, which can be found here https://fusecorpus.eu/faq/. It is clearly stated on the site that "The content is managed by Lasse Ehrnrooth, data stored on a server administered by HostPapa and the user interface is run on the current version of WordPress." After declaring this, the site dedicates a section named "What personal data WordPress collects and why we collect it" for explaining how the data is retained for instance. It is also clearly notified that the students have to fill in a consent form (and/or the parents if the student is under 18 years of age), if a teacher wants to send in a recording. In the actual audios, every name or identification feature that the students say have been censored with a bleep. In the transcriptions, the students' and the teachers' identities are secured by referencing them by id's, e.g. F1 (female 1) or T1 (teacher 1).

What is important to note is that the Finnish national oral exam of English is in three different parts: the first part is reading, the second one is summarizing a story, and the third one is a conversation situation. Consequently, the FUSE corpus only consists of this third part of the test. The third part is the only one recorded, because it is the least structured part of the exam, which is why it is the most fruitful one for teachers and scholars to examine interaction, which is the main focus of the Väiski project. There are twelve different task types used in the

conversations of this corpus, which are listed on the site that can be found here https://fusecorpus.eu/explore/tasks-used-in-the-examination/. The tasks used in the conversations analyzed in this thesis were specified a bit earlier. The grading for the students is also provided by the site, with both the school grade and the CEFR scale. The purpose of this study is to examine L2 interactional competence, therefore only the CEFR scale given for *Interaction* is acknowledged (highlighted in Figure 2). The reason why CEFR scale is taken into account in this thesis is because it is more globally distinguished than the Finnish grading system. The assessment table looks like this:

Teacher's assessment based on students' conversation in part III of the exam

CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(see e.g. Europass)

Teacher id = 1

F1		
Skill areas in spoken English	CEFR	School grade
Interaction	B2.2	9
Fluency	B2.2	9
Pronunciation, intonation and stress	B1.2	7
Vocabulary and structures	B2.1	8
Grammar	B1.2	7
Average value	B2.1	8

Figure 2. Teacher's assessment based on the students' conversation in part III of the exam. FUSE Corpus.

What I have decided to omit from the analysis are the first turns, even though there might be instances of e.g. *yeah*s or *okay*s, because the audios are cut in a manner that the teacher's instructions cannot be heard, which is why we cannot know what the first turns answer to. In addition, turns after instances in which the teacher has said something mid-conversation that has been anonymized are omitted from the analysis as well, reasoning being the same as just described.

3) An excerpt from Pair 4.

Turns	Speakers and utterances
1	**F6**: Yeah
2	**F7**: Yeah
3	**F6**: Part three... Er waitress, waitress!
4	**F7**: Hello hello, er what do you need?

This first particular example indicates how the speaker "F6" reads directly from the instruction paper by saying "part three", after which I consider the conversation to begin. As explained, the first two *yeah*s are not counted.

4) An excerpt from Pair 9.

62	**T1**: [censored: teacher giving instructions]
63	**M11**: Okay let's talk about socializing, free time opportunities. So it's [censored: forename] talking- talking here and er... I think you know the... town or the state should provide like free- free time opportunities to young people... like for example Helsinki... er... City like m-... er organizes free... er courses... in summer... but maybe there should be more. What do you think?

Excerpt 4 is an instance in which the teacher has given instructions mid-conversation, after which a possible backchannel *okay* is not counted.

Another element that is omitted from the analysis is instances of Finnish, which appear in half of the conversations. However, any instance of Finnish that has the function of a backchannel is taken into account in the analysis. There are seven such instances, which will be discussed in section 4.1.6 in more detail. Since the focus of this thesis is English backchannels, the Finnish ones are not categorized into the five backchannels types introduced earlier. An example from the data of Finnish being used when backchannelling (emphasis added):

5) An excerpt from Pair 15.

22	F19: Er well I don't er really know what are the most effective spots in a supermarket but I have heard that... er usually shops put their er newest products on the left because when a human walks in he or she... er watches to the left first, so there are all the most expensive and the newest products.
23	F20: **[fin]Aha[/fin]** Yes

What also needs to be made evident is that any instances of e.g. *yeah* or *yes*, even though being some of the most frequent reactive expressions, are not considered to be backchannels after a question. This is pretty obvious, because after a question an answer is expected and even required. Even though backchannels are described as short words or utterances, they are not required in a way that answers are. Here is an example of the data of a *yeah* that is not a backchannel:

6) An excerpt from Pair 18.

10	F26: //No// no no I- did you say that you had two tickets?
11	F25: Yeah

3.1.1 Limitations with the data

Just like in any other data, the FUSE corpus has some limitations as well. Firstly, the transcriptions have errors in them, which I decided to treat differently. Minor errors include a couple of *mhm* and *yeah* that are not transcribed even though heard in the audio, in addition to one instance of one extra *Aha* in the transcription that is not heard in the audio. In these cases, I do not count them in my analysis. More major errors include speakers getting mixed midst conversation. In these instances, I decided to correct the mixed speakers myself (Pair 14 and Pair 15).

Another point about this data that is not particularly a challenge, but an issue, needs to be noted: like mentioned, the data can come from anywhere, because it is not stated from which part of Finland the data originates from. For obvious reasons, the school or even the city where the

data is recorded cannot be stated in order to maintain the speakers' anonymity, however, the part of Finland could be expressed in the data in my opinion. Because the FUSE corpus is not that massive yet, it does not perhaps play any role, but if the corpus continues to grow then it would be a welcome addition to know where each pair is approximately from. Even though this does not have an impact on my thesis, I want to raise this observation from the data.

3.2 Method

To describe the process of identifying the backchannels from the data in as detail as possible, the phases of the analysis are explained. First, the transcriptions of the audios were copied into a word file, after which every instance of backchannelling was coded. In the coding system each backchannel type has a different colour as follows: Minimal Response (MR), Reactive Expression (RE), Collaborative Finishes (CF), Repetitions (Rep), Resumptive Openers (RO), and Finnish Occurrences of Backchannels (FOB). An example excerpt of the analyzed data looks like this:

7) An excerpt from Pair 14.

193	**F18**: //I saw the Moomins// mm Muumi's monster there as well... I //have//
194	**F17**: //Oh//
195	**F18**: the- it's- it's changed cha- eh //[laugh]//
196	**F17**: //Like the// boogyman.
197	**F18**: It's boogyman.
198	**F17**: Yeah

After coding, every instance of different backchannel type was counted, and added into an Excel file. This allowed me to count the total number of occurrences of each type as well as the number of Backchannels (Bs) in total. All in all, the method is rather straightforward in practice. The first table made that consists of all of the crucial information looks like this:

Pair	Speaker	MR	RE	CF	REP	RO	FOB	Bs in Total	CEFR scale	TASK TYPE
1	F1	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	B2.2	DEBATE
	F2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	B2.2	
2	F3	11	11	0	3	0	0	25	B2.2	DEBATE
	F4	8	20	1	1	0	0	30	B2.2	
3	M1	1	8	0	3	1	0	13	B2.1	DEBATE
	F5	0	6	0	0	0	0	6	B2.1	
4	F6	0	16	0	3	4	0	23	B2.2	EATING OUT
	F7	0	13	0	1	6	0	20	B2.1	
5	M3	2	8	0	0	1	0	11	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F9	2	11	0	0	0	0	13	B2.1	

Table 1. An excerpt of the excel file.

This table consists of all the information required in order to successfully complete the analysis. The information I considered to be also important is the task type, because it might have an impact on the number of backchannels. The complete table can be found in Appendix A.

The method is suitable for this study, because to answer my first two research questions "What types of backchannels occur in Finnish upper secondary school students' speech in an English language spoken performance test? and "How frequent are the different types of backchannels in relation to each other?" identifying and counting the backchannel types was a necessity. To identify the types, I drew on conversation analytic methods, which allowed me to focus on the organisation of the interaction and turn-taking in particular. Whereas these first two questions are more on the quantitative side of the spectrum, the third research question is more on the qualitative side: "What could explain the possible variation in the use of backchannels between the students?" For this particular question I needed to delve into the results: could it be explained by the students' proficiency levels, by task type, or by individual variation? The reason to choose these three perspectives was that those are the most probable reasons that could explain the possible variation.

4. Analysis

In this chapter, the results are presented. In addition, the backchannel types introduced in section 2.1.2 will be discussed each in separate sections with examples of the occurrences, and some borderline cases. This section provides instances of the types, which makes it easier to understand the occurrences of this phenomenon. As a remainder, the complete table of the results can be found in Appendix A.

4.1 Backchannel types and frequencies

Each of the previously introduced backchannel types appear in the data. Firstly, the frequencies of the types of backchannels are presented:

RE	MR	RO	REP	CF	FOB	Total number of Bs
748	104	87	55	17	7	1018
73.5%	10.2%	8.5%	5.4%	1.7%	0.7%	100%

Table 2. The frequencies of the types of backchannels in relation to the total number of backchannels.

As shown in Table 2, the evidently most frequent backchannel type is reactive expression that covers almost 74% of the backchannel types in the data. The second most frequent type is minimal response that covers approximately 10% of the instances, followed by resumptive opener that covers almost 9%. Repetitions are the second least frequent type covering approximately 5% of the occurrences, and the least frequent backchannel type is collaborative finish that covers almost 2% of the occurrences. Finnish occurrences of backchannels cover less than a percent of the data. The different backchannel types are examined in their own section next, proceeding from the most frequent backchannel type to the least frequent one.

4.1.1 Reactive Expressions

It is no wonder which backchannel type is the most frequent one in the data; there are 748 occurrences of reactive expressions in all of the 20 conversations analyzed. Even though it is the most used one, there is one examinee (F2) who did not produce any reactive expressions in her speech, which is the only case of such behavior in the data. Even though *yeah* and its

variations are the most common, there are various different words and expressions that are counted in under the type of reactive expression. The most frequently occurring words or phrases are:

Types of RE	**Number of occurrences**
yeah	494
okay	60
yes	51
yeah yeah	33
yeah + something	14
yeah that's true	13
oh + something	13
that's true	7
really	5
yeah me too	4
okay + something	4
(that's) great	4
neither have I/yeah me neither	4
oh no	4
yeah true	3
oh my god	3
alright	3
yeah I know	2
exactly	2

Table 3. The most frequent reactive expressions in the data.

All in all, reactive expression as a type is the most versatile one, because the possibilities of expressions that are a reaction to something are innumerable. In addition to the expressions introduced in Table 3 above, words and/or utterances appearing just once in the data are: *mkay*, *yeah same*, *yes yeah*, *ah + something*, *good*, *of course*, *okay great*, *yep*, *definitely*, *I see*, *yes I agree*, *I know right*, *I think so*, *oooh*, *true*, and *right*. One instance included a variety of expressions into its utterance: *Oooh okay okay, yeah yeah I understand*. The most common use of reactive expressions taken out of the data are presented in excerpt 8 (occurrences put in bold and underlined):

8) An excerpt from Pair 14.

30	**F18**: Even if it's not that scary situation you may feel so scared and helpless //or//

31	**F17**: //**Yeah**//
32	**F18**: especially the feeling of... being helpless
33	**F17**: **Yeah** //of//
34	**F18**: //is// scary.
35	**F17**: **Yes**

There are also other words, utterances or phrases that appear less often in the data. For instance, occurrences that are distinctively related to a happy and a disgusted reaction emerge once each: *yay* and *ew*. Furthermore, even though reactive expressions are usually affirmative in nature, two instances of negative reactions are counted based on their clear function of a reaction, as shown in excerpts 9 and 10:

9) An excerpt from Pair 1.

18	**F2**: of like er some newspapers er website then there is- there are all the important news of the day you don't have to see all the //boring news//
19	**F1**: //**no no**//
20	**F1**: but that is not ehm, like that is not sophisticated, sorry but it's just- you know, you have to know about things that is not like some Iltalehti's n- l- website and you're like oh there's somebody got killed and nothing more. And when you're reading the newspaper you can see the whole news and read them and get information and yeah, //that is good//.

10) An excerpt from Pair 18.

9	F25: Erm... well of course you- w- I can sell the tickets if you don't want to go there because... you don't have to, I understand if you don't like One D because... well... they're not in... they like everyone doesn't like them, I //understand//
10	F26: //**No// no no** I- did you say that you had two tickets?

Excerpt 11 represents how backchannels can be in a form of a question as well:

11) An excerpt from Pair 3.

14	**F5**: I really really do believe in pa- real actual papers and I- I //heard they gonna//

15	**M1**: //**<u>You do?</u>**//
16	**F5**: I th- I heard they're gonna survive the time of the internet.

In this particular conversation in excerpt 11, M1's phrase *you do?* is clearly a reaction of the primary speaker's turn. Even though it seems to be a question, it is not treated as such, because it is not answered by F5; it clearly has the function of a backchannel. In addition, phrases like aforementioned are usually uttered as rhetorical questions. Instances of *really?* fall into the same category as the one just discussed.

12) Excerpts from Pair 9.

15	**M11**: You know if you have a... er huge workload of stuff to do then you get stressed because you have to do so many things and that can affect your social life.
16	**F14**: Mmm
17	**M11**: And that //leads to//
18	**F14**: //**<u>it does</u>**//
19	**M11**: depression.

27	**M11**: Like alcoholism... is a bad problem.
28	**F14**: **<u>It is</u>**

These two particular instances of excerpt 12 indicate a supporting function the non-primary speaker F14 exhibits. As stated in the overall definition of a backchannel, these two phrases do not bring anything new into the conversation topic-wise; they are merely uttered to show the primary speaker understanding and support.

13) An excerpt from Pair 17.

78	**F23**: spend //like budjeting for that vacation//
79	**F22**: //You- you- you hadn't- **<u>yeah, yeah</u>** you were//

Excerpt 13 is a great example of a distinctive backchannel occurrence in the data. The example is rather difficult to read, however, the slashes (//) represent the cases in which the examinees

speak simultaneously. Therefore, it is evident that F22 stops what she is saying to acknowledge F23's turn; the backchannel is in between the speaker F22's turn. Instances such as this appear fairly frequently in the data, which are challenging to notice due to their location in the turn.

4.1.2 Minimal Responses

As can be seen from the results, minimal response is the second most frequent backchannel type that occurs in the data. Most common minimal responses are introduced in Table 4:

Types of MR	**Number of occurrences**
mm	44
mmm	28
mhm	17
oh	5
aah	4
hmm	3

Table 4. The most frequent minimal responses in the data.

Other minimal responses appearing just once are *err*, *ooh*, and *mm mhm*. The difference between *mm* and *mmm* as well as *oh* and *ooh*, is a clear consonant or vowel lengthening, which can be heard in the audios. An example of the most common instance of a minimal response is presented in excerpt 14:

14) An excerpt from Pair 2.

11	**F4**: Well I think it- it's funny that er you think that way because I think like er- I actually tried this Helsingin Sanomat app //in my//
12	**F3**: //**mm**//
13	**F4**: iPhone but er- I think er- it was- it was too small when I- I didn't like my eyes hurted because it was er- the mobile phone is so small and I have to read the text from it so I //prefer//
14	**F3**: //**mm**//

However, there are some borderline cases. Some minimal responses appear at the beginning of turns, even though resumptive openers are defined as minimal responses occurring at the beginning of turns. To distinguish these two types from each other, two elements must be taken

into account: firstly, if a relatively long pause follows a backchannel instance occurring at the beginning of a turn, it is coded as a minimal response rather than a resumptive opener. As a recap, one characteristic of a resumptive opener is that "only short pauses appear after a resumptive opener" (Clancy et al., 1996, p. 363). Secondly, the intonations of these two backchannel types are distinct. The intonation of a minimal response is usually rising and falling, as illustrated in excerpt 15. The intonation patterns are only shown in cases in which a minimal response occurs at the beginning of turns in order to illustrate the difference from a resumptive opener. An example is presented of a minimal response occurring at the beginning of a turn in excerpt 15.

15) An excerpt from Pair 13.

77	**M16**: Yeah... //I agree//
78	**M17**: //if you do it// all the time it's really expensive.
79	**M16**: **Mhm**... Aa... Get your guide versus official guides... erm... [laugh]... er well... it erm... get your guide... official guides... I dunno what

The backchannel occurrence in excerpt 15 is coded as a minimal response, purely based on the intonation of the utterance as well as the relatively long pause that occurs after the minimal response, which is indicated by the three dots (…) in the transcription. The pause might originate from the fact that the examinee M16 expected M17 to continue his turn, which he did not. Since M17 did not continue his turn, M16 proceeds with his turn by introducing an entirely new topic after the occurrence of the backchannel. Instances like these appear a few times in the data, but because the pauses are distinctively longer than with the cases of resumptive openers, the decision was made to code these as minimal responses. Again, the more specific transcription conventions can be found in Appendix D.

4.1.3 Resumptive Openers

Resumptive openers are the third most frequently occurring backchannel type in the data. As stated in the definition, it would be coded as a minimal response if not continued by a full turn. However, the pause that immediately proceeds the backchannel and the intonation of the backchannel have an effect on the type, determining whether it is a resumptive opener or a

minimal response, as discussed in the previous section 4.1.2. Since there are reoccurring types of resumptive openers, the most frequent ones are presented in Table 5:

er	43
mm	10
mmm	8
erm	7
ah	4
aah	3
eh	2
oh	1

Table 5. The most frequent resumptive openers in the data.

Resumptive openers that appear only once each in the data are: *uuh*, *oh naa*, *err*, *mm eh*, *ah oh*, *aa*, *hmm*, *ooh*, *eer*, and *oh*. Typical occurrences of resumptive openers can be seen from excerpts 16 and 17:

16) An excerpt from Pair 16.

61	**F21**: **Eh** well we have a lot of forest and nature //is//
62	**M18**: //Yeah//

17) An excerpt from Pair 14.

144	**F17**: I- mhm //[laugh] yeah but I like//
145	**F18**: //[laugh] [inaudible]//
146	**F17**: ***er*** celebrities but ***er*** for one dream I have had was like- it was ***er*** summer, ***er*** it was midsummer... //like the//
147	**F18**: //**Aah** I see.//

Excerpt 17 introduces a phenomenon that is not in the focus area of this thesis: fillers. It is important to make a distinction between a filler and a resumptive opener, because *er*, being a frequent filler type, can be a resumptive opener as well. Whether the syllable is a resumptive opener, or a filler depends on its location in a turn. In this thesis, *er* syllables that are produced in the beginning of a turn are coded as resumptive openers. However, if the *er* is in-between turn, as seen in the speech of F17, it is a filler (the instances of fillers are bolded and italicized

in the example). Since fillers are a frequently occurring phenomenon in the data, a careful analysis of these non-lexical elements is required.

As discussed, pause is an important factor in differentiating between a minimal response and a resumptive opener, as is intonation; that is to say that a pause might also occur after a resumptive opener. The intonation that is present in resumptive openers is more of a thoughtful one than an affirming one. Usually, resumptive openers are the non-lexical elements that indicate thinking: what am I about to say next? Intonation of a resumptive opener could be characterized as a level one, or a rising one. An example of a resumptive opener with a rising intonation is illustrated in excerpt 18:

18) An excerpt from Pair 16.

46	**M18**: //[laugh] yeah// [laugh] yeah... erm... are there any coun- eh eh er no er has image of Finland changed recently?
47	**F21**: **Er**... I think... it hasn't changed a lot

A differentiation also needs to be made between reactive expressions *oh + something* and resumptive opener *oh*, even though there is just one occurrence of *oh* as a resumptive opener. *Oh + something* as a reactive expression represents a short phrase following the *oh*, which is clearly a reaction of enjoyment, delight or understanding (e.g. *oh that's true* and *oh that's nice*). *Oh* as a resumptive opener merely begins a longer turn, as can be seen from excerpt 19:

19) An excerpt from the Pair 4.

75	**F7**: //**Oh**// that would- you are welcome and er bring you friends with you.
76	**F6**: Yes I- I think I will.

4.1.4 Repetitions

The second least frequent type of backchannels is repetitions. A typical example of a repetition occurrence is presented in excerpt 20:

20) An excerpt from Pair 2.

56	**F3**: //and people// need that
57	**F4**: Yeah **people need that** //yeah//

When searching for repetitions, a careful analysis needs to be performed, because the word/phrase that the non-primary speaker repeats is within the primary speaker's turn, and the turn can be in several different lines in the transcription (the left column that marks the turns, e.g. 56 and 57 in excerpt 21 above). The turns can be divided into several lines, because all of the backchannels, coughs, laughs, or other instances need to be registered into the transcript. This can be seen from excerpt 21 of a repetition occurrence in the data:

21) An excerpt from Pair 7.

55	**M7**: Because they weren't important.
56	**M8**: //Yeah//
57	**M7**: //like//
58	**M8**: **They weren't important**.

In some cases, the repetition might not be the first thing the non-primary speaker utters, as seen from excerpt 22:

22) An excerpt from Pair 3.

20	**F5**: //Yeah but you can still recycle// the paper it's really easy to recycle.
21	**M1**: Yeah I mean it's **easy to recycle** but the amount of recycling it... I don't know how big is that I mean, is everyone recycling the paper or not?

4.1.5 Collaborative Finishes

Collaborative finishes are the least frequent backchannel type in the data with 17 occurrences in total. The occurrences of them are challenging to distinguish, because in several conversations the speakers speak simultaneously adding up to each other's speech, which makes the analysis demanding on this part. To make the difference evident between a continued story and a collaborative finish, there are some nuances that need to be added into the definition.

Collaborative finishes are rather short phrases, in most cases just a word, which are added to the primary speakers' turn. Usually, the non-primary speaker produces a collaborative finish in order to help the primary speaker, which can be noticed when the primary speaker pauses and seems to be clearly at a loss about which word/phrase to use. In addition, if the speakers express themselves simultaneously, how would they know what the other one is about to say? Therefore, the parts where a lot of simultaneous speech occurs, there are no coded instances of collaborative finishes. Here are some examples of collaborative finishes:

23) An excerpt from Pair 2.

1	**F3**: What do you think about newspapers? I- I- I usually read my newspapers from my news, from my i- from my iPhone, from er Helsingin Sanomat mm...
2	**F4**: s- **App**.
3	**F3**: The App.
4	**F4**: Yeah

24) An excerpt from Pair 14.

60	**F17**: //[laugh]// Sorry no- no- not sorry no- //it's//
61	**F18**: //**Sorry// not sorry**.
62	**F17**: it's like... well... erm
63	**F18**: **Scary things**
64	**F17**: Yes scary things and if you get traumatized or... //it's er- it just//

Excerpt 23 represents a situation, in which the primary speaker is at a loss for the noun 'app'. Excerpt 24 includes two instances of collaborative finishes; F18 finishes F17's turn, because she is hesitant to how the saying *sorry not sorry* is said. As it is evident from these examples, a collaborative finish is followed by the primary speakers' affirmative utterance (such as *yeah*) to confirm that the non-primary speaker has said the right word/phrase. Another way of affirming the collaborative finish is to repeat what the non-primary speaker has said, such as in the excerpts above.

In some instances, it is unclear whether the non-primary speaker is attempting to finish the primary speakers' sentence, or if the non-primary speaker reads directly from the task paper.

Since the speakers have the task paper in front of them from which they read the instructions, they could be reading from it directly rather than assisting the primary speaker. Since the audios are the only source of information available for these situations, I cannot assume that they are reading from the task paper. Therefore, I have counted them as collaborative finishes. One example of the aforementioned is presented in excerpt 25 (the actual task can be found in Appendix C):

25) An excerpt from Pair 13.

8	**M17**: And er... well Wolt //versus//
9	**M16**: //**Wolt versus// dir- di- dining [laugh] at a- er restaurant**.

There are also instances in which the difference between a repetition and a collaborative finish is ambiguous, as can be seen from excerpt 26:

26) An excerpt from Pair 14.

27	**F17**: //like// you feel anxious or //scared.//
28	**F18**: //**Scared// in a dream**.

I have decided to code the backchannel occurrence in excerpt 26 as a collaborative finish, even though the word *scared* is repeated. The reason why this is recognized as a collaborative finish and not a repetition is because the word *scared* is said simultaneously (slashes as indicators), therefore F18 cannot have predicted that F17 is going to say that particular word.

4.1.6 Finnish occurrences of backchannels

There are seven instances of Finnish backchannels in the data. The instances are *oho*, *joo* (4 instances), *aha*, and *nii*. An example of an occurrence of a Finnish backchannel is introduced in excerpt 27:

27) An excerpt from Pair 18.

77	**F18**: //My mom// actually saw nightmares from... er... Exorcist for three years.
78	**F17**: [fin]**Oho**[/fin]

The utterance *oho* indicates a surprised reaction in Finnish, hence it would be categorized as a reactive expression. However, I have decided to code the Finnish instances of backchannels into their own type, due to the fact that they might have an impact on the possible variation I am set out to study. These Finnish occurrences of backchannels are discussed in more detail in section 4.2.1.

4.2 Possible variation between the types

To answer the last research question, it is important to revisit the results. Consequently, I endeavour to answer the question of what could explain the possible variation in the use of backchannels between the students. And by the use of backchannels I refer to the types of backchannels used, and the number of backchannels exhibited. The perspectives I chose to approach this particular question are discussed in their own sections, which are proficiency levels, task type, and individual variation, because they seem the most probable factors for the variation.

4.2.1 Proficiency levels

In this section, the students who have received the same proficiency level will be discussed in separate paragraphs in order to analyze the backchannel types that have occurred with those particular students.

RE	MR	RO	REP	CF	FOB	Total number of Bs
174	38	20	16	1	7	249
69.9%	15.3%	8.0%	6.4%	0.4%	2.8%	100%

Table 6. Frequencies of backchannel types across students rated B1.2.

Four students had received the CEFR proficiency level B1.2, which is the lowest one given in the data. As can be interpreted from Table 6 above, the backchannel type that has the most occurrences from this group is reactive expressions with a significant difference. Minimal response is the second most frequent, followed by resumptive openers, repetitions, Finnish occurrences of backchannels, and collaborative finishes. Consequently, the frequencies of the backchannel types are mostly in line with the overall results presented in Table 1, except for

the Finnish occurrences of backchannels that are more frequent than collaborative finishes with this particular group of students. The number of backchannels each examinee has uttered differ greatly, from 23 occurrences to 98 ones.

The fascinating factor with this group of students is that every instance of a Finnish backchannel appears at this proficiency level – the Finnish occurrences of backchannels are even more frequent than collaborative finishes. Because this is the lowest graded group and Finnish backchannels are not found at higher proficiency levels, there is a possibility that the instances of Finnish are a contributing factor why the students are given such a proficiency level. On the other hand, there are other instances of Finnish that are not counted in the data (i.e. codeswitching), which might also have an impact on the result (see Lukkari, forthcoming). Nevertheless, there is a factor why Finnish occurrences of backchannels might be significant: the speakers who have uttered backchannels in Finnish do not correct themselves afterwards, which is what could have redeemed the uttering of Finnish having an influence on the grading. This conclusion is, however, purely conjecture. Since Finnish backchannels do not occur in the other proficiency levels, the category FOB is omitted from henceforth.

RE	MR	RO	REP	CF	Total number of Bs
381	45	59	21	13	519
73.4%	8.7%	11.4%	4.0%	2,50%	100%

Table 7. Frequencies of backchannel types across students rated B2.1.

The CEFR proficiency level B2.1 is the most distributed one in this set of data; there are 25 students who have received this level. As shown in Table 7, out of the 519 occurrences of backchannels reactive expressions occur the most frequently covering over a half of the instances, and collaborative finishes occur the least frequently. Contrary to the overall results of backchannel type frequencies, resumptive opener is the second most frequent type, after which is minimal response. The second least frequent type is repetitions. The number of backchannels in total also differ quite a bit; even though these students have been given the same proficiency level, some have only two occurrences of backchannels in their speech when some have 93 occurrences.

RE	MR	RO	REP	CF	Total number of Bs
193	21	8	18	3	243
79.4%	8.6%	3.3%	7.4%	1.2%	100%

Table 8. Frequencies of backchannel types across students rated B2.2.

Eleven students had received the CEFR proficiency level B2.2, which is the highest level given in this data. As seen in Table 8, out of the 243 backchannel occurrences the most frequent type is reactive expression, the second most frequent one is minimal response, and the least frequent one is collaborative finish. Interestingly, the second least frequent backchannel type with this group is resumptive openers, and not repetitions. Moreover, the difference between the types minimal response and repetition is only 1.2%, which has been more significant at other proficiency levels. This set of data also indicates how drastically different the total number of exhibited backchannels between the speakers are, alternating from one instance to 43 instances.

4.2.2 Task type

The task types used in the data vary from mind maps to phone calls, as discussed already in chapter 3 of this study. Based on the conversations of the students, it could be argued that some task types are more structured than others, which might have an impact on the students' performances. For this section, a closer look at the task types is necessary.

As a recap, the task types used in the data analysed are "Newspapers" (debate-like), "Eating out", "Mind map" (various different topics), "Call to a mail order company", "An unsuitable present", and "At a party." Every task except from mind map include rather specific instructions on how the conversation should proceed. The following excerpt is taken out of the instructions for "eating out" on the FUSE's website:

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:
– The soup of the day and the other types of starter available
– Recommended main courses and desserts
– The types of drinks available
– The loudness of the background music
– Whether the meal was satisfactory
– Payment by credit card

Each task, excluding mind maps, has the same "Cover at least the following topics" section with instructions adapted to the task at hand. Therefore, it can be stated that these task types are more structured ones than mind maps. How does this have an effect to the number of backchannels then? The number of backchannels the students have uttered each differ from one instance to 99 instances, and each student who has exhibited over 31 instances of backchannels in his/her speech has performed the test using the task type mind map. Thus, this observation suggests that the more unstructured speech, the more instances of backchannels. On the other hand, if a student exhibited less than 31 instances of backchannels in their speech, there is no indication for a pattern in terms of task types. For instance, in a conversation in which five instances of backchannels occurred in total, the task type used was mind map.

4.2.3 Individual variation

This section will discuss examples from the data that are somehow exceptional. This section, as well, endeavours to find a pattern that could explain the variations that occur in the results. There are pairs that are brought up for a closer inspection in this section.

Pairs 14, 15 & 16, and 4 & 17

First, I am going to introduce five pairs whose speakers have been assessed on a different proficiency level with each other, which are the only pairs evaluated so in the data. First, pairs 14, 15, and 16 are introduced, because they share an element with each other: the speaker who has the lower proficiency level has exhibited more backchannels in his/her speech (circled in Table 9). Moreover, the difference between the instances of backchannels is not minor, it is almost half, and with the case of pair 15 it is more than a half. What is fascinating with this set of pairs, is that the speaker who has been given a higher proficiency level has exhibited fewer instances of backchannels in his/her speech, which is against what I initially expected. What is also interesting is that pair 16 is the only pair in this data in which the proficiency level difference between the speakers is two levels.

Pair	Speaker	MR	RE	CF	REP	RO	FOB	Bs in Total	CEFR scale
14	F17	8	81	1	5	3	1	99	B1.2
	F18	14	24	5	2	4	0	49	B2.1
15	F19	0	5	2	0	2	0	9	B2.1
	F20	5	13	0	3	2	3	26	B1.2
16	F21	5	40	0	1	6	0	52	B1.2
	M18	2	26	0	3	3	0	34	B2.2

Table 9. Pairs 14, 15, and 16.

However, pairs 4 and 17 in Table 10 show opposite results:

Pair	Speaker	MR	RE	CF	REP	RO	FOB	Bs in Total	CEFR scale
4	F6	0	16	0	3	4	0	23	B2.2
	F7	0	13	0	1	6	0	20	B2.1
17	F22	3	75	2	7	6	0	93	B2.1
	F23	20	40	0	7	9	3	79	B1.2

Table 10. Pairs 4 and 17.

The examinees are assessed on a different proficiency level similarly to the previous set of pairs in Table 9, but the ones who have been assessed higher have exhibited more backchannels in their speech in Table 10. The difference in total number of backchannels is less distinct in the case of pair 4, whereas it is more distinct with the pair 17, which is fascinating; with almost no difference at all to a major one, the backchannelling behaviour does not seem to have an impact in the assessment. Note that the use of Finnish backchannels takes place with this set of pairs who are assessed on a different level; the students who are graded lower have exhibited Finnish backchannels in their speech. Thus, I speculate whether the students would have been graded on the same proficiency level if Finnish backchannels would not have been used. Another notable fact is that the different use of backchannel types between the speakers varies to some extent, but not prominently.

Pairs 2, 10, and 20

The majority of the examinees in the data are assessed on the same proficiency level as their pair. Since there are fifteen of such pairs, pairs 2, 10, and 20 are introduced to represent three different examples of the speakers of pairs who are assessed on the same proficiency level:

Pair	Speaker	MR	RE	CF	REP	RO	FOB	Bs in Total	CEFR scale
2	F3	11	11	0	3	0	0	25	B2.2
	F4	8	20	1	1	0	0	30	B2.2
10	F15	3	11	1	1	1	0	17	B2.1
	F16	8	23	1	2	1	0	35	B2.1
20	M23	1	5	0	0	1	0	7	B2.1
	M24	0	3	0	0	4	0	7	B2.1

Table 11. Pairs 2, 10, and 20.

As can be interpreted from Table 11, the total number of backchannels between speakers of a pair vary quite a bit; the difference is either distinct, or not major at all. The speakers of pair 2 show a difference that is not that substantial. With the case of the speakers of pair 10, the distinction is a bit over a half making the difference in backchannels 18 instances. On the other hand, the speakers of pair 20 have exhibited the same number of backchannels in their speech. Consequently, the pairs in which the speakers share the same proficiency level indicate three separate degrees of differences; a distinct difference, a moderate difference, or no difference at all. The remaining twelve pairs in which the speakers share the same proficiency level are divided into these three groups quite evenly, therefore none of these newly introduced degrees stand out. Moreover, the pair-internal use of backchannel types varies to some extent with this set of pairs as well, but similarly to the previous set of pairs in Tables 9 and 10, the alteration is not prominent.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the results are summarized, and the research questions are answered. In addition, Sivukari's (2015) thesis is revisited in order to compare my results to hers, and a pair from the data is brought up for a discussion. Without further ado, here are the research questions of this study and my answers to them one by one:

1. What types of backchannels occur in Finnish upper secondary school students' speech in an English language spoken performance test?

The types that occur in the Finnish upper secondary school students' speech in an English language spoken performance test in FUSE corpus are reactive expressions (RE), minimal responses (MR), resumptive openers (RO), repetitions (REP), and collaborative finishes (CF). In addition, a few instances of Finnish backchannels occurred (FOB), which are taken into account as their own type.

2. How frequent are the different types of backchannels in relation to each other?

Frequencies of the types in relation to each other are presented in Table 2 in section 4.1, which is demonstrated here as a recap:

RE	MR	RO	REP	CF	FOB	Total number of Bs
748	104	87	55	17	7	1018
73.5%	10.2%	8.5%	5.4%	1.7%	0.7%	100%

Table 2. The frequencies of the types of backchannels in relation to the total number of backchannels.

Reactive expression is the most frequent backchannel type, and the difference to the next frequent type of minimal response is over 63.3 percentage points, which is quite considerable. The next frequent types in order are resumptive openers, repetitions, collaborative finishes and Finnish occurrences of backchannels, which are all under 10% in frequency. One possible reason why reactive expression is significantly more frequent than other types is because it covers a variety of words and utterances into its type; it does not have to be a short non-lexical element which for instance minimal responses and resumptive openers are. My initial hypothesis was that minimal response would be the most frequent type, or at least close to the

most frequent one, because utterances such as *aha* and *mm* would be the easiest ones for speakers in the Finnish speech community to produce, because they occur as backchannels in the Finnish language as well.

3. What could explain the possible variation in the use of backchannels between the students?

There are numerous reasons that could explain the possible variation in backchannelling behaviours between individuals, but the perspectives I chose to approach the third research question are *proficiency levels*, *task type* and *individual variation*. In general, the results did not prove to be clear-cut. Nevertheless, there are a few tendencies that can be observed. Firstly, a tendency appeared regarding the *proficiency levels*; Finnish occurrences of backchannels only occur in the speech of those students who are given the lowest proficiency level. However, some of the conversations include other Finnish as well (i.e. not just backchannels), which are not taken into account in this analysis. Therefore, the influence of Finnish as a whole cannot be reported, just on the basis of Finnish occurrences of backchannels. The frequencies of backchannel types within each proficiency level are mostly in line with the overall results of frequencies of Table 2, however, each proficiency level indicate different results considering the backchannel types. Here are the backchannel type frequencies of each proficiency level presented:

Students rated:	**RE**	**MR**	**RO**	**REP**	**CF**	**FOB**	**Total**
B1.2	69.9%	15.3%	8.0%	6.4%	0.4%	2.8%	100%
B2.1	73.4%	8.7%	11.4%	4.0%	2,50%	0%	100%
B2.2	79.4%	8.6%	3.3%	7.4%	1.2%	0%	100%

Table 12. Relative frequencies of backchannel types across students rated B1.2, B2.1, and B2.2.

As can be interpreted from Table 12, reactive expression is the most dominantly frequent type at all levels. Minimal responses are either the second most frequent (levels B1.2 and B2.2), or third most frequent (level B2.1). Resumptive openers are the third most frequent (level B1.2), the second most frequent (level B2.1), or the fourth most frequent (level B2.2). Repetitions are either the second least frequent (levels B1.2 and B2.1), or third most frequent (level B2.2). Collaborative finish is the least frequent at each level. As discussed, the Finnish occurrences of backchannels only appear at the lowest level of the data, and they are even more frequent than collaborative finishes at level B1.2. Therefore, it could be argued that the use of Finnish

backchannels implies lower proficiency. Moreover, what stands out from the results in Table 12 is how relatively higher minimal response is in frequency at the lowest level of B1.2. Resumptive openers are also distinctively higher in frequency at the lowest levels of B1.2 and B2.1. Thus, the results indicate that minimal responses and resumptive openers are produced by lower proficiency level speakers, at least based on this set of data. Extensive use of minimal responses and/or resumptive openers in relation to other backchannel types may indicate lower proficiency as well.

What is also worth noting in Table 12 is the more frequent use of collaborative finishes at higher levels of B2.1 and B2.2, which implies that they are more challenging types of backchannels to use. On the other hand, could the less frequent use of collaborative finishes be explained by the speech community differences already discussed in section 2.1.3? Tiittula (1994) argues that speakers in the Finnish speech community do not exhibit backchannels that often in their speech, because it is considered rude to interrupt the speaker, even though backchannels are not considered as turns. Frequently, collaborative finish is an interruption; not necessarily an interruption of the turn, but rather an interruption of the train of thought the primary speaker is having. Therefore, the low frequency of collaborative finishes could stem from that theory.

All in all, the results regarding the proficiency levels are not clear-cut. At each proficiency level, reactive expression is the dominant backchannel type, and either collaborative finish or Finnish occurrences of backchannels are evidently the least frequent ones. Minimal response, resumptive opener and repetitions are the types that indicate the most change, since their relative frequencies alter between the proficiency levels to some extent. The results suggest that there are no significant differences between the proficiency level a student has been given and the backchannel types that occur in that student's speech, except for the Finnish occurrences of backchannels. Moreover, the diverse use of backchannel types does not seem to contribute whether or not a student has been given a higher grade or not, which is against my initial assumption.

Secondly, a pattern can be perceptible with the case of *task types*; speakers who have exhibited more than 31 instances of backchannels in their speech have participated in a conversation in which the task type used has been a mind map task. This can be explained by the fact that the mind map task is the least structured task type in the data, which might generate more uncontrolled speech, given that backchannels would occur in such speech. On the other hand,

the relation between the task types and the number of how many backchannels are uttered in a conversation appears to be arbitrary in the conversations in which the instances of backchannels are less than 31. Again, even though the results on this part are not clear-cut, a tendency can be identified.

Thirdly, the *individual variation* considering the use of backchannels does not indicate any frequent patterns; the number of backchannels each speaker exhibits seems to be individual, which is the point of this perspective. Whether the difference in uttered backchannels between the examinees is a distinct one, a moderate one, or a nonexistent one, there are no tendencies that can be interpreted. However, analyzing the produced backchannels more generally, the results indicate that lower level students produce more backchannels than higher level students. When comparing the lowest and the highest proficiency levels to each other, the total number of backchannels each examinee has exhibited in their speech is higher at level B1.2 (altering from 23 occurrences to 98 ones), whereas at level B2.2 the occurrences are relatively lower (altering from 1 instance to 43 instances). At level B2.1 the number of backchannels each examinee has uttered demonstrates a wider scope (altering from 2 instances to 93 ones), situating itself in-between the extremities.

In conclusion, it is fascinating how variant the use of backchannels is between the different speakers, even though the results are rather inconclusive. There are interesting instances from the data, which generate questions: for example, the examinees of pair 1 have uttered 3 backchannels in total in the conversation, but they have been assessed on the highest level given in this data – why is that so? If backchannels are an element of successful interaction, why is it not distinctively evident from the results? A reason why the number of backchannels does not seem to have an effect to the assessment is because there are other elements present in interaction than just the ability to successfully use the L2 language's backchannels, as already stated in section 2.1 of this thesis (depiction of the tree). Interactional competence is a concept with many elements contributing in the final result. Another point why the rich use of backchannels does not seem to have a positive impact on the assessment is because I only counted verbal instances of backchannels for reasons already stated in this thesis. Non-verbal instances of backchannels are also important, which cannot be analyzed with the case of the FUSE corpus. Perhaps the examinees who have exhibited little backchannels but assessed on a higher level have produced more non-verbal backchannels instead. Also, another speculation arouses: if a student has used a lot of backchannels, perhaps s/he has not said much else? In

other words, this implies that the speaker who has uttered backchannels considerably has not had the chance to express him/herself otherwise, which has led to a lower grade. However, I investigated pairs in which the difference in uttered backchannels is quite considerable, and I did not find an indication of one examinee having spoken more than the other.

5.1 Comparison with Sivukari (2015)

Next, Sivukari's (2015) results are briefly reviewed. As a recap, Sivukari's data consists of 20 pairs from the HY-talk corpus, which is a slightly older one than the FUSE. The aim of Sivukari's study is partly the same, because she analyzed what types of backchannels were found in the speech of Finnish upper secondary school students in an English spoken language test. Sivukari's other aims are to examine what differences there are between students who have used backchannels more or less frequently, and to study the relation between the students' assessed proficiencies in English and their uses of backchannels (2015, p. 34). Sivukari's and my results are summarized in Table 13:

Results	RE	RO	REP	CF	MR	Total number of Bs
Sivukari	12.55	4.55	3.80	1.95	1.25	482
Lempinen	37.4	4.35	2.75	0.85	5.20	1018

Table 13. Sivukari and my results in average numbers. (2015, p. 44)

Sivukari (2015) uses average numbers of backchannels and not frequencies like I do, therefore I need to apply the same counting formula to my results as well. Sivukari counted the average number by dividing the occurrence number of each backchannel type with the number of pairs (so for example reactive expressions is counted 251/20=12.55). I omitted the category Finnish occurrences of backchannels here because Sivukari did not include such category in her thesis. So, as can be seen from Table 13, the results seem to be concordant with each other, except for the second frequent backchannel type; minimal responses are the least common backchannel type in Sivukari's data, whereas it is the second frequent in mine. One possible reason why minimal responses are the least common backchannel type in Sivukari's results might be due to the fact that I counted some instances that would be considered resumptive openers as minimal responses (intonation and pause, discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3). However, this only explains a portion of the difference, because those instances did not occur frequently.

The differences in the total numbers of backchannel occurrences between Sivukari's (2015) results and mine can be explained by two different factors: firstly, teaching of interactive listening skills might have improved since the HY-talk corpus. Secondly, Sivukari counted turn-internal cases of backchannels, whereas I counted both turn-internal and turn-external ones. Therefore, my analysis contains more instances of backchannels than Sivukari's. The major difference between Sivukari's results and mine, however, is that my study did not find any relation between a proficiency level and the number of uttered backchannels. On the contrary, Sivukari states that "pairs with higher assessed proficiencies were likely to use backchannels more frequently when compared to pairs with lower assessed proficiencies" (2015, p. 76).

5.2 Discussion of Pair 11

Pair 11 is an example I want to introduce, because it is one of its kind in the data. Even though the pair does not relate to my research questions, the examinees have a conversation that supports the discussion of Tiittula's (1994) article, which is introduced in section 2.1.3. Therefore, an excerpt of the conversation is presented as an example:

28) An excerpt from Pair 11.

Turns	**Speakers and utterances**
1	**M12:** I'm gonna... discuss something about... how educational opportunities effect... young people around the world. So... I know in many countries... people have to pay something... to get to school and it's like... pretty... pretty you know... exotic for Finnish people to... to think- think that cause in Finland we have in- you know... free educational sh- system... and in America people have to... pay to get college and it's pretty... pretty expensive... and also... in Finland we have you know pretty good educational system, it's free and... it's... it's for twelve years or nine years but in... some places only I- few percent [fin]no[/fin]... well like fifty percent I don't know... from younglings can go to school and that's... pretty serious problem... in today's world, I think.
2	**M13:** **<u>Yeah</u>** erm and yeah I totally agree with that er we have er very advanced educational system here in Finland... and er... of course we ha- we already know that because have studied for like... I don't know twelve years or something... er... and er... it's pretty sad to think that in like third world countries... not so many kids get to go- go to school even like elementary school... er when at the same time we have the opportunity to... study... till we're like adults... for free and er even when we go to university we don't have to pay for it... at least not yet... and er... e- everything that wou- on- only things we have to pay for when we study is

Turns	Speakers and utterances
	like f- food and... living and this kind of stuff but... it's really... really interesting that there's not so many places around the world that... w- were they have er free education... because... I- I don't think I know any countries other than Finland except maybe Scotland. I think they have free universities there... but er yeah mostly around the world the universities are really... expensive... of course it varies... for example in the US it's really expensive but... almost everywhere you have to pay something for education... er at least in universities, I don't know about the situation in er elementary schools and so on but... I think we're pretty well off here in Finland.
3	**M12: <u>Yeah</u>**

The pair 11's conversation is fascinating, because the whole interaction repeats the same pattern; the turns each speaker holds are significantly long, as can be seen from excerpt 28. In addition, there are only five occurrences of backchannels in the whole conversation, and in this particular case the speakers do not speak simultaneously. Therefore, pair 11's conversation supports what Tiittula (1994) discusses in her article, which is that speakers from Finnish speech community usually hold longer turns compared to for example English speech communities after which the possible backchannels occur. Tiittula also suggests that Finnish speakers do not practice simultaneous speech nor interruptions, which is a view pair 11's conversation supports. Nevertheless, similar conversations to the one just discussed are rare in this particular set of data, though single instances of longer turns may occur. Since conversations similar to pair 11 are uncommon in the data, it seems that most of the Finnish students have adopted English ways of backchannelling when speaking English.

6. Conclusion

From the vast field of interactive communication, this thesis endeavoured to elucidate Finnish upper secondary school students' English backchannelling behaviours. The aim was to discover what types of backchannels there are, as well as their frequencies in relation to each other. Moreover, an aim was to find reasons for possible variations in the use of backchannels between speakers via three different perspectives: proficiency levels, task types, and individual variation.

From the data, I have been able to determine the backchannel types and frequencies Finnish upper secondary school students exhibit in an English spoken performance test. However, there are no downright patterns of how many and what types of backchannels each speaker exhibits in his/her speech on different proficiency levels. Finnish occurrences of backchannels seem to influence the proficiency level, and task type might have an impact on how many backchannels each speaker utters. Generally, backchannelling behaviour is a rather individual phenomenon, because the differences between uttered backchannels between speakers are drastically different; from one instance to 99 instances.

My study could be developed further with a larger sample in order to discover more conclusive tendencies. First of all, only three perspectives were chosen to approach the third research question of the study, but more perspectives could be added, for instance the influence of the pair, which is what Luoma (2004) discussed in her work (mentioned in section 2.2). Secondly, a research topic emerged when comparing Sivukari's (2015) results to mine: are there any differences in English backchannelling behaviours in the lowest levels of proficiency versus the highest levels of proficiency? Consequently, CEFR levels A, B, and C would be analyzed all separately and compared to each other.

More broadly, backchannel types could be researched in other languages as well, for instance in Finnish, in order to compare different backchannelling behaviours across different speech communities. Also, the backchannel types between languages could be compared: for instance, would some other speech community exhibit more collaborative finishes in their speech than speakers from a Finnish-language speech community might do? Hence, the differences between

the frequencies of backchannel types between different speech communities would be fascinating. Considering interactional competence or spoken performance, a lot can be done.

In conclusion, I wish to see an increasing number of studies on the field of spoken interaction in relation to Finnish students speaking English, because of the future occupation of a teacher I am hoping to pursuit. The matriculation examination in Finland includes an oral component in the near future, which increases the need for adequate instructions for teachers and assessors. Even though the results of this thesis propose that backchannels are not a contributing factor towards a high grade, my intention is not to suggest that the use and teaching of backchannels is unnecessary – I am rather trying to prove a point of how important it is to have thorough research on spoken interaction in order to make assessment criteria for spoken performance clear and articulate for teachers nationwide.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The complete Excel table of the results

Pair	Speaker	MR	RE	CF	REP	RO	FOB	Bs in Total	CEFR scale	TASK TYPE
1	F1	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	B2.2	DEBATE
	F2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	B2.2	
2	F3	11	11	0	3	0	0	25	B2.2	DEBATE
	F4	8	20	1	1	0	0	30	B2.2	
3	M1	1	8	0	3	1	0	13	B2.1	DEBATE
	F5	0	6	0	0	0	0	6	B2.1	
4	F6	0	16	0	3	4	0	23	B2.2	EATING OUT
	F7	0	13	0	1	6	0	20	B2.1	
5	M3	2	8	0	0	1	0	11	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F9	2	11	0	0	0	0	13	B2.1	
6	F10	1	23	0	0	2	0	26	B2.1	A PHONECALL
	F11	0	18	0	0	2	0	20	B2.1	
7	M7	0	31	1	1	0	0	33	B2.2	MINDMAP
	M8	0	15	1	2	0	0	18	B2.2	
8	M9	0	18	0	0	0	0	18	B2.1	MINDMAP
	M10	0	8	0	1	1	0	10	B2.1	
9	M11	0	14	0	0	0	0	14	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F14	6	18	0	0	0	0	24	B2.1	
10	F15	3	11	1	1	1	0	17	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F16	8	23	1	2	1	0	35	B2.1	
11	M12	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	B2.1	MINDMAP
	M13	0	3	0	0	0	0	3	B2.2	
12	M14	0	29	0	2	0	0	31	B2.2	MINDMAP
	M15	0	41	0	2	0	0	43	B2.2	
13	M16	3	25	1	2	2	0	33	B2.1	MINDMAP
	M17	0	28	1	1	8	0	38	B2.1	
14	F17	8	81	1	5	3	1	99	B1.2	MINDMAP
	F18	14	24	5	2	4	0	49	B2.1	
15	F19	0	5	2	0	2	0	9	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F20	5	13	0	3	2	3	26	B1.2	
16	F21	5	40	0	1	6	0	52	B1.2	MINDMAP
	M18	2	26	0	3	3	0	34	B2.2	
17	F22	3	75	2	7	6	0	93	B2.1	MINDMAP
	F23	20	40	0	7	9	3	79	B1.2	
18	F25	0	4	0	0	1	0	5	B2.1	UNSUITABLE PRESENT
	F26	0	8	0	0	2	0	10	B2.1	
19	F30	1	11	0	0	7	0	19	B2.1	AT A PARTY

	F31	0	12	0	1	7	0	20	B2.1	
20	M23	1	5	0	0	1	0	7	B2.1	AT A PARTY
	M24	0	3	0	0	4	0	7	B2.1	
TOTAL:		104	748	17	55	87	7	1018		

Appendix B: Table 3 – Common Reference Levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use (CEFR, 2001, pp. 28-29).

1.3 Qualitative aspects of spoken language use

	RANGE	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	INTERACTION	COHERENCE
C2	Shows great flexibility reformulating ideas in differing linguistic forms to convey finer shades of meaning precisely, to give emphasis, to differentiate and to eliminate ambiguity. Also has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).	Can express him/herself spontaneously at length with a natural colloquial flow, avoiding or backtracking around any difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.	Can interact with ease and skill, picking up and using non-verbal and intonational cues apparently effortlessly. Can interweave his/her contribution into the joint discourse with fully natural turntaking, referencing, allusion making etc.	Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices.
C1	Has a good command of a broad range of language allowing him/her to select a formulation to express him/ herself clearly in an appropriate style on a wide range of general, academic, professional or leisure topics without having to restrict what he/she wants to say.	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare, difficult to spot and generally corrected when they do occur.	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.	Can select a suitable phrase from a readily available range of discourse functions to preface his remarks in order to get or to keep the floor and to relate his/her own contributions skilfully to those of other speakers.	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2	Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics, without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.	Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although he/she can be hesitant as he or she searches for patterns and expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses.	Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he / she needs to, though he /she may not always do this elegantly. Can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension, inviting others in, etc.	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some "jumpiness" in a long contribution.
B1	Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circum-locutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used "routines" and patterns associated with more predictable situations.	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.	Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.
A2	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorised phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes.	Can make him/herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when he/she is following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like "and, "but" and "because".
A1	Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorised repertoire.	Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication.	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair.	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like "and" or "then".

Appendix C: Tasks that appear in the data

1. NEWSPAPERS

STUDENT A

You think that newspaper are old-fashioned and that eventually nobody will read them. Instead, people will read their news on the Internet, like you do. You do not read newspapers at all.

STUDENT B

You think that newspapers will survive the age of the Internet. You like to read your daily newspaper and believe in the future of newspapers as well.

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

– Starting the dialogue about newspapers
– Student A: expressing your opinion about the future of newspapers
– Student B: expressing your opinion about the future of newspapers
– Continuing the conversation and arguing for your own point of view
– Ending the conversation

2. EATING OUT

STUDENT A

You are a customer in a cafe. You have a big appetite. The waiter/waitress comes to serve you. Order your food and drink.

STUDENT B

You are a waiter/waitress in a cafe. You are serving a customer. Take his/her order and answer any questions.

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

– The soup of the day and the other types of starter available
– Recommended main courses and desserts
– The types of drinks available
– The loudness of the background music
– Whether the meal was satisfactory
– Payment by credit card

3. CALL TO A MAIL ORDER COMPANY

STUDENT A

You recently ordered a number of clothing items from a mail order company. When you open the package, you notice that you have been sent two pieces of clothing that do not match your order. You phone the company to find out what you need to do to correct the order.

STUDENT B

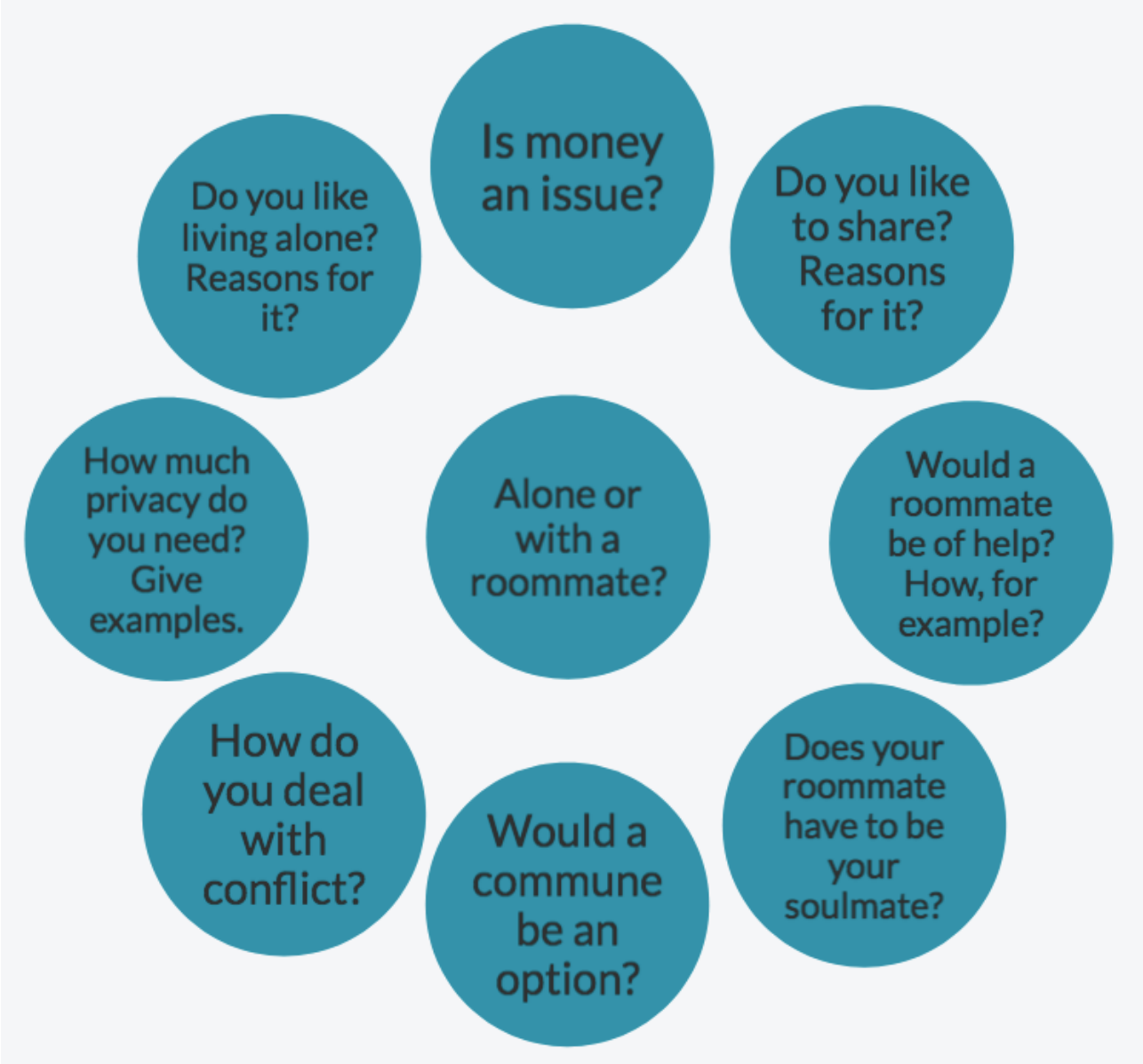
You work in the customer services department at a mail order company that sells clothes. A customer has ordered a number of clothing items and phones you with a problem with two items received. You help the customer.

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

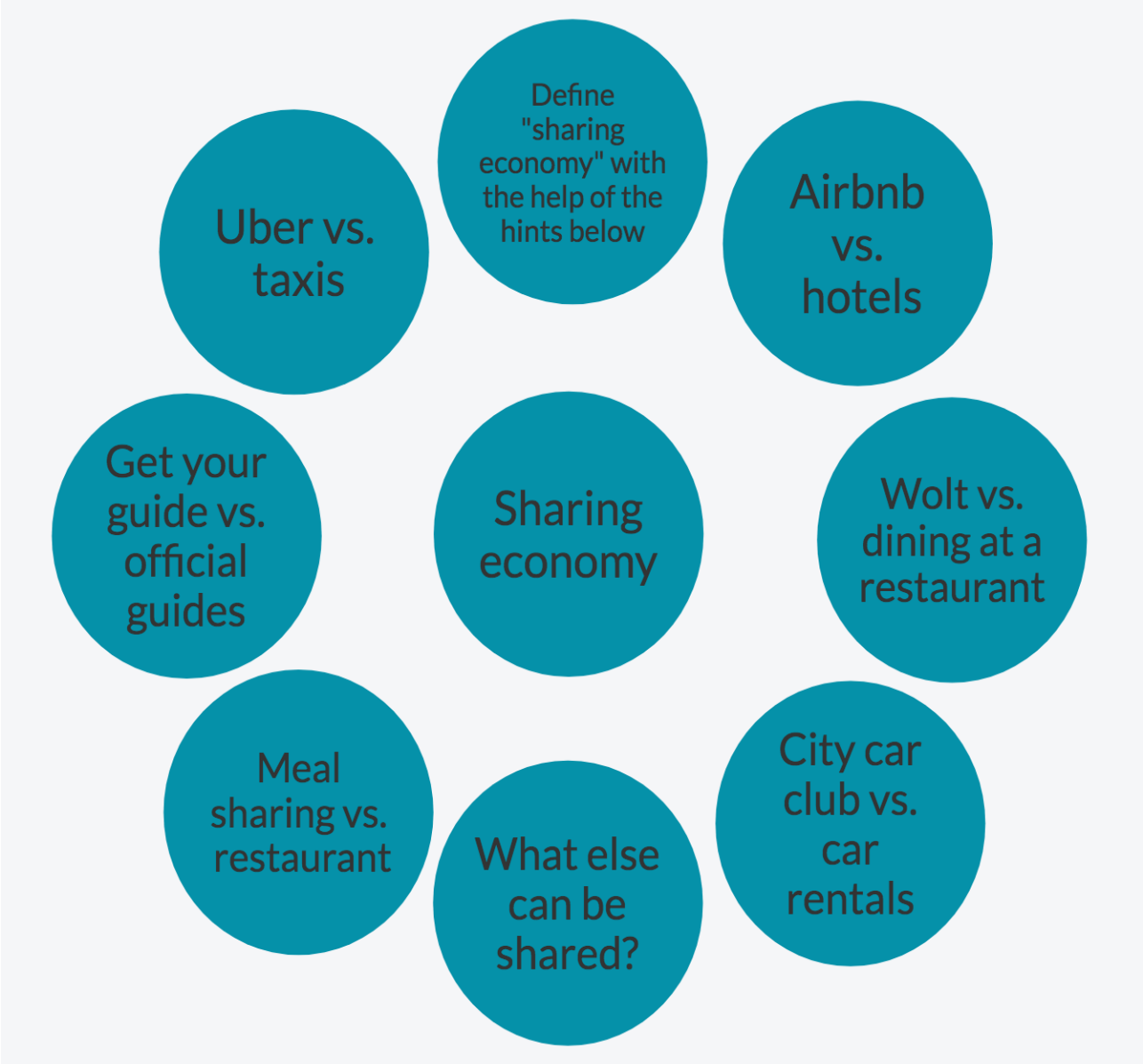
– Student A: Description of the problem
– Student B: Checking the customer details and when the order was made
– Discussing the solution
– Conclusion

4. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss what affects young people and their lives in various parts of the world today. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.

5. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.



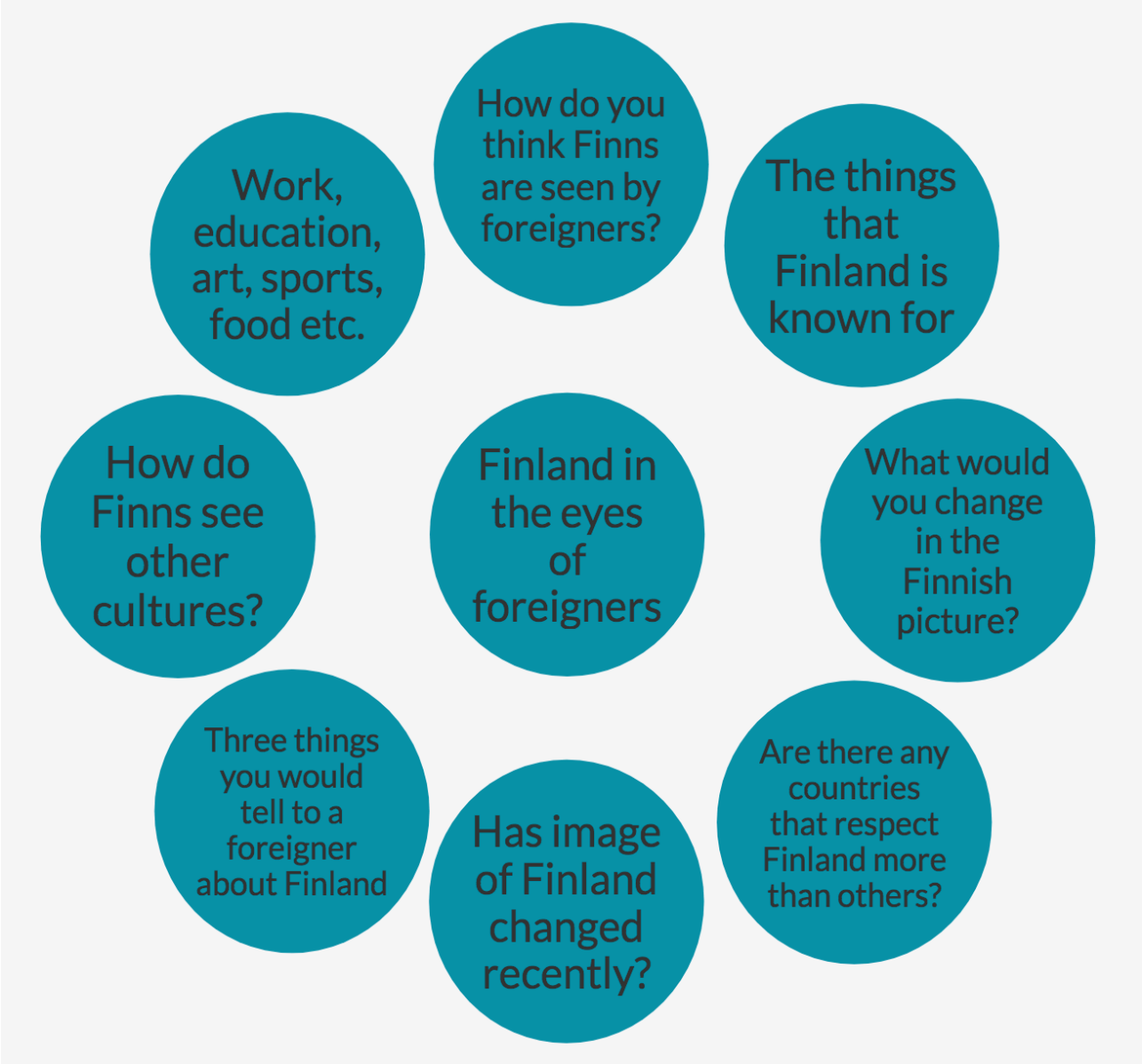
6. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.



7. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.

8. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.

9. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.



10. Look at the mind map. Together with your partner, discuss the topic. Share your knowledge and opinions on as many aspects as you can in the time available. Make sure that during the discussion you both comment on what the other person says.

11. Read the situation, then act it out together with your partner.

AN UNSUITABLE PRESENT

STUDENT A

You give a friend/relative a birthday present. You have tried hard to choose a suitable present.

STUDENT B

A friend/relative gives you a birthday present. You were hoping for something different than what she/he gives you.

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

– Starting the dialogue
– Giving (Student A) and receiving (Student B) the present
– Politely expressing disappointment (Student B)
– Reacting to disappointment, offering alternative (Student A)
– Reacting to alternative idea (Student B)
– Organize alternative
– Ending the dialogue

12. Read the situation, then act it out together with your partner.

AT A PARTY

STUDENT A

You are at a party on a Friday evening. You meet a friend you haven't seen for a long time. You talk about the party and other things.

STUDENT B

It's Friday evening and you are at a party. You come across a friend you haven't seen for a while. You start talking.

COVER AT LEAST THE FOLLOWING TOPICS:

– How you got invited to the party
– Opinions of the party
– Other people you've met at the party
– Complimenting each other on the clothes you are wearing
– Offering to buy a drink
– Plans for the weekend
– Other good parties to go to soon

Appendix D: The transcription conventions in FUSE

The following text is taken out of FUSE's site (see here https://fusecorpus.eu/about/transcription-guidelines-in-fuse/).

Transcription guidelines in FUSE

In addition to the recordings, another important part of FUSE consists of transcriptions. The mark-up guidelines of the transcriptions follow the ones used in the SCOTS corpus but include some additional elements. The general mark-up guidelines from SCOTS can be seen below in the block quotation, followed by the additional tags and their descriptions.

Overlap
Stretches where more than one participant is speaking at the same time are marked in the transcription by double slashes (//) surrounding the words which overlap:

Speaker 1: ...although it might come across //as being arrogant.//
Speaker 2: //[laugh]//

Here Speaker 2's laugh overlaps with the final three words of Speaker 1's utterance.

Mark-up
Transcribers have used the following tags:

Censored
Sometimes words or sequences of words have been censored from documents, principally so that individuals may not be identified. Where this has been done, a Censored tag indicates what has been removed as follows:

"Don't put your fingers in it though, [CENSORED: forename]. Cause you'll be a mucky pup."

Other items which may be censored include postal addresses, email addresses, place names, phone numbers, and company names.

Where this applies to an audio transcription, the corresponding section of the audio file has been replaced by a beep (or, in certain circumstances, silence). Censoring of personal or sensitive information has occasionally been necessary in written documents too, and is marked in the same way as above.

Inaudible
Words or longer stretches which the transcriber has not been able to hear or understand appear as follows:

"Yeah, what kind of cup was this [inaudible]?"

Unclear

Parts of the transcription where the transcriber and checker are unsure are surrounded by question marks: [?]…[/?]

"they're chaffin away [?]crattlin[/?] these toy cups"

Words marked as unclear are not indexed, and do not contribute to the word count.

False starts and truncation
False starts, stammering and truncated words are tagged and appear in the transcription followed by a hyphen:

"nineteen f-f-f- fifty-nine Triumph."
"Everybody got a Chri- the whole class got a Christmas present."

These are not indexed, and do not contribute to the word count.

Semi-lexical items
Semi-lexical items ('mmhm', 'erm', 'uh-huh' etc) appear unmarked in the transcription, but are tagged in the underlying form.

Speaker 1: er not until I was kind of older
Speaker 2: uh-huh

Non-lexical items
Non-lexical sounds (coughs, sneezes, laughter, yawns etc.) appear between square brackets. These are not indexed and therefore will not be found using the Standard Search or Advanced Search features. Such items can be located in a document page, using the web browser's find function.

"Five years till I'd done my apprenticeship [cough]"
"Yeah, I simply don't [laugh] really remember."

Non-linguistic events
Non-linguistic "events" which may have an impact on language also appear between square brackets. Audible background "events" which do not affect the language used have not been transcribed.

"[phone rings] Eh? Right you go and do that, Toots. I'm no gonna answer it, we'll get it later."
Pronunciation difficulties
The additional tag used in the current version of FUSE is categorized under pronunciation difficulties. Words or longer stretches that the transcriber has analyzed to pose significant pronunciation difficulties for an individual speaker are surrounded by prd tags: **[prd]…[/prd]**

"But hey, in Finland there is lack of er paper [prd]indu- industry- industry[/prd] and er they have er problems because people are l- doing like you and er the paper [prd]industry[/prd] [laugh] is er the- it's the Fin- Finland's first big thing //er before Nokia//"

Finnish and other L1 utterances vs English utterances
Finnish utterances are surrounded by fin tags: **[fin]…[/fin]**

"//Yeah// because… [fin]No[/fin] yeah well… yeah //[laugh]//"

There might be other L1s present in the utterances. These are marked by transcribers with three letter language codes. For example a Swedish utterance might be transcribed as [swe]…[/swe].

Pauses
Finally, there is the question how to mark pauses in a transcript. In this ongoing project one important aim is to keep the transcriptions reader-friendly for a wide audience and therefore pauses that are over 400 milliseconds in duration are marked with three consecutive dots (i.e. **…**).

"M1: Alright erm… Ha- Have you read this new article about erm er Finnish ice hockey league er no Finnish ice hockey team Jokerit going to KHL?"