

# Turn-taking in a Japanese EFL classroom : What kind of backchannels work in a discussion activity?

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# Turn-taking in a Japanese EFL classroom: What kind of backchannels work in a discussion activity?

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Japanese EFL learners' English turn-taking. I explored what kinds of backchannels were actually used through a series of Japanese EFL learners' discussion activities. In this discussion project, I selected topic-based activities. Accordingly, I found the following: 1) Most students could cultivate some backchannels; 2) Most backchannels used were similar to Japanese backchannels; 3) Backchannels could possibly work as an effective measurement in an EFL discussion activity. Therefore, I believe that backchannels should be focused in an EFL classroom.

## Key word

TEFL, spoken discourse, turn-taking, backchannels, discussion activity

## 0. Introduction

When people talk, they take, hold and yield turns naturally. For L1 speakers these turn-taking skills would be acquired through experiencing real communication, but for Japanese EFL learners it might be difficult to learn the English turn-taking system because of their different cultural background.

### 0.1. Turn-taking

Turn-taking 'is something that may not need to be "taught," but specific linguistic realisation can be presented and practised and significant cultural differences can at least be pointed out to the learner.' (McCarthy 1991) It is certain that ESL learners will be able to speak English if they attain linguistic knowledge and communicative skills necessary to produce the language. However, most Japanese EFL learners usually do not have sufficient time for interacting with each other through English in the classroom. In a sense, it is necessary that teachers should give students an opportunity to take turns through some communicative activities.

### 0.2. Backchannels

In the turn-taking system, backchannels are considered to make communication smooth or comfortable. 'Spoken interaction requires active participation by both parties in a two-party dialogue. This means that the current listener is not allowed to remain passive. Nor is s/he allowed to provide only silent feedback, such as head-nods, smiles, and eye-glances. Some kind of oral responding is expected, minimally in the form of backchannels.' (Stenstrom 1994) However, most Japanese EFL learners who have had little, if any, experience discussing in English could not

actually use backchannels effectively.

There are some strategies in the turn-taking system to achieve smooth interaction: pauses, fillers, appeals, uptakes, etc. According to Stenstrom, backchannels 'help the current speaker along while manifesting the listener's attention.' (Stenstrom 1994: 68-133)

I noticed that many Japanese EFL learners could not use such backchannels effectively in English classrooms, because they were not in optimal learning situations: small, learner-centered or interactive classrooms, for example. In most Japanese junior or high school classrooms, where there are approximately 40 students, the typical turn-taking system between teacher and students includes smiling or laughing, watching and listening to teacher, nodding, and sometimes, questions and answers. That is, it is not too much to say that Japanese EFL classrooms do not have any normal turn-taking interaction.

Though backchannels are indispensable to spoken interaction, learners cannot learn or experience backchannels in the classroom. Stenstrom excludes silent feedback from effective backchannels but admits only active participation to be optimal with the following words:

*ah, oh, mhm, yes, sure, right, really, good heaves, I see, of course, oh dear, oh God, that's nice, that's not bad, that's right.*

However, nonverbal feedback (laughing, smiling, nodding, eye-glance, etc.) is also very important for Japanese EFL learners who are motivated to communicate in English.

### 0.3. Discussion activities

Discussion or debate activities are considered to be very effective in ESL/EFL classrooms. However, if learners do not have sufficient structural knowledge or communication skills, their activities do not work well. Even if they are supported by teacher, their turn-taking might be liable to be unnatural or unrealistic.

In my teaching experience, group discussion seems to work well if a native speaker or a competent speaker joins as a participant or a moderator. On the other hand, it would be rather difficult for only Japanese EFL students to discuss something. However, without doubt, student-to-student talking activities are very necessary for effective or active classrooms. To activate classroom activities, students have to be strongly motivated to speak English. Also, teacher has to give students interesting and motivating activities.

There are two types of discussion activities: task-based and topic-based activities. Task-based activities are sometimes very exciting and fun, but often seem to lack in reality. As a result, such discussion activities are liable to fail. On the other hand, topic-based activities are not so exciting but students can express their own ideas and feelings. It means that such activities will soon lead to real communication. If teacher selects good topics and gives students useful expressions and communication skills, topic-based activities will be very effective and practical. Therefore, both discussion activities should be provided appropriately for Japanese EFL students. In this discussion project, I selected topic-based activities because my students wanted to talk about themselves.

'The most natural and effective way for learners to practise talking freely in English is by thinking out some problem or situation together through verbal interchange of ideas; or in simpler terms, to discuss.' (Ur 1981) In a sense, discussing is certainly very effective for students to improve their English. Therefore, I decided to survey what students do in discussion activities. I specifically

intended to comprehend their turn-taking when talking in English without teacher participation. In this survey I focused on observing their backchannels in discussion. That was because backchannels were considered to show whether or not their communication would work well.

## 1. Research questions

Before starting the survey, I had formed the following research questions.

- (1) Are backchannels used appropriately or effectively in an EFL discussion activity? Or can learners learn effective backchannels through discussion activities?
- (2) What types of backchannels are used in an EFL discussion activity?
- (3) What types of backchannels are expected to be used in an EFL discussion activity? Or should backchannels be taught or practiced?

## 2. Subjects and methods

I did topic-based discussion activities in two classrooms, each of which had 22 and 28 students respectively. The subjects were first year college students whose native tongues are Japanese and are learning English as a foreign language. Most students had already attained sufficient knowledge of English. However, since their English knowledge was learned so as to pass college entrance examinations, they could not communicate in English so well, especially when speaking. Therefore, I decided to give them as many opportunities as possible to communicate in English throughout the year-long course, which consists of 26 class sessions.

In this classroom project, one unit consisted of three activities: 1) reading, 2) speech, and 3) discussion. Discussion was arranged as a review activity, which aimed not only to cultivate oral communication ability but also to learn the turn-taking system as well. In the classroom, each discussion group had three to six students. According to each discussion session, Topics and roles (moderator and reporter) were arranged one week before for the students to be prepared for their ideas. During the discussion, teacher walked around the classroom, observed students' interaction, and helped them when they could not communicate what they wanted to say. In order to survey students' backchannels in detail, I videotaped their discussion activities two times: one was videotaped in July, and the other in December. However, two videotapes could not be compared because the settings, situations and motivations were all different. Therefore, I gave up the quantitative analysis of the data, extracted the backchannels the students used, and analyzed them qualitatively in this paper.

## 3. Results

I gave the 50 students seven discussion activities in total. Each discussion activity was 20 to 30 minutes. During the students' discussions, I observed and took memos of their utterances and attitudes, especially focusing on their backchannels. After each discussion activity, I interviewed them or employed questionnaires so as to collect data on their reflections.

### 3.1. April to July

Before the first videotaped discussion activities, I provided the students with three discussion activities, which were made up of three to four students. Though I had explained to them how to

discuss and given them some suggestions and formulaic expressions for discussion, most students could not discuss very well in English. There were some reasons for the inactivity: shyness, lack of English language communication skills and linguistic knowledge, poor motives, etc. As a result, I could not find any appropriate turn-taking in the students' discussion activities. In the first videotape I surveyed, I just found only two negative or silent backchannels:

**1 smiling and laughing      2 head-nodding**

The students seemed to be enjoying talking in English but they did not know how to interact with each other. Speakers were just reading their memos, not telling their ideas with any mimes, and listeners were not watching the speaker, giving no feedback. Specifically, most students did not use backchannels effectively. Moreover, many students were using Japanese so often. They did not try to cooperate or interact with each other so that their discussion activities did not work well. However, to my surprise, according to the students' reflections of the discussion activities, they were satisfied with their discussion. The questionnaire I employed after the discussion activity showed that 54.2% of the students were satisfied with their participation.

### **3.2. September to December**

The students had two discussion activities before the final session in December. At the second and final session of videotaped discussion activities which were all made up of four to six students, each discussion improved in terms of the volume of utterances. Further, none of the students used any Japanese. Many students spoke more English than before. It was because they were prepared for those discussion activities more than the past six discussion activities. I could observe more backchannels but they were not appropriate backchannels, compared to those in the native speakers' interaction. The observed backchannels were summarized as follows:

- 1 smiling and laughing**
- 2 head-nodding**
- 3 eye-glances**
- 4 raising a hand**
- 5 responding by gesture or one word:** e.g. yes un-un mm, aah! ah! ah! oh!
- 6 supporting, adding or helping:** e.g. but, okay
- 7 repeating or checking:** e.g. amuse? use any case?
- 8 commenting:** e.g. It's nice discussion, I can't, OK! I don't.
- 9 interrupting:** e.g. please speak slowly, what? eh?
- 10 appealing:** e.g. you see? that's all, how about you? do you know?

Two groups showed better turn-taking among the 9 discussion groups. One group was enjoying the discussion, despite the poor content which they discussed. As all the students responded to each speaker's utterance, their turn-taking was very smooth and comfortable. They were using many effective backchannels and tried to tell their ideas. On the other hand, the other group was eager to discuss a serious topic. Each opinion was well-prepared beforehand, but they did not just read their memos when talking. Furthermore, one student was very active and controlled the group's turn-taking very well. Therefore, all the students listened to each speaker and gave good feedback or backchannels. The other seven groups did their discussion activities better than before. However, they still could not take turns so effectively. The backchannels appeared in their discussions were

almost all smiling (laughing) or nodding.

According to the questionnaire I employed after the discussion activity, 76.1% of the students were satisfied with their participation. The rate of their satisfaction over the discussion in English improved in the end.

### 3.3. Summary

The following is a summary of the results:

- 1) Most students could cultivate some backchannels through the topic-based discussion activities.
- 2) Most backchannels that the students used were similar to the ones that they were using when speaking Japanese.
- 3) Whether or not the students effectively used backchannels strongly related with whether or not their discussion resulted in success. That is, backchannels were one of the good indicators to measure whether or not the discussion activity resulted in success.

## 4. Discussion

Based on the findings, I will discuss the three research questions: Each research question is related to backchannels in a Japanese EFL classroom, especially in discussion. It is said that culture strongly influences language. Therefore, it is natural that the backchannels which the students are using are expected to be different from those which L1 English speakers use.

### 4.1. First research question

It is not so easy for Japanese EFL learners to attain English turn-taking skills. Moreover, it is difficult to teach them in the classroom. According to the results, the students did not use backchannels effectively, still less knew that backchannels were necessary when discussing. However, they gradually came to be able to use more and more backchannels through the seven discussion activities, though the backchannels they used were still somewhat negative. Therefore, it is possible to say that even EFL learners can learn effective backchannels by letting them experience some discussion activities in the classroom. Moreover, EFL learners should be provided an opportunity for discussion activities in the classroom even if their linguistic knowledge is not sufficient to communicate. Learners can attain some important skills in such turn-taking activities for themselves.

### 4.2. Second research question

All the subjects' first language was Japanese. It is natural that the backchannels they were using were different from the ones which were presented by Stenstrom. However, the following backchannels which were observed in discussion are very active and effective for Japanese EFL learners:

1. **laughing:** This strategy is indispensable to make it easy for learners to speak.
2. **eye-glances:** Japanese people do not look at a speaker. It is very important to suggest to learners that they should watch a speaker or listener.
3. **responding by gesture or one word:** Each speaker is afraid if listeners can understand what he or she says. Any feedback is very effective. It is necessary to show your participation.
4. **supporting, adding or helping:** Every speaker cannot spontaneously express what he or she

wants to say in English. Listeners' help or support is very helpful for a speaker to complete his or her opinion.

5. **repeating, checking or interrupting:** It is very important to understand what a speaker is talking about, when you want to interact with him or her. If there is any misunderstanding in discussion, you cannot take turns so smoothly. You should not hesitate to interrupt when a speaker is talking.
6. **commenting, agreement or disagreement:** This is a key to holding discussion. This kind of backchannel leads to debating. It may induce a speaker to speak more.
7. **appealing:** This backchannel may yield the turn or ask for more explanation. You can use this backchannel easily.

These backchannels might be partly different from the ones used in various English-speaking countries. In this respect, English authentic backchannels might be taught or practiced in the classroom. However, in this case, backchannels should not be controlled by teacher or forced to be used as in English speaking countries, since all the students have Japanese-speaking cultural background. What is the most important is how to interact with each other or how to share ideas with each other.

#### 4.3. Third research question

I believe that backchannels should be focused on in an EFL classroom, but they should not be taught as target teaching items. According to this survey, most students did not know how to take turns before starting this discussion project. Even if they could use backchannels when discussing in Japanese, they did not use backchannels in English. Perhaps they might not use effective backchannels even in Japanese discussion. Finally, though I did not directly teach any backchannels in the classroom, two groups could show a very effective use of backchannels. Possibly the students did know the turn-taking system. However, they had not had sufficient opportunities to realize how effective backchannels were until then. The important things in an EFL classroom are to show learners real turn-taking, to make them aware of backchannels, and to let them have as many opportunities to experience discussing as possible.

#### 5. Conclusion

Turn-taking is necessary for any oral communication. But it has not been focused on in the classroom so far. Spoken interaction needs much knowledge of English structure. Therefore in normal oral communication classrooms EFL teachers tend to teach English knowledge and skills, providing students with some grammar, notional, functional and situational-based activities. However, these activities seem to let students learn some target grammar, meaning, and skills appropriate for typical situations. Accordingly, the turn-taking system might not be practiced consciously.

In this paper I surveyed how students were actually using backchannels when discussing some topics which they wanted to discuss. In the end, I found that backchannels are necessary for discussing but they are what learners should cultivate themselves. As for the turn-taking system (= interactional speech or talk), Ur (1996) states that 'given general language proficiency and a knowledge of the more obvious courtesy conventions, most learners will be able to cope adequately

Turn-taking in a Japanese EFL classroom: What kind of backchannels work in a discussion activity?

with interactional speech on the basis of their own cultural knowledge and common sense.' It is certain that the way turn-taking is carried out is related to culture or society. Therefore, teacher should believe that each student will be able to cultivate his or her own communicative competence, but she should not forget to give any student a chance to practice turn-taking, especially in an EFL classroom.

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