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Exploring Learners' Backchannel Production in Complaint Sequences Across Proficiency Levels

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To participate effectively in interaction, interlocutors should make use of various resources such as backchannels. Through backchannels, listeners can, for example, show attention and provide support and feedback. The study aims to explore the effect of proficiency level on backchannel production. 64 English learners at two different proficiency levels participated in a role-play task consisting of a complaint situation. The learners' production of backchannels was analysed in terms of frequency and typology. Results suggest that the proficiency level and the role adopted in the simulated task appeared to affect the overall frequency and typology of backchannels. Learners with a higher level of language proficiency seem to use backchannels more frequently, probably due to their greater linguistic repertoire and pragmatic awareness regarding the construction of interaction. Results also show that the backchannel categories of continuer and agreement stand out above the rest. Finally, the study offers some pedagogical implications concerning the treatment of backchannels in the language classroom.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, interactional pragmatics, backchannels, language proficiency, foreign language learning

INTRODUCTION

A primary goal of language teachers is to provide learners with opportunities to effectively develop their communicative competence in the foreign/second language (SL/FL). For this purpose, teachers should go beyond the traditional linguistic-based approach, commonly adopted in most SL/FL contexts, to focus on how to use language at a conversational and discursive level. Over the years, several researchers have discussed the basis of SL/FL pedagogy, pointing out that learners need to develop a series of competences to better use the language. Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence set a precedent in language teaching. Following his tenet, several researchers presented a series of models (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995; Celce-Murcia, 2007). These models comprise several competences learners should expand to communicate successfully in the target language. Among these competences, the development of learners' pragmatic

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competence is critical as it entails learners' ability to use language effectively in a particular social context (Taguchi, 2009).

In most communicative competence models, except for Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence is not explicitly referred to as an independent competence but as part of other competences. For example, pragmatic knowledge is included within sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), sociocultural competence and actional competence (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1995), and sociocultural competence and interactional competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007). For Celce-Murcia (2007), sociocultural competence implies "speaker's pragmatic knowledge, i.e., how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication" (p. 46). In addition, in this model pragmatic knowledge also seems to be part of interactional competence. This competence encompasses actional competence (speech acts) (Celce-Murcia, et al., 1995), conversational competence (turn-taking system), and non-verbal/paralinguistic competence. Therefore, in Celce-Murcia's (2007) model, pragmatic knowledge is viewed from a conversational and discursive perspective with special attention paid to the variety of resources speakers can use to construct meaning in interaction. We assume that speakers and listeners must cooperate to effectively create discourse and engage in interaction. This study adopts an interactive perspective to explore the way interlocutors show signals of active listenership. These responses are commonly referred to as backchannels, even though other terms are used such as reactive tokens (Clancy, et al., 1996) or response tokens (McCarthy, 2002).

The term backchannel, coined by Yngve (1970), is defined as short and non-floor-grabbing messages listeners perform throughout a conversation while the speaker holds the turn. Backchannels are non-competitive or collaborative overlaps as opposed to competitive overlaps in which the interlocutor attempts to take the floor (Yngve, 1970; Duncan & Fiske, 1985). This interactional resource, also described as "intermittent vocal noises e.g., mm, oh, right, yeah" (Peters & Wong, 2014, p. 408) serves to establish and maintain harmony between speakers, as well as to provide feedback (Ohashi, 2021). In addition, listeners may also accomplish other communicative purposes such as showing signals of agreement or disagreement (Hayashi & Hayashi, 1991), interest or engagement (Sacks, 1992), understanding and attentiveness (Gass & Houck, 1999). Listeners' use of backchannels is thus essential as they contribute to establishing and maintaining interpersonal meaning among interlocutors.

Following Yngve' work (1970), several studies have been carried out to explore the backchannel phenomenon. For example, Duncan (1973) provides a classification of backchannels that comprises (1) "*m-hm*" described as a group of readily identified verbalisations; (2) *sentence completions*; (3) *requests for clarification*; (4) *brief restatements*; (5) *head nods and head shakes*; and (6) *smiles* (added by Duncan & Fiske, 1985). Also, Edmondson (1981) proposes a taxonomy of listener behaviour that involves (1) *go-ons*, i.e., showing that the listener is attending and is in favour of the speaker continuing; (2) *accepts*, i.e., indicating that an act is heard and understood and that it is not unacceptable, e.g., "yes", "mm"; (3) *exclaims*, i.e., revealing an emotional reaction to the discourse or situation, e.g., surprise, interest; (4) *okays*, i.e., showing that

the listener is satisfied with the outcome. Oreström (1983), drawing on Duncan's (1973) work, specifies that utterances can be divided into speaking turns and backchannel items that contain lexical and non-lexical listener responses and whose functions entail showing the speaker that the message is "received, understood, agreed to and/or has caused a certain effect" (p. 24). The author suggests the following backchannel classification: (1) *supports* (e.g., "m-hm", "yes"), expressing acceptance, agreement, and/or that the listener has understood the message; (2) *exclamations* (e.g., "oh", "gosh"), which are emotional expressions, e.g., surprise; (3) *exclamatory questions* (e.g., "what", "really"); (4) *sentence completions*; and (5) *restatements*. Using a spoken corpus, O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008) also provide a model of backchannels that consists of (1) *continuers tokens* to maintain the flow of the discourse, e.g., "yeah"; (2) *convergence tokens* to show agreement such as "did you?", "yeah"; (3) *engagement tokens* in which the listener provides emotional responses such as "excellent", "oh wow"; and (4) *information receipt tokens* that indicate that the information has been received, e.g., "right".

Moreover, backchannels have been examined from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, in a study examining backchannel behaviour across cultures (American and Japanese) elicited in dyadic interactions, Maynard (1986) identifies six different types of backchannels: (1) *continuer*, i.e., shows that the listener is bypassing the change to initiate a repair, similar to Edmondson's (1981) *go-ons*; (2) *display of content understanding*, i.e., used when there is doubt on the part of the speaker as to the listener's understanding, equivalent to Edmondson's (1981) *accepts*; (3) *supports towards the speaker's judgment*, i.e., used as a response to a speaker's evaluative statement; (4) *agreement*, i.e., performed as a response to a question or question-like statement; however, this is not seen as an opportunity to take the floor but only to express agreement; (5) strong emotional response, i.e., including a laugh or exclamation, similar to Edmondson's (1981) exclaims; and (6) *minor addition, correction or request for information*. Furthermore, the author also discusses the nature of head movements as active listenership signs and suggests that head movements and backchannel vocalisations may be combined. Also in a Japanese context, Gass and Houck (1999), in their study on interlanguage refusals (Japanese and English), explore the listener's non-verbal signals of active listenership. The study demonstrates that non-verbal responses tend to occur as follows: (1) separately, with no vocalisation; (2) with minimal vocalisations, e.g., "mm"; (3) with lexical items that express agreement, e.g., "yes"; and (4) with brief statements, e.g., "it's a problem". The data disclose the following categories: (1) *agreement, brief confirmations, and positive responses to yes-no information questions*; (2) *acceptance*, as a positive response to a speech act that requires an acceptance or a refusal; and (3) *common backchannel functions* such as "mm", "yeah" that are performed as a continuer (or transition filter), as a minimum signal of understanding, or as an indicator of support.

In addition to this, Cutrone's (2005) cross-cultural study on Japanese and British English backchannels reveals verbal and non-verbal categories. Accordingly, backchannels can occur either alone or combined: (1) *simple*; (2) *compound*; (3) *complex*; (4) *simple with a head nod(s)*; (5) *compound with a head nod(s)*; (6) *complex*

with a head nod(s); (7) *isolated head nod*; (8) *multiple head nods*; (9) *smile*; (10) *laughter*; (11) *raised eyebrows*; and (12) *two or more non-verbal backchannels occurring simultaneously*. In another cross-cultural study including Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and English, Clancy et al. (1996) identify the following reactive tokens: (1) *backchannels*, as a non-lexical vocalic form that serves as a continuer, shows interest or claims understanding and stands alone; (2) *reactive expressions*, as a non-floor-taking lexical phrase or word, including assessments; (3) *collaborative finishes*, when the non-primary speaker finishes the utterance of the speaker; (4) *repetitions*, elicited when part of the speech of the speaker is repeated; and (5) *resumptive openers*, non-lexical vocalisations similar to backchannels but followed by a full turn. In addition to this, Cutrone (2015) also carries out a study to explore the effects of explicit and implicit instruction of backchannel behaviour in Japanese learners of English as FL. The study demonstrates that although both pedagogical treatments seem to be effective, the explicit group outperformed the implicit group. More recently, Castello and Gesuato (2019) examine the role of backchannels in oral examinations from a cross-cultural perspective (Italian, Chinese, Indian). This study reports on the role of learners' linguistic background as regards the performance of backchannels and the impact on spoken assessment practices. Yamashita (2008) also discusses the nature of backchannels in interlanguage pragmatics and indicates that listener responses may be related to learners' pragmatic competence or ability. That is, speakers' overall pragmatic competence level may play a role in the way learners employ and understand backchannel responses.

In general, listener responses contribute to constructing the communicative event. The choice of backchannel forms may be determined by the communicative purpose listeners aim to meet. Backchannels are part of interactional competence, particularly conversational competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007), and contain pragmatic meaning. From an SL/FL perspective, learners' pragmatic and interactional competence development involves, among others, becoming aware of how to exploit interactional resources and manage conversational conventions (Celce-Murcia, 2007) to effectively engage in communication.

Against this backdrop, the present study attempts to contribute to the field of language teaching and learning pragmatic competence by focusing on the way learners produce backchannels in interaction. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how learners at two different proficiency levels show signals of active listening. For this purpose, we examine the frequency and typology of backchannels used by learners while participating in a simulated conversation (i.e., role-play task). In this study, we aim to determine whether the general use and choice of backchannels vary as learners show higher level of language proficiency.

METHOD

The participants of the study were 64 first-year university students (mean age: 19.7) who were taken an English for Specific Purposes subject at a Spanish university. All the learners were Spanish. The learners' proficiency level in English was measured using the *DIALANG Language Assessment System*, resulting in B1 (n=32 participants, 16

female) and B2 (n=32 participants, 16 female) according to the CEFR (2001). Drawing on the proficiency level results; the 64 participants were divided into pairs to perform a role-play task involving a complaint situation. Each pair member acted out a role, either a complainer or a complainee. The spoken data obtained from the role-play task represent the dataset of the study. Specifically, the dataset used for the present study is taken from a multimodal spoken corpus of interlanguage complaints and responses to complaints elicited through a role-play task (Beltrán-Palanques, 2016). The instrument (i.e., role-play) was designed drawing on an exemplar generation task and a likelihood questionnaire (Jianda, 2006; Beltrán-Palanques, 2021). Learners were asked to provide examples of complaint situations that would be familiar to them. Then, considering the learners' responses, a selection of complaint situations was included in a likelihood questionnaire to measure their probability of occurrence. One of the situations resulting from that questionnaire was chosen as the scenario for the role-play task. The scenario involves two close friends and a high level of offence due to the interlocutors' relationship and the damage caused. In particular, the scenario describes a situation in which a friend has not invited his/her friend to a party (Beltrán-Palanques, 2016, 2021). For the role-play, the participants were asked to interact naturally to achieve communicative goals and no time constraints were imposed.

The adoption of a conversational perspective permitted the exploration of the variety of verbal and non-verbal resources the participants made use of to cooperate, show politeness and elaborate their discourse throughout the role-play task. While the participants were engaged in the role-play task, they elicited several utterances to construct complaints and responses to complaints, showed signals of backchannelling, and attempted to take the floor (overlapping). In the present study, the focus is on linguistic backchannels, which were first identified and then categorised according to the pragmatic function they convey. For this purpose, classifications proposed in previous studies (Maynard, 1986; Clancy et al., 1996; Gass & Houck, 1999; O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008) were used. A paired sample T-test was applied to perform the statistical analysis of data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 25).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that backchannels were generally used across the two proficiency levels (B1 and B2) by the complainers and complainees. Table 1 shows a summary of the statistical results.

Table 1
Frequency of backchannel use

Complainer and complainee						
Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
B1	32	26	.81	1.230	2.400	.019*
B2	32	78	2.44	3.627		
Complainer						
Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
B1	16	16	1.00	1.549	.929	.360
B2	16	27	1.69	2.522		
Complainee						
Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
B1	16	10	.63	.806	2.276	.030*
B2	16	51	3.19	4.430		

*p<.05.

As shown above, the participants elicited a total number of 104 occurrences, specifically 26 in the B1 group and 78 in the B2 group, pointing to a statistical difference between the groups (*p<.05.). Although both proficiency groups were aware of the use of backchannels, the B2 group tended to elicit them more frequently, probably because of their overall language competence. In addition, results indicate that the role the participants played, along with the proficiency level, also affected the production of backchannels. Particularly, the participants who took the role of the complainer (speaker) produced 43 (B1=16, B2=27) while those who acted out as the complainee (listener) elicited 61 (B1=10, B2=51). This result may be related to the fact that the complainees acted out primarily as listeners whereas the complainers tended to make use of the main turn. In the case of the complainees, results indicate that the B2 group outperformed the B1 group, and the difference was found to be statistically significant (*p<.05).

Table 2 shows a summary of the statistical results of the occurrences of backchannels according to their typology.

Table 2
Backchannel typology by participants' proficiency level

Typology	Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
Continuer	B1	32	0	.0000	.00000	3.144	.003*
	B2	32	21	.6563	1.18074		
Agreement	B1	32	20	.6250	1.12880	2.029	.047*
	B2	32	52	1.6250	2.54951		
Assessment	B1	32	2	.06	.246	1.438	.156
	B2	32	0	.00	.000		
Information	B1	32	2	.06	.354	7.25	.471
received	B2	32	4	.13	.336		
Repetition	B1	32	2	.06	.246	.584	.562
	B2	32	1	.03	.177		

*p<.05.

To classify the variety of backchannels the participants elicited, we considered previous literature (Maynard, 1986; Clancy et al., 1996; Gass & Houck, 1999; O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008). Results reveal that the participants made use of the following categories: continuer, agreement, assessment, information received, and repetition. Among these various categories, two stood out, namely continuer and agreement. The B2 group produced 21 backchannels occurrences classified as a continuer, whereas the B1 group appeared to elicit none, pointing to a statistically significant difference between them (*p<.05.). Likewise, the B2 group (n=52) performed more agreement backchannels than the B1 group (n=20). The difference in the use of agreement backchannels between the two proficiency groups was shown to be statistically significant (*p<.05.).

Probably, the categories of continuer and agreement were frequently used due to the nature of the complaint situation. Complainees likely opted to make use of the continuer category to show support and interest in the interlocutors' conversation (Maynard, 1986; Clancy et al., 1996; Gass & Houck, 1999) and agreement to demonstrate understanding (O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008). The B1 group did not elicit backchannels to show continuation, possibly because their proficiency level somewhat prevented them from engaging in a more dynamic type of interaction. However, it should be noted that a continuer backchannel can be considered a basic way of showing the interlocutor the continuation of the conversation. Thus, learners at B1 proficiency level may be expected to produce this type of active listening signal. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the B1 group was unaware of the importance of showing signals of active listenership as they used other backchannel categories to fulfil their communicative purposes.

The data were then analysed separately to explore the effect of language proficiency according to the participants' role (i.e., complainer and complainee). Table 3 shows a summary of the results.

Table 3
Backchannel typology by participants' proficiency level and role

Complainer							
Typology	Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
Continuer	B1	32	0	.0000	.00000	1.826	.078
	B2	32	8	.5000	1.09545		
Agreement	B1	32	13	.8125	1.47054	.494	.625
	B2	32	17	1.0625	1.38894		
Assessment	B1	32	2	.13	.342	1.464	.154
	B2	32	0	.00	.000		
Information	B1	32	0	.00	.000	1.000	.325
received	B2	32	1	.06	.250		
Repetition	B1	32	1	.06	.250	.000	1.000
	B2	32	1	.06	.250		
Complainee							
Typology	Group	N	f	M	SD	t	p
Continuer	B1	32	0	.0000	.00000	2.546	.016*
	B2	32	13	.8125	1.23639		
Agreement	B1	32	7	.4375	.62915	2.089	.045*
	B2	32	35	2.1875	3.29077		
Information	B1	32	2	.13	.500	30	.700
received	B2	32	3	.19	.403		
Repetition	B1	32	1	.06	.250	30	.325
	B2	32	0	.00	.000		

*p<.05.

As can be observed, the participants' production of backchannels was generally distributed across all the categories, though with some exceptions. The tendency was to make use of agreement and continuer backchannels, especially in the B2 group. When comparing each of the categories found for the complainers and considering their proficiency level, results reveal that there were no statistical differences between the two groups. On the contrary, in the case of the complainees, statistical differences were found in the categories of continuer (*p<.05.) and agreement (*p<.05.). As shown, the B2 group elicited 13 occurrences of continuer while the B1 group produced none. The results concerning the number of backchannels to show agreement were especially striking for the B2 group. The B2 group produced a total of 35 instances while the B1 group 7.

Overall, these results seem to support the idea that the role taken by the participants in the role-play task might have determined the production of backchannels. This is because, as suggested above, the complainees tended to assume the role of listeners. This result suggests that participants who took the role of listeners (complainees) had more chances to show signals of active listening. In addition, the nature of the complaint situation could have influenced the participants' backchannel production and the categories they chose. In a complaint situation, the complainee is expected to take responsibility for a particular issue and hence the use of agreement seems to come to the fore to, for example, provide signals of understanding (O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008).

This result may also point not only to the understanding of the situation on the part of the complainees, but also to their pragmatic knowledge, especially in the case of the B2 group (Yamashita, 2008).

The most frequent items of continuer backchannel found in both roles were "yeah" and "yes", which served as an invitation for the speaker to continue speaking (Ward & Tsukahra, 2000; O'Keeffe & Adolph, 2008). Example 1 illustrates the use of the backchannel category of continuer.

Example 1
B2 level participants: Continuer

Line	Turn	Participant	
Pre-complaint move			
A: Complainer and B: Complainee			
1	33	B_#19	yeah I don't think i::t will be watching I don't think it would be a problem
2	34	A_#19	the point is
3		B_#19	yeah<A19: BC_CON<yeah>//BC>
4	35	A_#19	I think you won't have a lot of space to
5	35	B_#19	a lot of space?

The above example represents a sequence in which the complainee (line 3) is evaluating a particular issue that derives from the complaint situation they are dealing with. When the complainer utters "the point is" (line 2), the complainee performs a backchannel, "yeah" (line 3), that functions as a continuer. The complainee does not try to take the turn but invites the interlocutor to continue speaking (Ward & Tsukahra, 2000) as well as to show attentiveness.

The analysis also reveals that the other salient backchannel category was agreement, which allows the listener to provide support and show compliance. In this case, the most frequent lexical items were "yes", "yeah" and "okay". Example 2 illustrates the use of the backchannel category of agreement.

Example 2
B1 level participants. Agreement backchannel

Line	Turn	Participant	
Topic negotiation move			
A: Complainer and B: Complainee			
1	**6**	B_#7	oh sorry I forget it umm I umm I had to organize a lot of things and the music er and sent a //a// //a// I invited but er
2	**7**	A_#7	yes it's my favourite group which is playing
3		B_#7	yeah<B7: BC_AGREE<yeah>//BC>
4		A_#7	you should
5		B_#7	yeah <A7: BC_AGREE<yeah>//BC>
6		A_#7	remember, you're my friend

In this short sequence, the two participants are in the process of negotiating the complaint. The complainee tries to justify his fault while the complainer shows agreement through a backchannel. The complainee makes use of agreement

backchannels (line 3 and line 5) to show the complainer that he understands his statement and agrees with him (Maynard, 1986; Gass & Houck, 1999; O'Keeffe & Adolph, 2008).

These backchannels should be understood as part of a conversation that is focused on a complaint situation. Both participants should ideally try to find a solution to their conflict and showing agreement may be useful to support the other interlocutor. Also, in this context, backchannels may contribute to facilitating not only the acceptance of the interlocutor's response but also mutual understanding. Besides this, the use of backchannels may represent a source of feedback that helps the interlocutors rethink their speech and modify it (if necessary) to meet their communicative goals.

This analysis shows that the participants of the two proficiency levels made use of varied cues to show attentiveness throughout the conversation. Results suggest that, in general, the B2 group tended to use backchannels more frequently, probably influenced by their overall proficiency, experience in FL conversations as well as pragmatic knowledge. Nevertheless, when the data were explored considering the role of the participants (i.e., complainer and complainee), the results differed. In the case of the complainers in the two proficiency groups, the results did not reveal statistical differences between them. This finding could be related to the fact that the complainer tended to keep the main turn and thus they had little opportunity to show signals of active listenership compared to the complainees. On the other hand, the complainees usually acted out as listeners. Therefore, they tended to exhibit more signals of active listenership. In addition, the analysis also indicates that, when looking at the typology of backchannels, the participants usually elicited instances that fell under the categories of continuer and agreement. Concerning this, statistical differences were observed for complainees in the categories of continuer and agreement, pointing to higher use in the case of the B2 group.

Overall, the results of this study provide insights into how learners at two different proficiency levels made use of backchannels while engaged in interaction. The participants' use of backchannels was generally appropriate and reflected their pragmatic knowledge. The results suggest that the proficiency and the role the participants took in the conversation influenced backchannel frequency and typology. Moreover, the results indicate that most participants were, in general, aware of the importance of displaying active listening cues. However, the B2 group appeared to use backchannel cues more frequently, especially when adopting the role of the listener. This result reveals that the participants' proficiency level appears to influence the use and choice of backchannels.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this preliminary study was to explore the frequency and type of signals of active listenership learners at two different proficiency levels displayed in a simulated role-play task. The findings of the study suggest that the participants' general proficiency level and the role adopted in the role-play task (i.e., complainer and complainee) influenced the overall production of backchannels. In general, higher

proficiency level learners exhibited greater production when comparing the total amount of backchannel items. This result may be related not only to the participants' overall linguistic knowledge but also to their pragmatic knowledge. In addition, the role the participants acted out in the role-play task also affected the number of occurrences they elicited. That is, the participants who performed the role of the complainee (usually acting out as a listener) produced more backchannel cues. It seems the participants were pragmatically aware of the importance of making use of this interactional resource to keep the flow of the conversation. The most salient backchannel categories were continuer (B2 level) and agreement (B1 and B2 levels).

In this study, the data were taken from a simulated role-play task, which may not necessarily reveal language use in authentic contexts. A more realistic task (e.g., an elicited conversation task) or authentic interactions would provide further insights regarding active listening cues. Still, the data used in this study served to identify and explore how learners made use of backchannels in interaction. As a preliminary study, the purpose was to observe learners' backchannel behaviour and to make decisions about further research and pedagogical actions. The study shows the need for pragmatic instruction, especially in the case of lower-level learners who should become more aware of the importance of providing interlocutors with signals of active listening. It should be noted that some prior studies have adopted, for instance, a cross-cultural view to exploring backchannel behaviour (e.g., Cutrone, 2005). However, in the present study, we have focused on the learners' production of backchannels in a particular setting without taking a cross-cultural approach or embracing a model of native-speakerism. This is so because we argue for the adoption of an international language perspective, which is also becoming popular in the pedagogical treatment of pragmatics (e.g., Tajeddin & Alemi, 2021).

As an interactional resource, backchanneling requires the participation of all interlocutors involved in a conversation, especially those acting as listeners. This resource carries pragmatic meaning and contributes to the overall construction of interaction. Furthermore, through backchannels, speakers can maintain and progress within a conversation and establish interpersonal relationships with their interlocutors. Listeners' responses are crucial to show involvement in interaction (Taguchi, 2015) and language learners should be aware of their communicative potential. From a pedagogical perspective, language teachers who aim to teach pragmatics should reconsider addressing interactional resources such as backchannels. While we agree with the relevance of designing communicative tasks that focus on speech acts, we also argue for dealing with interactional resources. This would entail moving beyond the teaching of speech acts to paying attention to the variety of interactional resources interlocutors may use to construct discourse, both verbally and non-verbally. Making learners aware of the role of interactional resources such as backchannels may serve to increase their pragmatic competence and thus their overall communicative competence.

Concerning the pedagogical treatment of interactional pragmatic resources, it is important to provide learners with appropriate opportunities for input, practice, and feedback (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Backchannel may be exploited as an

interactional resource and ideally along with other pragmatic aspects, such as turn-taking. The idea is to make learners aware of the importance of displaying signals of active listenership while participating in a conversation. Teachers should prepare some awareness-raising and practice activities to foster learners' reflection and use of verbal and non-verbal backchannel responses. To start, teachers can pose a few questions to make learners think about their active listenership behaviour while interacting in the FL. This may be useful to make learners consider whether they elicit any kind of interactional resources while acting as listeners. Teachers can then select some audiovisual input to explore with learners the construction of interaction. Scripted materials (e.g., TV series) may serve this purpose; nevertheless, samples taken from authentic interaction would better illustrate how interactional resources are used. Teachers can ask learners to, for example, identify and analyse the spoken data (with special attention paid to backchannels) and discuss their pragmatic meaning. After that, teachers can design communicative tasks (e.g., role-plays and debates) to promote learners' use of backchannels. Feedback on performance should be given, especially in the case of less proficient learners, who may face some linguistic limitations that can prevent them from effectively producing backchannels. These steps represent a simple and systematic way to approach this interactional resource in the classroom. It can be adapted to the specific needs of language learners to better support their learning.

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