

## **Are You Listening? (Backchannel Behaviors)**

*Anne Berry, Georgetown University, United States*

**Level:** High Intermediate/Advanced

**Time:** 5 minutes to prepare, 35-45 minutes in class

**Resources:** A list of interesting topics that one might find in everyday conversations with friends

### **Goal**

To promote awareness of short responses during conversations such as *uh-huh* and *yeah* known as backchannel behaviors; to increase awareness of cultural differences in backchannel behaviors; to practice behaviors that indicate active listening

### **Description of the Activity**

This activity provides a situation in which students can observe their own behavior and the behavior their classmates when listening. It also provides the basis for a discussion about how these behaviors may vary from person to person, situation to situation, culture to culture.

For the activity to work, students must be able to observe conversations in action. Observable conversations can be found all over the place, even when the teaching situation is outside of an English-speaking country. Conversations on television sitcoms and dramas are far more natural looking and sounding than they used to be. Conversations on talk shows (radio and television), while structured to some extent, often occur with enough spontaneity that the turn-taking is not choreographed. Within an English-speaking country, observable conversations abound, and “eavesdropping” takes place all the time, even when unintended and undesired. While students can take advantage of these situations to watch how listeners behave, the conversations that are observed in this activity actually occur in the classroom.

Since one of the goals of the activity is to show students how listening behaviors vary from culture to culture, observing the conversations in which they themselves participate is quite useful. For this to occur, the teacher must set up the classroom with, on the one hand, pairs of speakers, and on the other hand, observers. (See procedure below.) While the pairs of students are talking, the observers keep track of who has the floor and who is listening, and what the listener is doing while s/he doesn't have the floor. Occasionally, students feel like they are being observed, and their conversations are not natural. However, even when this is the case, there is a surprising amount of variation in the behavior of the individual listeners. If the teacher participates in a pair as a listener, the amount of variation is greater still.

### **Procedure**

#### 1. Warm-up discussion (5 minutes)

Tell students to think about a friend of theirs who they would consider a good listener. Ask students why they consider that person to be a good listener; what does that person do to show that s/he is listening?

#### 2. Set-up (5 minutes)

Put students in pairs and give them a list of interesting topics that might be found in everyday conversations (e.g., a new relationship, a recent vacation, an accident that someone had or saw). Tell each student to choose a topic that he will be able to talk about for a few minutes.

#### 3. First set of conversations (5-10 minutes)

Choose half of the pairs and put them face to face at the front of the classroom. (In other words, if there are 12 students in the class, there should be six pairs. Put three of the pairs at the front of the classroom with each person facing his partner.) Tell one student in each pair to talk about his chosen topic until he is told to stop. Tell the second student to listen to the speaker and react naturally; questions and comments are okay, but remember that the

first student is supposed to be the primary speaker for the moment. (Pairs of students can speak in whatever language is common to them, including English. Listeners should come from a variety of cultural backgrounds if possible.) Tell the observers to focus on one of the pairs and to pay attention to the way the second student listens; what does s/he do and say while listening?

#### 4. Second set of conversations (5-10 minutes)

Repeat this step with the second half of the pairs at the front of the classroom conversing while the first group returns to their seats to become the observers. As in the first set of conversations, if there are students of different cultural backgrounds or different native languages in the class, choose the listeners such that a variety of cultures or languages is represented. In multilingual EFL settings, make use of the different languages the students may speak at home.

Note that more than one pair of students may demonstrate a conversation at the same time. Letting two or three pairs converse in front of the classroom simultaneously takes the pressure off of students because there is never one lone speaker who everyone is listening to. In fact, observers are not interested in what the speaker in each pair are saying; they are focused on observing the behaviors of the listener in each pair.

#### 5. Follow-up discussion (10-15 minutes)

Ask students to sit in a circle and discuss the following questions: What did the listeners do or say while they were listening? Did you notice any difference in the behaviors of the different listeners? Did you (the speakers) feel that the listener was paying attention to you? Why or why not? Did you (the speakers) feel that the listener was interested in what you were telling him? Why or why not? Think about how you act/speak when you are listening to your friends tell you something in your native language; do you make any

noises or comments?; do you ask any questions?; do you use any gestures or facial expressions? Do you behave like any of the listeners in these situations? Do you listen (or show that you are listening) in a different way when you are speaking to your teacher? boss? family members? Do you think you act this way because of your personality? the personality of the other speakers? the situation? Do other speakers of your language act the same way?

#### 6. Optional homework

If students are in a country where the target language is spoken, send them out to observe conversations between native speakers. Watching an English-language television interview show provides an alternative to observing native speakers in other areas. Tell students to keep track of listening behaviors: what body language do listeners use? what words or noises? how frequently does the listener make a sound or a movement? Later, discuss the differences that students observe when they watch their classmates listening and when they watch native speakers listening.

#### **Rationale**

Backchannel is a topic of interest to discourse analysts and sociolinguists because of what it contributes to the study of cultural differences in terms of conversational turn-taking. The term was coined by Yngve (1970) and is derived from the notion of a “back channel” through which the listener sends the speaker short messages, such as “yes” and “uh-huh”, that are not a bid for the floor. Which types of utterances can be considered backchannel activity is often debated. The very short messages like “mhm”, “yeah”, “right”, which are common in English, clearly qualify because they add a great deal to the quality of the interaction without really adding meaning to the conversation. However, Yngve also considers questions like, “you’ve started writing it then –your dissertation?” and short comments like, “Oh, I can believe it,” to be backchannel utterances. Duncan (1974) added other types of utterances to

the list, such as sentence completions, requests for clarification, and brief restatements, since their purpose is not actually to claim the turn but to provide the speaker with needed feedback.

Comparative research on conversational styles shows that speakers from different cultures exhibit different backchannel behaviors. For example, Berry (1994) that both the English speakers and the Spanish speakers who participated in her study used a variety of backchannel comments; however, the Spanish speakers tended to use longer and more explicit comments in their backchannel contributions (“Ay, sí, es verdad, sí- *Oh, yes, that is so true*” instead of “yeah”), and they were more likely to repeat or rephrase what the speaker was saying as a way of showing understanding. So, for example, the speaker says, “Me da mas penita no estar,\* bueno, me ha llamado me madre después de la boda para contarme...– *It makes me so sad that I can't be there, \* well, my mom called me right after to tell me...*”, and at the asterisk, the listener overlaps with “Sí, te sienta mal sí – *Yeah, it makes you feel bad, yeah.*” Although this type of longer backchannel occurred occasionally with the English speakers, it was far more common among the Spanish speakers.

Looking at backchannel informs our understanding of turn taking and helps clarify the notion of floor holding, but it also explains some of the misunderstandings that occur as a result of cross-cultural conversations. Listening behaviors that are considered polite in one culture may not be considered polite in another. In interviews with her Spanish and English participants, Berry found that the Spanish considered comments and questions that overlap with the speaker to be a positive part of conversation, saying that they show that people are paying attention, having fun and being “touched”, whereas the English speakers said that if two speakers are talking at once, they are not listening to each other. On the other hand, while the English speakers consider backchannel comments like “mhm” and “yeah” to be

cooperative, the Spanish speakers generally agreed that a constant “uh-huh, uh-huh” makes a listener sound uninterested and pressures the speaker to hurry up and finish.

Understanding backchannel is a necessary part of learning a second language. In fact, anyone who has contact with anyone from another culture can benefit from a heightened awareness of listening behaviors even if both speakers share a native language. (Consider the difference between a high-involvement style and a high-considerate style, both of which were found in American speakers of English, Tannen, 1984.) This activity, even when done with a class of students from the same cultural background, is a good first step to helping students become aware of this aspect of language learning.

### **Alternatives and Caveats**

Follow up by listing listening behaviors (comments and gestures) that are common among English speakers from the United States (e.g., “uh-huh,” “oh, really,” “wow,” “you’re kidding,” nodding, raising the eyebrows) and discussing how they are similar to and different from listening behaviors among speakers of other languages. Then, put students back in pairs; this time, if possible, pair up students of different cultural backgrounds. Have one student talk about one of the topics from the list while the other practices using the listening behaviors that have been discussed.

### **References**

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