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Towards the Students' Use of Backchannel Signals Within the Context of Virtual (Zoom) Class: The Students' Perspective

Abstract

This paper deals with special signals which show the speaker that their message is getting through. These signals are examined in online classroom discourse, taking place via Zoom and emphasis is placed on students' perspective in relation to the use of the abovementioned signals.

The data were collected through questionnaires that have been prepared in Google Form to circulate among the undergraduate students from the Department of English Philology, Faculty of Humanities at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. After the thorough study of linguistic and empirical data, the frequency of the usage of backchannels by students has been established and the types of backchannel signals were distinguished. In addition, the students' perspective on the function of the backchannel signals has been determined and Zoom-specific backchannel signals were identified.

Keywords: students' backchannel signals, Zoom class, online classroom discourse.

1. Introduction

The recent coronavirus outbreak had a great impact on almost every aspect of our life, jostling the day-to-day activities of millions of people and leading to a new custom of life. The academic world was no exception. According to UNESCO (2020), 186 countries implemented nationwide closure to stop the spread of the virus, and 73.3 % of learners were affected as a result. Educational institutions all over the world faced a new reality: students and lecturers had to stay home and use different online platforms for attending or conducting lectures. Georgia was no exception; higher educational institutions went online in February 2020 due to the decision of the Prime Minister of Georgia.

The new experience, the switch from face-to-face to online classes, has brought, on the one hand, some benefits, such as the feeling of safety in terms of not getting infected, open access to electronic materials, and not spending time and money on transportation. On the other hand, many barriers and challenges, for both lecturers and students, regarding effective communication, teaching efficiency and access to the Internet were also introduced.

The courses that were formerly face-to-face were mediated by Information and Computer Technology. In particular, the Zoom platform was the choice of many higher education institutions, including Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

I taught online during the pandemic. Based on personal experience, I reckon that one of our primary concerns for us, instructors, was to teach our students as effectively as possible and keep them engaged during practical classes, as they could easily get distracted. One of the ways we could observe students' engagement was through backchannels.

The purpose of this study is to observe the usage of backchannel signals by students, from their perspective, which can serve as a clue to their engagement. Identifying how involved Zoom classes were is important as this form of teaching is becoming more and more common.

This study aims to explore the students' views concerning the following issues: a) how common backchannel signals were in online classes; b) the types of backchannel signals used; c) the function of the backchannels; d) which was the most frequently used backchannel and e) finally, was there any backchannel signal used by students during online classes only.

2. Zoom Platform

As a result of advancements in technology, more and more universities have been offering online courses recently. Discussing online learning, there is a need for applications which can serve as a bridge between lecturers and students. During the Covid pandemic, almost all schools and higher educational institutions went online all over the world; thus the significance of such online platforms has drastically increased. Nowadays, there are several online platforms (skype, google classroom, Teams, Messenger, Zoom) offering to organize virtual meetings with several students for free.

Zoom has been the choice of most institutions, including Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, where all lectures, seminars and practical classes were conducted via Zoom. According to an article published in HeyHi by Ashley (2020), Zoom has grown exponentially since 2019, when Covid pandemic forced everyone to switch to online meetings, lectures, etc. In April 2020, Zoom announced to have a 2000% increase compared to pre-pandemic days with over 200 million daily active users.

As defined by Owl Labs (2020) "Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing platform that can be used for video conferencing meetings, audio conferencing, webinars, meeting recordings, and live chat" for free. It allows users either to schedule a meeting or to join one already created. Zoom meeting has a host and participants. In the given setting, the host was always the university lecturer and the participants – students.

In addition, the application predetermines what a host and participants are allowed to do. The host of the meeting can share the screen, and files and use the whiteboard and chat box within the meeting group or privately. In addition, he or she can allow the participants to share the screen and files and is also entitled to mute or unmute the participants as needed. Moreover, breakout rooms are available for hosts to create small collaborative group work, and polls for students' feedback. Zoom meetings can be recorded and made available for future reference (Zoomsupport, 2023).

Zoom meeting participants can send their reactions, which can be visible to the whole online class. The reaction buttons can be found at the bottom of the Zoom meeting.

The layout of Zoom can be customized. The various views available are: a) Speaker View – only the speaker is visible on your screen; b) Gallery view – all the participants are visible at the same time; c) Floating thumbnail window – allows one to minimize zoom window keeping zoom video on top of other windows; d) Full-screen meeting window – Zoom meeting is visible in the full-screen mode (Zoomsupport, 2023).

To join or host a Zoom meeting, it is required to have the Zoom app downloaded and share the link of the meeting or meeting ID. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University lecturers had their unique meeting IDs and passwords/ meeting links shared with students before the start of the semester. For the free version of Zoom, the length of one meeting is 40 minutes. The majority of the lecturers at the university used the free version. The length of the practical classes are 50 minutes, and each group had two 50-minute sessions, thus we had to restart the Zoom meeting after the time expired.

Most of the time, the lecturers' cameras were on during the classes, however, the university allowed the students to decide to join the online lecture with the camera on or off.

3. What are Backchannel Signals

According to Goffman (Hatch, 1992), in every communication, there must be special signals which show the speaker that the message is getting through and encourage him/her to continue. Backchannel signals can be sounds, words, phrases, gestures, facial expressions, nods, and smiles. They can be both verbal and non-verbal. "During conversations, even when it is not our turn to talk, we may nod or make noises like umhhmm, uhuh, yeah, yeah right - backchannel feedback that encourages the speaker to continue. These signals do not take the turn away from the speaker" (Hatch, 1992: 14).

In any type of oral communication, such backchannel signals are important as they show the engagement of the communication participants, classroom discourse is no exception. As defined by Van de Walle, Karp, Lovin, and Bay-Williams (2014), classroom discourse includes "the interactions between all the participants that occur throughout a lesson" (p. 20). Gonzalez (2008) regards classroom discourse as an essential component of learning that includes both teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions. Although classroom discourse may include students' representations of knowledge through both written and oral forms, for the scope of this article, we will focus on oral discourse. Backchannel signals are crucial in classroom discourse as they help teachers to diagnose a problem, see whether students understand the material introduced, are interested, etc. In teacher training, teachers are told not to ask students whether they understand what they are taught or not. Instead, teachers have to observe backchannel signals and adjust their methods and explanations accordingly. Smiling, eye contact, and head nods can be interpreted as positive feedback, whereas bored looks and lack of eye contact can be an alarming signal (Hatch, 1994: 15).

This paper studies classroom discourse, happening not in the usual setting, classroom but an interaction taking place via Zoom and the use of backchannels in this setting.

The term backchannel was initially coined by Yngve (1970) for such messages as "mm-hmmm" eye contact, smiles, and head nods from the listener. As stated by Yule (1996), backchannels are "vocal indications of attention when someone else is speaking" (p. 127). They provide feedback to the current speaker that the message is received. The verbal and nonverbal backchannel signals can vary according to the setting (Hatch 1994). This type of feedback is crucial in a classroom setting. The lecturer is concentrated on making students understand the material being taught and students need to show the lecturer whether they understand things, need clarification, show agreement, confusion, etc. Therefore, backchannels are crucial and beneficial for lecturers and students as they need to see and understand that their message is received and understood.

Backchannel signals have been studied for many years. There exist various classifications of backchannel signals in scholarly literature. Tottie (1991) sub-classifies backchannels based on their form as simple, which consists of one backchannel item (e.g. yeah), double, containing multiple repetitions of the same item (e.g. mhm mhm, yeah yeah) or complex, comprising of various backchannel items (yeah, I know, yeah, right) (Tottie 1991: 263).

Another categorical distinction is between specific and generic backchannels, also called assessments and continuers respectively (Goodwin, 1986). Specific backchannels, such as oh wow, are context sensitive as they express addressees' responses to the context of the previous turn. Generic backchannels, such as uh huh, yeah, show understanding and attention to the speaker.

Hayashi and Hayashi (1991 in White 1997) distinguish four subcategories of backchannel signals based on their function: a) continuers; b) repairers; c) reinforcers and claimers, and d) prompters and clarifiers.

Coulthard et al. (as quoted in White 1997) claim that backchannels are used to acknowledge, accept, or endorse information stated by the current speaker.

Backchannel signals can also be classified according to the role of the speakers engaged in the communication. In this setting, we have the role of a teacher (a lecturer) and a student. The backchannels used by them may vary in form, function and placement of the feedback. Within the framework of the paper, the emphasis is placed on students' backchannel signals.

4. Methodology and Data Analysis

Questionnaires were prepared in Google Form to circulate among the target group. The survey results were collected online. The group included undergraduate students from the Department of English Philology, Faculty of Humanities at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. The students were of different academic performances and years of studies. In total, 100 students filled in the questionnaire.

Within the framework of the Undergraduate Program in English Philology, students have to take different aspects of English depending on the semester they are doing. Those are practical classes, where students have to show weekly engagement in class activities, prepare homework, participate in class discussions, debates, etc. The practical classes are the following: Phonetics, Analytical Reading, Grammar, Text Interpretation, Speaking, legal English, Business English, Language of Newspaper, FCE and Writing. All these classes went online (via Zoom) during the pandemic. Within the framework of the questionnaire, the students were asked to think about the backchannels they used during those practical classes. The reason for concentrating on those classes was the following:

The students are more actively engaged in those practical classes compared to lectures;

There are fewer students (approximately 10-15 students), so they knew that a lecturer would notice and appreciate their feedback more; thus making students more open.

The term backchannel was predefined, and examples were provided at the beginning to make sure that students understood backchannels before answering the questions. They were also asked to provide answers based on their experience.

Here are the questions that the students had to respond:

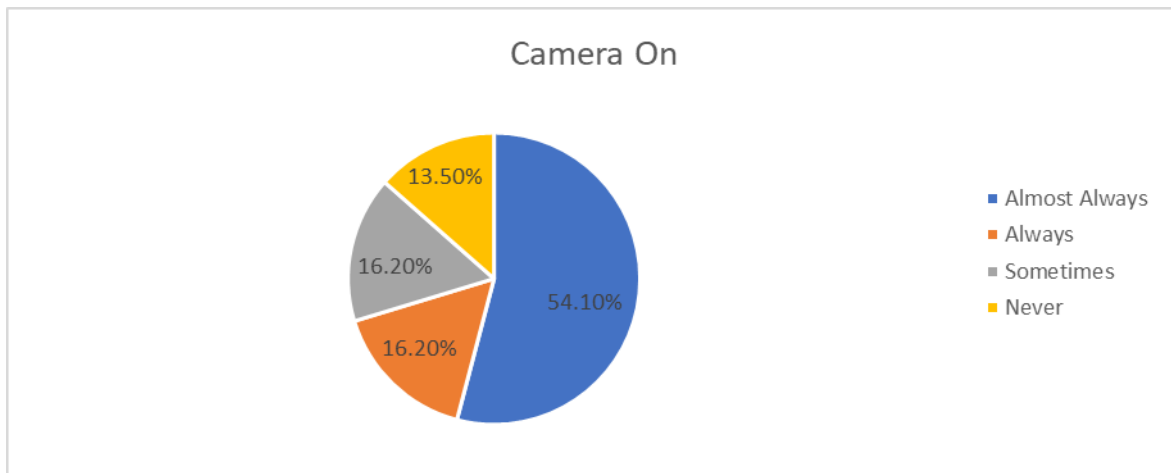
- 1) How often did you have your camera on during online lectures?
 - a) Almost never
 - b) Sometimes
 - c) Almost always
 - d) Always
- 2) Did you use backchannel signals during online (zoom) lectures?
 - a) Almost never
 - b) Sometimes
 - c) Almost always
 - d) Always
- 3) You used backchannel signals mainly
 - a) when a lecturer was speaking
 - b) when a student was speaking
- 4) What was/were the function of your backchannel/s?

- 5) If you have not used backchannel signals, can you specify the reason for not using them?
- 6) Which verbal backchannel signals did you use? Please, name them.
- 7) Which nonverbal backchannel signals did you use? Please, name them.
- 8) Which was the most frequently used backchannel?
- 9) Was there a particular backchannel that you used only during Zoom classes?

The obtained empirical data were carefully observed and analyzed. Thus, the given study represents an attempt to look into the students' perspectives regarding their use of backchannel signals.

5. Results and Discussion

Initially, students were invited to think about how often they had cameras on during Zoom classes. The study has shown that the majority of students claim to have their cameras on either most of the time or always. The chart below (pic. 1) indicates that 54.1 % have stated to have the cameras on almost always, sometimes and always both accounted for 16.2 % and only the minor part – 13.5 % has confessed to having never turned the cameras on.

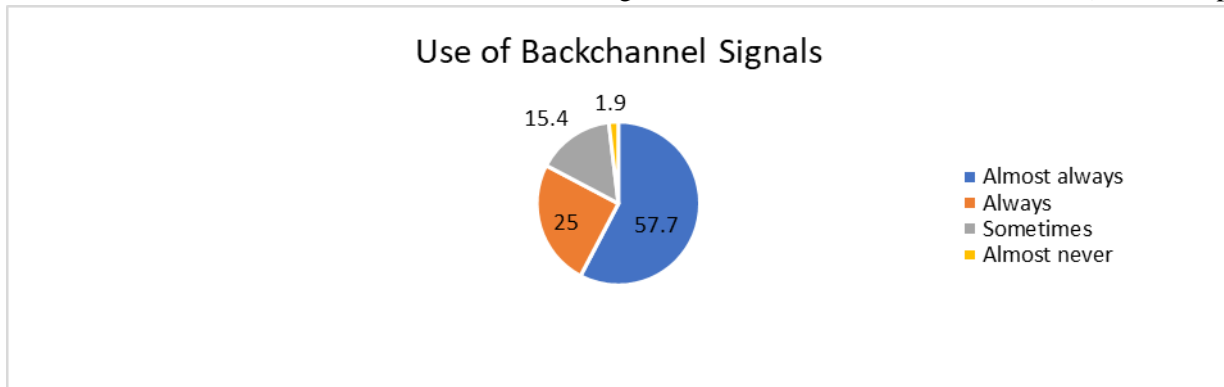


Picture 1. *Having cameras on during Zoom classes*

The data suggest that the major part of the students were well aware that their involvement was graded and one of the ways to impress the lecturers, make them remember their faces and show their eagerness to participate or participation during Zoom classes was through having their cameras on.

Besides engagement, students also had to show their interest, understanding, misunderstanding, disagreement, etc. and this could be achieved through backchannel signals. The next question referred to the use of the mentioned signals. The results of the survey have shown that 57.7% of respondents used backchannel signals almost always, 25 % always, 15. 4% sometimes and only a small group, 1.9 % claimed

to have used backchannel signals almost never (see pic. 2).

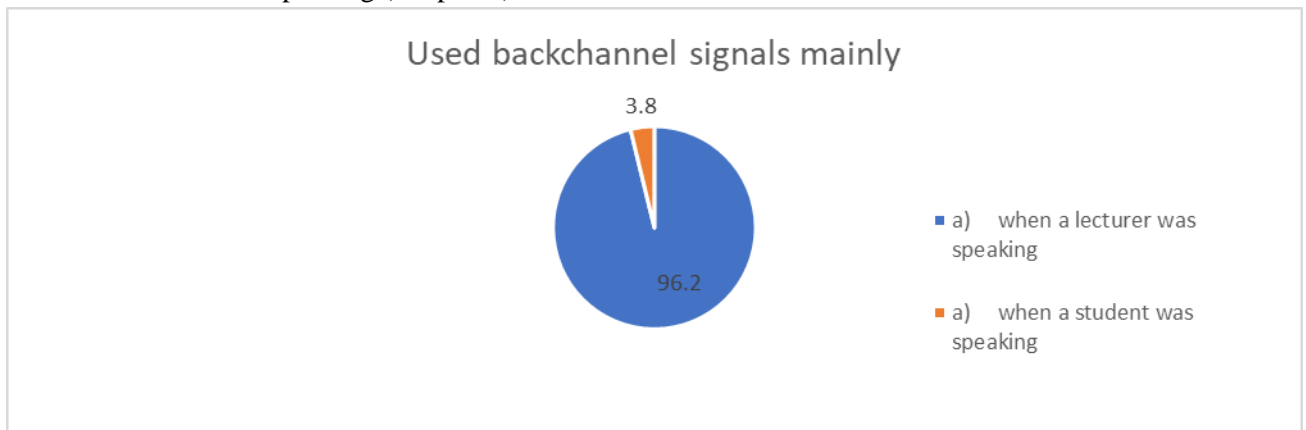


Picture 2. *How often students used backchannel signals*

As can be observed, the majority of respondents believe that showing feedback was of utmost importance even during online classes, when we did not see each other face-to-face. The diagram shows that only a very small number (1.9%) claimed to have almost never used backchannel signals. While 57.7 % of students have used them almost always. The numbers indicate that students not only try to have their cameras on and show their eagerness for engagement during the lesson but also be active listeners and show the speaker, in this case, the lecturer that his or her message is getting through. These signals are beneficial for both students and lecturers, as they make communication more effective.

The three consecutive questions provided more insight into when students mainly used backchannel signals and why they chose to use backchannel signals or not.

As for the use of backchannel signals, the respondents' answers revealed that students mainly claimed to use feedback when a lecturer was speaking (96.2%) and only 3.8 % of respondents stated to have used them when a student was speaking (see pic. 3).



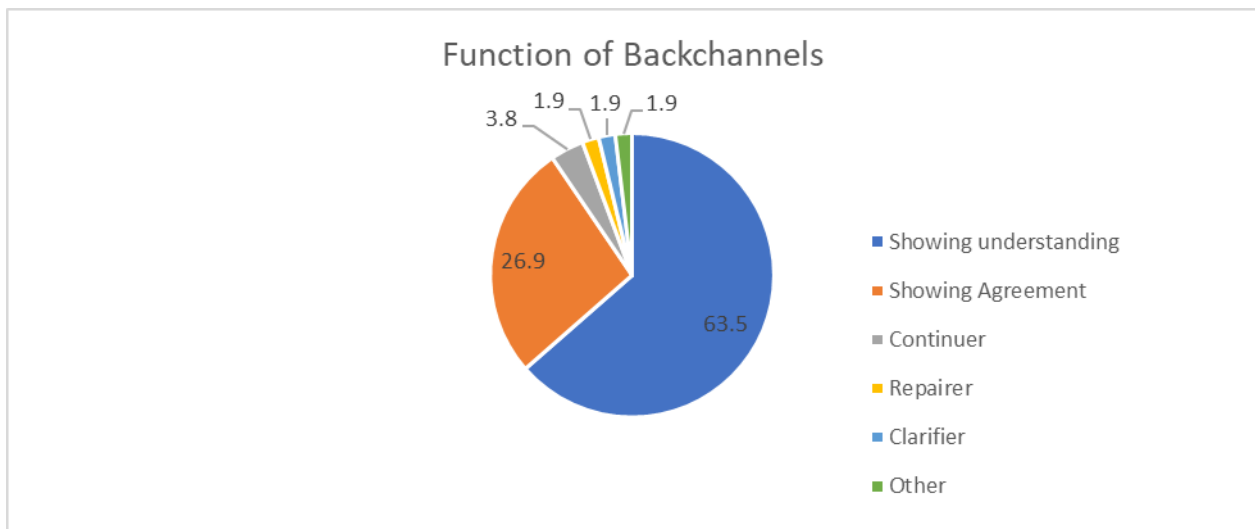
Picture 3. *During whose speech do students mainly use backchannel signals*

The results show the prevalence of backchannel signals during a lecturer's speech, and it can be attributed to a number of facts:

- 1) A lecturer plays an important role in classroom discourse, and students wish to impress him/her in order to obtain good grades and also show a positive attitude and interest;
- 2) A lecturer is the one who introduces the new materials, and students need to show whether they understand the topics covered or not.

The analysis of the data reveals that students mainly used backchannels during a lecturer’s speech because they tried to show their comprehension. The feedback that most lecturers are looking for when introducing and covering new materials.

Furthermore, students were asked to contemplate the function of their backchannel/s. The results of the survey have revealed that most of the students – 63.5% have used backchannels to show understanding, 26.9 % - to express agreement, 3.8% - used them as continuers, 1.9 % - as repairers, 1.9 – for clarification and 1.9 % has some other reasons (see pic. 4).



Picture 4 *The reasons students use backchannels*

When naming the reasons for not using the backchannel signals, the respondents pointed out the following issues:

- a) I was not listening to the lecturer;
- b) There was no need;
- c) I had some private problems, and was not able to concentrate;

Fortunately, such cases when students were not using feedback were very few and accounted only for 1.9 %.

Students were also asked to think about the verbal and nonverbal backchannel signals used by them during zoom classes (see table 1).

Verbal Backchannel	Number of Students
Yes, I see	2
uhhuh	12
Right	3
Ok	6
гогоб	9
Great	2
umhmm	8
yeah	35
No	5

Yeh, right	7
Yeh, understand	1
Everything is clear	1
Got it	1
Exactly	3
Yes, of course	5
დიახ, გასაგებია	8
გეთანხმებით	3
კი, ბატონო	1
კი	2
არა	2
დიახ, ისმის	2

Table 1. *Verbal signals used by students*

We can observe from the table that a variety of English and Georgian backchannel signals were used during online classes. This table indicates that the three most frequently used ones were yeah (29.6%), uhuh (10.1%) and დიახ (7.6%). One student also mentioned one backchannel signal - დიახ, ისმის which is characteristic for Zoom classes as lecturers often needed to see that the internet connection was stable or their microphone was working and their message was getting through.

The data showed that students did use backchannel signals. However, the next issue was whether those signals reached a lecturer or not. In this case, communication was held via Zoom, and to make the message audible, the microphone had to be on. Students usually had it off when they were not speaking.

As for the nonverbal backchannel signals during Zoom classes, this was easier for students to use as they needed to have their camera on without adjusting the microphone.

The study has shown that students have claimed to use a wide variety of nonverbal signals, like eye contact, head nods, smiles, etc (see Table 2).

Nonverbal signals	Number of students
Eye contact	26
Head nod	28
Head shake	3
Smile	25
Mimicry	2
Raising hand	2

Table 2. *Nonverbal signals used by students*

Students were also expected to reflect on the frequency of backchannel signals. The study of the data has revealed that students named nonverbal signals (head nod, smile and eye contact) as the most frequently used once. The finding was not surprising, as in Zoom classroom, nonverbal signals were easier to use and make the speaker see it, as it did not require the microphone to be on.

Eventually, they were asked to think about the backchannel signals that they have used only during zoom classes and as I expected, they have named Zoom Emojis - 🙌 - clapping hands, 👍 - thumbs up, ❤️ heart, 🙋 raised hand.

6. Conclusions

Thus, the substantial study of the subject allows us to make the following inferences:

- a) Backchannel signals play a significant role in classroom discourse even when it is held online, via Zoom. Students are well aware that they have to give feedback to a lecturer for effective communication.
- b) The signals, both verbal and nonverbal, are amply used by students, mainly when the lecturer was speaking.
- c) Backchannel signals used by students were of different functions;
- d) Students used Zoom emojis as feedback which were available only during Zoom classes.

Acknowledgements

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