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Listener Responses as a Pragmatic Resource for Learners of English

■ Listener responses are essential to the progress and intelligibility of conversation. Learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have only rarely been taught the forms and functions of these conversational particles. This paper offers a simple taxonomy of the most common listener responses; compares English listener responses with those of Spanish, German, Japanese, and Chinese; and discusses the pragmatics and interpretation of listener responses. It examines the placement and interpretations of three types of listener responses: minimal responses, the most common of backchannels, continuers (e.g., uh-huh), and reactive expressions (e.g., o.k.). Pedagogical tools for raising awareness, eliciting intuitions, and using listener responses are recommended.

Many, if not most, English learners entering the L2 academic environment initially encounter difficulty not with grammar, vocabulary, or literacy, but with oral skills. As long ago as 1983, Scarcella noted, "It is no longer enough for the language teacher to teach grammar and pronunciation; language students must also acquire the rules and norms which govern conversation" (p. 178).

According to Farr (2003), the ability to express oneself and participate in "engaged listenership" must be developed quickly so that one can participate in "critical academic engagement" (p. 72). Gardner (1998) wrote of the importance of teaching listener responses as part of engaged listenership: "If language teaching is to prepare learners to talk in the real world, then part of that preparation would need to take into account participation in interactive talk that involves these very common vocalizations" (p. 204). (For an opposing stance, see Lawrence, 1999.)

Like other pragmatic features of language, listener-response skills are acquired very late in both the first language (as late as adolescence!) and the second language (Hess & Johnston, 1988). Listener responses—both form and function—are transferable; in the first language, they are one of the first skills lost when the second language becomes dominant (Heinz, 2003; Tao & Thompson, 1991).

Why, then, are listener responses so rarely taught? One reason, according to Gardner (2001), is that listening and speaking are often taught as separate skills, removing the context of instruction for this "in-between" language. The artificial distinction between listening and speaking in second language pedagogy may discourage the teaching of "real conversation." Production (speaking) and comprehension (listening) are strongly interdependent because interlocutors align themselves first to the situation ("space, time, causality, intentionality, and currently relevant individuals," Garrod & Pickering, 2003, p. 8) and then, by using each other's sounds, words, and syntax, construct interactive alignment. This alignment is not coincidental; it is projected by tightly interwoven linguistic features, including listener responses.

Second, listener response use is highly variable and dependent on features such as language (see discussion below); age (Kajikawa, Amano, & Kondo, 2003; Stenstrom, 2004); ethnicity (Patrick & Figueroa, 2002; Phillips, 1976); speech genre (Allard, 1995; Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2002; Roberts, Francis, & Morgan, 2006); and participant gender (Furo, 2000; Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995; Mulac, Erlandson, Hallett, Molloy, & Prescott, 1998). Finally, analysts have been unsystematic in their categorization and inconsistent in their labeling of listener responses. While remedying the first problem is beyond my control, and research on the second is in its infancy, enough work has been done on the form and function of these conversational particles to warrant a systematic, consistent taxonomy sufficiently simple for application to second language teaching.

Listener Responses: Form

As mentioned above, there is considerable disagreement about the classification of minimal response types (Drummond & Hopper, 1993). When I look at the least-common denominator of each taxonomy in the literature, I find that "listener response" assumes the notions "floor" or "primary speakership" and therefore entails the notions "*off* floor" or "*non*-primary speakership." This seems to be the case regardless of whether analysts view such responses as turns, non-turns, or "non-primary turns" (Heinz, 2003, p. 1117). To situate these within conversational structure, I will use the term *listener response* as the superordinate and make a distinction between two subordinate categories, *backchannel* (Yngve, 1970) and *minimal response* (Fiksdal, 1990). Within the backchannel category, I distinguish between *continuers* and *reactive tokens* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Taxonomy of Listener Responses

Listener responses
Backchannels   Minimal responses
Continuers   Reactive expressions
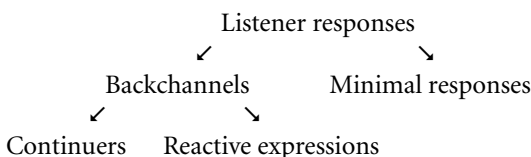
While backchannels are listener responses internal to the turn of the speaker, minimal responses occur at floor changes, that is, when the listener has taken or has been given the floor (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Ward & Tsukahara, 2000). The utterance material of a minimal response may be identical to that of backchannels (*uh-huh, yeah, o.k.,* etc.) but instead fills a turn slot. To illustrate this, in excerpt (1) the first three utterances of the tutor (*o.k, uh-huh, o.k.)* are backchannels, while the fourth (*got it,* which one might argue is semantically equivalent to *o.k.*) is a minimal response, as the student's turn is over.

(1)
S: What brings me in? I'm working on a paper for my class, Ethics and Public Policy,
            and I've come up with a draft, and I'm looking for feedback on the draft.
T: *o.k.*
S: Basically, the (.) intention of the course is to develop good arguments
T: *uh-huh*
S: and we're studying ethics and public policy, and this week we were [on (.) the
T: [*o.k.*
S: subject of surrogacy, surrogate parenting.
T: *Got it.*
Note: *Thonus, 2002, p. 117.*

A backchannel can be formally distinguished from a minimal response by three "negative" features:

- It is grammatically optional (this term from Müller, 2005).
- It is not positioned as a "postcompletion" utterance.
- It does not elicit acknowledgment by the on-floor speaker.

I propose two types of backchannels: those that respond to the *fact* of an utterance (*continuers*) and those that respond to its *content* (all other backchannels—which I will label *reactive expressions*). Whereas continuers "hand the floor back to the immediately prior speaker," reactive tokens "claim agreement or understanding of the prior turn" (Gardner, 2001, p. 2). Typical English continuers are *uh-huh* and *yeah*; typical reactive tokens are *o.k.* and *Great!* as well as laughter (Ward & Tsukahara, 2000).

Listener Responses: Functions

With some terminology in place, we can now turn to the functions of listener responses. Their primary function is to "make a claim to another participant about how that talk has been received by his or her listener" (Gardner, 1998, p. 209). Listener responses are multifunctional and "quintessentially metacommunicative" (Hess & Johnston, 1988, p. 332), assisting in the conversational work of turn-management, monitoring, repair, and politeness. They are situated within the larger context of conversation and participant orientation:

Together with assessments, response tokens provide information to other participants in the talk not only about how some prior talk has been

receipted, but also some information on how the response token utterer is projecting further activities in the talk, for example whether they approve of, agree with, disagree with, will remain silent on, or have something to say about the prior talk. (Gardner, 2001, p. 3)

Interpretations of specific listener responses are surprisingly consistent across the research literature. Schegloff (1982) argued that *uh-huh* exhibits "an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway by another, and that it is not yet complete" (p. 81). Jefferson (1984) followed this with the interpretation of *mmhmm* (≈ *uh-huh*) as "passive recipiency," in contrast to *yeah*, which hints that the hearer views the speaker's turn as nearing conclusion or as complete. Drummond and Hopper (1993) noted that there is another sense in which *uh-huh* and *yeah* differ: that is, how soon after its utterance the off-floor speaker will attempt to take the floor or succeed in doing so. They found that *yeah* initiates "turn bids" almost half the time it is uttered, whereas this is true for *uh-huh* only 4-5% of the time. Function supports the formal distinction made between continuers (e.g., *uh-huh, mmhmm*) and reactive expressions (e.g., *yeah*).

Regarding politeness, listener responses attend to three primary wants: hesitancy (allowing options); equality (making interlocutors "feel good"); and formality (creating distance so as not to impose) (Farr, 2003). According to Heinz (2003), they fulfill the intent of Grice's Cooperative Principle: "Providing appropriate backchannel responses can therefore be thought of as a required contribution when the Cooperative Principle is enacted, when one interlocutor is telling a story or holds the floor and the other wants this alignment to continue for the time being" (p. 1114).

Failing to use listener responses or using inappropriate ones is death to a conversation, "likely to make communication less efficient and to leave conversational participants dissatisfied" (Heinz, 2003, p. 1125). Interestingly, use of a variety of response tokens across an interaction appears crucial; repeated use of the same response in sequence may signal "incipient disinterest" (Schegloff, 1982, p. 85). In Farr's words, "interactional and pragmatic faux-pas (emanating from the incorrect use of listenership devices) may not be well tolerated" (2003, p. 72).

Thonus (2002, 2004) investigated the form and function of listener responses in one-on-one academic writing tutorials. In interviews with writing tutors and with native speaking (NS) and nonnative speaking (NNS) students referencing 24 separate interactions, she found that all participants agreed that backchannels signaled conversational involvement of both parties and concurred that "backchannels are welcomed if they serve affiliative purposes" (Thonus, 2002, p. 127). The continuer *uh-huh* seemed to respond to the *fact* of the speaker's utterance, while reactive expressions *o.k., yeah, (all) right*, and *oh* responded to the *content* of the utterance:

uh-huh	"I heard what you said."
o.k.	"I heard and am considering what you said."
yeah	"I agree with what you said."
(all) right	"I agree with what you said."

oh   "That's new information to me."

The following excerpts illustrate their deployment in academic conversations (T = tutor; S = student):

(2)
T: O.K. um so let's see. So what you're going to do then, let's review here,
S: *o.k.*
T: (.) is (.) add the collector's, I think that the main thing that you need to be doing is
    adding the collector's interpretation to [each of these paragraphs because
S   [*uh-huh*
    I give the informant's,   pretty much.
T: *yeah*

(3)
T: And this doesn't necessarily mean you have to do a lot of changing
S: *uh-huh*
T: because you're probably making those points already,   um so what you
S: *uh-huh*
T: might do is just focus on the beginning of each paragraph and try to clarify your point in
    that paragraph, and then maybe the rest of it's fine.   You know, check,
S: *o.k. right*
T: check and see if you need to play with it.   So this isn't necessarily a
S: *uh-huh*   *o.k.*
T: huge revision, right?   Just very pointed [revision.
S: *uh-huh*   [*uh-huh, all right*

Note: *Data from Thonus, 2002.*

Crosslinguistic Studies of Backchannels

It is now possible to claim with some confidence how English listener responses compare and contrast with those in other languages (McCarthy, 2003; Sorjonen, 2001). A number of descriptive and contrastive crosslinguistic studies suggest strong language-specific rules for listener responses, and the working out of these rules appears to be coconstructed in conversation. One of the earliest studies was White's (1989), which contrasted Japanese and American English. Summarized here are studies of English compared to Spanish, German, Chinese, and Japanese; unfortunately, I could find little else in the literature on backchannels for languages other than English in sources written in English.

Spanish and English

Scarcella (1983) studied Spanish and English backchannels, finding that Spanish speakers make frequent use of content words, creating a repetition strategy. Scarcella correctly predicted that Spanish first-language speakers' use of repetition, if transferred to second-language English, might be perceived as "interruption." Roebuck and Wagner (2004) supported Scarcella's claim that repetition is a key strategy in Spanish-language backchanneling.

German and English

Heinz (2003) did contrastive work on German and English listener responses, noting that the majority in both languages served a supportive function (i.e., continuers). In German, however, fewer listener responses and fewer overlapping listener responses were observed, with most occurring after pauses. The second most frequent response type was hesitation (i.e., silence). In comparison, English featured more listener responses and more overlapping listener responses; the second most frequent response type was the exclamation. These findings suggest that listeners in English conversations are expected to be more participatory than those in German conversations.

Japanese and English

Maynard (1990) found that Japanese-language listener responses occurred far more frequently than English-language ones in comparable social situations. Furo (2000, 2001) agreed, noting that in Japanese, on single-person floors, numerous listener responses are expected, and turn transitions invite backchannels (in our terminology, minimal responses). In English, on single-person floors, fewer backchannels are expected, and turn transitions are not always occasions for minimal responses. In fact, when used by second-language learners of English, minimal responses may be interpreted as interruptions (a taking of the floor) rather than an evaluation of the previous speaker's utterance, causing English speakers to feel "pushed" to cede the floor. This analysis suggests that minimal responses are less preferred in English than are backchannels, consistent with a negative politeness strategy: Minimal responses are far more "presumptuous" than backchannels, as they presume to take the floor.

Cutrone (2005) studied interactions in English between Japanese and British speakers. He noted the tendency for the Japanese to use the backchannels *uhum* and *yeah* even when disagreeing with or misunderstanding the other speaker. While viewed by the Japanese as supporting harmony (*omoiyari*), these were interpreted by the British speakers "with displeasure," signaling either interruption or disinterest in the content of their communication (p. 269). Cutrone's paper is relevant to comparative studies of backchannels research in an even more crucial way: Citing Tottle (1990) and Orestrøm (1983), he noted that the inventory of British backchannels is relatively larger than those of Americans', while Americans use backchannels about three times more often than do the British. Hence, when one discusses "English" backchannels, one must be careful to distinguish between varieties.
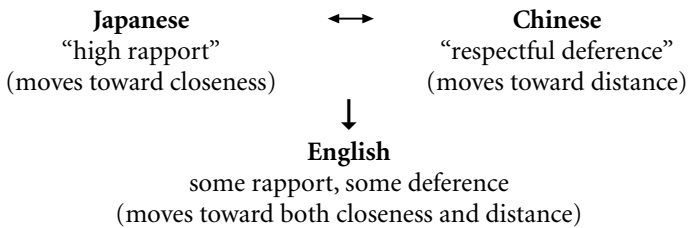
Chinese and English

Tao and Thompson (1991) compared listener responses in Mandarin Chinese and American English. In Chinese, they found few backchannels as "continuers within the other speaker's turn"—only 8% of the turns in the sample. Nonverbal backchannels such as head nods were also infrequent in the data. In English, listener responses were more in evidence—27% of the turns in the sample. About half of these patterned as backchannels and the other half as minimal responses; nonverbal backchannels such as head nods were nearly as frequent.

Chinese, Japanese, and English

Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao (1996) noted that continuers are more frequent in Japanese than in either American English or Chinese, and that other reactive tokens are more frequent in Chinese than in either Japanese or English. In Chinese, reactive expression use, "without waiting for a [turn] transition point, is seen as presumptuous, intrusive, and even rude or impolite" (p. 382). Therefore, most listener responses are voiced as minimal responses, consistent with Tao and Thompson's (1991) observations—and unlike the high backchannel use of American English speakers, who anticipate listener responses other than backchannels at semantic or pragmatic completion points, "points at which a full proposition has been uttered" (p. 381), and their use is much less frequent than backchannels. Like Furo, Clancy et al. predicted that *o.k.* and *yeah* uttered before such points would be processed as "dismissive" or "disruptive" by the speaker. American English listener response behavior, therefore, positions somewhere between the "high rapport" of Japanese and the "respectful deference" of Chinese, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Pragmatic Functions of Listener Responses in Three Languages

Japanese	←——→	**Chinese**
"high rapport"		"respectful deference"
(moves toward closeness)		(moves toward distance)

↓

English
some rapport, some deference
(moves toward both closeness and distance)

For (American) English language learners and their teachers, three rather simple conclusions may be drawn from these crosslinguistic studies:

- Use more listener responses (unless your first language is Japanese).
- When backchanneling, prefer continuers to reactive expressions (especially if your first language is Chinese).
- Avoid using repetition as a backchanneling strategy (especially if your first language is Spanish).

Teaching and Learning Listener Responses

Understanding the rules of the English turn-taking system may be more important in teaching listener responses than in teaching any other conversational move. According to Lerner (1996), awareness of "opportunity spaces" is based not on orientation to *actual* completion points (such as turn boundaries) but on anticipation of *potential* completion points. Furo's (2001) term "sensitivity" takes on new meaning when we understand that listeners must pay attention to semantic, pragmatic, *and* intonational completion points as possible triggers for listener responses. Ward and Tsukahara (2000), for example, found a correlation between backchannels and "a region of low pitch"

paired with a pause of approximately 110 milliseconds. It is no wonder that teaching and learning listener responses is arduous and thus often avoided!

Complicating the pedagogy of listener responses is the dearth of explanations and exercises provided in teacher education materials and learner textbooks. Discourse studies of conversation (Carter & McCarthy, 1997; Eggins & Slade, 1997) recognize listener responses in varying degrees of detail. Carter and McCarthy actually include them in their transcriptions and thus make some comments about them, while Eggins and Slade code *oh* and *really* as "registering responses" but do not transcribe other backchannels. Descriptions of the English of various groups of L1 speakers, the most notable Swan and Smith (2001), deal wonderfully with "basic" linguistic categories (phonology, grammar, etc.) but fail to provide information about features of conversational interaction that might transfer into English. While exploring a dialogic/fluency model of academic speaking in a laudable manner, Folse (2006) never mentions listener responses. Even Numrich's popular student textbook *Tuning In: Listening and Speaking in the Real World* (2005) lacks attention to this important feature of conversation.

Native speakers, including teachers, may themselves fail to provide adequate models for appropriate use of listener responses. Lindemann (2006), for example, cited "withholding acknowledgement" as one way that native speakers "reject the communicative burden." Teachers have been found to accommodate to learners' backchannel use (Thonus, 2005), further increasing the likelihood that students will learn them incorrectly or not at all.

At what proficiency level is a learner ready for intensive study and practice of listener responses? If we draw on research in first language acquisition (Hess & Johnston, 1988), the learner must have reached certain stages of readiness: "Linguistically … experience and practice with all varieties of form … sufficient automaticity in message comprehension to free attentional resources to reflect on his or her own comprehension state" and "Communicatively … capable of sustained topic development and turn taking" (p. 331). This suggests that explicit instruction in listener responses is best begun at intermediate levels.

The first skill, as in many language-learning tasks, is raising awareness: "We must surely encourage an awareness of this issue and by so doing provide students of EAP with choice regarding their degree of conformity or nonconformity" (Farr, 2003, p. 72). Obeng (1994) suggested that moments of asymmetry and "conversational difficulty" create excellent opportunities for doing so. Gilewicz and Thonus (2003) argued that close vertical transcriptions of NS-NS and NNS-NNS conversations (in tutorials, in this case) were an excellent means of raising awareness. That is, analysis of transcripts permits focused study of backchannel variations and functions. Excerpts in this section demonstrate how transcript analysis can tap into the conversational intuitions of both tutors/teachers and students/learners of English.

Students may be more aware of their backchannel use than teachers think. For example, when listening to a tape of his tutorial while following along in the transcript, the student (4) asked, "Too much?" He was referring to his overuse of backchannels, which he recognized as not quite targetlike.

(4)

T: I think that that's, I think that that's good, that, that you talk about your training and,
    and his sort of paranoia   [about his employees [and his [customers. It's
S: *uh-huh,* [*right*   [*yeah*   [*yeah*
T: funny. Um I also thought it was an interesting observation that you made that the store
    was opened at ten in the morning and that people were always there,   [buying the same
S: [*yeah, you're*
T: [thing. That would be an interesting thing to expand [on as well.
S: [*right*   [*uh-huh*   *o.k.*

Note: *Data from Thonus, 2002*

Acquiring listener responses is a process that takes time. Students progress through stages of underuse to overuse (flooding). They first fixate on one backchannel to the exclusion of others, in time broadening their repertoires. The incorrect use of repetition-as-backchannel is also common. In (5), the English learner mistimes listener responses and uses repetition as a backchannel strategy, once simultaneously (*similar*) and once delayed (*thesis*).

(5)

T: Yeah, something like that. I mean, that's not a, the br-, the best topic sentence in the
    world. But the idea is [it explains what's [*similar* about [it (.)
S: [*yeah*   [*similar*   [*o.k.*
T: And then you can have like a *thesis* where, [you know, for (.) in which you'd mention
S: [*yeah, thesis, o.k.*
T: both…

Note: *Data from Thonus, 2002*

In sum, teachers can and must help students become more competent conversationalists by teaching listener responses as a necessary strategy in the academic listening/speaking course. Some strategies, illustrated by exercises in the Appendix, are:

- Contrasting listener responses across languages;
- Creating opportunities for students to become "conversational researchers";
- Providing multiple examples of listener responses in varying contexts;
- Coaching listener response use in fluency-focused exercises.

Conclusion

The history of pragmatics and language teaching demonstrates that rules and routines, once recognized, contextualized, and exemplified, become eminently teachable. Though "exquisitely complex" (Gardner, 2001, p. 1) and seemingly unimportant as compared to the content of referential utterances, there is strong evidence that listener responses can and should be taught to learners of English as a second language for academic purposes. Instruction must draw upon both the forms and functions of listener responses, their comparison to similar forms and functions in learners'

first/additional languages, and the development of an inventory of skills for their appropriate use.

Author

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Appendix
Exercises for the Teaching of Listener Responses

A. What may be confusing about the backchannels in these excerpts?

(1)

T: It'll just take a second to, to photocopy, really. [Um and I'll take a copy,

S: [*o.k.*

T: [and maybe while I'm doing that you can read through and maybe mark spots   [that

S: [*o.k.*   *uh-*[*huh*

T: you think   [don't sound right to you for whatever reason, or it might be the wrong

S: *uh-*[*huh*

T: word, [or something like that.   And then we can talk about those as well.

S: [*uh-huh*   *yeah*

T: O.K.

(2)

T: Yeah, something like that. I mean, that's not a, the br-, the best topic sentence in the

      world. But the idea is [it explains what's [*similar* about [it (.)

S: [*yeah*   [*similar*   [*o.k.*

T: And then you can have like a *thesis* where, [you know, for (.) in which you'd mention

S: [*yeah, thesis, o.k.*

T: both…

(3)

T: So those, the relationship [between these two, however you set it out [in the thesis and

S: [*uh-huh*   [*uh-huh*

T: in your own mind   is going to influence what this transition [is going to be

S: *uh-huh*   [*oh, o.k.*

T: between the two sections.   If you're going to say, "And also Silko, Silko also

S: *right*

T: does [these things," or if you're going to say, "But on the other hand

S: [*uh-huh*   *uh-huh*

T: Silko does [these things …"

S: [*Silko*   *all right*

B. Insert appropriate backchannels.

(1)

S: And these are my essay,   and I ((laugh)) wasn't sure

T: _____

S: whether I well organized the structure,   and because you know

T: _____

S: since I'm nonnative speaker,   I was wondering about my um grammar.

T: _____

Insert (teacher) backchannels with carets (^) on the T: lines under the student's lines.

(2)

S: And you know what?

T: Uh-huh?

S: I think this part, I think it's not clear like how it's different because like

T:

S: after I tried to like (.) bring it out for the supporting paragraph and I got that,

T:

S: that first they said it's like this and the second is like this, it's like the difference,

T:

S: but it's (.) long, too long, and this is already like long enough, and also this part.

T:

S: So I'm not sure that how can I fit this part and this part.

T:

C. Listen to (or read) this conversational narrative and insert possible listener responses.

A dear friend of mine once pulled me aside after a particularly trying Ph.D. class to say, "Oh my God, you *have* to stop making those *faces*. You are making me laugh just to get me in trouble, aren't you?" "What faces?" I asked. "You know." She scrunched up her brow and pulled a comically pained frown. Then she laughed mightily. "You're making it really hard to keep a straight face whenever that boring guy talks." The boring guy, as I recall, was a fellow student who talked a lot and never made any sense. I had thought I was the very image of self-control, since I never, ever, not even once, said anything withering or mean in response to his comments. In fact, I shut myself up tight for at least ten minutes after each time he spoke… As it turns out, I seem to have zero control over my facial expressions. In my M.A. program, I had a perceptive professor who would watch me beadily as he lectured, only to interrupt himself with, "A White Bear, your eyebrow seriously twitched when I said that. Why?" Usually, my eyebrow had twitched because I wanted to respond, but at other times my eyebrow twitched because I had been enjoying a particularly ripe daydream of some sort at that moment. Asking me what I was thinking about based on my face was a gamble he was apparently willing to take. At academic lectures, I'm sure I'm a mess. At bad ones, I've been observed with my mouth agape, subtly shaking my head no, no, no, no, against my own will. At good ones, I'm smiling and nodding (subtly, thank God). Once, while moderating a conference panel of mixed quality early in the morning, I was seen listening to an entire talk with my head straight on, my mouth lightly pursed in the attitude of courageous endurance.

Source: http://bitchphd.blogspot.com/2006/04/matters-academic.html

D. Engage in a short conversation with another student with the tape recorder on.

Use as many different backchannels as you can. Then roughly transcribe the conversation and check the appropriateness of (a) the frequency, (b) the placement, and (c) the type of listener response.