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Attitudes Toward Back-channeling in Iranian EFL Online Vs. Regular Classes

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ABSTRACT

Due to the vital role of back channels in mutual understanding and their use in many aspects of language learning, the present study investigated the attitudes toward back-channeling in Iranian EFL online versus regular classes. The study was quasi-experimental in design, with interviews and recording of course sessions by ZDF Soft Screen Recorder and the voice Memos application in both classes to measure the duration of silence, TTT (Teacher Talk Time), STT (Student Talk Time), BC (Back Channels), and other activities such as TCS (Teachers' Code-Switching), SCS (Students' Code-Witching), S (the time passed in silence). In doing so, two online classes included 30, two regular ones included 27, and four English teachers of the participants were randomly selected from the Kanoon Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran, to take part in the study. Learners received four and a half hours of instruction per week within the course period. In the next step, all the data gathered was analyzed and statistically addressed by using, IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) software. The results revealed back channels had positive effects on learners in both classes. Besides, teachers and learners had positive attitudes toward using back channels, however, in online classes, learners were more willing to use back channels. The findings of this study could be fruitful for improvement with well-designed materials and explicitly teaching back channels, which can provide opportunities for learners to express their emotions, and ideas, and enhance their strengths.

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1. Introduction

Classroom talk is a fixed and common feature in every English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. The teacher and the learner need to interact with each other to produce the necessary input and output. Therefore, Teacher Talk (TT), the time it occupies in every class (TTT), Student Talk (ST), and the time it allocates to itself STT (Student Talk Time) are elements that are directly or indirectly concentrated on in a large number of classroom studies. Farahian and Rezaee (2012) argue that TT is a significant factor in determining whether the teaching process has succeeded or failed in achieving its goals. If the learners cannot understand the teacher speaking English or if they are only able to communicate what they mean in the first language, they shift into their native language, and as a result, code-switching occurs. However, there are cases where the issue of an interjection, a single word, or somebody's expressions can work much more efficiently than the previously mentioned ways of class communication. This means that when one partner is speaking, the other interactant often reacts to his talk. These reactions which are usually displayed in the form of verbal or visual ones are called back channels (Bavelas et al., 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve, 1970). The subsequent cease of the conversation and the use of varied backchannels far from expectations are the reasons that make backchanneling in communication noticeable. Words like wow, oh, okay, and body language can be considered general examples of verbal or visual backchannels (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve,1970).

Learners can be encouraged and engaged in their learning process by understanding and using back-channeling. Due to the vital role of backchannels in mutual understanding and their use in many aspects of language learning, the attitudes regarding back-channeling in English learning environments, specifically in Iranian EFL online and regular classes are the target of the present discourse quasi-experimental study. TTT, STT, BC, and code-switching are also the attributes discussed and examined in this research. Learners can be encouraged and engaged in their learning process by understanding and using back-channeling. Due to the vital role of backchannels in mutual understanding and their use in many aspects of language learning, the attitudes regarding back-channeling in English learning environments, specifically in Iranian EFL online and regular classes are the target of the present

discourse quasi-experimental study. TTT, STT, BC, and code-switching are also the attributes discussed and examined in this research.

1.1. General Outlook of Backchanneling

Backchannels are a crucial aspect of spontaneous conversation, encompassing verbal and nonverbal responses from the addressee to the speaker (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve,1970). According to Bavelas et al. (2011) and Bertrand et al. (2007), backchannels can be subdivided into three types: one-word utterances (such as "yeah" or "no"), short phrases (such as "oh" or "I see"), and questions (such as "Is that so?" with a falling tone). Another perspective suggests three kinds of back channels, including non-lexical backchannels (vocalic sounds with little or no referential meaning, such as "mhm"), phrasal backchannels (expressions of acknowledgment and assessment, such as "really"), and substantive backchannels (turns with referential content, such as a repetition or clarifying question) (Iwasaki, 1997).

In linguistics, backchannels refer to a type of verbal feedback (such as nodding or saying "uh huh") provided by a listener to encourage the speaker to continue or clarify the talk. This concept of backchannels is frequently studied in language and culture research (Wolf et al., 2008; Miyata & Nisisawa, 2007; White, 1989). Verbal backchannels include words such as "yeah" or "okay,". Nonverbal or visual backchannels consist of facial expressions, nods, and gestures (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2007; Yngve,1970). The use of non-verbal cues, such as head nodding and maintaining eye contact, can signify attentiveness in a conversation. These cues are expected by the speaker as a form of acknowledgment, while verbal responses such as "yes" or "mhmm" also indicate attentiveness. Back-channel signals, including head nodding and eye contact, are ways for individuals to demonstrate active listening (Donahue, 1998; Lambertz, 2011; McClave, 2000).

The proactive backchanneling theory posits that addressees play an active role in the construction of dialogue by providing acknowledgment, agreement, or consent tokens. Acknowledgment tokens like uh and huh make the speaker’s message to be recognized and the conversational exchanges happen. Agreement tokens reflect the addressee’s alignment with the speaker’s position. Conversation participants mostly use some words or phrases like “okay” or “right” as an example of consent tokens to

express their agreement to a plan. Both the speakers and the addressees need to monitor each other for such responses in an active way and adjust their talk accordingly (Clark & Murphy, 1982; Clark & Krych, 2004).

Research on backchannels is mainly concentrated on two distinct aspects: functional distinctions between specific and generic backchannels (Goodwin, 1986; Bavelas & Chovil, 2000) which are also called assessments and continuers respectively (Goodwin, 1986; Stivers, 2008), and the placement of backchannels within conversations. Specific backchannels reflect the addressee's replies to the content of the previous turn. As a result, they are considered context-sensitive. Examples are interjections such as oh and wow. However, generic backchannels such as uh, huh, or yeah indicate the addressee's paying attention to the speaker. They show that the listener has received and comprehended the message. They allow the conversation to be continued (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Bertrand et al, 2007; and Yngve,1970). Interjections, which are exclamations used to express emotions or feelings, are commonly employed in conversations. Laughing, repeating answers for clarification or correction purposes, and repeating as a means of continuation, are considered forms of acknowledgment and continuation in conversation. The function of repeating can serve both of these categories depending on its usage within the conversation (Jokinen, 2009).

In the study of backchannels that are used to produce spontaneous narrative dialogues, Tolins and Tree (2014), put forward two hypotheses regarding the relationship between generic and specific backchannels and discourse progression. They propose that after a generic backchannel, the speaker is more likely to continue the narrative with events or material that is new to the discourse, whereas, after a specific backchannel, the speaker is more likely to elaborate on the information to which the backchannel responded.

Backchannels serve multiple functions at once and at different analytical levels including displaying listener uptake at different levels of joint action, such as attending, identifying, understanding, and compliance (Clark & Krych, 2004). They also play a role in turn-taking and the structural organization of conversation. This conceptualization drives some research to examine the point where the backchannels occur in the speaker's talk. As markers, backchannels also indicate which participant

may hold the floor next and typically occur at transition-relevant places (Duncan, 1972, 1974; Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Sacks et al., 1974). Since backchannels are involved in organizing the sequence of a conversation, it is discussed that they are used when there is a relevant transition from one speaker to the next (Sacks et al., 1974). The impact of verbal backchannel distinctions in similar narrative contexts was investigated in a study by replacing one category of backchannel with another (for example, replacing a generic "yeah" in the first condition with a specific "wow" in the second one. (Tolins & Tree, 2014).

Previous research on backchannels has focused on their function and placement of the speaker's previous talk, neglecting their role in the ongoing, multi-turn utterance and how feedback affects the speaker's talk development. However, studies have shown that speakers do incorporate feedback into their talk (Norrick, 2012), as evidenced by the use of verbal backchannels in telephone conversations (Chovil, 1991). Back channels are thus important in structuring ongoing activities and influencing the speaker's talk, similar to their role in task-oriented dialogues where one speaker has sole access to information.

1.2. Recent Studies of Back Channeling

Backchannels are utilized as conversational tools to denote engagement in both classroom and out-of-classroom settings, with internet-based devices such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Line being the preferred mediums (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). Backchannels enable teachers and students to interact and share information by commenting on or clarifying class discussions, which is particularly suited to the current needs of students. For teachers with large class sizes, backchannels offer several advantages (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015; Samaka, 2013). Ally and Samaka (2013) found that a well-designed digital online backchannel could enhance collective consciousness among large-class students, providing appropriate interaction and feedback to assist with discussions and encourage participation. Glessmer et al. (2014) showed that online backchannels meet the technology needs of modern students and the assessment needs of teachers. Correspondingly, Yardi (2006) claimed that online backchannels stimulate student curiosity and interaction in learning, resulting in

an increased desire to learn. This is due to the facilitation of a community channel, which enables students to share learning activities and build social interaction.

Previous studies have highlighted the benefits of online backchannels in promoting curiosity and interaction among students, particularly at the university level (Harunasari & Halim, 2019; Kassner & Cassada, 2017). Backchannels are effective in engaging students with their learning and creating a sociable online learning interaction room (Carpenter, 2015). Backchannels can also be used in writing classes to facilitate discussion and generate ideas, thereby enhancing students' active participation and easing the difficulty of generating writing topics (Harunasari & Rahmat, 2015). However, most studies have focused on EFL students at the university level, who are more mature and familiar with using technology in the learning process. In contrast, junior high school students are in the beginner and adaptive phase of using technology in learning (Jailani et al., 2017). An experimental study by Wiyaka et al. (2019), found that online backchannels were effective in improving English achievement among junior high school students, but did not explore how students responded to the implementation of online backchannels in the English classroom. All the literature reviewed indicated the use of backchannels in either face-to-face or online classes. No research was found to establish a comparative analysis between these two different classes. As a result, the current study attempted to fill this insufficient information in the published research on the topic of classroom study.

1.3. Theoretical basis of the study

Maynard's (1997) taxonomy of backchannels is the basis for this research, as it is one of the most comprehensive classifications of backchanneling. However, researchers rarely use a specific taxonomy for backchanneling, mainly due to overlapping items and incomplete taxonomies, as well as issues with the term and its classifications. Fujimoto (2009) provides a comprehensive classification of back-channeling that combines various existing classifications. This classification includes thirteen functions of back-channels, incorporating Maynard's (1997) list of six functions: continuation, understanding, support, empathy, agreement, and emotive. Additionally, Gardner's entries of continuers, acknowledgment, news markers, change-of-activity tokens, and assessments are also included (Fujimoto, 2009).

In this research study, explicit learning methods were used, therefore definition and explanation of explicit learning need to be taken into consideration. Based on Hulstijn's (2005) points of view, it can be defined as an input processing with the conscious intention of knowing whether the input information contains regularities, and if so, finding out the concepts and rules with these regularities can be acquired. On the other hand, implicit learning is related to input processing which doesn't have such an intention and takes place unconsciously.

After reviewing and examining previous studies on back-channeling, it is time to investigate the attitude toward the utilization of back-channeling in online and regular Iranian EFL learners' classes. To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following research questions were raised:

1. What is the attitude of language learners and instructors about backchanneling in online classes?
2. What is the attitude of language learners and instructors about backchanneling in regular classes?
3. In which classes (online or regular) did the usage of different forms of back-channeling have more significant effects than the other one?

2. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-method research design. This design was chosen to investigate the quantitative and qualitative data on learners' perceptions of using different kinds of back channels in online and regular English classes. The study was conducted at Isfahan Kanoon Language Institute in Iran. The quantitative and qualitative parts consisted of gathering data through interviews and recording course sessions. EFL learners received four and half hours of instruction per week within the course period (24 sessions, 8 weeks in total), including primary skills and sub-skills. The books used in the institution were Active Skills for Reading Level 2 and Level 3 and Headway Academic Skills Level 2 and Level 3. In this connection, extra materials such as grammar, vocabulary, and reading exercises had been provided to learners for every unit by the institution. All the course classes had to use standard materials and topics. In addition, each session was recorded from the beginning to the end.

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 57 pre-intermediate and intermediate language learners (two online classes included 30, and two regular ones included 27) enrolled in the Kanoon Language Institute in the spring term of 2023 in Isfahan, Iran. The average age of the whole number of participants was 23 years old. Four classes of the institute were randomly selected to take part in the study. Two online classes included 30 and two regular ones included 27 of the participants.

In Addition, a panel of four English teachers with a 4.5 average year of teaching English and research experience was arranged to participate in the study. It should be mentioned that teachers had doctoral and master's degrees in ELT. The participants' demographic information is tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Background of the Participants

Participants	Learners	Instructors
Number of Participants	57	4
Level of Education	Undergraduate/Postgraduate learners	Ph.D./ M. A degree
Age	The average age of 23 years old	The average age of 32 years old
English Level	Intermediate/Pre-intermediate	Advanced
Gender	25 males and 32 females	2 males and 2 females
Nationality	Iranian	Iranian
Native Language	Persian	Persian
Foreign Language	English	English

2.2. Instruments

Observation is regarded as one of the most authentic research tools that allow researchers to gather data from natural social situations (Cohn et al., 2017) and to conduct classroom research (Inamullah & Hussain, 2008; Zohrabi et al., 2012; Chalak, 2021). As a result, since this research investigated online and regular courses, all the online sessions under study were video recorded to reflect what happened in the classroom. Thus, the video-recorded sessions were applied as the main instrument in online classes recorded by ZDF Soft Screen Recorder. All regular classes were also recorded by the voice Memos application. This is because implementing this tool allows a researcher to record all the events in a classroom in their usual way without

manipulating any variables. It results in detecting everything in its natural way. Besides, the recorded data's advantage is that it provides access to the original data for later inspection by making data revivability possible.

One point should be noted here, online classes were conducted through the usage of BigBlueButton, which is a virtual classroom software program designed for online education. Accessed most commonly through a variety of Learning Management Systems, the application provides engagement tools and analytics for educators to interact with their students remotely. Last but not least, some semi-structured interviews were designed to increase the validity of the research. After consulting with experienced professors of the Department of English of the Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan Branch), some questions were selected for the research interview (for more information and examples see Appendix B). It should be noted that the instructors and learners were asked to comment on using backchannels in both classes. Some comments were gathered through Google Docs, most of which were collected using WhatsApp. In addition, learners and instructors were interviewed on WhatsApp by voice messages or video call and their comments were categorized to examine the qualitative and quantitative views (see Appendix D & C).

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Since observation was the most reliable instrument to carry out this research, and because this study examined both online and regular classes, the first step to gathering the data was recording the classes. The online classes were held using the BigBlueButton platform as mentioned before. To attend the class, each student and the teacher needed to have their unique usernames and passwords, which the ILI registration center defined. However, the researchers could not enter the class since they were not the teachers of the classes or learners in the class. The teachers of the classes under investigation were very willing to contribute to this research. Therefore, they voluntarily tried to help and accepted the researchers' request to record the classes.

Before the teacher started recording the classes, ethical issues were detected by sending a consent form (See Appendix C) to all the students through WhatsApp and Google Doc social networking sites. After collecting all the filled-in forms from the learners and reassuring them that all their personal information was kept confidential

and none of their identities, voices, or videos were shared with others, the teacher started recording the classes. Although the teacher and the learners cooperated voluntarily, they were guaranteed to be free to leave the process if they changed their minds and did not want to proceed with the process. Therefore, nobody was forced to contribute to this research. The original data were gathered by recording 24 sessions of the online EFL classes from the beginning to the end. Each session was one hour and a half long. No part of the classes was deleted because the purpose of recording the classes was to calculate the total amount of silence, TTT (Teacher Talk Time), STT (Student Talk Time), BC (BackChannels), and other activities such as TCS (Teachers' Code-Switching), SCS (Students' Code-Witching), S (the time passed in silence).

In the process of collecting data, the researchers and teachers of the courses decided to add an extra session to the course. In this extra session, different conceptualizations of back channels were introduced, explained, and emphasized to give a better understanding of the utilization of backchannels in online and regular classes. It is worth mentioning that, in online classes, learners were able to use emojis (emojis were classified based on educational setting) to respond and also provide their feedback. Samples of emojis (as shown in Table 2.) were provided in tables to help the learners use them more easily.

Table 2 Most Popular Emojis in Online Classes and Their Meaning

Emoji	Name	Meaning
😂	Face with Tears of Joy	Extreme happiness or laughter
❤️	Red Heart	Love (red by default, but the meaning is the same for any color)
🤣	Rolling on the Floor Laughing	Intense or hysterical laughter
👍	Thumbs Up Sign	Well done, good job, or approval
🙏	A person with Folded Hands	Prayer, thank you, and sometimes a high-five
😘	Face Throwing a Kiss	Kissing someone, or a general expression of love
😍	Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes	Love or adoration
😊	Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes	Positive or happy
🎉	Party Popper	Celebration or congratulations
😁	Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes	Glowing, beaming happiness
😅	Smiling Face with Open Mouth and Cold Sweat	Relief, nerves, or excitement
👏	Clapping Hands Sign	Round of applause in celebration
👌	OK Hand Sign	Okay or correct
💯	Hundred Points Symbol	100 percent approval
🥴	Woozy Face	Dazed, or confused

Due to this action learners were informed and gained knowledge that by understanding and using these different kinds of feedback, they can show their feelings, and anxiety, be involved in their progress of learning, and also, they can demonstrate their positive and negative reactions toward their lessons or even the class atmosphere. Additionally, they were also able to express their opinions more easily and to encourage their classmates when they were presenting a lecture or doing exercises as illustrated in Figure 1.

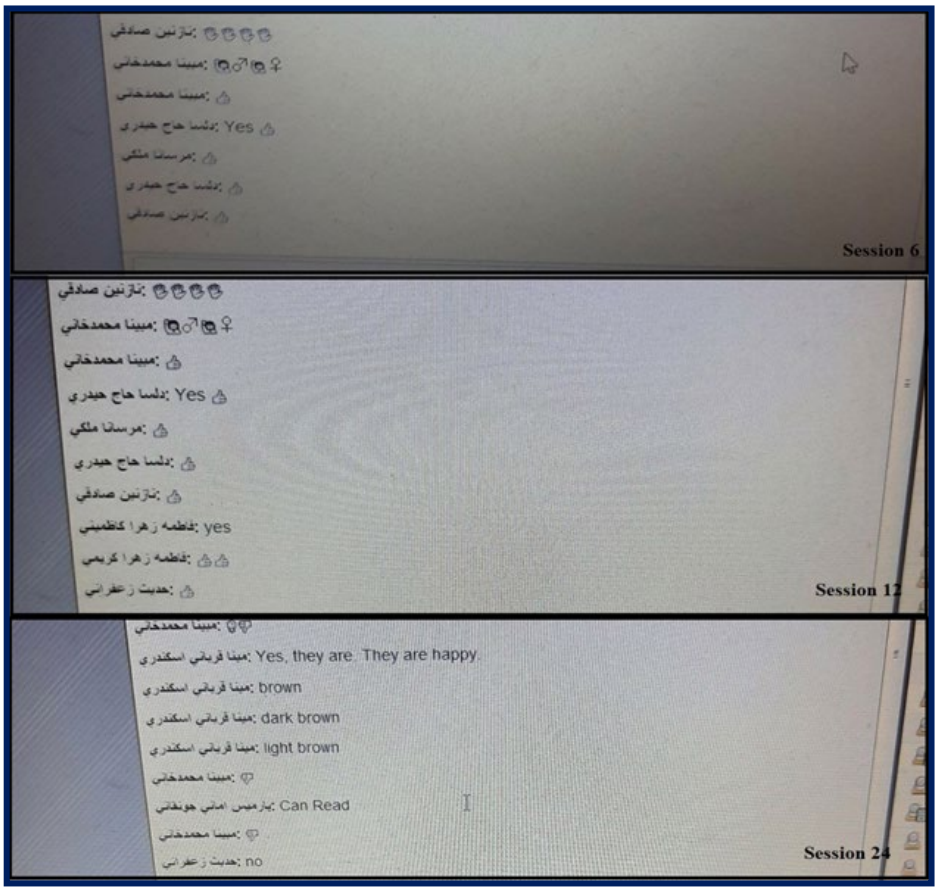

Figure 1 Screenshots of Online Classes on the BigBlueButton Platform

As shown in Figure 1, the screenshots with the personal information of some participants were utilized to bring a visual aspect to the study. Figure 1. Presents screenshots related to sessions 6, 12, and 24 of online classes. One should not overlook the fact that these screenshots were provided with the participants' prior full consent. In a parallel manner, some flashcards with emojis related to the subject of the study were provided for learners in regular classes to make the use of these symbols easier.

Furthermore, a sample list of back channels was given to both classes to enhance their understanding of these elements and clarify the use of various types of back channels as shown in Table 3 (educational clarification). In addition, some examples of back channels were clarified and provided in both online and face-to-face classes for a better understanding of the concept and its authentic real-world usage (see Appendix A).

Table 3 Sample list of Backchannels for Online and Regular Classes

Back-channels	**Meaning**	**Examples**
Verbal Responses	Any response that is given using spoken language	Yeah, oh, okay, mm-hm, uhh-huh or mhm
Visual Displays	A way of communicating, reacting, or responding to a conversation that is visible.	Facial expressions, nods, eye gaze, laugh, and gestures
Specific backchannels	They are sensitive to the context by expressing the replies of the addressees to the content of the previous turn or conversation that they had.	Oh, wow, really, oh come on, are you serious?
Generic backchannels	Responses that demonstrate understanding and continued attention to the speaker.	uh, huh, or yeah, sentence completions, requests for clarification, brief statements
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Generic backchannels	Responses that demonstrate understanding and continued attention to the speaker.	uh, huh, or yeah, sentence completions, requests for clarification, brief statements

The process of data collection can be summarized as follows: In the first week of the course, learners gained some knowledge about back channels, course materials, and the curriculum of the institute in both online and regular classes. All the sessions were recorded from the beginning to the end. Learners were encouraged to express their emotions, ideas, and reactions through several kinds of backchannels. Finally, during week eight, 20 learners and all the teachers were interviewed. In the end, DA (Discourse Analysis) was carried out after gathering data on both online and regular classes to examine the effect of using backchannels and also competing for these effects in both courses.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis began with organizing data from video records, voice records, and interviews. It continued with transcribing the data into paper-based transcriptions, coding the data, reporting the findings, interpreting the results, and validating the accuracy of the findings in the discussion. Consequently, a detailed transcription of all the data gathered was provided and analyzed statistically about the three research questions the study addressed by using, IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) software for summarizing and categorizing the information.

All the data gathered from the 2160 minutes of voice and videotaped classes, were investigated in detail. To measure the exact amount of TTT, STT, BC, and the time passed in silence, as well as the frequency of back channels, all the collected data was arranged on a Microsoft Excel Spread Sheet, and in the following step, these numbers were turned into percentages so that the author could compare these attributes more easily. The authors also tried to confirm the reliability of data analysis by acting as an intra-rater and conducting a self-review. Therefore, they double-checked all the mathematics after some time passed and made the correctness of the results certain.

Finally, the last step in data analysis was interpreting the data, in which the findings were described narratively to answer the research questions of this study. The interpretation included the description of what had been found, the analysis of categories, and the conclusions of those interpretations based on the theories underlying it. The data analysis process involved systematic search and arrangement of data following Bogdan and Biklen's (1997) concept of transcribing, organizing, and categorizing data and then deciding what it meant to inform others.

To ensure that the research is practical and effective, the validity and reliability of the study through data collection and analysis procedures were established. The fact that the data gathered from the individual subjects can be used as basic samples to form general conclusions as well as the nature of observing the participants ensured the researcher's both internal and external validity.

Consequently, the collected data represents the participants' regular performances. Retrievability is also assured since both classes were wholly recorded and transcribed; therefore, later investigation of the data will be possible because of the

availability of the original data. Through applying triangulation, conformability is also ensured, while triangulation indicates the same results through other sources, i.e., video recordings, and interviews; therefore, all the data can be studied correlatively. It means that the reliability of this study is also guaranteed since reliability relates to consistency and replicability.

3. Results

To achieve the goals of the current study and identify the frequency and finally the attitude about back channels in online and regular Iranian EFL classes, the authors investigated 24 sessions of both classes. Each session took 90 minutes long. Most of the talk teachers used were in the form of statements that included the teaching material, and most of the student talk occurred in the form of repetition and the dialogs the students conducted with their peers as pair work. Both teachers and the students spoke in English while conducting the classroom talk. However, they both switched to Persian occasionally. The central focus of this study was to measure the language use of backchannels in the classroom, however, other features, including teacher's code-switching, students' code-switching, video playing, and silence, were also taken into consideration. The duration of each event was measured in minutes, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4 Amount of BC, TTT, STT, and Other Activities per Minute in Online Classes Part One

SESSIONS	N	BC, TTT, STT, AND OTHER ACTIVITIES (SCS, BC, S) PER MINUTE					
		TTT	STT	T CS	S CS	BC	S
1	28	80	42	18	26	25	20
2	27	96	40	17	25	23	14
3	27	74	42	16	26	25	30
4	30	100	38	17	24	24	12
5	27	72	34	18	26	26	20
6	26	88	40	15	25	25	22
7	28	76	44	11	23	26	20
8	26	70	46	15	23	27	42
9	26	102	32	18	23	24	16
10	30	68	54	20	24	24	22
11	25	88	48	14	24	28	20
12	26	74	54	16	25	29	16

As mentioned before, 24 sessions were observed by the authors in the form of video records. N in Table 4. points to the number of students. The online class population in

general included 27 students; however, in some sessions, some of the students were absent. This is the reason for the difference in the number of students presented in the table above.

Table 5 Amount of BC, TTT, STT, and Other Activities per Minute in Online Classes Part Two

SESSIONS	N	BC, TTT, STT, AND OTHER ACTIVITIES (SCS, BC, S) PER MINUTE					
		TTT	STT	T CS	S CS	BC	S
13	25	86	42	17	28	26	18
14	28	84	40	18	29	22	17
15	30	82	42	19	27	28	16
16	26	76	38	16	28	27	15
17	24	100	34	15	26	26	19
18	26	72	40	10	25	25	20
19	25	92	44	16	28	26	19
20	28	76	46	18	29	28	20
21	30	88	32	15	26	27	17
22	26	60	54	19	30	24	21
23	27	94	48	12	28	28	16
24	29	30	54	4	35	0	45
MEAN		80.3	42.8	15.58	26.37	24.7	21

The amount of TTT ranged from 30 to 102 minutes during the observed sessions. On average, TTT occupied 80.33 minutes of each 90-minute session for both classes A and B. The mean score of STT was 42.83, meaning that the amount of TTT was twice as much as that of STT. The teacher's code-switching, coded as TCS, was counted to be 15.58 minutes, while students' code-switching, coded as SCS, was 26.37 minutes in general. The average time which passed in silence (coded as S) was 20.70.

As seen in Tables 4 and 5, in some sessions, silence took more than 21 minutes of the total class time, especially in sessions 8 and 24. One of the main reasons behind this rather large amount of silence in online classes was the quality of the Internet and the development of the ability to conduct classes in virtual conditions.

Table 6 Amount of BC, TTT, STT, and Other Activities per Minute in Regular Classes Part One

SESSIONS	N	BC, TTT, STT, AND OTHER ACTIVITIES (SCS, BC, S) PER MINUTE					
		TTT	STT	T CS	S CS	BC	S
1	25	75	45	13	25	20	17
2	27	80	42	12	24	19	12
3	27	64	44	12	23	22	25
4	24	84	40	14	22	21	13
5	27	62	38	14	24	22	14
6	23	78	41	10	23	25	18
7	25	66	46	9	21	21	19
8	26	64	47	10	19	22	31
9	24	89	38	13	20	20	12
10	27	58	64	15	21	21	20
11	25	78	50	10	20	24	18
12	26	64	60	14	22	20	17

The amount of BC, TTT, STT, and Other Activities per Minute in regular Classes is illustrated in Table 6. All data was recorded through a voice recorder from the very beginning to the end of both classes C and D.

Table7 Amount of BC, TTT, STT, and Other Activities per Minute in Regular Classes Part Two

Sessions	N	BC, TTT, STT, and other Activities (SCS, BC, S) per Minute					
		TTT	STT	T CS	S CS	BC	S
13	25	82	45	15	27	24	15
14	26	80	43	16	27	23	15
15	27	78	46	17	25	25	13
16	26	72	43	14	26	22	12
17	24	85	39	13	24	21	16
18	26	68	42	12	24	21	17
19	25	82	46	15	27	22	17
20	27	66	46	17	28	23	18
21	27	78	35	14	26	20	15
22	26	57	58	18	29	19	15
23	27	80	52	10	27	25	14
24	27	25	46	5	36	0	47
Mean		71.5	45.7	13	24.6	20.9	17.9

The average percentages of TTT, STT, TCS, SCS, BC, and S in regular classes C and D are illustrated in Table 7. (TTT=71.45, STT=45.66, TCS=13, SCS=24.58, BC=20.91, S=17.91). The mean of each item was calculated based on information provided in both

tables (Table 6., and Table 7.). One delicate point should be mentioned that in both classes (online & regular) there were some sessions related to midterm and final exams, therefore in those sessions, most of the time was dedicated to the process of taking exams.

3.1. Results of the Interviews

To increase the reliability and validity of the study, the researchers planned some interview sessions with the students and teacher participants to check their perceptions of the classroom talk. This research study benefited from Interview questionnaires, which can be defined as a list of pre-prepared questions that participants of the study need to complete before an interview. The interview was composed of some questions, which were a five-point Likert scale of 12 items adapted to fit the needs of this study (see Appendix B for more information). In addition, as mentioned before 20 learners from both online and regular classes, and all the teachers were interviewed.

Table 8 Online and Regular EFL Learners' interviews

QUESTIONS	N	STRONGLY DISAGREE 1	DISAGREE 2	AGREE 3	STRONGLY AGREE 4	MEAN	SD	TOTAL AGREEMENT	TOTAL DISAGREEMENT
Q1	20	0%	0%	31.20%	68.80%	3.68	0.48	100%	0%
Q2	20	0%	0%	18.70%	81.30%	3.81	0.4	100%	0%
Q3	20	0%	12.50%	18.70%	68.80%	3.56	0.73	87.50%	12.50%
Q4	20	0%	56.30%	24%	18.80%	2.62	0.81	43.70%	56.30%
Q5	20	0%	18.80%	18.70%	62.50%	3.44	0.81	81.20%	18.80%
Q6	20	0%	25%	31.20%	43.80%	3.18	0.83	75%	25%
Q7	20	12.50%	18.80%	37.50%	31.30%	2.87	1.02	68.70%	31.30%
Q8	20	0%	12.50%	25%	62.50%	3.5	0.73	87.50%	12.50%
Q9	20	0%	6.30%	18.80%	75%	3.68	0.6	93.80%	6.20%
Q10	20	12.50%	37.50%	25%	25%	2.62	1.02	50%	50%
Q11	20	18.80%	18.80%	12.50%	50%	2.94	1.23	72.50%	27.50%
Q12	20	18.80%	18.80%	37.50%	25%	2.68	1.07	62.50%	37.50%

According to Table 8, most of the learners had positive attitudes toward using back channels. As shown in the table above, most of them agreed or strongly agreed. It should be noted that 10 learners were randomly selected from online classes and the rest of them were chosen from regular classes.

Table 9 Teachers interviews Results

QUESTIONS	N	STRONGLY AGREE 5	AGREE 4	NEUTRAL 3	DISAGREE 2	STRONGLY DISAGREE1	MEAN	STD	AGREE	DISAGREE
Q1	4	33.30%	66.70%	0%	0%	0%	4.33	2.1	100%	0%
Q2	4	33.30%	50%	16.70%	0%	0%	4.16	2	83.30%	0%
Q3	4	33.30%	50%	16.70%	0%	0%	4.16	2	83.30%	0%
Q4	4	0%	66.70%	33.30%	0%	0%	3.66	1.9	66.70%	0%
Q5	4	0%	66.70%	33.30%	0%	0%	3.66	1.9	66.70%	0%
Q6	4	0%	66.70%	16.70%	16.70%	0%	3.5	1.9	66.70%	16.70%
Q7	4	33.30%	16.70%	50%	0%	0%	3.83	2	50%	0%
Q8	4	33.30%	66.70%	0%	0%	0%	4.33	2.1	100%	0%
Q9	4	33.30%	50%	16.70%	0%	0%	4.16	2	83.30%	0%
Q10	4	33.30%	33.30%	33.30%	0%	0%	4	2	66.60%	0%

As it is depicted in Table 9, most of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the items, except for item 7, which refers to learners' understanding of back channels. It is necessary to note that due to the teachers' lack of time and also the busy schedule time that they had during the courses, some questions were summarized and also omitted.

4. Discussion

An EFL class is often characterized by questions, reactions, and feedback. Additionally, the utilization of back channels would be a great help in this regard for learners, whether in regular or online English classes. Based on the information, which was provided in the previous section, back channels had positive effects on learners in both classes. Using back channels in improving learners' interaction with each other and also with the teacher of the course has been valued broadly among social media enthusiasts (Ross et al., 2011; Sutton & Shklovski, 2008). Tao and Thompson (2009) studied English back channels in Mandarin conversations from their point of view Back channels can be a significant indicator of the second language. Based on the results of the analysis of recorded sessions, and interviews, learners' and teachers' positive attitudes in online and regular classes, back channels may accomplish many things at once, at different levels of analysis. Understanding, complying, and using back channels can lead to encouragement and identifying their problems, which are in line with Clark and Krych's (2004) four levels of joint action.

The utilization of back channels in this research study proved that learners' feedback can develop their skills, which correlates with the previous study results conducted by Norrick (2012). In addition, based on all teachers' interviews, and their

class observations, learners in regular classes were much more likely to produce facial displays instead of verbal back channels, which is in line with Chovil (1991). The present study benefited from an extra session to explain and explicitly teach different conceptualizations of back channels in online and regular classes. Some well-designed materials such as categorization of back channels, examples, emojis, and so on, were provided for learners to give them some opportunities to express their emotions, and ideas, and enhance their strengths. Therefore, this research study conforms with Ally and Samaka's (2013) research regarding enhancing learners' strengths with well-designed digital online back channels.

Based on the results of the study and providing well-designed back channels, learners were assisted with discussion and encouraged to participate more in their classroom through appropriate interaction and feedback. Online back channels stimulated the student’s curiosity and interaction in learning so that the desire for learning was increased, which is in line with Glessmer et al. (2014) study results. According to Yardi's (2006) point of view, the students were aided by a community channel that allowed them to share learning activities and develop social interaction.

Results of learners' and teachers' interviews and the usage of back channels in both classes revealed that the utilization of back channels can lead to support learners and engagement between students and their learning. However, in online classes, learners were more willing to use back channels. From the authors' perspectives, this is mainly due to the class atmosphere and the easy accessibility of technological devices, which is in parallel with the results of some studies (Harunasari & Halim, 2019; Kassner & Cassada, 2017). In support of that, this study is in line with Carpenter, (2015) results in an online learning interaction room that makes the students sociable. Additionally, students’ active participation in back channels can help them develop their different skills, as Harunasari and Rahmat (2015) correctly mentioned. In addition, this research study shows the effectiveness of backchannel in improving students' English achievements, which is examined by Prastikawati and Adi (2020).

5. Conclusion

Based on the recorded data from both classes and the information provided from interviews, EFL learners tend to use more back channels in online classes (Online BC=24.70, Regular BC=20.91). Even though the differences in means are not too significant. Some of the reasons behind these differences might be explained in this way, by observing online classes researchers noticed that when learners were presenting lectures or when they were addressing class activities, it was much easier for online learners to give comments. Using emojis, prefabricated words or phrases, or even sentences provided by teachers could help them show their feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Moreover, in regular classes, the explicit teaching of back channels, and encouraging EFL learners to share their thoughts and feelings through using them could lead to better communication which is the final goal of nearly all EFL classes.

One delicate point should be noted examining the project with gender differences is recommended to obtain a better result in this case because in both classes some feedback and responses had a sign of gender differences. No research study can be conducted under ideal conditions, and every study has its problems and limitations, and this study is not an exception. The small number of participants is one of the limitations of the study. Moreover, this research examined backchannels in a general view. Further research is recommended to be conducted on a larger population analyzing the effects of backchannels on language skills and subskills. Which requires further research for any generalizations. The credibility and reliability of the verbal or written answers to the instruments used in this study were limited to the honesty of the experts and the learners. The subjects in this research study were male and female.

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7. Appendixes

7.1. Appendix A

Appendix A: Examples of back channels were clarified and provided in both online and face-to-face classes for a better understanding of the concept and its authentic real-world usage.

Back-channeling Markers	
Really?	Ah
Fantastic	Nnn
He he he	Hey
Wow	I am with you
Yes-Yeah	Aha
No	Very exciting
Uh-huh	Aww big party
Hmm-hm	I am not sure
I see	Interesting
I know	Ooooh
Ok-okay	I agree
Uhu	You are (so) right.
How splendid	How true
Right	Goodness
Hell	Gosh
Facial expressions: happiness, surprise, contempt, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger.	Nods, eye gaze, laugh, and gestures
Oh, come on	are you serious?
Requests for clarification: I'm not quite sure, I understand what you are saying.	When you said ..... what did you mean?
	Could you repeat ...?
Nice work! Thanks for helping out., You are a fast learner.	Outstanding! Great! Nice going. You're really improving.

7.2. Appendix B

I hereby declare that I voluntarily participated in this study. I let the researchers use my responses as data as far as my identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers guarantee that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

Name: ……Time of the Class: …… Age: …Educational background: …. English Experience (year): ……

Direction: Please check the closest answer to the following questions according to your actual cases. Thank you very much for your help and patience.

5= Strongly agree 4= Agree 3= Neutral 2= Disagree 1= Strongly disagree

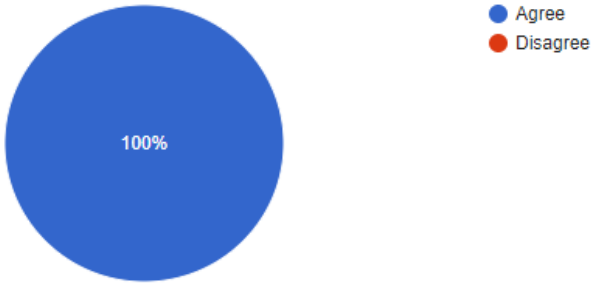
Qs	Interview Questionnaire	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I think that using back channels is helpful for learning.					
2	I think that using back channels can help me understand my learning.					
3	I think that using back channels is suitable for learning.					
4	I think that back channels are easy to use.					
5	I think that using online back channels (emojis) is convenient to use.					
6	I think that using back channels is easy to understand.					
7	I will continue to use back channels in the future.					
8	I am willing to use back channels to acquire, store, share, apply, and create knowledge.					
9	I think using back channels provides a good learning approach.					
10	I think that using back channels for English learning and language exchange is a good choice.					
11	I think that using back channels can enhance my intention to learn.					
12	I think using back channels in class can be fun and exciting.					

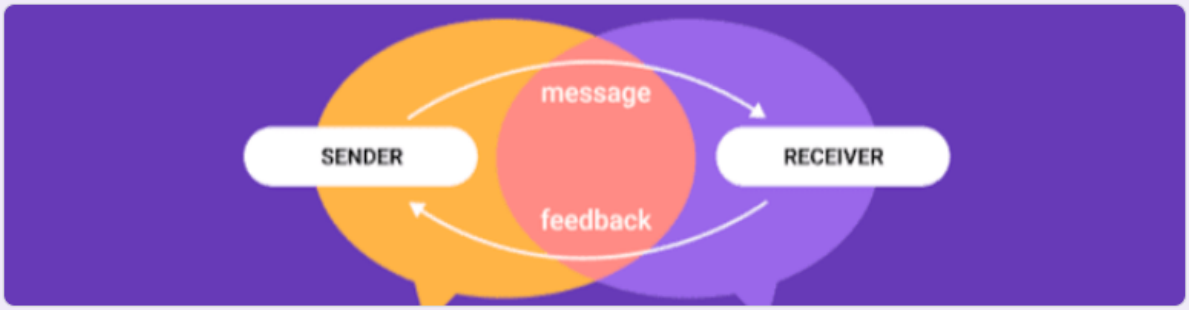
7.3. Appendix C

Appendix C Example of One of the Online Consent Forms on Google Docs

I hereby declare that I voluntarily participated in this study. I let the researchers use my responses as data as far as my identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers guarantee that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

Copy





Utilization of Back-channels in Teaching English

Direction: Please check the closest answer to the following questions according to **your actual cases**. Thank you very much for your help and patience.

I hereby declare that I voluntarily participated in this study. I let the researchers use my responses as data as far as my identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers guarantee that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. *

- ○ Agree
- ○ Disagree

1. I think that using back-channels is helpful for learning.

7.4. Appendix D

Appendix D Examples of Learners Interviews

Categories	Examples
1. Use of the back channels in online classes	If you had created a group chat on WhatsApp or Telegram, you can use emojis. All in all, I think it is useful and can provide a unique experience for us. I agree that using back channels is useful for learning. I think it's great. I think it is very funny and entertaining. This way of reacting is new and exciting.
2. Use of the back channels in face-to-face classes	That is helpful and can provide an opportunity for learning English. I think it's a very useful app to develop our knowledge. It's easy to use and makes communication easier. It can be very helpful in the future. Not is it fun and exciting, but also it fun.
3. Advantages, and disadvantages	It is good and useful, but if you want to learn more, you should learn more about them. Hi dear. Having a list is very good and useful. All in all, it's a good choice for learners. Thanks a lot for everything. If we had the list before, we would use it sooner. When I am doing exercises, they send emojis. It makes me nervous. You can easily send ok, yea, ... to show your feeling. When we talk with people, their feedback is so important.
4. Easy-to-use and easy-to-learn factors	It's good and easy to learn. It is very useful and practical if you continuously practice and use them. Comfortable and suitable . Easy to use and meaningful. We can use it everywhere.
5. Communicative language learning: through back channels	I think it was a helpful way for those learners who have a basic knowledge of English (or any other language they are willing to learn), also a good way to communicate with native speakers and learn many things which are not taught in books or classes

7.5. Appendix E

Appendix E Examples of Teachers' Interviews

Categories	Examples
1. Use of the back channels in online classes	In my opinion, using back channels can help learners understand their learning process. Back channels are easy to use, especially in online classes through different apps, emojis, and so on. Emojis can show students feeling and anxiety.
2. Use of the back channels in face-to-face classes	Using back channels is easy to understand when teachers explain them one by one, which can be time-consuming a little bit. I would prefer to use back channels in the future in my online classes and traditional English classes with the use of back-channels lists.
3. Advantages, and disadvantages	In my opinion, back channels are an inseparable part of learning. Based on my own experience, every method has its own advantages and disadvantages. For instance, most institutions are avoiding extra sessions. They believe that it costs too many expenses.
4. Easy-to-use and easy-to-learn factors	Due to the easy-to-use and easy-to-learn factors of back channels, I know that, in my class, most students will use back channels, and I am pretty sure about that.
5. Communicative language learning: through back channels	Backchannels can be a good way of learning, but when students were given some awareness about using them. Gamification and the funny aspect of using back channels with flashcards are helpful and can remove barriers between learners and teachers. In addition, it has a positive effect on learners and the learning atmosphere, and eventually can affect learners' communication skills.