Backchannels as a Cooperative Strategy in ELF Communications

Kanghee Lee

(University of Seoul)

Lee, Kanghee. 2020. Backchannels as a cooperative strategy in ELF communications. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 20, 257-281. This study aimed to investigate how backchannels are used in ELF communication and which kinds of backchannels are frequently employed by ELF speakers. The data was based on naturally occurring ELF conversations among the international students in the UK university and analysed with the Conversation Analysis (CA) approach. The results showed that the participants frequently and actively produced backchannel responses, and the types were identified as agreement-oriented, rapport-oriented, and participation-oriented backchannels. The most frequent forms were the short response tokens as in other ELF studies, and the ELF speakers also employed echoing repetition and utterance completion, which are more active forms of backchannels to display participation and support. The findings confirmed that ELF speakers attempt to avoid silence and gap between turns by showing their participatory listenership and the understanding of the interlocutors and participate in active involvement and co-construction of turn-takings through backchannel responses.

Keywords: backchannel, ELF, cooperation, involvement, listenership, rapport-building

1. Introduction

As English has been used as a means of communication in many international contexts, speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have been involved in intercultural communications through English. A great number of studies have shown that understanding problems are relatively rare in English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF), because participants tend to accomplish more cooperative and mutually supportive communication to overcome possible understanding problems and build solidarity and rapport (Cogo and Dewey 2012, Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey 2011, Mauranen 2012, Seidlhofer 2011). Speakers are found to use diverse pragmatic strategies to support the interlocutor's meaning-making process and signal their

understanding and agreement to flow the interaction smoothly. Backchannel behavior, which is "verbal and non-verbal listener feedback in spoken interaction that does not involve a speaker shift, but functions as a turn-continuer" (Bjørge 2010, p. 193), is a way of achieving supportive and cooperative communication.

The active feedback is one of the most common and effective mechanisms of collaborative turn sharing and contributes to successful communication in ELF situation. To achieve mutual understanding and collaboration, ELF research has stressed the significance of collaborative turn sharing and co-construction of talk (Jenkins et al. 2011, Kaur 2011, Seidlhofer 2009). Although an accumulating body of research has examined diverse cooperative pragmatic strategies in ELF communication, there is still lack of empirical research on backchannel behaviours in ELF contexts. In addition, the findings from previous ELF research on backchannel have focused on the patterns of frequency and types of backchannel, which are limited to simple agreement tokens, and showed a lack of awareness on the distinctive functional aspects of backchannel in interaction.

This paper presents an investigation into backchannel behaviour in ELF interaction among the international students in the UK university. To explore how these ELF speakers are involved in cooperative turn-taking and co-construction of meaning through active feedback, this study will identify function-based backchannels ELF speakers employ by analyzing naturally occurring ELF interactions with the Conversation Analysis (CA) approach. It will be also examined whether the findings are similar to the patterns and features of backchannel responses in other ELF studies. The article will first address previous research on backchannel practice in ELF and Korean speakers' conversations and then present the analysis of the data and discussion of findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Backchannels in ELF Communication

A number of studies in ELF revealed that ELF speakers make ample use of backchannels to keep a high degree of politeness and display empathy and involvement, and this showed that ELF is highly cooperative and mutually supportive in nature. Backchannelling acts as an effective pragmatic strategy to express the speaker's

positive attitude and understanding in ELF, where diversity and complexity are prevalent and adaptation and supportiveness are important for successful communication. For example, Meierkord (2002) observed the frequent use of backchannelling in ELF to support the participants in communication. She argues that backchannel responses may often produce a specific meaning according to the topic and the context of use. Cogo and Dewey (2012) also revealed that backchannels are often used as a means of supporting meanings in ELF. The speakers in their data employed backchannels such as mhm and ok to indicate their listenership and to encourage the interlocutor to continue. By providing backchannel responses "at finely timed points in the exchange", the speakers seemed to attempt to fill the gap between turns in conversation (Cogo and Dewey 2012: 142). Further, backchannelling occurred with the form of immediate latching and overlapping with the main speaker, which indicate the active involvement and engagement in the talk.

In Mauranen's (2006) study, which showed how misunderstanding is signaled and pre-empted in ELF communication, the speakers signaled their understanding by frequently producing minimal responses such as *yes, yeah* or *ok*. As she points out, this communicative behavior indicates the speakers' effort to facilitate a smooth flow of conversation. Speakers seem to recognize that it is difficult to achieve mutual understanding "without special effort" and consequently signaling understanding through frequent backchanelling is a way of "a successful management of the discourse" (Mauranen 2006: 147).

Bjørge (2010) analysed both the verbal and non-verbal backchannels in negotiation conversations of ELF speakers in a business programme and the data showed that head nods were the most frequent form in non-verbal backchannelling, whereas verbal backchannels were limited to *yes, yeah, mhm* and *okay*. Bjørge argues that backchannelling is a way of active listening to show understanding and support and acts as a crucial negotiation skill. She emphasized the crucial role of active listening in a negotiation process, where the speakers explicitly signal that they are keeping focus on the topic being discussed and provide constant feedback. Such interactive skills contribute to positive relationship-building and rapport management (McCarthy 2002, Planken 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2000).

Kordon (2006) focused on the agreement tokens as a backchannel behavior in ELF communication between Austrian and Vietnamese speakers. She classified the patterns of agreement tokens into three types, weak (e.g., *mhm, hm, mm,* etc.), neutral (*yes, no, yeah, yah*, etc.) and strong agreement tokens (exactly, right, absolutely, etc.) and

her ELF data show the extensive use of agreement tokens. The participants of her ELF data attempted to indicate their interest and listenership to the other interlocutors by using frequent agreement tokens. Kordon interpreted backchannelling as a way of "phatic communion", where the motivation and function of interaction are to establish rapport rather than transactional purposes for conveying factual or referential information (Kordon 2006: 65). The speakers attempt to keep the contact and exchange the utterance to show their attention, involvement and listenership to the other speakers. In this mode of conversation, the topic of interaction does not have a significant meaning and the purpose of talk is not mainly limited to the exchange of information.

An accumulating body of ELF studies have revealed that ELF communication is consensus-oriented, mutually supportive and collaborative (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019, Jenkins 2018, Mauranen 2018), since ELF speakers are observed to employ a variety of interactional strategies and practices to support the interlocutor's meaning-making process and build rapport and positive social relationships. In ELF contexts, where speakers are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and consequently may have a lack of in-group membership and affiliation among them, the participants are more likely to project an intentional effort to be involved in communities of practice, which often tend to be situated, emergent and improvised. The participants' cooperative and supportive behavior through backchannels in ELF allows them to adapt to the intercultural atmosphere and maximize the expression of understanding.

2.2 Backchannels in Korean Speakers' Conversation

Korean speakers are also found to use different forms of backchannels for diverse functions and purposes in conversations. For example, in Heo's (2015) study, which analyzed the use of backchannels during a free discussion in a Korean university classroom, the students actively provided their interlocutors with backchannel tokens such as uh huh, mu hm, yes, and yeah to signal continuation to the other speakers, show an understanding of content, and express disagreement. The students also showed strong emotional responses and empathy by producing laughs, rising intonation, and exclamatory statements. Heo stressed the importance of backchannels in interaction as a way of expressing an active listenership and the role of backchannels to encourage students, particularly for a low level of students, to keep conversation

going and develop social competence.

Kim (2010) also presented similar findings that Korean university students made frequent use of backchannel tokens such as yes, yeah, uh huh, and mm hm in paired English conversations. Kim identified the main functions of backchannel in his data as managing the flow of interaction and reflecting the speaker's nonnativeness. Also, backchannels performed as a turn-initial cue to gain speakership from the interlocutor and accomplish speaker incipiency, where the recipient's role transfers from a listener to a speaker in a turn-taking process. On the other hand, backchannels can reflect the speakers' non-nativeness by using their L1 resources and disfluent transition of speakership. In other words, Korean speakers may employ their L1 resources as a backchannel to manage the L2 interaction, and the speakers' particular linguistic patterns in their L1 can be transferred to L2 performance and lead to a smooth flow of conversation although in some cases disfluent transition of speakership occurs in the non-transition-relevance place (TRP).

The non-nativeness of backchannels was also observed in Park's (2004) study, focusing on the backchannel cue *yeah* that Korean university students used in conversations with the native speaker (NS) tutors. In her data, the Korean speakers provided yeah both as a self-continuer and as a 'turn-exit device' (Park 2004: 93). In other words, while the Korean speakers were involved in a sequential structure of a multi-unit turn, the NS provided a backchannel to encourage the Korean speakers to keep their turn. Consequently, they accepted the NS's continuer and completed the next slot of turn after producing yeah.

As seen in the studies on backchannel above, backchannels are frequently and dynamically used in ELF contexts and Korean speakers' conversations in English and found to play a crucial role in cooperative and rapport-building interactions. However, previous research on backchannel in intercultural communication tends to be limited to simple backchannel cues or minimal responses and focus on the comparison of backchannel frequencies and forms between native and non-native speakers or among different L1 background speakers. Therefore, this study will explore a wider range of backchannel patterns such as echoing response or utterance completion as a feedback. In particular, backchannel in ELF is under-researched despite its significant pragmatic values and the growing use of ELF worldwide. Therefore, This study aims to provide useful data on backchannel in ELF communication by investigating how backchannels are used in ELF communication and which kinds of backchannels are frequently employed by ELF speakers in naturally occuring conversations. The research questions are:

1）Do the international students typically use backchannels in ELF communication?

2）What kinds of backchannel cues are most frequently used among ELF speakers?

3）Are there any different backchannel patterns in the data comparing to previous studies?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

The data of this study is based on naturally occurring ELF communication among the international students in the U.K. higher education setting. The participants of the data were the international students who were studying undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the UK university. The participants were four Chinese, one Korean, one Japanese and two Thai speakers, and their majors varied from Management, Finance, and Accounting to Linguistic, Education, Computer Science and Hotel Management. In total, eight students participated in the research, and the ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 29. The length of their stay in the UK ranged from 4 months to 2 years. The IELTS (International English Language Testing System), which is the official measurement exam for the entrance of international students in the UK universities, scores of the participants ranged from 6.0 to 7.5, which means that the participants possessed the proficient level of communication abilities enough to engage in interactive conversations in English.

To recruit the participants, the researcher circulated an e-mail to the international students through the international students' community website of a university and asked the international students who were interested in the research to participate in data collection for a 4-week-period of time. I arranged the meetings with the participants and demonstrated the research purpose, which is to collect the data of naturally-occurring ELF communications, to them. The participants were divided into three different groups, which were organised with three or four participants each. The members of each group met regularly for four weeks in the group-meeting room in the campus and had conversations with different issues raised during the conversations among them. Each conversation event was audio-recorded without presence of the researcher and fully transcribed for the analysis. The data consists of 10 different speech events and is approximately 12 hour-long in total.

3.2 Analytic Tool

Conversation Analysis (CA) was used as an analytic tool to identify and analyse the sequences and procedures of backchannel responses. CA is one of the most frequently deployed analytic tools in empirical studies of ELF research based on naturally occurring conversations, since CA is designed to analyse turn-constructional units of naturally occurring interactions (Seedhouse 2004). As CA provides details of transcribing data such as "timed pauses, audible inhalations and exhalations, hesitations, cut-offs, prosody, and some pronunciation particularities" (Pietikäinen 2020: 179), it is useful to identify and interpret salient phenomena of pragmatic strategies. Given that most ELF studies aim to analyse communication processes and strategies in naturally occurring conversations, CA is a useful analytic framework for corpus-based empirical ELF data (Kaur 2016, Lichtkoppler 2007). As CA allows to examine and understand the communicative procedures and the sequential organisation of the turn-taking, the patterns and structures of backchannels in interaction in this study will be described and identified with the conversation a analytic approach.

4. Findings

4.1 Agreement-oriented Backchannel

Short reactive tokens were the most frequently used form of backchannel in the data. This type of backchannel is mainly used to indicate the speaker's agreement and acceptance with the speech or opinion that a mainchannel speaker produces. Such form of backchannel, which is called "agreement-backchannel", does not interrupt the flow of interaction nor intends to take up the floor, because the turn is immediately returned to the mainchannel speaker and there is no sign of a speaker shift. Instead, agreement-oriented backchannel tends "to avoid cluttering the mainchannel with extra text" by giving minimal response tokens (Cogdill et al. 2001: 3) and to encourage the mainchannel speaker to continue the talk by implying acknowledgement and approval. In other words, agreement-oriented backchannel functions as turn-continuers, "which acknowledge that the other speaker still has the floor" and "reflect passive recipiency" (Jurafsky et al. 1998: 115). Backchannel as a continuer signals that the backchannelling speaker is listening to and interested in the mainchannel speaker's talk

and encourages the other to continue the talk by providing continuous backchannel responses at the appropriately timed point in the course of conversation (Schegloff 1982).

Agreement-oriented backchannel also contributes to indicating the listener's understanding on the mainchannel conversation. As Fujie et al. (2005) describe, by getting constant feedbacks, the mainchannel speakers can know the interlocutor's position and "feel comfortable to speak", since they can recognise the interlocutor is listening to them and understands what they said (p. 889). The participants in the data produced a regular and active feedback by using a number of backchannel responses in turns during the communication as in the following extracts.

Extract 1. K-Korean, E-Chinese, M-Japanese

1K	so especially for the post graduate study, especially the phd study, er we don't have
2	any lecture, formal lecture, so we try to ehm, we attempt to er attend to workshop
3	or seminar, even in this kind for academic activity (.), er ehm people are very good
4	at arguing and debating or exchange their opinion, and they are very good at become
5	becoming critical=
6E	→=**yeah**
7K	have different kind of the idea or their opinion, and they try to express their opinion
8	and they are very good at asking about what they are unclear, or something like
9	that, but in asian, in asian education culture
10E	→**ehm**
11K	just pass the, we just let it pass
12M	→**[ehm]**
13E	→**[ehm]**
14K	even when we don't understand, or even we have some kind of question or
15M	→**ehm,ehm**
16K	yeah, yeah (.). what i very envy to the native speaker or the western students is
17	yeah, they are very good at debating and argument
18E	→**yeah**
19K	yeah, they are very natural and confident
20E	yeah, i think in, during the lecture sometimes the lecturer will ask 'do you have any
21	question' and the asian students just just stay quiet
22K	→**yeah**
23E	even though the lecturer questions, they stay quiet, and then they will ask after
24	lecture
25K	ah, face-to-face, one-to-one
26E	→**yeah**
27K	uh, yeah, it's true, ehm, i see, so how how we how is the classroom in japan?
28M	how is the classroom? ehm (:)

In Extract 1, the participants are exchanging their experiences and ideas about their study in the UK, which is to some extent different from that of their own countries. As seen in the conversation, there are backchannel cues in almost every other turn. Speaker K is talking about the advantages of the PhD course in the UK such as more opportunities of debates and critical thinking. In line 6, speaker E produces the backchannel *yeah* with latching the previous turn but the turn is not maintained by speaker E. Backchannels with overlapping or latching to the previous speaker's turn indicate the speaker's intention to express the prompt engagement and active listenership, because "retarding the response may function to signal a lack of understanding or even disinterest in and inattention to the current speaker" (Zimmerman and Candace 1975: 123). The backchannel cues continue to be provided in the next stretch of interaction. When the speakers keep producing the agreement tokens *yeah* or *ehm* as in line 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 22 and 26, they do not claim the floor and interrupt the flow of the communication but the floor is immediately returned to the original speaker, who continues his/ her utterance in the following turn. Other than line 16, 19, 20, and 27, where the speakers produce a longer stretch of talk along with the backchannel tokens, backchannels are used as a means of instant feedback and the expression of agreement. The similar pattern of backchannel action is also observed in the next extract.

Extract 2. K-Korean, E, L-Chinese, M-Japanese

1K	but when i was younger than now, i mean, maybe(.) university student, actually I
2	spent a lot of time to surfing the internet-shopping, and yeah, actually i did buy
3	some items from the internet shopping website, but in some cases it was successful
4	to get the items
5M	→**yeah**
6K	which i was very satisfied with, but in many, most, more cases, i'm very disappointed
7M	→**ehm**
8K	because(.) the the most of the item on the screen seems very pretty
9E	→**yeah @@**
10K	than off-line but even, when ierer saw it, yeah, it's very disappointing
11E	→**yeah**
12K	i mean the colour is slightly different
13M	→**ehm**
14K	from those on the screen
15E	→**yeah**
16K	and the design or size is not suitable, it's not appropriate for me, so
17L	i think the quality is not very good
18K	→**ah, yeah**, in in some cases er the news broadcast er(.) in the news broadcast,

19		there are a lot of fake website or
20M	→**ehm**	
21K	→**yeah**, and they just tell a lie	
22M	→**uh(:)**	
23K	and even they they just after they make the website and after they get the money	
24	from the customer	
25E	→**uh(:)**	

  In this extract, the speakers have a conversation with regard to their experiences on the Internet shopping. In the interaction, the other speakers constantly provide speaker K's utterance with frequent backchannels. Although constant backchannels occur following speaker K's turns, speaker K's utterances are not interrupted. In particular, long turns appear to generate backchannel responses. In other words, in speaker K's long turns as in line 1, 20 and 23, the other interlocutors are trying to provide backchannel acts since speakers in interaction view backchannel as a more polite and effective way to keep the conversation going on rather than silence (Schegloff 1982). Without feedback and reaction, the speaker is more likely to consider that the listeners do not listen to and have no interest in the talk. In line 9, speaker E expresses a greater sense of rapport and friendliness and creates a positive atmosphere by producing laughter with agreement token yeah. However, while backchannel cues in the most turns were used for passive recipiency, the backchannel uses of *yeah* in line 18 and 21 marked incipient speakership, because speaker K is trying to open the turn with the words and continues to make further talk after the backchannel. In other words, backchannels such as yeah or yes "which indicate an intention to take the floor reflect preparedness to shift from recipiency to speakership" (Jurafsky et al. 1998: 115).

  As seen in the data in Extract 1 and 2, the reactive token *yeah* is often employed as a turn-initial lexical item, and this in effect occurs in everyday conversations. It may occur as a non-content turn-preface item such as well, *right* and *mhm* but in many cases they function as a sign of acknowledgement and understanding to the interlocutors and "project engagement and interactional bonding with interlocutors" (McCarthy 2003: 36). Gardner (1998) argues that the agreement token yeah expresses "some alignment with what has been said, in the sense of claiming to have understood the content of the turn" (p. 210). By giving minimal responses to the prior talk, backchannel allows the prior speaker to keep subsequent action in the following turns without topic change. These examples of minimal response tokens indicate

typical uses of agreement-oriented backchannel as "an item used by a primary listener to provide a response that is telling the other to continue talking" (Gardner 1998: 212).

4.2 Rapport-oriented Backchannel

Repetition of others, or mirror response, occurs during a pause in the main speaker's turn and shows attention and possibly understanding. In communication, the pragmatic behavior that one speaker repeats the other's utterance in order to make the conversation continue is called responsive repetition (Yun 2013). Responsive repetition is a crucial discourse strategy where both speakers successfully co-build the construction of interaction and establish more rapport-building relationships. Speakers are more willing to deploy responsive repetition to exhibit listenership or indicate their attitude and opinions more directly "to maintain the harmony of the conversation" (Yun 2013: 34).

In the data, the participants often echoed the other speakers' utterance, which is aimed to signal that they are listening and to express their empathy and coherence to the interlocutor (Lammi 2010, Lichtkoppler 2007). Responsive repetition, which functions as a backchannel, is often observed in myriad contexts of conversation (Li 2006, Li et al. 2010, Xudong, 2008). While self-repetition is in many cases used to reinforce explicitness and clarity for intelligibility or comprehension, other-repetition is primarily employed to indicate the speaker's empathy or solidarity (Johnstone 2008, Lichtkoppler 2007). By echoing exactly what the other speaker said, speakers show rapport in conversation and express "participatory listenership" (Sawir 2004: 9) as in the following extract.

Extract 3. J, E— Chinese, K— Korean

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1K      also british english tend to be very=
2J      =royal i think
3K      stiff
4J      stiff?
5K      i mean more (.) clearer, clear (.)
6J      →clearer
7K      much clearer=
8E      =and also they connect, connect words like middle yesterday, they don't say
9K      linking, linking word, some kind of (.)
10J     →ah, linking word
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11E	ok
12K	yeah
13J	american english i usually link link to the american black-,black culture like rock @@
14E	uh (.), disaster for me @@@ but i cannot understand @@@
15J	→**you cannot understand**

The speakers in the extract have a conversation regarding the phonological features of British English. Korean speaker K mentions that British English sounds more explicit and clear in line 5, and Chinese speaker J repeats what speaker K has said in the preceding turn. By repeating speaker K's repaired expression clearer in the following turn, speaker J seems to confirm the mutual understanding and show that he is paying attention to speaker K's utterance. Speaker J again reiterates speaker K's utterance in line 10 and echoing is also observed in line 15 by speaker J. Speaker J neither adds any new information nor continues beyond the interlocutor's words but the original speakers complete their turns. The responsive repetition in interaction is used for a metalinguistic function because it does not request the truth of the prior talk to the speaker but merely indicates that it has been ratified. Such repetition occurs after talking of presenting new information and is consequently described as "information receipts" (Svennevig 2004: 490).

Such responsive repetition needs to be distinguished from a repair strategy, in which speakers aim at resolving understanding problems and therefore often call for a response. Whereas repetition is often used as a discourse strategy for clarity or understanding confirmation, all three cases of echoing response are not related to problem-solving purposes because there is no sign of rising intonation in each echoing response, which means that speakers do not require a response (White 1997). Instead, speakers deploy responsive repetition to provide active listenership and reciprocal involvement, and therefore, this kind of backchannel is rapport-oriented and functions as a supportive move. The instances of active echoing are also observed in the next extract.

Extract 4. M-Japanese, K-Korean, L- Chinese

1M	i i found the ranking first professional sport, professional sports career, and second
2	patisserie just=
3K	=patisserie?
4M	patisserie, third er working for the kindergarten
5K	uh, really?
6M	yeah, for (.) er manga, cartoon writer

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7K      wow
8L      →cartoon writer
9M      ehm
10K     uh, it's very different
11M     fifth is doctor
12K     →doctor
13M     sixth, fashion designer
14K     →fashion designer
15M     seventh, er like nurse
16K     →nurse
17M     eighth is pharmacy like er=
18K     →=pharmacy
19M     yeah, yeah
20K     pharmacist
21M     yeah, pharmacist and nine singer
22K     →singer
23M     ten (.) er how to say, hair [hair] designer
24K     →                          [hair]         dresser
25L     i think the hair designer is very popular
26M     yeah, yeah, very popular because of the famous drama may be, fifteen years ago
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In this conversation, the speakers are talking about the popular jobs in their own country. While Japanese speaker M is listing the top-ranked jobs in Japan, the other speakers keep echoing speaker M's utterance as in line 8, 12, 14, 16, 18, 22, and 24 with a falling intonation, which indicates that their echoing responses are not aimed to request confirmation or clarification and invite a response. After the last ranking job, a hair designer, speaker L supports speaker M's point by reiterating it and adding a lexical phrase '*very popular*' to express a strong agreement. In the following turn, speaker M echoes speaker L's wording again. The participants in the interaction make ensemble and co-construct the turns with constant backchannel responses. Dynamic and active echoing response indicates the speaker's intention for rapport, empathy and solidarity-building and contributes to the smooth and collaborative flow of conversation. This kind of "solidarity repetition", as Murata (1994: 200) calls, acts as a form of backchannel, because speakers neither add further information and develop a topic and idea nor take other speakers' floor and elicit a response from others. Instead, it signals to interlocutors "that they are listening, understanding or even accepting what the interlocutor said" (Lee 2013: 128). Consequently, echoing backchannel is a way of "a co-operative gesture by the speakers, explaining themselves for their listeners" (McCarthy 1998: 115).

4.3 Participation-oriented Backchannel

Another outstanding form of backchannel in the data is utterance completion, where speakers provide a feedback by jointly constructing incomplete turns of the other speaker. Through utterance completion backchannel, speakers can show collaboration and co-participation in conversation and express affiliation in joint action (Lerner 1993), and therefore this type of backchannel is participation-oriented. Utterance completion is a way of listener response to project a great level of convergence by integrating into the preceding turn. In other words, speakers collaboratively participate in a turn-constructional unit in the ongoing process of the mainchannel speaker's turn and jointly enter into a possible completion point by providing a syntactically and contextually coherent sequence to the mainchannel (Sacks and Jefferson 1992). Utterance completion occurs based on a constant monitoring process in which listeners keep track of the mainchannel and anticipate the next slot of talk. As Cogdill et al. (2001) put it, "many backchannel utterances require an understanding of context, a sense of the writer's purpose, and sufficient length" (p. 2), and particularly utterance completion is a form of backchannel which is only possible when speakers fully understand the context and the mainchannel speaker's intention and meaning. Backchannel speakers typically make cooperative actions based on the information provided in the prior turns, but in more cases they complete turns by anticipating "the not-yet-completed utterance with shared common knowledge and background information to coordinate further talk" (Lee 2013: 128). This joint construction of turns as a backchannel contributes to a smooth flow of conversation and shows that backchannels in ELF are not restricted to passive recipiency but related to active involvement in turn construction as in the following extracts.

Extract 5. E- Chinese, K-Korean, M-Japanese

1E	minimum is six point, but the total score is six point
2K	so overall score is six point five, it's so hard, so are you er are you visiting er
3	china? during summer holiday?
4E	ehm, i'm not sure, because if i i don't pass the ielts exam, i need to stay here for
5	the pre-sessional course
6K	yeah, this is not er (⋯) this is not based on statistics but normally er taking
7	especially for the writing is easier to take it in your country than taking it in this
8	country
9E	why? (.) i think it is more difficult if we take it here
10K	i mean

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11M    speaking part especially
12K    yeah, speaking and writing=
13E    →=is more difficult
14K    is more difficult to get a better score in this [country]
15E                                                 [so]
16K    there are a lot of competition and i mean there are a lot of good students in this
17     country
18E    yeah, so
19K    especially the european students
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In the conversation above, speaker E is talking on the difficulties to get the requirement score of IELTS exam for the entrance of the postgraduate course she wants to apply for. Speaker E worries that she did not meet the writing score, which is minimum six points, although her overall score is six points. The other participants in the conversation show the agreement with how difficult it is to get the requirement score particularly in the writing part in the exam. In line 4, speaker E mentions that in case she does not pass the exam, she should take the pre-sessional course, which is the academic session for the international students who do not achieve the requirement score for the English test. In the subsequent turn, speaker K demonstrates that it is easier to get a higher score in the writing part in China than in the UK, and speaker E asks the reason in the next turn. However, speaker E immediately supports speaker K's idea after a short pause in line 9 by reiterating the utterance "i think it is more difficult if we take it here.", speaker M adds the point that the speaking part is also difficult to get the score, and speaker K displays the acknowledgement to speaker M's point by initiating the turn with the agreement token yeah. Speaker E joins the co-construction of speaker K's sentence in the following turn by suggesting the next slot of the turn "is more difficult". After speaker E's completion, speaker K does not show disagreement or rejection but echoes what speaker E said in the preceding turn, which signals agreement and acknowledgement of what the interlocutor is saying. Meanwhile, the mainchannel speaker's certain communicative behaviour can also lead to the completion backchannel as in the next example.

Extract 6. P- Thai, K-Korean, Y- Thai

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1P    there is a big gap between the poor and rich, you may not see this in your country,
2     because er you know it's very different because your country, i mean the economy in
3     your country and the developing countries is very fast, and now the gap between poor
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4        and rich er in your country, i mean in south korea it's not very big, lots of people
5        lots of people are in the middle class, but in thailand, we have lots of rich and poor
6        as well [...]
7K       ehm (.) and one of the, i think one of the (.) the majors
8P       uh, uh
9K       to evaluate one country
10P      uh, ehm
11K      is developing or developed is, in the developed country, er developed country
12P      uh, ehm
13K      developed countries have er, how can i say, the very stable
14P      uh, ehm
15K      stable group of middle (.), er how can i say, middle (.) middle people? middle=
16Y      →=middle class
17P      middle class
18K      middle class people but in the poor country, the developing country
19P      uh, ehm
20K      they have a lot of rich people
21P      ehm
```

In the conversation above, Thai speaker P is describing the situation of Thailand where the gap between the rich and the poor is highly severe. Korean speaker K is trying to explain that one of the criteria to distinguish between the undeveloped and developed countries is the rate of middle class people. However, speaker K continues to make a hesitation and pause to construct a sentence as in line 15, and after a constant hesitation and pause, speaker Y finally produces a utterance completion as a backchannel in line 16 by providing the candidate word *middle class*. In the subsequent turn, speaker K reiterates the word middle class that speaker Y suggested, which is an active form of bachchannel to express acceptance. This type of completion backchannel occurs when a mainchannel speaker has some troubles in producing appropriate expressions in the on-going conversation. Once the mainchannel speaker makes a hesitation or pause to search proper lexical items, the backchannel speaker enters a possible completion point in the on-going turn constructional unit and suggests prospective lexical items "base on what they monitored and understood" (Lee 2016: 75). Completion backchannel is often observed at the word-search moment of the interlocutor (Park 2007). It is only possible to accomplish utterance completion when the speakers monitor each other's turn and fully understand the meanings.

This type of backchannel behaviour is described as "lexical suggestion" or "lexical anticipation" (Kirkpatrick 2010: 127). It has been found that ELF speakers in interaction support the other speakers by suggesting prospective lexical items, which

can contribute to facilitating the interactional process of talk, and this interactional strategy attests a great level of collaboration and mutual supportiveness in ELF interactions. In many occasions of lexical suggestion, mainchannel speakers show a positive response, and it is not accepted as interruption or intrusion because there is no sign of irritation, and the mainchannel speakers hold the floor again. In effect, lexical suggestion is distinctive from "lexical correction", which generally happens in communication between native and non-native speakers and is used to repair non-native speakers' expressions into a more native-like word or phrase. Whereas lexical correction is viewed as error correction, which leads to face-threatening and anxiety, lexical suggestion is commonly considered as a convergent and supportive pragmatic strategy.

By completing each other's turns, speakers create ensemble in conversation (Antaki, Díaz, and Collins 1996), and such ensemble turn construction is described as 'duets', where speakers jointly take part in multi-party conversations as if they are one (Szczepek 2000). Participants in duets share turns and collectively formulate sub-turns in which they have an equal role and authority to talk about the topic. In the process of duets in interaction, each speaker's completion acts as a sub-turn rather than an independent turn because utterance completion is not recognised as interruption but considered as though the turn is uttered by one speaker. In many occasions of completion, there is no symptom of a syntactical, lexical and contextual shift in the structure of a duet sub-turn, but the sub-turn makes extension of the main turn and shows an active response of understanding to the preceding turn. This kind of interactional duets projects the speakers' shared concern and knowledge on the issue, and one of the most efficient ways to signal rapport and unity to show the other speakers that "I know what you are saying" (Szczepek 2000: 12).

5. Discussion

The participants in the data showed the high frequency of backchannel use, which is also echoed in many other ELF research. Since ELF is highly cooperative and mutually supportive in nature, a frequent use of backchannel may indeed show a good listenership. Good listenership is not limited to listeners' passive recipiency but it is expressed by their active engagement and reaction, as "the smallness of small actions often hides the contribution they make to the ongoing talk" (McCarthy 2003: 59). In

other words, listeners are not restricted to a minimal role of a hearer but engage in the dynamic turn-taking process with interactional partners (Cogo and Dewey 2012).

The types of backchannel responses in the current data are characterised as agreement-oriented, rapport-oriented, and participation-oriented bachcannels. Agreement-oriented backchannel is used to show positive reaction and acknowledgment to the main channel speaker, and the form is mainly limited to short response tokens such as *yeah, ehm,* and *uh* although strong agreement tokens were used in some cases. This pattern is resonated to other ELF studies on backchannels (e.g., Bjørge 2010, Cogo and Dewey 2012, Kordon 2006, Mauranen 2006). The reason may be that ELF speakers intend not to interrupt the interlocutor's turn by producing longer utterance and strong expressions but to encourage the interlocutors to continue the turn. Instead, ELF speakers seem to adopt minimal responses to signal understanding and facilitate a smooth flow of interaction. Although a minimal response or short reactive token does not convey a significant linguistic meaning itself, the absence of verbal feedback in conversation may exhibit the listener's lack of interest and attention to the mainchannel speaker and consequently lead to communication breakdown and unfriendly impressions to the interlocutors.

However, rapport-building interaction is more accomplished through the form of echoing repetition or mirror response as a backchannel. Whereas Bjørge's (2010) ELF data displayed the low frequency of echoing repetition as a form of backchannel, the data in this study showed a frequent use of echoing repetition. Bjørge pointed out that the speakers with lower proficiency levels made use of repetition, because they might have more need for repetition to clarify the utterance. However, repetition as a backchannel does not necessarily manifest the lack of understanding and proficiency. It is not merely used to correct and modify errors or misunderstanding but more often acts as a means of signaling attention and agreement.

Echoing backchannel is a more active form of feedback to show understanding of a prior turn and acceptance in a more explicit way than a reactive token. Rather than simply giving a reactive token in feedback, speakers converge to the interlocutors by echoing their talk, and such mirror response shows a greater degree of empathy and builds rapport and positive social relationships. Speakers converge to their interlocutors to become more similar to their communicative behaviour of the interlocutors, because individual speakers tend to be more attracted and express a favour and respect to the one whose communicative styles and patterns are similar to themselves (Giles and Ogay 2007). Therefore, convergent behaviour in interaction is commonly described as

more "competent, attractive, and cooperative" (Gallois et al. 2005: 128).

Utterance completion, which is under-researched in ELF backchannels, is the most active form of backchannel feedback to the mainchannel. It is not limited to a passive response in interaction but extended to co-construction of shared meaning and reciprocal engagement. The backchannel speaker's talk is syntactically and pragmatically coherent to the prior turn as a turn continuation rather than an independent and separate turn-constructional unit (Szczepek 2000). The backchannel speaker joins the turn completion to orient and move towards the mainchannel speaker and to jointly engage in the interaction rather than interruption of the main channel, which usually occurs to compete a turn, change a topic or signal disagreement at non-transition relevance place (Farley 2008). The completing speaker does not keep holding the turn, but the turn is returned to the mainchannel speaker immediately after a completion backchannel.

Given that the notion of communication is the meaning-making process jointly produced by participants, such supportive verbal feedback is a natural and effective communicative strategy through which the listener reacts at the appropriate moment in the appropriate way to the ongoing discourse. Speakers seem to avoid silence and gap between turns by showing their participatory listenership and understanding to the interlocutors, and backchannels seem to act as an indicator of the participants' realisation of desirable listenership. As active feedback can express the listener's interest and attention and make communication as a two-way process, signalling involvement and listenership through backchannel tokens is "an important aspect of communicative ability that contributes to rapport management" (Bjørge 2010: 201).

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how ELF speakers show their backchannel responses in intercultural communication. The short reactive tokens such as *yeah* or *ehm* were mainly used to express agreement and acknowledgement and are the most frequent forms of backchannel responses in the data, as in other ELF studies. The ELF speakers also used echoing repetition and utterance completion as a backchannel to show rapport and active participation. The speakers are found to provide constant feedback and responses in the course of interaction and seem to avoid the gap or silence, which may give the interlocutors the impression of inattentiveness and lack of interest.

From this perspective, backchannel behavior can be approached and understood in terms of turn-management strategy and active listenership. The speakers make effective use of indicators to corroborate that the turn is still open to the primary speaker by stopping the turn after the single backchannel items. ELF speakers collaboratively join a turn-construction but do not hold up the turn and make the original speaker maintain his/her channel. They seem to merely provide the interlocutor with a positive reaction to the statement and indicate listenership without claiming the floor to maintain the flow of the conversation. As interaction is a joint activity between a speaker and a listener, backchannelling shows "the significance of listener response and the effects of response on the way speakers construct their turns" (McCarthy 2003: 43).

Even though there may be some differences of forms, frequencies and placement of backchannels according the contexts of use, participants, topics and modes of communication, backchannels seem to serve diverse positive functions such as signaling support, involvement, attention, and alignment and showing acknowledgement, agreement and understanding. The research findings in the data confirm that ELF speakers participate in active involvement and co-construction of turns in interaction through backchannel responses. Such frequent and dynamic backchannel behavior of ELF speakers seems to be motivated by achieving interpersonal harmony and enhancing contextual coherence.

However, as the findings of this study is based on a small-sized corpus data among the limited number of participants, the result cannot be generalized as a confirmed feature of ELF backchannels, which can be applied to other contexts of ELF. Therefore, the more various functions and types of backchannels as an interpersonal and affective strategy need to be explored in the future research with participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in different communicative modes and contexts of use, and it can help better understand and elaborate the pragmatic value of backchannels in intercultural communication through ELF. Also, English learners and students who will engage in intercultural communication need to raise awareness on more cooperative and supportive communication, build active listening skills and develop rapport management abilities for successful and effective conversations.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Tertiary

Lee, Kanghee, Professor
University of Seoul
Division of General English
163 Soeoulsiripdaero, Dongdaemun-gu
Seoul, Korea
Tel: 82-2-6490-5224
E-mail: kangheelee0919@gmail.com