

Backchannelling in the Language Classroom: Improving Student Attention and Retention with Feedback Technologies

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Abstract

Backchannelling is a technique for monitoring student engagement and performance in the language classroom. In this article I give the pedagogical rationale for this activity and describe some examples of best practice. The article concludes with a number of practical recommendations on how to get started with the various tools that are available and how to best make use of their affordances with your students.

Keywords: Motivation, assessment, monitoring, CALL

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1. Introduction

Good teachers continuously check for understanding and monitor student participation. Comprehension checks, seeking opinions, and mini assignments are some of the techniques used to get feedback on the extent to which learners are involved in the class and are learning the content. Recent developments in the use of mobile phones and web services further expand this repertoire and give teachers additional ways of monitoring the learning process. These techniques are often referred to as ‘backchannelling’ or ‘audience response systems’ and have been shown to have a positive impact on learning (Kay & LeSage, 2009). In this short article I look specifically at ways in which the available tools can be helpful in the teaching of languages.

2. Monitoring Student Learning in Real-Time

In face-to-face classes teachers can have a hard time knowing who has understood the lesson content, who is engaged, and who is merely present. The larger the number of students, the harder this job becomes. In particular in classes and lectures, opportunities for inviting feedback and checking understanding are minimal. To deal with this, various backchannel technologies now exist that allow teachers to request feedback, check understanding and monitor participation, and for learners to respond, with the answers becoming available to the teacher (or everyone in class), usually in the form of a chart or a percentage. Teachers can choose to display the answers on an overhead

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projector for all to see, or can look at them on a computer at the front of the class. Similarly, teachers can choose to respond online or by reading out a question or comment.

Feedback technologies come in different flavours. Until a few years ago they were mostly hardware based, using specially designed handheld 'clickers' and 'trackers' (these looked like mini remote controls) that connected to a local network to allow students to answer 'yes' or 'no' to questions by pressing the appropriate button and to display the information through an overhead projector. With cellphones and tablets becoming ubiquitous and connectivity improving, most solutions nowadays involve the use of students' phones or laptops to do the same thing (this is sometimes referred to as BYOD, or 'Bring Your Own Device'). Students login to a website or start an app on their phone or tablet, post or answer questions and share these through SMS (text messages) or wifi.

There are many such programs and apps available, both free and paid (see the list of programs at the end of this article), but also general programs are often used, such as chat applications or Twitter. A chat window that all students log in to (including the teacher) allows everyone to post and read comments. Twitter can be used in the same way, but to make it easier to find the relevant messages, best practice is to create a 'hashtag' that students can use in their posts. (A hashtag is like a label starting with the symbol # that will allow people to contribute to a particular topic.) For example, a conference on the topic of L2 Writing might create the hashtag #L2writing and all posts using that hashtag can be easily found by others. For more information on this see Atkinson (2009). There are also programs that use Twitter but create closed environments that are visible only to particular people; ideal for use in class. The site twtpoll.com is an example.

Another way of using backchannels is as part of an online class that uses programs such as Gotomeeting or Adobe Connect. Most of these include a chat facility, or even polls that allow you to post questions or short quizzes. These are mostly suitable for teachers who are seeing their students online in the first place.

A further development, at this point mainly with younger learners in general education, is the use of classroom behaviour management programs such as Class Dojo (www.classdojo.com, <http://appcrawlr.com/app/uberGrid/995417>). These give teachers ways of rewarding good behaviour through a tablet or computer with positive comments, stickers or badges. Although not all such programs also allow students to raise questions or post comments, it is likely that this functionality will become available in the future.

3. The Benefits of Using Feedback Technologies

The technologies described above have a number of advantages for teachers. Specifically, feedback technologies have a number of benefits that are useful for all teachers, including teachers of language:

They help increase participation. Teachers can invite comments, allow students to post questions, or ask for opinions. This encourages learners to participate more actively.

They help monitor student satisfaction. It can be hard to tell if students are enjoying the lesson, especially in large groups where the most active students may be sitting at the front, while those who are bored fall asleep at the back. Feedback technologies are a great way to ask students yes/no questions like: "Would you like more examples of the difference between the active and passive voice?", or ask students to provide ratings like: "on a scale from 1-10 how useful do you think this lesson was for improving your speaking skills?"

They help monitor understanding. Teachers can post questions, ranging from simple yes/no comprehension checks ("is this an example of an uncountable noun?") to multiple choice questions ("which of the following sentences are incorrect?"). As the results are shown immediately, this helps the teacher to get a quick idea of the extent to which students are following the lesson content. Students who got the answer wrong can be verbally invited to talk to the teacher after class, be referred to follow-up reading, or in the case that many students got the answer wrong the teacher

may want to explain the content again. Another option is to check the answers after class, identify students who clearly struggled and send them additional materials, or invite them for a tutorial.

Taking this one step further, feedback technologies can also help with in-class assessment. A series of questions could be administered at the end of a class, and the answers recorded. The results could be made available to students to help them see their progress and identify areas for improvement.

An additional advantage is that questions can be sent out to students to complete after class, to check understanding or to encourage students to memorise what they heard. The latter is particularly helpful for vocabulary.

All the above have been shown to increase attendance as well as the quality of learning (Kay & LeSage, 2009). But how are the benefits of using feedback technologies different from simply using a 'show of hands'? Some of these are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Advantages of using feedback technologies

Advantage	Detail
Precision	Rather than guessing, you can see the results in great detail. Not only will you be able to tell how many participants got it right or wrong, you will also (in the case of multiple choice questions for example) see what they were thinking.
Faster	In the case of multiple questions, or multiple-choice questions, obtaining feedback is much faster.
Results can be shared	The results are not only detailed, they can also be shared or shown directly on the projector screen, so all students can see them.
Different types of questions and answers	Multiple-choice questions are difficult or time-consuming to conduct without technology. Other questions types, like ratings, or comparisons are almost impossible.
Anonymity	Answers can be anonymous, thus encouraging greater participation. This also avoids the problem of students copying each other. For example, when asking 'who thinks the answer is A' and many students put up their hand, more students are likely to do the same.
Recording	The results can be recorded for the teacher to look at later, for further analysis.

4. Applications for Language Teaching

There are a lot of uses of feedback technologies. I have mentioned some examples for teaching in general above and these are all useful for language teachers as well; for example, checking that students are enjoying the class is simply good practice. Here are some examples specifically for language teaching.

4.1. Grammar Check

This can be helpful following either inductive or deductive input. For example, after an explicit explanation of a grammar point, you could ask students to respond to a few sample questions, indicating which ones are correct or incorrect. After reading a passage in which a particular grammar point is used a lot, students could be asked to pick the grammatically correct sentence from several options. Similarly, learners can be asked to select all passives or adverbs or any other grammar structure in a text.

4.2. Vocabulary

Similarly, new vocabulary can be checked throughout the lesson. This is particularly helpful in the case of vocabulary which we know is best learned if words are encountered in different contexts and multiple times. A quick check of new items encountered during class will not only give you information about which words may need further attention, but will also increase the likelihood of those words being remembered.

You could present words with several definitions and ask students to select the correct one, or ask more advanced learners to prioritise the answers from most to least common. You could also ask learners to supply a synonym or an antonym, use gap-fill or almost any other type of regular vocabulary exercise. New words can also be sent out to students at certain intervals after class.

4.3. Pragmatics

It is difficult to check that all learners understand the subtleties of language in use. It is helpful, for example, to give students a context and ask them to grade possible utterances or responses in terms of their appropriacy.

4.4. Reading

Reading longer texts may or may not be possible in class but comprehension questions can be administered. For shorter texts such as newspaper clippings, learners can be asked to select the key words, thus helping them with skimming practice.

4.5. Writing

Most feedback tools only give space for short answers so are not useful for extended writing practice, but students can be asked to select the most appropriate thesis statement, rank the order of paragraphs in an essay, or select the most appropriate conjunctive adverb.

5. Downsides

It is important to acknowledge that feedback technologies have a number of downsides. Firstly, they require an investment in time and often – though not always – money. You are likely to have to spend some time to get to know the technology and so may your students. You may need help from your IT support colleagues to set up the system, and, especially in large institutions, there may be limitations on what can and cannot be installed on the network.

Perhaps a greater challenge is that backchannels can be distracting. To the teacher, a stream of messages can be difficult to deal with (see below) and to students it can provide an attractive opportunity to 'opt out' of the classroom interaction. The key is to ensure that the backchannel and any possible tasks students are asked to complete are closely related to the focus of the lesson. If the backchannel turns out to be distracting, at other times it can be turned off.

A practical concern is whether students have access to the required tools. Although most students have cell phones, not all do. If you are not concerned about recording all students' comments, you can ask students to work together. Alternatively, most backchannel programs allow participants to post messages online from a computer, so possibly the class could be held in the computer lab.

Where you do make use of students' own devices, consider any data connection charges and the cost involved with sending text messages. Ask students beforehand.

Another possible downside is when school policy does not allow students to bring devices to class. There may also be privacy concerns. Students may worry about using their personal devices for school purposes and may worry what will happen with their data. Clearly this needs to be discussed with administration first. In practice, I have yet to run into major obstacles when using backchannels,

especially as a wide range of options is available (see the list at the end of this article), but it pays to be prepared.

Finally, backchannels can be used in a disruptive manner by students intent on doing so. Below we look at ways of handling situations like this. Backchannels almost certainly create a more informal atmosphere in the classroom. This is not necessarily a downside - in fact many teachers note this as one of the most positive aspects of the technology – but it is worth considering beforehand how you will feel about this.

6. Practical Preparation

The pedagogical preparation is perhaps more challenging and requires careful consideration. Below are a number of questions to ask yourself:

What is the purpose?

What is the main purpose of using backchannels? Is it to encourage participation? To motivate students? To see how they are doing? To collect information on engagement? To follow up afterwards with students who got answers wrong? Clearly, each of these will require you to post different questions. Also, it pays to be clear to students. If they feel you will scrutinise their answers (and possibly even ‘punish’ them with extra homework) they may not be forthcoming.

How will you deal with the answers?

Not everyone is ready for the flurry of questions, comments (some positive and some negative!), off-topic messages and so on that an open backchannel can inspire. Here is a comment from a colleague who tried this for the first time recently:

I made the mistake of not giving clear instructions on what I wanted students to do. To be honest I don't think I had given it too much thought. Five minutes in and I was trying to keep up with the stream of messages and my head started spinning. I had a hard time reading and keeping on topic at the same time. I've since learned that it is much better to tell students exactly what I want them to do and when. So, I now tell them, for example, to listen to a recording and then post their reactions to it. Or I might ask students to type 'yes' or 'no' to see if my explanation was clear.

Another point is to prepare yourself for negative comments. Clearly, rude or aggressive comments should not be allowed, but the purpose of backchannelling is to get feedback on what does and does not work for your students. You may feel that you have just given the best explanation possible of the difference between countable and uncountable nouns, and it may be disheartening to see someone post ‘that makes no sense to me!’, but it certainly is better to know that right away than have the student leave the class unhappy. More difficult is when students post negative feedback on your teaching. I once had a student type ‘YAAAAWN’ during the class. At least he wasn’t really yawning, so I guess that was a kind of improvement! Just as we don’t continuously take offence at a student who is not paying attention or someone who is late, it is important to learn not to take every comment too seriously. Not every post, positive or negative, requires an action from you.

What instructions will you give to students?

From the above it is clear that it is important to be specific about what you expect students to do. If you don’t want students to post questions to each other and answer each other’s questions, then make this clear (although in practice, I have found this to be one of the most positive aspects of backchannelling). If you only want students to answer questions you post, then say so. For those new to using this technique, it may be a good idea to initially only use backchannels for one or two purposes, and then – if you feel comfortable – to give students more freedom in choosing how to use it.

When will the backchannel be open?

Will you allow students to post at any time or do you want to set specific times when they can ask questions or post comments? You may need to open and close the channel yourself – otherwise the temptation might be too great!

Anonymous or not?

Anonymous backchannels have some major advantages; firstly, they encourage honesty. If you are looking for ‘raw’ feedback on your class, anonymous comments are a must. Another advantage is that it will encourage shy learners to speak up. In particular in some cultures, learners are not encouraged to share their opinions, or to challenge another speaker. An anonymous backchannel will allow this and will also eliminate any group hierarchies (for example, between older and younger learners, or men and women) that may impact on who gets to do most of the talking. A major downside, especially with larger groups, is that you may receive some harsh feedback, or (although this is unlikely in all but the largest groups), find someone posting insulting comments. Here is the experience of an EFL teacher in South Korea.

My biggest fear was always to have someone in the audience posting lewd or otherwise offensive remarks. Well, a couple of months ago, I hit the jackpot. As soon as I started the lecture someone started making comments about me, about other students, about the school and so on. At first I was shocked, but decided not to respond and to just continue. To my surprise, after an initial giggle or two, the rest of the students seemed to pay no attention to the comments at all, and others soon started posting sensible questions and comments. After a while the offensive posts simply stopped. In the end it wasn't much of an issue.

Will (all) student posts be visible to all?

Initially you may feel more comfortable monitoring posts and perhaps select specific comments to display to the whole group. This can also be helpful in lecture theatres with very large audiences where you are not confident someone will not ‘hijack’ the backchannel. Another reason is that you may not want to overload your students with too many posts. However, most teachers quickly ‘turn on the tap’ and allow all posts to be visible to all learners, unfiltered.

What will you do with the results?

Ask yourself beforehand what information you would like to keep and possibly analyse later. Make sure to remember to ask the questions you want the answers to – for example, if you want to know which part of the lesson students found most helpful, or which topic they would like to hear more about, include a specific question and perhaps post it online for students to see.

Related to this, is that you will need to decide whether to respond to, or act on the replies in class or later. For example, you may announce the favourite choice of topic for the next class and give students their required reading on the spot. If, on the other hand, you asked students to comment on something you would like to improve about the course, you may need more time to consider how you will accommodate their suggestions. In this case, it may be best to publicly acknowledge students’ contributions and make it clear what will happen next. For example, you could say that you will consider their replies and respond at the start of the next class.

7. Conclusion

It may seem daunting but backchannelling opens up the classroom and allows you to connect much more with your learners, as well as encouraging learners to connect with each other. The result can be much more active participation and a sense of community. For teachers, the sense of keeping a ‘finger on the pulse’ of the classroom can quickly become addictive. As a colleague recently said in an online forum ‘I can’t teach without it anymore!’. Most importantly, backchannels allow learners to

have a voice in their own learning that previously simply was not available. This can be both motivating and empowering.

Biostatement:

Dr. Hayo Reinders (www.innovationinteaching.org) is TESOL Professor and Director of the doctoral program at Anaheim University in the United States and Head of Education at Unitec in New Zealand. He is also Editor-in-Chief of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching. Hayo's interests are in technology in education, learner autonomy, and out-of-class learning and he is a speaker on these subjects for the Royal Society of New Zealand. His most recent books are on teacher autonomy, teaching methodologies, and second language acquisition and he edits a book series on 'New Language Learning and Teaching Environments' for Palgrave Macmillan.

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Appendix

A List of Useful Programs

A useful resource is Jane Hart's Learning Technologies website. It offers reviews and alternative so many of the examples below: www.c4lpt.co.uk

Chat applications:

These are easy to set up and mostly free but offer limited functionality. Specific backchannelling applications that use chat include:

Chatzy.com

Chatterous.com

Wiki

An easy alternative is also to simply set up a wiki page that everyone can add to.

A similar concept but customisable is: <http://padlet.com/>

Learning Management System

If you teach online, the software you use may already have polling and other functionality built in.

SMS

Several programs use text messages such as www.classpager.com

Web-based

Today'smeet.com free

Multi platform

<http://www.polleverywhere.com>

<https://www.mentimeter.com/>

<http://socrative.com/>

Twitter

twtpoll.com lets you customise tweets to particular users.

Quizzes and polls

<https://code.google.com/p/quiz-and-poll/> is a great, free application by Google that lets you create quizzes and polls before a lesson. You can save the answers for later analysis.