

CROSS-CULTURAL BACK-CHANNEL COMMUNICATION: INSIGHTS FROM MAINLAND CHINESE AND MALAY CONVERSATIONS

(Komunikasi Saluran Belakang Merentas Budaya: Pandangan daripada Perbualan Masyarakat Cina Tanah Besar dan Melayu)

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Abstract

The significant research has been conducted on similarities and differences in back-channel communication across languages such as Japanese and English. Recently, there has been a growing interest in examining back-channel communication between speakers of different target languages. However, the back-channel use between Mainland Chinese and Malay has not been explored. This study investigates the use of back-channels in intercultural communication between Mainland Chinese and Malay speakers. It aims to identify and compare these back-channel patterns to reduce misunderstanding and improve communication in multicultural society. A total of 20 female students, ten Malay and ten Mainland Chinese, studying at higher education institutions in Malaysia took part in this study. The topic guided conversation among each group was recorded. The data collected from recoded conversations were analysed. Both similarities and differences in the verbal and nonverbal use of back-channels between the two groups were identified. The study highlights the culture affect back-channel communication and influence how both groups interpret and respond to in intercultural contexts. The insights gained from this study can help reduce misunderstandings and enhance effective communication between speakers of these languages. The findings provide a valuable perspective on intercultural communication dynamics and contribute to language education by incorporating cultural nuances into foreign language teaching. The findings of the study can strengthen foreign language learners' communication skills by increasing their awareness of culturally specific back-channel cues in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Non-verbal communication, back-channels, foreign language teaching, Mainland Chinese, Malay

Abstrak

Banyak kajian signifikan telah dilakukan mengenai persamaan dan perbezaan dalam komunikasi saluran belakang antara bahasa yang berbeza, seperti Jepun dan Inggeris. Baru-baru ini, terdapat peningkatan minat untuk mengkaji komunikasi saluran belakang antara penutur bahasa sasaran yang berbeza. Namun, penggunaan saluran belakang antara penutur Cina Daratan dan Melayu masih belum banyak diteroka. Kajian ini menyelidik penggunaan saluran belakang dalam komunikasi antara budaya antara penutur Cina Daratan dan Melayu. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti dan membandingkan pola saluran belakang ini bagi meningkatkan pemahaman dan mengurangkan salah faham dalam konteks komunikasi antara budaya. Data daripada perbualan

berpanduan topik yang dirakam dalam kalangan peserta dianalisis melalui rakaman video. Kajian ini mendapati terdapat persamaan dan perbezaan dalam penggunaan saluran belakang secara verbal dan non-verbal antara dua kumpulan tersebut. Kajian ini menekankan nuansa budaya tertentu yang mempengaruhi komunikasi saluran belakang, dan bagaimana isyarat ditafsirkan dan diberi respons dalam konteks antara budaya. Penemuan daripada kajian ini dapat membantu mengurangkan salah faham dan meningkatkan keberkesanan komunikasi antara penutur bahasa-bahasa tersebut. Penemuan ini memberikan perspektif yang berharga tentang dinamik komunikasi antara budaya dan menyumbang kepada pendidikan bahasa dengan memasukkan nuansa budaya ke dalam pengajaran bahasa asing.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi non-verbal, saluran belakang, pengajaran bahasa asing, Cina daratan dan Melayu

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of globalisation, connections between countries have strengthened, making intercultural communication a crucial aspect in various fields. In daily interactions, people rely not only on verbal communication, but also on various forms of nonverbal communication, such as back-channel communication. Back-channel communication refers to the use of verbal and nonverbal cues by listeners in conversation to indicate that they are actively listening, comprehending, and engaged, thus encouraging speakers to continue. Mainland China and Malaysia have significantly different cultural backgrounds, which may influence how people from these two countries interact with others, particularly in their use of back-channel communication. Although studies (Pan, 2014; Surkamp, 2014; Burgoon et al., 2021; Nurjaleka, 2023) have explored the impact of cultural differences on back-channel communication in specific cultural contexts, research comparing these cultural backgrounds remains limited. Jabber and Mahmood (2020) compared back-channel communication patterns between Chinese and Arab speakers. However, no studies in the current literature have focused on back-channel communication between Malay and Mainland Chinese speakers. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the similarities and differences in back-channel communication between Malay and Mainland Chinese speakers, as well as how cultural differences can shape the way people use back-channel cues in their interactions. By studying these similarities and differences in back-channel patterns, the study hopes to add a new perspective in intercultural communication theory, which allows us to avoid misunderstandings in intercultural communication processes, improve how people interact on another. Additionally, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence for the field of foreign language education. Foreign language educators may include the culture specific back-channels in their syllables to help foreign language learners to improve their language competence.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Backchannel in Communication

Back-channel refers to short signals used by both speakers and listeners during their interactions, which includes both non-verbal and verbal signals. This signal indicates listeners' attention and engagement in the conversation, that signals their understanding of the conversation (Amer et al., 2023). These responses include non-verbal expressions such as gestures, nodding, and facial expressions to send messages to the speakers that listeners are paying attention to and, at same time, signaling

speakers to continue. Verbal feedback, such as "uhm," "yes," "repeat," and "really," indicates attentiveness (Blomsma et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2024).

Cultures difference may affect the interpretation and usage of these back-channels. Studies (Li et al., 2020; Nurjaleka, 2023) found that, in some cultures, people employ more verbal back-channels in their interactions, while in others, non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and nodding are more commonly employed. In certain cultures, people employ both verbal and non-verbal back-channels while they are interacting with others. For example, Nurjaleka (2023) found in their research that Indonesian native speakers, regardless of gender, often overuse the nonverbal back-channels rather than verbal-oral feedback. In this study, non-verbal back-channels, such as nodding, laughing, and smiling, are commonly used by listeners in job interview settings. However, in intercultural conversations between Anglo-Canadians and Mainland Chinese, both groups of participants used mixed back-channels (verbal and non-verbal). More specifically, Chinese participants used more back-channels than Canadian participants. The most frequent responses used by both groups were "nod" with the verbal response "okay," while cultural differences observed in the use of "repeat" and "uhm" (Li et al. 2010).

In both formal and informal communication, understanding back-channels across cultures and utilising them effectively can enhance communication by providing feedback to the speaker, indicating comprehension, and creating a more dynamic conversation.

2.2 Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication includes nodding, smiling, eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures, all of which play essential roles in interpersonal interactions. Non-verbal communication conveys messages and influences how people respond to one another in daily interactions. Studies (Nataša et al., 2022; Shen, 2023; Eshimov et al., 2022) summarised the following non-verbal cues in communication: facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, posture, and body language. Non-verbal communication cues can reinforce verbal communication, make messages more meaningful, and convey emotions more effectively than verbal communication. Research on non-verbal communication often focuses on identifying universal patterns and understanding cultural differences. Such studies typically involve observing and analysing interactions to identify common non-verbal behaviours and their meanings. Eshimov et al. (2022) provided a summary of the differences in non-verbal communication among Kazakhs, Russians, and other ethnic groups. The study concluded that different body parts convey specific semantic meanings in communication. Non-verbal communication serves various functions in human interactions, such as regulating the flow of conversation, expressing emotions, and establishing social bonds.

2.3 Cultural Difference in The Non-Verbal Communication

Cultural differences significantly influence non-verbal communication behaviours and the interpretation of human interactions. Different cultures have distinct sets of values and norms that shape the expression and understanding of non-verbal cues. Exploring these differences can help identify both unique and universal patterns in non-verbal communication across cultures.

1. Chinese and Malay Non-Verbal Communication

Chinese non-verbal communication is influenced by Confucian values, which emphasise harmony, respect, and hierarchy.

(a) Facial expression

Facial expressions play a crucial role in intercultural communication. They serve as a primary means of conveying the emotion and intentions. Research indicates that some of facial expressions are universally recognised; however, culture influences their interpretation (Brooks et al., 2024; Hamid & Singh, 2023).

Cultural factors contribute significantly to differences in facial expressions between Mainland Chinese and Malay individuals. In other words, both cultures may share some basic facial expressions; however, their interpretations can differ significantly depending on cultural contexts. According to research that Chinese people often use facial expressions to communicate emotions, thoughts, and intentions, while also maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict. For example, a smile often indicates politeness, agreement, or happiness (Zhang, 2021). In contrast, Malays use facial expressions to convey politeness and hospitality, with a genuine smile being common in social interactions. This is influenced by Islamic teaching, which states that "smiling is a form of charity". This indicate that although both Chinese and Malay smile while interacting with others, however, the interpretation of this facial expression mainly depends on their specific cultural context. Similarly, Wong et al. (2023) found that both Malay and Chinese participants employed distinct eye movement strategies when recognizing facial expressions, indicating cultural difference influences individuals' perception and interpretation of facial cues. Zhao (2022) suggests that appropriate facial expressions, along with spoken words and clear information, can enhance verbal communication. Therefore, understanding facial expressions is essential in cross-cultural business negotiations, as misinterpretations can lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective communication.

(b) Gestures

Hand gestures are commonly used in many cultures, and it is an essential component of non-verbal communication. Li and Han (2024) and Pang et al. (2024) pointed out that culture alone influences the use of gestures, which in turn affects their interpretation and understanding of the meaning, especially in cross culture communication. Due to difference overt cultural practices, there are both parallels and divergences in the use of gestures in Chinese and Malay cultures. For instance, due to the influence of Confucianism on the Chinese culture, people often use gestures such as bowing or nodding during interactions to emphasize respect and order (Хуэй & Лучинская, 2024). In Malay culture, gestures are important for expressing politeness, humility, and social harmony.

Kleinová (2019) found that in Chinese culture, prolonged eye contact is often seen as a sign of respect and attentiveness. The Chinese people tend to shake hands lightly when greeting and always offer the right hand to give and receive items as a sign of respect. Chinese people tend to remain silence to convey thoughtfulness and contemplation. However, in Malay culture, gestures emphasize warmth and hospitality. Slight nods with a smile are common, symbolizing peace and goodwill (Chernykh, 2024). Malays typically shake hands with individuals of the same gender and give or receive things with both hands. In Malay culture, pointing at something with one's index finger is rude. Understanding the differences in gestures used among people from different cultural backgrounds can significantly improve intercultural interactions, helping communicators avoid unintentionally offending others or conveying unintended messages.

(c) Eye Contact

Eye contact is a powerful cue in non-verbal communication. It conveys a range of emotions and intentions, builds connections, and regulates the flow of conversations. Since eye contact is interpreted and used differently in different cultures, understanding the differences and accepting these differences is essential for cross-cultural communication (Kleinová, 2019). Eye contact plays a particularly notable role in the Malay and Chinese cultures significantly influencing the communication process and social interactions. Eye contact is also a vital non-verbal signal in interactions, helping regulate the flow of conversation in these cultures. Without considering the cultural aspects of eye contact, misunderstandings may arise in multicultural settings (Lei, 2023). In Chinese custom, for instance, direct eye contact is seen as a sign of respect and attentiveness to the matter at hand (Yang, 2024). Similarly, in Malay culture, respect and courtesy are expressed through eye contact. Eye contact is a universal communicative act; however, differences in its interpretation across cultures may lead to misunderstandings. Awareness and understanding of these distinctions are foundational for respectful and effective intercultural communication.

(d) Personal space

Personal space is a non-verbal communication that refers to the personal distance between the sender and receiver in the conversation. Appropriate personal space can regulate social interactions. Maintain comfortable levels of communication and respect for others (Krocze et al., 2020). The concept of social distancing can vary across cultures. In Chinese culture, a greater distance is normally practiced in a formal setting to show respect for the hierarchy; however, among family members, more relaxed personal space practiced showing warm and family bonds. However, in Malay culture, similar practices are observed in formal settings with family members. In crowded environments, however, there are some differences in practice. Chinese people practice a smaller personal space due to a larger population density, and females prefer a greater interpersonal distance ((Li, 2022). On the other hand, Malay culture attempts to adapt to reduced personal space while respecting boundaries. Due to the influence of Islamic teachings, Malays also try to keep a greater personal space between unrelated genders. Therefore, it is essential for both parties to understand the differences of cultural effect on the personal for more effective and respectful intercultural communication.

3.0 METHOD

This qualitative analysis aimed to examine the back-channel communication features in conversations among Chinese and Malay university students studying in Malaysia. The recorded conversation on the topic “the usage of the Internet in daily life” was used to identify the back-channel patterns used by the participants. Ten participants from each group were randomly selected to participate in conversations. The participants were paired to have a conversation, and ten pairs of conversations were recorded.

Data was collected from 20 minutes of video recorded of 10 pairs of conversations. Participants discussed a given topic in their target language. The recorded conversations were transcribed and translated into English to facilitate analysis.

The transcribed and translated data were analysed to identify patterns of back-channel communication between the participants. Bukhkalov et al. (2023) argued that if you don't understand the cultural values and non-verbal cues, translating the data in bilingual context might influence the interpretation of back-channel communication. Therefore, the research considered these elements during translation process to ensure that all data were translated accurately and double-checked with target language speakers. Given the limited data, the findings provide insights specific to these two cultural groups and their interactions with the given topic. The analysis focused on comparing the similarities and differences in the back channels used by these two cultural groups within the conversation.

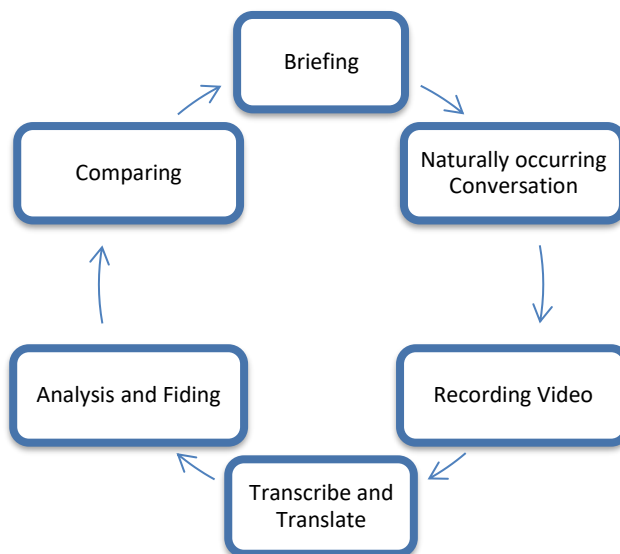


Figure 1 Data Collection and Analysis Procure

This study revealed both similarities and differences in the verbal and nonverbal backchannel patterns used by Mainland Chinese and Malay participants. The backchannel type used by participants is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Types of Backchannels Used in Conversation

| | Chinese | % | Malay | % |
|---------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| Nod | 193 | 51% | 187 | 49% |
| Noted with okay | 52 | 50.4% | 51 | 49.6% |
| Nod to Umm | 47 | 49% | 49 | 51% |
| Is that so (shi ma) | 30 | 100% | 0 | X |
| repeat | 44 | 63% | 26 | 37% |
| yeah | 44 | 38% | 71 | 62% |
| uhm | 48 | 41% | 68 | 59% |

4.0 SIMILARITY OF THE TYPE OF BACK-CHANNEL USED BY THE PARTICIPANTS

The study findings concluded that both Mainland Chinese and Malay participants frequently used nonverbal backchannels accompanied with simple verbal affirmations backchannel “nodding with ok” in the conversation to indicate engagement and agreement in the conversation. This finding is consisted with previous study, (Li et al., 2010) which found that nonverbal backchannel “nod” supplying with verbal response like “okay” is the common back-channel used in the intercultural conversation.

The similarities in back-channel usage between the Mainland Chinese and Malay participants highlight the universal aspects of conversation engagement. This

finding is consistent with previous research indicating that nonverbal backchannels and simple affirmations are essential components of effective communication across cultures. By understanding this similarity in backchannels usage can help individuals to improve their communication skills in cross cultural interactions. Identifying these similar patterns from different cultures can also help individuals to reduce the negative perceptions and enhance their intercultural communication in a multicultural society.

4.1 Difference in the type of back-channel used by the participants

This study revealed differences in back-channel patterns between Chinese and Malay participants from both cultural backgrounds.

- (a) **“Repeat”**: Chinese participant tend to use the verbal communication back-channel “repeat” more frequently (63%) than Malay participants (37%) in the given topic conversation.
- (b) **“Yeah”**: Malay participant tend to use the verbal communication back-channel “Yeah” more frequently (62%) than Chinese participants (38%) in the given topic conversation.
- (c) **“Uhm”**: Malay participants used “uhm” (59%) more frequently compared to Chinese participants (41%) in the given topic conversation.
- (d) **“Is that so”** (shi ma): This response was unique to Chinese participants, with a 100% usage rate among them and none among Malay participants in the given topic conversation.

This study found that Malay participants tend to use the backchannel “Yeah” and “Uhm” more often in the given topic conversation compared to mainland Chinese participants. This finding aligns with a previous study in which Malays used various backchannels in their communication to provide feedback and show engagement during conversations. Malays commonly use back-channel cues such as verbal prompts like “yeah,” “okay,” “I see,” “really,” “uhm,” and non-verbal cues like nodding, smiling, and making eye contact (Adiba et al., 2021). According to Adiba et al. (2021), these verbal and non-verbal cues, influenced by the Islamic faith practiced by Malays, are deeply rooted in their daily communication norms and customs. They demonstrate respect for the speaker, active listening, and engagement in the conversation, reflecting a cultural emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Mainland Chinese tends to use unique backchannel “is that so (shima) in the given topic conversation? This finding supports Li’s (2006) study that Chinese people have a special usage of the backchannel “is that so (shi ma)” in the physician–patient interaction between Chinese and Canadian participants. In this study, Li (2006) claimed that the reason Chinese participants used “is that so (shi ma)” frequently to engage in the conversation and to show understanding and acknowledgement. This specific verbal communication back-channel reflects Chinese cultural norms and communication patterns in Chinese discourse, in which seeking clarification and conformation is very important. The usage of “is that so (shima)” indicates respect and politeness, maintain the harmony of conversations, and expect clearer information. Chinese speakers employ this phrase to encourage the speaker to continue sharing more information with them, or to show they are actively listening the conversation, and also have interest in the conversation (Li, 2006) The usage of “Is that so” (Shi Ma) as a distinctive backchannel response in Chinese interactions highlights the cultural nuances and linguistic strategies that play a role in intercultural communication, influencing the overall effectiveness of information exchange and understanding between speaker and listener.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of back-channel communication between Mainland Chinese and Malay participants in the Malaysian high education institutions. This study provides significant insights into intercultural communication and reveals the impact of the different cultural backgrounds on the communicational strategies and interaction patterns. Both groups demonstrated similarities and differences in back-channel responses. The study revealed that both groups of participants used "nod" and simple verbal affirmations like "okay" to indicate the active listening and engaging in the conversation. Malay participants use "yeah" and "uhm" more in their conversation compared to Mainland Chinese participants. Mainland Chinese participants like to use "repeat" more than Malay participants to clarify the information. Mainland Chinese participants used a unique backchannel "is that so (shima)" to encourage sending to continue sharing more information?

Understanding these similarities and differences in the usage of back channels is important for enhancing intercultural communication. Understanding and being aware of culturally specific back-channel usage can help individuals to better interpret and respond to these cues to reduce potential misunderstandings and foster more effective intercultural communication. The findings can contribute valuable knowledge to language teaching and learning, incorporating cultural nuances in foreign language curricula to help learners improve their communication competence.

This study had several limitations. This study involved only a small sample size of for each group from high education institutions in Malaysia. The small sample size may not adequately represent the broader populations of Mainland Chinese and Malay speakers but will potentially affect the generalizability of the findings. The data analyzes the recorded conversation in topic-guided conversation, the finding may not be applicable if it is a different topic or a more formal setting conversation. Therefore, the study suggests that future research include larger sample size and include diverse conversational contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of back-channels across different cultures and social contexts.

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