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## Helping business english learners improve discussion skills

Como ayudar a estudiantes de ingles de negocios a mejorar sus habilidades de participación en discusiones orales.

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### Abstract

Developing discussion skills is a central task in Business English (BE), as doing business involves negotiating meaning and persuasive power in order to realize one's transactional intentions. A group of BE learners in Colombia did not recognize L2 verbal and non-verbal turn-taking conventions, nor did they know how to interrupt or to deal with interruptions successfully. Additionally, they did not know how to deal with backchannels. Consequently, some classroom activities were aimed at helping learners notice how spoken communication devices work in different cultures, using mechanisms to signpost their turn and deal with unexpected interruptions, and becoming familiar with backchannels. After eight three-hour lessons learners became more sensitive to spoken discourse elements and expanded their gambits and backchannels repertoire.

**Keywords:** Discussions, Transactional, Interactional, Turn-taking, Gambits, Backchannels in L2 learning.

### Resumen

Desarrollar habilidades orales es primordial en inglés de negocios porque negociar involucra la negociación de sentido y el poder de persuasión para lograr nuestros propósitos transaccionales. Ante las falencias presentadas por un grupo de aprendices colombianos de inglés de negocios frente al uso de mecanismos de manejo de turnos e interrupciones y señales de atención 'backchannels', se implementaron actividades orientadas a: promover el reconocimiento de mecanismos de comunicación empleados en diferentes culturas; usar diferentes marcadores del discurso para señalar la participación del hablante y sortear las interrupciones, y familiarizarse con los 'backchannels'. Después de ocho sesiones de tres horas, los estudiantes aumentaron su sensibilidad frente a algunos elementos del discurso oral y expandieron su repertorio de marcadores del discurso y de 'backchannels'.

**Palabras clave:** Discusiones, Transaccional, Interaccional, Toma de turno, Expresiones prefabricadas - Backchannels en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua.

### Résumé

Développer des compétences orales en l'anglais des affaires est primordial, car négocier entraîne la négociation de sens et le pouvoir de convaincre pour atteindre nos buts transactionnels. Face aux faiblesses qui présentait un groupe d'étudiants colombiens d'anglais des affaires pour l'usage de mécanismes de gestion des tours de parole, des interruptions et des signaux d'attention 'backchannels', des activités visant à promouvoir la reconnaissance des mécanismes de communication employés en différentes cultures, à utiliser des marqueurs du discours pour faire noter la participation du locuteur, surmonter les interruptions et se familiariser avec les 'backchannels' ont été mises en œuvre. Après huit séances de trois heures, les étudiants ont augmenté leur sensibilité à quelques éléments du discours oral et ont étendu leur répertoire de marqueurs du discours et de 'backchannels'.

**Mots clés:** Discussions, Transactionnel, Interactionnel, Prise de tour, Expressions pré-fabriquées - Backchannels.



## Resumo

Desenvolver habilidades orais é primordial em inglês de negócios porque negociar envolve a negociação de sentido e o poder de persuasão para conseguir os nossos propósitos transacionais. Ante as falências apresentadas por um grupo de aprendizes colombianos de inglês de negócios frente ao uso de mecanismos de manejo de turnos e interrupções e sinais de atenção 'backchannels', implementaram-se atividades orientadas a: promover o reconhecimento de mecanismos de comunicação empregados em diferentes culturas; usar diferentes marcadores do discurso para sinalar a participação do falante e eludir as interrupções, e familiarizar-se com os 'backchannels'. Depois de oito sessões de três horas, os estudantes aumentaram sua sensibilidade frente a alguns elementos do discurso oral e expandiram seu repertório de marcadores do discurso e de 'backchannels'.

**Palavras chave:** Discussões, Transacional, Interacional, Toma de turno, Expressões pré-fabricadas - Backchannels.



## Introduction

Getting the message across in order to share one's views and/or persuade others into them is not always an easy task, even for some native speakers. Sometimes, when communicating in one's first language (L1) we find it difficult to take the floor when invited, to grasp the turn to avoid misunderstandings or our purpose is not being accomplished, or to yield the turn without regretting having said more or appearing incapable of speaking our mind sensibly. Achieving such aims becomes even more complicated when we are asked to speak in a language other than our mother tongue.

In my experience as a teacher, I have often seen my BE learners struggling to participate in discussions held during lessons. They require these skills not only to negotiate, reach agreements, or make decisions about action plans, but also to share their opinions in academic and personal contexts. Therefore, they need to be sensitive to different aspects involved in spoken discourse. These include first, interaction rituals and conventions according to the culture of the participants, their position in the company, and their role in the discussion (i.e. a meeting or a negotiation), and second, appropriate verbal and non-verbal ways to participate as speakers or listeners so that they can use their language knowledge more effectively.

Following Leech's (1983) claims that language is a means to an end, and that its use must be understood rhetorically in order to use it strategically and therefore successfully, I decided to introduce activities into the lessons in order to give learners more room for developing skills to participate in discussions. As a wide range of skills are required for successful participation in discussions, I started with the ones whose absence was the most noticeable and whose importance is fundamental in BE discussions

so that fatal misinterpretations can be, if not avoided, at least noticed and swiftly clarified. A good example of how misinterpretations can affect business can be found in Tanaka (2006, 2008) where the Japanese participants' silence during a meeting, rather than being interpreted as an expression of attentiveness, was assumed as a sign of consensus by the French members, whose erroneous interpretation would have produced adverse outcomes for the meeting.

The group of BE learners I selected displayed three basic problems. Firstly, they did not recognize verbal and non-verbal turn-yielding mechanisms. Secondly, they did not know how to handle interruptions, and thirdly, they neither knew how to show they were following the current speaker nor how to react to backchannels. Consequently, the skills I began with were recognizing and using turn-management mechanisms, gambits to interrupt and deal with interruptions, and backchannels.

During some classes, activities aimed at approaching the above problems explicitly were carried out. As a result, proficient learners started to use more gambits (chunks that show the speaker's communicative purpose) to signpost their participation and to request a turn, and less proficient learners started using gambits but without variety. Most of the learners (proficient and less proficient) started to be more attentive to turn-yielding signals. In addition, proficient learners expanded their gambits and verbal backchannels repertoire, but less proficient learners continued using the same expressions as they did before or resorted to L1 expressions. Finally, most subjects gradually started to pay more attention to gambits not only for interrupting or dealing with interruptions but also for making a point, clarifying, asking for opinion or clarification, etc. Besides, they started to notice backchannels, as well as other features of spoken discourse which were not explicitly addressed like intonation and posture.



## Theoretical Considerations

Discussions are formal conversations aimed at speaking about (a) certain topic(s) in order to share and negotiate opinions, reach consensus, solve problems, take decisions, and/or make plans around it/them. Schmatzer and Hard-Mautner (1989) divide discussions into meetings and negotiations. The former are controlled by a chairperson whose main role is to mediate turn-taking as well as expressing their view as all participants - meetings are held with the aim of sharing information, proposing and/or discussing ways to deal with problems, and/or agreeing on action to be taken. On the contrary, negotiations do not have a chairperson, which means participants compete for the floor and moderate turn-taking on their own. The main purpose of negotiations is discussing proposals to reach agreements.

In either case, speakers need skills at turn-taking, agreeing/disagreeing, interrupting, dealing with interruptions, giving and asking for opinion, asking for clarification, negotiating meaning, and arguing for/against an idea, among others. Also, discussions are highly transactional<sup>1</sup> since “information transference is the primary reason for the speaker choosing to speak” (Brown & Yule, 1983 p. 14) so that their language must be clear and highly precise so that information can be accurately transmitted and understood. For example, when negotiating a contract, discussing marketing strategies to launch a new product or deciding how to develop a given task, speakers have to focus on conveying their ideas as correctly as possible so that a plan of action can be efficiently set.

<sup>1</sup> Richards (2006) based on Brown & Yule (1983) classifies speaking functions in: talk as interaction (oriented to building and maintenance of social relationships, e.g. telling and anecdote to a friend), talk as transaction (oriented to the message, e.g. making a hotel reservation), and talk as performance (oriented to transmitting information before an audience, e.g. giving a speech).

Besides, discussions are interactional-oriented exchanges (Brown & Yule, 1983) whose main communicative purpose is to build up good relationships. These can be accomplished by using different devices such as:

1. ‘Backchannels’ which include verbal devices (Yule, 1996; McCarthy, 1991) e.g. ‘really’, ‘I see’, ‘ah-ha’, ‘mm-mm’, ‘yeah’, or ‘sure’, as well as non-verbal mechanisms (Richards & Schmidt, 2002) such as smiles, headshakes, nods, grunts, and other facial gestures. They are used by the listener to show they are paying attention to what the speaker is saying.
2. Friendly and appropriate body language to support one’s participation whether as a speaker or a listener.
3. ‘Hedges’ (Yule, 1996), also called gambits (Richards & Schmidt, 2002) or signpost language, which are linguistic devices that show the speaker’s communicative function and/or intention in his/her next turn like ‘yeah, but...’ to soften the force of a disagreement (Thornbury, 2005).

Moreover, this interactional side of discussions has to do with our interpersonal skills where politeness and intercultural competence play crucial roles, since they enable us to establish and sustain group solidarity. Politeness, as defined by Yule (1996) and Spolsky (1998), is being aware of the interlocutor’s rights in the situation, which allows us to show respect towards socially distant interlocutors, and friendliness with socially close interlocutors. Additionally, it has to do with how members of a speech community recognize their interlocutor’s face and try to save it (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Intercultural competence allows us to be sensitive to socio-cultural manners, customs, and behaviors to avoid being judged as disrespectful or tactless, or causing communication breakdowns or relationship ruptures; by asking ‘How do you do that there?’ we can manage cross-cultural



encounters (Thornbury, 2005). Both elements govern our choices to express, for instance, emotion, agreement, or disagreement without committing a face-threatening act with our interlocutor<sup>2</sup>.

These two qualities, transactional and interactional, are not polar but overlapping and move in a continuum, where message-oriented and relationship-building features respectively are more or less stressed according to the speakers' intentions and how the communication flows. Thus, transactional exchanges are inserted into interactional ones because of courtesy rituals (Brown & Yule, 1983). Learners should be aware of the fact that in any language, there are ritualized interactions that have intended purposes, and our task, as effective participants, is to understand what the speakers really mean and the right moment to make our move (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

As in any discussion, our main goal is to convince the audience of our views and therefore, rapport should be built and cogent arguments should be put forward while communicating so that our purposes are more likely to be achieved, which is the ultimate challenge to business interactions. Turn-management, especially turn-taking, provides such an opportunity of persuading people gently and successfully if handled according to the cultural, golden, and sometimes unwritten rules, which are part of the local management system (Yule, 1996 p.73) and consequently shared by the members of the community. Otherwise, inappropriate turn-taking could create an atmosphere of discomfort where participants might feel restrained from making their views known openly.

Yule (1996) defines turn as "the opportunity to speak at some point during conversation" (135) which allows speakers to participate in

a communicative exchange. Duncan (1972) affirms that turn-taking is a mechanism "whereby participants manage the smooth and appropriate exchange of speaking turns in face-to-face interaction" (283); it means, the desirable and effective change of speaker during a conversation. Discussions are to be developed on a 'collaborative floor'<sup>3</sup> basis where all present members have the right to take part in the interaction. Thus, turn-taking can occur in two possible ways: firstly, as a 'joint floor' where participants do not rule abide for turn-taking conventions so that "disruptions like turn failure, interruptions, unexpected topic changes and suspension are more frequent" (Pöhaker, 1998 p.13); or secondly, as a smooth, synchronic interaction, an 'ensemble', where speakers are sensitive to turn-taking mechanisms.

Turn-taking is inevitably culturally influenced. For example, a study of a series of intercultural business meetings showed that Japanese tended to take short turns and distribute them equally, whereas Americans distributed turns unevenly by giving the highest proportion of turns to the speaker who initiated the topic in discussion (Yamada, 1990). However, turn-taking deals with being sensitive to Transition Relevant Places, or TRP (Yule, 1996) signalled verbally (e.g. by gambits, formulaic speech) and non-verbally (e.g. by gesture, body language, paralinguistic and prosody features), where turn change occurs smoothly once the dynamics of the discussion is understood by its participants regardless their cultures. In this regard, Duncan (1972, 1973) proposes three rules for successful turn-taking to develop:

2 'Face' here refers to "that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize" (Yule 1996 p.60) and treat them accordingly.

3 Yule (1996) and Spolky (1998) define 'floor' as the right to speak at any given moment in a conversation. Collaborative floor, in opposition to 'single floor', 'singly-developed floor', or 'linear' (Edelsky, 1981) is dominated by one speaker at a time so that turns are taken sequentially. Coates (1996) argues that a collaborative floor "is a shared space and what is said is constructed as being the voice of the group rather than of the individual" (134) which makes different from the single one not only in terms of the number of participants but also in how it is developed.





1. The use of turn-yielding cues to signal the speaker's end of the turn so another participant can take his/her turn (e.g. selection of next speaker by gazing at him/her or saying 'So, *I'd like to hear you*', *I've made my point*').
2. The use of turn-maintaining clues to show the speaker's intention to continue his/her talks (e.g. using discourse markers as *'well, let's see now...'*). Also, it is important to deal with overlaps (two speakers simultaneously) by using prosodic signals such as keeping on talking louder, and interruptions e.g. by using gambits or semi-fixed expressions such as *'I haven't quite finished yet'*.

The use of backchannels by auditors to show they are listening carefully to the current speaker (e.g. *'right', 'yeah'*), and that they are not eager to hold the floor despite the speaker's turn-yielding signals (e.g. avoiding eye contact with the current speaker or head-nodding).

3. However, some other researchers have gone deeper into Duncan's proposal and made explicit some actions, which are considered necessary for carrying on conversations smoothly. Thus, we could say that rules n°4 and 6 below derive from Duncan's rule n°2, rule n° 5 complements rule n°1, rule n°7 is related to rules n°1 and 3 above, and that rule n°8 is linked to the three rules proposed by Duncan (1972, 1973). Such rules are:
4. The use of turn-requesting cues to show you want to speak (Wiemann & Knapp, 1975). Here interruptions and self-selection take place (e.g. *'Sure, but...'*, *'I'd like to say something'*).
5. Recognising the appropriate moment to get a turn (Thornbury, 2005): awareness of turn-yielding cues (e.g. the current speaker leans back, changes intonation, or says *'and that's about it'*). Besides, recognising the role of silence which permits, for example,

having thinking-time after each speaker's contribution or during the turn 'intra-turn pausing' and/or showing reluctance to speak in the discussion dynamics, is essential to prevent irrelevant turn taking and therefore look opinionated, intrusive or uninterested. Such discussion dynamics can be develop in a high involvement style<sup>4</sup> which is relatively fast, with no pausing between turns, some overlap on the other's turn completion, or in a high considerateness style<sup>5</sup>, characterized by slower rate, long pauses between turns, and no turn interruption (Yule 1996, 76).

6. Holding the floor during one's turn (Thornbury, 2005): it is necessary, first, to start the turn with a relevant contribution to the previous turn, and then, express one's ideas, for example, by recognising adjacency pairs (mutually dependent pair of utterances) and responding accordingly (e.g. A: *'did you get my point?'* B: *'Yes, sure, but I think quite differently because...'*). Second, to keep the turn by showing auditors you want them to understand your view (e.g. *'are you following me?'*, *'is that clear?'*).
7. Recognising others' wish to speak (Thornbury, 2005) or turn-requesting signals: this shows you are aware of others willingness to participate but you need to make your point thoroughly (e.g. *'I'm about to finish', 'just a minute'*).
8. Coping with an unexpected given turn: this is to gain time to gather one thoughts and participate (e.g. by using pause fillers *'er, erm, well'*) or to refuse the turn politely (e.g. *'I think I'll pass on that'*).

Now, taking into account that not only speakers play an active role in communicative interactions, let us give some attention to backchannels. These are frequently left aside in

4 Associated with the 'joint collaborative floor' type.

5 Related to the 'ensemble collaborative floor' type.



the language classroom, since they are produced by the listeners who traditionally are seen as 'passive' participants. Thus, listeners show their involvement through the use of backchannels, which are verbal and non-verbal clues that help to achieve the smooth flow of interactions since they indicate the listeners' attention to the speaker. However, Duncan (1973) argues that backchannels are neither turns nor turn requests, but signs of the auditors' unwillingness to take the turn.

These listener responses that give support and feedback to speakers and signal that listeners

have received, understood and/or reacted to their messages (Oreström, 1983), are also called 'response tokens', 'reassurers', 'signals of attention', 'continuers', accompaniment signals', 'feedback signals', 'acknowledgers', 'go-ons', and 'minimal responses'. However, the term 'backchannel' coined by Yngve (1970) has been widely known.

Yngve (1970), Duncan (1973), Oreström (1983), Tottie (1991), and Hayashi and Hayashi (1991) identify backchannels essential features which are described in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Backchannels, Essential Features

1. They do not claim the turn.
2. They smooth the path of the interaction by showing speakers that their messages are being received.
3. They can be verbal and non-verbal.
4. Most of the time, they overlap with the current speaker's turn.
5. They can be explicitly elicited by the current speaker (who wants to know what auditors are really thinking about his message) by means of laughter, gambits like 'you know', 'I think', 'I don't know', or the use of tag questions.
6. They can elicit responses from the current speaker. These are called 'back-backchannels' (Oreström, 1983) which are the current speaker's short reactions to backchannels e.g. laughing back to giggles, making a short comment, nodding one's head.
7. They become a turn if they cause the current speaker's turn yielding or change/replanting of the direction of the conversation. Therefore, Tottie (1991) claims that backchannels can be determined based on the following utterance.

### *Types of backchannels*

Backchannels are broadly divided into verbal and non-verbal. However, Duncan (1973)

proposes a more detailed classification of backchannels according to their realisation, as seen in Table 2.

1. Signals: these are verbal forms such as gambits, formulaic speech or other linguistic expressions. According to the items they have, they can be:  
Simple: containing one item e.g. 'm-hm', 'yeah', 'yes', 'hm', 'no', 'mm', 'surely', 'really?'.  
Double: containing multiples repetitions of the same item e.g. 'yeah, yeah', 'sure, sure'.  
Complex: containing one or more items of different backchannel categories and/or different open-class lexical forms e.g. 'yes, quite', 'I see', 'that's not true', 'oh, you think so'.
2. Sentence completion: the listener provides a brief completion of the current speaker's previous sentence.  
Example: A: '...eventually they will learn to cope with difficult situations on the spot...'  
B: '...as well as make quick assertive decisions.'  
A: 'as they move up the career ladder.'





**Table 2. Backchannels Classification (Duncan, 1973)**

<p><b>3.</b> Requests for clarification: words or short phrases to make the speaker's messages clearer.  Example: S: '...somehow they're better able to cope with it.'  A: 'You mean these anxieties, concern with it?'  S: 'Possible that other people have...' (p.166)</p>
<p><b>4.</b> Brief restatement: the listener restates the information expressed by the current speaker.  Example: S: '...having to pick up the pieces';  A: 'the broken dishes, yeah';  S: 'but then a very...' (p.167)</p>
<p><b>5.</b> Non-verbal forms: they are non-linguistic forms such as laughter, coughs, sighs, groans, head nods, head shakes, facial expressions, hand signs, body language, and eye-contact.</p>

### Functions

Backchannels are well known for their primary function as signals of attentiveness. However, they play some other important roles

in the flow of spoken interactions (Yngve, 1970; Duncan, 1973; Oreström, 1983; Tottie, 1991), which are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Backchannels Functions**

<p>1. As a continuer: they do not show any listeners' reaction or attitude to the message; they keep the flow of the interaction and encourage the current speaker to maintain the floor, e.g. 'm-hm'</p> <p>2. As a 'capture interest token': they show the listeners' great interest in the message expressed by the current speakers and therefore, they endorse him/her to keep on sharing his/her views, e.g. 'that's news to me!'</p> <p>3. As a 'consonance token': they show the listeners' agreement with the current speaker's conveyed message, e.g. 'say it again'</p> <p>4. As an 'information confirmation token': they show the listeners agree or disagree, accept or deny information conveyed, and that they still support the current speaker's floor-holding, e.g. 'I don't think so', 'not quite', 'that's true'.</p>
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It is now time to describe the context wherein the elements outlined above were introduced.

### Pedagogical context

I chose a group of 20 learners in their seventh semester of the International Business program. They had one three-hour BE lesson a week. The proficient learners (13) were at B1 CEFR in all the skills; nine of them were taking extra English courses at different language institutes, and four had already spent six months or a year studying English abroad. The other seven learners were less proficient in speaking and writing (A2 level) but in listening and reading were at B1 level.

As a group they had the following problems: they transferred their L1 conversational style and conventions, resorted to L1 gambits, and did not recognize the use of turn-management mechanisms whether to request, maintain, or yield a turn. The proficient learners used sometimes signpost language but without variety.

As they were significant problems, I tried to specify them and rank them according to how noticeable they were and how important they are in business discussions so that I could take clear and specific actions in order to manage it gradually.

Proceeding sequentially, I will describe the central problems diagnosed during the



regular lessons. They were extremely evident during three speaking activities (discussions-meetings) held with some American and Japanese businesspeople, which warned me that some action should be taken.

First, my BE learners did not recognize verbal and non-verbal turn-yielding conventions (gambits, intonation shifts, gestures, body language) in the target language and, as such, did not participate unless they were clearly nominated by the current speaker<sup>6</sup>. Thus, most of the time they were surprised by a given turn they did not expect and therefore they switched to L1 immediately, preferred to remain silent, and made a 'no' gesture with their hands or shook their head to say they were not taking that turn.

During three *interactionally managed turn-taking* discussions (where turn-taking is shaped by the parties) held as some of the classroom activities at the annual local business fair organized at the university, three American and three Japanese businesspeople came to discuss the shoe market in Bucaramanga. From observation, it was noticed that the Americans interpreted my learners' behaviours (use of their L1 and/or reluctance to speak) as signs of lack of interest, weakness or ignorance; they found it strange to wait for this person to decide whether s/he was participating or not, and just simply yielded the turn to another participant, or someone else just grabbed it. Subsequently, they tried to avoid giving them a turn again unless they struggled for it. Conversely, Asian businesspeople looked worried about participants' reluctance to speak and tried to wait for them to participate. Asians would have probably concerned themselves with such quiet participants and found their silence or turn rejection as uncooperative, impolite or disrespectful because of their collectivistic ideology (Yuka, 2009; Du-Babcock, 2010).

6 Even though, to some extent this will depend on the learners and shared cultures for the paralinguistic elements, recognizing such conventions needs exposure and if not, explicit instruction.

Second, the BE learners did not know how to request a turn, interrupt, or deal with interruptions successfully. Most of the time they transferred L1 local culture turn-taking rules to L2, which is not a problem in a monolingual environment, but can affect negatively learners' participation in discussions with L2 native participants or ELF (English as a lingua franca) speakers. For example, they tended to develop high involvement style discussions. They grabbed their turn by overlapping until one of the two current speakers decided to give up, and interrupted someone else's turn by raising their voice, without even asking "*Can I interrupt you for a moment?*", a fact which was irritating at times for the Americans (who, interestingly, showed the same pattern), and always for the Japanese. The Japanese were uncomfortable at interrupting a turn and waited for the current speaker to finish their participation, and if they were interrupted, they remained silent and did not finish their participation. For BE learners, being aware of appropriate ways of interrupting and dealing with interruptions is extremely important - intercultural business deals might not be made because of a mistaken sense of aggression and/or impoliteness (Du-Babcock, 2010).

Third, BE learners neither knew how to show they were listening to the current speaker nor how to react to backchannels. They ignored the listeners' backchannels and continued speaking regardless of backchannels showing disapproval, and they spoke louder to express their right to express their view, which gave the impression of being irritated. In our local culture backchannels are not only to show the listener is paying attention. They are also an indication that the listeners are waiting for the speaker to make a new contribution, an 'Ok. I already know that but what else?'

Therefore, during the interaction with the American and the Japanese businesspeople, my



learners probably felt invited to maintain their turn despite the clear disapproval indications expressed by the audience. Also, some learners (as listeners) remained silent, which made the speaker think they were not interested in their opinion. Others used L1 backchannels, which was not that problematic with their classmates because of a shared L1. However, using L1 backchannels confused the current American or Japanese speakers because they did not know whether their ideas were being welcomed or refused or whether the auditors were being supportive, unhelpful, or impolite.

In an L2, EFL, or ELF environment, not being sensitive to or using backchannels can result in a face-threatening situation for both the speaker and the auditors. Thus, the Colombian speaker, who is neither aware of L2 backchannels as sign of being attentive nor familiar with them, will react as he does in his L1 culture. Consequently, the auditors will consider the speaker's rise in pitch and intonation as aggressive or unnecessary. For example, in the case of an Indian speaker who is unaware of L2 backchannels, s/he will find them as intrusive and disrespectful. As a result, s/he will stop speaking and think the other person is requesting a turn or interrupting. This sudden silence can be seen as rude or ungrateful by one's auditors.

With this in mind, let us move to explain how I addressed the problems detected.

## Pedagogical Procedure

To face the problems already explained, a direct approach to develop discussion skills was adopted. It consisted in planning a set of activities "around the specific micro-skills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (Richards, 1990 p. 76-77), which allows both the learners and the teacher to focus on specific skills development. Thus, in an eight-lesson period,

learners carried out various pedagogical tasks which were employed to elicit intentional use of specific L2 forms and skills (Nunan, 1989) so that special forms could be targeted. Feedback on form was crucial.

Also, learners performed focused-tasks which were oriented towards eliciting incidental use of specific L2 forms and skills (Ellis 2003) so that meaning, content and fluency were directly addressed. They were used mainly as informal assessment to check learners' progress.

The tasks presented here are pedagogical ones. They were designed to fit the regular BE lessons, along with other speaking activities (discussions, role-plays, and, simulations about business topics and situations) and reading and video comprehension activities about how business discussions are held in different countries and how culture can affect business deals. All the tasks were done in order to sensitize learners to the importance of improving their discussion participation skills and those elements of oral communication which help businesspeople turn a potentially fruitless negotiation into a business deal, or vice versa. I chose the following three sets of activities, since they were easily developed and incorporated into a lesson, teaching sequence, or sequence of lessons.

## Set of Activities #1

First, an awareness-raising activity was presented: Learners watched a video, *'Intelligent Business Intermediate Meetings'*, to become aware of how L2 speakers signal (by verbal and non-verbal clues) to get and yield the turn. While watching, the video learners worked on a handout on which they had to circle the type of cues for turn-requesting and turn-yielding observed in the video (Appendix 1). Then in pairs, the learners shared their grids, and after that, the teacher checked answers (as a whole class), elicited



the turn-taking cues the learners already knew or had just noticed in the video, and shared a short discussion about how effective they were in different contexts.

After that, a noticing and production activity was done. Thornbury (2005) argues that activities focused on turn-taking practice have to promote the natural kinds of turn-taking encountered in the target discourse. Therefore, learners need to feel free to speak, which requires not to impose a discussion topic or consensus-reaching, or at least not to assign them roles. As my BE students had to prepare a trade fair for their school, discussing its preparation was a suitable topic. Learners were divided into groups of four (three interlocutors and one observer). The interlocutors held a ten-minute discussion about what they needed for the fair (money, sponsors, facilities, etc.) and the observer filled an observation grid (adapted from Green, Christopher, & Lam, 2008) of each interlocutor's participation (Appendix 2). This was done four times within each group so that all students could be observers. Then the learners looked at the four observation grids to notice whether they followed a pattern in turn-taking or used different ways to get and cede turns. Subsequently, each learner figured out what cues they needed to work on.

Finally, the whole class shared their observations and came to the conclusion that their weakest points were overusing gestures for both getting and yielding the turn and underusing gambits. Thus, we made some sensible suggestions such as starting to learn turn-management gambits and emphasising their use during any interaction in the classroom. Therefore, one of the assignments during the eight lessons was to write down as many expressions as they could and bring them to the class in order to build an 'expression bank' where gambits were classified according to their use (e.g. get, keep, give the turn).

## Set of Activities #2

Nolasco and Arthur (1987) propose a very useful activity, called 'As I was saying', oriented to interrupting and dealing with interruptions verbally. I used this activity with some adaptations. Learners again got in groups of four. Each learner had a role in the group (Appendix 3). Learner A started telling a story, Learner B had to interrupt politely, Learner C had to interrupt rudely, and Learner D observed and noted down what happened among the three participants. This activity went for about 10-15 minutes.

Then, the observers started a discussion within their groups about how the conversation developed, how Learners A, B, and C felt about the interruptions, whether they were appropriate or not, and how Learner A coped with them. The members of the group proposed ways to improve them. After that, the teacher chaired a plenary session and asked observers to report each group findings. Also, the teacher elicited and introduced other verbal cues (Appendix 4), and pointed out which ones were considered impolite. The teacher set a discussion on how to interrupt politely, as well as when rude interruptions could be possibly allowed. Finally, a communicative drill on the gambits was carried out. The teacher asked one learner at a time to retell parts of the story, and interrupted them politely or rudely; students had to deal with the interruption appropriately.

This activity was more suitable for the proficient learners since they have already gained a lot of practice in speaking and have learned a good repertoire of grammar and lexis which enabled them to tell a story in a more spontaneous way. Less proficient learners, however, slowed down the flow of the interaction. Therefore, it was necessary to give learners their turn to participate strategically: the less proficient learners went interspersed between every one or two proficient learners. In this way, the less



proficient learners could imitate or follow the proficient ones, which lowered their anxiety and promoted learning, along with preventing the activity from being halted by the slow pace of the less proficient learners.

### Set of Activities #3

According to Duncan (1973), using and recognising backchannels provides feedback and support to speakers, which is imperative in business discussions. The following activity prompted backchannels use. The teacher got learners in groups of four and gave each group a set of twenty questions (*Business Communication Games #33*, Appendix 5) related to different interesting facts about some countries. Each group discussed the answers and reached agreement on them. Then the whole class took turns giving answers. The teacher asked a member of the group in turn to support the group's choice and questioned the student to make him/her defend his/her group's arguments. The purpose of this stage was to elicit reactions and comments among the rest of the class. The teacher gave the right answer after each group's participation, asked the class whether they were surprised or not about the facts, and got them to compare the information with our Colombian context. This comparison made the facts relevant and debatable since it involved learners' real life. Therefore, it elicited mixed reactions, which were expressed through backchannels, interruptions, and active, meaningful participation.

After all questions were answered, the group with the highest number of right answers won. In my lessons, winners always get points as a reward. According to how demanding the game is and how learners perform, they can gain from 5 to 10 points in a single game. To keep learners interested in the game, before starting it, I tell them which places will score (e.g. only first place,

first and second places, the first three, etc.). However, the number of points that will be gained is revealed when the game is over. When learners have accumulated 25 points, they can get their lowest mark (earned in a mini-test, homework, tasks in the virtual campus, etc.) deleted from the record, provided that such a poor mark is not a zero for not having presented the assignment or the mini-test. Games are always designed and played not only for pleasure, but also with an intended pedagogical purpose.

After determining the winner, the teacher got students to remember the expressions, gestures, and comments they used when listening to their classmates supporting their answers, and elicited as many as possible. The teacher wrote them on the board under the headlines 'verbal' and 'non-verbal' (Appendix 6), asked the students why they were important during interactions, clarified their functions (showing attentiveness and giving feedback to speakers, but without showing willingness to participate) and set a short discussion about how to use them and deal with them appropriately. Then, the teacher played a video where a meeting was being held and got learners to recognize the backchannels used by the participants. Finally, the students worked in pairs and took turns to tell an amazing/true/unbelievable/untrue story or facts; the auditor had to use backchannels. This activity was suitable for both proficient and less proficient learners.

Learners were asked to make some mnemonic cards with the gambits and backchannels studied during the lessons and the ones they picked up from the video. For speaking activities, feedback on form and content was very important because learners needed to know whether their language use was appropriate and whether their ideas were pertinent and well-supported.

### Results

After the eight three-hour lessons, I observed that:





Proficient learners (13) started to use more gambits to signpost their participation and to request a turn and less proficient learners started using gambits but without variety. Even though the target gambits were for interrupting and dealing with interruptions, other gambits (for giving and asking for opinion, expressing agreeing and disagreeing, and asking for clarification) were introduced as learners started asking for them.

Most of the learners (proficient and less proficient; 17 out of 20) started to be more attentive to turn-yielding signals mainly when I was the chairperson, probably because learners always pay attention to the teacher as a source of input and because of the teacher role itself. However, when a learner missed a turn-yielding signal, their classmates made them aware of it.

Proficient learners (13) extended their verbal backchannels repertoire since they frequently used 'yeah', 'yes', or 'mmm'; less proficient learners kept on using 'yeah' and 'yes' (5 learners) or resorted to L1 expressions (2 learners).

Most learners asked for the Spanish-English equivalent of certain gambits when they did not know how to express them in English. This shows that learners started to become more sensitive to the importance of signpost their participation in a discussion.

Incidental learning of common gambits for expressing different functions took place in the learners who had been abroad. For them, you could say that rather than learning, it is about retrieval, since it is probable that they already knew the expressions but stopped using them because of lack of continuous practice; through the tasks and conscious attention to the gambits learners started using them again.

Most proficient learners (10 out of 13) extended their gambits repertoire. In the case of gambits for interrupting and dealing with

interruptions, they started using different expressions from 'but', 'excuse me, but', and 'let me finish'. Most of less proficient learners (5 out of 7) started using 'let me finish' and continued using 'but' to interrupt. However, they tended to stopped speaking when interrupted or resorted to L1 gambits for dealing with interruptions.

Most of them gradually started to notice gambits not only for interrupting or dealing with interruptions but also for making a point, clarifying, asking for opinion or clarification, etc., Also, they became more aware of backchannels, as well as of other features of spoken discourse which were not explicitly addressed such as intonation and posture.

## Conclusions

After approaching directly the development of some discussion skills during a short period of time, the following conclusions were reached:

Proficient learners are likely to learn gambits and backchannels more quickly than less proficient ones. This is likely because proficient learners have already gained knowledge of the form to express their views and feelings so that they can devote more attention to ways to improve their language use and how to express themselves more effectively through, for example, signpost language.

It is necessary to hold and generate discussions in the BE classroom, not merely as an opinion or consensus-reaching activity in itself, but as an opportunity to focus in different aspects concerning spoken discourse such turn-taking conventions, backchannels use, gambits to interrupt, give and ask for opinion, express agreement or disagreement, and others.

BE learners need to be exposed to input showing how discussions are developed in different business settings so that they can





become aware of different appropriate ways to interrupt, deal with interruptions, get and yield a turn, show interest, etc., all fundamental elements of communication and ones which can affect interactions positively or negatively. In doing business with people from different cultures with which learners are not familiar, participating in discussions inappropriately might result in losing a contract. However, input alone is not enough; it is necessary to get learners to notice and understand the intended L2 items. Besides, learners need opportunities to become conscious of how the meaning and the form of the language are linked to realizing communicative intentions. Therefore, learners need to pay attention to both meaning of what they want to say and to the form they choose to say it (Van Lier, 1991).

Ellis and Johnson (1994) state that knowing *how* to use the language becomes more important than knowing *about* it, which highlights the need to observe general intercultural parameters. Consequently, learners need to be sensitized to intercultural diversity, closely linked to the development of pragmatic competence, which deals with using appropriate language to the context and observing culturally bounded conversational behaviors (Yule, 1996). BE learners must be conscious of using the language according to the situation and the rules of the local culture, since it may encourage harmonious business relationships or, conversely, hostile and tense ones, which in turn may lead to a business deal closure or rejection.

Learners need to be trained in L2 discussion skills, otherwise they will transfer their L1 discursive patterns, which might have more adverse consequences than mistaken grammar or phonological forms (Richards & Schmidt, 1983). While interacting, people's faces are exposed, so threatening them through inappropriate use of language can be taken as a sign of disrespect or offence.

Even though Richards (1990) argues that a direct approach to teach conversational skills emphasizes the transactional side of interactions to the detriment of the interactional component, such an approach was adopted, since doing business is highly transactional. It is about convincing others of our ideas and getting things done the way we have already planned them. Therefore, I decided to follow Schmidt's (1993) suggestions about teaching explicitly the forms, their functional meanings, and the relevant characteristics of their context of use in order to help learners use the language more appropriately and consequently more effectively. However, this direct approach represented by the pedagogical tasks is complemented by the focused-tasks, which give room for negotiation of meaning and attention to content rather than form, as suggested by Richards (1990).

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## Appendix 1

Verbal	Non-verbal		
Nomination Expressions:	Gestures Face Hand Eye-contact	Body language Change of posture Leaning forward Leaning back Hand-raising Index-raising	Voice Speaks louder Speaks lower

## Appendix 2

Behaviour	Student _____	Student _____	Student _____
1. Total number of contributions made			
2. Eye-contact			
Getting the turn			
Yielding the turn			
3. Body language			
Getting the turn			
Yielding the turn			
4. Gestures			
Getting the turn			
Yielding the turn			
5. Verbal turn-yielding			
Nomination			
Use of formulaic expressions, gambits			

## Appendix 3

Selected and adapted from: Nolasco and Arthur (1987)

Student A	Student B
<p>Spend a few minutes thinking of something interesting, exciting, funny, etc. which has happened to you or to someone you know.</p> <p>You can choose any subject you wish. When you are ready, start telling the story to your partner.</p>	<p>Your partner is about to tell you a story. After about thirty seconds take any opportunity to interrupt him or her politely, e.g. because you don't understand, or you wish to make a comment, etc. The following expressions might prove useful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sorry, but . . .</li> <li>- Excuse me, .</li> <li>- Er, I'd just like to comment on that. . .</li> <li>- Er, may I interrupt a moment. . .?</li> </ul>



<p><b>Student C</b></p> <p>Your partner is about to tell you a story. After about thirty seconds take any opportunity to interrupt him or her tactlessly, e.g. because you don't understand, or you wish to make a comment, etc. The following expressions might prove useful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What, what!!!</li> <li>- I'm lost!</li> <li>- Again!</li> <li>- But, is that true?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student D</b></p> <p>Your task is to observe what happens between the other two students in your group- One is going to tell the other a story. The other, the listener, has been asked to interrupt as often as possible. As they speak, try to note down:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How the interruptions are made</li> <li>What the storyteller's reaction is to the interruptions? Does he or she get angry? How does he or she deal with them? What does he or she say to try to get back to the story? Don't worry if you can't note down every example, just do as much as you can.</li> </ol> <p>When the task is over discuss your observations with the other members of your group, and then be prepared to report what happened to the rest of the class.</p>
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## Appendix 4

Interrupting	Dealing with interruptions
<p>Excuse me...</p> <p>But...</p> <p>Sorry but...</p> <p>Excuse me for interrupting...</p> <p>May I interrupt for a moment...?</p> <p>Can I add here that...?</p> <p>Can/May I say something here...?</p> <p>I'd like to say something if I may...</p>	<p>Where was I?</p> <p>As I was saying...</p> <p>Yes, well anyway...</p> <p>To return to the topic/what I was saying...</p> <p>I'm sure that's true, but...</p> <p>Please, let me finish.</p> <p>Rude expressions:</p> <p>May I continue?</p> <p>If you don't mind, I'd like to continue...</p> <p>Is that all?</p>

## Appendix 5

<p>Question 1</p> <p>Which European country gives free but compulsory language lessons to refugees and immigrants?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sweden</li> <li>Denmark</li> <li>UK</li> </ol>	<p>Question 6</p> <p>In what country will decisions made at formal meetings not necessarily be carried out?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>USA</li> <li>Belgium</li> <li>Italy</li> </ol>
<p>Question 2</p> <p>In which country do employees often count sick days as holidays?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Germany</li> <li>Finland</li> <li>Japan</li> </ol>	<p>Question 7</p> <p>In which country is it still common for a man to kiss a woman's hand?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Austria</li> <li>Switzerland</li> <li>Italy</li> </ol>



<p>Question 3</p> <p>Which European workers work the shortest hours?</p> <p>a. British</p> <p>b. Germany</p> <p>c. Italian</p>	<p>Question 8</p> <p>The smallest spread of earnings between the highest and the lowest-paid employees is in which EU country?</p> <p>a. Ireland</p> <p>b. Germany</p> <p>c. Sweden</p>
<p>Question 4</p> <p>Which European country has the highest number of foreign-owned companies?</p> <p>a. Portugal</p> <p>b. Ireland</p> <p>c. Finland</p>	<p>Question 9</p> <p>Which country has the largest proportion of people over 65 in the world?</p> <p>a. Turkey</p> <p>b. Sweden</p> <p>c. Hungary</p>
<p>Question 5</p> <p>Which European country only gave the vote to women in 1971?</p> <p>a. Switzerland</p> <p>b. Greece</p> <p>c. Spain</p>	<p>Question 10</p> <p>In which country is it most difficult to work your way from a junior position to a top one in a company?</p> <p>a. Germany</p> <p>b. USA</p> <p>c. France</p>
<p>Question 11</p> <p>In which country does the working day start early and finish at lunchtime?</p> <p>a. Spain</p> <p>b. Greece</p> <p>c. Russia</p>	<p>Question 16</p> <p>In which country is there a tradition of making business deals in the sauna?</p> <p>a. Sweden</p> <p>b. Finland</p> <p>c. Russia</p>
<p>Question 12</p> <p>Which country has mostly open-plan offices (also for senior staff)?</p> <p>a. Japan</p> <p>b. Portugal</p> <p>c. USA</p>	<p>Question 17</p> <p>Instructions should sound like polite requests in which country?</p> <p>a. UK</p> <p>b. Netherlands</p> <p>c. Germany</p>
<p>Question 13</p> <p>In which country is it very important to start a presentation with a joke or humorous anecdote?</p> <p>a. France</p> <p>b. Greece</p> <p>c. UK</p>	<p>Question 18</p> <p>In which country is written communication (reports, memos, etc) an important aspect of business life?</p> <p>a. Japan</p> <p>b. Germany</p> <p>c. France</p>



<p>Question 14</p> <p>Which of the following countries has the lowest proportion of unionized workers?</p> <p>a. USA</p> <p>b. Germany</p> <p>c. France</p>	<p>Question 19</p> <p>d. In which country is there seldom a formal agenda for a meeting?</p> <p>e. a. Russia</p> <p>f. b. Spain</p> <p>g. c. France</p>
<p>Question 15</p> <p>In which country has unpunctuality been formalized so that it is almost impolite to be on time?</p> <p>a. Spain</p> <p>b. UK</p> <p>c. Italy</p>	<p>Question 20</p> <p>h. In which European country do people have the most positive attitude to life?</p> <p>i. a. Netherlands</p> <p>j. b. Ireland</p> <p>k. c. Greece</p>

## Appendix 6

Verbal	Non-verbal
<p>m-hm</p> <p>Right</p> <p>Yeah</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes quite</p> <p>I see</p> <p>Surely</p> <p>That's (not) true</p> <p>Exactly</p> <p>Hear, hear</p> <p>Absolutely</p> <p>You said it</p> <p>Wrong</p> <p>No quite</p> <p>Oh, come on</p> <p>That's news to me</p>	<p>Head nods and shakes</p> <p>Hand signs</p> <p>Facial expressions</p> <p>Body postures</p>

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