

Negotiating Backchannel Behaviour

—Challenges in ELF Communication—

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1 Introduction

With the growing interests in English as a lingua franca (ELF) interactions where participants come from different cultural settings and varying linguistic backgrounds, a number of linguistic areas—lexical, grammatical, phonological, and pragmatic aspects just to name a few—have been investigated. This paper argues that interactional management strategies in ELF interactions also deserve close attention, and focuses on one such strategy, backchanneling behaviour, in ELF contexts. It offers an in-depth analysis of backchannel instances in three dyadic conversations among three English speakers, and discusses the implications of the findings.

2 Backchannels

Backchanneling, so called *aizuchi* in Japanese, has attracted scholars' interests for decades. Although definitions of a backchannel still vary among linguists, the research has come a long way from interpreting backchanneling as being a solely listener's activity, functioning as 'continuer' (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) to viewing backchanneling as an interactional management strategy that involves the speaker and the listener (Ike, 2016; Ike & Mulder, 2016). A number of studies have shown that backchanneling behaviour differs across languages (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996; Maynard, 1986, 1990) and varieties of English (Ike, 2010, 2016; Ike & Mulder, 2016; Maynard, 1997; Tottie, 1991; White, 1989; Wong & Peters, 2007). Japanese is known for its high frequent use of backchannels in casual conversations (Mizutani, 1985), and the frequent use, as well as the range, of backchannels in English spoken by Japanese (i.e., Japanese English¹) have been documented elsewhere (Cutrone, 2005, 2014; Ike, 2010; Ike & Mulder, 2016).

Developing Ike's (2010) earlier study, Ike and Mulder (2016) show backchanneling behavioural differences in Japanese English (JE) and Australian English (AusE), employing a multimodal analysis. They first define two different types of backchannel (BC) instances; Speaker-elicited

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backchannels (S-BC) in which the primary speaker gives a range of BC cues to elicit a backchannel from the listener and the listener produces a backchannel in response, and Listener-initiated backchannels (L-BC) in which the listener orients to an intonation unit ending and offers a backchannel without the speaker's explicit invitation. Further analysis of BC instances reveals a BC sequence, in which a series of BCs are exchanged between the participants (Ike & Mulder, 2016; also see Shoichi Iwasaki (1997) and Kita & Ide (2007) for more discussion of 'loop sequence'). Ike and Mulder (2016) state that a backchannel can be acknowledged by the speaker (i.e., speaker producing a BC back to the listener), forming a minimal BC sequence, or can open up an extended BC sequence, in which a series of BC are simultaneously exchanged between the participants. They argue that in an extended BC sequence, there can be three phases based on the roles and functions of BCs in the sequence. The listener's BC is acknowledged by the speaker (acknowledgement phase), and both participants build rapport in actively engaging themselves by simultaneously producing a series of BCs to each other (rapport establishment phase), and they negotiate the next speakership (turn negotiation phase). Ike and Mulder (2016) further note that in their data AusE is typically characterised by the predominant use of S-BC with the eye gaze shift being the primary BC cue, while JE can be characterised by a more frequent occurrence of L-BCs and BC sequences, with head movement—especially nodding—being the primary BC cue.

Although earlier analyses and arguments of backchannels treat backchannels as 'listener's acts/responses' (e.g., Clancy et al., 1996; Gardner, 2001), recent studies suggest that backchanneling behaviour, as well as some other listener tokens, is one of the interactional management strategies which can be collaboratively achieved between the speaker and the listener (e.g., Ike, 2016; Ike & Mulder, 2016; Shimako Iwasaki, 2015; Norrick, 2012). This paper therefore focuses on the interactional management aspects of backchanneling when the speaker and the listener come from different language/culture backgrounds. In such cross-cultural settings they are involved in ELF communication—they share a language (i.e., English) but they may have different expectations of each other's interactional management strategies including BC behaviour. As Canagarajah (2006) argues, in ELF communication the participants do not necessarily adapt their cultural values or create a culture-free environment, but rather they negotiate each other's local values and their own identities through interaction. The following sections describe the BC behaviour between an AusE speaker and a JE speaker in detail. It is argued that participants each bring their own cultural beliefs and interactional style, particularly their style of BC behaviour, to the conversational setting, and they employ a number of negotiation and accommodation strategies in each conversation.

3 Data

In this paper, four examples of BC instances (three from ELF conversation and one from JE-JE conversation) are presented. The original data from which examples are selected consists of dyadic ELF conversations between AusE speakers and JE speakers and intra-cultural English conversations between AusE speakers and between JE speakers (cf. Ike & Mulder, 2016). The three ELF examples are excerpted from two ELF conversations—one between Liz and Yumi, the other

between Liz and Ruiko (AusE speaker and JE speaker respectively). The other example, JE conversation, is between the same Japanese participants Ruiko and Yumi, providing a bench-mark for analysis. The recording took place in Melbourne, Australia, and both JE speakers had spent a few years in Australia and held a score of IELTS 6.0 or above at the time of recording. The Australian participant Liz held a tertiary qualification. Participants were provided, but not limited to, a topic of comedy films, TV programs, comics, or children’s books. Using ELAN (https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/), each conversation was then transcribed² for speech, nodding, eye gaze, and head/body movement in separate tiers.

4 BC elicitation strategies in ELF

As discussed above, there are a range of BC elicitation strategies (cf. Ike, 2010, 2016; Ike & Mulder, 2016). This section describes how the two JE speakers use BC cues in eliciting a BC from their AusE speaking conversation partner Liz, and how they negotiate their BC behaviour with each other.

Example 1 is drawn from a conversation between Liz and Yumi in which Yumi is telling Liz about her favourite children’s book, *Guri and Gura*. Each speaker’s speech (SPCH), eye gaze (EG), head/body movement (MV), and nodding (NOD) are transcribed in separate tiers given in Figure 1.

Example 1. [Guri and Gura]

- Yumi: → It’s Japanese uh, book for children?
 Liz: mhm,
 Yumi: → and then, Guri and Gura is a name of uh, squirrels?
 Liz: .. ye[ah],
 Yumi: [yeah] yeah @@@ and then they,

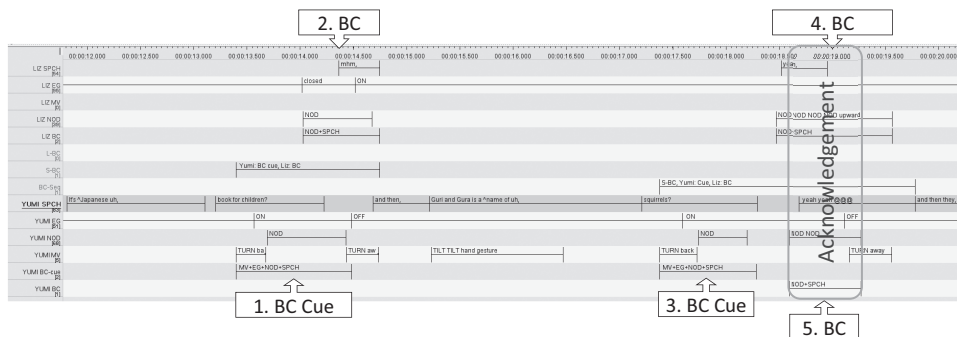


Figure 1 [Guri and Gura]

Yumi employs multiple BC cue elements in her speech. When she utters *book for children*, she explicitly turns back to Liz as well as shifting her eye gaze on her, gives a nod slightly leaning forward, and finishes her turn with a clear rising intonation (Annotation 1). In response, Liz gives a

deep nod and a vocal (*mhm*) BC (Annotation 2). As soon as Yumi sees Liz nodding and responding with a BC, she takes her eye gaze off Liz and continues to develop her talk. Yumi then gives another BC cue towards the end of her utterance *Guri and Gura is a name of uh, squirrels?* Again, she uses a combination of explicit turning back movement, clear eye gaze shift on, a noticeable nod and rising intonation (Annotation 3), which elicits Liz's next BC (four nods and a vocal utterance *yeah*) with a micropause delay (Annotation 4). Liz's BC is acknowledged by Yumi, opening a short BC sequence (minimal BC Sequence). Yumi immediately acknowledges Liz's BC with both the utterance *yeah yeah* and two nods (Annotation 5), and then shifts her eye gaze off and turns away from Liz to claim the continued speakership.

Yumi successfully negotiates her backchannel behaviour with Liz by giving an explicit BC cue followed by a noticeable pause each time. In particular, explicitness is enhanced by her movements (face turning and nodding) being overt. Liz, in turn, closely monitors her interlocutor and accommodates her backchannel behaviour by responding with overt BCs at each designated pause in interaction. The second delayed BC (Annotation 4) indicates that it may not have been a point for backchanneling in Liz's BC repertoire, but her accommodation strategy, close monitoring, enabled her to react to Yumi's BC cue.

Next Example 2, given in Figure 2, is drawn from a conversation between Liz and Ruiko in which Ruiko is suggesting possible topics and themes for a funny film.

Example 2. [Language problems]

- Ruiko: Um, (0.3)
 → I was thinking maybe we can,
 u:m, (0.6)
 → create, something,
 → like um, for language purpose? (0.4)
 → and, someone's, like, .. trying to learn a language, (0.3)
 → but then, like, (0.8)
 have--do you speak any other language?
 Liz: Uh, I speak a bit of Nepali,
 Ruiko: Uh ok.

As shown in Figure 2, as Ruiko starts explaining her opinion she turns back and shifts her eye gaze on Liz (Annotation 1). These two movements are Ruiko's first BC cue, but when she does not receive any BC response from Liz, she turns away and adds two more words *create something*. As she utters the second word *something* Ruiko gives another BC cue by turning back and shifting her eye gaze back on Liz (Annotation 2). The second BC cue however, is also not reciprocated with a BC and she tries a more explicit BC cue using rising intonation at the end of the utterance *for language purpose?* (Annotation 3) and waits for Liz's response BC, with her eye gaze fixed on Liz. Even the explicit third BC cue does not elicit a BC from Liz, so Ruiko starts using hand gestures in her following utterance and ends with a slight nod and a pause (Annotation 4), which works as yet

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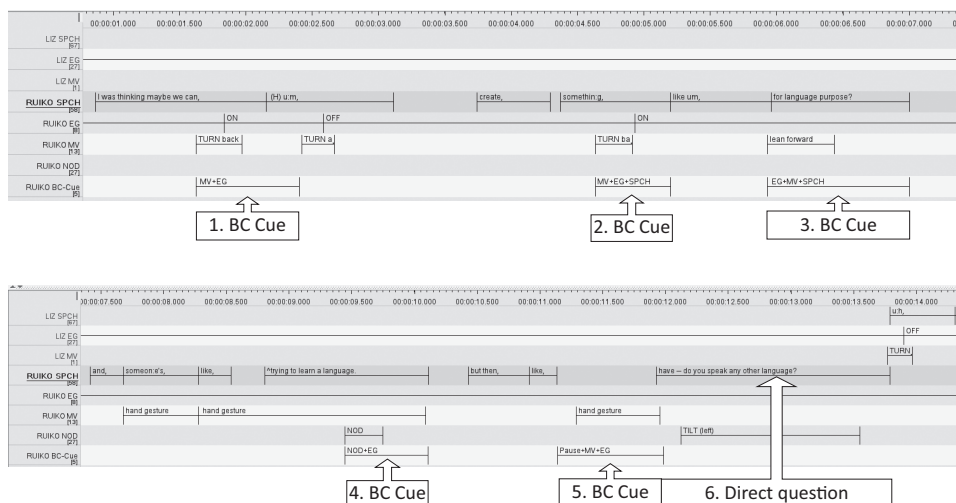


Figure 2 [Language problems]

another BC cue. Ruiko's last BC cue is a long pause (0.8 seconds) with a waving hand gesture (Annotation 5), but she decides to directly elicit a response from Liz and asks her if she speaks another language (Annotation 6).

In this interaction, Ruiko tries to negotiate her backchannel behaviour with Liz by employing a number of different BC cues, and when those do not work in eliciting a BC from Liz she accommodates her style by directly asking a question. This particular excerpt may seem to be an example of 'breakdown', as Ruiko fails to elicit a BC from Liz. However, Figure 2 also shows that Liz keeps her eye gaze on Ruiko without shifting her eye gaze off even once, and the video data shows that Liz has a smiling expression as she listens to Ruiko's speech. Thus it is argued that Liz displays BC functions such as understanding and continuer within her own discourse repertoire (i.e., posture and facial expression). It is also possible that Liz is accommodating her discourse style by not interrupting Ruiko's speech and patiently waiting for her to finish her turn.

A noticeable difference between the two interactions presented above is the display of BC cues by the two JE speakers. While both Yumi and Ruiko use multiple BC cues in eliciting a BC, and the range of elements in the BC cues is identical, Yumi uses all four BC cue elements in each of her BC cues while Ruiko selects two or three elements at a time. As a result, Yumi's BC cues are much clearer in display, and she effectively uses a pause without any movement offering a turn for a BC response.

5 BC sequences: comparison between JE and JE-AusE ELF conversations

Ike and Mulder (2016) argue that the frequency of BC sequences are notably lower in AusE conversations than in JE conversations. They also argue that in JE conversations, there are three phases in an extended BC sequence—acknowledgement, rapport building, and turn negotiation.

This section first describe the three phases in JE conversation, and examines a BC sequence in ELF conversation.

Example 3, given in Figure 3, is from a conversation between Ruiko and Yumi in which Yumi is finishing her description of a film that was funny to her, and Ruiko takes over the speakership in developing the topic of funny film.

Example 3. [Topic change]

Yumi: @[@@it]'s[₂@like],
 Ruiko: [@@] [₂@(H)]
 Yumi: (H) not in reality bu[t, %it] was really,
 Ruiko: [(H)]
 Yumi: funny for me.
 Ruiko: uh [@yeah],
 Yumi: [hmm hmm]
 Ruiko: → .. have you heard a drama, .. called, .. is it,

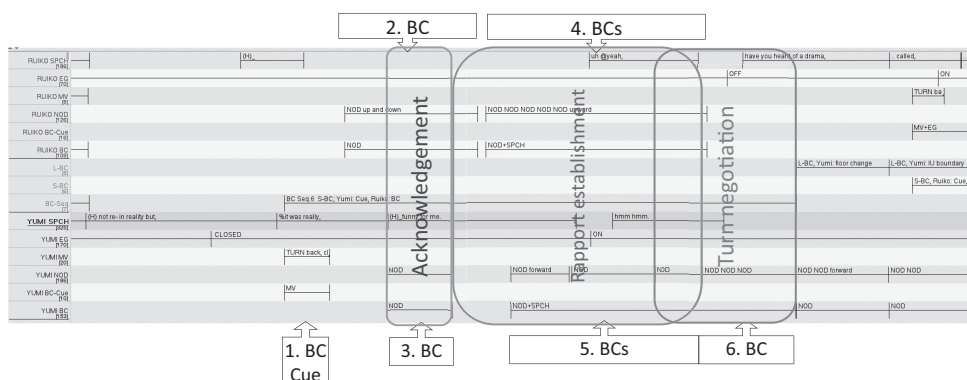


Figure 3 [Topic change]

In Example 3, Yumi starts giving her opinion of the film *it was really*, and in doing so she turns to Ruiko, which functions as a BC cue (Annotation 1) even though her eyes are closed thus not monitoring Ruiko’s response BC (Annotation 2). Yumi’s next nod (Annotation 3) is somewhat ambiguous—it can be argued that this is an independent BC, because Yumi’s eyes are still closed when producing the nod. However, she is directly facing Ruiko and it is clear from the video data that her nod is received as an acknowledgement by Ruiko, opening an extended BC sequence. Ruiko starts giving a number of nods and a vocal BC *uh @yeah* (Annotation 4) and as soon as Yumi opens her eyes she adds a vocal BC *hmm hmm* as well as continuing her nodding (Annotation 5). These simultaneous BCs by both Yumi and Ruiko are defined as the rapport establishment phase. After the series of nods and a vocal BC (Annotation 4) Ruiko stops giving more BCs and looks at Yumi. When she sees that Yumi continues to nod (Annotation 6), Ruiko shifts her eye gaze off Yumi and starts to talk, claiming the speakership change, and Yumi quickly responds with

another series of BCs accepting her listener role in turn. It is argued that this last part is where the next speakership is negotiated (the turn negotiation phase) and they successfully switch the speaker/listener roles without interrupting each other. Therefore, it appears that participants use BCs in an extended BC sequence not only to share the moment and thus build rapport, but also to offer a space to each other for turn negotiation.

The last Example 4, given in Figure 4, is drawn from the ELF conversation between Liz and Yumi continuing on the topic of *Guri and Gura*. In response to Liz’s clarification question asking whether *Guri and Gura* is an independent book or a series, Yumi explains that there are two books but the second book is not a sequel to the first.

Example 4. [*Guri and Gura cont’d*]

Liz: Was it just one book? or many,
 Yumi: → u:h it’s a, (0.3) I think two books.
 Liz: ye[ah],
 Yumi: → [ye]ah, yeah yeah but, separate story, yeah
 Liz: yeah=
 Yumi: → =but I’ve read, many times @@ (H) yeah,
 Liz: My, [one of my f]avourites,
 Yumi: [hm hm]
 Liz: when I was a child was,

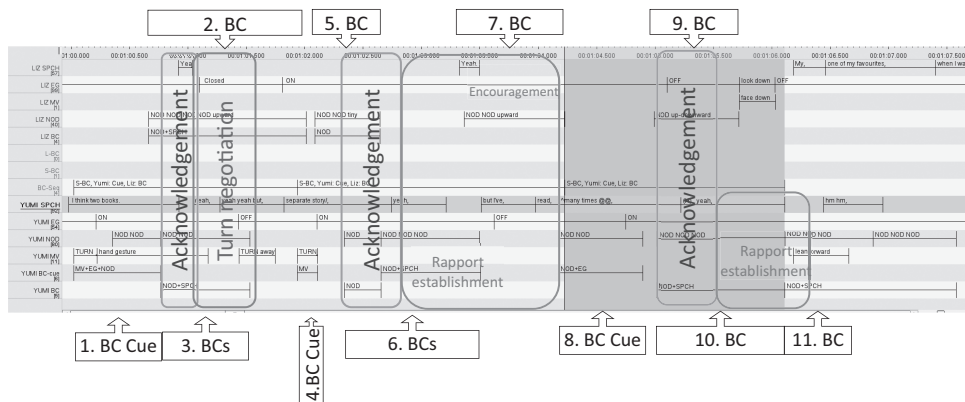


Figure 4 [*Guri and Gura cont’d*]

In Example 4, there are three BC-sequences. Liz responds promptly to all of Yumi’s BC cues (Annotations 1, 4, and 8), and each initial BC by Liz (annotations 2, 5, and 9) is acknowledged by Yumi (Annotations 3, 6, and 10). These sequences appear to be similar to prototypical BC sequences (minimal and extended) discussed in Ike and Mulder (2016) and in Example 1 above, but a closer look reveals noticeable differences in the role of BC elements.

In the first BC sequence (Annotations 1–3), as soon as Liz starts nodding in response to Yumi’s

BC cue Yumi gives back a BC consisting of *yeah* and two nods, acknowledging the BC. As Yumi realises Liz's eyes are closed and not monitoring, she then quickly moves on to the turn negotiation phase by taking her eye gaze off Liz as well as turning away, and continues with her speech. Yumi then elicits another BC with a cue (Annotation 4), to which Liz responds with two tiny nods (Annotation 5). This response opens the second BC sequence with a quick acknowledgement, followed by three nods and a vocal BC *yeah* by Yumi in an attempt to establish rapport (Annotation 6). However, instead of joining Yumi's nodding Liz gives another distinctive two nods with a vocal BC *yeah* (Annotation 7), which seems to function as 'encouragement', rather than 'rapport establishment'. Thus Yumi takes the next turn again and gives a little more information *but I've read many times*. Yumi provides yet another BC cue (Annotation 8) and Liz again responds (Annotation 9). Since this is the end of Yumi's topic Yumi tries again to establish rapport after the brief acknowledgement (Annotation 10). However, Liz does not cooperate in establishing rapport and instead shifts her eye gaze off Yumi claiming her speakership and producing the utterance *my*, and takes over the floor by starting to talk (*one of my favourites*). Although Yumi quickly accepts the speakership change and responds with a number of nods and a vocal BC *hm hm* (all L-BCs), there is no rapport establishment or turn negotiation phase that are frequently observed at topic closings in JE conversations such as in Example 3 above.

In this example, both Yumi and Liz cooperate with each other to overcome their pragmatic differences in BC behaviour in terms of BC elicitation and responses. This example also indicates that BC sequences exist not only in JE conversations but also in ELF conversations. However, the functions and roles of the BCs seem to remain different between the two speakers Liz and Yumi, resulting in noticeably different phases in the BC sequences and the absence of lengthy extended BC sequences in this ELF communication. The following section discusses the significant roles and functions of BCs in Japanese and JE conversations, and the implications of the findings from the three examples presented here.

6 Discussion and concluding remarks

The roles of BCs, especially in a lengthy BC instance (described as extended BC sequences in this paper) have been discussed in earlier studies in relation to rapport building (Kita & Ide, 2007) and listener strategies. Otani (2015) and Iwata (2015) both claim that the high frequency of BCs in Japanese conversation is due to the preference for a monologue style of topic development and distinctive listener/speaker roles, especially in first-encounter conversations. The designated listener in Japanese conversation makes an effort to be a 'good listener' by not interrupting and not demanding additional information from the speaker, preserving the speaker's negative face (Iwata, 2015). As mentioned above, Liz's silence in Example 1 can be her accommodation to adapt monologue style. Iwata further argues that in such first-encounter Japanese conversations, a turn is 'offered' by the speaker, rather than 'taken' or 'stolen' by the listener. I argue that a turn is not only 'offered' by the speaker but also 'negotiated' between the participants in JE-JE interaction, as demonstrated in Example 3.

It is also noteworthy that Liz's BCs in Example 4 fit Otsuka's (2015) analysis—she argues that Australian English speakers tend to produce *aizuchi* when eliciting more information, and so *aizuchi* is observed after a response to a question, and in between a short explanation and additional information. It can be argued that Liz's BCs (Annotations 2 & 5 in Example 4) are in response to Yumi's BC cues, but also within Liz's BC pragmatic repertoire. Furthermore, Liz's claim of speakership at the end of Example 4, together with her clarification question at the beginning, supports Otani's (2015) analysis of the topic development style in AusE. Otani (2015) states that the most preferred topic development style in AusE is a combination of an 'interactive style', in which the listener actively requires additional information from the speaker, and a 'duet style', in which the listener offers their personal opinions or experiences.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) argues that rapport management depends on the participants' perceived sociality rights and obligations, on which people develop their behavioural expectations. Kita and Ide (2007) state that in Japanese conversation *aizuchi* and nodding contribute to rapport building and social bond is formed through exchanges of such actions in conversation. This is also observed in JE-JE conversation (as in Example 3), but Example 4 suggests that such exchanges are not part of rapport management strategies in AusE. In other words, AusE speakers may not perceive the need for rapport enhancement (see Spencer-Oatey (2008) for more discussion of rapport management) in BC sequences but rather treat such a sequence as solely a turn management opportunity. Note that this is also different from the 'turn negotiation phase' in JE conversation, where the next turn is negotiated by both participants. In Example 4, Liz rather abruptly claims the turn without negotiation at the end of the third BC sequence. It can also be argued that stance alignment in listenership may not be as important in AusE as in JE and Japanese conversation, and thus Liz, an AusE speaker, does not recognise the rapport building function of BCs in ELF.

This paper examined a number of S-BCs, consisting of BC elicitation strategies by JE speakers and BC responses by an AusE speaker, using two ELF conversations as a case study. Firstly, it was revealed that where speakers have different styles of BC behaviour, overt and explicit display of BC cues by the speaker, as well as close monitoring of the speaker by the listener, can be efficient accommodation strategies in ELF interaction. Secondly, examination of the BC sequences in JE-JE conversation and JE-AusE (i.e., ELF) conversation suggests that the differences in the functions and roles of BCs in the BC sequences between the two types of conversations are due to differences in cultural beliefs and rapport management strategies between the two languages and societies. In this small case study, to what extent the range of accommodation strategies is efficient still remains areas of investigation for further research. However, it is made clear in this article that backchanneling behaviour, politeness strategies, turn management and rapport management are all intimately interwoven with cultural values. The absence of backchannels or BC sequences does not mean that one participant fails to successfully participate in ELF interaction. Rather, it shows that each participant employs different approaches to stay active in the conversation. For further understanding the reality of ELF interaction, close multimodal conversation analysis is necessary.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this paper, the term Japanese English (JE) refers to English spoken by Japanese L1 speakers and is not used to claim it being a variety of English.
- 2 Transcription convention used in the analysis draws on Du Bois, Chafe, Meyer, and Thompson (2000).

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