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Towards The Use of Backchannel Signals during Classroom Oral Presentations: Speakers' Perspective

Abstract

Classroom oral presentations are crucial across many higher education courses. They also play a key role in developing communication skills and preparing students for future careers. Although oral presentations have long been recognised as important for communication development and are widely integrated into curricula, much existing research has mainly focused on delivery techniques, assessment methods, and presentation design. Conversely, comparatively little attention has been given to the role of the audience, especially the impact of verbal and non-verbal feedback signals on presenters. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how undergraduate students perceive audience backchannel signals - such as verbal cues (e.g., "aha," "no," "yeah") and non-verbal reactions (e.g., eye contact, nodding, shaking the head, smiling) - and how these influence their levels of nervousness, self-confidence, and delivery performance during classroom oral presentations.

The novelty of this study lies in its speaker-centred perspective. While previous research has largely viewed the audience as passive recipients of information, this research emphasises the audience as active participants in shaping the speaker's psychological state and performance. Understanding this dynamic is especially important in higher education, where anxiety around public speaking often hampers learning outcomes.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2012). Data were collected through an online questionnaire created in Google Forms and distributed among first-, second-, and fourth-year undergraduate students of the Department of English Philology at the Faculty of Humanities, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. One hundred twenty-seven valid responses were received, ensuring representation across different academic years. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended items, allowing for statistical analysis of trends and a deeper understanding of students' experiences and perceptions. The data were systematically analysed to identify patterns of anxiety, common triggers, and the role of audience reactions in either exacerbating or alleviating stress.

Findings show that most students experience notable nervousness when delivering oral presentations, with the fear of negative evaluation being among the strongest causes of anxiety. However, the data also indicate that positive audience feedback - whether through reassuring verbal cues or encouraging non-verbal behaviours - plays a crucial role in boosting confidence, reducing stress, and improving delivery effectiveness. These results suggest that oral presentations should be viewed as co-constructed communicative events, where the audience's active role is acknowledged and emphasised. This study highlights the importance of training both presenters and audiences in effective communication practices, fostering more supportive classroom dynamics, and incorporating feedback-awareness strategies into academic presentation training.

Keywords: *oral presentation, audience feedback, backchannel signals, student anxiety*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, classroom oral presentations play a vital role in developing students' communication skills. For many years, oral presentations have been widely used in language teaching to provide opportunities for language practice. According to Schmidt (2018), oral presentations are a common requirement in numerous academic courses. They can be delivered individually or in groups, with or without visual aids (Bui et al., 2022). Furthermore, an oral presentation is a crucial skill that students must master at higher education levels. Accordingly, a student majoring in English philology at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University must deliver an oral presentation on a specific topic, either assigned by an instructor or chosen by the students, in nearly every course throughout the programme.

The Undergraduate Programme in English Philology at Tbilisi State University offers students a curriculum covering a wide range of practical courses in English, including Phonetics, Analytical Reading, Speaking, Grammar, Reading, Text Interpretation, Legal English, Business English, Language of the Newspaper, FCE course, and Writing. Within these courses, emphasis is placed on developing the four conventional language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Most of these courses focus on practical aspects, requiring students to engage in weekly in-class activities, critically analyse and synthesise written arguments or literary texts, prepare oral presentations, participate in class discussions and debates, and write various types of essays. Oral presentations are essential to formal assessment in nearly all aspects taught within the English philology programme.

Having taught the course - Text Interpretation - within the framework of the English Philology programme for over a decade, I have observed students' experiences with oral presentations as part of either a mid-term exam or, currently, as a skills component. Consequently, I have noticed students' anxiety before and during these presentations. Additionally, I observed the significant influence of audience behaviour on the presenter. Positive backchannel signals, such as smiling or nodding, can significantly boost the student's confidence, motivation, and overall performance. Conversely, a lack of such supportive feedback often has the opposite effect.

While numerous studies have explored effective delivery techniques, the challenges students face during presentations, the importance of oral presentation skills, and the specific role of audience interaction and backchannels have been largely overlooked. Most research emphasises delivery methods or audience assessment but neglects how audience behaviour impacts speaker performance and emotional state during presentations.

Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining students' perceptions of audience feedback during presentations.

Therefore, the study's objectives are a) to investigate students' experiences with oral presentations, b) to examine the backchannel signals provided by the audience from the speakers' perspectives, and c) to explore the impact of these signals on speaker performance and emotional well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Oral Presentation and Audience

According to the Learning Centre of the University of New South Wales, an oral presentation can be considered a speech delivered in a structured manner on a predetermined topic for a specific audience (Zakaria et al., 2023). As mentioned above, oral presentations have become an essential part of higher education, particularly in ESL classrooms (Yeereem, 2013).

An oral presentation, or public speaking, is a speech where a speaker addresses an audience on a particular subject. Levin and Topping (2006) stated that "presentation is not only given to the audience; it is

given for the audience" (p.4). Similarly, good speakers understand that the audience is not just people sitting in front of them but the individuals for whom they must prepare their speeches. Therefore, a speaker must consider the audience in advance and conduct audience analysis, which involves taking into account the audience's demographic characteristics (age, culture, gender, physical and mental abilities) and tailoring the presentation accordingly (Floyd, 2018).

On the other hand, an audience must listen actively and effectively to a speaker's oral presentation and demonstrate their attitude either verbally or nonverbally (by using backchannel signals).

2.2. Oral Presentations and their Challenges

A classroom oral presentation is a form of public speaking. Delivering an oral presentation can benefit students; however, it is widely recognised that giving a speech can be challenging for many people, even in front of a small group in class. According to poll results from the Gallup organisation regarding adult Americans' fears, the most commonly mentioned fear was of snakes, and public speaking - delivering presentations - ranked second (Floyd, 2018).

One of the most common challenges students face during oral presentations is public speaking anxiety, or nervousness about performing in front of an audience (Floyd, 2018; Al-Nouh et al., 2015). This anxiety may be caused either by worrying it might be difficult to make a presentation or by a lack of confidence (Whai & Mei, 2012). Additionally, sometimes anxiety occurs during an oral presentation due to the audience's reactions (Tian and Mahmud, 2018).

Another challenge is students' language proficiency. Often, students feel anxious before an oral presentation because they lack specific language skills - such as pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence structure, and fluency (Chen, 2015).

Students also find it challenging to have adequate prior preparation and practice for oral presentations. A lack of practice may stem from limited experience in delivering presentations, as students often do not prepare thoroughly (Al-Darwish & Taqi, 2015). Furthermore, the presentation topic and insufficient knowledge can also heighten students' anxiety.

Sometimes, the challenge arises from how students perceive their audience. It is widely recognised that speaking in front of others can feel threatening due to the presence of the audience. Just having someone there, even a peer, can make students feel anxious (Chen, 2015). Many student presenters also believe that others are closely watching them to catch mistakes or figure out what they are saying (Al-Darwish & Taqi, 2015). Ultimately, some presenters become distracted when late students enter the room or when others talk and laugh during their presentations (Al-Nouh et al., 2015).

2.3. Oral Presentations and Backchannel Signals

Speakers prepare oral presentations in advance. However, during the presentation, not only the speaker but also the audience play a vital role. They must act appropriately and listen actively. Correspondingly, they must use suitable verbal and non-verbal signals to demonstrate their engagement.

According to Goffman (Hatch, 1992), every communication involves specific signals that indicate to a speaker that their message is being understood. This is especially important during oral presentations. Backchannel signals can include sounds, words, phrases, gestures, facial expressions, nods, and smiles; thus, they can be verbal or non-verbal. As Hatch (1994) explains, "Even when it is not our turn to speak, we might nod or make sounds like 'umhm,' 'uh-huh,' 'yeah,' or 'yeah right,' providing backchannel feedback that encourages the speaker to proceed. These signals do not interrupt the speaker's turn" (Hatch, 1994: 15). In

any form of oral communication, such backchannel signals are crucial as they show the participants' engagement. Classroom oral presentations are no exception.

Fries (1952) was probably the first to analyse backchannel cues in telephone conversations. He considered backchannels as signals that did not take the turn from a speaker. However, the term backchannel was first introduced and coined by Yngve (1970) to describe signals like "mm-hmmm," eye contact, smiles, and head nods from a listener. According to Yule (1996), backchannels are "vocal indications of attention when someone else is speaking" (p. 127). They serve as feedback to a speaker, indicating that the message is being received. The form of both verbal and non-verbal backchannel signals can vary depending on the context (Hatch, 1994). This type of feedback is essential during oral presentations, as speakers need to see that the audience understands and acknowledges their message.

Backchannel signals have been the subject of extensive study, and various classifications exist in academic literature. Tottie (1991) classifies backchannels based on their structure as simple (a single backchannel item, e.g., "yeah"), double (multiple repetitions of the same item, e.g., "mhm mhm, yeah yeah"), or complex (a combination of different backchannel items, e.g., "yeah, I know, yeah, right") (Tottie 1991: 263). Hayashi and Hayashi (1991) categorise backchannel signals into four functional subtypes: a) continuers, b) repairers, c) reinforcers and claimers, and d) prompters and clarifiers. Coulthard et al. assert that backchannels are used to acknowledge, accept, or endorse the information provided by the current speaker (White 1997).

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, adopting a "mixed method approach" (Creswell, 2012). Primarily, a survey questionnaire was used to gather data, which was then analysed through descriptive and content analysis to provide not only numerical data but also to highlight the hypothetical relationships between different variables and patterns.

In this study, a convenience sampling method was used to select respondents based on their willingness and availability to participate. Participation was entirely voluntary, responses remained anonymous, and participants could withdraw at any time without submitting their answers. The sample comprised 127 participants selected from a target population of approximately 700. The target group consisted of undergraduate students (majoring in English Philology) at Tbilisi State University who had enrolled through the state university based on the unified NAEC (National Assessment and Examination Centre) exam within the years 2021-2024. Participants were informed that the survey was anonymous and their privacy would be protected. Accordingly, they were encouraged to provide honest responses.

To describe the teaching and learning background of the Undergraduate Program in English Philology at Tbilisi State University, students are required to take courses such as English Phonetics, Grammar, Analytical Reading, Speaking, Reading, Text Interpretation, Writing, Legal English, Business English, Language of Newspapers, and FCE. These practical courses involve students producing various written and oral assignments. Therefore, through the survey, students were asked to reflect on their experiences during oral presentations.

3.2. Research Design and Procedure

The research tool used in the present study was a survey questionnaire designed on Google Forms and circulated among students online through personal emails, messenger chats, and Facebook groups. The questionnaire was open online from February to March 2025.

The survey consisted of 7 questions. Most of these were multiple-choice questions for quick and easy responses. Two open-ended questions were also utilised alongside the multiple-choice questions to gather additional information and students' perceptions of the issue discussed. The questions used for the study are the following:

1. What is your current year of study?
   a. I year b. II year c. III year d. IV year
2. How frequently do you have to give oral presentations?
a. Never b. almost never c. sometimes d. almost always e. always
3. Do you feel nervous during oral presentations?
a. Never b. almost never c. sometimes d. almost always e. always
4. If you feel nervous, what do you think is the reason of your anxiety?
   a. I am not nervous
   b. I am not well prepared
   c. I do not have adequate language competence
   d. I do not like performing in front of the audience
   e. I am afraid of negative feedback from the audience
   f. Other (please specify)
5. During oral presentations, do you pay attention to backchannel signals from the audience?
a. Never b. almost never c. sometimes d. almost always e. always
6. Which backchannel signals from the audience has the most positive effect on you as a speaker (you can select more than one answer)?
a. Smile b. head nod c. eye contact d. verbal signals (uuhmm, yeah, yeah right e. other (please, specify)
7. Which backchannel signals from the audience has the most negative effect on you as a speaker?
a. Gazing in different direction b. frowning c. Talk among audience members
d. Head shake e. Verbal backchannel signals (no, I don't know, etc.) f. other (please, specify)

3.3. Limitations

Using a survey questionnaire as the data collection tool means that the empirical data relied solely on students' responses. Furthermore, most survey questions were closed-ended, meaning participants were provided with predefined answer options. While this type of question makes participation easier for respondents, it restricts the depth and richness of the information collected.

Another limitation is the lack of gender diversity among the participants. Since most students at the TSU Bachelor Educational Program in English philology are female, all respondents to the survey were female. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences or perspectives of male students

4. Results and Discussion

127 TSU students majoring in English philology participated in the survey. More than half of the respondents were first-year students, making up 54.3% (n=69), followed by third-year students at 22.8%

(n=29). Additionally, second-year students accounted for 13.4% (n=17), while fourth-year students represented the smallest group at 9.45% (n=12) (Figure 1)

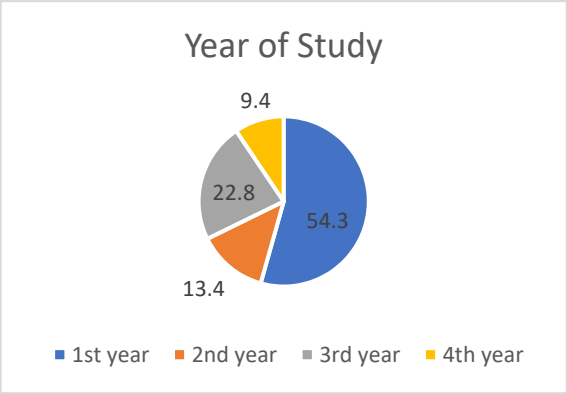


Figure 1. *Current Year of Study*

Based on the demographic profile of respondents, especially their year of study, students were asked to reflect on the frequency of their oral presentations. An equal proportion, 39.4% (n=50), reported giving oral presentations almost always or sometimes, while 16.5% (n=21) said they always had to deliver presentations. Only a small percentage of respondents admitted that they either never (0.8%, n=1) or rarely (3.9%, n=5) gave oral presentations (Figure 2).

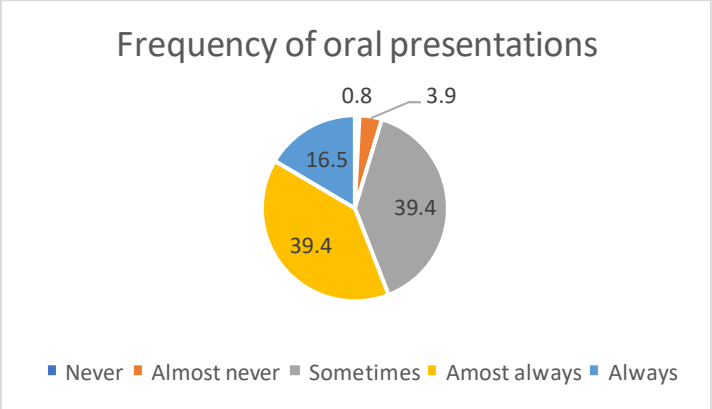


Figure 2: *Frequency of giving oral presentations*

The data analysis revealed that, as expected, most students (95.3%, n=121) made classroom oral presentations more or less frequently, irrespective of their year of study. Furthermore, the research participants were asked whether they felt nervous while delivering an oral presentation. The majority of the respondents admitted to having felt nervous more or less. For 25.2 % (n=32), oral presentations always caused anxiety, 19.7 % (n=25) stated that they felt nervousness almost constantly, and the vast majority of respondents (40%, n=51) felt anxiety sometimes. Only a small portion of the respondents (14.9%, n=19) claimed never or rarely to have experienced nervousness during oral presentations (Figure 3).

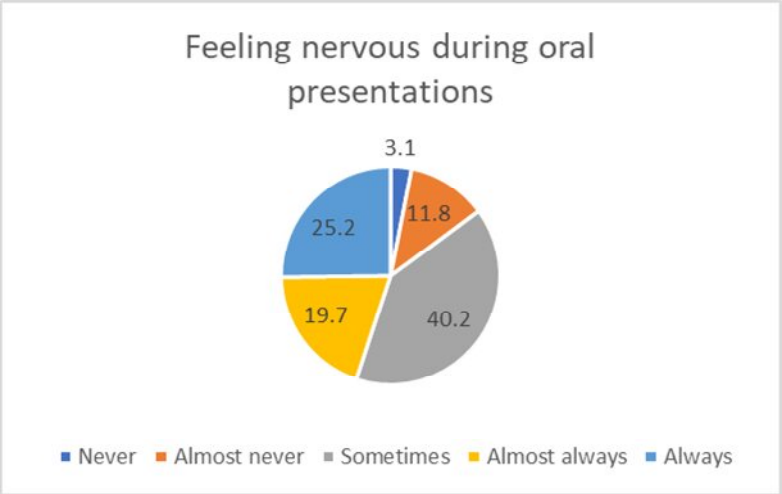


Figure 3. *Feeling nervous during oral presentations*

The survey showed that classroom oral presentations caused nervousness among students with varying frequencies (sometimes, almost always, and always) in the vast majority (85.1%), regardless of their year of study. This suggests that, no matter how often they had to give presentations, most still found the experience stressful. Additionally, an attempt was made to identify the main reason for students' anxiety. The data from the survey revealed that 59.1% (n=75) of students felt nervous because they disliked performing in front of an audience, 37.8% (n=48) were anxious about negative feedback, 9.4% (n=12) felt nervous due to lack of preparation, 6.3% (n=8) experienced anxiety because of their language skills, and 12.6% (n=16) cited other reasons. Only 11.8% (n=15) of respondents reported not feeling nervous during an oral presentation (see Figure 4).

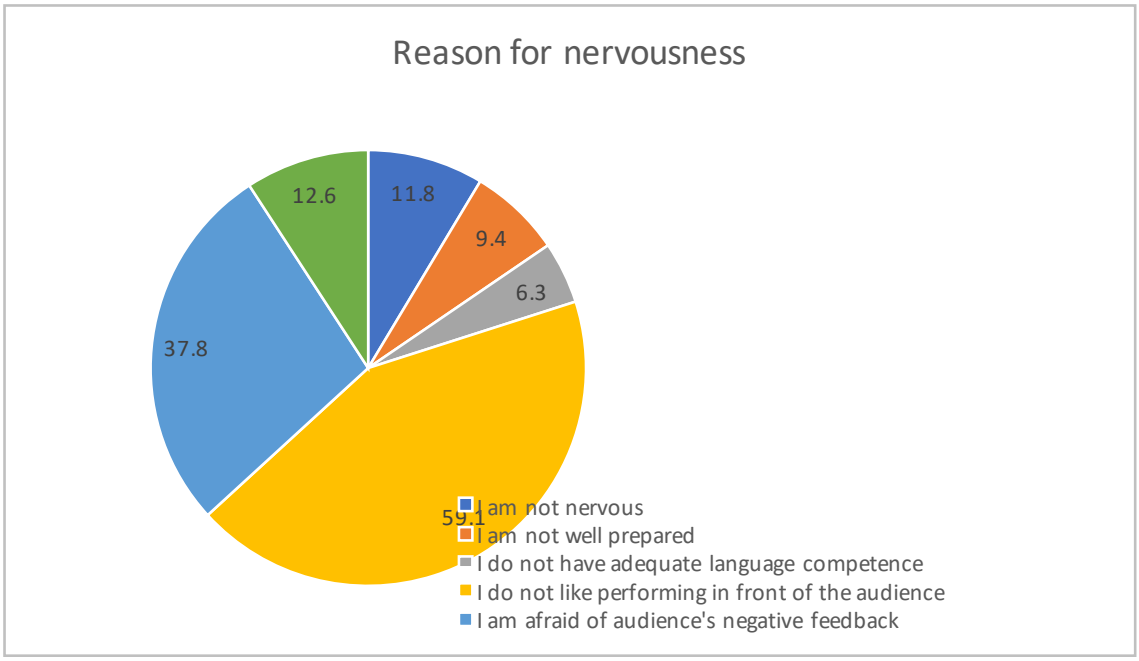


Figure 4. *Reason for nervousness during oral presentations*

Additionally, respondents who selected "other" had to specify their reason for nervousness. The survey revealed that respondents' concerns during oral presentations primarily focus on four main areas: fear of the audience, fear of an instructor/professor, the level of preparedness, and personal issues (Table 1).

Table 1. *Respondents concerns during oral presentations*

Fear of Audience	Fear of Instructor/Professor	Level of Preparedness	Personal issues
The number of audience members.	I think an instructor might not like it		I am afraid that I might fail
I feel stresses, I am afraid of audience's negative comments.	I worry whether a lecturer will like it or not		I have complexes
I am afraid of performing in front of the audience.	I am nervous about how an instructor will grade me.		I feel tensed. I am very emotional.
I am nervous that I might not be interesting enough for the audience.			
I am afraid of other people			

The analysis of the survey data reveals that most students experienced some kind of anxiety during oral presentations, with fear of audience judgment and negative feedback being the most significant factors. This highlights the importance of a supportive environment in educational settings, where the focus should be on encouraging and educating the audience to give positive feedback. Additionally, the data show that public speaking anxiety during oral presentations is caused by both external and internal pressures, such as fear of the audience or the instructor, the student's level of preparedness, and personal issues. The questionnaire also asked respondents whether they pay attention to backchannel signals from the audience during oral presentations. The majority, 94.4% (n=119), responded positively, admitting that they almost always or sometimes pay attention to the audience's verbal and non-verbal backchannels. Only a small percentage, 4.6% (n=7), responded negatively (Figure 5).

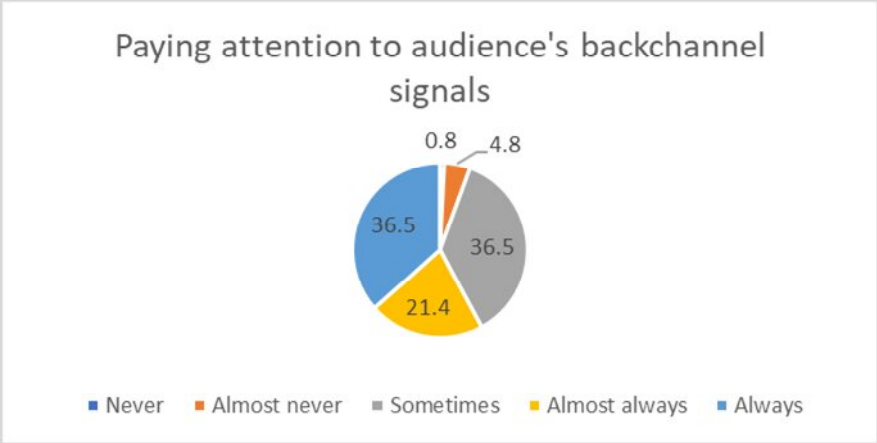
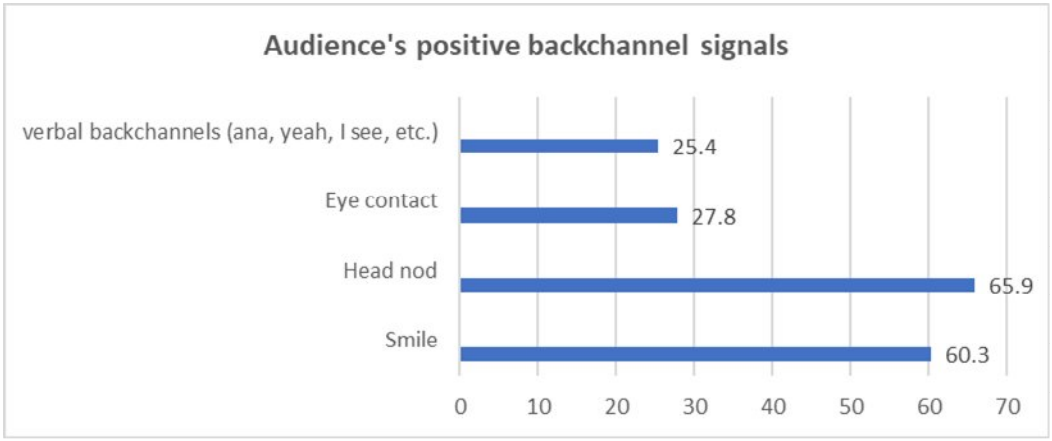


Figure 5. *Paying attention to audience's backchannel signals*

The survey also aimed to identify the audience's backchannel signals that positively influence a speaker. The results showed that, for most respondents, 65.9% (n=83) found nods most effective, 60.3%

(n=76) said a smile from the audience positively influenced them, 27.8% (n=35) considered eye contact important, and 25.4% (n=32) believed verbal backchannels (aha, yes, etc.) were effective (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Audience's positive backchannel signals*



The analysis of the survey results indicates that non-verbal signals, especially nodding (65.9%) and smiling (60.3%), are the most effective backchannel signals for positively influencing a speaker. Additionally, through an open-ended question, the questionnaire asked respondents to add any other verbal or non-verbal backchannel signals used by the audience that positively affect a speaker. They identified audience applause as a beneficial backchannel signal impacting them. Finally, respondents were asked to select the verbal and non-verbal backchannel signals that negatively affect a speaker. The vast majority of respondents (68.3%, n=86) chose audience members talking to each other as such a backchannel signal; frowning had an adverse effect on 26.2% (n=33), while head shaking and gazing in different directions were negatively rated by 24.6% (n=31). Verbal backchannels, such as "no," "I do not think so," etc., were found to be stressful for 17.5% (n=22), and finally, 4.8% (n=6) of respondents stated that other backchannels negatively affected them as speakers (Figure 7).

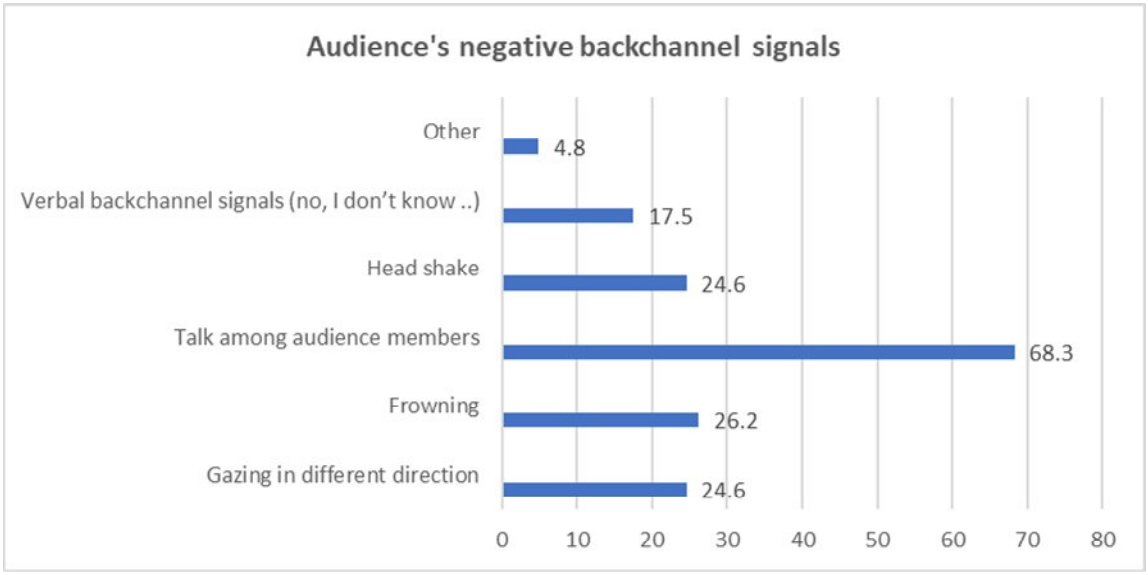


Figure 7. *Audience's negative backchannel signals*

Once again, the questionnaire asked respondents, through open-ended questions, to comment on any other verbal or nonverbal backchannel signals used by the audience that negatively affect a speaker. They identified using mobile phones as the signal that affected them negatively.

Therefore, the analysis of the survey results indicates that speakers are more affected by nonverbal backchannel signals (nod, smile, shake, frowning, eye contact, gazing elsewhere), whether positively or negatively. This is likely because speakers cannot hear the audience members' signals, but it is easier to see them. As a result, speakers tend to pay more attention to the audience's nonverbal backchannel signals.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

As a result of the empirical data analysis, which included 127 student responses, the following inferences can be made:

a) The vast majority of respondents (95.3% majoring in English philology at TSU) confirmed that they must give oral presentations in various courses. This finding highlights the importance of understanding and supporting students' experiences during oral presentations.
b) The survey revealed that classroom oral presentations are quite stressful for most students (85.1%), regardless of their year of study. This suggests that public speaking anxiety is not limited to first-year students but persists; therefore, creating a comfortable atmosphere for students is essential.
c) Many students face some level of anxiety during oral presentations, with fear of audience judgment and negative feedback identified as the most significant factors. This highlights the importance of fostering a supportive environment in educational settings and encourages the audience to focus on giving positive feedback. Instructors should educate students about how audience behaviour impacts them and promote giving constructive and positive feedback.
d) Speakers pay close attention to their audience, particularly their backchannels. The survey data analysis shows that nonverbal signals, especially nodding (65.9%) and smiling (60.3%), are the most effective forms of backchannel signals. Classroom activities should include mini-activities where students practice giving and receiving positive audience feedback.

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