CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research by outlining the background and rationale of the study. It presents the research questions, aims of the research, significance of the research, scope of the research, and definition of key terms. Through these sections, the chapter provides a foundation for understanding the importance of investigating verbal and non-verbal backchannels and their contribution to promoting oral interaction in EFL classroom settings.

1.1 Rationale

Oral interaction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms is the main space for students to practice their speaking skills, convey ideas, and negotiate meaning. However, the quality of oral interaction is not only determined by the speaker, but also by the listener's responses during the conversation. At this point, verbal and non-verbal backchannels become an important issue because brief responses (verbal) and body language (non-verbal) can make interactions feel more supportive and encourage the continuation of conversation. In line with Hu & Wang (2023), EFL students show different levels of willingness to communicate (WTC); some students actively seek opportunities to speak, while others tend to avoid and choose to remain silent.

Conceptually, the term backchannel was pioneered by Victor H. Yngve (1970) to describe signals from listeners that appear while the speaker still has the floor, while Nebieridze (2025) expands on backchannels as feedback signals that can be verbal or non-verbal. In conversation studies, backchannels are understood as listener responses that can be verbal or non-verbal/visual. For example, verbal backchannels can be short utterances such as “yeah/okay,” while non-verbal backchannels can be facial expressions, nods, and gestures that indicate the listener's attention. Therefore, this study consistently uses the terms verbal and non-verbal backchannels so that the focus of the study is in line with the title, namely the two modes of listener response that appear in EFL classroom discourse.

From an interactional function perspective, verbal and non-verbal backchannels serve as markers of engagement and help facilitate the flow of

conversation, including turn-taking coordination. According to Blomsma et al. (2024), the timing aspect of backchannels is crucial; the duration/timing of nods can influence how the signal is interpreted in interaction. Blomsma et al. (2024) also mention the existence of backchannel opportunity points (BOPs), which are specific moments when listener responses are more "invited" to appear. This confirms that the emergence of verbal and non-verbal backchannels needs to be observed in natural interactions, as their patterns and functions are closely related to the context of the conversation.

The urgency of this research is even more relevant because oral activities in EFL are often accompanied by psychological pressure. Mardiningrum & Ramadhani (2022) report that nervousness and audience factors are among the challenges that arise in oral presentation activities in the EFL context. In line with this, Nebieridze (2025) emphasizes that research on presentations/oral activities often focuses on delivery techniques, even though the role of the audience through verbal and non-verbal feedback signals for example, brief verbal responses and non-verbal reactions such as eye contact, nodding, smiling is related to nervousness, self-confidence, and the presenter's performance. In other words, verbal and non-verbal backchannels are not merely "additions," but part of interactional support that has the potential to promote oral interaction.

From a pedagogical perspective, teachers' communication behaviours also contribute to student engagement in classroom communication. Hu & Wang (2023) showed that teachers' immediacy behaviours (verbal and non-verbal) significantly affect students' WTC and academic engagement. They also emphasized that when the psycho-affective distance between teachers and students is minimized, students tend to be more relaxed to participate and initiate conversations. In the more specific non-verbal domain, Kennedy et al. (2024) report that, observationally, teacher nodding is associated with student comprehension, interest, and confidence. Here, the inspiration from Wahyuni et al. (2025) can be understood briefly: they emphasize that non-verbal communication supports understanding and engagement, but is sometimes still overlooked in teaching practice.

Although research on backchannels has developed, focused and detailed mapping of verbal and non-verbal backchannels in EFL classroom discourse

especially regarding the types that emerge and how they contribute to the promotion of oral interaction still needs to be strengthened. Furthermore, backchannel behaviour tends to be varied and "idiosyncratic," so it cannot be easily assumed to be uniform across individuals or interaction situations (Blomsma et al., 2024).

Therefore, this study is consistently directed at the title and research questions: examining the contribution of verbal and non-verbal backchannels in promoting oral interaction, identifying the types of verbal backchannels most frequently used by students and teachers, and mapping the types of non-verbal backchannels that appear in EFL classroom discourse.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What types of verbal backchannels are most frequently used by students and teachers during classroom interaction?
2. What types of non-verbal backchannels occur in EFL classroom discourse?
3. How do verbal and non-verbal backchannels contribute to the promotion of oral interaction in the EFL classroom?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To identify the most frequently used types of verbal backchannels produced by students and teachers during classroom interaction.
2. To describe the types of non-verbal backchannels that occur in EFL classroom discourse.
3. To examine how verbal and non-verbal backchannels contribute to promoting oral interaction in the EFL classroom.

1.4 Scope of the Research

This study is limited to the examination of verbal and non-verbal backchannels that appear in EFL classroom discourse, particularly during oral interaction. The main focus is on how backchannels appear, what forms they take, and how they support the continuity of interaction.

Methodologically, this study uses a qualitative approach with the main data source being recorded classroom observations, which are then transcribed for analysis as classroom discourse. The research participants include teachers and

students, with the unit of analysis being interaction segments that show the emergence of verbal and non-verbal backchannels.

To complement the observational data, this study also used an open-ended questionnaire for students to capture their perceptions of verbal interaction experiences and listener responses in the classroom, as well as interviews with teachers to obtain contextual explanations of interaction practices and pedagogical considerations. This study is not aimed at quantitatively measuring improvements in speaking ability or comparing the effectiveness of specific teaching methods, but rather at mapping and understanding the phenomenon of verbal and non-verbal backchannels in EFL classroom interactions.

1.5 Significance of the Research

Theoretically, this study is relevant to enriching the study of classroom discourse and pragmatics in the context of EFL, especially since verbal and non-verbal backchannels are an important part of the conversation mechanism (listener responses) that are often considered minor but play a role in the smoothness of interaction and the formation of listener engagement. The focus on two modes (verbal and non-verbal) is also important because classroom interactions are multimodal: meaning is constructed not only through words, but also through bodily signals that accompany conversation.

Practically, the results of this study have the potential to provide input that can be directly understood by EFL teachers, for example, to recognize the types of verbal and non-verbal backchannels that most often appear, understand when listener responses usually occur, and how these responses can keep the interaction flow more active. Ultimately, the findings of this study can support efforts to create a more engaging classroom environment and encourage more students to engage in oral interaction.

In terms of academic relevance, this research is in line with the needs of EFL studies, which not only assess speaking “output” but also examine the interaction processes that keep students engaged in conversation. By limiting the study to verbal and non-verbal backchannels in accordance with the title and research questions, this research is expected to provide a focused, measurable

contribution that does not stray into aspects outside the realm of oral interaction in EFL classrooms.