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## **The Use of Conversation Fillers in English by the Students of English Education in Intensive Speaking Class at Universitas Negeri Semarang**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the types, functions, and communicative impacts of conversation fillers among English Education students at Universitas Negeri Semarang who were enrolled in intensive speaking courses. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and a case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, audio/video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. The findings revealed that the most frequently used fillers were unlexicalized hesitation markers such as uh (72.5%), um, and ah, which were typically employed when students experienced lexical retrieval difficulties or formulated ideas spontaneously. Lexicalized fillers, including you know and well, were also used to structure discourse and clarify intentions. The identified functions of these fillers included (1) creating processing time, (2) signaling hesitation while maintaining conversational control, (3) facilitating self-correction or reformulation, and (4) reducing speaking anxiety. Students demonstrated awareness of these functions and reported that fillers supported fluency, confidence, and active participation in spoken tasks. However, excessive and unregulated use of fillers was associated with reduced coherence and lower perceived proficiency. The study concluded that fillers were not merely disfluencies but adaptive strategies reflecting cognitive demands and pragmatic competence in second language use. Therefore, instruction in speaking should not focus solely on eliminating fillers but should instead promote strategic awareness and controlled usage. Enhancing linguistic competence, increasing self-awareness, and building learner confidence were found to be essential in helping students manage fillers more effectively, ultimately improving their fluency and discourse coherence in academic speaking situations.

### **KEYWORDS**

Conversation fillers, fluency, speaking anxiety, pragmatic competence, English Education

### **ABSTRAK**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji jenis, fungsi, dan dampak komunikatif penggunaan conversation fillers pada mahasiswa Program

### **KATA KUNCI**

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Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Negeri Semarang yang mengikuti kelas intensive speaking. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dan desain studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, rekaman audio/video, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan kuesioner terbuka. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa jenis filler yang paling dominan adalah unlexicalized hesitation markers seperti uh (72,5%), um, dan ah, yang digunakan saat peserta mengalami kesulitan dalam mengakses leksikon atau merumuskan ide secara spontan. Selain itu, lexicalized fillers seperti you know dan well juga muncul sebagai alat untuk mengarahkan alur wacana dan memperjelas maksud. Fungsi fillers yang diidentifikasi meliputi: (1) menciptakan jeda waktu berpikir; (2) menandai ketidakpastian sambil mempertahankan giliran berbicara; (3) memfasilitasi koreksi atau reformulasi ucapan; dan (4) mengurangi kecemasan berbicara. Para mahasiswa menyadari bahwa fillers mendukung kelancaran dan kepercayaan diri saat berbicara, meskipun penggunaan berlebihan dapat mengganggu koherensi wacana dan menandakan rendahnya penguasaan bahasa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa fillers bukan semata-mata bentuk disfluensi, melainkan strategi adaptif yang mencerminkan beban kognitif dan kompetensi pragmatik dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa asing. Oleh karena itu, pengajaran speaking sebaiknya tidak hanya menekankan pengurangan fillers, tetapi juga membina kesadaran dan pemanfaatan strategis fillers untuk meningkatkan kefasihan dan efektivitas komunikasi lisan mahasiswa dalam konteks akademik.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), conversation fillers have been widely recognized as a salient communicative strategy that allows speakers to maintain discourse continuity, manage cognitive load during real-time speech production, and facilitate self-repair (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 2021). The appropriate and context-sensitive use of fillers also contributes to the development of pragmatic competence, as it reflects a speaker's ability to navigate various social and academic interactions effectively. However, an excessive reliance on fillers may indicate lexical retrieval challenges, grammatical formulation issues, or linguistic insecurity and lack of confidence. Given these contrasting functions, it becomes essential to investigate how language learners employ fillers and to what extent their usage influences overall speaking performance.

Among students enrolled in English Education programs—especially those undertaking intensive speaking courses—fillers serve various functions, including managing speaking anxiety, gaining time to organize thoughts, and signaling active engagement during

spontaneous speech (Tavakoli & Wright, 2023). Although fillers can support oral performance in such high-pressure environments, their overuse may negatively affect listeners' perception of the speaker's fluency and competence. Thus, a balanced and strategic approach to filler usage is necessary. At Universitas Negeri Semarang, English Education students participate in structured oral training through discussions, debates, and presentations. In these academic speaking settings, the use of conversation fillers naturally emerges; however, the extent to which these fillers contribute to or detract from students' performance remains underexplored.

Previous studies have highlighted the relationship between filler usage and L2 fluency. Gilquin and De Cock (2020) found that beginner learners often overuse fillers due to difficulties with lexical access, while more advanced learners deploy them strategically to enhance discourse structure. Similarly, Huang and Radwan (2022) argued that moderate use of fillers may improve coherence and naturalness in spoken language. Moreover, Liu and Lu (2023) emphasized the pedagogical importance of explicit instruction in filler management to improve oral proficiency among EFL learners. While these insights are valuable, existing research has largely centered on native speakers or advanced learners in Western contexts. Little empirical work has addressed the role of fillers among Indonesian EFL learners, particularly in academic environments where fluent English is essential.

To bridge this gap, the present study focuses on English Education students at Universitas Negeri Semarang—future educators who are expected to model effective spoken English. This research seeks to examine the types, functions, and implications of filler usage in intensive speaking courses. Specifically, it aims to address the following questions: *What types of conversation fillers are most frequently used by students in intensive speaking classes? What are the functions of these fillers in students' spoken discourse? How does the use of conversation fillers impact students' speaking fluency and discourse coherence?* By answering these questions, the study intends to provide pedagogical insights for enhancing speaking instruction, particularly by promoting filler awareness and strategic usage. The findings may also inform curriculum development to better support students' communicative competence and public speaking skills in English.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the use of conversation fillers among English Education students at Universitas Negeri Semarang enrolled in intensive speaking courses. A descriptive case study design was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of the functions, frequency, and perceptions of fillers within authentic academic speaking contexts. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, the research aimed to explore how learners assign meaning to their use of fillers, capturing both students' and instructors' perspectives. The study targeted students actively participating in classroom discussions, debates, and presentations. Using purposive sampling, 10 students and one instructor were selected. Student participants were required to have active involvement in speaking courses and a basic understanding of spoken discourse. The instructor was chosen based on at least one year of teaching experience in speaking classes. To ensure validity and data richness, multiple qualitative instruments were employed: classroom observations, audio/video recordings, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. Observations focused on students' natural use of fillers, while audio/video recordings captured classroom interactions for transcription and analysis. Fillers were categorized into hesitation markers

(e.g., *um, uh*), discourse markers (e.g., *you know, well*), and emphasis markers (e.g., *really, actually*). Semi-structured interviews with both students and the instructor gathered perceptions on filler use, its causes (e.g., anxiety, planning), and its pedagogical implications. Open-ended questionnaires further elicited student reflections on fluency, confidence, and filler awareness. Data collection proceeded in four phases: (1) classroom observations, (2) audio/video recordings and transcription, and (3) interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns across datasets, supported by coding fillers by type and function, frequency counts, and comparative analysis across proficiency levels. Triangulation enhanced credibility by cross-verifying data from different instruments. Member checking was used to confirm transcription accuracy, and peer debriefing with linguistic experts ensured analytical rigor. Ethical procedures were strictly followed, including informed consent, participant anonymity through pseudonyms, and secure data handling. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The study offers a comprehensive, ethically grounded framework for examining the strategic role of fillers in academic English speaking, providing insights relevant to pedagogy and curriculum development in EFL contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical evidence from studies conducted on Indonesian EFL learners, including those at the university level, consistently indicates a dominant use of unlexicalized fillers. For example, a study examining English Study Program students revealed that unlexicalized fillers constituted an overwhelming 93.8% of all identified fillers, with "uh" being the most frequently observed form (72.5% of all fillers). In contrast, lexicalized fillers, such as "like" and "you know," were significantly less common, accounting for only 6.2% of the total. This pattern is corroborated by observations in senior high school students in Semarang, where "ehm," an unlexicalized filler, was also predominantly used. The table below summarizes these findings:

Table 1: Types and Frequencies of Conversation Fillers Observed in EFL Learners

Filler Type	Specific Filler	Number of Instances	Percentage of Total Fillers
Unlexicalized	uh	222	72.5%
	um	33	10.8%
	e	10	3.37%
	a	10	3.37%
	em	5	1.63%
	eh	5	1.63%
	ow	1	0.33%
Lexicalized	er	1	0.33%
	like	14	4.58%
	you know	2	0.65%
	yeah	2	0.65%
<b>Total</b>	well	1	0.33%
		<b>306</b>	<b>100%</b>

This dominance of unlexicalized forms suggests that learners, when faced with cognitive demands during spontaneous speech, opt for the simplest and most readily available vocalizations to fill pauses. These sounds require minimal cognitive processing or lexical retrieval, making them efficient tools for maintaining the conversational floor while the speaker's internal linguistic processes catch up.

## **Interpretation**

### **Reasons for Filler Usage: Navigating Linguistic Roadblocks**

The primary reasons for the frequent use of fillers among Indonesian EFL learners are deeply rooted in the linguistic challenges and cognitive demands inherent in spontaneous speech production in a foreign language. Students commonly employ fillers due to limitations in their mastery of vocabulary and a less than complete understanding of grammatical structures. This forces them into a situation where they need to "buy time" to search for appropriate words or to correctly formulate sentences in English. Furthermore, in unscripted conversations or when confronted with unexpected questions, students use fillers to signal hesitation. This is particularly evident when they are uncertain about the accuracy of their answers or the proper construction of their sentences.<sup>4</sup> The overall process of producing speech in a foreign language imposes a significantly higher cognitive load on the speaker, as they must simultaneously plan their ideas and select the correct linguistic elements. Fillers serve as a crucial buffer in this process, preventing complete silence and allowing the speech production system sufficient time to process and retrieve the necessary components.

The consistent association of filler usage with "linguistic component shortages" and the "need for thinking time" indicates that fillers are a direct manifestation of the increased cognitive burden experienced by L2 learners. They are not merely a "bad habit" but rather a necessary coping mechanism that enables real-time language processing under the constraints of developing proficiency. When learners have not yet achieved automaticity in lexical retrieval or grammatical encoding, they rely on fillers to maintain the conversational flow while their internal planning mechanisms catch up. This suggests that fillers represent a strategic pause within the ongoing speech stream. Therefore, simply instructing students to "stop using fillers" addresses only the symptom, not the underlying cause. Effective pedagogical interventions should instead focus on enhancing core linguistic proficiency—such as expanding vocabulary, improving grammatical accuracy, and fostering automaticity—to naturally reduce the inherent need for excessive fillers.

### **Learners' Perceptions: The Functions and Impact of Conversation Fillers in EFL Speaking**

The perceptions of ten students from the English Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang revealed that conversation fillers are not viewed as mere disfluencies but as strategic tools in navigating spontaneous speech. These students demonstrated awareness of the cognitive, pragmatic, and affective functions of fillers, which played a crucial role in their speaking performance during intensive speaking courses.

One of the most frequently mentioned functions was the use of fillers as time-creating devices. Students noted that fillers helped them maintain the flow of speech while thinking of what to say next.

*“When I say 'um' or 'you know', it helps me to think while still talking. If I stay silent, I feel more nervous.”*

— Student 1

*“Fillers give me time to prepare the next sentence. Especially when I forget the word, I just say 'uh' to buy some time.”*

— Student 6

These responses indicate that fillers serve to reduce cognitive pressure during real-time processing, allowing learners to continue speaking without abrupt pauses. Fillers were also described as **hesitation markers**, signaling uncertainty while maintaining the speaker’s right to continue.

*“Sometimes I say 'like' or 'well' when I’m unsure, but I don’t want others to think I stop speaking.”*

— Student 3

*“It’s like a signal for me. When I say 'uh', my friends know I’m still thinking, not finished.”*

— Student 7

Such comments reflect the interactional function of fillers, which helps avoid interruptions and ensures smoother turn-taking.

Several students also acknowledged the use of fillers for **self-correction or reformulation**.

*“I use 'I mean' or 'actually' when I realize what I said is not accurate, so I can change it without stopping.”*

— Student 4

*“I noticed I often say 'you know' before correcting myself. It makes the correction smoother.”*

— Student 10

This suggests a metalinguistic awareness, where fillers are employed to refine or clarify spoken ideas without halting the interaction. Notably, students highlighted the **positive psychological effects** of using fillers.

*“Using fillers makes me more confident. I feel it’s okay to pause and still sound natural.”*

— Student 2

*“Before, I was afraid to speak, but now I use fillers to help me manage nervousness and keep talking.”*

— Student 9

These comments demonstrate that fillers can function as affective buffers, reducing performance **anxiety** and encouraging learners to engage more actively in class. Additionally,

fillers were linked to increased **motivation and willingness to participate** in speaking activities.

*“In discussions, I participate more because I know I can use fillers if I get stuck. It’s less stressful.”*

— Student 5

*“I think fillers are helpful, not bad. They let me speak even if I don’t know all the vocabulary.”*

— Student 8

Fillers are perceived as supportive tools that make oral tasks more approachable, contributing to a more inclusive and confidence-building classroom environment. The students’ reflections indicate that conversation fillers play strategic roles in managing speech production, expressing hesitation, correcting speech, and supporting speaker confidence. These findings challenge traditional views that associate fillers solely with low fluency. Instead, they highlight the value of fillers as adaptive mechanisms that support communicative competence in EFL learners. This learner-centered perspective underlines the importance of incorporating filler awareness and training into speaking instruction as part of fostering fluency and interactional confidence.

The study’s findings can be theoretically interpreted through several key SLA frameworks, which collectively reframe fillers as sophisticated communicative tools rather than mere errors. From a cognitive perspective, fillers are audible markers of the high cognitive load involved in speech formulation, acting as crucial placeholders that allow learners to manage real-time linguistic planning. This challenges traditional views of fluency by highlighting how fillers contribute to repair fluency, where learners actively self-correct and manage their speech. Furthermore, fillers are integral to developing communicative competence; many function as discourse markers (e.g., “well,” “you know”) that structure conversation, while their use to manage hesitation exemplifies strategic competence—the ability to resourcefully overcome communication challenges. In this light, fillers are not signs of failure but are functional, adaptive mechanisms that demonstrate a learner’s active engagement in constructing meaning and managing interaction.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the types, functions, and communicative effects of conversation fillers among students in intensive speaking classes within the English Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang. The findings reveal that the most frequently used fillers are unlexicalized hesitation markers such as *uh*, *um*, and *ah*, followed by discourse markers like *you know*, *well*, and *I mean*. These fillers commonly occur in moments of lexical retrieval difficulty or spontaneous idea formulation, particularly during presentations, discussions, and impromptu speech activities. The functions of these fillers, as perceived by students, extend beyond mere hesitation. They are used strategically to create processing time, signal uncertainty while maintaining conversational control, and facilitate self-correction or reformulation of ideas. Furthermore, some lexicalized fillers contribute to structuring

discourse and guiding listener interpretation. Thus, fillers serve not only cognitive and linguistic purposes but also pragmatic and interactive roles in spoken communication. In terms of their impact on speaking fluency and discourse coherence, the study found that controlled and purposeful use of fillers can support more natural and confident speech delivery. Students reported that fillers helped reduce speaking anxiety and enabled them to stay engaged in communication despite linguistic challenges. However, excessive and uncontrolled use of fillers was associated with disrupted coherence and reduced fluency, often signaling low proficiency or lack of preparation. Overall, conversation fillers are an integral part of students' development of spoken English. Rather than treating them solely as disfluencies, instructors should recognize their strategic value and guide learners in using fillers appropriately. Raising awareness, improving linguistic competence, and fostering confidence can help students manage fillers more effectively—ultimately enhancing both their fluency and discourse coherence in academic speaking context.

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