

## THE USE OF FILLER WORDS IN ORAL EFL STUDENTS' PRESENTATION

Wini Ranti, Wahyu Nur Azizah and Nurul Ilmi Mufidah

State University of Malang, Malang  
[wini.ranti.2202218@students.um.ac.id](mailto:wini.ranti.2202218@students.um.ac.id)

---

**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the types and functions of fillers in presentations of English as a foreign language. This study used a qualitative method by analysing students' oral presentations. The participants in this study were 10 English students at Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. The data collected were the audio recording and interview. The audio recording of the participants discovered when making presentations and then the data is transcribed. After that, the participants conducted interviews in order to get more in-depth information to answer research questions. Both Rose's (1998) theory of filler types and Stanstrom's (1994) theory of filler functions were applied to the transcriptions' analysis. The findings of this study indicate that: (1) The type of filler that was often used by students is non-lexical filler (em, hmm, uhh), followed by lexical filler (so, well, I mean), and (2) The function of students using filler was to make time, hesitation, empathy, mitigation, and editing terms. The function most often used by students was that they provided a time delay or they were thinking about the sentence to be spoken next.

**Keywords:** Filler words, oral presentation, EFL classroom

### INTRODUCTION

There are several researchers who have conducted research about fillers. Fillers are known as sounds or words or phrases that can appear anywhere in speech and can be removed from speech without causing any changes (Baalen, 2001). In line with that, Bygate (as cited in Santos et al., 2016) explains that fillers are expressions of certain sounds like well, erm, hmm, I mean which are used in speech to fill in pauses. Speakers often use these expressions to create delays when communicating, which allows them to continue the conversation. Therefore, these expressions are not part of the main message conveyed by the speaker. Although there is no meaning in the fillers, speakers often use them as a strategy when communicating. Fillers are used, for instance, to imply that speakers are looking for a word, deciding what to say next, or whether they want to hold or relinquish the floor (Clark and Trees 2002).

English is primarily taught in schools in Indonesia and is a foreign language. Therefore, Indonesians rarely use English when communicating on a daily basis. Thus, people often experience problems when interacting with this foreign language. Then they will try to find a strategy to achieve the communication goals and keep the communication smooth. Celce-Murcia (1995, 2007) said that there were several strategies carried out by the speaker, namely stalling for time or gaining time (fillers), repeats, gambits, and hesitation devices (example: repeating what the other has said while thinking). Fillers play a crucial role in communication tactics, such as filling pauses (example: er, emm, eh...), self-correcting (example: I mean...), hesitating (example: what is that...), and asking for assistance (example: what is the English of..., etc.). Mahendra and Bram (2019) stated that in terms of introducing themes, grabbing students' attention, providing directions, looking for words, and reinforcing and confirming ideas, the commonly mentioned fillers all have advantages. Afriyanti and Andini (2020) claimed

that many students use fillers because they have difficulty comprehending and developing the content, fillers are also frequently used throughout the teaching stage.

Most research focused on English fillers used by native English speakers. Research conducted by Nur et al (2019) investigated the use of filler in Valentino Rossie's speech. In addition, Kharismawan (2017) also investigates the use of fillers in Barack Obama's speech. Oktarin (2020) also found fillers, but in this study, they were categorized according to the notion of lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. In Aldawsari's research (2021) entitled "A Corpus-based Study of the Use of Pause Fillers Among British English Speakers" said that sociolinguistic characteristics like age and gender, which are believed to be correlated with advancing age and better fluency in female speakers, influence the use of pause fillers among British English speakers.

From these several studies, it indicates that the research which talks about filler words especially in doing presentations is still under exploration. The researchers mostly take a look at different contexts and even the different participants. Students do not realise when and how to use fillers when they communicate. Therefore, researchers are interested in researching the use of fillers in the context of EFL in English classes especially in graduate level of education.

Based on the above background, this study focuses on investigating the way English students use filler at State University of Malang when they present the presentations in English class. This study is trying to solve two questions:

1. What type of fillers occur in oral presentations of Indonesian EFL learners?
2. What factors affect the learner in using fillers in oral presentation?

### **Literature Review**

A filler is a lexically meaningless word with vague discourse functions, other than to close a gap in a dialogue. It frequently happens to indicate hesitancy or care for control of a conversation as the speaker considers their next move (Fatimah, 2017). Fillers, also known as delaying or hesitating phenomena, are a frequently observed aspect of natural speech in which pauses or gaps develop while utterances are being produced (Santos & Mora 2017). Furthermore, Fitriati (2020), argued that especially in spontaneous speech, where speakers employed fillers to make the discourse appear natural and hold the floor, employing fillers in communications helps speakers enhance speaking naturalness and fluency. However, Nurrahmi and Sunra (2021) stated that the use of filler pauses in the presentation are bothered if the speaker often uses it, because it can distract the meaning of the presentation.

Fillers according to Santos (2017) has two types of pauses; silent pause (the silent breaks between words), and Filled pauses (the gaps filled by such expressions as um, er, hmm). Moreover, Unlexicalized filled pauses and lexicalized filled pauses are the two categories that Rose (1998) divides covered pauses into. Unlexicalized filled pauses, which can include ehm, uh, ee, ah, um, and other non-lexemes (non-words), are employed by speakers to show uncertainty while they consider what to say next. Lexicalized filled pauses, on the other hand, are fillers that take the form of words or brief sentences including yeah, you know, I mean. Fillers have diverse tasks depending on the speaker's context as hesitation techniques to fill communication gaps. According to Stenstrom (1994), fillers have five functions, such as hesitating, empathising, mitigating, editing terms, and time-creating devices. Hesitation are pauses that emerge in an utterance when a speaker is unsure how to use certain words, such as ee, uh, err, uhm, etc. Empathizing, which is used as attention-getting devices or empathising to check whether or not the listener pays attention. The expression such as well, you know, right, hey, etc. Next, filler as mitigating devices, which means to reduce utterances in order to hurt addressees' feeling (as a method of developing solidarity and courtesy). Additionally, fillers function as a phrase for editing that corrects speech flaws in the speaker's utterances, such as

-I mean, um, huh, etc. Following that, fillers are used to create time so that speakers can plan their following line of speech. The lexical repetition is the most common form.

There were several studies that have been done by some scholars according to the use of filler words. Fatimah (2017), on the study of fillers used in classroom interaction by lecturers and students highlighted the types of lexicalized and unlexicalized and the function of using it. The finding indicated that the lexicalized Fillers were frequently employed by the lecturer during class interactions. Meanwhile the students mostly used unlexicalized fillers. The percentage of the fillers function showed that the highest function of the lecturer and the students were the same, that was fillers used as a mark hesitation. The least amount of fillers that have been identified as editing terms currently exists. However, the study from Fitriati, et al. (2021) studied fillers words that integrated to the communicative competence theory, indicating different results. They examined the frequent fillers word that was used by Master Students on their casual communication and found the students' tendency to utilize fillers as attention-getting strategies or to get the listener's involvement in what they are saying is shown by the filler's dominating use as an empathizer. It also serves as a reaction to let the speaker know when their message has been heard and understood..

Other scholars assumed gender and age also as factor of using fillers word, as Aldawsari (2021) conducted the study on investigating pause fillers and its relationship between age and gender among British English speakers, indicated that the used of pause filler influenced by sociolinguistic variable such as age and gender. This is considered to be related to female speakers' raised fluency and age-related changes. Furthermore, females and male tend to use fillers because of their age. Young people use fillers more frequently than old people. Moreover, nervousness becomes the first factor, then the thinking process or cognitive process as the second factor why they used fillers words (Afriyanti & Andini, 2020).

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

In this paper, the authors aim to understand more about the filler words that an EFL learner uses during giving a class presentation. Finding out what kind of filler words emerge and what kind of factors may cause the presence of fillers in that situation is the goal of this study. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the author is trying to provide examples of how this article might be put into practice. This was revealed by Kothari (2004) in his explanation of the definition of a descriptive study, that is as one that focuses on describing the qualities of a certain person or group. So far, this study uses data from EFL learners that are collected naturally and in-depth in a classroom context. That allows the researcher to draw detailed personal information and evaluate it (Creswell, 2003).

The participants are graduate EFL learners in the second semester of the English Department at Universitas Negeri Malang. This research was conducted for 2 weeks in the third week of March. The global data is produced to collect the data, thus, there is no age range and different gender determiner in this research.

### **Data collection**

The method of implementation is carried out using a sampling strategy. According to Sugiyono (2014), there are two types of sampling techniques: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. From the two types of sampling techniques that are available, non-probability sampling techniques are chosen in order to answer the goal of the study through accurate data. Thus, non-probability sampling is quite appropriate for this study's investigation.

The participants invited are 5 EFL learners in the second semester of master degree class. The participant is from 2nd semester in the course in the graduate program of the English Department in Universitas Negeri Malang. There is no specification from certain categories in

selecting the participant because this research wants to know in general about the participant without differentiate them. Another reason that the participants are only 5 is because those participants have already shown saturated data, thus the researcher thinks that it must be triangulated from the point of data source.

The instruments consist of an interview guide and audio recorder. There are three steps following the instruction to get the main data source, first selecting the candidates to be the participants and then they would be recorded while having their presentations. This recording session is intended to make it easier for researchers to analyze data from filler words that presenters have delivered. The data that is in the form of recording is about 10 to 15 minutes long.

The following step is that interview session. There are 5 questions related to the reason the participants use a filler. The deeper understanding of why the filler word can occur is answered from the interview session. The interview session is directly held after the participants deliver their presentation. This session is used to ensure that sufficient information would be obtained to answer the second research question in order to get deeper data through question and answer with the participants. Thus, audio recording and interviews are done on the same day.

The last step is transcribing the audio recording. Transcribe sessions help the researcher to know deeper about the way the participant used or even choose the filler words while conveying their thoughts in presentation. The data from this transcribe is put in the form of a table to make easy in grouping the frequency it appears from the participants. Observation is implemented while listening to the presentation in the classroom

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

#### The types of fillers used by students

To answer the first research question, the researchers analysed audio recordings of students presenting in class. Based on the results of the audio recordings, the results of this study indicate that students use lexical fillers more often when they make presentations. Filler types are divided into two, namely lexical and unlexicalized fillers (Rose, 1998). Meanwhile, lexical gaps are fillers in the form of short words or phrases. Unlexicalized filler is a pause that does not contain lexemes (not words) that speakers utter when they are in doubt and they are thinking about what they want to say next (Rose, 1998; Baalen, 2001). Ehm, uh, err, ee, ah, um are some examples of non-lexicalized pauses (Baalen, 2001). The table below shows the type and amount of filler that is often used by students:

**Table 1. Types and occurrence of fillers used by students**

No	Types of Fillers	Number
1	Lexicalized Fillers	187
2	Unlexicalized Fillers	112

Researchers have calculated the amount of filler from student presentations that have been transcribed. This was done to answer the first research question, namely the type of filler used by students during presentations.

**Table 2. Lexicalized fillers**

No	Types of Fillers	Number
1	Lexicalized Fillers	187
2	Unlexicalized Fillers	112

The table above is the result of the filler used by students during presentations. There are several words that students often say. The word "so, well, then, we know that" is the lexical filler that is most often used by students. Examples of lexical fillers:

- S1: So, we are from the last group, so we will discuss about...  
 S1: So this one is eee....  
 S1: and then we also have eemm priority competence  
 S2: And then we also have linguistic knowledge  
 S2: Okey, for the first competence is vocabulary  
 S2: Well, thank you for the time. So, let's move to the next material.  
 S2: We know that .....  
 S3: Alright, then ...  
 S4: So, the next is about  
 S4: Well, the keyword of ...  
 S5: And then for a sequential indicator eee...  
 S5: Yeah, here is the example of...  
 S5: So, yeah like I said before, macro ....  
 S5: We know that in different situations, we have different ...

**Table 3. Unlexicalized fillers**

No	Fillers
1	Eeee
2	Umm
3	Yaaa
4	Emmm
5	Aaaa

Based on the results of the audio recordings, table 3 shows that there are several unlexicalized filler words that are often spoken by students during class presentations. The words "eee and emm" are unlexicalized fillers that are most often used by students. Examples of unlexicalized fillers:

- S1: Eeee, We will cover this one emm...  
 S1: Eemm we use English for academic purposes, like ee learning ...  
 S2: Eee specific vocabulary is ...  
 S2: We use gestures, emm ...  
 S3: Eee the first is about ....

From this finding, the filler "eee" is often used by students to give a little pause and think about what to say next.

### **Factors Affecting Filler words**

In relation with the theory from Stenstrom (1994), there are five function of fillers word such as hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing terms, and time-creating devices, the result of this research showed that there are four factor that affecting fillers in students oral presentation, such as fillers as hesitation, empathizing, editing term or correcting, and terms creating devices. The result showed from the audio recording and interview as well, such as:

- S1: "Yes, I realize that when I use filler words, I usually use hmm, mmm, aaa, etc. to think about what to say next or sometimes to pause while talking."  
 S3: "while presenting, sometimes I do not realize that I automatically use filler words. I think that's okay. Usually, filler words appear when I don't know, or think what word to say next, or sometimes when I forget the vocabulary."

S5: "Yes, I'm aware that I often use filler words like well, so, and then, we know that, and also aaa. I use it because I want to pause, and to think about what sentence I should say next."

Those findings can be classify as:

### 1. Fillers as Hesitation

Based on the results from the recording and the interview the students showed that they used fillers like eee, emm, so, etc as pauses or when they hesitated to say something.

S4: "I use filler words as a pause, and to think about what sentence I should say next."

S2: Eee specific vocabulary is ...

S2: We use gestures, emm ...

S2: "I use word fillers, like eee, emm, as a pause for what word is suitable for what follows. and I say the word unconsciously"

S2: hmmm, we will, hmm.....

S1: with specific aaa, specific .....

S3: Eee the first is about ....

### 2. Fillers as Mitigating

Other findings showed that fillers used by the student as mitigation. This is to soften or mitigate the impact of a statement. For example, when the students want to express a strong opinion or make a bold statement, they might use a filler like "so" to make their statement less forceful.

S1: Yeah, here is the example of...

S4: So, yeah like I said before, macro ....

S4: "fillers"so" "to support my opinion"

### 3. Fillers as Editing Terms

The finding from the students showed that Fillers used to signal that the speaker is about to make a correction or clarification. For instance, the students might say "actually", or "we know that" or "I mean" before restating or refining a point.

S2: "I also often use actually, to justify what I've said."

S5: I am using "I mean" to correct what I have said before.

S4: We know that in different situations, we have different ...

S2: We know that .....

S3: Alright, then ...

S5: Yeah, here is the example of...

### 4. Fillers as Time-creating devices

The last finding was fillers that used to create time for the students to think or formulate their thoughts. For example, someone might say "well" or "so" to give themselves a moment to gather their ideas before continuing their train of thought.

S1: "the fillers"so " and "well " here I used to begin my presentation, to continue what to say next."

S1: So, we are from the last group, so we will discuss about...

S2: Well, thank you for the time. So, let's move to the next material.

S3: Well, the keyword of ...

S4: So, the next is about.....

## DISCUSSION

The result of this research is to find out the type of filler that is often used by students when presenting groups in front of the class. There are two types of filler used by students, namely lexicalized and unlexicalized filler. This is in line with the theory put forward by Rose

(1998) that there are two types of filler, namely lexicalized and unlexicalized filler. The results of this study, lexical filler is more often used by students than unlexicalized filler. Research conducted by Pamolango (2016) stated that participants use unlexicalized fillers more often. Therefore, the results of this study are not the same as this previous researcher.

Lexical fillers are fillers that are often used by students, but non-lexical fillers like "eee" are fillers that often appear. As the research conducted by Mukti & Wahyudi (2015), showed that this filler often occurs at the beginning of speech when the speaker wants to speak. Therefore this showed the readiness of the speaker to open the subject. Similar to the results of the research above, the word "ee" is often found at the beginning of speech. In addition, Juan (2006) also said that uhm, uh, err, ee, ah, um and other vocalisations that are classified as unlexicalized filled pauses are the sounds that are most often spoken and are the easiest to make when speaking.

Another finding of this research was to find out the factors affecting fillers words that were used by the students in their oral presentations. According to Stenstrom (1994) there are five functions of filler words, such as hesitating, mitigating, editing terms, and time creating devices. However this present research found that there are four factors that affect the students in using fillers in their oral presentation. Those are hesitating, that the fillers used to signal hesitation or uncertainty when the students' oral presentation, the word such as mmm, aa, hmm, etc. Mitigating, the filler to soften or mitigate the impact of a statement, for example so, yeah, kind of, etc. Editing terms, to signal that the speaker is about to make a correction or clarification, the word such as we know that, actually, then, alright, etc. The last was Time-creating devices, to create time for the speaker to think or formulate their thoughts, for example the use of so, well, aaaa, etc. Additionally, this research also discovered that the most frequent filler word used by students in their oral presentation was to reduce hesitation, then to create time to think of what to say next. Followed by fillers word as editing term, and the last was for mitigating the impact of their previous statement. Finally, these functions are not mutually exclusive and can overlap in their usage. The use of filler words can help speakers to maintain the flow of conversation and convey their intended meaning effectively.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the background information provided, it was evident that there were two research questions (RQs) which the researchers were interested in exploring, specifically those that dealt with the kinds of filler words that are used and why it may appear, particularly when learning English presentations. Filler words, as they are described, are distinctive in pragmatic research because they can also be categorized under second language acquisition.

Lexical and non-lexical words were the two categories of filler words discovered in this study, and they both connect to the theories offered by Rose (1998) and Baalen (2001). Accordingly, this study provides an explanation why the types that show up in this topic of discussion concurrently. It indicates that when only one type appears during the English presentation, there is no evidence of contrasting use. Even when one type is more prominent, two types can coexist and emerge together.

Interviews with the presenters were done to dig up more precise data to deepen the findings of the data from the tape. According to the findings of the interviews, four out of five theories (Stenstorm, 1994) exhibited a preference for or variables influencing the use of filler words in English presentations. The terms "hesitating," "mitigating," "editing terms," and "time creating devices" allude to these five elements.

The overall results of the research summarized in this paper support the assertion that making use of filler words sparingly or excessively might damage a speaker's credibility. The usage of infrequent words, anxiousness, and split attention are the main causes of these filler



words. Filler words can limit or threaten the listener's comprehension, thus undermining the speaker's authority. Speech that uses filler words sparingly is most effective. In other words, it shows the contrast result from the previous study, which shows that undergraduate students tend to use non-lexical filler, while this research is the opposite. It may conclude that the master degree tends to use the word as a filler rather than using a certain sound to fill the presentation time.

The implementation of this study provides some pedagogical implications. First, there will be a further description or illustration of the usage of filler words relying on the type and recognized factors that caused the phenomenon in question. Then, in order to support the theory that already exists that, in addition to having a bad interpretation, filler words can also have a positive connotation. This will be accomplished using implicit data by using the field of semantic theory. Second, to enhance how EFL students explicitly use positive and negative fillers so that they can use fillers correctly to make their speech sound natural. Additionally, it is predicted that this research will be able to help new researchers develop models and/or create new types of research papers, like semantic fields that aim to understand problems by looking for solutions in related fields of knowledge and meaning.

## REFERENCES

- Afriyanti, R., & Andini, D. S. (2020). Fillers Used by Male and Female Students in Practice Teaching Performance of Micro Teaching Class. *TELL-US Journal*, 6(1), 13-36. <https://doi.org/10.22202/tus.2020.v6i1.3541>
- Aliyah, S. L., Anggraini, R., & Hestrian, P. (2022). An Analysis of Fillers Used By Agnes Monica With Build Series' Interview. *Curricula : Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 6(2), 80-87. <https://doi.org/10.22216/curricula.v6i2.276>
- Creswell, John W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*. California: Sage Publications.
- Dr. Hamad Abdullah H Aldawsari. (2021). A Corpus-based Study of the Use of Pause Fillers Among British English Speakers. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 3(12), 09-16. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2021.3.12.2>
- Fatihurrahman, F. (2016). The use of fillers in thesis proposal presentations by Indonesian EFL learners (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim). <http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/id/eprint/4955>
- Fatimah, G. S. (2017). An Analysis of Fillers Used by Lecturer and Students in EFL Classroom Interaction. *JALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literacy)*, 1(2), 43-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.25157/jall.v1i2.1735>
- Fitriati, S. W., Mujiyanto, J., Susilowati, E., & Akmilia, P. M. (2021). The use of conversation fillers in English by Indonesian EFL Master's students. *Linguistic Research*, 38, 25-52. <https://doi.org/10.17250/khisli.38..202109.002>
- Mahendra, A. W., & Bram, B. (2019). Filler Utterances of Instructors in ELT Context. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 7(2), 45-61. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v7i2.999>
- Nurrahmi, I., Sahril, S., & La Sunra, L. S. (2021). Students' Filler in Academic Presentation Jeda Yang Digunakan Mahasiswa Dalam Presentasi Akademik. *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity & Social Studies*, 1(4). <http://eprints.unm.ac.id/id/eprint/25943>
- Nurwahyuningsih, P. et.al. (2019). ELT students' communication strategies in advanced speaking classroom activities. Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Negeri Makassar. [http://eprints.unm.ac.id/13222/1/%5BFX%5D\\_Artikel.pdf](http://eprints.unm.ac.id/13222/1/%5BFX%5D_Artikel.pdf)



Samar Ghanmi. (2022). Filler Words: The Definition and Their Communicative Functions, Arabic Language, Literature & Culture. Vol. 7(2) pp. 6-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.11648/j.allc.20220702.11>