



UNIVERSIDAD DE CUENCA

Facultad de Filosofía, Letras y Ciencias de la Educación

Carrera de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa

Analyzing Filler Words in Daily Conversations

Trabajo de titulación previo a la
obtención del Título de Licenciado
en Ciencias de la Educación en
Lengua y Literatura Inglesa

Autor: Carlos Andrés Guamán Arpi

C.I. 010620863

Correo electrónico: carlos.guaman0716@gmail.com

Director: Mgst. Verónica Rosalía Piedra Carrión

C.I. 0106044803

Cuenca-Ecuador

14-febrero-2020



Resumen

Esta investigación bibliográfica exploratoria tuvo como objetivo conocer si el uso de palabras de relleno beneficia o perjudica el proceso comunicativo, de igual manera se encontró que existen ciertas palabras de relleno más comunes que otras, las razones para emplearlos, las actitudes de los oyentes frente a su uso, y los espacios en los que se emplean. Después de analizar un total de 21 estudios se encontraron dos tipos de palabras de relleno utilizadas frecuentemente por los hablantes: rellenos lexicalizados y no-lexicalizados. El entorno y la audiencia juegan roles significativos para el uso de estas palabras. Las palabras de relleno tienden a ser lo primero en ser pronunciado durante las intervenciones de los hablantes, y en la mayoría de los casos empleados en situaciones informales. Las palabras de relleno fueron más utilizadas por los hablantes durante el uso de la lengua extranjera que de lengua nativa a pesar de su alta competencia. El uso de estas palabras particulares no se considera un acto descortés; sin embargo, es esencial usar la cantidad necesaria de rellenos e identificar a la audiencia de antemano para evitar malentendidos.

Palabras clave: palabras de relleno, pausas de relleno, vacilación, pausas, difluencias, discurso, marcadores sociolingüísticos, marcadores del discurso.



Abstract

This exploratory bibliographic research aimed to know if the use of filler words is beneficial or harmful to the communicative process, at the same time it was found that there are certain filler words more common than others, reasons to use them, attitudes of the listeners regarding their use, and the places in which they are used. After analyzing a total of 21 studies, two types of filler words frequently used by speakers were found: lexicalized and non-lexicalized fillers. The environment and the audience assumed significant roles for the use of these words. Filler words tend to be pronounced as the first word during the intervention of speakers, and in most cases, used in informal situations. The speakers of L2 use more filler words than speakers of L1 despite their high competence. The use of these particular words is not considered an impolite act; however, it is essential to use only the necessary amount of fillers and identify the audience previously to avoid misunderstandings.

Keywords: filler words, filled pauses, hesitation, pauses, disfluencies, speech, sociolinguistics markers, discourse markers.



Table of Contents

Resumen.....	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Cláusula de licencia y autorización para publicación en el Repositorio Institucional.....	7
Cláusula de Propiedad Intelectual.....	8
Introduction.....	9
Chapter I: Description of the Research	10
1.1 Background.....	10
1.2 Statement of the problem.....	11
1.3 Rationale.....	12
1.4 Research Questions.....	12
Chapter II: Theoretical Framework	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Communicative process involves filler words.....	13
2.3 What are filler words?	14
Chapter III: Literature Review	16
3.1 The most common fillers used by speakers.....	16
3.2 Reasons that explain the use of fillers	18
3.3 Filler words influence the comprehension of the listener.....	21
Chapter IV: Results	22
4.1 Analysis of the Results	22
Chapter V: Methodology.....	30



Chapter VI: Conclusions and Recommendations.....	31
6.1 Conclusions	31
6.2 Recommendations	33
References.....	34



List of tables

Table 1. The focus of the study according to the participants	23
Table 2. The most common fillers and their meanings.....	24
Table 3. Speakers' reasons for using filler words.....	26
Table 4. Listener's reactions towards speakers using filler words	28
Table 5. Filler words' settings	29



Cláusula de licencia y autorización para publicación en el Repositorio Institucional

Carlos Andrés Guamán Arpi, en calidad de autor y titular de los derechos morales y patrimoniales del trabajo de titulación “Analyzing Filler Words in Daily Conversations”, de conformidad con el Art. 114 del CÓDIGO ORGÁNICO DE LA ECONOMÍA SOCIAL DE LOS CONOCIMIENTOS, CREATIVIDAD E INNOVACIÓN reconozco a favor de la Universidad de Cuenca una licencia gratuita, intransferible y no exclusiva para el uso no comercial de la obra, con fines estrictamente académicos.

Asimismo, autorizo a la Universidad de Cuenca para que realice la publicación de este trabajo de titulación en el repositorio institucional, de conformidad a lo dispuesto en el Art. 144 de la Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior.

Cuenca, 14 de febrero de 2020

Carlos Andrés Guamán Arpi

C.I: 0106208630



Cláusula de Propiedad Intelectual

Carlos Andrés Guamán Arpi, autor del trabajo de titulación “Analyzing Filler Words in Daily Conversations”, certifico que todas las ideas, opiniones y contenidos expuestos en la presente investigación son de exclusiva responsabilidad de su autor.

Cuenca, 14 de febrero de 2020

Carlos Andrés Guamán Arpi

C.I: 0106208630



Introduction

Daily conversations are characterized by containing several marks of hesitation or fillers. Nevertheless, what are the most common fillers uttered by speakers during conversations? What are the reasons that explain their use, and how do these particular words influence on listeners' comprehension? The present paper examines data concerning filler words responding to these research questions.

Although the majority of the articles used for this analysis focus their attention on the speakers, there are also some investigations focused on the attitudes that listeners take when exposed to fillers usage. Filler words are monosyllabic pieces of language consisting of vocalic segments easy to be produced that cannot be related or linked with any other existing word (Belikova & White, 2009). Five filler words are the most frequent in different articles being considered as the most common among speakers: *uh*, *um*, *you know*, *like*, and *ok*; these words were present in several studies as the most relevant fillers uttered by speakers.

According to the studies examined, there are more positive than negative perceptions toward the use of fillers during speech production. Moreover, a listener's reactions tend to be positive when they are exposed to speakers emitting fillers (Bada 2010; Tottie 2014; Arciuli, Mallard, & Villar 2010) though there are certain negative attitudes towards the use of them, too (Navratilova 2015; Fox Tree 2007). Evidence for the respective analysis was recovered from different sceneries in which each investigation took place; these settings included laboratories, classrooms, and natural settings. These sets contribute significantly to evaluate the influence and role of the environment in the production of filler words, although some situations were planned for obtaining results.



Chapter I: Description of the Research

1.1 Background

It is important to indicate that researchers have focused their attention largely on speakers instead of listeners' comprehension. Freud focused his attention on interpretations of speech slips, forgetting words, replacement of intended words, and transpositions of sounds. He came up with psychoanalytic explanations for the mentioned slips; he described that extended silences and speech disturbances indicate anxiety (Freud, 1938). Although filler words have been subject to study for more than 65 years, little research has been carried out (Maclay & Osgood, 1959). The same authors found that each language has its own filler words.

The researchers Arciuli, Mallard, and Villar (2010) discovered that the participants employed filler words such as “um” as well as “like” in truth-telling situations instead of lying situations. Subsequently, Navratilova (2015) suggested two kinds of fillers; lexicalized “ok, I think, you know, right” and unlexicalized “eh, ehm, ee.” Unlexicalized fillers were most frequently used during speech production.

Clark and Fox Tree (2001), assumed that the usage of filler words could interfere positively or negatively with speech fluency, as well as the speakers' image. Fuller (2003) explained that DMs (discourse markers) “well” and “oh” are used in conversations, while DMs “y’know,” “like,” and “I mean” are used in interviews. Similarly, Fox Tree (2007) found that fillers were used when talking to friends in informal situations. Pfeifer and Bickmore (2009) concluded that fillers were produced as the first word during a speech while Vickov and Jakupčević (2017) analyzed the use of DMs in six non-native EFL teachers finding that “ok,” “so,” as well as “and” were used frequently.



Fehringer and Fry (2007) found a negative relationship between memory capacity and the production of speech; filled pauses were more recurrently used by L2 than L1 speakers. On the other hand, Fraundorf and Watson (2011) analyzed the fillers “uh” and “um,” demonstrating that these words affected memory and recall significantly during discourse. Results in a study obtained by Tottie (2014) showed that fillers were used most commonly in classrooms when difficult subjects were discussed. Likewise, Walker, Risko, and Kingstone (2014) demonstrated that talking to another person instead of a computer implies a higher rate of filler usage.

1.2 Statement of the problem

During these four years of learning the English Language at the University of Cuenca, I have noticed a particular and interesting feature when students and teachers talk; they make use of filler words such as um, amm, eee, right, like frequently. Some classmates use these fillers very often during their presentations, and in some cases, the recurrent usage of these words distract from the actual message that they try to convey. However, it is unknown whether these students are accurately using filler words since these types of words have not been explicitly analyzed in the classes.

“It has recently been acknowledged that teaching how to hesitate in speaking has been a neglected part of teaching” (Erten, 2014, p. 71). Most of the textbooks teachers follow in their lessons do not include activities to focus the student’s attention on the use of fillers as an oral strategy. Teachers, in general, think that filler words are part of speech that is naturally developed by the speaker during the learning process (Basurto, Hernández, & Irasema, 2016). The same authors state that although speakers unconsciously make use of fillers during their interventions, they are not able to explain the real function or meaning of these particular words.



1.3 Rationale

People probably would not notice filler words involved in conversations or discourses; they appear to be inexistent, without a purpose or significance. Nevertheless, there are some situations in which filler words are especially important for accurate communication. It is essential to understand that filler words form the lexicon of the individual and for that reason the purpose of this research is focused on knowing when and where it is appropriate to employ them since the situations are never the same.

Like any other word, fillers have functional and social significance, and it might be worth to know more about these common words, which play an important role in oral communication (Basurto, Hernández, & Irasema, 2016). To have an accurate communicative skill, people need to have higher knowledge about the use of fillers (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

1.4 Research Questions

This research analyzes different aspects the use of filler words in daily conversations. For this reason, this investigation attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are the most commonly used fillers by speakers?
- Which are the reasons that explain the use of fillers?
- How do filler words influence the comprehension of the listener?



Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

Researchers have been investigating filler words for more than 65 years, so it is not considered as a new subject to study. Daily conversations are spontaneous and often contain disfluencies such as filled pauses considered as fillers, repetitions, non-lexical prolongations, and false starts; these components of language production start to be developed at the age of 8.5 years (Shriberg, Gruber, & Kwiatkowski, 1994). A scholar estimates that in spontaneous speech 6 per 100 words are considered as fillers; these fillers do not interfere with the comprehension of the message (Fox Tree, 1995). It is necessary to clarify that researchers use different terms referring to filler words; filled pauses, hesitations, pauses, disfluencies, sociolinguistics markers, discourse markers.

2.2 Communicative process involves filler words

According to Navratilova (2015), people want to become great speakers with the ability to communicate clear messages. However, it is not an easy task, and each speaker has a different style to express thoughts or opinions. There are two ways in which people can express themselves; by writing and by speaking, nevertheless the result of these two production systems are not the same, and the most difficult skill for the majority of people is speaking. Spoken discourse contains filler words and some other features that help utterances going natural (Navratilova, 2015).

Human communication is difficult and requires more than simple words; people tend to use gestures unconsciously, also they tend to change the tone of voice to show emphasis in order to convey their messages without misunderstandings (Corley & Stewart, 2008). It is essential to follow a specific process in order to understand and obtain a comprehensive message during



speech: the words employed throughout the communicative process need to be identified, assigned grammatical roles, and finally, connected to a syntactic representation (Fox Tree, 2001).

Dailey O'Cain (2002) explained that words take new roles according to different situations throughout a process called grammaticalization; a method for which a language can change. A clear example is the term “like,” this term can be assigned two different roles according to the circumstances. It is considered a content word (verb) with a clear meaning, nevertheless, the same word can easily become a function word having grammatical role and an indefinite meaning (filler). Jucker and Smith (1998) proposed separation between reception markers (e.g., yeah, oh, and okay), and presentation markers (e.g., like, y’know, and I mean).

2.3 What are filler words?

Fraser (1999) defined DMs (Discourse Markers) as a pragmatic class, lexical expressions that come from conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. In addition, this author described that these words have “a core meaning which is procedural, not conceptual, and their more specific interpretation is 'negotiated' by the context.” Recent work on DMs mentioned that they are an essential part of style in the speaker, and thus they need to be used depending on the varying rate of interactions (Fuller, 2003).

Filler words are monosyllabic pieces of language (uh, um, ok, so, and so on) used to communicate that cannot be related or linked with any other existing word. Phonetically, this kind of words frequently consists of “vocalic segments,” among the most common of these phonetic representations are (ə, e, a); sounds that are believed to be easy to produce, without any inconvenient. In some circumstances, depending on the environment and the audience, speakers tend to prolong the final vowel of a word (the – thee), rather than employing a different or new



word (Belikova & White, 2009). Like any other word, fillers have functional and social significance (Basurto, Hernández, & Irasema, 2016).

A common belief is that filled pauses mean nothing and are words in most of the cases used by teenagers (Fox Tree, 2007). A contradictory opinion is that these words are collateral signals used to manage the conversation (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002), but they are considered pauses instead of words and are filled with sounds. Filled pauses are described as signs of coming delay (Clark & Fox Tree 2002; Smith & Clark, 1993), and as indicators of problems when talking (Reynolds & Paivio, 1968).

Underhill (1988) claims that filled pauses are considered as focus particles, helping to focus the speaker's main point in an utterance. Filled pause denotes vocalic, nasal, or mixed sounds occurring in natural utterances (Maclay & Osgood, 1959). Fillers are usually interpreted as "a sound, word, or phrase ("you know?") used to fill pauses in speaking" (Merriam-Webster Online). This definition explains that fillers are meaningless components that only serve to fill pauses during discourses.

According to an analysis developed by Schiffrin (1986), it is believed that fillers serve as a structural device for creating discourse, and as a marker of interaction between speakers and listeners. Clark and Fox Tree's definition considers filler words as actual words used by speakers as collateral signals managing the current performance of the conversation. "Conversational fillers are a common form of grounding in dialogue" (Pfeifer & Bickmore, 2009). Some examiners claim that these particular words function as fillers enriching the whole message, but they do not have a specific meaning (Corley & Stewart, 2008). On the other hand, Fox Tree (2001) argued that they are isolated words with their meanings, and the term "planners" was proposed by Tottie (2011), referring to filler words.



Chapter III: Literature Review

This part of the investigation is the basis for responding to the research questions since it offers the material for the respective analysis. It is focused on three main classifications considered significant for this investigation; each category contains valuable evidence from different articles and authors offering several ideas that enrich this literature review. These categories have been selected since they appear to be the most relevant points to discuss and answer the research questions; besides, there is an excellent amount of information related to them. The first category contains evidence connected to speakers and the most common fillers, the second one has to do with reasons that explain the use of fillers, and the last category is related to fillers and listeners' comprehension.

3.1 The most common fillers used by speakers

The most common filler words used by speakers in different studies and situations are analyzed in this investigation, such words were selected mainly for repetitive occurrences in the corpus and their pragmatic meaning. In American English, the fillers “uh” and “um” are well-known since these words had reported high occurrences on speakers, these words can be produced conscious or unconsciously during speeches (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002). Similarly, Fox Tree (2001) developed research in which they found that phrases such as “you know” and “I mean” provide valuable information for the listener, these phrases containing filler words tend to occur repeatedly among the participants although different circumstances.

According to Fuller (2003), five filler words also considered as Discourse Markers “DMs” (well, oh, y’know, like, and I mean) appeared to be the most common used by native and non-native speakers of English. The findings indicate that DMs “well” and “oh” are used more regularly in conversations, while DMs “y’know,” “like,” and “I mean” are used the most in the



interview setting. Likewise, Fox Tree (2007) developed a survey in which respondents acknowledged that they usually employ fillers most frequently with friends; in other words, in informal situations. Moreover, this study demonstrated that people often use the filler words “um, uh, you know, and like” at the same level of importance.

Pfeifer and Bickmore (2009) conducted a social dialogue in which participants needed to act as if they were in a hospital being videotaped for corresponding analysis. During the conversations fillers such as “um, like, uh, so, just, you know, kind of” presented more frequencies, researchers suggested that in most of the cases, speakers used a filler as the first word during the process of producing speech.

The researchers Arciuli, Mallard, and Villar (2010), during their experiment, assigned each of the 32 participants a position; a truth-teller or a liar. The scholars discovered that the participants tended to use frequently filler words such as “um” as well as “like” in truth-telling situations instead of lying situations. In addition, the study reported that these two fillers were produced for a shorter period while lying instead of truth-telling speeches.

Navratilova (2015) suggested that there are two kinds of fillers words; lexicalized fillers which contain a phrase in their structure “ok, I think, you know, right” and unlexicalized fillers which contain a “lexical empty” in them “eh, ehm, ee.” From these two categories, the unlexicalized filler words appeared to be the most frequently used during speech production. In the same way, Vickov and Jakupčević (2017) analyzed the use of fillers in six non-native EFL teachers and found that the DMs most frequently used in the classroom setting were “ok,” “so,” as well as “and.”



3.2 Reasons that explain the use of fillers

The usage of filler words during public speeches, presentations, or interviews contains some factors that can interfere positively or negatively with speech fluency, as well as the speakers' image. A study developed by Clark and Fox Tree (2002) suggested that speakers use filled pauses (fillers) to search for an appropriate word to use, to decide what kind of utterances is the most suitable to produce according to the environment, to maintain listener's attention, or for turn-taking. Scholars also reported that speakers might use "uh" to indicate a slight interruption and "um" a more significant interruption.

Research consisting of an eye-tracking experiment conducted by Arnold, Fagnano, and Tanenhaus (2003), revealed that speakers who used "um" and "uh" were ranked as unprepared people to talk. The researchers Bailey and Ferreira (2003) support this position by noticing that speech produced without previous planning often contains disfluencies causing interruptions to the flow of speech.

Data collected by Fuller (2003) indicate that natives and non-natives of English use DMs (fillers) to focus or modify words creating coherence during the communicative process. However, results suggest that just native speakers can differentiate communicative necessities in different settings, e.g., conversations and interviews.

Additionally, Fox Tree (2007) investigated the reasons for which people employ fillers during speech. He demonstrated that the speaker-listener interaction involves "folk notions" related to filler words, which help people to improve the communication and understanding of the message. Similarly, Bada (2010) exposed two reasons explaining the use of filler words; one reason is to provide more extended periods for organizing ideas before producing new



statements, and the second reason is to self-repair, which means to correct mistakes or misunderstandings produced during a speech.

Another study developed by Fraundorf and Watson (2011) in which they analyzed specifically the fillers “uh” and “um,” found that these words affected memory and recall significantly during the discourse. Participants’ task was to listen to recorded passages that were taken from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland book. After that, the participants had to recall the passage. Results confirmed that fillers helped to direct attention to the speech, and the most critical finding was that these words aid in remembering easily the story facilitating recall.

However, Fehring and Fry (2007) argue against Fraundorf and Watson’s ideas since they found a negative relationship between memory capacity and the production of speech. It was investigated the production of fillers in the L1 versus the L2 of highly proficient bilingual speakers and found that filled pauses were more recurrently used by L2 speakers than L1 speakers despite their high proficiency. Furthermore, these researchers found that participants with low memory ability employed filler words as time-buying devices more habitually.

A study developed by Urizar and Samuel (2013) showed that fillers usually take place when speakers struggle planning what to say, providing specific information when speakers are communicating. Likewise, Navratilova (2015) explained that both, male and female participants use filler words as filling pauses or marks of hesitation. These words serve to the speakers to hold their turn, interrupt others’ performances, mitigate, focus, or edit speech. Similarly, Vickov and Jakupčević (2017) suggested that DMs are employed for management and organization in classroom interaction.



An investigation developed by Gósy, Gyarmathy, and Beke (2017) explored vocalic filled pauses (fillers) during English (L2) and Hungarian (L1) natural conversations. This study was developed with thirty participants with different L2 proficiency levels; the main purpose of the research was to determine the form, location, and length of filler words. The findings revealed that both languages have similar forms regardless of the level of language proficiency. Results confirmed that primary and intermediate EFL learners noticeably tend to prolong vowels present in filled pauses, while their peers that were learners with a considerably higher level of L2 tried to avoid this vowel lengthening. These authors consider fillers as essential tools that help speakers with their speech planning or execution problems in L2 speech more than in L1.

Findings in a study done by Tottie (2014) related to conversations in non-private (classrooms) and in private environments (homes) showed that fillers are used most commonly in classrooms. The use of filled pauses had to do with planning utterances, especially when difficult subjects were discussed. Under these circumstances, fillers appeared to have pragmatic functions conveying their own information.

This is echoed in Iwasaki's work (2011), who examined how five male English-speakers learning Japanese use fillers while studying in Japan. Analyses of fillers in Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) conducted before study abroad revealed that filler words were used to search appropriate words while talking about problematic issues, on the other hand, a similar analysis after study abroad exposed that fillers served social and interpersonal purposes, for example justifying comments of negative evaluation. Walker, Risko, and Kingstone (2014) developed an experiment in a laboratory using humans and computers as their participants. Results for this study demonstrated that talking to another person instead of a computer implies a higher rate of filler usage; it demonstrated that when a person employs filler words during discourses, it



improves the communicative process between speakers and listeners. For these authors, fillers are not produced while the speaker is towards a difficult or challenging situation, instead, they are emitted when the talker wants to convey a clear message without confusions.

3.3 Filler words influence the comprehension of the listener

During the communicative process, listeners play a significant. However, it depends on the speaker what kind of language and words to employ for conveying a clear message without misunderstandings. This category evaluates data related to how it affects listeners' comprehension when speakers use fillers in their interventions.

Brennan and Schober (2001) developed an experiment in which listeners had to select an object corresponding to certain instructions, which were divided into two groups; fluent and disfluent. The findings show that fillers provide for more time after the interruption for listeners to cancel false information. It helps listeners compensate for interferences and interruptions in spontaneous utterances. While Arnold et al. (2003) pointed out that disfluencies (fillers) are considered as "speech errors" that provoke listeners to be distracted, in consequence, hearers tend to lose attention from the main point speakers try to convey.

Bailey and Ferreira (2003) found that fillers expressed at the beginning of the clause aid to identify and comprehend the message since fillers have a metacognitive function, which draws the listeners' attention to the mind of the speaker. Some researchers consider filler words to be potentially useful cues that speakers provide to listeners (e.g. Arnold et al., 2003; Brennan & Schober, 2001; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002).

Watanabe, Hirose, Den, and Minematsu (2008) studied the effects that filled pauses (FPs) have on native Japanese and proficient non-native Chinese listeners. During the experiments,



participants were in front of a computer screen exposed to listen to simple and compound descriptions related to shapes. The experiment consisted of pressing a button quickly after the shape matching the corresponding description was identified. Such descriptions consisted of phrases preceded by different factors, for example, a filler, a silent pause, or even no pause. The results showed that the presence of filled pauses does not have negative consequences that can affect understanding. Besides, researchers have found the level of language proficiency on non-native listeners play an active role when interpreting filled pauses

Similarly, Barr and Seyfeddinipur (2010) used a mouse-tracking experiment to examine the listener's receptions; they had to identify images that a speaker was describing and select the more suitable image. As a result, listeners expected new referents when "um" was employed during the speech, and it suggested that fillers take additional signals that help to understand the message easier. Pytko and Reese (2013) examined how the use of these particular words, "um" and "uh" can impact the perceived intelligence of a speaker. Examiners found that filler words do not affect a speaker's intelligence. However, there are other features such as preparation in advance, public speaking abilities, and ease of understanding that are affected directly by the usage of fillers.

Chapter IV: Results

4.1 Analysis of the Results

This section presents the results after a respective analysis; data for this examination came from twenty-one studies, which helped to enrich this research synthesis. Results are divided and presented into five tables; however, only three of them are related and answer directly to the three research questions regarding the project, and the other two tables are necessary for organizing information.



The 21 studies analyzed in this research were coded according to three main categories; each study contained certain characteristics that satisfied the requirements for being part of one or another group. Some categories served for determining a study's suitability for inclusion, and others for giving the possible answers to the research questions on this investigation.

Table 1 indicates the focal point of each research study depending on the role of the participants (listeners, speakers), and the activities they had to complete in the experiment. After the corresponding analysis, it is presented that 15 (71,4%) of the 21 primary studies examined were focused on speakers, and the remaining 6 (28,6%) were focused on listeners. It was predictable since filler words are more common among the producers of speech, who are in continuous contact with filler words, in this case, the speakers.

This table is the basis for answering the three research questions since it helps to set each study in categories, organize, and present relevant evidence in tables 2, 3, and 4 according to the different inclinations.

Table 1. *The focus of the study according to the participants*

Focus	N° of studies	%
Speakers	15	71,4%
Listeners	6	28,6%
Total	21	100%

N=21

Table 2 corresponds to the most common filler words employed during the analyzed articles; five fillers resulted being the most frequently used by speakers, besides, it is presented their clearest meaning found in each investigation. As a result, the words “uh” and “um” appear



to be the most used during speech since they were present in 11 (65%) and 10 (59%) of the 17 (100%) studies analyzed respectively.

The filler “uh” itself constitutes a short-term delay, and “um,” an extended delay (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002). The filler “you know” was present in 5 (29%) studies, this particular filler has two main functions during a speech. First, to check understanding and second, to explain or describe new or difficult material easier. (Navratilova 2015; Fuller 2003; Fox Tree & Schrock 2002; Pfeifer & Bickmore 2009).

Table 2. *The most common fillers and their meanings*

Position	Filler word	Meaning	N° of studies	%
1	uh	initiate a mayor delay in speaking	11	65%
2	um	initiate a minor delay in speaking	10	59%
3	you know	checking for understanding explain and describe	5	29%
4	like	challenging definition	4	24%
5	ok	a topic opener	2	12%

N=17

Note: Certain studies contain different fillers; for that reason, some studies are counted on more than one occasion.

Fillers with less frequency in discourse are “like,” found in 4 (24%) studies, and “ok” in 2 (12%) studies. When people hear “like” in the course of speeches, it means that the speaker is trying to define something difficult, while the word “ok” means that the speaker is going to start talking, and needs the listeners’ attention.



Table 3 was necessarily created for answering the second research question; this table presents the reasons that explain why speakers tend to use filler words; 12 reasons were found in 15 different studies examined in this research. This table indicates that 7 (47%) out of the 15 (100%) studies refer to speakers using fillers in to have more time before pronouncing a word; this means that speakers need to plan and organize their time, words, and ideas previously. This reason was the most important one found among the research findings (Bada 2010; Fehringner & Fry 2007; Tottie 2014; Vickov & Jakupčević 2017).

There were 3 (20%) examinations that established that speakers use fillers to make their speech understandable and amenable. Similarly, three more studies indicated that fillers are employed to direct attention throughout the discourse. As shown in Table 3, the reason for keeping listeners' attention is important, as well as the reason for correcting utterances. Both reasons took place in 3 studies representing 20% respectively.

Researchers found that having the audience involved in the discourse is a complicated issue; for that reason, filler words are used to maintain the public focused on the speech and avoid silent pauses (Navratilova 2015; Clark & Fox Tree 2002). It is very common to hear speech errors when a person is talking, and if the speaker realizes this, he tries to correct those mistakes by using filler words to deliver a clear message (Bada, 2010).

Searching for words is another reason that explains why people tend to use this kind of particular words when producing utterances; this reason was found in two studies, which represent 13% out of the total. A person needs to decide what to say and what kind of vocabulary to use according to the environment and the audience, for this reason, speakers use fillers showing that they are searching for the appropriate words to express.

Table 3. *Speakers' reasons for using filler words*

Reasons	No. of studies	%
Time buying devices	7	47%
Make the speech understandable	3	20%
Direct attention	3	20%
Keep listener's attention	3	20%
Correct utterances	3	20%
Search for words	2	13%
Truth-telling	1	7%
Cede the floor	1	7%
Facilitate recall	1	7%
Interruptions	1	7%
Production problem	1	7%
Unprepared speech	1	7%

N=15

Note: Some reasons appear in more than one study.

Truth-telling (7%) (Arciuli, Mallard, & Villar 2010), cede the floor (7%) (Clark & Fox Tree 2002), and facilitate recall (7%) (Fraundorf & Watson 2011) were found to be the less common reasons for using these words, however, they are respectable reasons that help to understand the functions of the filler words.

People need to speak clearly and using facts when trying to convince the audience; for this reason, people generally tend to use fillers to describe the situation and involve the listeners in the conversation. Likewise, when a speaker finishes his intervention, he needs to cede the turn



to another person, and for doing this, it is recommended to employ fillers since they help to cede the floor easier without the necessity of pointing out others. The last but not least, academics consider fillers as facilitators for recalling; these words help to remember information quickly.

Interruptions (7%) (Navratilova 2015), production problem (7%), and unprepared speech (7%) (Fox Tree 2007) are some reasons found in this research as well. It is clear that speakers tend to pronounce fillers when they are having a problem with explanations, definitions, or descriptions of something new or challenging. To interrupt a person who is delivering a speech is considered an impolite action. Besides, listeners note quickly when a speaker is having difficulties when talking, fillers are employed frequently, and it shows that the speaker is not well prepared. Another reason is having problems when trying to remember and produce accurate information; speakers rely on fillers when they are not sure about what to say next.

In total, twelve reasons answer the second question (What are the reasons that explain the use of filler words?). Nine of them represent positive results; this information was obtained from different articles although some reasons appeared in more than one article. On the other hand, only three reasons were considered unfavorable. It can be concluded that the use of filler words during speeches or conversations helps to convey the message clearer and easier. It is not considered an impolite action; however, it is essential to use the accurate amount of filler words during the discourse. Also, the speakers must identify the audience because, depending on it, the speaker needs to choose between employing fillers for a more productive speech or avoid them.

Table 4 indicates the reactions listeners have when they are exposed to hear speakers emitting filler words. For this table, only six studies were considered because just these studies had information related to listeners; five reactions were found to be the most relevant and constant that suit the necessities for this research.

Table 4. *Listener's reactions towards speakers using filler words*

Reaction	No. of studies	%
Expect new information	*2	33%
Focus attention on the speaker	*2	33%
Insensibility	*2	33%
Compensate for disruptions and delays	1	16%
Facilitate understanding	1	16%

Note: *Certain reactions are repeated twice since they were found in different studies.

N=6

Only 2 studies suggest that listeners expect new information when speakers are articulating fillers in their discourses. Also, these words cause the listeners to be more focused on the message that the speaker is trying to convey. However, two authors explain that the use of these words provokes insensibility among the listeners (Bailey & Ferreira, 2003 & Arnold et al. 2003). They mention that the speaker cannot express clear messages. The other two reactions representing 16%, respectively, explain that listeners take filler words as compensations for disruptions during a conversation. Besides, the last reaction is related to understanding the message quicker since fillers help to have a better description or picture of the situation and circumstance (Barr & Seyfeddinipur, 2010).

Table 5 presents information linked to the setting in which each investigation took place; different sceneries help to understand why speakers tend to use more certain fillers in one environment than others. It is necessary to point out that in every situation, the presence of fillers



is evident. There is a significant amount of studies (9, representing 47 percent) that were developed in a laboratory; this setting was planned to obtain precise results. Another set that was repetitive in 6 studies representing 31 percent is the classroom setting; also, it was planned, but with less degree of significance.

Table 5. *Filler words' settings*

Setting	No. of Studies	%
Laboratory	9	47%
Classroom	6	31%
Home	4	21%
Total	19	100%

The most critical fact in this scenery was to gather information from the participants without altering their natural speaking style. The last but not least is the natural setting, which is related to the home; in this setting, there was not planned anything at all; each piece of information related to fillers was natural since it was found in spontaneous conversations. This table shows and clarifies that researchers, in general, have focused more on planned and organized settings than in natural or spontaneous circumstances. However, the data recovered from these investigations is appreciated since it helps to identify the importance of the environment in the production of filler words.



Chapter V: Methodology

This exploratory bibliographical research aimed to find information associated with the production of filler words during conversations in different settings. This investigation was focused on finding the reasons that explain the use of filler words during a speech. It was necessary to define certain criteria for gathering significant information for this research. The material was collected from published articles that analyze the use of fillers.

For this study, the inclusion criteria that were taken into account were the following. The year of publication needed to be from 2000 until now because it presented: recent and updated information. Participants were male as well as female; it helped to have additional information about the use of fillers according to gender. It was not necessary to put restrictions on the age of participants since each person speaks differently and uses different kinds of filler words; children, teenagers, and adults emitted particular fillers during their participation, so different information were collected, and it enriched this analysis.

Studies necessarily had to report their findings in the English language although some filler words came from other languages. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods used in research studies were considered because, in these studies, different methods were administered to collect information, and their results offered valuable material for this project. All the research studies were empirical studies for obtaining more trustworthy data. Those articles that were more focused on explaining why people use fillers were the most relevant for this research. It was necessary to use a coding scheme to organize the information; such codes emerged throughout the investigation.

Google Scholar was the research engine used to find information, also, looking at the references of the articles helped to gather valuable data. It was necessary to define certain key words for searching trustworthy articles; these words considered as synonyms are the following.



Filler words, filled pauses, hesitations, pauses, disfluencies, speech, sociolinguistics markers, discourse markers, all of them referring to fillers. For the present research synthesis, a total of 21 studies were considered as the more suitable to obtain a significant amount of evidence to be analyzed. This section described the entire process that was followed to obtain and analyze information, and it was helpful to have different categories for organizing the data present in each study.

Chapter VI: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

After having conducted this exploratory bibliographical research, it is concluded that the studies analyzed have responded to the research questions with relevant evidence. It is essential to mention that filler words as a subject of study are not new at all; researchers have been investigating these words for more than 65 years. Besides, it is important to indicate that researchers have focused their attention largely on speakers instead of listeners' comprehension.

The most common filler words are *uh*, *um*, *you know*, *like*, and *ok*; these words were present in several studies being employed by speakers. The fillers "uh" and "um" are the most currently used since they were present in the majority of studies. On the other hand, fillers with less frequency in discourse are "like" and "ok." There are important reasons that explain the use of filler words, and it can be concluded that employing filler words during discourses or conversations helps to convey the message clearer and easier.

Similarly, it is shown that fillers are considered positive elements in the production of language. These words do not affect the comprehension process; on the contrary, it facilitates understanding (Brennan & Schober, 2001). Besides, these words allow the listeners to predict information (Arnold et al. 2004; Corley et al. 2007).



However, there are other reasons that are considered as negative since filler words tend to be considered unnecessary interruptions that affect fluent speech, showing that the speaker is not well prepared (Brennan and Schober 2001; Bailey and Ferreira 2003). It is not considered an impolite act; though, it is essential to use only the correct amount of fillers, and identify the audience in advance for avoiding misunderstandings.

Only five reactions regarding listeners towards speakers emitting fillers were found to be the most relevant and constant for this research. These reactions tend to be positive, even though some researchers present negative reactions as their results. Listeners expect new information when a speaker expresses fillers during discourses. Also, these words cause the listeners to be more focused on the message delivered by the speaker (Bailey & Ferreira, 2003).

On the other hand, fillers also provoke insensibility among the listeners considered a negative reaction (Arnold et al. 2003). Additionally, listeners take filler words as compensations for disruptions, and the message is understood quicker since fillers offer a better description of the situation (Barr & Seyfeddinipur, 2010). Researchers have focused more on planned and organized settings (laboratories, classrooms) than in natural or spontaneous circumstances (houses). However, the data recovered from different settings contributed to detect the importance of the environment in the production of fillers.

After a deep analysis of filler words in 21 articles, it seems that this kind of words does not affect the communicative process. It is essential to take into account that speakers should employ an accurate amount of fillers during discourses, conversations, or interviews.



6.2 Recommendations

Teachers in general does not consider fillers words as significant elements for being included in their teaching plans since these words are thought to be learnt unconsciously (Erten, 2014). As a recommendation, teachers should make filler words more noticeable for students, and explain that there is a constant presence of this kind of words in the communicative process. Besides, it would be useful to explicate if fillers benefit or harm this process as well. And the final recommendation is that speakers should employ only the necessary amount of fillers as a strategy in communication since an excessive use of them could be considered impolite.



References

- Arciuli, J., Mallard, D., & Villar, G. (2010). "Um, I can tell you're lying": Linguistic markers of deception versus truth-telling in speech. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 31(3), 397–411. doi:10.1017/s0142716410000044
- Arnold, J., Fagnano, M., & Tanenhaus, M. (2003). Disfluencies signal thee, um, new information. *Journal of psycholinguistic research*, 32(1), 25-36. doi:10.1023/A:1021980931292
- Bada, E. (2010). Repetitions as vocalized fillers and self-repairs in English and French. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(6), 1680–1688. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2009.10.008
- Bailey, K., & Ferreira, F. (2003). Disfluencies affect the parsing of garden-path sentences. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 183–200. doi:10.1177/0023830913506422
- Barr, D., & Seyfeddinipur, M. (2010). The role of fillers in listener attributions for speaker disfluency. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 25(4), 441–455. doi:10.1080/01690960903047122
- Basurto, N., Hernández, M., & Irasema, P. (2016). Fillers and the Development of Oral Strategic Competence in Foreign Language Learning. *Porta Linguarum*, 1(25), 191-201.
- Belikova, A., & White, L. (2009). EVIDENCE FOR THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE HYPOTHESIS OR NOT? . *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 31(2), 199-223. doi:10.1017/s0272263109090287
- Brennan, S., & Schober, M. (2001). How Listeners Compensate for Disfluencies in Spontaneous Speech. *Journal of Memory and Language* 44, 274–296 (2001), 4, 274–296. doi:10.1006/jmla.2000.2753
- Clark, H., & Fox Tree, J. (2002). Using uh and um in spontaneous speaking. *Cognition*, 84, 73-111.
- Corley, M., & Stewart, O. (2008). Hesitation Disfluencies in Spontaneous Speech: The Meaning of um. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 2(4), 589–602. doi:10.1111/j.1749-818x.2008.00068.x
- Dailey O'Cain, J. (2002). The Sociolinguistic Distribution of and Attitudes Toward Focuser like and Quotative like. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*(4), 60-80. doi:10.1111/1467-9481.00103
- Erten, S. (2014). Teaching Fillers and Students' Filler Usage: A Study Conducted at ESOGU Preparation School. *International Journal of Teaching and Education*, 2(3), 67-79. Retrieved from Teaching Fillers and Students' Filler Usage.



- Eslami-Rasekh, Z. (2005). Raising the pragmatic awareness of language learners. *ELT Journal*, 59(3), 199-208. doi:10.1093/elt/cci039
- Fehringer, C., & Fry, C. (2007). Hesitation phenomena in the language production of bilingual speakers: The role of working memory. *Folia Linguistica*, 41, 37-73. doi:10.1515/flin.41.1-2.37
- Fox Tree, J. (1995). The Effects of False Starts and Repetitions on the Processing of Subsequent Words in Spontaneous Speech. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 34(6), 709-738. doi:10.1006/jmla.1995.1032
- Fox Tree, J. (2001). Listeners' uses of um and uh in speech comprehension. *Memory & Cognition*, 29 (2), 320-326. doi:10.3758/bf03194926
- Fox Tree, J. (2007). Folk notions of um and uh, you know, and like. *Text & Talk*, 27(3), 297-314. doi:10.1515/TEXT.2007.012
- Fraser, B. (1999). What are discourse markers? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31(7), 931-952. doi:10.1016/s0378-2166(98)00101-5
- Fraundorf, S., & Watson, D. (2011). The disfluent discourse: Effects of filled pauses on recall. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 65(2), 161-175. doi:10.1016/j.jml.2011.03.004
- Freud, S. (1938). *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Fuller, J. (2003). Discourse marker use across speech contexts: A comparison of native and non-native speaker performance. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 22(2), 185-208. doi:10.1515/mult.2003.010
- Gósy, M., Gyarmathy, D., & Beke, A. (2017). Phonetic analysis of filled pauses based on a Hungarian-English learner corpus. *International Journal of Learner Corpus Research*, 3(2), 149-174. doi:10.1075/ijlcr.3.2.03gos
- Iwasaki, N. (2011). Filling Social Space with Fillers: Gains in Social Dimension after Studying Abroad in Japan. *Japanese Language and Literature*, 45, 169-193.
- Jucker, A., & Smith, S. (1998). Andpeople just you know like 'wow' . *Discourse Markers. Description and Theory*, 171-201. doi:10.1075/pbns.57.10juc
- Maclay, H., & Osgood, C. (1959). Hesitation Phenomena in Spontaneous English Speech. *Word*, 15(1), 19-44. doi:10.1080/00437956.1959.11659682
- Navratilova, L. (2015). Fillers Used By Male And Female Students Of English Education Study Program in Argumentative Talks. *Center of Language Innovation Journal of Linguistics and Language Teaching*, 2(1), 121-134.
- Pfeifer, L., & Bickmore, T. (2009). Should Agents Speak Like, um, Humans? The Use of Conversational Fillers by Virtual Agents. *The Use of Conversational Fillers by Virtual*



- Agents. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 460–466. doi:10.1007/978-3-642-04380-2_50
- Pytko, J., & Reese, L. (2013). The Effect of Using “Um” and “Uh” on the Perceived Intelligence of a Speaker. *College of St. Elizabeth Journal of the Behavioral Sciences*, 1-21. Retrieved from EFFECTS OF UM AND UH ON INTELLIGENCE.
- Reynolds, A., & Paivio, A. (1968). Cognitive and Emotional Determinants of Speech. *Canadian Journal of Psychology/Revue Canadienne de Psychologie*, 22(3), 164-175. doi:10.1037/h0082757
- Schiffrin, D. (1986). Functions of and in discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10(1), 41-66. doi:10.1016/0378-2166(86)90099-8
- Shriberg, L., Gruber, F., & Kwiatkowski, J. (1994, October 1). Developmental Phonological Disorders III. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 1151-1177. doi:10.1044/jshr.3705.1151
- Smith, V., & Clark, H. (1993). On the Course of Answering Questions. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 32(1), 25-38. doi:10.1006/jmla.1993.1002
- Tottie, G. (2011). Uh and Um as sociolinguistic markers in British English. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 16(2), 173-197. doi:10.1075/ijcl.16.2.02tot
- Tottie, G. (2014). On the use of uh and um in American English. *Functions of Language*, 21(1), 6–29. doi:10.1075/fol.21.1.02tot
- Underhill, R. (1988). Like Is, like, Focus. *American Speech*, 63(3), 234-246. doi:10.2307/454820
- Urizar, X., & Samuel, A. (2013). A Corpus-based Study of Fillers among Native Basque Speakers and the Role of Zera. *Language and Speech*, 57(3), 338-366. doi:10.1177/0023830913506422
- Vickov, G., & Jakupčević, E. (2017). Discourse markers in non-native EFL teacher talk. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 7(4), 649-671. doi:10.14746/ssllt.2017.7.4.5
- Walker, E., Risko, E., & Kingstone, A. (2014). Fillers as Signals: Evidence From a Question–Answering Paradigm. *Discourse Processes*, 51(3), 264–286. doi:10.1080/0163853x.2013.862478
- Watanabe, M., Hirose, K., Den, Y., & Minematsu, N. (2008). Filled pauses as cues to the complexity of upcoming phrases for native and non-native listeners. *Speech Communication*, 50(2), 81-94. doi:10.1016/j.specom.2007.06.002