



# FILLERS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF EXTEMPORANEOUS SPEECHES OF THE TERTIARY EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENTS

Phoebe S. Arado<sup>1</sup>, Lean L. Parilla<sup>2</sup>, Geraldine L. Villamor<sup>3</sup>, Jessa G. Namoc<sup>4</sup>,  
Lesther John S. Hechanova<sup>5</sup>, Ryan A. Jancinal, PhD<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

<sup>2</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

<sup>3</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

<sup>4</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

<sup>5</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

<sup>6</sup>St. Mary's College of Tagum, Inc.

## ABSTRACT

This corpora-based qualitative study focused on the fillers used by the tertiary education program students in delivering their extemporaneous speech and identifying the function of each filler. The purpose of this study is to analyze the fillers found in the extemporaneous speeches of the students. This study was anchored towards Rose's concept (1998) on the categorization of the Types of fillers, namely: lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers, and supported by Castro's (2009) Functions of Fillers: Opening marker, Information indicator, Fill the time, and Correction Marker. This study was conducted at one of the schools in Tagum City, Davao del Norte, Philippines. The researchers analyzed 20 corpora that were selected based on inclusion criteria. The result showed that the students used 484 fillers in their extemporaneous speeches. The frequency of unlexicalized fillers is observed to be higher among the students compared to lexicalized fillers. Out of 484 fillers, unlexicalized filler "uhm" and lexicalized filler "so" were the most frequent fillers used by the students. Moreover, the most occurring function used is fill the time. Therefore, the presence of fillers found in this study revealed that Tertiary Education Program students used filler words in their speech because they need time to collect their thoughts, lack of confidence, inadequate preparation, poor English vocabulary, and poor English language proficiency. Results of this study can bring further information to the academe to help develop effective communicators who possess strong public speaking abilities essential for success both inside and outside the classroom.

**KEYWORDS:** fillers, extemporaneous speech, corpora-based approach, tertiary education program students, Tagum City, Davao del Norte, Philippines.

## INTRODUCTION

Speakers use fillers as discourse markers when they ponder or pause during their speech. Accordingly, fillers are sounds, words, or phrases that have no meaning within the context of what someone is saying. The speaker uses fillers to occupy time while expanding on the following subject or sentence (Erten, 2014). However, when a speaker uses and/or overuses filler words, it indicates that a person is unskilled or lacks mastery of the information conveyed and can compromise the audience's understanding of the topic (Duval et al, 2014). With that, there is indeed a problem in communication when a speaker uses or overly uses filler words especially in extemporaneous speeches as it will hinder the comprehension of the listeners in the communication process.

In Indonesia, a qualitative study was conducted on the student's use of fillers in their impromptu speeches. The findings revealed problems in overusing the filler words in impromptu speeches which resulted in the difficulty of understanding their topic (Saputri, 2017). In addition, a study by Gikas and Sutcliffe (2019) found that employing discourse markers or filler words

may undermine communication competence and diminish professional credibility. In the Philippines, Santos et al. undertook a study in 2017 on fillers as a speaking impairment that hinders students' oral communication both inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, another study of a similar nature demonstrates that the most common type of filler that students use during oral recitation are nonword fillers and this suggests that a speaker's credibility may be harmed if they use too many filler words (Sadjail, 2021). In Region XI, a study conducted by Enriquez et al. (2022) revealed that one of the weaknesses evident in the teaching of English language in Senior High School students are the use of filler words.

Based on the previous studies presented, the researchers saw fillers as an underlying problem in academic speeches. With a great need, this urges the researchers to conduct the study to contribute new information that would help teachers in the pursuit of the use of English language and help the students as well to be aware of this concern to improve their English communication skills. Therefore, this study can be beneficial to the society in a way that the results that were extracted from this



study may help the schools and teachers to produce more proficient speakers in the society that will make drastic contributions in the emerging industries.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative discourse analysis study was to analyze the fillers of the selected 20 Extemporaneous Speeches of the Tertiary Education students in one of the private schools of Tagum City, Davao del Norte.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the types of fillers used by the tertiary education students in extemporaneous speeches?
2. What are the function fillers used by the tertiary education students in extemporaneous speeches?

**Theoretical Lens**

This study is anchored towards Rose’s concept (1998) investigating the types of fillers wherein it was stated that English has two subcategories of fillers, namely lexical and unlexicalized fillers. Additionally, this study is also supported by the theory of Castro (2009) about the functions of fillers. Castro (2009) says that discourse markers can be used in the following ways in a textual context: opening marker, information indicator, fill the time, and correction marker.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative design specifically employing discourse analysis because it was the suitable research approach

to use in analyzing the extemporaneous speech of the teacher education students to identify and analyze the types and functions of fillers. According to Levitt et al. (2017), qualitative research is an inductive design in which the researcher typically investigates the meaning and insights of a particular circumstance.

**Research Materials**

In this study, the research materials were the transcripts of the speeches of the Tertiary Education Program students in their Purposive Communication class. A good number of corpora-based analyses, according to Clarke and Braun (2013), are between 10 and 100. In this study, the researcher gathered 20 of the extemporaneous speeches of the selected students who qualified in our inclusion criteria.

**Data Analysis**

Upon the completion of the data collection procedures, the collected data were categorized, reviewed, transcribed, and analyzed. As defined by Hasko (2012), qualitative data analysis for corpora is a methodology for performing in-depth investigations of linguistic phenomena in the context of real-world, communicative situations, and made accessible, retrievable, and analyzed. Thus, in analyzing the data in this study, we categorized the various types of fillers found in each corpus and analyzed their underlying function. Moreover, we labeled the transcripts with the abbreviation ES, which stands for Extemporaneous Speeches and we used the Arabic numerals from one (01) to twenty (20) for the researchers to be easily guided in arranging the analysis results (e.g. ES 01).

**RESULTS**

**Table 1**  
**Types of Fillers Used by the Tertiary Education Students in Extemporaneous Speeches**

Types of Fillers	Filler	Sample Statement	Analysis
Lexicalized Fillers	Okay	<i>Okay</i> , so um first of all, I would like to greet um with ahh uhh good morning. ES-01	The word "Okay" is classified as lexicalized filler because it is an actual word that agrees. However, in these utterances, the speakers begin their greetings by using the word "Okay" as an unnecessary cue to start speaking.
	What do we call this	Multicultural communication is a key driver ahh for ahh specific person or a business or an entity to um communicate to umm cluster share or <i>what do we call this...</i> um.. like build a rapport other business owners... ES-03	The phrase "what do we call this" is a lexicalized filler phrase because it is made up of words that imply meaning. In this utterance, it is used by the speaker to ask himself about something he forgot.
	Like	..and when we have people from different cultures working together, we get to see problems from different angles and this helps us to come up	The word "like" is an example of a lexicalized filler because it is a word that is used for comparison and the speaker used the word here to indicate hesitance over a term they were about to express.



		with <i>like</i> more Creative Solutions. ES-04	
	Yes	Good morning everyone. Am I audible po? <i>Yes</i> . So good morning everyone. Praised Be Jesus and Mary Now and Forever.. ES- 10	The word “yes” in the utterance was used as lexicalized filler. In ES-10, it was used as a cue for the speaker to start speaking.
	So	<i>So</i> , good morning everyone. ahh My name is ES-01 and good morning so sir, umm thank you very much for the opportunity for me to speak uhh in front of the class. ES-01	The statement showcase the common use of the lexicalized filler word “so” as an opening tool for the speaker to start talking.
Unlexicalized Filler	Um	...It is.. it's important, and it is important because in today's, in today's people from different cultures are more <i>um</i> likely to interact with which with each other. ES-02	“Um” is an unlexicalized filler because it is not an actual word and in this utterance, “um” is added and used by the speaker to give himself time to think of what to say next.
	Uh	So developing intercultural communication is important in several ways because <i>uh</i> it increase our knowledge from different cultures. ES-10	Uh is a non-word filler used to express hesitation. In these utterances, the speaker showed signs of hesitancy by using the non-word filler uh.
	Ah	Next <i>ah</i> be patient. <i>Ah</i> It may take longer to understand each other and it may require more effort <i>ah</i> to build trust and rapport. ES-01	The sound Ah is unlexicalized filler because it is a non-word filler that does not have meaning. In these utterances, the speaker used the sound as a gap filler in the speech.
	Ahh	..because when we have people from different cultures working together <i>ahh</i> .. we can come up with better ideas, to avoid misunderstandings ES-04	In the utterance, Ahh is non-word expression and is used by the speaker with prolongation to fill in gaps of time while thinking.
	Erm	<i>erm</i> First, uh my topic is developing intercultural communication competence means um It means umm ...having the knowledge skills and attitudes and attitudes needed to effectively.. ES-02	In this utterance, the sound is used as filler that shows that the speaker is preparing to begin his speech.



**Table 2**  
**Function of Fillers used by the Tertiary Education Students in Extempore Speeches**

Functions of Fillers	Filler	Sample Statement	Analysis
Opening Marker	Ah	So um we can use a.. ah.. We can ah learn about different communication Styles. <b>Ah</b> It is important to learn about different communication Styles and customs in different culture. ES-01	The filler word “ah” is uttered by the speaker in a very short manner to use it as a transitional cue to open up his new point in addition to his answer.
	Okay	<b>Okay</b> , so um, first of all, I would like to greet um with ahh.. uhh.. good morning, everyone... ES-01	Upon starting his greeting, the speaker opened by cueing himself with the filler word “okay” to mark the opening of his speech.
Information Indicator	Yeah	So , uh.. in addition, we need to make them uh.. feel like they are valued or being respected, respected so that, uh.. uh.. <b>yeah</b> , it would create a harmonious society po. ES-17	The expression “yeah” is utilized by the speaker to agree with her prior statement and indicate her concluding statement.
	You know	It is important to be respectful, respectful of different communication styles and to avoid making assumptions or <b>you know</b> , as stereotypes based on cultural differences. ES-01	The filler phrase “you know” in this extract is used to express the speaker’s presumption that the listeners are already aware of what he is trying to point out.
Fill the time	Ahh	So, good morning everyone. <b>ahh</b> My name is Michael Gazmen and good morning so sir, umm thank you very much for the opportunity for me to speak uhh in front of the class. ES-03	By uttering the sound “ahh”, the speaker showed indications that he needed time to decide what to state next after his greetings.
	Uhm Uh	So, first is non-verbal communication is <b>uhm.. uh..</b> you cannot really, <b>uh..</b> relay <b>uhm</b> , communication properly in non-verbal communication <b>uhm..</b> Second is, <b>uhm..uhm</b> , non-verbal communication is <b>uhm</b> ay like what I said earlier, that is <b>uhm</b> you cannot rely upon.. ES-15	The words “uhm and uh” are utilized to fill up the space in the discourse in order for the speaker to think and organize his thoughts before he continues to speak.
Correction Marker	Uhm	..uhm with the rise of uhm, businesses, travels, and uhm.. migration uhm.. individuals from different ah cultural backgrounds are interacting more <b>uhm..</b> even more. ES-20	The filler word “uhm” in the utterance is used by the speaker to change the word “more” to “even more”
	Uh	My question is, uh.. why does it mean? Why <b>uh..</b> what does it mean to develop intercultural communication competence and why it is important? ES-20	The non-word filler “uh” is utilized by the speaker to correct and restate the first question he uttered.



## DISCUSSION

Based on the result of this study, there were many lexicalized filler words and phrases found in the extemporaneous speeches of the students. Most of the common lexicalized filler words are *so*, *and*, *like*, *okay*, and *yes*. The common filler phrases found are *what do we call this*, *I mean*, and *you know*. From the result, the commonly occurring lexicalized filler word is *So* which occurred 71 times. Moreover, most of these fillers are used by the students to use it as an opening marker, information indicator, and correction marker.

Moreover, there were numerous unlexicalized fillers found in this study. From the data, fillers such as *ahh*, *um*, *uh*, and *uhm* are used by most of the students in their extemporaneous speeches with the purpose of either as an opening marker, correction marker, or time filler. The most occurring unlexicalized filler word is *uhm* which occurred 413 times in the materials. Furthermore, in the function filler opening marker, the common fillers found are *so*, *ah*, *uhm*, and *okay*. In this function, the filler *so* is frequently used by the students. The most common fillers as an information indicator are, *you know*, *yeah*, and *like*. The most frequently occurring was the filler word *like*. In the function filler fill the time words like *uhm*, *uhh*, *ahh*, and *what do we call this* are used by the speaker to fill in the gaps in a conversation or any utterance while the speaker is thinking about the statement or word to say in the speech. Also, the result of this study shows several correction markers found in the extemporaneous speeches of the students. They are, *I mean*, *uh*, and *uhm*.

## Implication for Teaching Practice

The results of this study revealed the excessive use of fillers in the extemporaneous speech of the students that reduces their credibility, hinders effective communication, and reflects poorly on their practice of professionalism. With this, teachers may encourage students to use filler words as little as possible so that they become aware of their filler word habits. By being aware of the process of filler words, students may be able to examine their speaking performances by reflecting their usage of filler words. Teachers may also modify their pedagogy by creating an interactive learning environment where students are actively involved in their language learning process in practicing effective communication. The teacher may use techniques such as pausing briefly to gather thoughts or using transitional phrases can help maintain coherence without resorting to excessive filler usage. Furthermore, this study also suggests that students should focus on improving their speaking skills by practicing active listening and engaging in meaningful conversations through the help of teacher.

## Recommendation for Future Research

This study was to analyze the types of fillers used by the students which were categorized into two: lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers, and the functions of these fillers: opening marker, correction marker, to fill the time and information indicator. Since this study only intended to identify the types of fillers and their functions, other researchers may dwell on the underlying implications of the usage of filler words. This study can also be conducted using

another method such as the quantitative research method. In such a method, researchers can study and analyze the number of filler words used in a speech as well as categorizing its types.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while excessive use of filler words is discouraged, it is essential to recognize that they are a part of natural speech patterns and can be helpful when utilized appropriately. Students should be encouraged to develop their speaking skills by minimizing reliance on fillers through practice, providing knowledge, exercises, and preparation while still appreciating their role in maintaining fluency and connection with the audience.

## REFERENCES

1. Castro, C. M. (2009). *The use and functions of discourse markers in EFL classroom interaction*. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, (11), 57-78.
2. Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. *Successful qualitative research*, 1-400.
3. Enriquez, C. F., Candido, G., Abing, N. F., Bucog, F., & Bacatan, J. (2022, November). *Code switching in Grade 11 students of UM Peñaplata College*. In *ELT Forum: Journal of English Language Teaching* (Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 201-216).
4. Erten, S. (2014). *Teaching fillers and students' filler usage: A study conducted at Esogu preparation school*. *International Journal of Teaching and Education*.
5. Levitt, H. M., Motulsky, S. L., Wertz, F. J., Morrow, S. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2017). *Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity*. *Qualitative psychology*, 4(1), 2.
6. Rose, R. L. (1998). *Filled pauses in language teaching: Why and how* (Doctoral dissertation, Waseda University).
7. Santos, N. M., Hernández Alarcón, M. M., & Mora Pablo, I. (2017). *Fillers and the development of oral strategic competence in foreign language learning*.