

FILLER WORDS IN STUDENTS' SPEECH AND METHODS FOR REDUCING THEM

Xolmirzayeva Fotima Jamshidovna

Xolmirzayeva Zuxra Jamshidovna

Termiz davlat universiteti Xorijiy filologiya fakulteti talabalari

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19876565>

Annotation

This article examines the use of filler words in students' speech and their impact on speaking performance. Filler words such as "um," "uh," "like," and "you know" are commonly used when speakers hesitate, think, or feel nervous during communication. While occasional use of these expressions is natural, excessive repetition can reduce fluency, clarity, and confidence in speech. The article analyzes the main reasons why students rely on filler words, including lack of vocabulary, anxiety, insufficient speaking practice, and fear of making mistakes. It also discusses effective methods for reducing their use, such as regular speaking exercises, pause control techniques, vocabulary development, self-recording, and classroom feedback. The findings suggest that with consistent practice and awareness, students can minimize filler words and improve their overall speaking skills, becoming more confident and effective communicators in academic and real-life situations.

Keywords: filler words, students' speech, speaking skills, fluency, hesitation, communication, vocabulary development, speaking anxiety, confidence, pronunciation practice.

Speaking is one of the most important productive skills in language learning. It allows learners to express ideas, share opinions, participate in discussions, and build communication with others. In modern education, speaking competence is considered a key indicator of language proficiency because students are often evaluated not only by what they know, but also by how clearly and confidently they can communicate their knowledge. For this reason, improving oral communication has become one of the main goals in teaching foreign languages, especially English. However, many students experience difficulties when speaking, even if they have sufficient grammar knowledge and vocabulary. One of the common problems observed in students' speech is the frequent use of filler words.

Filler words are sounds, words, or short expressions used by speakers when they need extra time to think, organize ideas, or continue speaking without silence. Common examples in English include "um," "uh," "well," "like," "you know," "actually," and "so." These expressions are natural parts of spontaneous speech and are used by native and non-native speakers alike. In everyday conversation, filler words may help maintain the flow of communication and prevent uncomfortable pauses. They can also signal that the speaker has not finished speaking and needs a moment to continue. Nevertheless, when filler words are overused, they may negatively influence speech quality, making communication less clear, less fluent, and less professional.

Among students, the problem of filler words is especially noticeable during presentations, classroom discussions, oral exams, and spontaneous speaking tasks. Many learners rely on filler words because they need time to search for vocabulary, remember grammar structures, or overcome nervousness. In some cases, students are not aware of how often they use these

expressions. They may believe they are speaking fluently, while listeners notice repeated hesitation markers throughout the speech. As a result, excessive filler word usage can create the impression that the speaker lacks confidence, preparation, or language competence.

The issue becomes even more significant in foreign language learning environments. Students who speak in a second or foreign language often process multiple tasks at the same time. They must think about vocabulary, sentence structure, pronunciation, meaning, and audience reaction simultaneously. This cognitive pressure increases hesitation, and hesitation often appears through filler words. For example, a student giving a short speech in English may repeatedly say “um” or “you know” while trying to remember the next sentence. Such patterns are understandable, but if they occur too frequently, they may interfere with communication effectiveness.

Another reason filler words are common in student speech is anxiety. Many learners feel nervous when speaking in front of teachers or classmates. Fear of making mistakes, being judged, or forgetting ideas can increase stress levels. When anxiety rises, students may use filler words unconsciously as a coping strategy. These expressions provide a brief pause that helps the speaker think while still holding the listener’s attention. Therefore, filler words are not only linguistic features but also psychological signals related to confidence and emotional state. The role of filler words in communication is complex. On one hand, they are often viewed negatively because they interrupt fluency and reduce the quality of speech. On the other hand, some researchers argue that filler words are natural discourse markers that play functional roles in conversation. They can indicate politeness, soften statements, signal transitions, or help manage turn-taking in dialogue. For example, words like “well” or “so” may guide listeners through ideas. Therefore, the goal in language education should not be to eliminate all filler words completely, but to reduce unnecessary overuse and help students speak more consciously and effectively. In academic settings, clear speech is highly valued. Students are expected to present research, answer questions, participate in seminars, and communicate professionally. During such tasks, excessive filler words may distract listeners and weaken the message. A well-prepared student with good ideas may still receive a poor impression if the speech contains too many hesitations such as “uh... um... like...” repeated after every sentence. Consequently, addressing filler word usage is important not only for language fluency but also for academic success and career readiness.

Technology and social media have also influenced modern speaking habits. Students are constantly exposed to informal speech patterns through online videos, podcasts, and digital communication. Many influencers, vloggers, and casual speakers frequently use filler words in natural conversation. As students imitate these speaking styles, filler words may become habitual. In addition, fast-paced communication culture often values spontaneity over careful speech planning, which can further normalize hesitation markers. This social influence makes it necessary for educators to teach the difference between informal conversation and formal speaking contexts.

Reducing filler words requires awareness, practice, and supportive instruction. Many students cannot improve because they do not recognize the extent of their own habits. Recording speech, receiving feedback, and analyzing speaking patterns can help learners notice repeated fillers. Once students become aware, they can practice replacing filler words with

silent pauses, slower pacing, and clearer organization of ideas. Silence, when used naturally, is often more effective than repeated hesitation words. A short pause may sound thoughtful, while constant fillers may sound uncertain.

Teachers play a significant role in helping students overcome this challenge. Instead of criticizing learners for every hesitation, educators should create a positive environment where students feel safe to speak and improve gradually. Structured speaking tasks, pair discussions, presentation practice, pronunciation exercises, and confidence-building activities can reduce dependence on filler words. Teachers can also model effective speaking by demonstrating clear pauses, transitions, and organized speech patterns.

Furthermore, vocabulary development is closely connected to filler word reduction. Students with limited vocabulary often hesitate because they cannot quickly find the right word. Expanding lexical knowledge through reading, speaking tasks, and thematic vocabulary practice gives learners more tools for expression. As vocabulary access becomes faster, hesitation decreases, and filler words become less necessary. Similarly, repeated speaking practice improves automaticity, allowing students to produce language more smoothly. From a methodological perspective, studying filler words offers valuable insights into speaking processes. It helps researchers understand hesitation, fluency, anxiety, discourse management, and learner psychology. It also provides practical strategies for classroom improvement. By identifying when and why students use filler words, educators can design targeted interventions rather than simply asking learners to “speak better.”

This topic is especially relevant today because communication skills are increasingly demanded in education, employment, and international interaction. Students need not only grammatical accuracy but also confident and effective oral delivery. Whether in interviews, presentations, meetings, or everyday communication, clear speech creates stronger impressions and better understanding. Therefore, minimizing unnecessary filler words has become an important component of modern speaking competence. The present article focuses on filler words in students’ speech and methods for reducing them. It explores the linguistic and psychological causes of filler word use, examines their effects on fluency and listener perception, and presents practical strategies for improvement. Attention is given to classroom techniques, self-monitoring methods, vocabulary enhancement, and confidence-building approaches. Through this discussion, the article aims to show that filler words are manageable habits rather than permanent weaknesses

The Concept of Filler Words in Speech

Filler words are sounds, expressions, or short phrases used during speech when a speaker needs time to think, organize ideas, or continue communication without silence. They are common in natural spoken language and appear in almost every language. In English, the most frequent examples include “um,” “uh,” “like,” “you know,” “well,” “actually,” and “so.” These expressions may occur consciously or unconsciously. In many cases, speakers do not realize how often they use them.

From a linguistic perspective, filler words are part of spontaneous speech production. Unlike written language, spoken language happens in real time. Speakers cannot always plan every sentence in advance, so they often pause, restart, or hesitate. Filler words function as

temporary bridges between thoughts. They help speakers hold the floor while preparing the next idea.

However, not all filler words serve the same purpose. Some indicate hesitation, while others organize discourse. For example, “um” and “uh” usually signal thinking time, whereas “well” or “so” may introduce a new point or conclusion. Understanding these differences is important because some fillers are more problematic than others in formal speaking contexts.

Why Students Use Filler Words

Students use filler words for several reasons. One major reason is limited vocabulary. When learners cannot quickly remember the correct word or phrase, they often fill the silence with “um” or similar expressions. This is especially common in foreign language classrooms where students are still developing lexical knowledge.

Another important reason is grammatical uncertainty. A student may know what they want to say but hesitate because they are unsure about sentence structure or verb tense. As they mentally construct the sentence, filler words appear naturally. Speaking anxiety is also a major factor. Many students feel nervous when talking in front of classmates, teachers, or unfamiliar audiences. Stress affects thinking speed and confidence. As a result, students rely on filler words to gain extra time and reduce pressure. Lack of preparation also increases filler word use. Students who begin speaking without organizing their ideas often pause frequently. They may know the topic generally, but without a clear structure, they struggle to move from one point to another smoothly. Habit formation should also be considered. Some students use filler words regularly in their native language, and this habit transfers into English speech. If they often say similar expressions in everyday conversation, those habits become automatic during academic speaking as well.

Types of Filler Words Common in Student Speech

Student filler words can be divided into several categories.

The first category includes hesitation sounds such as “um,” “uh,” and “er.” These are used when students need immediate thinking time.

The second category includes discourse fillers such as “well,” “so,” and “okay.” These may help organize ideas or start responses.

The third category includes habitual expressions such as “like,” “you know,” and “I mean.” These often become repetitive and may not add meaning.

The fourth category includes repetition fillers. Students may repeat words such as “the... the... the problem is...” while planning the rest of the sentence.

The fifth category includes native-language fillers inserted into English speech. Multilingual learners sometimes use hesitation words from their first language when speaking English.

Recognizing these categories helps teachers identify whether the issue is vocabulary, anxiety, planning, or habit.

Negative Effects of Excessive Filler Words

Although filler words are natural, overuse can create several problems. First, they reduce fluency. Speech with constant interruptions sounds less smooth and less confident. Even when grammar is correct, frequent fillers may make the speaker appear

uncertain. Second, filler words reduce clarity. Listeners must focus harder to understand the message when unnecessary expressions appear repeatedly.

Third, they weaken professional image. In interviews, presentations, and formal discussions, too many fillers may create a negative impression.

Fourth, fillers distract the audience. Instead of listening to ideas, people may notice repeated “um,” “like,” or “you know.” Fifth, they reduce persuasive power. A speaker who sounds hesitant may be considered less credible, even if their ideas are strong.

For students, these effects are important because oral performance often influences grades, opportunities, and self-confidence.

Positive Functions of Filler Words

Despite criticism, filler words are not always negative. In moderate amounts, they can perform useful communication functions.

They may help speakers keep their turn in conversation. Instead of stopping completely, a short filler signals that the speaker has more to say.

They can make speech sound natural. Perfectly polished speech is rare in real conversation. Some fillers create authenticity.

They may soften statements. Expressions like “well” can introduce disagreement politely.

They can also help listeners process transitions. For example, “so” may signal a conclusion or next point.

Therefore, the goal should not be total elimination. The real objective is balanced and conscious use, especially in academic and professional speaking.

Filler words are common features of spoken language and appear naturally in student communication. They often emerge when learners need thinking time, feel nervous, search for vocabulary, or organize ideas. While moderate use may be normal and sometimes useful, excessive repetition can reduce fluency, clarity, confidence, and professional impact.

The study of filler words is important because it reveals both linguistic and psychological aspects of speaking performance. Students do not simply use fillers because of weak language ability; they also use them due to stress, habit, lack of planning, and fear of mistakes. Therefore, solving the problem requires a broader educational approach.

Effective reduction methods include awareness training, silent pause practice, vocabulary growth, repeated speaking tasks, slower pacing, and supportive teacher feedback. Technology such as self-recording and speech analysis tools can further accelerate progress. Most importantly, students need regular opportunities to speak in a positive environment where gradual improvement is valued.

Teachers play a central role in guiding students from hesitant speech toward confident communication. By creating safe classrooms, offering constructive feedback, and teaching practical speaking strategies, they help learners replace unnecessary fillers with purposeful pauses and clearer expression.

In conclusion, filler words should not be seen as permanent weaknesses but as manageable habits. With conscious practice, self-monitoring, and consistent speaking experience, students can significantly reduce filler word overuse. As a result, they become more fluent, more confident, and more effective communicators in academic, professional, and everyday life.

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