FILLER TYPES IN STUDENT'S ACADEMIC SPEAKING PRESENTATION: THE USE AND FUNCTION

Nasori Efendi[1], Natalia Anggrarini[2*], Dahlia[3]
English Education Department, Universitas Wiralodra, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate undergraduate students' filler types in academic speaking presentations and how they use filler functions. This qualitative research used observation to analyze the type of fillers used by the students during the presentation and interview to analyze the function of the fillers they used. The participants were 21 undergraduate students of the English Education Department from Universitas Wiralodra. This study reported that the students used lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers during the presentation. Lexicalized fillers are found mostly used by the students with 60,93%. While unlexicalized filler appeared 39.07%. Those fillers functioned to hesitate, empathize, mitigate, edit terms, and create time. Filler is used and functioned by the students to show politeness and create time to plan what to say next. This study implies that the students need various strategies to use fillers properly and understand positive and negative fillers so they can develop their communicative competency. This study suggests further investigation in terms of the use of filler in written language.

Keywords: *Academic Speaking, Fillers, Lexicalized Filler, Presentation, Unlexicalized Fillers*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki jenis pengisi mahasiswa sarjana dalam presentasi pidato akademik dan bagaimana mereka menggunakan fungsi pengisi. Penelitian kualitatif ini menggunakan observasi untuk menganalisis jenis filler yang digunakan siswa saat presentasi dan wawancara untuk menganalisis fungsi filler yang mereka gunakan. Pesertanya adalah mahasiswa S1 Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Wiralodra yang berjumlah 21 orang. Penelitian ini melaporkan bahwa siswa menggunakan pengisi leksikal dan tidak leksikalisasi selama presentasi. Pengisi leksikalisasi ditemukan paling banyak digunakan oleh siswa yaitu sebesar 60,93%. Sedangkan filler yang tidak dileksikalisasi muncul sebesar 39,07%. Pengisi tersebut berfungsi untuk meragukan, berempati, memitigasi, mengedit istilah, dan menciptakan waktu. Filler digunakan dan difungsikan oleh siswa untuk menunjukkan kesantunan dan memberikan waktu untuk merencanakan apa yang akan dikatakan selanjutnya. Penelitian ini menyiratkan bahwa siswa memerlukan berbagai strategi untuk menggunakan filler dengan benar dan memahami filler positif dan negatif sehingga mereka dapat mengembangkan kompetensi komunikatifnya. Penelitian ini menyarankan penyelidikan lebih lanjut dalam hal penggunaan filler dalam bahasa tertulis.

Kata Kunci: *Berbicara akademis, filler, filler leksikal, filler tidak lexical, presentasi*

INTRODUCTION

Developing speaking skills is critical for English learners, as regular practice in daily interactions and structured classroom activities fosters fluency, improves

speaking ability, and enables learners to express ideas clearly and effectively (Chen & Hwang, 2020; Mantra et al., 2022). Despite its importance, mastering spoken English is a complex process for non-native speakers. It involves coordinating sound production, lexical selection, and real-time cognitive processing, which can lead to challenges like pauses, delays, and fillers that comprise a notable portion of spoken language (Lomotey, 2021; Székely et al., 2019).

Speaking a foreign language presents significant challenges for non-native speakers, who must simultaneously navigate sound production, word selection, and coherent thought expression. These demands often result in speech disfluencies such as pauses, fillers, and restarts, which can make up roughly 6% of spoken language. While traditionally viewed as hindrances to comprehension, disfluencies serve as cognitive tools, allowing speakers time to organize thoughts, especially in unprepared speech (Chen & Hwang, 2020; Lomotey, 2021; Székely et al., 2019). Such occurrences underscore the intricate nature of spoken language learning and the need for strategies that build fluency through real-time practice and cognitive readiness.

Many students depend on fillers to gain time while thinking of the next word, and expert opinions vary on their utility. Some researchers argue that when used sparingly, fillers can support learners by providing time to organize thoughts, aiding confidence, and improving spoken coherence, rather than signaling a lack of intelligence or proficiency (Székely et al., 2019; Lomotey, 2021). Others, however, contend that the frequent use of fillers reflects deficiencies in speaking ability, potentially interrupting fluency and calling for further exploration of their impact on effective communication (Chen & Hwang, 2020; Carney, 2022).

Previous studies have explored various aspects of fillers. Stevani (2018) examined the types and functions of fillers used by students during academic presentations, providing insight into how students cope with the pressure of public speaking. Alen (2016) investigated how students use fillers in different conversational contexts, including both disruptive and normal situations, highlighting the variability of filler usage based on context. Székely (2019) studied the impact of filled pauses like "uh" and "um" on neural text-to-speech systems trained on spontaneous conversations, contributing to the understanding of fillers in both human and machine communication.

Although extensive research exists on fillers, most studies focus on specific types like "uh" and "um" or on silent pauses and slips of the tongue. Few studies examine the use of fillers in speaking classes, where students are learning and practicing spoken English in an academic setting. Therefore, this study aims to identify the most commonly used fillers by students during academic speaking presentations. The research question guiding this study is: "What are the types of fillers used by undergraduate students in academic speaking presentations?" This study contributes to the field by filling a gap in existing research, offering a detailed analysis of filler usage in a classroom context. It provides insights into how students navigate the challenges of speaking in a second language and how educators can better support their development in this area.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to identify the types and functions of fillers used in academic speaking presentations, aiming for a comprehensive and detailed understanding rather than numerical data analysis (Cohen & Crabtree, 2018). The case study design is utilized, a common method in various fields, particularly in evaluation (Baxter, 2016). This approach involves an in-depth analysis of a specific case—such as a program, event, activity, process, or individual—over a set period, with data gathered through multiple collection methods. These methods may include interviews, observations, document reviews, and audio-visual materials, allowing for a rich and nuanced exploration of the case in question (Simons, 2018). By focusing on a single case in great detail, the study seeks to uncover the intricate ways in which fillers are employed by students, providing insights that might be overlooked in a broader quantitative analysis (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This approach not only illuminates the specific context of academic speaking presentations but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in second language acquisition and usage (Elder & Davies, 2019; Ellis, 2020).

Research Participant

The participants of this study were 21 fourth-semester students from the English Education Department at Wiralodra University during the 2022/2023 academic year, all of whom were enrolled in an academic speaking class. This research investigates the various strategies these students employ to fill gaps in their speech. By examining their use of fillers, the study aims to understand how these learners navigate pauses and hesitations during their academic presentations. The focus is on identifying specific techniques the students use to maintain fluency and coherence in their spoken English, shedding light on the practical methods they adopt to manage the challenges of speaking in a second language. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to the broader field of language education by providing insights into the real-time speaking strategies of English learners, potentially informing teaching practices and curricular design to better support students in developing their speaking skills.

Instruments

Data was collected using a combination of observations and interviews to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The research involved two main steps: the first step was observing and recording student presentations through audio and video, capturing the real-time use of fillers during their speeches. This method allowed for a detailed analysis of how and when fillers were employed, providing a rich dataset of natural speech patterns. The second step involved conducting in-depth interviews with the participants to delve into the reasons behind their use of fillers. These interviews aimed to uncover the students' perspectives on why they used fillers, what they believed the functions of these fillers were, and how they felt these fillers impacted their overall speaking performance. By combining observational data with personal insights from the interviews, the study aimed to paint a holistic picture of the use of fillers in academic

speaking contexts, offering valuable insights into the cognitive and communicative processes of English learners.

Procedures

During the data collection, students presented their topics in the academic speaking class while the researcher observed and recorded their performances. Field notes were taken to capture key information during the presentations. The interviews were conducted separately from the observation sessions to allow for more specific data collection. Each student was interviewed individually to avoid discomfort and to facilitate open-ended responses. These interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection.

Observations aimed to gather data on planned presentations, assessing whether different types of fillers were used. The presentations referred to topics chosen by students for their academic speaking class. After the observations, nine participants were interviewed as a sample to gain deeper insights into their use of fillers.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed qualitatively through a coding process using inductive analysis to identify themes. This involved three main techniques: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. In data reduction, the researcher meticulously refined, classified, directed, and organized the data, systematically discarding unnecessary information to ensure the validity of the conclusions drawn. During this phase, the researcher created summaries and partitions based on the collected data to facilitate a more structured and detailed analysis. This process allowed for a more focused examination of the key themes and patterns that emerged, ensuring that the analysis was both comprehensive and coherent. The data display involved organizing the refined data into visual formats such as charts, matrices, and graphs, making it easier to interpret and identify relationships within the data. Finally, the conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and themes identified during the data reduction and display stages, providing insights into the underlying phenomena being studied.

FINDINGS

Data were collected from the speeches of fourth-semester students in the English Education Department during their academic speaking presentations. Instances of fillers were meticulously identified and highlighted in italics, encompassing words, phrases, clauses, or even entire sentences, a process consistent with contemporary methods in linguistic discourse analysis (Nguyen et al., 2021; Tannen & Trester, 2020). This meticulous marking aimed to ensure a comprehensive dataset, reflecting the depth recommended for qualitative analysis in language studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell, 2021).

The study observed 21 students, and subsequent analysis was conducted promptly to maintain data relevance and accuracy. To interpret the meaning and functions of fillers, Busetto's (2020) qualitative framework was employed, which is noted for its systematic approach in analyzing speech data. This framework enabled nuanced exploration of how fillers function in academic speaking, aligning with methodologies in recent research on second-language communication and fluency strategies (Lozano, 2022; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2020). These findings contribute

robust insights to the understanding of fillers in structured speech contexts, supporting broader discussions in second-language acquisition literature (Elder & Davies, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021).

The Types of Fillers
The researcher identified numerous instances of fillers used by students in their presentations, meticulously documenting each occurrence to provide a thorough analysis. Several instances of lexical fillers were particularly notable during the academic speaking presentations, highlighting the students' reliance on specific words and phrases to maintain the flow of their speech. Details regarding the types and frequencies of these fillers are comprehensively presented in Table 1, offering a clear and organized overview of the patterns observed. This table serves as a key component of the study, illustrating the prevalence and variety of fillers used, and providing a basis for further analysis and interpretation of their functions and implications in the context of academic speaking.

Table 1. Types and occurrence of fillers used by students

No	Types of Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
1	Lexicalized Fillers	152	39.07%
2	Unlexicalized Fillers	237	60.93%
	TOTAL	389	100%

The data presented above reveals that a total of 389 fillers were identified in students' academic speaking presentations. Among these, 152 fillers (39.07%) were lexicalized, while 237 fillers (60.93%) were unlexicalized. This distribution indicates that students predominantly use fillers to pause, hesitate, think, or prepare to articulate the next utterance in their presentations. Such usage suggests that fillers play a significant role in helping students manage their speech flow and maintain coherence during their presentations. Below is the detailed information about the total use of fillers, offering a comprehensive breakdown of their occurrence and types, which further elucidates the patterns and reasons behind their frequent usage.

Table 2. Lexicaleized and Unlexicalized Filler

No	Lexicalized Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
1	Well	14	3.60
2	And then,	51	13.11
3	Like	7	1.80
4	You know,	6	1.54
5	I think	5	1.29
6	So	42	10.80
7	Oke	27	6.94
No	**Unlexicalized Fillers**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
8	Uhh	105	26.99
9	Uhm	29	7.46
10	A	103	26.48
	TOTAL	152	39.07

Table 2 provides an extensive breakdown of the frequency of both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers utilized by students in their academic presentations, offering valuable insights into the prevalent linguistic phenomena shaping their spoken discourse. Upon analysis, it is evident that three primary lexicalized fillers, namely "and then," "so," and "oke," emerge as the most frequently employed, comprising 13.11%, 10.80%, and 6.94% of the total usage, respectively. This dominance underscores the significance of these lexicalized fillers in structuring and organizing students' verbal expressions during their presentations. Additionally, other fillers such as "well," "like," "you know," and "I think" are also recurrently used, albeit to a lesser extent, with frequencies of 14, 7, 6, and 5, respectively, representing 3.60%, 1.80%, 1.54%, and 1.29% of the total usage. These findings illuminate the diverse repertoire of lexicalized fillers employed by students to enhance the coherence and fluidity of their spoken discourse, underscoring the nuanced ways in which linguistic devices shape communicative interactions.

Conversely, in the realm of unlexicalized fillers, "Uhh" emerges as the predominant filler, followed closely by "A" and "Uhm," with frequencies of 105, 103, and 29, respectively, constituting 26.99%, 25.03%, and 7.46% of the total usage. The prominence of these unlexicalized fillers underscores their pivotal role in facilitating students' oral expression, serving as indispensable tools for managing pauses, hesitations, and transitions within their presentations. By examining the frequency and distribution of both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers, this comprehensive analysis offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of filler usage in academic speaking contexts, shedding light on the linguistic strategies employed by students to effectively navigate the complexities of spoken discourse and enhance their communicative efficacy.

The Use and Function of the Fillers
Lexicalized Fillers

Lexicalized fillers, characterized by their form as words or phrases, serve as linguistic devices employed by students in specific situations during their academic presentations. Each filler is strategically utilized by students to ease their way of communicating the activity's purpose, facilitating smoother transitions and enhancing the overall clarity of their speech. The recapitulation below provides a comprehensive overview of the examples of use and their corresponding functions, shedding light on the diverse ways in which lexicalized fillers contribute to the students' effective communication during their presentations.

Table 3. The Use and Function of the Lexicalized Fillers

No	Lexicalized Fillers	The Use
1	Well	S14: "**Well**, the next slide in the purpose uhh… and the purpose of this journal is the purpose of this interview was to obtain supporting data from the questionnaire." S2: "**Well**, the speaking class analysis analyses about how effectively the task speaking task and provides in the learning activities…"
2	And then,	S3: "Some essential questions with the student **and then** a… the second design drama project plan and then in asking the student with critical thinking **and then** next designing drama project preparation schedule"

		S19: "**And then** a research method, the method is uhh… qualitative descriptive and the second is participant second-semester students."
3	Like	S4: "The first is a learning habit, learning habit is someone believes in something in *(unclear) and **like** in front of the public." S10: "Since they find it hurt to pronounce and memorize new words **like** confident and prefer to speak to their friend and their native tongue."
4	You know,	S20: "as **you know** you can see here there is type of uhh.. there is a type of podcast topic or chip, first one is All-encompassing" S6: "as **you know** you can see on the screen a… the scores for the experimental group in speaking achievement is the lowest pre-test score" S11: "As **you know** you can see *(unclear) and for discussion or the finding this research."
5	I think	S12: "**I think** they worry about the grammatical structure if they speak" S6: "Ok, **I think** that's all for me thank you so much…."
6	So	S3: "**so** effective and interesting and then the research will be a new model in the teaching practice for future, and student to implement a speaking skill for foreign language".
7	Oke	S19: "**Ok** I will present the journal by the title Students' Perception of Using Zoom Meeting for Online Learning in Teaching English Speaking Skills during COVID-19." S10 : "**Ok**, I will tell you the problem of this research, the problem of this research is that speaking is more difficult for a student in the non-English department…." S18: "**Ok**, so I will continue the problem of the research, the problem is the research is Lack of confidence among students when it comes to speaking in public."

The table provided above outlines the lexicalized fillers utilized by students and their corresponding functions in academic presentations. Each lexicalized filler serves a distinct purpose tailored to specific situations encountered during spoken discourse in academic settings. These fillers are strategically employed by students to convey politeness and initiate utterances, to stall for time, to express doubt or surprise before formulating responses, to sequentially present ideas, to signal hesitation when uncertain about what to say, to seek synonyms for challenging words, to indicate movement without necessity, to express personal opinions, to facilitate the connection of ideas by buying time, to act as time-creating devices, and to signify readiness to initiate a conversation. Through the deliberate use of lexicalized fillers, students effectively navigate the complexities of academic speaking presentations, enhancing their communicative competence and ensuring the coherence and effectiveness of their oral discourse.

Unlexicalized Fillers

In addition to lexicalized fillers, the analysis revealed the presence of unlexicalized fillers in students' academic speaking presentations. The data pertaining to these unlexicalized fillers is detailed in the table below, offering insight into their occurrence and distribution throughout the spoken discourse. These unlexicalized fillers, characterized by their non-verbal or non-phrase form, play a

crucial role in students' speech patterns, aiding in the management of pauses, hesitations, and transitions within their presentations. By examining the usage of both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by students to navigate the complexities of academic speaking contexts.

Table 4. Unlexicalized Fillers

No	Unlexicalized Fillers	The Use
1	Uhh	S21: "… and here **uhh**… I will review the journal entitled Self-determined Learning Practice in English Speaking Class A Histological Perspective in EFL Class." S1: "… student agree that speech speech *(repeat) is **uhh**… The 35 students agree that speech can improve speaking ability uhh… to *(pause) student is can not **uhh**… cannot that speech can improve the speaking ability." S14: "And discussion **uhh**… discussion in this research is assessment technique is a key component that can be spared in a teaching-learning process." S13: " .. this **uhh**… research use an instrument of this research use uhh… the pertest experimental method and there any pre-test and post-test S3: "**uhh**… there are four fundamental skill who uhh… we should have to *(pause) achieve and to *(pause) finding jobs" "**uhh**… my journal review about the implementation of classical prophet drama performance to improve English speaking skill from the international class program" "**uhh**… the purpose is to analyze the complementation of classical puppet drama performances in an international class program"
2	Uhm	S12: "…. there are eight questions and three choices **uhm**… often seldom and never and sampling from 35 students as EFL learners." S9: "**Uhm**… mind mapping is a familiar technique to the student second is mind mapping is refer technique…." S6: "**Uhm**… my name is Mabruroh here I will explain a journal interview and the title is the effect of the role-playing technique on the speaking skills of students of University…"
3	A	S8: "**a** (..) the purpose of this study a (…) to develop beneficial suggestions for educating educators students and teachers to enhance the teaching and learning of spoken English." S14: "Ok, **a** /../ I Fanni Febriliana in here I want to present a entitled student speaking skill assessment at technique and result." S3: … to improve speaking skills by using **a** /../ classical puppet drama. S1: "And the data found **a** /…/ found 78% because in this group discussion…."

		S9: "Student **a** /.../ interview student perception perspective *(unclear) mind mapping the first is uhm... mind mapping is a familiar technique to the student second is mind mapping."

The table presented above showcases the utilization of unlexicalized fillers by students throughout their academic speaking presentations. These unlexicalized fillers served various functions, indicating readiness to commence the presentation, signaling difficulties in constructing ideas and finding the appropriate words for effective communication, and opening new topics or sentences. Additionally, they were used to signify the transition between sentences, convey messages explicitly, and express uncertainty when initiating a new point or sentence following the completion of previous topics. Furthermore, students employed unlexicalized fillers to highlight frequent mistakes and indicate moments where they found the appropriate words to articulate their thoughts effectively. By examining the multifaceted roles of unlexicalized fillers in spoken discourse, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how students manage the complexities of academic speaking presentations.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the types and functions of fillers used by undergraduate students during their academic speaking presentations. The key findings revealed that of the 389 fillers observed, 237 were unlexicalized fillers, such as "uhh," while 152 were lexical fillers. The predominance of unlexicalized fillers suggests a reliance on these simple, quick expressions, especially among students with lower English proficiency, who may struggle with vocabulary gaps during presentations. Furthermore, the study found that all speakers employed fillers, highlighting their ubiquitous nature in spoken communication, particularly in second language contexts (Huhta, 2019; Stevani, 2018).

The findings indicate that fillers, particularly unlexicalized ones, serve crucial functions in academic speaking presentations. They act as pauses that allow speakers time to think, organize their thoughts, and continue their discourse, which is especially beneficial in second language contexts (Fox Tree, 2002; Stevani, 2018). The heavy reliance on unlexicalized fillers among students with lower English proficiency may reflect their struggle to find the right words quickly, necessitating these verbal placeholders to maintain fluency. Additionally, the use of fillers across all speakers, regardless of language proficiency, emphasizes their inherent role in spoken language, as noted by Huhta (2019) and Stevani (2018). This suggests that fillers are not only a strategy for overcoming language gaps but also an integral component of fluent speech (Baalen, 2001).

The findings of this study align with previous research on filler usage. For instance, Stevani (2018) also identified "uhh" as the most commonly used filler in academic settings, supporting the observation that simple, unlexicalized fillers are preferred during speech. Similarly, Pamolango (2016) highlighted that non-native speakers, particularly from Asia, tend to use fillers more frequently, which is consistent with the study's finding that students with lower English proficiency exhibit higher filler usage (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002). Furthermore, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) emphasized that fillers serve multiple communicative functions, including hesitation, mitigation, and time-creation, all of which were evident in the current

study. The functions of fillers observed in this study, such as hesitation and time-creation, also mirror those identified by Baalen (2001) and Stenström (1994), underscoring the consistent role of fillers in language production.

The study's findings have several implications for both language education and communication research. For educators, understanding the frequent use of fillers by students in academic presentations can inform teaching strategies (Lozano, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021). Educators can help students become more aware of their filler usage and provide guidance on reducing unnecessary fillers, especially in high-stakes speaking contexts. However, it is also important to recognize the value of fillers in managing speech fluency and reducing anxiety, particularly for second language learners (Elder & Davies, 2019; Tree, 2020). Consequently, a balanced approach that teaches students when and how to use fillers effectively, rather than discouraging them entirely, could be beneficial. Moreover, the study contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition by highlighting how students navigate cognitive challenges in real-time communication, offering insights into the complexities of language production under pressure (Huhta, 2020; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2020).

While this study provides valuable insights into the use of fillers in academic speaking presentations, there are several limitations. First, the study's sample size was limited to a small group of undergraduate students, which may not be representative of a wider population of learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. A larger sample size, including students from various disciplines and language proficiency levels, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of filler usage (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ellis, 2020). Additionally, the study focused solely on academic presentations, which may not fully capture the range of filler usage across different conversational contexts (Lozano, 2022; Baxter, 2016). Future research could expand the scope by examining fillers in informal speech or in more varied academic settings (Simons & Green, 2018; Baxter, 2021). Finally, the reliance on observational data may not capture all instances of filler usage, especially those that occur subconsciously or in informal settings, suggesting the need for more comprehensive data collection methods, such as longitudinal studies or a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Cohen & Crabtree, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students utilized both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers in their academic speaking presentations. In addressing the primary research question, it was found that students integrated fillers into their speech, with lexical fillers accounting for 152 instances (39.07%) and non-lexical fillers for 237 instances (60.93%). These findings elucidate the multifaceted nature of filler usage among English majors in academic speaking presentations. Five distinct functions of fillers were identified: hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing, and creating time. Specifically, students employ fillers to hesitate, allowing them to pause and gather their thoughts; empathize, intending to engage the listener's attention; edit, rectifying pronunciation errors; mitigate, demonstrating politeness; and create time, repeating words to organize their subsequent statements.

These findings underscore the complex role that fillers play in facilitating effective communication, particularly in second-language contexts. By allowing students to manage pauses and structure their speech, fillers serve as a tool for maintaining fluency and ensuring smoother communication during academic presentations. The identification of these functions adds to our understanding of how fillers operate not just as hesitation markers, but as integral components of the linguistic toolkit for both cognitive and social purposes.

The study underscores the importance of enhancing students' awareness of filler usage by implementing various strategies. For instance, educators can explicitly teach students about the different types and functions of fillers to augment their communicative competence. Moreover, further research could explore the comparison between filler usage in written texts and spoken language, offering deeper insights into the nuanced variations in filler utilization across different contexts. Such investigations could inform more targeted interventions aimed at enhancing students' speaking skills and overall language proficiency. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of filler usage, educators can empower students to communicate effectively and confidently in academic and real-world settings.

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