

Analyzing the Use of Fillers in Postgraduate EFL Learners' Academic Presentations: A Qualitative Case Study Approach

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Abstract

This study explores the use of fillers in academic presentations by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, aiming to understand their functions and impact on communication during academic presentations. The research used a qualitative method that analyzed 373 fillers uttered by 3 students during their presentations, classifying them into simple words, phrases, and clauses. Data collection was conducted through audio and video recordings of the participants' presentations. The data was manually transcribed to form a corpus of the students' spoken language. Common fillers like "Ehmm," "okay," "so," and "I think" were identified. Some of their functions, such as signaling hesitation, providing thinking time, and clarifying points, were examined. The findings suggest that while fillers help maintain speech flow and engage the audience, using them too much can make the speaker seem less confident or unprepared. The study shows that fillers can be useful when used thoughtfully, but overusing them can affect the clarity and professionalism of the presentation. The research suggests that students could benefit from being more aware of how they use fillers, and instructors might include training on managing fillers in their presentation workshops. In terms of academic implications, this research highlights the need for further exploration into the cognitive and social functions of fillers in EFL contexts. Practical implications for EFL instructors include incorporating targeted exercises into speaking curricula, such as awareness-building activities, real-time feedback, and guided practice sessions, specifically focused on managing the use of fillers in academic settings.

Keywords: *Academic Presentation; Fillers' Function; Learners*

Abstract

Penelitian ini meneliti penggunaan pengisi kalimat (fillers) dalam presentasi akademik oleh siswa EFL (English as a Foreign Language), dengan tujuan memahami fungsi dan dampaknya terhadap komunikasi selama presentasi akademik. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang menganalisis 373 fillers yang diucapkan oleh 3 mahasiswa selama presentasi mereka, diklasifikasikan menjadi kata-kata sederhana, frasa, dan klausa. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui rekaman audio dan video presentasi peserta. Data tersebut ditranskrip secara manual untuk membentuk korpus bahasa lisan mahasiswa. Pengisi umum seperti "Ehmm," "okey," "jadi," dan "saya pikir" diidentifikasi. Beberapa fungsinya, seperti menandakan keraguan, memberikan waktu berpikir, dan mengklarifikasi poin, dianalisis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun fillers membantu menjaga aliran pembicaraan dan melibatkan audiens, penggunaan yang berlebihan dapat membuat pembicara terlihat kurang percaya diri atau tidak siap. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa fillers dapat berguna jika digunakan dengan bijak, tetapi penggunaan berlebihan dapat memengaruhi kejelasan dan profesionalisme presentasi. Penelitian ini menyarankan bahwa mahasiswa dapat memperoleh manfaat dari kesadaran yang lebih besar tentang cara mereka menggunakan fillers, dan instruktur mungkin dapat memasukkan pelatihan tentang pengelolaan fillers dalam workshop presentasi mereka. Dari segi implikasi akademik, penelitian ini menyoroti perlunya eksplorasi lebih lanjut mengenai fungsi kognitif dan sosial dari filler dalam konteks EFL. Implikasi praktis bagi pengajar EFL meliputi pentingnya memasukkan latihan yang terarah dalam kurikulum berbicara, seperti kegiatan

untuk membangun kesadaran, umpan balik langsung, dan sesi latihan yang terarah, yang secara khusus berfokus pada pengelolaan penggunaan filler dalam setting akademik.

Kata Kunci: Fungsi Pengisi; Presentasi Akademik; Siswa

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INTRODUCTION

An academic presentation is a structured oral communication where an individual presents research findings, ideas, or concepts to an audience, typically in an academic or professional setting. It aims at informing or persuading the audience (Nurjaini et al., 2020). According to Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan (2010), the purpose of academic presentations is to integrate language skills, practice speaking, promote decision-making, prepare students for real-life situations, and encourage independent learning and critical thinking. However, during these presentations, students often produce speech sounds while delivering their main content, known as fillers. These fillers, although sometimes viewed negatively, are an essential part of speech that can aid in maintaining fluency and allowing the speaker time to organize their thoughts. Understanding the use and function of fillers can help improve presentation skills and enhance communication effectiveness. Fillers, which are linguistic expressions such as ‘um’ and ‘er’, play an important role in speech, especially in academic contexts. Fillers can indicate hesitation or pauses while the speaker arranges their thoughts, enabling a more coherent delivery despite moments of uncertainty (Sugiura et al., 2020).

Rather than being a linguistic flaw, this phenomenon is a strategic tool that enables speakers to maintain audience engagement while processing their next words or thoughts (Sugiura et al., 2020; Syamsudin et al., 2024). Specific studies suggest that the appropriate use of fillers can improve perception; audiences often rate speakers who use fillers more effectively than those who rely predominantly on silent pauses, considering them to be more competent presenters (Syamsudin et al., 2024). Fillers can take various forms, such as simple words, phrases, or clauses (Stevani et al., 2018). Simple word fillers are single words like “but,” “okay,” “well,” “um,” “yeah,” “uh,” “eh,” “see,” “so,” and “right.” Phrasal fillers are groups of words without a subject or verb, such as “by the way” and “how to say.” Clausal fillers, on the other hand, consist of both a subject and a predicate, like “I mean” and “you know.” Fillers can also be categorized by their functions, which include hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing terms, and time-creating devices (Kharismawan, 2017; Stenström, 1994). The researcher analyzed the use of fillers and categorized their functions, taking into account the context of the situation and the utterances made.

The use of fillers can have both positive and negative effects on the speaker's perceived value in front of the audience. On the positive side, fillers can provide speakers with crucial cognitive processing time. They function as pauses that allow the presenter to organize thoughts and maintain flow within the discourse, which can enhance audience engagement and create a more conversational atmosphere (Anggrarini et al., 2024). For instance, Anggrarini et al. (2024) examined how students utilized fillers to express hesitation and create space for more structured communication. This demonstrates that fillers can be strategically employed to mitigate the pressure of delivering information in real-time. The use of fillers can signal to the audience that the speaker is still thinking, thus implicitly inviting their participation and fostering a more interactive environment (Anggrarini et al., 2024). This can make the speaker seem more relatable and approachable, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the presentation.

However, fillers can also possess negative implications, particularly when overused or improperly integrated. Excessive reliance on fillers may detract from the clarity and professionalism of the presentation, potentially leading to a perception of disfluency or lack of preparation. Research

has shown that audiences may interpret the overuse of fillers as a sign of the speaker's lack of knowledge or insecurity, which can compromise their credibility. In contexts where clear and precise communication is highly valued, fillers can create barriers, making the message less impactful (Azi, 2018). For instance, excessive fillers may disrupt the flow of a narrative, causing listeners to miss important points and reducing the educational value of the presentation (Azi, 2018). Despite preparing for their academic presentations, students may unconsciously use fillers when delivering them. (Seals & Coppock, 2022) highlight that the overuse of fillers in academic presentations can reduce the speaker's credibility and impair the audience's understanding of the message.

A number of studies have examined the role and function of fillers in academic oral presentations, highlighting their significance in communication dynamics among students and speakers in educational settings. A study by (Anggrarini et al., 2024) is particularly relevant in this context, as it investigates the types of fillers used by undergraduate students during academic presentations. The study reveals that fillers serve various functions, including hesitation markers, time-gaining tools, and devices that mitigate the impact of uncertainty, thereby facilitating smoother communication (Anggrarini et al., 2024). This qualitative research study involved 21 students from an English Education Department, with the objective of demonstrating how the strategic utilisation of fillers can enhance the interactive quality of presentations, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the speaker's thought process. This study still not accommodate the functions of the fillers itself during the presentation, which will be investigated in this study. Another one, (Yulpia 2025) investigates centres on the English-speaking practice of students in an Intermediate class, where the prevalent use of fillers is assessed in terms of their organisational role in speech. This research emphasises the effectiveness of fillers in segmenting speech, thereby enhancing fluency and coherence, which are pivotal components in any academic discourse. The findings of the study demonstrated that students' use of fillers facilitated the navigation of pauses in speech, thereby suggesting the complexity of their thought structure during presentations (Yulpia, 2025). Even though this study investigated the functions of fillers during presentation, the participants of this study are different. So, this study comes to investigate on another level.

Another research study of relevance to this debate is that of Mohammad et al., which analyzed the frequency and rationale behind the use of fillers in presentations made by students. The mixed-method approach employed in this study enabled a comprehensive understanding of the utilization of fillers, with findings indicating that their primary functions include the reduction of anxiety and the procurement of time for the speaker to formulate responses during discussions (Mohammad et al., 2024). This is of critical importance for maintaining presentation flow, particularly in high-stakes academic environments where clarity and confidence are paramount. The use of fillers can thus play a key role in enhancing communication effectiveness by providing speakers with the necessary cognitive space to manage their thoughts and reduce pressure, leading to more structured and confident presentations.

While previous studies have examined the use of fillers in academic presentations, including their functions in hesitation marking, time-gaining, and mitigating uncertainty, there remains a lack of comprehensive research that directly explores how these fillers impact the effectiveness of communication in EFL academic presentations, particularly from the perspective of both the speaker's cognitive process and the audience's perception. While studies like Anggrarini et al. (2024) and Yulpia (2025) have explored the types and functions of fillers, their focus has been limited to the role of fillers in speech segmentation and fluency enhancement in general contexts. None of these studies have specifically examined how fillers influence the clarity and professionalism of academic presentations within the EFL context, nor have they explored how excessive filler use may alter audience perceptions of the speaker's credibility and competence. Furthermore, while existing

research often highlights the general impact of fillers, there is limited discussion on how EFL learners can strategically manage fillers to optimize the flow and engagement of their academic presentations. This gap presents an opportunity to contribute more targeted insights into how EFL learners can use fillers not just as communication tools, but as a means of improving their overall presentation performance, thus addressing a critical aspect of academic communication in global contexts.

METHODS

The methodology used in this study is a qualitative research design with a case study approach, aiming to explore the use of fillers in EFL learners' academic presentations. The research focuses on three postgraduate students as participants, each delivering an academic presentation during the academic year of 2025/2026. These participants were purposefully selected from the same academic major, ensuring consistency in their background while focusing on different topics for their presentations. This selection was based on their willingness to participate and the availability of suitable presentation opportunities within the academic year. Although the sample size is small, this case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the individual use of fillers in academic presentations, providing valuable insights into the phenomena being studied.

Data collection was conducted through audio and video recordings of the participants' presentations. The recordings were transcribed manually to form a corpus of the students' spoken language. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the agreement letter, ensuring that the research adhered to ethical guidelines in terms of participant privacy, consent, and data protection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study, with a clear explanation provided regarding the purpose of the research, the recording process, and the confidentiality measures in place. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The recordings were stored securely and anonymized to protect the participants' privacy, with identifiable information removed from the final transcriptions and analysis.

The participants' utterances during the presentations were carefully observed and analyzed. The fillers were identified from the corpus, with the data sorting process involving separating fillers from other words, as described in similar studies by Nurjain et al. (2020) and Stevani Sudarsono, S., & Supardi, I. et al. (2018). Fillers were then analyzed using a framework adapted from Chapetón Castro (2009). The first step in the analysis was to identify and classify the fillers based on their forms (simple words, phrases, or clauses) and functions, drawing upon the theory of discourse markers by Castro. The frequencies of each filler word were computed manually, with the data presented in tables showing both the occurrence and the percentage of each filler used. The descriptive qualitative method was used to interpret the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the fillers used by the participants and their implications in academic presentations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study offers interesting findings on the use of fillers in academic presentations. In this section, examines the reasons for the prevalence of certain fillers and consider their implications for academic communication.

Findings

Types of Fillers

The analysis of academic presentations revealed that a total of 373 fillers were used across all presentations. The result showed that there were 20 types of fillers produced by the students while delivering their academic presentations. These fillers were: ehmm, okay, actually, so, that is, and, I think, I mean, I mean like, something like, like, you know, yes/ya, no, ah/uh, like that, yeah, well, oh

yea, and then. Among these, the most frequently uttered filler was “*Ehmm*”, appearing 35 times. Table 1 below shows those 20 fillers with their frequency and the form of fillers.

Table 1. Fillers produced by students during an academic presentation

No	Fillers	The Frequency (number)	Forms of Fillers
1	Ehmm	35	Simple Word
2	Okay	22	Simple Word
3	Actually	10	Simple Word
4	So	20	Simple Word
5	That is	18	Phrases
6	And	20	Simple Word
7	I think	25	Clauses
8	I mean	12	Clauses
9	I mean like	7	Clauses
10	Something like	5	Phrases
11	like	29	Simple Word
12	You know	11	Phrases
13	Yes/ yea	26	Simple Word
14	No	14	Simple Word
15	Ah/Uh	17	Simple Word
16	Like that	31	Phrases
17	yeah	29	Simple Word
18	Well	6	Simple Word
19	Oh yea	10	Phrases
20	And then	26	Phrases
	TOTAL		373

The result showed that 13 fillers in the form of simple words were produced by the students during their academic presentations. These fillers included “*ehmm, okay, actually, so, and, like, you know, yes/ya, no, ah/uh, like that, yeah, and well*”. The most frequently used filler was “*ehm*”, which occurred 35 times, followed by “*like that*” with 31 occurrences. Other commonly used fillers included *okay* (22 occurrences), “*so*” (20 occurrences), and “*and*” (20 occurrences). The filler “*like*” appeared 29 times, and “*yes/yea*” was used 26 times. “*Ah/uh*” occurred 17 times, while “*no*” was spoken 14 times. “*Yeah*” appeared 29 times, respectively, and “*well*” appeared 6 times. These 12 fillers in the form of simple words contributed significantly to the total number of fillers used by the students during the presentations. The 13 fillers identified in the study are classified as simple words due to their composition of a single word or an abbreviated form of speech, without any additional clauses or complex structures. As mentioned by Nurjain et al., (2020), fillers identified as simple words are typically single, stand-alone words used by speakers during pauses, hesitations, or when transitioning between thoughts.

The analysis of the data also revealed that 4 fillers were used in the form of phrases and 4 fillers in the form of clauses during the academic presentations. The phrases identified in the study included “*That is*” (18 occurrences), “*Something like*” (5 occurrences), “*Oh yea*” (10 occurrences), and “*And then*” (26 occurrences). These phrases were used by the students to introduce ideas or transition between points during their presentations. On the other hand, the clauses found were “*I*

think” (25 occurrences), *“I mean”* (12 occurrences), *“I mean like”* (7 occurrences), and *“You know”* (11 occurrences). These fillers of phrase classified because they were constructed by a group of words without a subject or a verb. The clausal fillers are classified because of a group of words that have both subjects and predicates (Nurjain et al., 2020). The example of those fillers can be shown in these utterances as follows:

S1: *“Ehmm*, first of all, I would like to say thank you to the moderator for giving a chance, *ehm*, to present”

S2: *“Actually*, today we are going to present....”

S3: *“Okay, ehmm*, the importance of input in”

S1: “I think, according to my limited knowledge, the introduction about morphology and syntax, *ehmm, I mean* it’s not that necessary for young learners, since”

S2: “When we talk about linguistics, *that is*”

Function of Fillers

According to Marcela & Castro (2009), there were 14 functions of fillers. In this study, there were 8 functions of fillers that were found during students’ academic presentations.

Table 2: Fillers produced by students during academic presentation

No	Functions	Types of Fillers	Example
1	Opening frame marker	<i>Ehmm</i>	<i>“Eehhmm</i> , let's begin by discussing the basic principles of syntax and its role in sentences structure”
2	Filler	Oh yaaa, like, ah	<i>“Oh yeah, like</i> , phonology really helps us understand how sounds are produced in language”
3	soliciting agreement	Oh Yaaa/ Yes/ya, Aaah, Uh	<i>Oooh yea</i> , semantics is about meaning, uh, and it’s essential in understanding how sentences convey thoughts.
4	Result marker and emphazier	Yeah, okay, so	<i>“Okay, so</i> the study of morphemes shows us how the smallest units of meaning combine to form larger structures.”
5	signalling continuity and temporal	uuh, an then, that is	<i>“Uuuu</i> the study of pragmatics focuses on context, that is, how meaning changes depending on situational factors.”
6	Closing frame	That is, okay, well	The morphological rules are essential for understanding structure, <i>that is</i> they directly impact how words are formed
7	Turn takers	I mean, I mean like,you know	“I mean, understanding the syntax of a The sentence is crucial because it determines the structure and the relationships between words” & “You know, phonology deals with the sounds of language, and without it, we wouldn’t be able to understand how meaning changes with different pronunciations.”
8	Information indicators	I think, that is, something like	“I think that is, something like the The relationship between syntax and semantics is key in understanding sentence structure”

Fillers play a significant role in academic presentations, serving multiple functions that help speakers manage the flow of their speech. In the context of an academic presentation, fillers such as “*um*,” “*uh*,” “*I mean*,” and “*you know*” are commonly used to give the speaker time to think, emphasize points, or engage the audience. These fillers often serve as **turn takers**, where the speaker uses expressions like “*I mean*” or “*you know*” to maintain control of the conversation and guide the interaction. These expressions help to introduce or clarify key concepts, making the flow of the presentation more interactive and ensuring that the audience is following along. They also act as a way to mark transitions, such as moving from one topic to another or linking ideas within a broader argument.

Moreover, fillers like “*okay*,” “*so*,” and “*uh*” are used as **result markers** or **emphasizers**, signaling important conclusions or key points in the discussion. For instance, a speaker might say, “*Okay, so*,” to indicate that they are about to summarize or emphasize an important detail. Other fillers, like “*Oh yeah*” or “*you know*,” are often used to solicit agreement or acknowledge the audience's potential understanding of the topic. **Closing frames** like “*that is, okay, well*” and **information indicators** such as “I think, that is” help to structure the ending or provide further clarification, making sure the audience grasps the main points before concluding the presentation. Overall, fillers are integral to academic presentations, not only to aid in the speaker's thinking process but also to maintain a connection with the audience, ensuring clarity and engagement throughout the discourse.

Discussion

The research on fillers commonly used in academic presentations shows numerous important characteristics of how speakers manage their speech during academic discussions. The findings indicated that 373 fillers were used across the presentations, with “Ehmm” being the most common filler. This implies that fillers are a common and natural aspect of speech, and that presenters use them to strategically direct the flow of their presentation as well as to indicate hesitations. Fillers such as “okay,” “so,” and “like” are used to underscore points, indicate transitions, or ask for agreement, which are crucial for keeping engagement and assuring clarity.

However, it is important to note that the case study design, while providing in-depth insights into the use of fillers, has limitations. The small sample size of only three participants may not be representative of a broader student population, and the findings might not be generalizable to all EFL learners. The limited number of participants also restricts the diversity of presentation contexts, which could have further nuanced the findings regarding filler usage in different academic disciplines or contexts. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples could provide a clearer understanding of how fillers function across various academic settings.

The high frequency of basic word fillers (such as “ehmm,” “okay,” “like,” “yeah,” etc.) suggests that students tend to employ single, independent words during pauses or while articulating thoughts. This underscores how fillers provide cognitive time to the speaker, enabling them to pause and reflect while concurrently preserving the flow of speech. In terms of why “ehmm” was the most frequent filler used, several factors could explain its predominance. “Ehmm” may function as a universal hesitation marker, which is simple to use and doesn't disrupt the flow of speech significantly. It can also serve as a signal for the speaker to pause and think, making it a low-risk filler choice compared to more complex phrases. Furthermore, “ehmm” may be less cognitively demanding, allowing speakers to focus on structuring their thoughts without worrying about the complexity of their utterance.

Moreover, the employment of fillers in phrases and sentences, such as “I think,” “I mean,” and “that is,” indicates that these fillers serve not just as pauses but also for the introduction, clarification, or emphasis of essential notions. This discovery corresponds with the research conducted by Nurjamin

et al. (2020), which posits that fillers in academic settings fulfil various roles beyond simple hesitancy, functioning as instruments for structuring arguments, negotiating meaning, and facilitating seamless transitions in discourse. The implications of these findings are significant for comprehending the function of fillers in scholarly discourse. Although fillers are frequently perceived as indicators of uncertainty or insufficient fluency, they are, in reality, essential for organizing an academic presentation, facilitating audience comprehension, and increasing speaker confidence. This indicates that students and presenters may gain from increasing their awareness of filler usage, learning to employ them effectively to improve their performance instead of perceiving them negatively.

From a practical perspective, these findings emphasize the importance of incorporating filler management into presentation skills training for EFL learners. Instructors may consider including targeted activities that focus on the strategic use of fillers, such as exercises that allow students to practice replacing fillers with more structured pauses or phrases. Additionally, role-playing exercises or peer feedback sessions could help students become more aware of their filler usage and its impact on audience perception. By incorporating filler management into EFL curricula, instructors can help students integrate their natural speech patterns with the need for clarity, fluency, and engagement in academic presentations. Fillers are not merely incidental to speech; they perform critical functions in academic presentations. Their effective use can improve communication flow, audience engagement, and the overall quality of the presentation. However, both students and instructors need to recognize their potential to enhance or hinder communication, depending on how they are used.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study explored the use of fillers in academic presentations by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, focusing on their functions and the impact they have on communication effectiveness. The research aimed to answer two key questions: What fillers are used in academic presentations? and What are the primary functions of these fillers in academic presentations? Through qualitative analysis, 373 fillers were identified in student presentations, with the most frequently used fillers being “Ehmm,” “okay,” “so,” “like,” and “I think.” These fillers were categorized into simple words, phrases, and clauses. The study revealed that fillers are an essential part of academic presentations, with different functions such as hesitation markers, time-gaining tools, and devices for signaling transitions or requesting agreement. Simple word fillers, like “ehmm” and “okay,” were most common, indicating that students frequently use fillers as cognitive tools to maintain speech flow and give themselves time to think. Additionally, phrases and clauses, such as “I think” and “you know,” were used to clarify or emphasize key points. Fillers, when used strategically, contribute to a more interactive and engaging presentation. However, excessive use of fillers can negatively impact the speaker's perceived fluency and professionalism.

The results indicate that although fillers are important for promoting more fluid communication, over-reliance on them can compromise a presentation's efficacy. Future research should specifically explore the variation in filler usage across different academic disciplines, examining whether certain disciplines have specific filler patterns or strategic uses of fillers. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies examining filler usage in non-native English settings would provide a broader understanding of how cultural and contextual factors influence filler employment in academic discourse. More targeted studies could investigate the relationship between emotional factors, such as anxiety or confidence, and filler usage, offering insights into how students can be trained to manage these factors for more effective presentations. In conclusion, the critical finding of this study is that fillers serve an important role in organizing thoughts and facilitating communication during academic presentations. In the postgraduate context, fillers such as “ehmm” and “I think” allow speakers to maintain a natural flow of speech while reflecting on their ideas. However, the overuse

of fillers can detract from the speaker's fluency and professionalism, suggesting that their strategic use is essential. Future research should delve into the specific contextual and cultural factors that influence filler usage and provide a deeper understanding of how EFL learners can optimize the use of fillers for more effective academic presentations.

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