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# Investigating the use of fillers by kurdish efl university students in relation to speaking fluency

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**ABSTRACT:**

The current study investigates the use of fillers produced by a sample of 80 Kurdish EFL university students (males and females), freshers and seniors, in relation to speaking fluency. The general methodological procedures of discourse analysis (hence, DA) by Potter and Wetherell (1987), Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1997) have been followed to analyze the data extracted from the selected sample (i.e., spoken corpus). For finding the types of fillers, it was helpful to use Rose's (1998) classification of fillers into unlexicalized fillers (UFs) and lexicalized fillers (LFs). Further, by using a speaking fluency rubric, the statistical correlation between fillers and speaking fluency was measured. The results showed that the lexicalized fillers (LFs) were used by the Kurdish EFL university students three times more than the unlexicalized fillers (UFs). Also, it was found that the most frequently used examples of UFs were Uh and Um, and the highest percentages of LFs were recorded for and, so, yeah and yes. With regard to speaking fluency levels, it was concluded that fillers are considered to be markers of mid or low levels of fluency. In other words, although fillers were also used in higher levels of fluency, however, the higher the level of fluency is, the lesser the use of fillers is.

**KEYWORDS:** Fillers, Lexicalized, Unlexicalized, Efl Students, University, Speaking Fluency.

## 1. Introduction

One of the important areas of discourse analysis research is the study of *fillers*, which are forms of formulaic language. They are considered very important aspects of showing either fluencies or disfluencies in speaking skills. In doing speaking proficiency tests or tasks by EFL learners, these learners naturally make pauses in spontaneous speech. That is, they use fillers. Examples of fillers include *ee, err, ehm, well, ok, you know, I mean, kind of, I see, sort of, like, I guess,* among other similar expressions, are considered fillers (Santos et al., 2016: p. 192; Fatimah, 2017: p. 44).

Fillers are lexically empty items with uncertain discourse functions, filling a conversational gap (Stenström, 1994: p. 222). According to Baalen (2001: p. 7), fillers are "sounds or words or phrases that can appear anywhere in the utterance and that can be deleted from the utterance without a change in content". Such ideas were later confirmed by Tottie (2011, p.174), who called such expressions as "filled pauses", and Richards and Schmidt (2012: p. 220) who stated that fillers are features of natural speech where "gaps or hesitations appear during the production of utterances." Also, Erten (2014: p. 70) defines fillers as "discourse markers speakers use when they think and/or hesitate during their speech". In other words, fillers are markedly occurred to signal hesitation or to hold control of a conversation. They help speakers gain more time for thinking about what to say next. They are indeed discourse markers used by speakers to help them "negotiate their way of thinking" (Carter and McCarthy, 1997: p.13). All in all, any filler performed by speakers can either be lexicalized (LF) or unlexicalized (UF) (Stenström, 1994; Rose, 1998). These types of fillers are explained in more details in 4.2 below.

When it comes to investigating the use of fillers in relation to speaking fluency at the university level, fillers play a significant role in improving the speaking proficiency, fluency, and accuracy when learning a second language (Wray, 2012). Some other studies have shown that such a usage of fillers is but a signal of lack of fluency and careless speech (Tottie, 2011: p. 174).

This study is limited to the assessment of using fillers by Kurdish EFL university students in their spoken discourse (i.e., student-teacher interaction). It is worth noting that both fresher (1st year) and senior (4th year) students, from both Duhok and Zakho universities, are targeted to assess the use of fillers on the basis of competence and performance of speaking fluency. All in all, it is expected that the results of this study will be valuable in showing the types of fillers, determining the speaking fluency levels of the target students. Also, the outcomes of this study will be of great significance for teachers, who can design better lesson plans for improving speaking fluency. Such improvement can be achieved via teaching fillers to their students, promoting awareness and knowledge of using fillers in spoken discourse.

In literature, it has been observed that speaking fluency, especially by EFL learners, is notably influenced by the use of fillers. Here, according to the evaluation and assessment of Kurdish EFL university students (males and females), especially fresher (1st year) and senior (4th year) students, it has been observed that fresher students from different universities (1) lack the competence and performance of speaking skills, (2) freshers make pauses and hesitations when performing speaking proficiency skills, and (3) freshers are new to academic university settings, where they to a degree feel shy and not confident. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to (1) present a statistical analysis of the main types of fillers used by Kurdish EFL university students in spoken discourse, and (2) give an

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account to the use of fillers with regard to speaking fluency levels. Based on these mentioned aims, this research paper attempts to answer the following questions yielding statistical descriptive data.:

1. What are the most frequently used fillers in Kurdish EFL university students' spoken discourse?
2. How speaking fluency affects the use of fillers by Kurdish EFL university students?

Finally, on the basis of the above objectives and aims, and by following qualitative and quantitative statistical methods, the following research hypotheses were tested to answer the research questions mentioned above: (1) lexicalized fillers are more frequently used by Kurdish EFL university students, (2) the students with lower levels of fluency use more fillers than those with high levels of fluency.

## 2. Theoretical Background

There are challenges against the communication process in a foreign language for newcomers, who are prone to awkward pauses, hesitations, and fillers when speaking spontaneously. Fillers, according to Clark and Tree (2002), have a place in speakers' lexicons because they aid in communication. In the following subsections, fillers, the types of fillers, and the relation of using fillers to speaking fluency are explained.

### 2.1. Fillers

Fillers are the term used by Baalen (2001) to describe these sorts of utterances that are used in spoken discourse. In his view, fillers are anything that may exist anywhere in an utterance and be removed without altering the meaning. To put it another way, Yule (2020) states that fillers interrupt the natural flow of communication. The purpose of fillers is to provide meaning to sentences, not to convey information. Given the theory that fillers are collateral signals meant to govern the discourse, they may have a specific function to perform (Clark and Tree, 2002). In classroom settings, fillers are often used by students who need a break and some time to think about the following word. Filler words become normalized over time, and unless individuals make a deliberate effort to avoid them, they become commonplace (Al-Bajalani, 2018). Generally speaking, the above definitions are utilized to fill in gaps and construct the speaker's thoughts.

There are a variety of other terminologies to the concept of fillers in the literature. Maclay and Osgood (1959), Goldman-Eisler (1968), Stenström (1994) and Tottie (2011), for example, refer to fillers as "filled pauses." Bortfeld et al. (2001) use the term "fills". According to Corley and Stewart (2008), fillers are called "hesitation disfluencies" or "hiccup disfluencies" because when speakers have speaking difficulties, they usually pause and make speech intervals. The term "editing expressions" is used by Levelt (1989). Further, Candea, et al (2005) use the term "autonomous pauses". Both Corley et al (2007) and Erard (2007) both use the term "verbal mistakes" to describe hesitations in spoken discourse. As far as they are considered vocabulary items or lexical chunks in grammar, McCarten (2007) uses the term "fragments" to refer to fillers. It is said that "fillers contribute to the interactive quality of speech because they communicate relations between the speaker, hearer(s), and discourse", and they are said to be "outside of grammar" (Biber et al, 2004: p. 440).

The term "filler" is defined by Stenström (1994) as "Lexically an empty item with unknown discourse functions, except to fill a conversational gap." This means that fillers have no semantic significance and are only employed when a speaker needs time to think about what to say next. The above definition was earlier confirmed by Bygate (1987) stating that fillers are "expressions like well, erm, you see, used in speech to fill in pauses". These expressions are used by speakers as discourse markers when they are unclear or not sure of what they will say next or when they

have options to pick from (Stenström, 1994). This is because of the fact that speakers cannot always utter every word they want since they probably forget some of them. When this occurs, they will utilize fillers to gain time until they recollect what they want to say next. Here, the use of fillers may be the result of person's state of mind, reflecting shyness and/or anxiousness.

Similarly, Baalen (2001) defines fillers as "Sounds or words or phrases that may come anywhere in the utterance and that could be omitted from the utterance without a change in substance." It means that, at any moment, fillers may be added or omitted from an utterance, and there will be no misunderstanding of meaning. Regarding the above definition, fillers have no such remarkable effect on the utterance in which they appear, implying that fillers are in a way or another useless.

### 2.2. Types of Fillers

Stenström (1994) and Rose (1998) divide fillers into two types: unlexicalized (non-words) and lexicalized (words):

1. Unlexicalized fillers: They are non-words which speakers use to indicate hesitation when thinking about their next messages" (Rose, 1998; Baalen, 2001). Unlexicalized filled pauses like *ehm, uh, err, ee, eh, umm, ah,* and *um* are mentioned by Dörnyei and Scott (1997), and Baalen (2001). These are better regarded as vocalizations rather than genuine words.
2. Lexicalized fillers: they are words that show hesitation gambits such as *well, OK, like, you know, actually, I mean, sort of, kind of*, etc. This type of fillers are not only words; however, they can be phrase or even clauses. According to previous literature, lexicalized fillers have no significant meaning in the sentence, even though they are usually uttered consciously (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). That is, speakers have to take a moment to think about what to say next before continuing with the speech, filling in the gaps in the conversation.

### 2.3. Fillers as Markers of Fluency or Disfluency

Disfluencies have always been seen as possibly detrimental to understanding (Baalen, 2001). Here, learners may utilize pauses, hesitations, and fillers to buy some time while they are thinking about how to talk and generate words to convey a message to the audience, which may result in disfluencies. The use of fillers has been found to help students feel more at ease while speaking in face-to-face communication, increasing their fluency (Santos et al., 2016). This means that, in EFL classrooms, teaching students how to use fillers as a communication strategy may help them to communicate fluently. As it turns out, many spontaneous speakers of diverse languages use pauses in their speech when necessary (Erten, 2014).

According to Schegloff (2010) and Tottie (2011), speakers can resume speaking in one of four ways, that is: (1) continuing where they left off, (2) restarting the last constituent, (3) correcting the error and replacing the constituent, and (4) starting a new utterance. This means that there is an ongoing debate whether fillers in general are markers of fluency or disfluency. Corley and Stewart (2008) argue that even though fillers may appear in situations associated with uncertainty or trouble, this does not prove that they are used by the speaker to signal a delay in speech. The same idea is confirmed by Corley and Hartsuiker (2011), stating that any delay (whether it was 'um', or a silence) has the same effect on word recognition. In contrast, Schegloff (2010) claims that it is a matter of "embodying" a delay rather than announcing it. Also, the use of fillers in teacher-student interaction is mostly related to fluency and disfluency measurements (Tavakoli, 2011). In the light of this ongoing debate, the relationship between using fillers and speaking fluency is assessed in the current study.

## 3. Previous Studies on Fillers

It is almost impossible to find speakers, native or non-native, who does not use any fillers in their daily communication (Khojastehrad, 2012; Richards and Schmidt, 2012; Erten, 2014).

For this reason, the use of fillers as an area of discourse analysis has recently become the focus of researchers. To the best of our knowledge, no research papers have been written on whether fillers are markers of fluency or disfluency at the university levels with Kurdish context. For instance, Rose (1998) investigated the use of fillers (or filled pauses) in spontaneous speech, i.e., spoken discourse. By using discourse analysis method, the researcher collected data from recording interviews (15 minutes) with two adult native English speakers (2 males and 2 females). After asking questions on a variety of themes, and transcribing the portion of speech, the obtained data were analyzed for showing speech and hesitation rates, focusing on fillers. The results showed that unlexicalized fillers (er, erm) and lexicalized fillers (well, you know) were the most common discourse markers (60%). Giving speakers more time, it was concluded that using fillers is actually an attempt for them "to appear more fluent".

Stia (2017) used qualitative methods to point out the types of fillers. After collecting data from a sample of movie scripts through watching and taking notes of the characters' utterances, the results revealed that the most frequent types of fillers used in the movie were filled pauses (FPs) (um 7.37 %, uh 3.16 %) as unlexicalized fillers and well (42.11%), oh (24.21%), you know (12.63%), I mean (10.53%) as lexicalized fillers. Finally, it was suggested that teachers can use media as a way to help to teach students to become more aware of fillers since learning English through experience will be beneficial for the students.

Fatimah et al. (2017) investigated the types of fillers used in teacher-student interaction. The procedure for data collection was through observing 22 participants (9 males and 13 females). By following qualitative methods, the data were transcribed for finding out frequencies and percentages of the fillers used. The results showed that the percentage of using the unlexicalized fillers (50 occurrences, 76.96%) by the EFL students was much higher than that of the lexicalized fillers (15 occurrences, 23.04%). Among all the unlexicalized fillers, the highest percentage was recorded for the filler *ee* (41 occurrences, 63.07%) while the lowest percentage was calculated for *ehm* (9 occurrences, 13.89%). On the other hand, the results presented that the lexicalized filler *yes* showed the highest frequency and percentage (10 occurrences, 15.38%), followed by *ya* (2 occurrences, 3.07%). Other lexicalized fillers such as yah, right and like had the same frequency of occurrence (1 time) and it was 1.53%.

In a similar study, Andriani (2018) investigated the use of fillers and their relation to levels of fluency, showing the main reasons behind using fillers. A sample of 6 students were purposively selected from Department of English, State Islamic Institute of Palangka Raya, Malesia. By following a qualitative method and consulting Rose's (1998) classification of fillers, the results showed that students with both low- and high-level of fluency tended to use unlexicalized fillers (eh, ee) more than the lexicalized ones (like, so, just). Surprisingly, the results presented that the students often start their conversations with *now, today, well* or *OK*. According to the researcher, the general reasons behind these obtained results are (1) lack of vocabulary, (2) having silence intervals during the spoken interaction, or (3) confusion.

Stevani et al. (2018) studied the types of fillers used by 10 students in delivering their presentations. The researchers used a descriptive qualitative method to interpret the data. These data were obtained by using a recording device. With an unlimited time of speaking and unspecified gender, the results of the study justified that 12 fillers (lexicalized and unlexicalized) were used. The unlexicalized filler *ehm* was repeated the most which occurred 689 times (79.19%); whereas, the lexicalized fillers (i.e., *right* and *how to say*) occurred only once for each as the least.

Fitriati et al. (2021) conducted a study of fillers used by a sample of 20 Indonesian EFL master students. By using qualitative methods, and using recorders and cell phones, the data were collected the students, who talked about different topics. For the purpose of data collection and analysis, Rose's (1998) theory of the types of was followed. Not considering gender differences into account, and from the total of 557 fillers extracted, the results showed that the use of lexicalized fillers (305 occurrences, 54.76%) was higher than the unlexicalized fillers (252 occurrences, 45.24%). The most frequently lexicalized fillers were *so* (44 occurrences), *yeah* (44 occurrences), *ok* (41 occurrences), *what is it* (26 occurrences), and *right* (22 occurrences). In contrast, the unlexicalized fillers emm (88 occurrences), hmm (59 occurrences), oh (43 occurrences), and ah (26 occurrences) recorded the highest frequencies. Finally, it was recommended that students were to be aware of how to use fillers in their conversations.

## 4. Methodology

In our study, the procedures of discourse analysis (DA) by Potter and Wetherell (1987), Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1997) have been followed to find, interpret and analyze the data extracted from the selected sample (i.e., spoken corpus). For finding the types of fillers quantitatively, it was helpful to use Rose's (1998) classification of fillers into unlexicalized fillers (UFs) and lexicalized fillers (LFs) (see 4.2). Also, a fluency rubric was prepared to measure the fluency level of the participants from their spoken discourse (see Appendix II).

### 4.1. Procedures of Discourse Analysis

As systematically organized by Potter and Wetherell (1987), Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1997), the process of the DA goes through six relatively ordered steps: choosing material, sampling, recording, transcribing, categorizing, coding, analyzing and narrating. These steps are presented in the figure below:

Choosing material → Sampling → Recording → Transcribing → Categorizing → Coding → Analyzing → Narrating
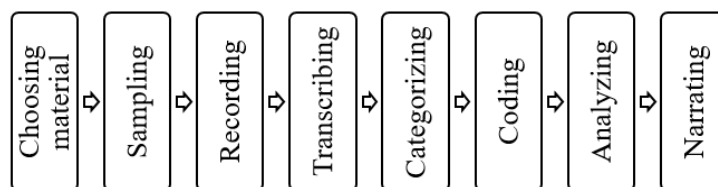
Figure 1: Procedures of Discourse Analysis

As they are presented in the above figure, the procedural steps of doing DA are briefly explained below:

1. Choosing material: As it is known, the material selected for any study can be either spoken or written. Since the data are extracted from the spoken corpus in the current study, the material understudy is the "spoken material", which is a term used by Juez (2005: p. 42). In our study, the material chosen for our study covers the linguistic phenomenon of fillers (i.e., fragments of talk such as sounds, words, and phrases) in spoken corpus during the teacher-student interaction at Kurdish EFL university levels.

2. Sampling: According to Taylor (2001: p. 24), "one of the processes by which material becomes data is selection". The best appropriate method of sampling in our study is the simple random

sampling. That is, the students were randomly and equally selected: 80 students, freshers (1st year) and seniors (4th year).

3. Recording: The recording procedure best works when there is "face-to-face" or "real-time" interaction (Bavelas et al, 2002: p. 118). In the current study, the researcher used a cell phone as a tool for recording the spoken corpus (i.e., conversations) between EFL teachers and students in the English departments, from both Duhok and Zakho universities. When recording the conversations, two things were taken into account, that is, ethics of data collection (informing the participants about recording their talks) and quality of voice (using modern cell phones for recording purposes).

4. Transcribing: In the transcription process, the recorded spoken material is converted into textual material, which is called transcript (Juez, 2005: p. 31). All the recordings were transcribed by using the Descript software (version 26.2.0). The following is an example of transcribing:
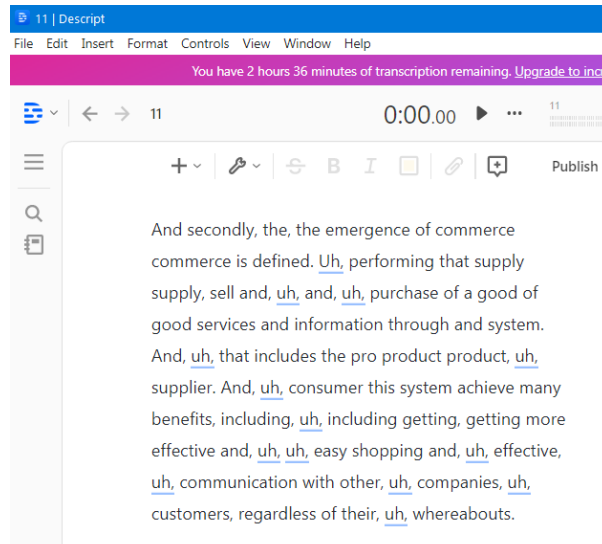


Figure 2: A screenshot of the Descript software showing transcription and underlined fillers

5. Categorizing: According to Berelson (1952: p. 147), any qualitative or quantitative analysis "stands or falls by its categories." Before starting the DA process and making the data analysis easier and more systematic, it was very necessary to classify the target sample into categories: (1) the spoken material and (2) the participants. Concerning the spoken material, fillers were categorized into lexicalized and unlexicalized types (as classified by Rose, 1998). With regard to the participants, they were categorized into males and females, seniors and juniors. These categories, which meet the research questions and objectives of our study, are clearly shown in the coding sheet (see Appendix I).

6. Coding: It is regarded as the most important step in DA. Krippendorff (2003: p. 84) states that coding is necessary "to create durable records of phenomena". Here, fillers are coded from the raw spoken material into codes and analyzable statistical calculations. For the purpose of saving time and calculating reliability, the researcher recruited four coders. The coders consisted of the researcher herself, the supervisor, and two other teachers from the English Department, College of Arts, University of Duhok. Every coder was given three things: (1) two recordings, (2) the coding sheet, and (3) one hour for coding. The coders went through the data systematically, typically listening carefully to the spoken material. This procedure was confirmed by Cohen et al. (2007). The coders listened to the recordings for

2-3 times, and checked for three things, as mentioned in the coding sheet: (1) demographic information such as gender (i.e., male or female) and university stage (i.e., fresher or senior), (2) file name and time duration of the recordings, and (3) examples and types of fillers. In the current paper, a coding scheme of some abbreviations was developed by the researcher. First, the types of fillers were given codes as UF (unlexicalized filler) and LF (lexicalized filler). Second, the names of recordings were assigned codes (such as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, … up to R80) for ease access to extracts (i.e., expressions and sentences where fillers are used). These codes, though used differently, were used by many researchers before including Stenstrom (1994), Rose (1998), Biber et al. (2004), Stia (2017), among others. During data analysis, a significant methodological procedure was followed. It was checking reliability. In order for the data to be reliable, coders must be reliable either. That is, they have to follow the same instructions and apply the same categories. Reliability is statistically measured by Cronbach alpha coefficient, which ranges from 0.0 to 1.0, as shown in the table below (Cohen et al., 2007: p. 506): low (<0.60), minimal (0.60-0.69), reliable (0.70-0.79), highly reliable (0.80-0.90) and very highly reliable (>0.90). The researcher checked reliability for the data extracted by 4 coders. After the data were inserted into SPSS software, it was found that the coders' procedures were stable and consistent:

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Coders |
|---|---|
| 0.801 | 4 |

As presented in the above table, the alpha measurement reached 0.801. This means that the process of data analysis was highly reliable according to the alpha scale.

7. Analyzing: The data of our study are analyzed by using (1) the Descript software for transcribing the spoken corpus, (2) Excel sheets for showing the results on tables and figures, and finally (3) the SPSS software for checking reliability and presenting statistical correlations. Hence, the procedures of data analysis in Chapter Four will be as follows: finding statistical descriptions for the types and examples of fillers, showing the use fillers according to spoken fluency levels.

8. Narrating: Simply the narrating step is the last step of the DA, where points of findings and conclusions are interpreted and reported. This depends on statistical descriptions and calculations that were done for the obtained data previously (Riffe et al., 2014).

### 4.2. Developing a Speaking Fluency Rubric

Rubrics are important grading tools used for evaluating the students' performance level in assessments. Rubrics are used for the purpose of adding "reliability, validity and transparency to assessments" (Chowdhury, 2018: p. 61). In the current study, and for the purpose of assessing the speaking fluency level of the students, a rubric was designed and developed by the researcher, following Hasselgren (2002), Maisa (2018), and Williams (2020). In order to clarify how the rubric in this study was developed, three main steps were followed (Wolf and Stevens, 2007: pp. 5-8): (1) identifying the criteria (i.e., smoothness, speed, volume, accuracy and phrasing), (2) describing the (Appendix II), and (3) setting the rating scale (i.e., Low, Mid and High). Further, for calculating the average mark of these fluency levels, they were given ranges of marks: Low (5 marks), Mid (6-10 marks), and High (11-15 marks). For the purpose of validation, the contents of the speaking fluency rubric were reviewed by six experts in general linguistics (see Appendix III). All the remarks, comments and suggestions for making any changes in the contents were taken into consideration by the researcher.

### 5. Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

The data extracted from the participants' recordings (i.e., teacher-student interactions) were analyzed according to Rose's (1998) classification of fillers into unlexicalized fillers (UFs) and lexicalized fillers (LFs). Hence, after the data were recorded, transcribed, categorized, coded, and checked for reliability, the statistical descriptions of fillers in relation to fluency are presented and discussed in the following sub-sections.

### 5.1. Statistical Descriptions of Types and Examples of Fillers

As a general statistical description of all the fillers extracted from the obtained data, and from the total of 2311 fillers, the LFs recorded a remarkable high percentage of 73.22% (1692 occurrences). In contrast, the UFs showed a lower percentage and it was 26.78% (619 occurrences). When compared to other studies mentioned in the literature, our results are close to those obtained by Khojastehrad, (2012), Richards and Schmidt (2012) and Erten (2014), who noted that it is almost impossible to find speakers, whether native or non-native, that can speak without the use of fillers. This is due to the fact that one cannot avoid using fillers at all because one cannot change his/her spoken performance (Gryc, 2014). Our results agree with those obtained by Fitriati et al (2021), where they manifested that the use of lexicalized fillers (54.76%) was higher than the unlexicalized fillers (45.24%). So, the results in Figure (3) are considered to be a general indication of the frequent use of fillers, lexicalized and unlexicalized, by the students:
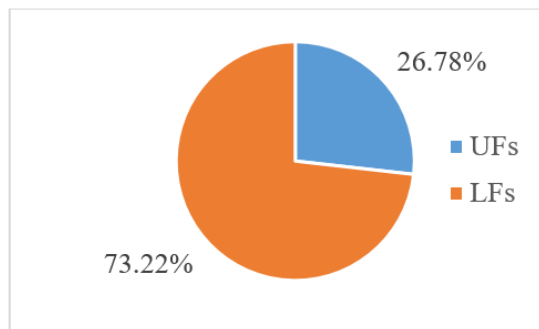


Figure 3: General Statistical Descriptives of UFs and LFs

With regard to the UFs, the most frequently used example of fillers was Uh with 79.01%, followed by Um (11.90%). In contrast with the results concluded by Fatimah et al (2017), the utmost percentage was recorded for the filler ee with 63.07%. Our results are expected because these two fillers (i.e., Uh and Um), in form of phonetic vocalizations, are very commonly used by the students to fill in silences or gaps in their conversations, indicating a status of hesitation and thinking what to say next. This claim was earlier confirmed by Rose (1998), Baalen (2001), Scheppers (2011) and Stia (2017). Also, other UFs including Huh (3.47%), Ehm (2.64%), Eh (1.98%), Uh-huh (0.83%), and Hmm (0.17%) recorded different frequencies. Labeled with the codes given to the recordings (i.e., R1, R2, … R80), the UFs are underlined in the following examples:

(1) R29: <u>Oh</u>, there is a suitcase on your hand.

(2) R5: and at the same time, he gained <u>eh</u> some knowledge and <u>uh</u> yeah so this is what I have.
(3) R13: He was <u>um</u> he was a good hunter.
(4) R21: <u>Uh huh</u> so it would be hard and difficult for him <u>eh</u> once he got in trouble or be some kind of lower class.
(5) R24: <u>mm-hmm</u> and lets complete essay <u>mm-hmm</u> as well as ratio of serious is often with friends and family and <u>eh</u> not with teachers.
(6) R37: Sports and games are more important to help and <u>eh</u> to make you fit and <u>eh</u> strong <u>eh</u> mask and <u>eh</u> and hurt and <u>eh</u> to make hurt.
(7) R25: <u>hmm</u> did any special things that happened those days had affected you?

The percentages of all the UFs extracted from the spoken corpus are shown in the following figure:
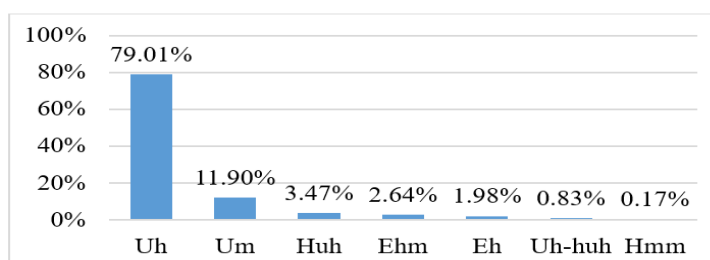
Figure 4: Percentages of UF examples in the recordings

According to the LFs, the results showed that the majority of students used the LF *and* with a percentage of 30.39%. This percentage is not consistent with the one presented by Fatimah et al (2017), who calculated the LF *yes* to have the highest percentage. The reason behind using the word *and* most frequently goes back to the fact that it is a discourse marker that has different functions such as marking a boundary between pieces of spoken discourse, reformulating information, constructing cohesive speech, or generally filling pauses and gaps in the conversation. Such purposes of the and usage has been earlier referred to by many researchers including Schiffrin (1987), Brinton (1996), Eggins (2004), Müller (2005), and Blakemore (2006). This means that the students were probably hesitant in their interaction with their teachers. Other LFs had various frequencies and percentages. For instance, as similarly calculated by Fitriati et al (2021), the LFs such as So, Yeah, Yes, Ok, Like, and Or were noticeably high in their use with percentages of 12.10%, 11.16%, 7.97%, 6.29%, 4.97% and 4.41% respectively. The target students tended to use these fillers mainly for the purpose of initiating discourse and linking preceding and following messages and ideas in a portion of speech. Further, the LFs such as *I mean, Well, In my opini*on, among others, recorded under 1% of their use, and they were 0.84%, 0.84% and 0.66% respectively. In other words, they were used to "not hurt the addressee's feelings" (Baalen, 2001: p. 3). Also, the students tended to use these LFs as hedging expressions to tell that they were in a status of doubtfulness. Such a claim was earlier confirmed by Baalen (2001) and McCarten (2007). The percentages of the LF examples used by the Kurdish EFL university students are presented in the following figure:
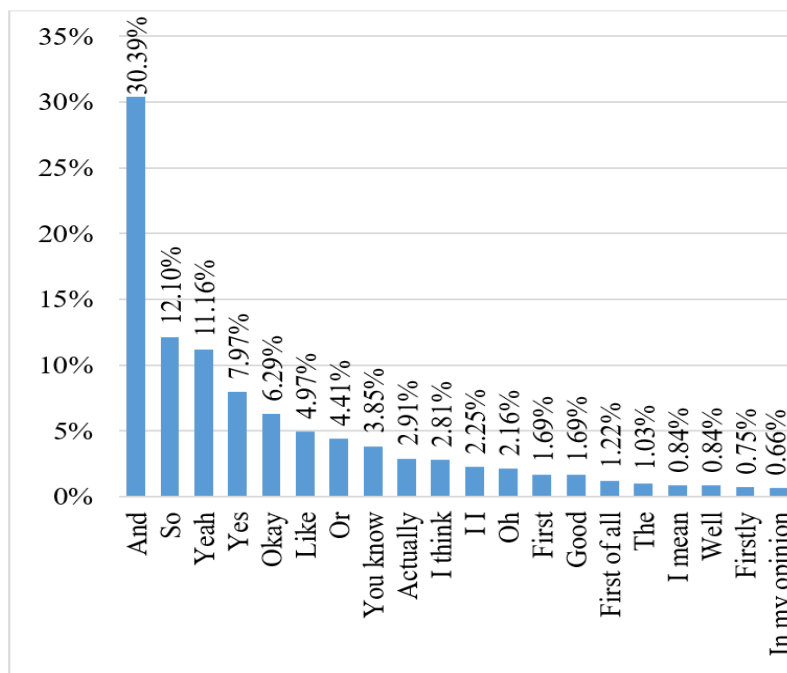
Figure 5: Percentages of LF examples in the recordings

To give some examples, the LFs extracted from the recordings are underlined in the following sentences:

(8) R40: <u>So</u>, <u>I know</u> that your favorite food is pizza.
(9) R67: <u>In my opinion</u> artificial intelligence benefit to humans and because we can't emerge our everyday life without google.
(10) R68: <u>So</u>, <u>you know</u> what the history before that is.
(11) R77: <u>Yeah</u>, <u>well</u> these were my points about the topic.
(12) R1: <u>The, and the</u> relationship between the students must be within the university.
(13) R9: <u>First of all</u>, I want to thank you for giving me this chance to talk about my experience at college.
(14) R62: <u>Yeah</u>, <u>yes</u>, I've never thought of it. <u>Yes</u> so <u>I know</u> that your favorite food is dolma.
(15) R79: It's <u>actually</u> uh <u>totally</u> it's fun but there's only one habit that's bad <u>actually</u>.
(16) R80: <u>Yeah</u>, <u>like</u> um lord of lies and beloved <u>I think</u> they are famous.

It is worth noting that sometimes fillers, specially the LFs, are produced in the form of repetitions. According to Leech et al. (1982), these repetitions are natural to all speakers. Therefore, repetitions are said to be advantageous because they can be produced for different purposes such as time-creating (Fitriati, et al., 2021), improving the speech performance (Andriani, 2018), or keeping engaged in conversations (Bublitz, 1989). Consider the following examples:

(17) R7: Sports and games are more important to help <u>and and</u> to make you fit and strong.
(18) R4: <u>Okay okay</u> how about your friends?
(19) R10: The character <u>I mean I mea</u>n when Zak was five years old his father gave him a gun.
(20) R66: They all organized in a <u>good good</u> way.
(21) R12: She is one of my students that it is the first time <u>I see I I or I</u> hear her.

As stated by Rose (1998) and Kim (2007), the most probably performed function behind these repetitions is hesitation. Hence, in this case they are said to be disadvantageous in teacher-student interactions. On the basis of the results and discussion above, hypothesis No. 1 (i.e., the LFs are more frequently used by the Kurdish EFL university students) is accepted.

**5.2. Statistical Correlations between Fillers and Speaking Fluency**

In order to find out whether fillers are used as markers of speaking fluency or disfluency, and before showing statistical correlations between fillers, speaking fluency, gender and stage, it was very necessary to assess the level of fluency according to the variable "stage", that is, freshers (1st year) and seniors (4th year). In using the SPSS software and analyzing the mean differences (M) and standard deviations (SD) for speaking fluency marks obtained from the recordings, it was found that there was a statistical difference between freshers and seniors. The levels of fluency assessed for freshers and seniors are shown in the following table:

Table 2: Fluency Measurement in Relation to Stage

| Stage | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Sum | % of Total Sum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Freshers | 9.07 | 40 | 1.20 | 363 | 45.4% |
| Seniors | 10.90 | 40 | 1.21 | 436 | 54.6% |
| Total | 9.99 | 80 | 1.51 | 799 | 100.0% |

As it is clear from Table (2), the seniors (M = 10.90, SD = 1.21) had a higher percentage (54.6%) than the freshers (M = 9.07, SD = 1.20), which recorded a percentage of 45.4%. These results can be more confirmed via the statistical significance. The correlation between fluency levels and stage (i.e., freshers and seniors) was statistically significant (Sig = .000, p < 0.05):

Table 3: Statistical Correlation between Fluency and Stage

| | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fluency & Stage | Between groups | 66.61 | 1 | 66.61 | 45.42 | .000 |
| | Within groups | 114.37 | 78 | 1.46 | | |
| | Total | 180.98 | 79 | | | |

Although both freshers and seniors were still within the range of mid fluency level (Appendix II), these results can reliably be the base for (1) interpreting whether fillers are markers of fluency or disfluency, and (2) answering the research question No. 2 whether higher levels of fluency can affect the use of fillers by Kurdish EFL university students. Since the seniors were more fluent (54.6%) than freshers (45.4%), and the seniors used slightly lower frequencies of fillers, it can be deduced that fillers used in spoken discourse are considered to be markers of mid or low levels of fluency. In other words, although fillers are also used in higher levels of fluency, however, the higher the level of fluency is, the lesser the use of fillers is. Hence, hypothesis No. 2 (i.e., students with lower levels of fluency use more fillers) is accepted. This concluding statement can be presented in the following inverse relationship:

Less fillers

↑

High

|

Speaking Fluency — Mid
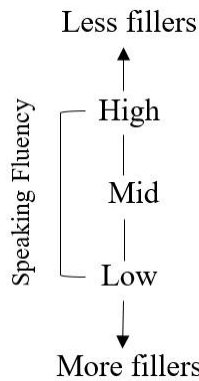
|

Low

↓

More fillers

Figure 6: The Inverse Relationship between Fillers and Fluency

Such a relationship between the use of fillers and speaking fluency has not been documented in the literature. Not showing this relationship, Andriani (2018) generally investigated the use of fillers by a sample of students with low and high levels of fluency, where they tended to use UFs (eh, ee) more than the LFs (like, so, just). According to Andriani (2018), the lower frequency of using the LFs mainly goes back to lack of vocabularies. Further, the inverse relationship in our study contrasts with Rose (1998: p. 34) concluding that the students use fillers "to appear more fluent".

**6. Conclusions**

The points of conclusion that are arrived throughout this study are the following:
1. As general statistical description of fillers, the lexicalized fillers (LFs) were used by the Kurdish EFL university students for approximately three times more than the unlexicalized fillers (UFs).

2. It was found that the most frequently used examples of UFs used by the freshers and seniors, males and females were *uh* and *um* while the LF example used by them was the word *and* that recorded the highest percentage. Other LFs such as *so, yeah, yes, ok,* and *like* had different percentages and frequencies.
3. The participants from both Duhok and Zakho universities used fillers differently; however, it is concluded that the freshers used a higher percentage of fillers for both the LFs and UFs from the seniors.
4. With regard to speaking fluency levels, it was concluded that fillers are considered to be markers of mid or low levels of fluency. In other words, although fillers were also used in higher levels of fluency, however, the higher the level of fluency is, the lesser the use of fillers is.

**7. Recommendations**

In the light of the obtained results and conclusions, it is necessary that teachers teach fillers to their students especially EFL

students. Therefore, training courses through better lesson plans for EFL students should be presented to master speaking fluency and finally avoid the repetition of fillers. Also, teachers must identify the areas of strength and weakness related to the factors that lead to the use of fillers that affect students speaking.

## 8. Suggestions for Further Studies

In our study, we focused on the use of fillers in Kurdish EFL university students' spoken discourse only. Therefore, we suggest the following areas of study to be conducted:

1.  Investigating the use of fillers at non-English departments at the university level.
2.  Assessing fillers within all the stages (i.e., freshers, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) at the university level.
3.  Designing and presenting lesson plans and classroom activities about speaking fluency to help students to be more aware of fillers.
4.  Analyzing fillers by using analytical programs such as PRAAT to assess their phonological aspects such as the duration of pauses.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix I: Coding Sheet for Calculating Fillers and Types of Fillers in the Recordings**

| University of | | Duhok | | Zakho | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stage | | 1st Year (Fresher) | | 4th Year (Senior) | |
| Gender | Male | Female | | | |
| Recording | | Time Duration | | | |
| No. | Filler | | Type | | |
| | | | UF | LF | |
| 1 | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | |
| 8 | | | | | |
| 9 | | | | | |
| 10 | | | | | |
| Total | | | | | |

**Note:** A tick √ is put for each type and function of filler extracted from the sample recording.

**Codes:**
**Types of Fillers:** UF (Unlexicalized Filler), LF (Lexicalized Filler)

**Appendix II: Rubric for Measuring Speaking Fluency of the Participants**

| University of | | Duhok | | Zakho | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stage | | 1st Year (Fresher) | | 4th Year (Senior) | |
| Gender | | Male | | Female | |

| Speaking Fluency Items | | Scale | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | (3) High | (2) Mid | (1) Low |
| 1 | Smoothness | Smooth speech (few breaks and pauses, self-correcting) | Relatively smooth (moderate hesitations and repetitions) | Sounding out of speech (frequently hesitant, repeating words and phrases) |
| 2 | Speed | Natural, conversational, authentic | Not too slow and not too fast | Laborious (either too fast or too slow, hard to understand) |
| 3 | Volume | Audible and understandable with varied voice | Audible but not understandable | Inaudible and not understandable |
| 4 | Accuracy | Correct pronunciation | A mixture of correct and incorrect pronunciation | Incorrect pronunciation |
| 5 | Phrasing | Good phrasing (English speaking native-like) | Speaking with pauses for breath | Speaking word-by-word (influenced by mother tongue with monotone voice) |
| Overall Evaluation | | | | |

Scoring: 1-5 points = low fluency, 6-10 points = mid fluency, 11-15 points = high fluency

**Appendix III: Jury Members Consulted for Validating the Speaking Fluency Rubric**

| No. | Name | Specialty | Academic Title | Affiliation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Asst. Prof. Dr. Halat Rajab Ibrahim | Linguistics Discourse Analysis | Asst. Professor | English Department /College of Languages /University of Duhok |

| 2 | Asst. Prof. Dr. Aveen Mohammed Hasan | Phonetics Phonology | Asst. Professor | English Department/ Faculty of Humanities/University of Zakho |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Asst. Prof. Dr. Sanan Shero Malo | Applied Linguistics | Asst. Professor | English Department/Faculty of Humanities/University of Zakho |
| 4 | Dr. Asma Mohammed Ameen | Linguistics Phonology | Lecturer | English Department/Collage of Languages/University of Duhok |
| 5 | Mr. Ivan Hasan Murad | TESOL | Asst. Professor | English Department/Faculty of Humanities/University of Zakho |
| 6 | Mr. Dilgash Mohammed Salah | Linguistics Sociolinguistics | Lecturer | English Department/Collage of Languages/University of Duhok |

فەكولىن خواندنەكە بو بكارئينانا فيلەران ژ لايێ خوێندەهڤانێن كورد يێن پشكا زمانێ ئينگليزيێ و پەيوەنديا وان ب رەهوانبێژيا ئاخفتنێ

**كورتى:**

ئەڤ فەمكولينە خواندنەكە خواندنا فيلەران ژ لايێ خوێندەهڤانێن كورد يێن پشكا زمانێ ئينگليزيێ و پەيوەنديا وان ب رەهوانبێژيا ئاخفتنێ. بو بدەسڤەئينانا داتايان، 80 خوێندەهڤانێن پشكا زمانێ ئينگليزيێ (كچ و كور) ژ زانكوێن دهوك و زاخو ل قوناغێن ئێكێ و چارێ هاتنە هەلبژارتن. رێكێن ميتودولوژى يێن گشتى ئەوێن ئەوين كو پوتەر و ويزمرێل (1987) و فێركلو (1995) و ڤاندايك (1997) لدويڤ چووين بو مەرەما دەرئينخستنا داتايان ژ سياقێن ئاخفتنێ هاتنە پەيرەوكرن. بو دياركرنا جورێن فيلەران، پولينكرنا روزى (1998) هاتە بكارئينان، كو فيلەران دكەتە دوو جور: فيلەرێن دەنگدار و فيلەرێن پەيڤدار. هەرەوسا پەيوەنديا دناڤبەرا فيلەران و ئاستێ شيانێن ئاخفتنا خوێندەهڤانان بريكا روبريكەكا ئاخفتنێ هاتە دياركرن. ئەنجامان وەسا ئاشكرا كو ڤەيوەنديا يێن كو ژ لايێ خوێندەهڤانێن كوردەڤە ل پشكێن زمانێ ئينگليزيێ هاتينە گوت سێ جارا هندى فيلەرێن دەنگدار بوون. رێزا هەرە بلند يا فيلەرێن دەنگدار بو هەردوو فيلەرێن uh "ئێ" و um "ئم" بو، بەلێ فيلەرێن پەيڤدار وەمکى yes و yeah، so، and ژ هەميا پتر هاتنە گوتن. دەربارەى شيانێن ئاخفتنێ، ئەنجامان وەسا دياركر كو فيلەر نيشانێن بو ئاستێن ئاخفتنێ يێن نزم و ناڤن. ئانكو هەرچەندە فيلەر ل ئاستێن بلندزى دهێنە بكارئينان، بەلێ هندى ئاستێ شيانا ئاخفتنێ بلندتر بيت، بكارئينانا فيلەران كێمتر لێ دهێت.

**پەيڤێن سەرەكى:** فيلەر، پەيڤدار، دەنگدار، قوتابيێن خواندنا زمانێ ئينگليزيێ، زانكو، شيانێن ئاخفتنێ

دراسة استخدام مواد الحشو من قبل طلاب جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية فيما يتعلق بطلاقة التحدث

**خلاصة:**

تبحث هذة الدراسة في استخدام الوقفات الكلامية التي أنتجتها عينة من طلاب الجامعات الكردية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية و علاقتها بطلاقة التحدث. تم اختيار عينة من 80 طالبًا جامعيًا(ذكورا و اناثا، السنة الأولى و الرابعة) من جامعة دهوك وزاخو ليكونوا مشاركين في الدراسة. تم اتباع الإجراءات المنهجية العامة للتحليل الخطابي و التي استخدمها من قبل كل من بوتر و ويذيرل (1987) و فيركلو (1995) و فاندايك (1997) لاستخراج البيانات وتفسيرها وتحليلها. للعثور على أنواع الوقفات الكلامية من الناحية الكمية، كان من الضروري استخدام تصنيف روز (1998) للوقفات الكلامية المقسمة إلى وقفات صوتية و وقفات معجمية. ايضاً تم استخدام نموذج تقييم طلاقة التحدث، لقياس الارتباط الإحصائي بين الوقفات الكلامية ومستويات طلاقة التحدث للطلاب. أظهرت النتائج أن الوقفات المعجمية استخدمت من قبل الطلاب أكثر بثلاث مرات من الوقفات الصوتية، و وجد أن الأمثلة الأكثر استخدامًا للوقفات الصوتية هي uh و um، و للوقفات المعجمية هي and، so، yeah، yes. اما فيما يتعلق بمستويات الطلاقة في التحدث، تم الاستنتاج أن الوقفات الكلامية بشكل عام هي علامات لمستويات الطلاقة المتوسطة أو المنخفضة. بعبارة أخرى، على الرغم من استخدام الوقفات الكلامية في المستويات العالية للطلاقة، إلا أنه كلما ارتفع مستوى الطلاقة، قل استخدام الوقفات الكلامية.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الوقفات الكلامية، صوتي، معجمي، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الجامعة، طلاقة التحدث