

Fillers in EFL Students' Spoken Analytical Exposition at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang

Nathanael Joan Pratama¹, Yuliati²

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

¹ nathanaeljoan@students.unnes.ac.id, ² yuliati@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Speaking fluency is one of challenges for EFL students, particularly in spontaneous spoken. To address these challenges, students often employ fillers as communicative strategies. This research aims to explore the types and functions of fillers applied by EFL students in short spoken analytical exposition at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang. This research applied a qualitative approach with limited frequency counts. The data consists of 30 video recordings of speaking performances produced by 60 eleventh-grade students and were transcribed verbatim. The fillers' types were classified according to Rose (1998), while their functions were analyzed using Stenstrom's (1994) framework. The findings revealed a total of 91 fillers, with unlexicalized fillers being the most dominant. This dominance indicates students' preference for immediate and low-effort strategies when facing linguistic constraints during spontaneous speech. Furthermore, the fillers served five communicative functions: hesitation devices, time-creating devices, empathizing devices, mitigating devices, and editing terms. These results confirm that fillers functioned as strategic resources in spoken language rather than as indicators of low proficiency. Fillers play a significant role in supporting EFL students' fluency, discourse management, and interactional competence. Therefore, this study suggests that fillers should be pedagogically recognized and integrated into speaking instruction to enhance students' communicative strategies.

Keywords: Fillers; Communicative Strategy; EFL Students; Short Spoken Analytical Exposition

INTRODUCTION

In the practice of spoken English, fluency is one of the main challenges faced by EFL students. According to Syamsudin (2015), this challenge is influenced by several linguistic issues such as mispronunciations (Sayuri, 2016), lack of vocabulary (Mukminin & Arif, 2015), grammar mastery (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020), and self-confidence (Riadil, 2020). These issues are often a consequence of the limited practice in listening and speaking during the school learning process (Islam et al., 2022). These issues affect the smoothness of speaking English, making it difficult for students to maintain continuity of speech, especially during spontaneous speech (Yulpia, 2025). As a result, students often hesitate, pause frequently, or switch to their first language during their English-speaking practice. This condition limits their opportunities to speak meaningfully and prevents the development of communicative ability.

Accordingly, communicative strategies are required to address these problems to enhance students' speaking performance. Communicative strategies can be defined as techniques applied to address the variety of issues in oral communication (Awang et al., 2022). Through the use of communicative strategies, students are able to overcome their speaking problems and maintain the continuity of their speaking performance (Pawlak, 2018). Furthermore, these strategies help students to manage their linguistic limitations during speaking without excessive pausing or interruption so that the smoothness of speaking performance stays maintained.

Consequently, communicative strategies has an important role in supporting students to maintain their spoken English.

There are various communicative strategies that can be used by EFL students; however, the most popular one is time-gaining strategies (Kalisa, 2019). These strategies are commonly used by EFL students to support their speaking performance, especially when they face difficulties in grammatical and vocabulary management. There are two types of time-gaining strategies, namely fillers and self-repair (Taslim & Hervina, 2021). Nevertheless, fillers are the most common type used in the students' speaking performances (Hardianti, 2016).

Fillers are referred to as sounds or words or phrases applied to filling gaps when speaker stop, pause or hesitate in the middle of their speech; however, they can be deleted or unused without changing or reducing the meaning (Gandeza, 2023; Vrika & Diananseri, 2022). Through the use of fillers as a communicative strategies, students are able to maintain fluency and continuity in their speaking performance and also avoid communication breakdown (Hassan et al., 2021; Syamsudin et al., 2024). As a result, students can feel more confident (Syamsudin et al., 2024) and their speaking can run more smoothly (Yulpia, 2025).

Although fillers have been reported as a popular time-gaining strategy to address challenges faced by students in their speaking performance, particularly fluency (Hardianti, 2016), a comprehend understanding of fillers' role in the context of spoken English requires further analysis and exploration. Specifically, it is important to identify the types and functions of fillers used in the students' speaking performance. Exploring these types and functions of fillers enables the identification of linguistic forms commonly used in students' speaking performance, as well as the roles of fillers in maintaining fluency and continuity in spoken production. Furthermore, the understanding of types and functions of fillers provides insights related to students' strategies in spoken English.

To support the exploration and analysis process, this research adopted two main theoretical frameworks: the types of fillers proposed by Rose (1998) and the functions of fillers described by Stenstrom (1994). Fillers are classified into two types, namely lexicalized fillers, which are produced from words or phrases, and unlexicalized fillers, which consist of non-lexical vocalizations (Rose, 1998). Meanwhile, based on Stenstrom (1994, as cited in Rahmawati & Farida, 2025), fillers are divided into five main functions, particularly hesitation devices, time-creating devices, empathizing devices, mitigating devices, and editing terms. These theoretical frameworks serve as an analytical basis for exploring and analyzing the fillers' types and functions used by EFL students.

Building on those theoretical frameworks, this research focuses on short spoken analytical expositions produced by EFL students at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang to explore the fillers' types and functions used in their speaking performance. Short spoken analytical expositions were selected because the students had to convey arguments and opinions spontaneously related to the topic provided (Rini et al., 2018). This spontaneous speaking condition places students under high pressure, in which students are required to think quickly about vocabulary and grammar to be spoken while maintaining fluency. Consequently, students may experience hesitation, pauses, or breakdowns in the middle of their speaking performance; thus, they start relying on the use of fillers to manage their speaking fluency. Therefore, short spoken analytical expositions provide a suitable context for investigating the use of fillers in EFL students, spoken English.

This research was conducted to explore the types and functions of fillers used by EFL students. Although there are many studies conducted to examine fillers in spoken English such as Yulpia (2025) who investigated fillers in the speaking performance; Vrika & Diananseri (2022) who examined fillers in the casual conversation; Awang et al. (2022) who analyzed fillers in oral interaction; Rangga et al. (2025) who examined conversation fillers; Gandeza (2023) who examined fillers in conversation, few studies exploring the use of filler in short spoken analytical exposition. This research seeks to respond to this gap by investigating and analyzing the filler used in short spoken analytical expositions by EFL students at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang through answering the following questions (1) What types of fillers do EFL students use in their short spoken analytical expositions?, (2) Which type of fillers are mostly used by students? (3) What functions do fillers serve in EFL students' short spoken analytical expositions? This research results are expected to offer pedagogical implications for EFL teachers in developing students' communicative strategic competence in spoken English.

METHOD

This research applied a qualitative approach to investigate the types and functions of fillers used by EFL students in their English-speaking performance. A qualitative approach was selected because of this research on linguistic phenomena in natural spoken discourse through descriptive analysis rather than measuring variables statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the production and functions of fillers in students' short spoken analytical expositions were examined from the perspective of spoken discourse analysis. This approach enables a comprehensive interpretation of the use of fillers in spoken English, particularly in relation to students' speaking fluency. Even though this research applied a qualitative approach, limited frequency counts were also used to support the identification of the most frequently used types of fillers.

Regarding the research setting and participants, this research was conducted at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang. The participants were grade eleven EFL students who had learned analytical exposition texts as part of the English curriculum in Indonesia. The students were selected using purposive sampling, which refers to the selection of participants as samples based on specific criteria according to research purpose (Tajik et al., 2024). This sampling technique was considered appropriate because the participants had relevant learning experiences related to the research focus. The participants consisted of two class of EFL students, with a total number of 60 students.

The selected students were asked to work in pairs with their classmates. Next, each pair was required to produce a video recording of a speaking performance without reading text about analytical exposition in 2 until 3 minutes duration. The topic of this speaking performance was healthy lifestyle. In total, 30 videos were collected as data for this research. Next, the videos were transcribed verbatim, including pauses and fillers, to enable a detailed analysis of fillers used by students during their speaking performance. The transcription process served as the basis for identifying and categorizing the types and functions of fillers.

The unit of analysis in this research was fillers produced by students during their spoken analytical exposition performance. The data collected were analyzed through some steps. First of all, the transcribed data, in the form of text, were carefully read while repeatedly listening to the video recordings to identify fillers used by students in their speaking performance. Second, all identified fillers were collected and systematically documented. Third, the identified fillers were classified into a table of fillers types based on the Rose (1998) theory, in which it contained

two types, particularly lexicalized fillers and unlexicalized fillers. Next, the fillers' functions were analyzed by using the framework proposed by Stenstrom (1994), which categorizes fillers into five main functions. Lastly, the findings were interpreted to explain how fillers functioned as communicative strategies in maintaining fluency in students' speaking performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The researchers' analysis revealed that a total of 91 fillers were used by the students of SMA Negeri 3 Semarang across 30 video recordings of short spoken analytical exposition, as presented in Table 1. The fillers identified in this research are classified into two types, namely lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers, as proposed by Rose (1998). Both of these types of fillers appeared alternately during the students' speaking performances, particularly when they were producing arguments or expressing opinions, indicating that the students employed communicative strategies to manage fluency and maintain the continuity of their speaking. Thus, the use of lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers reflects the students' strategy to cope with fluency challenges in short spoken analytical exposition performance.

In company of the two types of fillers, researchers found that unlexicalized fillers are the most common type of fillers used by the students of SMA Negeri 3 Semarang during their speaking performances. A total of 50 unlexicalized fillers were found such as "um", "uh", "hmm", and "ee"; accounting for 54.95% of all fillers analyzed, as presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Whereas, lexicalized fillers were found by researchers 41 times, such as "I think", "so", "okay", "well", "you know", "I think", and "I mean"; accounting for 45.05% of all fillers analyzed. Thus, the result means that students prefer to use unlexicalized fillers rather than lexicalized fillers, particularly when they encounter difficulties during their speaking performance. This result implies that unlexicalized fillers functioned as a more immediate and accessible strategy for maintaining fluency during short spoken analytical exposition performance.

Furthermore, from the two types of fillers found five functions, particularly hesitation devices, time-creating devices, empathizing devices, mitigating devices, and editing term devices, as proposed by Stenstrom (1994, as cited in Rahmawati & Farida, 2025).

First, fillers as hesitation devices were found when the students experienced difficulty in managing vocabulary, ideas, or constructing grammar structures. Unlexicalized fillers, such as "um", and "uh" were used by the students to overcome them. Here are examples of fillers as hesitation devices found by researchers:

"Healthy life is um very important for our future"

"Even though alcohol can release your stress, but uh it could damage your health."

Second, fillers as time-creating devices were used by the students to provide times to think about the next utterance without stopping their speech. Lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers such as "well", "hmm", and "uh" were used by students to address these problems when they were answering some questions or requesting the truth of arguments. Here are examples of fillers as time-creating devices found by researchers:

"Well, let's find out the truth."

"Hmm, not now maybe"

Third, fillers as empathizing devices were used by the students to engage listeners and establish shared understanding during their speaking performances. Lexicalized fillers such as “you know” and “so” were most commonly used by students. Here are examples of fillers as empathizing devices found by researchers:

“Healthy life is important, you know, because it affects our future.”

“So, our main idea is simple.”

Fourth, fillers as mitigating devices were used by the students to smoothen their arguments or opinions and reduce assertiveness. Lexicalized fillers such as “I think” were mostly used by the students in their speaking performances when they are not sure about the truth about their arguments. Here are examples of fillers as mitigating devices found by researchers:

“I think healthy life is important for students.”

“I think eating donuts can affect your health.”

Finally, fillers as editing terms were used by the students when they needed to correct or clarify their arguments or opinions during their speaking performance. Lexicalized fillers, “I mean,” were used by the students to address it. Here are examples of fillers as editing terms found by researchers:

“Healthy life improves our body, I mean, our physical and mental health.”

“Cigarettes is unhealthy bro, I mean, they break your lungs slowly.”

Overall, the findings of this research reveal that students employed both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers during their spoken analytical exposition performances. However, unlexicalized fillers were used frequently, particularly to address hesitation and linguistic issues while they were speaking spontaneously. Moreover, the fillers used by the students have five functions as proposed by Stenstrom (1994, as cited in Rahmawati & Farida, 2025), which makes these fillers a communication strategy used by students in managing the fluency of their spoken analytical exposition. These findings provide a foundation for further discussion on the role of fillers in EFL speaking performance and their pedagogical implications.

Table 1. Distribution frequency of fillers

Types of Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
Unlexicalized fillers	50	54.95%
Lexicalized fillers	41	45.05%
Total	91	100%

Table 2. Unlexicalized fillers used by students

Unlexicalized fillers	Frequency	Percentage
um	21	42.00%
uh	13	26.00%
hmm	11	22.00%
ee	5	10.00%
Total	50	100%

Table 3. Lexicalized fillers used by students

Lexicalized fillers	Frequency	Percentage
I think	13	31.71%
So	8	19.51%
Okay	7	17.07%
Well	5	12.20%
You know	5	12.20%
I mean	3	7.32%
Total	41	100%

Discussion

Fillers play a crucial role as communicative strategies in EFL students' short spoken analytical exposition performance. This is revealed by the result of this research, in which students actively attempt to manage fluency during their spontaneous speaking through the use of lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. It implies that fillers serve communicative value in maintaining fluency in speaking rather than being a sign of lack of fluency in speaking (Rose, 1998). This interpretation is supported by the functional framework proposed by Stenstrom (1994, as cited in Rahmawati & Farida, 2025), which views fillers as time-gaining strategies enabling speakers to cope with fluency challenges without causing communication breakdown. Previous studies similarly confirm that fillers help learners sustain interaction and continuity in speech (Hardianti, 2016; Kalisa, 2019). Therefore, the presence of fillers in EFL students' speech reflects strategic competence instead of linguistic deficiency.

Furthermore, the result of the domination of the use of unlexicalized fillers implies that EFL students rely on immediate and low-effort strategies when addressing linguistic issues such as lack of vocabulary or grammar mastery. This preference occurs because unlexicalized fillers are more accessible during spontaneous speech, particularly under high cognitive pressure (Gandeza, 2023; Hassan et al., 2021). In short spoken analytical exposition, the students are required to present arguments fluently and quickly, which increases pressure experienced by students during speech production. Consequently, unlexicalized fillers become an easier strategy for managing real-time speech production than lexicalized fillers.

Additionally, the identifications of five fillers' functions imply that fillers serve several pragmatic purposes beyond hesitation. Fillers as time-creating and hesitation devices reflect students' need to manage ideas and linguistic form during the short spoken analytical exposition, particularly when the students stated arguments. While fillers as empathizing and mitigating devices indicate students' awareness of interpersonal meaning. This finding supports the view that fillers contribute not only to fluency management but also to discourse organization and interpersonal alignment (Awang et al., 2022; Rahmawati & Farida, 2025). Thus, fillers should be understood as multifunctional elements that support both fluency and interactional competence in EFL speaking.

From a pedagogical perspective, fillers cannot be viewed as errors that must be deleted in speaking instruction. Instead, teachers may acknowledge fillers as natural features of spoken language and teach students about how to use fillers appropriately and strategically. Explicit instructions about types and functions of fillers may enhance students' awareness of fillers as communicative strategies (Syamsudin, 2015; Syamsudin et al., 2024). Moreover, integrating activities focused on speaking fluency, such as short speeches, can help students to decrease overreliance on unlexicalized fillers while promoting more meaningful lexicalized alternatives (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Finally, viewing fillers as part of communicative competence supports a more balanced and realistic approach to EFL speaking instruction.

CONCLUSION

This research examines the fillers' types and functions used by EFL students in short analytical expositions at SMA Negeri 3 Semarang. The findings of this research confirm that fillers are a communicative strategy that helps students maintain fluency in spontaneous English speech. Two types of fillers were identified, particularly lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. However, unlexicalized fillers are more frequently used by EFL students. This reveals that students tend to rely on more accessible strategies in overcoming linguistic challenges when speaking spontaneously. In addition, five functions of fillers, namely hesitation devices, time-creating devices, empathizing devices, mitigating devices, and editing terms, were found in this study. These functions play an important role in maintaining continuity when students are speaking spontaneously. Furthermore, these filler functions reflect discourse and interpersonal management. Therefore, fillers should be viewed as communicative strategies, rather than mere indicators of speech disfluency. Overall, the findings of this research confirm that fillers function as essential communicative strategies that can help students maintain fluency and continuity in spontaneous speaking practice, especially in short spoken analytical exposition. This study is limited to a specific speaking genre. The researchers recommend that future researchers explore the use of fillers in other speaking contexts, use a longitudinal design to observe developmental changes, and examine the impact of instructional interventions on students' strategic use of fillers in EFL speaking performance.

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