

Exploring Fillers in EFL Classroom Interaction: A Case from an Indonesian English Course

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Abstract. Fillers act as a crucial role in cognitive processing and discourse management, particularly in English as a Foreign Language. Most of the previous studies found that they highlighted the fillers in teacher-student interaction in formal education settings. They provide little insight into their role in informal, online EFL classes where interaction is more dynamic and semi-structured. Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of fillers and identify the most dominant fillers in an online English course. It also examines the functions of fillers in an informal classroom. This research used a qualitative approach and classroom discourse analysis (CDA) as the research design, supported by conversation analysis as the framework. The participants of this study are 18 students of the English Conversation Class. The data were gathered through classroom observation and a video recording from an online English course. Three instruments were used in this study: the observation sheet, the coding sheet, and the table analysis. The data were analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). Theory triangulation was used to validate the data. This study revealed that the combination of types of fillers, both lexicalized and unlexicalized, and the most common fillers that appeared in the teacher's speech were 88.81% lexicalized, while the students' 84.03% unlexicalized in an informal education setting. It also revealed that three functions of fillers were implemented in the classroom interaction, including cognitive function, social function, and discourse regulatory function.

Keywords: Classroom Discourse Analysis, Fillers, Online EFL Classroom, Speaking Fluency

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the analysis of classroom conversations has received significant attention in the educational field, particularly in the online context of EFL. This literature review discusses the various studies pertaining to the role of fillers in online classroom conversations. It highlights the importance of these components in regard to student interaction, learning, and communication. The literature concerning previous studies suggests that fillers are often disregarded in the instruction of languages. However, they have a significant impact on the flow and quality of speech in educational settings. Fillers are frequent in spoken language but do not have a significant meaning in propositions. Instead of performing grammatical or linguistic functions, fillers facilitate the conversation's flow. They're often considered to be part of the spoken language, but several studies have increasingly focused on their practical and linguistic functions in discourse.

Rose (1998) described fillers as lexicalized and unlexicalized statements that speakers utilize to occupy the floor, denote hesitation, or take turns during spoken language. These utterances are not random; instead, they have a significant role in maintaining the interaction, especially for second language (L2) speakers who may need to process the speech more slowly. More specifically, filler pauses can serve as a tool for maintaining control in conversation, particularly in terms of "turn-holding." Rose argues that speakers often use filler pauses to signal that they are still speaking and still have the right to speak, even though they may need extra time to think about their next comment. This function is particularly relevant in language teaching, where mastery of fillers can contribute to the fluency and ease of verbal interaction in the language being learned. Similarly, Tottie (2011) describes fillers as "non-propositional speech components that are inserted into spoken language to facilitate time management or cognitive processing during spoken language." Though often considered to be of no importance or value in formal speech, fillers are common features of natural conversation and serve multiple communicative purposes. Clark and Tree (2002) stated that speakers like "u" and "um" are not simply symptoms of fluency, but are instead collaborative signals that are used to signal to the audience that there is a delay in speech. Fillers are not simply accidental noise; they have a purpose that interacts with the spoken language, allowing speakers to signal their desire to continue talking while taking a moment to consider their actions. Of the several existing theories of filler, this research

utilized Rose's (1998) theory to determine what types of fillers exist. According to Rose (1998), there are two types of fillers that are categorized into lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. First, lexicalized fillers that have a literal meaning that is incorporated into their use, e.g., you know, I mean, like, well. Second, unlexicalized fillers, non-lexical vocalizations like uh, um, er, and their function as a marker of hesitation.

There were several previous studies conducted on fillers. For instance, filler pauses made by teachers in EFL contexts were examined by Mahendra and Bram (2019). They underlined that these statements could give students the breaks and time they need to absorb the material. This classroom discourse analysis encouraged students to actively participate and interact with one another, which is essential in online learning settings where face-to-face interaction is scarce (Zaki, 2021). Fillers were useful to maintain and manage the flow of conversation. In addition, a study of fillers was also conducted to see the use of fillers in academic staff candidates. The findings showed the use of fillers by ESL speakers in real job interviews as a processing time pressure-related strategy when the speaker was trying to fill in the gaps (Hassan et al., 2021). In another study, many fillers were found in the academic setting, such as the study conducted by Efendi and Anggrarini (2024) who studied fillers that occurred in the speaking presentation of undergraduate students of the English Department from Universitas Wiralodra. In the following year, fillers were also still studied. Yulpia, T. (2025) found that the most common usage of fillers by English students was unlexicalized, such as "uh" or "um". The finding signified that there was a lack of fluency in their speaking, as students spoke spontaneously without prior preparation. Similar findings were found in another study conducted by Cahyo et al (2025) through video assignments of students at the English Language Education study program at Universitas Gorontalo. The frequencies of fillers they used were unlexicalized, such as "um and uh." The absence of time and divided focus were among the many causes.

Ong (2017) showed how teachers can strategically use conversation to help students increase their vocabulary. These findings demonstrated that fillers can be utilized as instructional tools to enhance student learning by encouraging more fruitful classroom interactions instead of being linguistic aids. Fillers, particularly in online learning environments, can boost teacher and student engagement when used appropriately. The transition to virtual classrooms has necessitated the adoption of new teaching methods in order to maintain student participation. Torres (2023) stated that the importance of self-reflective teaching methods, including the use of additional materials, has been recognized. These additional materials can enrich classroom discussions. By this method, teachers can create a more supportive and less intimidating learning environment, this environment promotes student participation more actively.

Additionally, the diversity of fillers allows students to assimilate new information at their own rate, which assists them in managing their cognitive load during classes. This need for effective communication strategies is even more apparent in an online environment. According to Oktarin and Wengrum (2021), using different and creative approaches in teaching could have a significant impact on students' enthusiasm and participation in the learning process. Similar to this, Cahyani et al. (2023) showed how teachers can strategically use sentence extensions to alter classroom discourse and enhance students' overall linguistic competencies. A formal curriculum that included perceived social support was crucial because of the subtle yet important role substitutes play in social interaction (Luan et al., 2023). Fillers can help students feel like they belong and have a role by continuing to encourage understanding and participation. Barber (2020) emphasized that creating a dedicated online learning community was crucial to maintaining student interest while improving the results of learning. Promoting more authentic, informal, and focused dialogues between the instructor and students is one useful strategy; this will come across as more alluring. More relaxed interactions can also be facilitated by the appropriate use of fillers during the teaching process. Students will feel more connected to their teachers and peers as a result of the lively online classroom environment and decreased sense of loneliness that frequently occurs when learning remotely.

Examining conversations critically also promotes a reconsideration of the sociocultural facets of learning exchanges. Jenks (2020) demonstrated how the dynamics of power and cultural diversity in classroom discussions are reflected in a variety of conversational styles, including the use of filler words. Teachers can close the achievement gap and encourage active participation from all students by adjusting their pedagogical approaches to create a more inclusive classroom by being aware of these factors (Jenks, 2020; Oktarin & Wengrum, 2021; Zaki, 2021). Fillers are essential to the learning process and conversational pauses. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the educational process and student-to-student communication can both be enhanced by the thoughtful use of fillers. Thus, teachers can improve student outcomes and foster engagement more effectively by comprehending the

complexity of discourse in online learning environments. The study of classroom interaction is still important in addressing the unique advantages and problems of modern learning, even as the field of EFL education has continued to change.

A strong framework for researching classroom interaction in formal educational settings is provided by the literature, but little is known about the ways in which informal educational practices affect these settings. According to Liu et al. (2024), informal conversation frequently enables genuine engagement with sociopolitical issues that are not typically covered in formal education. Their findings indicate that fillers and informal conversation patterns may act as triggers for genuine involvement. Finally, acknowledging multiple educational frameworks involves a reconsideration of classroom discourse, particularly in terms of fillers, across contexts. This calls for further research into integrating formal practices into informal discourse to optimize language teaching strategies and broaden student engagement. Therefore, this study aims to 1) explore the types of fillers and 2) identify the most dominant fillers in an online English course, and 3) examine the function of fillers in an informal classroom setting.

METHODS

Research Design

This research used a qualitative approach and Classroom Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the research design, supported by conversation analysis as the framework. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand in depth how fillers arise and function in speaking class interactions. This approach allows researchers to explore meanings, social processes, and phenomena contextually, rather than simply measuring variables numerically (Creswell, 2018).

CDA was chosen because the focus of this research is to analyze the discourse that occurs in English classrooms, specifically how teachers and students build meaning through verbal interaction (Walsh, 2011). To strengthen the analysis, Conversation Analysis (CA) is used as a microframework to look at the details of the conversation, such as turn-taking patterns, pauses, overlaps, repairs, and the use of fillers. According to Seedhouse (2004), CA is relevant in analyzing classroom conversations because meanings often appear sequentially and are influenced by the context of interaction. By combining CDA and CA, this study can explore both the structure of the class discourse as a whole and the details of spontaneous interactions between participants.

Research Site

It was conducted online via Zoom meeting in an online English course in Bandung, which actively conducted the speaking activities as its fundamentals. It was conducted from July 7th to 14th, 2025, through a Zoom meeting.

Subject of the Data

The participants in this research were an English teacher and 18 students aged 18-25 years old. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, i.e. the selection of participants based on certain criteria that are relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015) based on the following criteria: 1) actively engage in speaking activity, 2) they had given their informed consent to be recorded during classroom speaking activities, and 3) they had attended at least four previous sessions to ensure a sufficient level of familiarity and engagement in classroom interaction.

Techniques of Data Collection

Research data from this study was the transcript from the video recording during speaking activities. The process of collecting the data followed these steps: 1) record the video, 2) transcribe the video, and 3) observe by taking notes of the situation, non-verbal expression, and the interaction. There were three instruments used in this study: an observation sheet, a coding sheet, and a table analysis. Observation sheets are used to record class conditions, participants' expressions, and special situations related to the use of fillers. The coding sheet contains filler categories to facilitate the process of identifying, calculating frequencies, and classifying filler functions. Analysis tables are used to summarize the coding results and relate them to relevant theories.

Techniques of Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, this study used thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to it was flexible and allowed researchers to identify patterns of meaning, both explicit and implicit, in classroom discourse. The data analysis process was carried out through the following steps: 1) transcribing the video, 2) read the transcript, 3) coding the data, 4) collocating the codes into potential themes, 5) collecting all the data relevant to the potential theme and checking the themes, 6) defining and naming the themes, and 7) interpreting the result. Moreover, this study also used theoretical triangulation to increase the credibility and validity of findings by analyzing data using more than one theoretical perspective. The researcher integrated Rose's (1998) theory of the classification of lexicalized fillers and unlexicalized fillers with the theoretical framework of Garcés-Conejos and Bou-Franch (2004) regarding the function of fillers, which includes cognitive, social, and discourse regulation functions. By combining these two theoretical frameworks, the researchers gained a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of the use of fillers in online English classroom interactions. In addition, the use of theoretical triangulation also helps to minimize researcher bias and increase the reliability of research results (Creswell, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings about the type and function of fillers used by the teacher and the students in the classroom interaction.

Finding 1

Types of Fillers and the Frequency Used by the Teacher and Students

Type of Fillers and the Frequency Used by the Teacher

The finding demonstrated that the teacher used several lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers in the classroom interaction. Lexicalized fillers are those in the form of short phrases, such as like, you know, well, so, okay, and let's see. Meanwhile, unlexicalized fillers include vocalizations such as a, am, e, em, u, uh, um, e, er, and erm (Rose, 1998). Table 1 displayed the type of lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers as well as the frequency used by the teacher.

Table 1. Type of Fillers and the Frequency Used by the Teacher

| No. | Type of Fillers | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Lexicalized | | | |
| 1. | Okay | 227 | 70.49% |
| 2. | So | 26 | 8.07% |
| 3. | Well | 21 | 6.52% |
| 4. | Like | 6 | 1.86% |
| 5. | I mean | 6 | 1.86% |
| Unlexicalized | | | |
| 5. | Em | 17 | 5.27% |
| 6. | E | 9 | 2.79% |
| 7. | A | 7 | 2.17% |
| 8. | Uh | 3 | 0.93% |
| Total | | 322 | 100% |

Based on Table 1, the teacher employed 322 fillers in the classroom interaction. It was divided into 286 lexicalized fillers and 36 unlexicalized fillers. The teacher mostly used lexicalized fillers in the interaction. There were several types of lexicalized fillers used by the teacher, including okay, so, well, like, and I mean. The lexicalized filler "okay" was used 227 times, or around 70.49%. Lexicalized filler "so" was used 26 times, or around

8.07%. Lexicalized filler “well” was used 21 times, or around 6.52%. Lexicalized filler “like” was used six times, or around 1.86%. Lastly, the lexicalized filler “I mean” was used six times, or 1.86%. Furthermore, they also used unlexicalized filler in the classroom interaction. Unlexicalized filler “em” was used 17 times or around 5.27%. Unlexicalized filler e used nine times or around 2.79%. Unlexicalized filler a used seven times or around 2.17%. Lastly, the unlexicalized filler uh " was used three times, or around 0.93%.

Type of Fillers and the Frequency Used by the Students

The finding demonstrated that the students also used several lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers in the classroom interaction. Table 2 displayed the type of lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers as well as the frequency used by the students.

Table 2. Type of Fillers and the Frequency Used by the Students

| No. | Type of Fillers | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Lexicalized | | | |
| 1. | Okay | 16 | 13.4% |
| 2. | So | 2 | 1.68% |
| 3. | Like | 1 | 0.84% |
| Unlexicalized | | | |
| 5. | E | 62 | 52.1% |
| 6. | Uh | 22 | 18.48% |
| 7. | Em | 12 | 10.08% |
| 8. | A | 4 | 3.36% |
| Total | | 119 | 100% |

Based on Table 2, the students employed 119 fillers in the classroom interaction. It was divided into 19 lexicalized fillers and 100 unlexicalized fillers. The students mostly used unlexicalized fillers in the interaction. The students only used three types of unlexicalized filler, including okay, so, and like. Lexicalized filler okay was used 16 times, or around 13.4%. Lexicalized filler was used two times, or around 1.68%. Lastly, lexicalized filler like was used only once, or around 0.84%. Furthermore, they also used unlexicalized filler in the classroom interaction. Similar to the teacher, the students also used several types of unlexicalized filler, including “e, uh, em, and a”. Unlexicalized filler e was used 62 times, or around 52.1%. Unlexicalized filler uh was used 22 times, or around 18.48%. Unlexicalized filler a was used 12 times, or around 10.08%. Lastly, the unlexicalized filler a was used four times, or around 3.36%.

Finding 2

The Most Dominant Fillers and Frequency Used by the Teacher and the Students

The finding demonstrated that the researcher found a high number of fillers used by the teacher and the students in the classroom interaction of the English Course. The details of finding the type and frequency of fillers are represented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Lexicalized and Unlexicalized Fillers
Used By the Teacher and the Students

| Type of Filler | Participants | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Teacher | | Students | |
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Lexicalized | 286 | 88.81% | 19 | 15.96% |
| Unlexicalized | 36 | 11.18% | 100 | 84.03% |
| Total | 322 | 100% | 119 | 100% |

Based on Table 3, the result demonstrated that the teacher mostly used lexicalized fillers rather than unlexicalized fillers in the classroom interaction. The teacher used lexicalized filler around 286 times, or 88.81%. They used five types of lexicalized fillers, including “okay, so well, like, and I mean”. However, they tended to use lexicalized filler words “okay” during the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, the teacher also used unlexicalized filler in the classroom interaction. It appeared around 36 times or 11.18%. They used four types of unlexicalized fillers, including “em, e, a, and uh”. The most lexicalized filler used by the teacher was “em”.

On the other hand, the students mostly used unlexicalized fillers rather than lexicalized fillers in the classroom interaction. Unlexicalized filler appeared around 100 times, or 84.03%. The most unlexicalized filler used by the students was “e”. It was different from the teacher who mostly used “em”. Meanwhile, lexicalized filler only appeared around 19 times or 15.96%. The students only used three types of lexicalized fillers, including “okay, so, and like”. It was different from the teacher who used five types of lexicalized filler. However, there was also a similarity with the teacher. The most lexicalized filler used by the students was “okay”, which is the same as that used by the teacher.

Finding 3

The Function of Filler

Garcés-Conejos & Bou-Franch (2004) proposed three functions of filler, including cognitive function, social function, and discourse-regulatory function. The details of each function will be discussed in the following sections.

1. Cognitive Function

Cognitive function is the most common function of fillers. In this function, fillers are used to show that the listeners are processing the information from the speakers. It aims to let the speaker know whether the listener is processing new information and making appropriate inferences while the speaker is talking. This process is called the interpretation process. This ability enables listeners to draw conclusions and generate brief verbal responses immediately, keeping pace with the speaker's rate of speed (Garcés-Conejos & Bou-Franch, 2004). It is due to the fact that it appears more apparent when an individual is 'thinking online' or participating in online verbal planning, compared to when they are utilizing fillers for different functions. In processing the utterances, the listeners mostly used the lexicalized filler “I mean” or the unlexicalized filler, such as “erm, um, or uh”. It indicates that they are planning to modify what they have said.

Cognitive Function Used by the Teacher

Based on the data, there were two main roles of cognitive function in classroom interaction. There were fillers used as a “thinking online” or engaged in online verbal planning, as well as fillers to modify what they said. There were several implications when filler was used as “thinking online”. First, the teacher used it when she thought of calling the students’ names in class. She employed unlexicalized filler, including “e” and “em”. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(1) “And **em** I will go to Bro Anwar. “

The teacher encouraged the students to explain their activity over the weekend. She thought about the other students who had not explained their weekend yet, so she used an unlexicalized filler “em” to plan selecting the other students to continue explaining their activity on the weekend.

(2) “Okay, **e** we have Brina, Putri. “

In the beginning of the class, there were still several students who were joining the class. The teacher tried to greet them by mentioning their name. That was the reason why she used unlexicalized filler “e” because she thought about the students’ names in the class.

Second, when the teacher found an issue in the learning process, they spontaneously used filler as a “thinking online” to solve the issue. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(3) “**E** wait a minute.”

The teacher’s laptop had an error during the lesson. She used an unlexicalized filler “e” because she thought about the way to solve the problem.

Third, the teacher explained about the other teacher’s accident to the students. She used the unlexicalized filler “e” in the explanation. It is illustrated in the following instance.

(4) “Seperti **e** I am to inform you my class, maybe if you don’t know our class now sama coach B karena coach B ada musibah ya, yang motornya kecolongan gitu di kost an nya.

In this class, the students from Coach B joined Coach A’s class because Coach B could not teach the students. That is the reason why coach A explained about coach B’s accident during the learning process. Coach A used an unlexicalized filler “e” to recall the accident and processed explaining it to the students.

Lastly, when the teacher answered several questions from the students, they employed filler to think about the appropriate answers. She used three types of unlexicalized filler, including “e, em, and a”. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(5) “Like example **e** one time when I met my husband.”

The teacher explained about the use of “once” with the meaning “sekali”. Then, there was a student who asked about the difference between once time and one time because the student had ever heard about the term “one time” in a song. The teacher used filler “e” because she thought about the appropriate answer.

(6) “**Aku** lupa, anyone remember? **A**, the day after tomorrow.”

A student asked a question about the English of the word “lusa.” The teacher actually knew the answer, but she did not remember it. That was the reason she used an unlexicalized filler “a” to think about the answer.

(7) “**Em** the day after yesterday. I’m not sure. Kata ini kayak belum common di aku.”

It was the next question, continuing from the previous question above. A student asked about the word of “lusa yang kemarin” in English. The teacher tried to answer the question, but there was a student answered “the day after yesterday”. The teacher spontaneously used an unlexicalized filler “em” to think about the opinion of the student.

The next role of cognitive function is to modify what they have said. The speakers had told the utterance, but the previous utterance was incorrect or unclear, so they planned to modify it to the correct utterance. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(8) “Jadi, she **e** she’s going to the police office now untuk ngurus ini surat kehilangan dan lain-lain, gitu.”

In this case, the teacher explained Coach B’s accident to the students. She used an unlexicalized filler “e” to plan modifying the previous utterance “she”. It is used to plan a detailed explanation of the accident.

(9) “Nah, kalo often, **e** kalo often itu ya nggak sesering always.”

In this case, the teacher explained the level of frequency of the word “often”. She planned to modify the term “kalo often” using an unlexicalized filler “e” because they wanted to explain the correct explanation.

Cognitive Function Used by the Students

Based on the data, the students also used two main roles of cognitive function. First, it was fillers as a “thinking online” or engaged in online verbal planning. It appeared in several parts of conversations. First, when

the students asked permission from the teacher, they used “thinking online” to arrange the words. It is illustrated in the following instance.

(1) “Good evening, coach A. Sorry Coach. I’m on the road riding to my home. **E e** previously I cannot fully open cam coach because I’m drive now until ya , **e** 7.30 pm.”

(2) “But **uh** for this evening I’m sorry I cannot **uh** open my camera because something wrong.”

The teacher instructed all of the students to open their cameras during the lesson, but there were some students who could not open their cameras due to several reasons. For the first example, she asked the teacher for permission not to open the camera and explained the reason that he was still driving. For the second example, he also asked permission not to open the camera and explained the reason that there was an error with the camera in his laptop. They used unlexicalized fillers “e and uh” as “thinking online” to arrange the sentence, so they could explain the reasons to the teacher.

Second, the students used filler as “thinking online” when they planned to answer the teacher’s questions. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(3) “**E** my husband in Japan.”

The teacher asked the student about her reason for joining this course. She was still processing the information to answer the question, so she used an unlexicalized “e” at the beginning of the sentence.

(4) “**Em** I’m in work.”

The teacher asked the student why he could come back to this course again. However, the students misinterpreted the question, and he was confused to answer it. That was the reason why he used unlexicalized “em” at the beginning of the sentence to think about how to answer it.

Third, when they tried to explain their activity on the weekend, they used filler as “thinking online”. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(5) “I did my daily activity, sleep and **e** yes watching the movie and another activity.”

(7) “**Em** I not go anywhere.”

The students used unlexicalized “e” and “em” because they were still thinking about the other activity that they did on the last weekend. They were still processing the information to remember the activities.

(6) “Hi coach **uh** same is coach A.”

In this sentence, she used the unlexicalized “uh” when trying to explain the activity on the weekend. There were two possibilities why she used uh. First, she did not know how to explain her activity, or whether the activities were the same as those with the teacher. Overall, she was still planning to explain her daily activity to the teacher.

Lastly, the students used filler as “thinking online” when they asked the teacher questions. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(7) “Coach, berarti klo dari 31 sama dengan seperti **e** thirty first gitu gitu ya coach?”

(8) “**Uh** what about one time. We call one time or once time?”

The students used unlexicalized filler words “e and uh” when they were trying to ask the teacher questions. In instance 7, she wanted to make sure about how to say the number in English appropriately. She used an unlexicalized filler “e” because she tried to remember the previous material discussed about the pronunciation of the number. In instance 8, she was hesitant to ask a question and was planning how to ask it to the teacher.

The next role of cognitive function is to modify what they said. The speakers had told the utterance, but the previous utterance was incorrect or unclear, so they planned to modify it to the correct one. It is illustrated in the following instances.

- (1) “**em** Coach B list **e** I saw in Coach B’s list mean almost 16, but I think that’s more.”

The teacher asked the students from Coach B's class about the number of students. One of the students tried to answer it. However, she used an unlexicalized filler “e” after saying “Coach B list” because her utterance was not complete, so she planned to modify it into a clear explanation.

- (2) “E one hundred **uh** salah coach. One hundred nine.”

The teacher gave a question to the students about how to pronounce year and chose a student to answer it. The student answered it, but it was an incorrect answer. That was the reason he used the unlexicalized filler “uh” to modify the answer into the correct answer.

2. Social Function

Garcés-Conejos & Bou-Franch (2004) stated that social function is related to their signaling involvement, affect, and/or interest.

Social Function Used by the Teacher

Based on the data, the teacher used fillers as involvement, affect, mitigating devices, and to hold the attention. The first role was involvement. It was the most used role by the teacher. Involvement means showing engagement or participation. It is the signal that the listeners follow and are actively involved in the interaction. The most filler used in this role was the lexicalized filler “okay”. It is illustrated in the following instances.

- (1) “**Em okay**, alright.”

The teacher used the combination of lexicalized filler “okay” and unlexicalized filler “em” in the utterance. It was implemented to show a response to the student’s story and participation in the learning process.

- (2) “**Okay**, really good.”

The teacher often gave compliments to the students. Before giving a compliment, the most filler that she used was the lexicalized filler “okay”. It was used to respond to the student’s contribution and give positive feedback with a compliment.

- (3) Coach A : “Okay student E how to read this? Gimana student E. Ayo student E kira-kira bacanya.”

Student E : “Nineteen-twenty Miss? Coach?”

Coach A : “**Okay**, em once again.”

The teacher used a lexicalized filler “okay” to acknowledge student E's effort to read the year. It was also a signal before instructing him to do “once again”.

Second, the teacher also used affect in the social function. Affect means showing empathy or emotional reaction in the utterance. In signaling affect, all of the utterances used by the teacher were lexicalized fillers, okay. It is illustrated in the following instances.

- (1) “**Oh, okay**, amazing.”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” to show an emotional reaction to the student due to healthy habit changes.

- (2) “**Okay** semangat kak B ya.”

Kak B joined this course because she wanted to speak English fluently so that she could follow her husband in Japan. It was a reason why the teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” in this utterance. The filler showed encouragement and positive emotion.

- (3) “I’ll go to Kak B. Kak B. **Okay**, glad to see you.”

At the beginning, the teacher wanted to ask another student about their activity over the weekend. The teacher selected one of the students. She was one of the students from Coach B’s class who joined this meeting. The teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” to express a warm and positive manner before greeting Kak B. It was used as an emotional or relational marker in the utterance.

- (4) “Ahaha bukan lupa, tiba-tiba deg-deg an, jantung berpacu cepat. Jadi, you forget padahal tahu. **Okay** nggak apa-apa it’s okay.”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” in the utterance. It was used to express empathy to the students as well as to show the understanding of the speaker’s feelings of nervousness and anxiety.

The next role is to hold the students’ attention. In this case, the teacher used filler to sustain the students’ engagement, ensure the conversation moves along seamlessly, and prevent abrupt silences that might disrupt concentration. It is illustrated in the following instances.

- (1) Coach A : “..... What did you do on weekend, student A?”

Student A : “On the weekend, I am e went with my friends”

Coach A : “Ehem, to?”

Student A : “To playing badminton in the morning.”

Coach A : “**Okay**.”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” to sustain the flow of the interaction and keep student A attentive to the flow.

- (2) “Yeah, you. There is no someone else with the name Desi here. **Okay**, what about you, Desi?”

The teacher used a lexical filler, okay, to ensure the student remains attentive and smoothly transitions to the next speaker. It preserves the flow of conversation and indicates the shift to the following turn.

- (3) Student F : “Nineteen eighty nine”

Coach Husna: **A**, eighty nine.

The teacher used a lexicalized filler as a brief moment before confirming the answer. It was used to sustain the flow of conversation, prevent silence, and keep the student attentive.

- (4) Student G : “Okay e I was born on October two 2004.”

Coach Husna : “**Em**? Coba gaboleh bilang two. Hayo pakenya apa?”

The teacher used a lexicalized filler “em” in the utterance because the student’s answer was incorrect, so that the students could think about the correct answer. It was also used to maintain the discourse smooth and the students’ attention.

Lastly, the next role of social function is mitigating devices. It is used to soften speech, avoid sounding too direct, maintain politeness, and show solidarity. There was only one part that implemented mitigating devices. It is illustrated in the following instance.

- (1) Coach A: “Anytime. Okay, aku gatau ya, but I’m so happy when I get when I have my students very excited. Mungkin karena kita terbiasa ngobrol ya sebelum kelas ya. Jadi kayak gabisa dibisa bisa in. Oh my God, kok aku baper ya. I want to try, gapapa bgt ya guys ya. Jangan merasa ih aku nggak dipanggil, gapapa aku suka kayak gitu, **well** thanks Samuel.”

In this case, the teacher used a lexicalized filler “well” in the utterance. It softened the move into giving thanks, so the utterance sounded more polite.

Social Function Used by the Students

Based on the data, the students used three roles of filler as social functions: involvement, mitigating devices, and holding attention. First, the students used involvement in their utterance. They tended to use it during the interaction. It is illustrated in the following instance.

(1) “A, enggak.”

The teacher remembered that this student loved Japanese music, but it was incorrect information. The student spontaneously used an unlexicalized filler “a” as a response marker. It showed participation and alignment in the interaction.

(2) “Em, thank you, coach.”

The student used an unlexicalized filler “em” as a response, showing participation in the interaction, because the teacher granted the material requested by her. It was also used as a softener before saying thank you.

(3) “Okay clear coach.”

The students used the lexicalized filler “okay” to acknowledge the teacher’s explanation as well as a signal of understanding and participation in the interaction.

Second, the students used mitigating devices in their utterances. There was only one appearance in the utterance. It is illustrated in the following instance.

(1) “Okay, sorry coach.”

The teacher asked the student to explain the activity over the weekend, but there was no response from him. Then, the student used the lexicalized filler “okay” and continued saying sorry. This filler softened the apology and made it more polite.

Lastly, the filler was used to hold attention. There was only one that appeared in the utterance. It is illustrated in the following instance.

(1) “A, I got you. Thank you.”

The student asked about the difference between the terms “one time” and “once”. Then, the teacher explained it to the students. The student spontaneously used a lexicalized filler “a” as a pause filler before continuing to the next utterance. It was used to hold attention and keep the floor while organizing the utterance.

3. Discourse Regulatory

Garcés-Conejos & Bou-Franch (2004) proposed that discourse regulatory function relates to how listeners validate the allocation of speaking and listening roles through their contextually suitable choices.

Discourse Regulatory Function Used by the Teacher

Based on the data, the teacher often used fillers as a discourse regulatory function in the classroom conversation. She used filler to fill the pause or a silent situation in the class. It was implemented in order to maintain the interaction with the students. It could create engaging learning and prevent a monotonous situation in an online classroom. She mostly used the lexicalized filler “okay” to communicate with the students. However, she also used

other lexicalized fillers and unlexicalized fillers at low frequency. There were several roles of filler in the discourse regulatory function. It can be used to start, sustain, or end the utterance. First, the role of discourse regulatory function is an opening marker in the utterance. It is illustrated in the following instance.

- (1) “Alright **well so** let’s practice speaking for today everyone.”

The teacher used lexicalized filler “well” at the beginning of the utterance to manage the flow of interaction before delivering the main message.

- (2) “**Okay**, is that everything clear now?”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “okay” at the beginning of the utterance as an opening marker before she asked about the students’ understanding of the material. This lexicalized filler appeared many times as an opening marker used by the teacher.

- (3) “**So**, ini tu emang hardly tu membuat banyak orang bertanya tanya. **So**, why?”

The teacher used a lexicalized filler as an opening marker before they continued discussing the term “hardly”.

- (4) “So, where is exactly your husband now? **I mean** like the country.”

At the beginning, the student explained that she joined this course to follow her husband. Then, the teacher asked where her husband was. She used the lexicalized filler “I mean” at the beginning of the utterance to explain detailed information about the question.

Overall, the teacher used lexicalized filler rather than unlexicalized filler in opening the utterance. Using a high number of unlexicalized markers was a sign that the teacher was not capable of speaking English, so she used lexical fillers in the form of words to indicate that she had the skill to speak English fluently in the conversation.

Next, the role of discourse regulatory function is to sustain the utterance. There were several implications when filler was used to sustain the utterance. First, the teacher used filler to sustain the utterance when they moved from one topic to another topic. This way maintained the flow of interaction between the teacher and the students. It is illustrated in the following instances.

- (2) “Yeah that will be no problem. **Okay so** how many students coming?”

In the first utterance, the teacher responded to a student who could not open the camera during the lesson. Then, she used lexicalized fillers “okay” and “so” to sustain the flow of interaction before moving to the other topic of interaction. Then, she continued the main message to check the students’ attendance in the meeting.

- (2) “Let me count it. 18 students with still Miss Amel and Miss Rofi. **Okay, well**, everyone, before starting the class as usual, let’s pray together as our beliefs.”

After checking the attendance, she used unlexicalized fillers “okay” and “well” to pray before starting the lesson. It indicated that these lexicalized fillers was used to sustain the utterance.

- (3) “Scrolling TikTok every single day. **Okay** and what about Sena?”

The teacher used the lexicalized “okay” to move to the other students. The first utterance was the explanation from student A. Then, the teacher moved to the other student to hear their story about their weekend. She used this filler to sustain the utterance before calling the other student’s name.

- (4) “Ninety sixty five. Good **well** again.”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “well” before giving another question of the year, and the students answered how to pronounce it. She used this filler to sustain the flow of interaction and teaching in the classroom.

Second, this filler was used to sustain the utterance when the teacher explained the detailed information from the previous utterance. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(3) “Yeah, is your life Spotify? I mean, **like** you are addicted so much to Spotify.”

(4) “You want to be diligent. **So**, you challenge to go jogging on the weekend.”

The teacher used the lexicalized filler “like” to tell a detailed explanation about the previous utterances. It was used to sustain the utterance.

Third, this filler was used to sustain the utterance when the teacher continued explaining the appropriate answer to the students. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(5) “Good, thanks. **Okay**, two thousand and four.”

Before this utterance, a student answered the teacher’s question appropriately. At the beginning, the teacher gave a compliment to her and continued using the lexicalized filler “oka”y to retell about the appropriate answer. It was used to sustain the teacher’s utterance.

Fourth, the teacher used filler to sustain the utterance when she would show an example to the students. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(6) In? In ya. Jadi kalau kita mau bilang tahun “in”. **Okay** misalnya aku bilang kayak gini ya “Siti dilahirkan tahun 2020. Nah, tinggal kita bilang aja tu. Siti was born in 2020.”

The teacher gave an example of how to write the year using the preposition “in”. She used a lexicalized filler “okay” to sustain the discussion in implementing the proposition into the sentence.

Fifth, the teacher used filler as a sustaining utterance when she clarified the right meaning of the utterance. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(7) Not I mean **like** are you joining the class with Coach B?

At the beginning, the teacher asked a question to the student. However, there was a misinterpretation of the meaning so that the student's answer did not relate to the question. The teacher used the lexicalized filler “like” to continue the flow of interaction with the students. She used this filler to clarify the right question and explained it in detail to the student.

Lastly, the filler also used at the end of the utterance. It is illustrated in the following instances.

(1) “Nah so today is the day **okay**.”

The teacher introduced today’s material, which was requested by one of the students. In this case, she used the lexicalized filler “okay” to fill the pause in her utterance.

(2) “Oh my god, I didn't I didn't have enough time to visit all the rooms. Jadi several rooms aja ya. **Okay, well**.”

At the end, the teacher divided the students into the breakout rooms, but she could not visit all of the classrooms due to the limited time. She explained this situation to the students, and she used lexicalized fillers “okay” and “well” at the end of the utterance to fill the pause in the utterance. Overall, most of the lexicalized fillers used at the end of the utterance were “okay”. However, the teacher did not use an unlexicalized filler at the end of the utterance.

Discourse Regulatory Function Used by the Students

The students rarely used filler as a discourse regulatory function in the classroom interaction. Based on the three roles of discourse regulatory function, they only implemented two of them. First, the students used filler as an opening marker. There were only two students who used filler as an opening marker, using lexicalized filler, “okay”. One of the examples appears in the following instance.

(1) “**Okay** I was born on January 14th 2003.”

In this case, the student answered the question about the date of their birthday. At the beginning of the utterance, she used the lexicalized filler “okay” to begin the utterance before continuing to answer the question.

Second, the students used it in the middle of the utterance. It is used to sustain the flow of the utterance. The following instance showed that they used it to tell a detailed explanation of the previous utterance.

(1) “Spotify session **so** we listening Spotify together with friends.”

The student used a lexicalized filler to sustain the flow of explanation in telling the details about the term “Spotify session.”

Next, they also used this filler in the middle of her utterance to continue the unfinished explanation.

(2) “Hallo **okay, okay** and on Sunday I just go to church.”

This student previously talked about her activity on the weekend, but it was not finished yet due to the unstable internet connection. Then, she spontaneously used the lexicalized filler okay to maintain the utterance with the teacher and continued explaining the story.

DISCUSSION

The result showed that the teacher and the students employed fillers in the classroom interaction. Rose (1998) proposed two filler types: lexicalized and unlexicalized. Lexicalized filler means fillers in short phrases, such as, you know, well, so, okay, I mean, and let's see. The teacher employed several lexicalized fillers: “okay, so, well, I mean, and like”. The most lexicalized filler used by the teacher was “okay”. Meanwhile, unlexicalized filler includes vocalizations such as “a, am, e, em, u, uh, um, e, er, and erm”. The teacher employed several types of unlexicalized filler, including “e, uh, em, and a”. The most unlexicalized filler used by the teacher was “e”. The teacher preferred to use lexicalized filler in the interaction. The teacher employed a higher number of fillers than the students. Similar to these findings, Ali et al. (2023) and Fatimah et al. (2017) stated that the lecturers often used a high frequency of lexicalized fillers in the interaction. Lexicalized filler “okay” was the most common filler used by the lecturers to dominate teacher talk because of their role in guiding and managing interaction. The teacher played a key role in initiating and managing classroom discourse, navigating real-time interactions, and shaping the flow of communication. They must skillfully manage classroom dynamics, including power relations and emotional exchanges, to maintain an effective learning environment (Aspelin & Eklöf, 2023). Thus, they unconsciously used a high number filler in the classroom interaction.

The students also employed several lexicalized fillers: okay, so, and like. It differed from the teacher because the students did not use the lexicalized filler “well” and “I mean”. In addition, they employed unlexicalized fillers, including “e, uh, em, and a”. They were the same with an unlexicalized filler employed by the teacher. They tended to use the unlexicalized filler “e” in the interaction. Similarly, Efendi & Anggrarini (2024) stated that the students tended to use lexicalized fillers. On the other hand, the most lexicalized filler used by the students was “uh”.

In analyzing the fillers, a theory proposed by Garcés-Conejos and Bou-Franch (2004) was employed in this study, which includes three functions of filler: cognitive function, social function, and discourse regulatory function. First, cognitive function means processing information from the speaker. The teacher used online verbal planning when the teacher called the students' names, found the issue in the learning process, explained about an accident, and answered several questions. This means that fillers allow the teacher to buy time to conceptualize and formulate responses without interrupting interaction (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002.) For instance, when the teacher uses filler before detailing an event or selecting a student to respond, it signals to the class that the teacher will still be responding while maintaining the interaction flow. Fillers correlate with higher cognitive demands when describing new or less familiar information (Barr, n.d.). This finding is particularly relevant to teachers, who answered the students' difficult questions.

For the students, online verbal planning was used to ask permission, answer questions, explain the activity on the weekend, and ask questions. Fillers are used as a processing time pressure-related strategy. They occurred when the speakers tried to fill the communication gaps (Awang et al., 2022). Furthermore, the teacher and the students also used cognitive function to modify what they had said. When the teacher or the students notice a

mistake, they often look for a more accurate term or rephrase their sentence to enhance clarity. In these situations, fillers serve as indicators of self-correction. It allows the teacher and the students to assess their speech, pause briefly, and rework their statement without fully disengaging from the conversation. Fillers indicate the cognitive process involved in self-regulation and error correction during natural conversation (Levett, 1983).

Second, social function is related to their signalling involvement, affect, and interest. The teacher implemented several roles of social function, including involvement, affect, mitigating devices, and holding attention. They used fillers as engagement tools to sustain students' attention and participation in the interaction. Awang et al. (2022) stated that fillers are used to retain students' attention on the subject matter being discussed. It is also used to express their emotions and feelings (Gandeza, 2023)

Meanwhile, the students only implemented three of them, including involvement, mitigating devices, and holding attention. Filler is used to respond to the teacher's questions. Like the teacher, filler is used to actively engage in the interaction. Moreover, the students also employed mitigating fillers to soften their speech and reduce face-threatening acts. Baalen (2001) suggests that SFs can mitigate utterances to avoid hurting the listeners' emotions. She also points out that SFs function as a marker of solidarity or a politeness strategy.

Third, discourse regulatory function relates to how listeners validate the allocation of speaking and listening roles through their contextually suitable choices. It can be used to start, sustain, or end the utterance. For the teacher, fillers frequently function as opening markers indicating the start of an explanation or a transition to a different topic. They are also utilized to maintain speech flow, with fillers like "uh" or "um" allowing the teacher to retain the floor during extended talks, ensuring continuity while keeping students engaged. Furthermore, teachers might use fillers at the conclusion of a statement to signal the end of a segment and prepare for a change in participation. As Garcés-Conejos and Bou-Franch (2004) point out, fillers are not arbitrary interruptions but organized tools that govern discourse limits and the rhythm of interaction.

On the other hand, the students only used filler to open or to sustain the utterance. The students only had limited control in the learning because the teacher predominantly manages transitions and closings. A study conducted by Trillo (2002) illustrated that discourse markers and fillers function as "pragmatic noise," helping to preserve interactional coherence and indicate discourse boundaries. In educational settings, this implies that teachers utilize fillers to steer the direction of the lesson. At the same time, students depend on them to manage their speaking turns, frequently using uh or um to pause or prolong their input without relinquishing the floor.

In conclusion, the teacher and the students used fillers in the classroom interaction. The teacher used a high frequency of filler words rather than the students. They mostly used the lexicalized filler "okay". Meanwhile, the students mostly used the unlexicalized filler "e". In addition, there were three functions of fillers: cognitive function, social function, and discourse regulatory function. The teacher implemented cognitive function in online verbal thinking. Online verbal thinking was used when they called the students' names, found the issue in the learning process, explained about an accident, and answered several questions. They also used this function to modify the utterance they said previously. Next, social function was also used in the interaction. The teacher used this function as an involvement, affect, and mitigating device to hold attention. The students also employed mitigating fillers to soften their speech and reduce face-threatening acts. Lastly, the teacher and the students used discourse regulatory function in the interaction. The teacher used it as an opening marker, sustaining the utterance, and at the end of the utterance. However, the students used it as an opening marker and sustained the utterance.

CONCLUSION

Teacher and students used fillers in classroom interactions. The teacher used fillers with a higher frequency than the students. The filler most often used by teacher is the "okay" lexicalization type, while students are more dominant in using unlexicalized "e" fillers. In addition, the filler used has three main functions in speech, namely cognitive function, social function, and discourse regulating function. This research has several limitations. The study was conducted in only one class of informal online English courses with a limited number of participants, so the results could not be generalized to the wider EFL context. The analysis also focused only on verbal interactions that could be observed, without involving metacognitive reflection from teachers and students regarding the use of

fillers. However, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of fillers in informal EFL class discourse. Fillers not only reflect hesitation or discontinuity of speech but also serve as a strategic tool for managing cognitive load, building social relationships, and regulating communication flows. Teachers use fillers to maintain class dynamics, maintain student engagement, and make room for student responses. Meanwhile, students use fillers to organize the thought process, demonstrate politeness, and maintain participation in interactions. Further research can expand on this study by exploring the use of fillers in different learning modes (e.g., face-to-face or hybrid), language proficiency levels, and different cultural contexts. Integrating awareness of the use of fillers in speaking learning can also provide pedagogical insights to improve EFL students' fluency and interactional competence.

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