

Verbal Fillers in Oral Language Production of Grade 12 Students

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Abstract: The word fillers such *uh* and *umm* are at odds with the field of psycholinguistics, where these kinds of verbal fillers are studied for their communicative value. This current study demonstrates that *umm* and *uh* are the inevitable -- and potentially beneficial -- byproducts of the enormously complicated task of human speech. This current study explored the causes of filler words (such as nervousness, infrequent words, and divided attention leading to anxiety). More so, the researcher summarized the kinds of fillers in spoken interaction into three kinds of fillers, they are non-words fillers, such as *em*, *hmm*, *uh*, *um*, *etc*; phrase fillers such as *I mean*, *well*, *sort of*, *etc.*; and silent pauses. However, in this study the researcher focused on *non-words fillers and phrase fillers only*. Also, this paper specifically discussed one of the subcategories of the grammatical approach of Hamers & Blanc (2000), which is extra-sentential code-switching, where a common feature is to add a tag question. The overall findings of the study presented in this paper led to the conclusion that the most common kind of filler used by students during oral recitation are the non-words fillers, such as *um*, *uh*, *so*, *okay*, *etc.*, with the inclusion of Non-English verbal fillers (Filipino Word Fillers) such as *Ano o*, *Ano and Kuan o*, which were commonly uttered at the beginning of the sentence. Not using filler words or excessively using filler words can cause harm to a speaker's credibility in that the speaker can be seen as unprepared or inexperienced. Thus, confident speakers who know what they are saying can be measured by the substance of their answers or utterances and not the frequency of their use of verbal fillers.

Keywords: Speech disfluency, verbal fillers, non-word-fillers, phrase fillers, repetition and silent pauses.

1. Introduction

A. Background of the Study

Everyday casual conversation is peppered with hesitations, repetitions and sounds that you may not necessarily find in the dictionary and these linguistic phenomena often go unnoticed. The research conducted by Laserna, Yi-Tai Seih and Pennebaker's (2014), was on features of this kind, they focused on *uh* and *um* (filled pauses) and also on words and phrases such as *I mean*, *you know* and *like* (discourse markers), calling both together 'filler words'.

Filler words are words (and phrases) that are used to fill silence when speaking. They are words that do not add any real value to the sentence. They simply keep you going while you come up with the rest of your sentence. Their actual name is

"discourse markers," but they are much more commonly known as "filler words." When an individual cannot think of the right word to use in a sentence, one might say "*umm*", this gives him/her a break while thinking, without an awkward, silent pause. Since filler words do not really add any meaning to the sentence, one does not need to think about using them. Thus, leaving their brain free of thinking of other things—like the word one is trying to remember.

Many filler words actually have other meanings, so not every "like" is a filler word, for example. We can see a real example of this in the following conversation from the show "Community," when Pierce tries to stop Shirley from using filler words:

Shirley: Okay. These brownies are, uh—

Pierce: Uh!

Shirley: They, um—

Pierce: Um!

Shirley: These brownies are delicious. They taste like—

Pierce: Like!

Shirley: That's not a filler word.

One way to finish Shirley's sentence would be, "They taste like heaven." In this example, "like" is used to compare brownies to heaven, so it is not a filler word in this context.

In spoken interaction, people often produce *ee...*, *err...*, *ehm...*, or *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, *kind of*, and similar expressions. According to Baalen (2001), these kinds of utterances are called fillers. He defines fillers as sounds or words or phrases that could appear anywhere in the utterance and that could be deleted from the utterance without a change in content. On the other simple words, Yule (2006) defines fillers as a break in the flow of speech. Most people produce fillers in their spoken interaction. Here are some examples:

- 1) "What do you do to enjoy your free time? I mean on the weekend."
- 2) "Umm, you know I don't have much free time although at the weekend. Actually, I want to go to vacation."

It is rare to encounter an individual who does not resort to using filler words when rushed or unprepared when speaking. Filler words permeate our society in virtually all aspects of speech. Whether an individual is talking with a friend, attending a lecture, or listening to a public speech, he or she is likely to

hear some type of filler. A filler word, for the purposes of this current research study, is any word or sound that interpolates the main message of the speaker. Words such as *like, um, uh, or ya know* are considered filler words.

Repetition can also be considered a type of filler. Despite the various causes of these words, every interpolation has an impact on the credibility of the speaker and on the comprehension of the listener. For the purpose of this current study, the conversation will be focused on the causes that lead specifically to filler words being produced during oral recitations. These interpolations into language are caused by several different factors, however, as seen below, other aspects of communication may be affected by a speaker's use of filler words (e.g., perceived preparedness, effectiveness at public speaking, and, as will be examined in this paper, ease of communication during oral recitations).

The focus of this research is to analyze the commonly used verbal fillers of Grade 12 students in Ateneo de Zamboanga University, while answering questions using the English language during the oral recitation in their Research class. There are 10 (ten) questions in English prepared by the researcher, in connection to topics related to the subject Practical Research in the first semester of 2019-2020 academic year. The researcher only wants to observe the verbal fillers, which are common or appear in answering the questions and the reason for using such fillers verbally, aside from the reason that the feature of people's speech, such as pitch, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, vary not only at different gender, but also at different ages (Holmes, 1992).

2. Review of the Related Literature

In the Study *Exploring Filler Words and Their Impact* conducted by Duvall, Robbins, Graham, and Divett (n.d), they mentioned that the causes of various speech disfluencies in verbal speech have been documented by several researchers, as such, speech disfluency is anything that causes a break or an upset to normal—or fluent—speech. There are several types of speech disfluencies that exist in spoken languages today, including slips of the tongue, long pauses, false starts, and filler words.

Scholars have narrowed down the causes of filler words into three categories: divided attention, infrequent words, and nervousness. Each of these activities can cause an increase in verbal disfluency, thus resulting in filler words interrupting speech. When they are combined together, the frequency of filler words and the disfluency of the speaker exponentially increase (Oomen and Postma 2001).

Divided attention is caused when an individual is attempting to focus on multiple points of interest at one time. This may be manifest during speeches in which there is a distracting member of the audience or when something unplanned or unanticipated occurs. The speaker momentarily directs his or her attention from his or her speech, and often filler words creep in to occupy the void left by nonfluent speech. In their research, Oomen and Postma found that divided attention and distractions lead to a strong increase in filler words and other 38 pauses in task-based activities. The results of their study indicate that the number of

filler words used by participants drastically increases in situations where their attention is divided.

Infrequent Words Filler words also appear in speech when an individual uses words that he or she uses infrequently. In the *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, Dockrell et al. state that infrequent words are a major cause of the appearance of filler words. Infrequent words are simply words that we do not use on a daily basis and are therefore somewhat foreign to our mental dictionaries. Filler words, then, appear when someone is having difficulty processing a word. This means that a person's brain cannot locate a word, which will cause him or her to pause, frequently throwing *um* in its place until the word, or a synonymous word, is found and used in speech.

Both divided attention and infrequent word usage cause nervousness, which is another cause of filler word in speech. Once the speaker has become nervous, it becomes inconsequential whether or not these issues are overcome. Additionally, Goldwater, Jurafsky, and Manning found that infrequent words and speaking too quickly caused a higher production of filler words (2010). Infrequent words and speaking too quickly can occur as a result of nervousness if a speaker is required to employ infrequent words. Words that people would not normally say may come into speech when the speaker is nervous because the speaker's brain is occupied with thoughts about the listeners and their opinions rather than about which words to say. The same phenomenon happens when speaking too quickly; speakers want to stop speaking as soon as possible to get rid of the feeling of nervousness and speak quickly as a result.

In addition to the nervousness that comes from infrequent words, *glossophobia*—anxiety regarding public speaking—may occur. This fear is manifest in a form similar to the well-known idea of stage fright and can appear as a social anxiety disorder (Garcia et al. 2013). This anxiety has a direct impact on the speaking ability of the presenter and often leads to dysfunctional speech disorder. This disorder is often manifested as a quivering voice, (leading to repetitions), as well as vocalized pauses (leading to filler words). These repetitions and filler words lead to the decreased credibility of the speaker, which in turn may cause the audience to become more disinterested and thus further exacerbate the nervousness of the speaker.

Whatever the cause, scholars are split as to the positive and negative effects of these fillers on a speaker's credibility. While the majority of scholars agree that the credibility of the speaker decreases with the increase of filler words (Conrad et al. 2013), some scholars suggest that filler words positively affect credibility of the speaker (Villar et al. 2014). Yet still others believe that filler words have absolutely no effect on a speaker's credibility (Conrad et al. 2013).

Ultimately, the majority of scholars agree that the overuse of filler words ultimately negates speaker credibility. Frederick Conrad et al (2013), of the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, conducted a study wherein he recorded the successful acceptance rate of telemarketers' invitation to participate in a survey (2013). He recorded the telemarketers and examined

how frequently the telemarketers used filler words. He then compared that with the success rates and found that success rates drop in proportion to the number of filler words used, especially after the number of filler words per 100 words rises above 1.28%. When Caroline Kennedy was running for the New York Senate, she conducted a live interview in order to give herself a more personal edge. However, because of her extensive use of filler words, she lost much of her credibility. Reporters from numerous publications criticized her and claimed that her use of “*cringing verbal tics . . . showed her inexperience*” (Saul 2008).

There are some experts, however, that suggest filler words actually improve credibility of the speaker. Australian scholars Villar *et al.* (2014), studied the speech of a man who was convicted of murder and found 41 that when filler words were present in his speech, he was being honest. They found that when the man used filler words, more specifically the word *um*, he was considering what he would say next and, therefore, his speech was less rehearsed, much like what actually happens when we recall information when asked. They discovered that when he was lying, he used virtually no filler words. He had planned out in advance what to say before speaking in an effort to mask his lies. His filler words, though, actually added to his credibility in terms of honesty. As this case illustrates, in less formal situations, especially when judging honesty, filler words positively affect credibility.

In a similar study, Villar *et al.* (2014) asked people to voice either a truthful or non-truthful opinion about a given topic and then indicate whether or not they had been lying. According to the report, “results showed that instances of *um* were significantly more frequent and of longer acoustic duration during truth-telling than during lying”. Credibility of a speaker can be positively impacted by the use of filler words when in non-formal settings and when gauging honesty. As will be shown later, the more rehearsed speech is, the less likely filler words are to appear. Because it is more likely that someone who is lying has thought through his or her sentences more than someone who is not lying, it can be expected that the lying individual will have fewer filler words. It is important to note that this is only for impromptu inquiries, and not for prepared speeches. It would be more difficult to assert honesty by examining filler words in prepared speeches because in both cases, both the lying and the truth-telling individual could have prepared equally, therefore skewing the conclusions about honesty that filler words may have provided.

Some scholars prefer to take neither the positive nor the negative path and instead believe that filler words can have little to no impact on listeners in terms of speaker credibility if the amount of filler words is not overly saturated or if the listener is engaged in the content or style of the speech. In other words, if the use of filler words is not emphatic or easily noticeable, then credibility is affected very little. Frederick Conrad *et al.* (2013), in an attempt to specifically study the effect of filler words on speaker effectiveness, discovered that those who use filler words moderately are viewed as having the same level of eloquence as those who do not use filler words. Researchers at Longwood University similarly concluded that filler words

have no impact on perceived credibility of the speaker (Pytko and Reese, 2013).

Besides the discussion on whether or not credibility is affected by filler words, scholars also devote much attention to the impact (or lack thereof) on listener comprehension. Again, scholars are split in that some believe that filler words negatively affect listener comprehension, some believe they positively affect listener comprehension, and some believe the listener comprehension may not be affected at all in some cases. In most cases, if the listener is aware of a person’s use of filler words, he or she will often direct his or her attention from the content of the speech to the use of filler words, therefore negatively affecting the listener’s ability to comprehend what the speaker is actually saying. However, as noted above, some scholars disagree and suggest that when a listener becomes aware of the use of filler words, it may actually positively affect listener comprehension.

In Vocabulary Learning Lin (2013) findings indicate that code-switching seems to increase the amount of cognitive processing made by students. Lin suggests that a larger cognitive effort is required to process words when there is both an explanation in the students’ L2 and a translation into the students’ L1, which could mean that the students will learn new vocabulary more thoroughly. Whereas Lin’s study did not show that code-switching was more effective when learning new vocabulary, it did show that code-switching did not affect vocabulary learning in a negative way.

There are several functions of code-switching such as filling linguistic gaps, expressing ethnic identity and achieving particular discursive aims (Bullock & Toribio 2009). These different functions can be divided into two dominant approaches; the sociolinguistic approach and the grammatical approach (Auer 1998; Hamers & Blanc 2000). The grammatical approach can be divided into three subcategories (Hamers & Blanc 2000): **extra-sentential code-switching**, where a common feature is to add a tag question like in “Du kommer väl på torsdag, right?” (You will be coming on Thursday, right?); **intersentential code-switching** i.e., where the switch occurs at clause/sentence boundaries like in “I’ll start a sentence in English y termino en español” (I’ll start a sentence in English and finish it in Spanish); and **intrasentential code-switching**, which occurs within clauses or within words e.g. by adding a Swedish plural ending to a word that has been code-switched: “Hur mår kidsen?” (How are the kids?).

Generally, word fillers are not used when writing, but mostly are used when speaking out loud. When speaking out loud, though, one might need some extra time to figure out what to say, that is when he or she can use filler words. Sometimes people use certain filler words (“like,” “literally” or “believe me”) when writing online in website comments, chats or social media, since conversations online are very similar to spoken conversations. Filler words are used for a number of reasons (Geikhman, 2014):

1. **To show that you’re thinking.** Use filler words when you need to think about your answer or statement. For example:

“I have *basically*... ten more years of college.”

2. **To make a statement less harsh.** When your friend has some broccoli stuck between his teeth, you could just tell him, “You have something in your teeth,” but that might make him embarrassed. It might be nicer to say something more like:

“Well, you have, *um*, you have a little something in your teeth.”

3. **To make your statement weaker or stronger.** While filler words don’t add anything to sentences, they can be used to change the sentence *tone*—the attitude of the sentence. See how different these three statements sound:

“I think pugs are cute” is just a regular statement.

“*Actually*, I think pugs are cute” shows contrast—that someone else doesn’t agree.

“*At the end of the day*, I think pugs are cute” is something you might say as a conclusion to a discussion about pugs and their ugly (or cute!) wrinkles.

4. **To stall for time.** To stall for time means to do something to try and gain more time. Filler words are an excellent way to stall when you don’t know how to answer a question, or when you don’t want to. For example, if your teacher asks you “Where’s your homework?” your response might sound a bit like this:

“Uhh. Umm. Well, you see.. My dog ate it.”

5. **To include the listener in the conversation without ending your sentence.** A conversation takes at least two people. Some filler words and phrases can include the other person in the conversation. It’s a bit like reaching out to them as you’re speaking to keep their attention. For example:

“It was a really big bear, *you know?*”

This sentence includes the listener without ending your speaking turn. Your listener might nod in agreement, allowing you to continue telling him about your pet bear.

In addition, some of the most common filler words and phrases used in American English are as follows:

1. **Well** can be used in a few different ways. You can use it to show that you are thinking.

“*Well*, I guess \$20 is a good price for a pair of jeans.”

-You can also use it to put a pause in a sentence.

“*The apples and cinnamon go together like, well, apples and cinnamon.*”

-You can even use the word to *stall*.

“*Well... fine, you can borrow my car.*”

2. **Um/er/uh** are mostly used for hesitation, such as when you do not know the answer or do not want to answer.

“*Um, er, I uh thought the project was due tomorrow, not today.*”

-You can use any of the words at any time—they do not all have to go together.

“*Umm... I like the yellow dress better!*”

3. **Hmm** is a thoughtful sound, and it shows that you are thinking or trying to decide something.

“*Hmm, I like the pink bag but I think I’ll buy the black one instead.*”

4. **Like** is sometimes used to mean something is not

exact.

“*My neighbor has like ten dogs.*”

In the above example, the neighbor probably does not have exactly ten dogs. Rather, the neighbor has a lot of dogs.

Usually, though, the word is used when you need a moment to figure out the next word to use. “*My friend was like, completely ready to like kick me out of the car if I didn’t stop using the word ‘like’.*” Keep in mind that the word “like” as a filler is seen as a negative thing. The word is often overused by young females, and can make you sound like you’re not sure what you’re talking about.

5. Actually/Basically/Seriously are all adverbs—words that describe actions. Many adverbs (though not all of them) have an “-ly” at the end of the word, which makes it easier to recognize them. All these words can be used as fillers which change the strength of a statement.

For example, the word “actually” is used to point out something you think is true, when others might not agree: “*Actually, pugs are really cute!*”

“Basically” and “seriously” change the sentence in slightly different ways too. “Basically” is used when you are summarizing something, and “seriously” is used to show how strongly you take the statement.

“*Basically, the last Batman movie was seriously exciting!*”

Other adverbs that are often used as fillers are “**totally**,” “**literally**” and “**clearly**.”

- The word “**literally**” means “something that is true,” but many times in conversation it’s used with a different meaning: to state strong feelings. For example, you’re not just laughing you’re *literally* dying from laughter.
- “**Totally**” means “completely,” and is used to emphasize (show that you feel strongly) about something.
- The word “**clearly**” means the same as obviously, and is used to state something that is very obviously true.

These three words do not have to be used together either, but here they are in one sentence:

“*Clearly you totally didn’t see me, even though I was literally in front of your face.*”

6. **You see** is used to share a fact that you assume the listener does not know.

“*I was going to try the app, but you see, I ran out of space on my phone.*”

7. **You know** is used to share something that you assume the listener already knows.

“*We stayed at that hotel, you know, the one down the street from Times Square.*”

It can also be used instead of an explanation, in cases where we feel the listener just understands what you mean.

“*When the elevator went down, I got that weird feeling in my ears, you know?*”

8. **I mean** is used to clarify or emphasize how you feel about something.

“*I mean, he’s a great guy, I’m just not sure if he’s a good doctor.*”

It is also used to make corrections when you misspeak.

“The duck and the tiger were awesome but scary. I mean, the tiger was scary, not the duck.”

“The cave is two thousand—I mean—twenty thousand years old!”

9. You know what I mean? is used to make sure the listener is following what you are saying.

“I really like that girl, you know what I mean?”

10. At the end of the day is a phrase that means “in the end” or “in conclusion.”

“At the end of the day, we’re all just humans, and we all make mistakes.”

11. Believe me is a way of asking your listener to trust what you’re saying.

“Believe me, I didn’t want this tiny house, but it was the only one I could afford.”

It is also used to emphasize what you are about to say.

“Believe me, this is the cheapest, tiniest house ever!”

12. I guess/I suppose are used to show that you’re hesitant, or not really sure about what you’re saying.

“I was going to eat dinner at home, but I guess I can go eat at a restaurant instead.”

“I guess” is used more often in speech, but “I suppose” can sound classier (a bit smarter).

13. Or something is a sentence ending that means you’re not being exact.

“The cake uses two sticks of butter and ten eggs, or something like that.”

14. Okay/so are usually used to start sentences, and can be a sign that a new topic is starting.

“So what are you doing next weekend?”

They can also be used to introduce a summary.

“Okay, so we’re going to need to buy supplies for our trip this weekend.”

15. Right/mhm/uh huh are all affirmative responses—they all mean a “yes” response.

“Right, so let’s prepare a list of all the things we’ll need.”

“Uh huh, that’s exactly what he told me too.”

Some of these words and phrases can be hard to use correctly, since the meaning is so subtle and slight. When thinking of someone as being a fluent English speaker, one must be probably thinking that they speak perfectly without stopping. In reality, even native English speakers use filler words, and they use them often. These words are an important part of sounding natural when speaking English.

A speaker is allowed to pause and think, to be unsure of how to answer, or even to forget the right word to use. The trick is knowing the right filler words to use while putting thoughts together. More so, every language has its own set of filler words. Learning English filler words will help students sound more like a native speaker.

Like with anything else, overusing filler words (using too many, too often) can make a speaker sound unprofessional. Even worse, listeners can make it difficult to follow the speaker’s sentences. Some people think all filler words are bad, and should be used as little as possible. For an English learner, though, they can be a very helpful way to speak more fluently and confidently. It is still considered a good idea to use as few

filler words as possible in interviews and professional settings (Geikhman, n.d.).

3. Statement of the Problem

The focus of this research is to analyze the commonly used verbal fillers of Grade 12 students in Ateneo de Zamboanga University, while answering questions using the English language during the oral recitation in their Research class. This paper specifically aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent types of verbal fillers used by the Grade 12 ADZU-SHS students?

2. What are the common reasons of the Grade 12 ADZU-SHS students in using verbal fillers?

3. What position in a sentence (beginning, middle, end) do these verbal fillers commonly found?

4. Theoretical Perspective

According to Stenström (1994), a filler is lexically an empty item with uncertain discourse functions, except to fill a conversational gap. It means that filler commonly occurs to mark hesitation or to hold control of a conversation while the speaker thinks what to say next. In this current study, the researcher would like to examine the kinds of fillers and the frequencies of the fillers in English used by the Grade 12 students of the Ateneo de Zamboanga University, academic year 2019-2020.

Fillers in spoken interaction can be divided into two types (Rose, 1998). The first type is lexicalized fillers. Lexicalized fillers are fillers in the form of short phrases, such as *sort of*, *you know*, *if you see what I mean*, etc. Moreover, the second type of fillers, which is similar to the lexicalized fillers, is verbal fillers consist of *well*, *I mean*, *sort of*. Furthermore, one of the scholars mentioned that one type of the fillers is *like* (when it is not used as verb or preposition) and *well* (not in the initial position). The researcher summarized the kinds of fillers in spoken interaction into three kinds of fillers, they are **non-words fillers**, such as *em*, *hmm*, *uh*, *um*, etc.; **phrase fillers** such as *I mean*, *well*, *sort of*, etc; and **silent pauses**. However, in this study the researcher focused on non-words fillers and phrase fillers.

Consecutively, the amount of cognitive processing made by students in their utterances could also lead to the several functions brought about by code-switching such as filling linguistic gaps, expressing ethnic identity and achieving particular discursive aims (Bullock & Toribio 2009). These different functions can be divided into two dominant approaches; the sociolinguistic approach and the grammatical approach (Auer 1998; Hamers & Blanc 2000). The grammatical approach can be divided into three subcategories (Hamers & Blanc 2000): **extra-sentential code-switching**, where a common feature is to add a tag question like in “Du kommer väl på torsdag, right?” (You will be coming on Thursday, right?); **intersentential code-switching** i.e., where the switch occurs at clause/sentence boundaries like in “I’ll start a sentence in English y termino en español” (I’ll start a sentence in English and finish it in Spanish); and **intrasentential code-switching**,

which occurs within clauses or within words e.g. by adding a Swedish plural ending to a word that has been code-switched: “Hur mår kidsen?” (How are the kids?).

5. Conceptual Framework

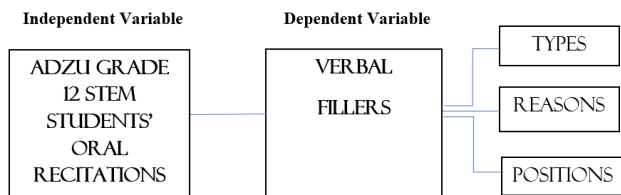


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of the study

The conceptual framework represents how the study was conducted. In the figure one presented above, the Independent Variable (IV) are the Grade 12 STEM AdZU Senior High School students, whereas the Dependent Variable (DV) are the word fillers commonly uttered- its types and common reasons as mentioned above by Rose, 1998, as well as the positions where it was commonly uttered in the sentence (beginning, middle, end) as mentioned by (Hammer and Blanc, 2000), specifically emphasizing the extra-sentential code-switching, where a common feature is to add a tag question in a sentence.

6. Significance of the Study

This paper can be regarded significant owing to the following reasons and the following individuals who can benefit from this research.

It may be beneficial for speakers to engage their listeners. By being aware of verbal fillers, they may be able to engage listeners in the content of the speech, the listeners then will less likely notice the use of filler words. Therefore, speakers may consider inviting their audience to take notes or personally internalize the information.

This may be impactful to the listeners, as there are a few techniques for improving comprehension when faced with an over-user of filler words. First and foremost, the most important thing is to strive not to become aware of a speaker's use of filler words. When a listener is unaware, filler words have little to no effect on the listener's comprehension. However, as soon as a listener becomes aware of this interpolation, his or her attention diverges from the content and comprehension will naturally decrease. Therefore, as listeners, they should strive to practice active listening by paying attention to the content of the speech as much as possible. Listeners should strive to get the main idea instead of listening to specific words (“active listening”). This will aid the listener in avoiding awareness of filler words, which will then strengthen their comprehension.

Also, this study may be relevant to the teachers (specifically language teachers). Being aware of speech disfunction, such as verbal fillers, they should help their students and ask them to practice - giving their speeches out loud in front of peers, when they will be speaking in public. This will help the speakers or their students to prepare because they will then feel confident and educated in whatever topic they are presenting on. Preparation will also eliminate the filled pauses as these speakers will already know what they should

say next.

This study will also be beneficial to students. Having this knowledge, students should relax a little bit, knowing that they are their own worst critics. In the article “Acoustic Characteristics of Public Speaking: Anxiety and Practice Effects” by Goberman *et al.* (n.d.), he noted that “the illusion of transparency [which is the illusion that the speaker thinks that the listener is perceiving their speech differently than they really do] occurs when a speaker thinks his or her anxiety is more noticeable to others than it really is.” Because of this illusion, students often become anxious, causing them to use more filler words. By adopting the mentality that listeners are not going to notice their anxiety, students can train themselves to ignore their own nervousness or forget it all together when conversing, such as during oral recitations, oratorical contests and the like. This will help also lessen the frequency of filler words when speaking.

In summary, this paper is significant to manifold related fields: theoretical linguistics (phonology), applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, language teaching, education, language preservation, *inter alia*. Ascribable to the fact that the paper places premium to a linguistic phenomenon, it is relevant to theoretical linguistics. The fact that this paper can be beneficial to teachers, it can be inferred that this paper is applied linguistics (specifically language teaching/education) relevant. It is obviously an aid to language awareness relative to dysfunctional words.

7. Scope and Delimitation

This current study aims to analyze how many verbal fillers were used by the Grade 12 Students of the Ateneo de Zamboanga University in the Academic Year 2019-2020 when they answer questions in English and if so, which function of fillers they tend to use and why. Only 5 Sections out of the 18 sections of the Grade 12 STEM strand were included in the study.

8. Definition of Terms

Filler words in this study are words (and phrases) that are used to fill silence when speaking. They are words that do not add any real value to the sentence. Baalen (2001), defines fillers as sounds or words or phrases that could appear anywhere in the utterance and that could be deleted from the utterance without a change in content.

Lexicalized fillers in this study is referred to as a type of verbal fillers that are in the form of short phrases, such as *sort of*, *you know*, *if you see what I mean*.

Repetition in this study is referred to as a disorder which is often manifested as a quivering voice, thus, can also be considered a type of filler.

Speech disfluency in this study is referred to as anything that causes a break or an upset to normal—or fluent—speech. This includes slips of the tongue, long pauses, false starts, and filler words.

Verbal fillers in this study is referred to as the verbal fillers which are consist of *well*, *I mean*, *sort of*.

9. Methodology

This chapter discussed the details of some steps that the researcher used in performing the analysis. The steps discussed in this chapter are the research design, data collection, and data analysis.

A. Research Design

This paper is descriptive-qualitative research with reliance on the description of the data analyzed. This research paper considered thick descriptions of the data imponderable to the characteristic inherent to qualitative research. Furthermore, this research is psycholinguistics in nature owing to the speech disfunction which is specifically verbal fillers, were examined in this paper.

This current study used descriptive qualitative approach since it intended to analyze more on words than numbers and the findings of this research were reported in the form of statement as Bogdan and Biklen (1982) say that the written word is very important in qualitative research to record data and disseminate the findings.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) as quoted by Kuntjara (2006) state that it is through the use of qualitative research we can uncover the process and its intricate details of the phenomena which are difficult to convey with quantitative methods. Kuntjara (2006) also quotes Silverman (2001) saying that the choice between different research methods should depend upon what the researcher is trying to find. In this paper, the descriptions were done in the analysis of the verbal fillers used by the respondents' responses during oral recitations and focused group discussion.

B. Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants in this study were the Grade 12 STEM students of the Senior High School Unit of the Ateneo de Zamboanga University. Out of the eighteen (18) sections in STEM strand, only the five (5) sections selected by the researcher were chosen as participants in this current study for the convenience of the researcher.

A simple random probability type of sampling through the use of fish bowl technique was utilized by the researcher during the conduct of the oral recitation, to give each student equal chances to participate. Out of the total population of one hundred eighty-one (181) students of the five (5) Grade 12 Stem strand sections, seventy (70) samples were randomly picked, with forty (40) males and thirty (30) females respectively.

C. Research Instruments

In order to analyze the types of the verbal fillers and its frequencies used by the Grade 12 students of ADZU, a **cellphone video recorder** was used to record the duration of the oral recitation during a one (1) hour class session of the five (5) sections in the subject Practical Research 2.

As the source of data, the researcher recorded the total seventy (70) students as they participated during the oral recitation and gave their honest answers in a natural setting. The researcher did an analysis based on the utterances and answers of the participants which contained verbal fillers. Moreover, the

recording process per section occurred about 30 - 50 minutes only, which means the researcher only recorded until the Ten (10) questions prepared were answered by the participants.

The researcher also prepared 5 questions for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide which was also conducted per section by the researcher. The randomly chosen participants who participated during the class oral recitation were asked as to why they think verbal fillers were uttered and happened during oral recitations.

D. Data Gathering Procedure

For the purpose of this current study, the researcher chose conveniently the five (5) sections of the Grade 12 STEM Strand of the Ateneo de Zamboanga University, of the academic year 2019-2020. These five sections namely: *STEM Badillo with thirty (30) students*; *STEM Boscovich with forty-two (42) students*; *STEM Clavius with thirty-seven (37) students*; *STEM DE Chardin with forty-two (42) students*; and *STEM Velarde with thirty (30) students* respectively, were the sections selected by the researcher in Practical Research 2 class.

Since the focus of this research is to analyze the use of verbal fillers among Grade 12 ADZU Stem students. The researcher scheduled a one (1) day oral recitation and prepared ten (10) questions related to the subject Practical Research 2 (*refer to Appendix A for questions*) in English, start with the easy to the difficult one. The students were informed that the oral recitation is part of the current study she is doing and asked for their consent to be part of it as participants.

During the one (1) hour session (60 mins) per class, a cellphone video recorder was prepared to capture the natural set-up of the class. The usual class routine was conducted at the start of the session and students were instructed to sit properly and prepare for the oral recitation. The fish bowl containing the student's names were placed on the table; once each name was picked a question was then given by the researcher. Each student was not time pressured but were instead allowed to answer on their own paced. Once a student cannot give a correct answer another name was called until the ten (10) prepared questions were answered appropriately.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also conducted per section by the researcher right after the class session. The randomly chosen participants who participated during the class oral recitation were involved in the FGD and were asked as to why they think verbal fillers were uttered and happened during oral recitations.

E. Data Analysis

A brief observation shows that there are a lot of verbal fillers such as *uh, umm, so, okay, well, etc.* are being used at the beginning of every sentence, for example: "*umm, RRL stands for review of Related Literature...*" However, the following data were gathered and analyzed:

Out of the one hundred eighty-one (181) participants, there were only a total of seventy (70) students who were randomly picked to answer the ten (10) questions prepared by the researchers, wherein forty (40) were male students and thirty (30) were female students.

To answer the first research question, the researcher reviewed the recorded conversation once again in order to get accurate data. After that, the researcher transcribed the students' responses and utterances. Then, the researcher coded down word by word as well as identified the verbal fillers and then counted how many times each verbal filler was uttered. Next, the researcher classified the verbal fillers by italicizing the word fillers and bolding the phrase fillers that occurred in the utterances. The researcher then analyzed the responses/utterances which contain lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. More so, the researcher summarized the kinds of fillers in spoken interaction into three kinds of fillers according to the perspective of (Rose, 1998), they are **non-words fillers**, such as *em, hmm, uh, um, etc*; **phrase fillers** such as *I mean, well, sort of, etc.*; and **silent pauses**. However, in this study the researcher focused on non-words fillers and phrase fillers only.

To answer the second research question, a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) Guide was conducted by the researcher to the identified participants who were chosen during the oral recitation, to know the common reasons why verbal fillers are uttered during oral recitation, following the perspective of (Geikhman, 2014), who stipulated in his study that word fillers are not used when writing, but mostly are used when speaking out loud. When speaking out loud, though, one might need some extra time to figure out what to say, that is when he or she can use filler words, thus verbal fillers are used for a number of reasons.

To answer the third research question, the researcher reviewed and analyzed the recorded conversation in order to get an accurate data of the three subcategories as mentioned by Hamers & Blanc, (2000), which are the extra-sentential code-switching, intersentential code-switching and intrasentential code-switching. After that, the researcher transcribed the students' responses and utterances. Then, the researcher counted how many times each verbal filler was uttered in each position (beginning, middle, and end) of each sentence.

10. Results and Discussion

A. Summary of Findings

The following tables below summarizes the findings of the data collected through the reviewed oral recitation using the cellphone video recorder:

Table 1
Common kinds of verbal fillers used, its frequency and percentage

Kinds of Verbal Filler	Verbal Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
Non-word Fillers	umm	69	99
	uh	68	99
	so	3	2.1
	okay	3	2.1
	basically	2	1.4
	like	2	1.4
Phrase Fillers	I mean	3	2.1
	I guess	1	0.7

As shown in Table 1, the most common non-words verbal fillers uttered by the Grade 12 STEM students of ADZU is

“umm” with a frequency count of 69 followed by “uh” with a frequency count of 68. Whereas, the verbal fillers “so” and “okay” have the same frequency of 3. On the other hand, verbal fillers “basically” and “like” were uttered twice respectively.

Table 2
Frequency of repetitions and pauses observed

Types of Verbal Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
Repetition	19	13.3
Pause	12	8.4

As shown in Table 2, there were other types of verbal fillers that were commonly uttered by the participants during the oral recitation. The two types of verbal fillers were **repetitions**, which is considered as another type of verbal filler and **silent pauses** which is another kind of verbal fillers, with a frequency count of 19 and 12 respectively.

Table 3
Non- English verbal fillers

Non-English Verbal Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
Ano o	9	6.3
Ano	4	2.8
Kuan o	2	1.4

Aside from the above-mentioned English verbal fillers, the researcher also observed non- English verbal fillers (*Filipino fillers*) that were commonly uttered by the Grade 12 STEM students during their oral recitations, as shown in the Table 3. These non-English verbal fillers were “Ano o” with a frequency count of 9; “Ano” with a frequency count of 4; and “Kuan o” with a frequency count of 2.

The researcher labelled “Ano o”, “Ano” and “Kuan o” as non-English verbal fillers because the students used them to fill silence when speaking. And since, they are words that do not add any real value to the sentence, but simply keep them going while they come up with the rest of their sentence - giving him/her a break while thinking, without an awkward, silent pause. Since filler words do not really add any meaning to the sentence, one does not need to think about using them. Thus, leaving their brain free of thinking of other things—like the word one is trying to remember.

Here, the researcher would explain further the results during the Focused Group Discussion (FGD) as to what the seventy (70) participants think about verbal fillers and why they think verbal fillers occur in their utterances:

Majority of the participants commonly answered that verbal fillers are part of their conversations and this are unavoidable, however, these verbal fillers normally gone unnoticed unless they are really conscious of these. Most of them answered that they are not even aware that this are called “verbal fillers” and that such phenomena exist. Although they know that such verbal fillers like “umm” and “uh” are commonly uttered, it is given less attention and importance by majority.

When asked what they think are the reasons why they utter these verbal fillers, such as in the following transcribed examples below, the participants' answers vary:

1. “umm the different research designs are umm descriptive research...”

2. “you as research **uh** can use probability **uh** sampling or **uh** nonprobability sampling...”
3. “**so** there are 3 types of research, **so** the first one qualitative research...”
4. “um **okay**, there are different types of sampling techniques, **okay** ah sampling techniques...”
5. “...there are so many questions...**basically**, research answers questions...”
6. “for me, **like** in my own words research answers questions...”
7. “to analyze...**I mean**, the solid data...”
8. “observation, analyzes, **I guess** umm can be conducted to gather data umm *I guess*...”

Most of the seventy (70) participants believe that verbal fillers occur when nervous and if one needs a moment to figure out the next word to use or when one needs to think about their answer or statement. The collated and summarized answers of the participants’ reasons as to what they think the causes and uses of verbal fillers in conversations are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Participants’ reasons of verbal fillers utterances

Reasons of uttering Verbal Fillers	Frequency	Percentage
Nervousness	70	100
Thinking Processing Time	70	100
Anxiety	60	86
Hesitations	60	86
Occupied thoughts	50	71
Doubt	50	71
Pauses	40	57
Self-Correction	40	57
Word Loss	40	57
Decision Making	40	57

The following transcribed examples below however, does not necessarily give a concrete and clear evidence as to what specific position in a sentence (beginning, middle, end) verbal fillers appear in a participant’s utterance. Evidently, each verbal filler may appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the sentence depending on how the participants process their thoughts. Thus, clearly emphasizing only one specific subcategory of Hamers & Blanc (2000) which is **extra-sentential code-switching**, where a common feature is to add a tag question like in “Du kommer väl på torsdag, right?” (You will be coming on Thursday, right?). Thus, the other two subcategories: intersentential code-switching and intrasentential code-switching are not properly supported by the results gathered.

1. “**umm** the different research designs are **umm** descriptive research...”
2. “you as research **uh** can use probability **uh** sampling or **uh** nonprobability sampling...”
3. “**so** there are 3 types of research, **so** the first one qualitative research...”
4. “um **okay**, there are different types of sampling techniques, **okay** ah sampling techniques...”
5. “...there are so many questions...**basically**, research answers questions...”
6. “for me, **like** in my own words research answers questions...”

7. “to analyze...**I mean**, the solid data...”

8. “observation, analyzes, **I guess** umm can be conducted to gather data umm *I guess*...”

11. Conclusion

Non-word fillers such as “**umm**” and “**uh**” were commonly uttered at the beginning of every utterance or sentence of the students, since mostly needed a moment to figure out the next word to use especially when one needs to think about their answer or statement. According to many psycholinguists, speakers who are searching for the next word, thought or idea are apt to fill pauses in their speech with an “**uh**” or “**umm**”. Other researchers suggest that speakers who focus on how they sound, rather than what they are saying, will likely use more “**uh**’s and **um**’s” -- thereby defeating well-meaning efforts to eliminate verbal fillers by drawing attention to them.

The overall findings presented in this current study led to the conclusion that these filler words are most often caused by nervousness, the use of infrequent words, and by divided attention leading to anxiety. When filler words occur, the comprehension of the listener can be jeopardized or limited, causing the speaker to further lose self-confidence. Verbal fillers might serve a useful purpose at oral recitation, and the delay signaled by verbal fillers is nothing more than “an indication that the speaker is thinking”, and this is nothing to be ashamed of.

In addition, it is not very likely that code-switching patterns or subcategories as mentioned by Hamers & Blanc (2000), specifically the intersentential code-switching and intrasentential code-switching the be analyzed in the oral production of verbal fillers among Grade 12 participants in this current research study due to limited and insufficient number of responses gathered. The researcher however, found it to be interesting to investigate further the amount of unintentional code-switching patterns among students in their English oral production. This could be done by an in-depth combination of classroom observations and interviews in future research study.

12. Recommendations

Students during oral recitations or in any form of speaking can take several actions to improve their ability to control their use of filler words. Several suggestions given by Goberman et al., in extreme cases of nervousness or public speaking phobias, is to see speech language pathologists who are experts in training people to speak at an average rate, to apply breathe support, and to use vocal inflections which help engage the listener. This will help students or speakers because they will then feel confident and educated in whatever topic they are presenting on.

As for pedagogical implication, teachers must give students preparation time to eliminate the filled pauses, as speakers will already be confident in what they should say next. On the other hand, students or speakers should also remember that listeners are not as harsh as they are made out to be. Having this knowledge, speakers should relax a little bit, knowing that they are their own worst critics.

For future researchers, they may also include in their future studies relevant to psycholinguistic field, the non-verbal communication specifically focusing on hand gestures and facial expressions of students during class recitations to shed light on the neuro-psychological activities of the brain, as well as the code-switching patterns among students in their English oral production.

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