

# Filled Pauses in Language Teaching: Why and How

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## Abstract

Filled pauses (e.g., *um*, *uh*, *er* in English) are well-known markers of several pragmatic functions including turn-taking and mitigation. Yet, in spite of this and their high frequency in spontaneous speech, they receive little explicit treatment in many language teaching materials. Building on a foundation of research from many disparate fields, I will make the argument that learners should receive explicit instruction about FPs and I will describe where in the language curriculum they might fit best.

First it is useful to dispel some myths about FPs. Contrary to popular wisdom, there is no evidence that FP use correlates with measures of intelligence. Furthermore, the use of silent pauses rather than than FPs is a more reliable predictor of such things as anxiety (Christenfeld, 1995) and deception (Benus et al., 2006). Rather, it appears that FPs—although frequent in everyday speech—go largely unnoticed by both speakers and hearers (Lickley, 1995).

FPs are produced and processed in an apparently automatic fashion and are taken by many pragmatics researchers as serving several possible functions. For instance, they can be used in the management of conversational turns (Sacks et al., 1974) and have been shown to be useful in preventing interruptions (Ball, 1975). Many discourse analysts also argue that they serve as a mitigating device when the speaker wishes to downplay their assertiveness (Eakins and Eakins, 1978), hide their lack of knowledge (Brennan and Williams, 1995), or otherwise preserve harmony with interlocutors.

FPs, however, form perceptual stumbling blocks for second language learners (Voss, 1979). In theory, this would interfere with their efforts to focus on form—argued to be an important factor in second language development (cf., Doughty and Williams, 1998). In addition to learning how to filter FPs in perception, learners also need to learn how to use FPs during processing. FPs have been shown to be useful in determining discourse boundaries (Swerts, 1998) as well as marking the discourse status (i.e., given or new) of entities (Arnold et al., 2004).

On the basis of the evidence, I argue that the phonological variants of FPs should be introduced early in the curriculum and learners should be given frequent exposure to them without expecting any facilitation from cross-linguistic transfer. Furthermore, I argue that FPs should be actively taught together with other meta-linguistic items that serve such pragmatic functions as discourse management.

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