

## Gap-Fillers Instruction and Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Speaking Performance

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**Abstract** – This study aimed at investigating the role of explicit instruction of some spoken features of English, say fillers, on improving learners' naturalistic and fluent speech. Nordquist (2015) defines filler as “A meaningless word, phrase, or sound that marks a pause or hesitation in speech, also known as a *pause filler* or *hesitation form*”. Some of the common filler words in English are *um, uh, er, ah, like, okay, right, and you know*. Gap-fillers may help speakers continue their conversation without long pauses or when they search for words. This study was conducted at Meshkat English Institute in Ahwaz during summer 2015. Sixty EFL (English as a Foreign Language) participants took a pre-test based on TOEFL speaking test and 40 subjects whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and assigned into control and experimental groups randomly. The teacher taught 20 different types of gap-fillers during 24 sessions to the experimental group explicitly whereas the control group exposed to the fillers implicitly. The outcomes of this study indicated that teaching gap-fillers did not significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' speaking performance and the null hypothesis was retained. Iranian learners prefer to fill gaps by frequent silence or to stutter some fillers like *uh* or *um* frequently. They claimed using fillers are more time-consuming.

**Keywords:** gap-fillers, speaking, fluency

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

To communicate English efficiently, EFL learners should develop their skills in writing, reading, speaking, and listening. However, many EFL learners pay more attention to speaking skill than other ones because people who know the language are referred to as “speakers” of that language. Meanwhile, fluent speaking provides speaker with several advantages such as efficient expression of one's thoughts, opinions and feelings as well as drawing the audience's attention to better understand his/her speech.

All languages have fillers. Fillers are unconscious devices that serve as a pause in the middle of sentences as the speakers gathers his or her thoughts, but wants to maintain the listener's attention. Fillers add nothing to the conversions, they just help speaker to think more and organize his speaking.

There are different opinions on the topic of fillers. Some linguists believe that gap-fillers are useful because they help learners think more and continue to their speech with more self-

confidence but they should not use fillers very much. Arrowood (2009) argues that filler words are okay in moderation; because there are no defined rules in the court we use fillers when we feel nervous or need a moment to shape our thoughts. It is normal to use fillers and their use does not reflect a lack of intelligence or education. However, other researchers believe speakers should not use fillers in their speeches because it shows their weakness. Fillers which have minimal grammatical or lexical value – have infiltrated daily conversation to such an extent that they threaten to further damage the beauty, power and effectiveness of verbal communication (Gosh, 2014).

Dziedzic (2011) says that nerves often exaggerate one's tendency to use filler words especially during times of high stress and uncertainty, slowly eliminating your usage of filler words will not only make you sound smarter, but it'll also make you more conscious of what it is that you're actually saying.

Feldman (2014) says "Everyone has filler words. One of mine is 'just.' I'm conscious of it because it was brought to my attention during a poetry workshop several years ago. Before that, I didn't even notice it. It was 'filler' in much the same way that everyone has their own version of a verbal pause. No one notices either the written or verbal pauses unless they're noticed or corrected by another." According to Feldman filler words can be almost any word, but ten of the more common ones include the following:

1. Just. "Just" isn't a required word most of the time; it's more often added to affect a version of "quite."
2. So. "So" is often used to describe the quality of something, i.e., "he was so late," but the word is incomplete without an explanation. If the explanation isn't required or shouldn't be given, the word "so" should not be used. The case is the same for the word "such."
3. Very. Like "so," "very" is used to describe the quality of something: "he was very late." The word doesn't really say much of anything and should be cut.
4. Really. "Really" functions like "very" and "so" and is another filler to guard against.
5. That. "That" often is a word used to connect phrases together but is rarely necessary. My advice with this particular word is to read the sentence aloud, once with the word and once without it. If the sentence makes sense without the word, cut it.
6. And then. These two words are used to show progression, but they're not needed. The story should be able to unfold on its own. If it can't, revisiting the plot is required, not the addition of "and then." This advice also applies to the words "and so."
7. But. "But" is a conjunction that joins phrases within a single sentence together. The word can be used to start a sentence – a use usually reserved for informal writing – but it isn't needed. The advice also applies to other conjunctions such as "and" and "yet" as well as words like "however."
8. Of. "Of" is a word not always required as in the case of "off of" and "outside of."

9. Some. “Some” is often used as an adverb meaning “somewhat” or as an adjective meaning “remarkable,” but it’s more correct to use the actual words than the colloquial “some.”
10. Like. “Like” may be more often heard when speaking, but it occasionally encroaches upon the written word.

Croucher (2009) found that college men and women used about the same numbers of Uhs and Ums. However, women used both *Like* and *You Know* a lot more than the men. He suggested this was due to a cultural influence from Southern California as humorously portrayed by Frank Zappa in the song, Valley Girl.

Jarret (2014) about links between use of speech fillers and personality claims use of discourse markers was more frequent among younger people, and among women versus men. However, the gender difference was only present in teen and student participants, and had disappeared from age 23 and up. Discourse markers were also used more frequently by people with a more conscientious personality. Uhs and ums became less common with age, but their use was not related to gender or personality.

Speaking skills are in serious decline in this country and elsewhere. As people develop a speech pattern over time -- and unless they make a concentrated effort to avoid them -- the filler words become normal, to the point that they do not even know they are using them (Fox, 2014). According to Gosh (2014), “Even prominent public figures use fillers quite often, sometimes excessively. Former President *Ronald Reagan* was widely mocked for frequently beginning replies to questions with the ever-popular filler *Well...*”

Chantim and Edelstein (2015) believe verbal fillers used when we feel nervous or need a moment to shape our thoughts. Avery (2014) stated “Any sound fills the space between two sentences or a new thought is unnecessary. You probably won’t be able to eliminate them entirely, as ‘people use fillers as little as 1.2 times per thousand words up to as many as 88 times per thousand words.’ However, you should count the number of times you hear your particular filler word during the recording and see how it deters from the message.”

## **2. METHODS**

In order to investigate the effect of teaching gap-fillers on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking performance and to analyze the data retrieved from the pre- and post-tests of the experimental and control groups, the researchers of this study used quantitative approach with experimental design. During 24 sessions the researchers gave treatment to the experimental group, but control group didn't receive any explicit instruction of the fillers. As an instrument the researchers used oral pre- and post-test based on TOEFL oral proficiency test. Then t-test was used to investigate whether there was any significance difference between control and experimental groups' performance.

## **2.1. Participants**

This study was conducted in southern city of Ahwaz, Iran. All subjects in this study were females. The age limit of the participants was between 20 and 28. The advantage of this age range was that the students' educational background would provide them with similar prior knowledge required for general English. The participants were at intermediate level of language proficiency. Sixty participants took a pretest, but 40 subjects whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. Subjects were randomly divided into two groups, one group received implicit while another one received explicit instruction of the gap-fillers.

## **2.2. Instruments**

The first instrument in this study was a pre-test based on TOEFL test of speaking. It was a face to face conversation which lasted between 10 or 15 minutes. The test began with asking general questions about their personal life, for example the examiner asked learners to confirm their identity, and talk about their jobs, family, and hobbies and so on. Then the examiner asked general questions on familiar topics such as home, family, work, studies and interests. Finally in part three, learners had a longer discussion on the topic. All the interviews were recorded. The second instrument was a post-test again using the same mentioned. Then the results of post-test were compared by independent t-test analysis.

## **2.3. Procedure**

To make homogenous groups, students were given a pre-test based on TOEFL oral proficiency interview. After obtaining the scores the average mean of the scores was calculated then subjects were divided into two groups, 20 subjects in each. The experimental and control groups were assigned the same materials and the teacher of both groups were the same also both groups were at the same place. However, techniques for teaching were different.

In this study, the researchers conducted the following stages: First, the teacher introduced gap-fillers and their application in the first session to the experimental group. Each session students learnt two fillers, after three sessions teacher asked students to speak to consider whether students use fillers or not. During the instruction students became familiar with 20 fillers, but the control group didn't learn any fillers. Finally, two groups were given post-test, again based on TOEFL speaking test. This project took place in 24 sessions, three days of the week in a period of about sixty days.

In order to find out whether teaching gap-fillers affected Iranian intermediate learners' speaking, the mean and standard deviation of the pre- and post-test scores were calculated then t-test analysis of the tests was run.

### 3. RESULTS

This study was based on the null hypothesis that stated “Teaching gap-fillers explicitly does not have any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking performance.”

The researchers used independent sample t-test because the aim of the hypothesis was to investigate the difference between two independent groups, control and experimental groups. Because the data of this study didn't reach to the quorum (30 members in each group) to identify the normality of the data in this study the K-S test was used because of high confidence.

**Table 1. The Normality of the Data**

		Experimental pre	Experimental post	Control Pre	Control Post
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	N	20	20	20	20
	Mean	17.80	21.40	18.15	20.40
	Std. Deviation	2.931	2.624	2.907	2.371
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.158	.140	.107	.173
	Positive	.158	.102	.104	.173
	Negative	-.112	-.140	-.107	-.164
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.705	.628	.480	.772
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.704	.825	.975	.591

Because the level of significance for all variables in the table 1 is higher than the alpha value ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) so the null hypothesis is retained it means the level of confidence is 95% and the distribution is normal.

**Table 2. Experimental and Control Groups' Post-test Results**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.187	.668	1.265	38	.214	1.00000	.79074	-.60076	2.60076
Equal variances not assumed			1.265	37.616	.214	1.00000	.79074	-.60130	2.60130

The outcomes in table 2 reveals that there is no significant difference between experimental and control groups' performance since the obtained level of significance ( $\text{sig}=0.214$ ) is higher than the critical alpha (.05). In other words, it can be concluded that with the 95% level of confidence there is no significant difference between two instructional methods in the control and experimental groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study was about the effect of teaching gap-fillers on Iranian intermediate learners' speaking performance. When the treatment was over both practical and statistical findings showed that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups' speaking skill.

According to the results of independent sample t-test in the table 2, the observed t of the control and experimental groups' posttest ( $t=1.265$ ) is less than critical t (2.021) so there was no significance difference between the scores obtained by participants on the experimental groups on the posttest and scores of the control group's posttest. Since the level of significance between experimental and control group was low enough at 0.05 level, the null hypothesis that stating teaching gap-fillers has no effect on Iranian intermediate learners' speaking retained.

Findings of this study rejected Robby's (2011) claim. According to Robby (ibid), every foreign language learners should be familiar with gap-fillers because it helps them to buy more time and think better to find their next word or sentences, but learners who took part in this study claimed they can think better without using fillers and they prefer to be silent and think to the next word that they want to say because if they want to use fillers they should spend a time to find an appropriate filler word after that again they should spend time to find their needed words or sentences, so using gap-fillers is more time consuming.

About using filler sounds, the findings of this study approved the most explicit claim that fillers serve as a communicative function, effectively as words in the speaker's vocabulary, comes from Clark and Fox Tree (2002), who argue that *um* and *uh* should be considered as integral to the information the speaker is trying to convey, although they do not add to the propositional content, or primary message. Instead, fillers are part of a collateral message, in which the speaker is commenting on her performance (Clark, 1994; 2002).

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This study started with this assumption that teaching gap-fillers would not affect Iranian intermediate learners' speaking. After nearly sixty days of applying instruction both statistical and practical results of the posttests of control and experimental group showed that teaching gap-fillers did not affect learners' speaking fluency, so the null hypothesis retained. Learners tended to be silent and think to find their next words instead of using filler words to save the time and think again for their next words.

Learners in experimental group mostly forgot to use fillers. They needed to think to remember them so it was more time-consuming for them to use filler words. They claimed using filler words disturb their concentration. Also in statistical analysis the mean of the scores of the control and experimental group in posttest and the results of the t-test in table 2 showed there was no significance difference between these groups' scores. The results of the study confirmed that teaching gap-fillers does not significantly improve learners' fluency in speaking. Meanwhile, the participants claimed that the application of fillers may result in slowing down their speaking fluency rate as well.

### 5.1. Recommendations

This study ignored the role of gender. All participants were female. For future studies this study suggests to investigate the role of gender on learning and using gap-fillers and its effect on the learners speaking skills because some scholars like Croucher (2009) believe that females use fillers more than males. Variables like participants' proficiency level, major, motivation, psychological type, attitude and so on not yet investigated among Iranian EFL learners which can serve as interesting areas for future research.

In this study only intermediate students participated. This study can be replicated to language learners at different proficiency levels for example advanced level to check what the findings will be. In this study learners were taught the instruction in a so called conventional way, teacher explained gap-fillers for experimental group then learners wrote gap-fillers as well as their meaning and application, then tried to use them in the class activities, but the effect of using videos or voices that contains gap-fillers in their conversations were ignored. In future studies the effect of these variables on learners' speaking can be investigated.

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