

FILLER USE IN EFL SPEAKING: A COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH CLUB INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Fillers are commonly regarded as indicators of speech disfluency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) communication; however, their strategic role in natural extracurricular speaking environments remains underexplored, particularly in cognitively demanding interactions such as debates. This study aims to investigate the types of fillers produced by EFL learners, examine their communicative functions, and explore students' perceptions of filler use during English Club activities. A descriptive qualitative design was employed involving 15 English Club members at a senior high school in Pekalongan, Indonesia. Data were collected through audio recordings, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed that students predominantly employed short lexical and unlexicalized fillers to maintain speech continuity, gain planning time, organize ideas, and manage real-time interaction, especially during debate sessions requiring higher cognitive processing. Interview data further indicated that students perceived fillers as useful strategies for sustaining fluency and reducing communication anxiety, although excessive use was considered detrimental to clarity and speaker credibility. This study contributes to the understanding of fillers as strategic components of communicative competence rather than mere signs of disfluency and highlights the pedagogical importance of fostering balanced filler use to support spontaneous speaking performance in EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Many learners experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and concern about peer judgment, which reduces their confidence in speaking (Tai & Chen, 2023; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). These psychological barriers are often accompanied by linguistic limitations such as restricted vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems. In addition, limited opportunities for authentic practice and the dominance of traditional lecture-based instruction further constrain

learners' speaking development (Chen & Hwang, 2020). As a result, EFL learners frequently struggle to maintain fluency during spontaneous communication, especially when they are required to express ideas in real time.

One common manifestation of these difficulties is the frequent occurrence of pauses in speech, which are linguistically realized as fillers. Fillers such as *uh*, *um*, *you know*, and *I mean* are prominent features of spontaneous spoken discourse. Traditionally, fillers have been viewed as indicators of disfluency or lack of proficiency. However, this perspective has been increasingly challenged. Early work by Rose (1998) suggests that filled pauses are natural and inevitable elements of spontaneous speech, reflecting ongoing cognitive processing rather than communicative failure. In this view, fillers function as signals that speakers are planning their next utterance, thereby helping to maintain the flow of interaction.

Further studies have demonstrated that fillers serve multiple communicative functions beyond hesitation. They can act as discourse organizers, markers of speaker attitude, and tools for managing interaction between speakers and listeners (Farahani & Ghane, 2022). In addition, fillers may appear in different positions within discourse at the beginning, middle, or end of utterances and can signal topic transitions or shifts in discourse structure (Böttcher & Zellers, 2024). These findings indicate that fillers are not merely signs of hesitation but also play an important role in structuring and maintaining spoken communication.

From the perspective of communicative competence, filler use is closely related to strategic competence, which refers to the ability to overcome communication difficulties and maintain interaction (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). In this context, fillers function as compensatory strategies that allow speakers to manage cognitive load, particularly when they experience lexical retrieval problems or difficulty formulating ideas (Dinkar et al., 2020; Fitriati & Lisa, 2019). Similarly, Celce-Murcia (2007) emphasizes that vocal fillers such as *uh* and *um* provide speakers with additional time to think and select appropriate linguistic forms. Fillers may also serve social functions, such as reducing anxiety and building rapport in communication (Myers et al., 2021). Thus, filler use reflects not only linguistic limitations but also adaptive strategies in real-time speech production.

In addition to strategic competence, fillers can also be understood as part of discourse competence, contributing to the cohesion and coherence of spoken interaction (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Lexical fillers such as *well*, *so*, and *you know* help speakers connect ideas and maintain conversational flow. At the same time, fillers can serve dual roles. On the one hand, excessive use may negatively affect perceptions of speaker competence; on the other hand, appropriate use can enhance fluency and facilitate communication (Fitriati et al., 2020). This duality highlights the need to examine filler use within its communicative context rather than viewing it solely as a deficiency.

Empirical studies across different EFL contexts have revealed variations in filler use influenced by cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, Öztürk & Durmuşoğlu Köse (2021) found that Turkish learners frequently used *I mean*, whereas British speakers preferred *you know*. Similarly, Huo (2023) reported that Chinese learners underused certain discourse markers such as *well* and *but*. These differences suggest that filler usage is shaped by both linguistic competence and sociocultural factors. Furthermore, specific fillers carry distinct communicative functions. For example, *I mean* is often used to clarify or reformulate ideas, while *you know* functions to seek listener understanding or engagement (Bušelić, 2019; Ibrohimova, 2025). Other fillers such as *ok*, *umm*, and *well* have been associated with managing nervousness, maintaining fluency, holding the conversational floor, and signaling transitions (Ali et al., 2023; Syamsudin et al., 2024; Indriyana et al., 2021).

Despite extensive research on fillers, most studies have been conducted in formal classroom settings or controlled speaking tasks, particularly at the university level. While these studies provide valuable insights into the types and communicative functions of fillers,

they may not fully capture how fillers operate as strategic communicative resources in more dynamic and authentic speaking environments. Consequently, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between filler use, communicative competence, and natural EFL interaction remains limited. In contrast, extracurricular settings such as English Clubs offer more natural opportunities for spontaneous communication. These environments encourage active participation, collaboration, and reduced anxiety, which can positively influence students' speaking confidence and fluency (Astrina, 2023; Fitriany et al., 2021; Hamadameen & Najim, 2020). Moreover, extracurricular activities have been shown to support students' social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as enhance their confidence and communication skills (Anjum, 2021; Buckley & Lee, 2021; Narkabilova & Khujamberdiyeva, 2021).

One prominent activity in English Clubs is debate, which requires students to produce spontaneous speech, construct arguments, and respond to opposing viewpoints in real time. Debate activities involve high cognitive demands, including organizing ideas, evaluating arguments, and managing interaction (Tur & Marín, 2015; Zahra, 2019). These conditions make debate a particularly relevant context for examining filler use, as students must balance fluency, accuracy, and strategic communication. Previous studies have shown that debate can enhance students' confidence, critical thinking, and communicative competence (Muktamir, 2020; Rangkuti et al., 2023). However, little is known about how fillers function within such cognitively demanding communicative tasks.

Therefore, by addressing this gap, the present study investigates the use of fillers in English Club activities, particularly in debate contexts, by focusing on three aspects: (1) the types of fillers used by students, (2) their communicative functions in spontaneous speech, and (3) students' perceptions of their use. By examining filler use in a naturalistic extracurricular setting, this study extends previous classroom-based research and provides a more comprehensive understanding of fillers as functional and strategic elements of EFL communication. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by enriching perspectives on spoken discourse and communicative competence, and practically, by informing more balanced approaches to teaching speaking that integrate fluency and accuracy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the types, communicative functions, and learners' perceptions of filler use in spoken discourse during English Club (EC) activities. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of linguistic phenomena within their natural context, with particular emphasis on participants' language use and meaning-making processes (Miles et al., 2020). Specifically, the descriptive qualitative design was chosen to provide a systematic and comprehensive account of how fillers are produced and function in authentic communication, without aiming to develop or test theoretical models (Dörnyei, 2007; Nassaji, 2015). Accordingly, this design is well suited to capturing naturally occurring speech and interpreting the cognitive and communicative significance of filler use in spontaneous EFL interaction.

Participants

This study involved 15 students who were members of the English Club extracurricular program at SMAN 1 Kedungwuni during the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants consisted of Grade X and XI students who had actively participated in English Club activities for at least one semester. They were selected through purposive sampling because they

regularly engaged in spontaneous English-speaking activities, making them information-rich participants relevant to the objectives of the study (Etikan et al., 2016).

The inclusion criteria required participants to have regular exposure to English-speaking practices and active involvement in communicative activities such as debates, storytelling, and role-playing. These activities provided opportunities for spontaneous speech production and generated authentic spoken data for analyzing filler use in natural interaction.

The participants' sustained involvement in English-speaking activities enabled the researcher to capture authentic speech patterns and examine the types, communicative functions, and contextual use of fillers in real communicative settings.

Instruments

Data in this study were collected using multiple instruments, including audio recordings, observation sheets, interview guides, and supporting documentation. The use of multiple instruments enabled comprehensive data collection and strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

Audio recordings served as the primary instrument to capture students' spoken discourse during English Club activities. This instrument was selected because it allows for accurate and detailed documentation of naturally occurring speech, including features such as pauses, intonation, and fillers (Mackey & Gass, 2022; Du Bois, 1991). Recordings were conducted during speaking activities, particularly discussions and debates, to ensure the authenticity of the data. Prior to data collection, recording equipment was prepared and tested to ensure functionality, following standard recording procedures (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2017). All recordings were conducted with participants' consent and were later transcribed verbatim using transcription conventions adapted from Du Bois (1991), enabling systematic identification and analysis of filler use.

Observation was conducted through naturalistic and non-participant techniques to capture authentic language use in its real context (Kraus, 2024). The researcher observed English Club sessions without intervening in the activities, ensuring that the data reflected natural communication. Observational data were documented using field notes and supported by audio recordings to enhance accuracy.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore students' perceptions of filler use, including their awareness, reasons, and attitudes (Ruslin et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted in either English or Indonesian, depending on participants' preferences, and each session lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. The interviews followed a structured protocol based on the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework (Montoya, 2016), which ensured alignment with research objectives and consistency in data collection. The protocol included stages such as developing inquiry-based questions, obtaining expert feedback, and piloting the instrument prior to implementation (Braaten et al., 2020). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

In addition, supporting documents such as activity schedules and lesson plans of the English Club were collected to provide contextual information about the implementation of extracurricular activities. These documents complemented the primary data and contributed to data triangulation, enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach adapted from Mezmir (2020), involving four interconnected stages: familiarization, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the familiarization stage, the researcher repeatedly listened to the audio recordings, transcribed the spoken data verbatim, and reviewed observation notes and interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' language use.

In the data reduction stage, the transcripts were coded to identify the types of fillers produced by students based on their linguistic forms (e.g., lexical and non-lexical fillers) and their communicative functions within the discourse. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories to facilitate thematic interpretation. Interview and observation data were analyzed concurrently to support the interpretation of filler use in different communicative contexts.

The organized data were subsequently presented in tables and thematic descriptions to illustrate the frequency, functions, and contextual use of fillers during English Club activities. Representative excerpts from the transcripts were selected to support each category and provide authentic examples of students' spoken discourse.

Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns across the data and relating the findings to the research questions and the theoretical perspectives on filler use and communicative competence. Data interpretation was strengthened through triangulation across audio recordings, observations, interviews, and supporting documents to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of data collected during English Club speaking activities. The findings are organized to address the research questions, focusing on three main aspects: the types of fillers used by students, the communicative functions of these fillers during speaking activities, and students' perceptions of their filler use.

The results are presented in three subsections. The first subsection discusses the types of fillers produced by students during English Club activities. The second subsection examines the communicative functions of these fillers in spoken interaction. The third subsection explores students' perceptions of their use of fillers in English Club speaking activities.

1. Types of Fillers Used in English Club Activities

The first research question aimed to identify and classify the types of fillers produced by students during English Club speaking activities. The findings indicate that filler use is a natural feature of spoken language rather than a sign of speech impairment. Students employed fillers as part of their language production strategy to regulate speech flow, gain time for cognitive processing, and organize ideas during spontaneous communication in English.

The analysis of five observation meetings revealed a total of 936 filler occurrences, consisting of short lexical fillers (456), long lexical fillers (52), short unlexicalized fillers (377), and long unlexicalized fillers (50). Overall, short lexical fillers were the most frequently used, followed by short unlexicalized fillers. This distribution suggests that students actively rely on both linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to maintain fluency while managing cognitive demands during speech production. The detailed frequency of filler use across meetings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Recapitulation of filler students used in meetings 1-5

Meeting	Short Lexical Fillers	Long Lexical Filler	Short Unlexicalized Fillers	Long Unlexicalized Fillers	Total
Meeting 1	85	7	45	7	144
Meeting 2	63	3	110	18	194
Meeting 3	106	5	77	6	194
Meeting 4	99	1	88	5	193
Meeting 5	103	36	57	14	210
Total	456	52	377	50	936

The dominance of short lexical fillers indicates that students do not merely pause during speech but actively organize their discourse. Expressions such as *I think*, *like*, and *yeah* function as pragmatic markers that help speakers structure ideas and maintain conversational continuity. For instance, in the utterance “*I think it is kind of like a fairy tale... wood and bamboo, I think*,” the filler *I think* serves a dual function: it initiates the speaker’s thought process and, when repeated at the end, allows additional time for idea formulation while maintaining the flow of speech. Similarly, in the statement “*my opponent, who I think would totally pass 100%, suddenly did not perform well*,” the insertion of *I think* enables the speaker to construct a complex idea without interrupting fluency.

The filler *like* also plays a significant role in structuring explanations. In the utterance “*should take their phone for a time, like when the teacher is teaching...*,” the use of *like* signals elaboration and clarification. Likewise, repeated use of *like* in expressions such as “*like a bad situation is like...*” indicates an ongoing planning process, allowing students to organize their explanations step by step while maintaining continuity in speech.

In addition, the filler *yeah* functions not only as a hesitation device but also as an interpersonal and discourse marker. For example, in the utterance “*Yeah, chance to upgrade next level*,” *yeah* signals agreement and serves as a turn-opening strategy, giving the speaker time to formulate the next idea. In longer utterances, such as “*but, yeah, the camera was on...*,” the filler helps maintain continuity and smooth transitions between ideas. It also functions as a connector that links personal opinions with supporting reasons, contributing to the overall coherence of the discourse.

On the other hand, unlexicalized fillers such as *uh* and *um* were also frequently observed, particularly during more cognitively demanding tasks. A notable increase in these fillers occurred during the second meeting, suggesting a higher cognitive load. For instance, in the utterance “*until uh break... when break is... eh...*,” the fillers indicate hesitation and ongoing lexical search. Similarly, repeated use of *uh* in longer utterances reflects the speaker’s effort to organize multiple ideas while maintaining speech flow. These fillers function as hesitation markers that allow students to plan their utterances, retrieve vocabulary, and manage complex explanations.

Further evidence of this can be seen in utterances such as “*Uhm okay, well I guess my opinion is...*,” where fillers like *uh* signal hesitation, while *okay* marks the transition from planning to expressing an opinion. This pattern reflects real-time cognitive processing, where speakers engage in word search and self-repair while maintaining interaction.

Moreover, the findings indicate that filler use tends to increase in more complex speaking tasks. During the fifth meeting, which involved a more demanding discussion topic, the frequency of fillers rose significantly. For example, in the utterance “*Okay, it is like, yeah, cheating...*,” multiple fillers are used to initiate speech, introduce explanations, and maintain fluency. This pattern suggests that task complexity influences filler use, as students require additional cognitive effort to formulate arguments, organize ideas, and respond spontaneously.

The findings indicate that filler use was closely associated with moments when students organized ideas, retrieved vocabulary, and maintained speech continuity during spontaneous communication. Lexical fillers such as *I think*, *like*, and *yeah* were frequently used to introduce ideas, organize arguments, and sustain interaction, whereas unlexicalized fillers such as *uh* and *um* appeared more often during hesitation and planning moments.

The dominance of lexical fillers suggests that students employed familiar expressions to maintain the flow of communication while speaking spontaneously in English. These fillers frequently occurred when students were introducing opinions, elaborating arguments, or responding to peers, indicating their role in supporting ongoing interaction during English Club activities.

The findings also show that filler frequency varied across speaking tasks. More cognitively demanding activities, particularly debate sessions, were characterized by a higher occurrence of unlexicalized fillers, suggesting that students relied more frequently on fillers when producing spontaneous responses under greater communicative demands.

2. Communicative Functions of Fillers in English Club Speaking Activities

The second research question examined the communicative functions of fillers used by students during English Club speaking activities. The findings indicate that fillers are not merely indicators of disfluency but serve as functional and strategic elements in spoken interaction. In this study, fillers function as communicative tools that help students manage cognitive processing, maintain their speaking turns, and structure their discourse during spontaneous communication.

Analysis of the data identified three main communicative functions of fillers consistently observed across the five meetings: (1) stalling devices, (2) discourse organizers, and (3) framing devices. These functions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Recapitulation of the communicative function of the filler

The Communicative Function of Fillers	The Explanation	The Example of Filler
Stalling Device	This function is the most frequently occurring and dominant in all meetings (Meetings 1-5). It is utilized by students who are cognitively overloaded, processing their thoughts, selecting appropriate English words, or constructing their next sentence structure without losing their speaking turns.	<i>Uh, um, uhm, mm, mhm, hmm, eh, oh</i> (Unlexicalized Fillers)
Organize The Flow	Present throughout the meeting. It helps create a smooth flow of dialogue, make logical connections between arguments, give examples, and demonstrate engagement with other speakers.	<i>Like, yeah, okay, well, so, maybe, and, but</i> (Lexicalized Fillers)
Framing Device	Found throughout the meeting. Used to mark discourse boundaries, such as initiating a new idea, positioning an answer as an opinion, clarifying, or making self-corrections.	<i>I think, I mean, what is it, you know, in my opinion, for example</i> (Lexicalized Fillers/Phrases)

The most dominant function identified was the use of fillers as stalling devices. Non-lexicalized fillers such as *uh*, *um*, *mm*, and *eh* were frequently used when students experienced cognitive load, particularly during idea formulation and lexical retrieval. These fillers allowed students to maintain their speaking turns while planning their next utterances. Rather than indicating communication failure, such filled pauses reflect ongoing cognitive

processing, supporting the view that hesitation is a natural component of spontaneous speech. In this context, stalling functions as a compensatory strategy that enables learners to sustain interaction despite linguistic limitations.

In addition to stalling, fillers also functioned as discourse organizers. Lexicalized fillers such as *like*, *yeah*, *okay*, *well*, and *so* were used to structure the flow of communication. These expressions helped students connect ideas, introduce examples, and maintain coherence in their arguments. Their use also facilitated interaction by signaling engagement and guiding listeners through the progression of ideas. This function highlights the role of fillers in maintaining discourse continuity rather than merely filling pauses.

Furthermore, fillers were used as framing devices to structure and clarify meaning. Phrases such as *I think*, *I mean*, and *in my opinion* were commonly employed to mark the beginning of an idea, express personal stance, or reformulate previous statements. These fillers functioned as boundary markers in discourse, indicating transitions between ideas and helping speakers organize their arguments more systematically. Their use suggests that students demonstrate emerging communicative awareness by intentionally structuring their speech.

A notable pattern observed in this study is the relationship between filler type and communicative function. Unlexicalized fillers were predominantly associated with stalling functions, reflecting their role in managing cognitive load. In contrast, lexicalized fillers were more frequently used for organizing and framing discourse, indicating a more advanced level of strategic language use. This distinction suggests that students are gradually developing the ability to use different types of fillers for specific communicative purposes.

Furthermore, the distinction between lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers reflects different levels of communicative control. Unlexicalized fillers such as *uh* and *um* were strongly associated with hesitation and online processing difficulties, while lexicalized fillers such as *I think*, *well*, and *like* were more interactional and discourse-oriented. This difference suggests that some students had begun to use fillers strategically rather than unconsciously, demonstrating emerging awareness of how spoken discourse is organized in natural communication.

The findings indicate that filler use among students was systematic rather than random and served multiple communicative functions during spontaneous interaction. Both lexical and unlexicalized fillers were used to maintain speech continuity, organize discourse, and support ongoing communication in English Club activities.

3. Students' Perceptions of Their Use of Fillers in English Club Activities

The third research question explored students' perceptions of their use of fillers during English Club speaking activities. The findings reveal that students hold both positive and negative views toward filler use, indicating an emerging awareness of their communicative roles as well as their potential drawbacks.

In terms of awareness, most students reported limited or delayed recognition of their filler use. They generally became aware of using fillers only after speaking, suggesting that filler production operates largely at a subconscious level. For example, one student noted that awareness occurred only after the utterance had been produced, while others described filler use as a natural reflex during moments of hesitation. Some participants also reported fluctuating awareness, particularly when they were focused on retrieving vocabulary or constructing sentences. Moreover, although students recognized common forms such as *um* and *uh*, many were initially unfamiliar with the term fillers until they engaged in transcript analysis. This indicates that their awareness was primarily experiential rather than metalinguistic.

Regarding the reasons for using fillers, three main factors were identified: cognitive, psychological, and stylistic. From a cognitive perspective, fillers were used to support mental processing, particularly when students translated ideas from Indonesian into English or searched for appropriate vocabulary. Psychologically, fillers were associated with nervousness and the pressure of speaking spontaneously. Stylistically, some fillers such as *yeah* and *like* were used intentionally to maintain conversational flow or engage listeners. These findings suggest that filler use reflects both internal processing demands and interactional strategies.

Students also perceived fillers as having both beneficial and detrimental effects on communication. On the positive side, fillers were viewed as time-buying devices that help prevent silence and support fluency. Several students reported that using fillers increased their confidence by allowing them to continue speaking while thinking. However, excessive use of fillers was perceived negatively, as it could reduce clarity, signal hesitation, and affect the speaker's confidence. Some participants preferred intentional pauses over fillers, considering them more effective in maintaining a confident speaking style.

From a social perspective, students' perceptions of fillers were closely related to judgments about speaker competence. Overuse of fillers was often associated with lack of preparation, limited mastery of the topic, or nervousness. Such perceptions were believed to negatively influence listeners' comprehension and reduce the speaker's credibility. Interestingly, students tended to evaluate their peers more critically than teachers, whose use of fillers was considered more acceptable. This suggests that social context plays a role in how filler use is interpreted.

Finally, reflective activities based on transcript analysis contributed to increased student awareness of their filler use. Through this process, students recognized the frequency and variety of fillers they used, including forms such as *um*, *so*, and *like*. This reflection led to greater metalinguistic awareness and self-monitoring, as students began to understand that while fillers are a natural part of spoken language, their use should be controlled to enhance clarity and effectiveness.

The findings also indicate that filler use in extracurricular English Club activities differs from filler use commonly reported in formal classroom settings. In the English Club context, communication was more spontaneous, interactive, and less teacher-controlled, which encouraged students to prioritize maintaining interactional flow over grammatical accuracy. As a result, fillers became important resources for sustaining participation and managing speaking anxiety during peer interaction. This highlights the significance of natural communicative environments in developing learners' pragmatic and strategic speaking abilities.

Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of filler use in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking by integrating three key dimensions: types of fillers, their communicative functions, and students' perceptions. Rather than treating these aspects separately, the findings reveal that filler use represents a unified phenomenon shaped by cognitive processing, communicative needs, and psychological factors within spontaneous speech.

From a cognitive perspective, the frequent use of both lexicalized fillers (e.g., *I think*, *like*, *well*) and unlexicalized fillers (e.g., *uh*, *um*) reflects the real-time demands of second language production. Students rely on these forms as they construct meaning, retrieve vocabulary, and organize grammatical structures under time pressure. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that filled pauses are closely linked to cognitive load and speech planning processes (Dinkar et al., 2020; Rose, 1998). The variation in filler types

across speaking tasks further supports this interpretation. More complex and cognitively demanding activities, such as debate, triggered higher use of unlexicalized fillers, indicating increased processing difficulty. In contrast, less demanding tasks allowed greater use of lexical fillers, which function not only as pauses but also as tools for shaping discourse. This pattern demonstrates that filler use is adaptive and sensitive to task complexity, reinforcing the view that disfluency features can reflect active cognitive engagement rather than linguistic deficiency.

Beyond cognition, fillers play a crucial role in facilitating communication and structuring discourse. Rather than functioning as random pauses, fillers appear to support learners' management of spontaneous interaction by helping them maintain conversational continuity and organize meaning in real time. Stalling functions, primarily realized through unlexicalized fillers, allow speakers to maintain their speaking turn while planning upcoming utterances. This supports the argument that hesitation phenomena are integral to fluent speech production rather than interruptions of it (Chatziagapi et al., 2022). At the same time, lexical fillers such as *like*, *so*, and *well* contribute to discourse organization by linking ideas, introducing examples, and maintaining coherence. These findings are consistent with discourse-based perspectives that view fillers as markers of interactional management and coherence (Farahani & Ghane, 2022).

Moreover, the use of framing expressions such as *I think* and *in my opinion* indicates that students are not only managing linguistic form but also structuring meaning and expressing stance. This reflects the development of discourse competence, as learners begin to organize their speech in ways that are meaningful and accessible to listeners (Celce-Murcia, 2007). This distinction suggests that learners are beginning to differentiate their use of fillers according to communicative demands, reflecting the gradual development of strategic and discourse competence. This distinction suggests that learners are gradually developing strategic competence, using different linguistic resources to achieve specific communicative goals.

In addition to cognitive and communicative dimensions, filler use is also shaped by psychological and social factors. The largely subconscious nature of filler production indicates that fillers emerge automatically during moments of linguistic pressure, especially when learners experience difficulty maintaining fluency. This supports previous findings that fillers emerge during lexical search and problem-solving processes in speech (Seals & Coppock, 2022). Psychological factors such as anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence were also identified as key triggers. These findings align with broader research on EFL speaking anxiety, which highlights the impact of affective factors on speech production (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021).

Importantly, students demonstrated a dual perception of fillers. This dual perception highlights the paradoxical role of fillers in EFL communication: while they support fluency and interactional continuity, excessive reliance on them may undermine perceptions of confidence and communicative effectiveness. This tension reflects the complex role of fillers in communication, where they simultaneously support and challenge effective speech. Similar findings have been reported in studies emphasizing that fillers can function as both facilitators of interaction and markers of disfluency, depending on their frequency and context (Fitriati et al., 2020).

From a social perspective, students' evaluations of filler use were closely linked to perceptions of speaker competence. Overuse of fillers was often associated with nervousness or insufficient mastery of the topic, which may negatively influence listener comprehension and credibility. Interestingly, students were more tolerant of filler use by teachers than by peers, suggesting that social roles and expectations shape how fillers are interpreted in

interaction. This highlights the importance of considering not only linguistic but also social dimensions of spoken communication.

A significant contribution of this study lies in the role of reflective practice in enhancing students' awareness of filler use. Through transcript analysis and reflection, students developed greater metalinguistic awareness and began to recognize patterns in their own speech. This finding supports the view that awareness-raising activities can promote self-regulation and improve speaking performance. Rather than eliminating fillers entirely, learners can be guided to use them strategically, balancing fluency with clarity.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that EFL instruction should adopt a more balanced perspective toward filler use. Rather than treating fillers solely as speaking errors, teachers can use them as indicators of learners' real-time cognitive and communicative processing. Speaking activities should therefore help students develop greater awareness of filler use, encouraging strategic use while reducing excessive reliance that may affect clarity and confidence. In addition, interactive environments such as English Club activities can support the development of spontaneous speaking ability by providing opportunities for authentic communication and meaningful peer interaction.

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of fluency in EFL communication by demonstrating that fillers function not merely as signs of disfluency but as adaptive resources that support spontaneous interaction in natural speaking contexts. Fillers function as essential tools that enable learners to sustain interaction, organize discourse, and manage real-time language production. Therefore, a balanced perspective is needed, one that recognizes fillers as both necessary and controllable elements of effective communication. This integrated understanding contributes to a more nuanced view of fluency and offers practical insights for improving speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the types, communicative functions, and students' perceptions of filler use in English Club speaking activities, particularly within spontaneous and interactive contexts such as debates. The findings suggest that fillers are not merely indicators of disfluency but systematic and adaptive features of spoken language that reflect learners' cognitive processing and communicative needs.

Both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers were widely used by students, with their occurrence varying according to task complexity and communicative demands. Functionally, fillers served as stalling devices, discourse organizers, and framing devices that enabled learners to manage processing time, organize ideas, maintain interaction, and express stance during spontaneous communication. Students also perceived fillers in both positive and negative ways, recognizing their role in maintaining fluency and reducing anxiety while acknowledging that excessive use may affect clarity and speaker credibility. These findings highlight the importance of viewing fillers as communicative resources that support real-time language production rather than merely as markers of hesitation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of filler use by emphasizing its cognitive, communicative, and psychological dimensions within naturalistic EFL speaking environments. Practically, the findings suggest that language instruction should guide learners to use fillers strategically and appropriately rather than eliminate them entirely, while interactive settings such as English Club activities can facilitate the development of communicative competence and spontaneous speaking ability. Despite these contributions, this study was limited to a specific extracurricular context with a relatively small number of participants. Future research is recommended to examine filler use across different educational settings, proficiency levels, and communicative tasks to provide a broader understanding of this phenomenon.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was voluntary. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with clear information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information and informed that all data collected would be used solely for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data generated and analyzed in this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant privacy and confidentiality. Restricting public access ensures compliance with ethical research principles and applicable data protection regulations. Nevertheless, the dataset may be made available to qualified researchers upon reasonable request for verification or further analysis. Any such request will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis and will require prior approval from the appropriate institutional ethics authority.

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