

# Use of Linguistic Fillers: University Teachers' Experience

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**Abstract** – Proficiency in the English Language enables us to communicate effectively in the workplace; however, disfluencies and linguistic fillers are inevitable. Linguistic fillers are words or phrases uttered to fill in gaps during a conversation. Utilizing a descriptive-qualitative research design, the study identified and analyzed the linguistic fillers used by 18 university teachers who handle General Education courses with English as a medium of instruction. It specifically determined the types of linguistic fillers used by the college teachers and their reasons for using these. The researcher gathered data through classroom interaction recordings, survey questionnaires, and in-depth interviews (IDI), which were analysed using Kolars' (2010) and Cappelli's (2009) typology of linguistic fillers and employing ranks, frequency counts, percentages, and weighted means. Findings showed that college teachers use discourse markers (DM), filled pauses, explicit editing terms, and asides/parentheticals. The most frequently used DMs are okay, so, and now; filled pauses are ahh, uhh, and ohh; explicit editing terms are: or, I am sorry, and rather. Further, the college teachers strongly agree that they use fillers to emphasize a point and indicate the beginning of a new topic. They agree that they use fillers to give a response, to express their ideas more comfortably, and to show they are listening.

**Keywords:** Linguistic fillers, disfluencies, English language

## 1. Introduction

Proficiency and mastering macro skills of students open opportunities in the workplace after graduation and not only inside the classroom. Hence, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) prioritizes the aim to develop these skills to obtain proficiency in communication to be used in the global community. Thus, teachers formulate challenging lessons and activities with the objective of developing communication.

Lazaraton (2006) claims that speaking is the most challenging and demanding among language arts skills because it requires the integration of numerous subsystems, this means, various demands are in place at once. These include monitoring and understanding the other speaker/s, thinking about one's contribution, producing the same contribution that was given, monitoring its effect, and so on. She further stressed that what makes spoken English difficult is that it is always accomplished through spontaneous interaction. Thus, speakers have difficulty in coping with all of its coinciding demands.

The Philippines is known as one of the largest English-speaking nations recognized globally, having an estimation of two-thirds of its population capable of some degree of fluency in the language (Cabigon, 2015). Spoken in schools during job interviews, and in office communications, it is one of the official languages used in the government agencies with Filipino being the other. Thus, there is a tendency among the general population to consider English as a symbol of arising social and economic versatility and flexibility.

Following global trends on English used in the professional and academic context, there have been many pedagogical changes in teaching the second language attempting to discover more suitable approach and aligning language curriculum. Thus, this reflects the desires of Filipinos to improve their proficiency in the use of English language.

On the other hand, Filipinos, as learners of a second language, experience various problems

alongside the process. One of the problems that learners face is disfluency, considering that for most Filipinos, they learn English as a second language. It is further observed that while students are reciting in classroom settings, there is a presence of *um* or *uh*. They would end up filling gaps using *you know*, *well*, *I think*, especially when learners are still processing what they would like to express or when they cannot find words to use. In some scenarios, they either stutter, pause, or do self-corrections.

Teachers are not an exemption to this phenomenon. To get the attention of the students, they tend to say *excuse me* or, most of the time, use *I am sorry* to imply a mistake. While for others, the use of *anyway* or *now* is an indication of topic changing or controlling.

Only a very few can speak fluently using expressive and meaningful words without hesitation or slip. This is corroborated by Khojastehrad (2012) in both the case of a second language learner and a second language teacher. He added that impetuous speech naturally includes what they called linguistic or conversational fillers; pauses, hesitations, *err* words, shortened words, repetition, prolonged sounds, and repairs, or it is what they called linguistic or conversational fillers.

These have become a usual occurrence in Philippine classrooms. Teachers use these fillers to initiate concepts, choose a suitable vocabulary, develop proper sentence or phrase structure, acquire the correct descriptive linguistics and initiate intricate motor patterns to move the communicator in exactly the necessary patterns. Consequently, they become liable to *ums*, *ehs*, repetitions, and corrections (Urizar & Samuel, 2013).

Traditionally, disfluencies are perceived to be distractions from the primary information. However, the usefulness of linguistic fillers depends on how the listener can clarify out these distractions in order to get the real information or message that the speech contains. Fillers are necessities in spoken language to think, process, and plan what to say next (Jonsson, 2016). The occurrence of fillers simply means that a speaker is only pausing and not done with the speech yet or not done talking. As claimed by Canale and Swain (1980), linguistic fillers are parts of

strategic competence, in the sense that it is one way of surpassing communication breakdowns. Thus, it describes the language learner's ability to balance and overcome any communication difficulty that might occur.

Moreover, Basurto Santos et al. Alarcon, & Pablo (2016) claim that the use of fillers is part of natural, spontaneous speech, taking into consideration that disfluencies as a *trait of conversation*. According to Hedge (1993), there are two meanings behind the word *fluency*; First, it is *the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation*, is commonly comprehended as fluency in language teaching materials and language assessment procedures, and second, it is *natural language use* which is likely to take place when speaking activities focus on meaning and its negotiation, when speakers use speaking strategies, and when they minimize overt correction.

When teachers and learners become more aware of the usefulness of these linguistic fillers and learn how to use them in speaking strategy, there is a possibility that it will help them become more fluent in the English language. Thus, rather than being corrected by using linguistic fillers, they should be informed, and they should know how to use it properly in order to attain a certain level of fluency, which could be that of natural language use.

Teachers at the University of Northern Philippines who use English as their medium of instruction are prone to use fillers in their teaching. This is influenced by the nature of the university, which caters local and international students with diverse first languages.

Hence, the researcher needed to conduct a study to analyze linguistic fillers' occurrence in college classes in this university. The study, though, is limited to the teachers' experiences and perceptions. The relevance of this research settles on how the use of linguistic fillers reflects its description as a major linguistic phenomenon. Teachers in English have always been after fluency in speaking English, yet in the Philippine class settings, linguistic fillers occur. This study benefits the students, teachers, administrators, and other researchers in the same line of study. It increases students' and teachers' awareness of the

types of linguistic fillers, and helps administrators monitor the extent of using linguistic fillers used in college classrooms. Furthermore, it caters to researchers who want to investigate similar areas or other unexplored areas, on language, linguistic fillers and disfluencies. This paper could help identify implications towards teaching English as a Second Language for an improved teaching and learning methods in Philippine colleges and universities.

### 1.1. Objectives of the Study

The study determined and analyzed the linguistic fillers used by college teachers in their classes. The study specifically determined the linguistic fillers used by college teachers in their classes, and the reasons why the teachers use linguistic fillers.

### 1.2. Theoretical Framework

Learning English as an international language emphasizes learning different major dialect forms; particularly, it aims to equip students with the linguistic tools to communicate internationally (Khojastehrad, 2012).

The phenomenal changes in global higher education have made English "the language of higher education" and the "international academic language". English is not just a useful language to know; it has become the language to acquire advanced training in disciplines ranging from diplomacy and economics to science, technology, and business. Two phenomena are associated with the rise of English- medium instruction: (a) the growing number of students studying outside their home country; (b) new programs and entirely new universities that target upwardly mobile students. As with most other aspects of globalization, there are significant local variations, but the spread of global English is also embedded in remarkable new global systems (Northrup, 2013).

Moreover, the idea of communicative competence is derived initially from Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. By competence, Chomsky means the shared knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener set in a completely homogeneous speech community.

Such underlying knowledge enables a user to produce and understand an infinite set of sentences out of a finite set of rules.

Performance, on the other hand, is concerned with the process of applying the underlying knowledge to actual language use. It involves too many performance variables to use as linguistic data, such as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors. Therefore, according to Hymes, the most salient connotation of performance is "that of imperfect manifestation of the underlying system".

Linguistic fillers are verbal or nonverbal, which speakers use to fill in communication gaps. Different researchers call these fillers differently. For instance, they have been called *hesitation disfluencies* (Corley & Stewart, 2008), *hesitation markers* (Maclay & Osgood, 1959), *filled pauses* (Maclay & Osgood, 1959), *conversation fillers* (Benus & Trnka, 2014) or *fillers* (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002). In this paper, the term *linguistic fillers* was used.

Cappelli (2009) defined these fillers (linguistic fillers) as sounds or words that are spoken to fill up gaps in utterances. Bygate (1987) who referred to them as *fillers* elaborated that they are "expressions like *well, erm, you see*, used in speech to fill in pauses". During oral interactions, speakers are highly likely to use expressions such as *well, I mean, actually, you know, let me think* to create a delay that enables them to carry on the conversation during times of difficulty (Richards & Schmidt, 2012).

Kolar (2010) and Cappelli (2009) distinguished four types of linguistic fillers: Filled Pauses (FP), Discourse Markers (DM), Explicit Editing Terms (EET), Asides/Parentheticals (A/P).

Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch, (2002) claim that fillers can fulfill three essential functions: a) a *cognitive function*, in that the hearer shows the speaker that he is processing what she says; b) a *social function*, as interjections signal involvement, affect, or interest; and c) a *discourse-regulatory function*, because they ratify the assignment of speaker- and hearer- roles and contribute to the shaping of discourse.

In the study of Gryc (2014), he cited three authors who have different ways of categorizing

fillers and their functions. First, he cited Biber et al. (2000) who provided a short list of fillers and their discourse functions. Biber et al. (2000) divide fillers into eight categories: Interjections (e.g. *oh, er*), Greetings/farewells (e.g., *hi, hello*), Discourse markers (e.g. *well, so, you know*), Response getters (e.g. *okay?, alright?*), Attention getters (e.g., *hey*), Response forms (e.g., *right, absolutely*), Polite forms (e.g., *thank you, you are welcome*), and Expletives (e.g., *damn, blimey, f-words*) – "usually taboo words" (Ibid.), which can offend.

According to Gryc, Biber et al. (2000) warn about the ambiguities of fillers. "Individual items may be used for more than one function; for example, *okay* can be a discourse marker, a response form, or a response getter (*okay?*)". As a result, one must be very careful while dividing fillers into particular categories.

Second, Gryc (2014) cited Stenström (1994), who has drafted her terminology. She divided lexical items into four categories: Empathizers (e.g., *you see, you know*); Hedges (e.g., *actually, I think, really, sort of*); Stallers – "are those items which are followed by a long pause when the speaker is at a loss" (typically, they are hedges); Fillers – "In some cases, it is not at all obvious what the items are doing".

Stenström also divided them according to their discourse function into seven categories: Appealer (e.g., *you know*), Acknowledge (e.g., *mhm, oh, I see*), Evaluate (e.g., *gosh*), Uptake (e.g., *yes, well*), Answer (e.g. *yes, no, sure, OK*), Frame (e.g., *right, now*), and Staller (e.g., *well*)

Stenström stressed that "discourse markers are better described in pragmatic than in grammatical terms".

Lastly, Gryc (2014) cited McCarten (2007) who divided fillers according to their discourse function: Responses (e.g., *exactly, great!, uh huh*); Monitoring expressions (e.g., *you know what I mean, you see, let me tell you, actually*); Vague expressions (e.g., *or something, and things like that, and stuff, and everything, or whatever, and that kind of thing, and so on, etcetera*); Hedging expressions (e.g., *kind of, sort of, just, I guess, a little, in a way*); and Expressions of stance (e.g., *personally, I think, from my point of view, I do not know*). McCarten's work is based on the *Cambridge International Corpus*.

On the other hand, Pamolango (2016) presented and discussed in his study five functions of the fillers in spoken interaction, that is, fillers function as *a holder the turn*, as *a mark of hesitation*, *empathizers*, *time-creating devices*, and *editing term*.

Navaretta (2015) claims that fillers have functions related to feedback and turn-management, or they signal discourse planning processes, such as lexical retrieval. However, he further claims that the various functions are not mutually exclusive.

The same filler may be multifunctional. It may fulfill different functions depending on the context in which it is used – the adverb *now*, for example, may function both as a way of speaker's signaling that a change of topic is prompted or as a marker of his/her intention to go on with sub-topics of the main issue just introduced (Gryc, 2014).

Furthermore, the causes of various linguistic fillers in verbal speech have been documented by several researchers. Duvall, Graham, Robins, and Divett (2014) presented three categories on the causes of filler words: divided attention, infrequent words, and nervousness. Basurto Santos et al. (2016) revealed participants' reasons for using fillers in their everyday conversations: *filling in spaces in conversations, expecting feedback from the hearer, nervousness, organizing the speech, and feeling insecure about what someone is saying*.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed descriptive-qualitative research design utilizing recorded lecture sessions, survey questionnaires which elicited information on the respondent's profile, a checklist to determine the reasons for using linguistic fillers in the classroom, and in-depth interview (IDI) which determined the awareness and reasons of the teachers in using linguistic fillers. This study is concerned with observing and providing descriptions of phenomena that occur naturally, without the intervention of an experiment or an artificially contrived treatment. Eighteen General Education teachers of the University of Northern

Philippines, who use English for instruction and learning, participated in the study.

The researcher used Kolar's (2011) and Cappelli's (2009) typology of linguistic fillers in classifying the linguistic fillers into filled pauses, discourse markers, explicit editing terms, and asides/ parentheticals.

## 2.2. Data Gathering Procedure

Eighteen teachers gave their consent to participate in this study. Two lecture classes for each of the teachers were recorded using a tape recorder.

The researcher then carefully and accurately transcribed the recordings. The teachers whose classes were recorded were scheduled for an in-depth interview to relate their personal experiences in classroom interactions. Prior to this, they answered the checklist instrument to know their reasons for using linguistic fillers. Their answers were counter validated in IDI. After collating the results of the study, the reasons for using linguistic fillers were identified.

## 2.3. Ethical Considerations

Along with the intension to improve teaching using the English Language, the researcher informed the respondents about the nature and purpose of the study and the protocols to be observed to protect their anonymity. The researcher ensured the privacy and confidentiality of both identities and answers given in the conduct of the study. Data gathered were all kept confidential, especially in reporting the results of teachers' usage of linguistic fillers. There were no risks associated with the conduct of the study. Frequency counts, percentages, and ranks were used to analyse data.

# 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 3.1. Linguistic Fillers Used by University Teachers

The college teachers used a total of 9,089 linguistic fillers. The linguistic fillers used are *filled pauses*, *discourse markers*, *explicit editing*

**Table 1.** Type of Linguistic Fillers Used by the Teachers

Types of Linguistic Fillers	F	%	Rank
<i>Discourse Markers</i>	6,183	30.87	1
<i>Filled Pauses</i>	2,812	68.10	2
<i>Explicit Editing Terms</i>	61	67.00	3
<i>Asides/ Parentheticals</i>	33	36.00	4
TOTAL	9,089	100.00	

*terms*, and *asides and parentheticals*. Among the fillers, *discourse markers* (68%) have the the highest percentage, followed by *filled pauses* (31%), then *explicit editing terms* (.67%), and *Asides and Parentheticals* (.36%).

The findings mean that there is a considerable difference between the frequency of the first and the second highest group. This implies that college teachers prefer using discourse markers much more than filled pauses, although it is still the second highest type of linguistic filler. Moreover, it is evident that *asides/parentheticals* garnered a shallow frequency of almost zero percent from all the linguistic fillers used.

## 3.2. Discourse Markers

Schiffrin's (1987) theory suggests that fillers may sometimes function as discourse markers. He stressed that they contribute to developing a conversation in a particular way, such as introducing a sub-topic, making a new start or rephrasing what he, or she was going to say or giving the floor to the listener.

There are thirty six discourse markers that were identified in the study.

*Discourse markers* have the highest frequency among linguistic fillers. That implies that the teachers use various DMs, which do not function as authentic transition markers but rather as fillers. From the extracts below, it can be noted that they have no relationship or do not establish any connection or association. Hence, they are

**Table 2.** Discourse Markers Used by the Faculty

Discourse Markers	F	%	R
<i>Okay</i>	2453	39.67	1
<i>So</i>	2310	37.36	2
<i>Now</i>	338	5.47	3
<i>Yes</i>	176	2.85	4
<i>Alright</i>	164	2.65	5
<i>Right</i>	123	1.99	6
<i>of course</i>	92	1.49	7
<i>meaning to say</i>	53	0.86	8
<i>Yeah</i>	44	0.71	9
<i>I think</i>	41	0.66	10.5
<i>Actually</i>	41	0.66	10.5
<i>you know</i>	38	0.61	12
<i>I mean</i>	34	0.55	13
<i>Well</i>	31	0.50	14
<i>let's say</i>	30	0.49	15
<i>isn't it?</i>	27	0.44	16
<i>Perhaps</i>	24	0.39	17
<i>Say for example/ say</i>	18	0.29	18
<i>come on</i>	17	0.27	19
<i>Etcetera</i>	16	0.26	20.5
<i>by the way</i>	16	0.26	20.5
<i>Anyway</i>	14	0.23	23
<i>Probably</i>	14	0.23	23
<i>What do you call</i>	14	0.23	23
<i>that? /What do call</i>			
<i>this? How do i say it/</i>			
<i>you see</i>	11	0.18	25
<i>and so on</i>	7	0.11	26
<i>Hello</i>	6	0.10	28
<i>you know what?</i>	6	0.10	28
<i>Practically</i>	6	0.10	28
<i>is it clear?/ is that</i>	5	0.08	30
<i>clear? /clear?</i>			
<i>let's see</i>	4	0.06	31
<i>and the like</i>	3	0.05	32
<i>or whatever</i>	2	0.03	34
<i>you know what I</i>	2	0.03	26
<i>mean</i>			
<i>mind you</i>	2	0.03	32
<i>I guess</i>	1	0.02	36
<b>TOTAL</b>	6,18	100.00	
	3		

classified as fillers in the form of discourse markers.

Among these discourse markers are *okay*, *so*, *now*, *yes*, *alright*, *right*, *of course*, *meaning to say*, *yeah*, and *I think*. The most frequently used DMs are *okay* (39.67%), *so* (37.36%), and *now* (5.47%). Actual lines showing these discourse markers are as follows:

*"Okay, there is what we have the formula. It has been presented. And to get the distance okay, you have to use the formula  $x$  distance initial plus the initial velocity times time. Okay this is the final distance, okay, you will have the initial distance from the plus the initial velocity the  $x$  component times time."* (ST2)

*By the way, the absolute value of a number is it is positive form. So -0.9 and we find -will be 0.9 then .1 and 1.1... the next step is... to multiply... the absolute value times the frequency... So .9 times 3 is equal to 2.7...(MT6)*

*No, do not use it. Now, so aside from the heading, ano yung sunod? So for example ahh... Huwag na nating I discuss yung— kwan ahh yong— What do you call this one? Ano ahh... the format. Alam niyo na siguro yong format eh. I mean, dalawa lang nman ung format, di ba?(ET2)ss*

### 3.3. Filled Pauses

Rose (1998) claimed that filled pauses are commonly used by conversationalists to hold their conversational turn. He further believes that filled pauses are useful in managing turns: starting a turn, establishing and signaling control of the conversation.

Filled pauses identified include *ahh*, *ahmmn*, *eh*, *eherm*, *hah*, *hmmn*, *huh*, *ohh*, *uhh*, *Uh huh*, and *Uhhmmn*.

**Table 3.** Filled Pauses Used by the Teachers

Filled Pauses	F	%	R
<i>Ahh</i>	1686	59.96	1
<i>Uhh</i>	682	24.25	2
<i>Ohh</i>	203	7.22	3
<i>Hmmn</i>	63	2.24	4
<i>Hah</i>	48	1.71	5
<i>Eh</i>	34	1.21	6
<i>Ahmmn</i>	30	1.07	7
<i>Eherm</i>	21	0.75	8
<i>Uhhmmn</i>	20	0.71	9
<i>Huh</i>	15	0.53	0
<i>Uh-huh</i>	4	0.14	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	2812	100.00	

**Table 4.** Explicit Editing Term Used by Teachers

Explicit Editing Term	F	%	R
<i>Or</i>	39	63.93	1
<i>I'm sorry/sorry</i>	13	21.31	2
<i>Rather</i>	6	9.84	3
<i>I should say</i>	2	3.28	4
<i>I mean</i>	1	1.64	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	61	100.00	

The top three most frequently used were *ahh* (59.96 %), *uhh* (24.25%), and *ohh* (7.22%). The top three most frequently occurring filled pauses are evident in the following excerpts:

"There are **ahh**, derived formulas to make ... shorter, and with the aid of the laws of exponents. If multiplication or **ahh** determination of product ... in any kind of..., **ahh** in some polynomials, but take note *ahh*, special products are applicable only to some or selected types of polynomials, not all kinds of polynomials." (MT1)

"They are limited in their quantities and also to think that **uhh** it is a product of a long...millions of years actually geological process. So, if you notice now, when you ride on a vehicle, they will **uhh** use **uhh** gasoline or **uhh**, yeah, petroleum to run the **uhh** vehicle, and what has being generated in millions of years would be extended in just a matter of hours." (ST6)

"Anyone, who can differentiate a phrase a from clause. I told you that last meeting. **Ohh**, will you? Please differentiate a phrase from a clause." (ET4)

### 3.4. Explicit Editing Term

According to Kolar (2011), EETs are explicit expressions by which speakers signal that they are aware of the existence of the disfluency on their part. In principle, they can appear anywhere within

the disfluency, but most frequently occur right after the end of the reparandum.

Although *explicit editing terms* as linguistic fillers are least used by the college teachers, there were five identified from the transcription, which are *I mean, I am sorry/sorry, rather, or, and i should say*.

The top three most frequently occurring explicit editing terms are *or, I am sorry/ sorry, and rather* as shown by the following excerpts:

"That is the function of sine opposite over the hypotenuse. We are just reviewing the last topic because we are going to *ahh* use it in... problem solving noh? So in cosine, the definition of cosine is— **or** Cosine a is equal to?" (MT2)

"Then 1 point for the identification of the group, *ahh ahh I am sorry*, 2 points for the electron configuration, 2 points for the group, because you determine the group as well as the type of element if it is a representative or transition, then another 1 point for the period to make it 5 points." (ST3)

"So there are those case wherein fish has *ahh* gills and lungs, that they can dig their— themselves— they can borrow, **rather**, themselves down the grounds, and until such time that when the rainy season comes, then they have to go out the dig, and then live. And then the gills will have to work, okay?". (ST4)

### 3.5. Asides and Parentheticals

Asides and parentheticals occur when the speaker utters a short side comment and then returns to the original sentence pattern. Asides are comments on a new topic, while parentheticals are on the same topic as the main part of the utterance (Rose, 1998). These interrupters (Hill, 2015) can provide character or narrator commentary, additional information, or even emphasis.

*Asides and parentheticals*, which are rarely used by the college teachers have no specific kinds, but they are presented through the use of *em*

**Table 5.** Asides and Parentheticals used by the Faculty

Asides / Parentheticals	F	%	R
<i>Parentheticals</i>	23	69.70	1
<i>Asides</i>	10	30.30	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	33	100.00	

dash as in the given example. *Parentheticals* has a higher frequency (69.70%) over *asides* (30.30%).

Asides:

*"So that, if you try to look at the given binomials now – Okay pay attention, please – if you look, if you try to observe or investigate the given binomials, first terms, the same, second terms, the same also. Okay? But they are connected with a plus and minus." (MT1)*

Parentheticals:

*"Okay, how---alright, so he put on sunscreen is the first clause; the sun was so extremely hot is the second clause and the third clause is he wanted to go inside. Now to correct this, you could say: He put on sunscreen because – so there is the need of conjunction – because the sun was so extremely hot. And the second sentence now would be: He wanted to go inside. Okay." (ET6)*

These results correspond to the study of Erten (2014). The research discovered that respondents preferred the use of discourse markers as compared to the traditional hesitation sound, such as filled pauses. On the other hand, explicit editing terms like *I mean*, *I'm sorry*, *rather*, and *or*, are least used by the teachers in developing proper syntax. However, the researcher noticed from the transcriptions that teachers also uttered repetition, repair, and restart, there are categories of edit disfluencies, which is one of the normal parts of spontaneous speech according to Shiberg (1994), aside from sentence-like units, and linguistic fillers. Asides and parentheticals, wherein teachers interrupt their speech and introduce information

either on a new topic or the same topic were also rarely used.

Generally, based on the high frequency of the use of fillers, it can be implied that all teachers, even the most fluent speakers of the English language, make use of linguistic fillers. Urizar and Samuel (2013) support this idea stating that although speakers often transmit their messages clearly and concisely, their speech also includes disfluencies, including filler words. This is confirmed by Bygate (1987), who admitted that speakers use fillers since they are a useful strategy to help them sound "normal". Furthermore, it can be deduced from the results that during their classes, teachers use a wide variety of discourse markers and filled pauses in activating concepts, selecting words, buying time to think and plan what to say next, and filling in communication gaps. However, the limited use of explicit editing terms and asides and parentheticals denotes a weak area that requires teachers more attention.

### 3.6. Reasons for using Linguistic Fillers

The use of linguistic fillers is inevitable. Teachers make use of linguistic fillers for some reasons. After examining the transcriptions, including classifying these fillers and comparing teachers' use of linguistic fillers, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview (IDI) with each of the college teachers; and before the IDI, teachers were asked to answer a survey checklist on their reasons for using linguistic fillers. Thirty items on reasons are included in the checklist and were rated as *Strongly Agree* (2.51-3.00), *Agree* (1.51-2.50), and *Disagree* (1.00-1.50).

Based on the responses gathered from the questionnaire, the teachers strongly agree that they



**Table 6.** Reasons of the college teachers' use of linguistic fillers.

Items	Overall
<b>I use linguistic fillers...</b>	
if I'm planning or thinking of what to say next	2.39
if I can't think of the exact word/vocabulary to express my idea	2.33
to buy time to think	2.11
to take or hold control of the floor	2.11
to relinquish control of the floor	2.00
to fill in spaces in conversations	2.28
to indicate the beginning of a new topic	2.56
to get the attention of the listener	2.39
to imply that I previously stated a mistake	2.11
to communicate that I'm just pausing, not having finished speaking yet	2.22
to indicate that I'm listening	2.44
to get affirmation from the listener	2.39
to give a response	2.50
to emphasize a point	2.61
to express my ideas more comfortably	2.50
to elicit response from the listener	2.28
when I utter a side comment	2.17
when I am distracted	2.33
when I am nervous	1.94
when I am not sure about what am talking about	1.89
when I am expecting feedback from the hearer	2.33
when I am trying to organize my speech	2.33
when I am trying to pronounce a word correctly	2.28
when I am trying to select the most effective word to use	2.39
when I am lying	1.61
when I have not rehearsed my speech	1.94
when I really don't know what to say	1.78
when I'm analyzing something that was said	2.11
when I want to sound more polite	2.11
when I hesitate to tell my thoughts	2.00

Legend: *Strongly Agree* (2.51-3.00)  
*Agree* (1.51-2.50)  
*Disagree* (1.00- 1.50).

use fillers *to emphasize a point* (2.61) and *to indicate the beginning of a new topic* (2.56). They agree that they use fillers *to give a response* (2.50), *to express my ideas more comfortably* (2.50), and *to indicate that I'm listening* (2.44).

On the other hand, the following items, to which teachers agree, are the least common reasons of the college teachers for using fillers: *when I am lying* (1.61); *when I really do not know what to say* (1.78); *when I'm analyzing something that was said* (1.89).

### 3.6.1. To emphasize a point

In classroom discussions, teachers try their best to establish their points, which make up the outline of their class. In so doing, several techniques are used, including the use of fillers. In the overall result of the reasons for teachers' use of fillers, teachers strongly agree that they use fillers *to emphasize a point*. That implies that teachers mostly use fillers to organize their concepts by establishing their points. Hence, they emphasize them during the discussion. According to the teachers, the IDI, they use fillers so their students may be able to process and understand the concept better.

The following are excerpts from the transcriptions, which further explains the reasons or context in which the fillers were used:

*Actually, how is advertisement come up to at least what? Persuade or convince you to patronize their products. Of course, these are all endorsed by popular personalities, local or foreign. You see? Wow! I'm going to patronize this. I idolized Azkals, and they are endorsing this. Between now ahh, perhaps – uh ahh let's say hmmn Andoks? And the other... okay. ahh, businesses offering, letchon manok, I would go for Chooks to Go, because this is the official chicken or red roasted chicken of Gilas Pilipinas or whatever. And you are persuaded, convinced. And these are all printed materials. (ET1)*

The use of *you see* in the example above is used to point out or emphasize what has

just been said by the teacher. This linguistic filler functions as *emphathizers* in this context (Strensom, 1994).

*Usually, you have to disturb the ground, and in prospecting it and in the uhh uhh, gathering of it, you already are creating a very big problem to the environment. Why? Because for several reasons. You know, when you have drowned out the content here. You bring here a bucket. And usually, it will have to be filled up. (ST6)*

The linguistic filler *you know* in the example above is used as an *emphathizer*. The teacher points out what is being explained by saying *you know*. Basurto Santos et al. (2016) and Urizar and Samuel (2013) stressed that one of the reasons for using linguistic fillers is to emphasize a point. The phrases "um," "aah," "you know" are used to signal that one is about to say something and that the person listening should not interrupt or say something for emphasis (Mele, 2017).

### 3.6.2. To indicate the beginning of a new topic

The second reason in the overall tally is to *indicate the beginning of a new topic*. The teachers strongly agree for this reason. Interestingly, teachers use this reason to introduce another lesson, which is vital considering the nature of their subject. Once a lesson is not introduced correctly, there is a higher chance for students not to follow the lesson, especially if it involves numerous computations. Hence, the use of fillers indicating the start of a new topic is needed as seconded by the teachers during the IDI.

They furthered that for a class to be systematic, they have to think of a way for students' line of thinking to be organized. Hence, clear boundaries must be set and felt by students during the discussion. Using a filler to signal a new topic will facilitate a smoother flow of discussion.

The following are excerpts from the transcriptions, which further explains the reasons or context in which the fillers are used:

*Teacher: So now, we will be looking for the, spin. Kung  $+1/2$  ba or  $-1/2$ , that will serve the*

*electron that we are looking for. So, is it a  $+1/2$ ? So with that, tells that we are looking for the 1st electron, in... the... 1st— ahh in the 1s sublevel...*

*Teacher: So another one, ...we have 6, 2... - 2...  $-1/2$ ... Ohh, please locate... the electrons. So I have already given the 4 quantum numbers, and it's up to you to, identify the electron that describe... (ST6)*

In the example given above, the linguistic filler *so* is used to begin a new topic. It could also be noted that *so* is used to start a new sentence or to give new information. This function of this linguistic filler is termed by Strensom (1994) as a *frame* that signals a discourse boundary.

*All these formulae, all these 1 to 4, 1 to 4, ito lang din ang inyong gagamitin or no, no, no, 1 to 4 or 3 to - ay - 2 to 4 'yong 2, I mean, 'yong power formula or the General Power Formula ang gagamitin ninyo. Now, in the 4th formula, it is now, this is now one application of the chain rule, wherein may kasama pa yan. PDX. PDX when you raise to N is equal to N times Un-1 times DU/DX. (MT2)*

In the example above, the linguistic filler *now*, which functions as a *frame*, is used to indicate the beginning of another idea.

In this manner, the result corroborates the claim of Castro (2009) that one of the pragmatic functions of discourse markers is that of *topic switchers*.

### 3.6.3. To give a response

This is the third reason for college teachers' use of linguistic fillers. The teachers agree that they use fillers *to give a response*. For a class to be interactive, there is a need for a response to check the understanding of students and to sustain the flow of discussion. According to English teachers during the IDI, giving a response to students gives them the idea that they are given special attention, and every answer is considered valuable.

The following are excerpts from the transcriptions, which further explains the reasons or context in which the fillers are used:

*Teacher: Okay. Example: He has a flair for giving bent to his uncontrolled emotions. Okay. Now, where is the preposition? ... Where is the preposition?... Where is the prep—preposition? ... Where is the preposition?*

*Student: for giving*

*Teacher: Okay...For? **Alright**, for giving –for giving bent. Okay? that is your ...ahh prepo –the gerund and for is the preposition and giving is the object. (ET6)*

From the example above, the linguistic filler *alright* is used as a response insinuating that the student's answer is correct. This serves the function as a *response form* (Biber, et al., 2000).

*Teacher: Our- We have your sixty-four point five plus forty divided by four, which is equal to ten ... ten minus five is equal tooo?*

*S: Five (5)!*

*Teacher: Five (5)! **Okay!**... times five!... twenty-five! divided by six (6)!.. twenty-five divided by six (25/6)? (MT5)*

From the given example above, it can be noted that the discourse marker *okay* is used to give a response to the student, affirming that the student's answer is right. The filler '*okay*', however is a *response getter*. It should then be pointed out that the same filler may be multifunctional depending on the context in which it is used (Gryc, 2014).

Cohen (2012) claimed that teachers use fillers as a response to students in a form of words or phrases. Thus, it makes the flow of conversation smooth.

### 3.6.4. To express my ideas more comfortably

This is the fourth reason for the college teachers in the overall tally. The teachers agree that they use fillers to express their ideas more comfortably. Since it is vital to elicit ideas and answers from students, they should be able to

express themselves using the target language. This was seconded by the teachers during the interview.

The following are excerpts from the transcriptions, which further explains the reasons or context in which the fillers are used:

*Okay, so **probably** some of you are not new with these business letters, okay? So probably— Who are the ahh officers of the council? Aside from the council officer, anybody of you, who is an officer of any organization?...you are officer of? Ahh? (ET2)*

The linguistic filler *probably* is used in the sentence as a hedging expression (McCarten, 2007) which means that the speaker is not directly claiming what he is trying to say, but just introducing a probable instance. In this case, the teacher plays safe in saying something they may not be sure about. Thus, the discourse marker *probably* as categorized by McCarten (2007) serves as a *hedging expression to express* one's idea in their comfort.

*So, we have 4; then the remaining factor will be three, three, m. Then the second term, even in the—the sum of the terms are raised to a power. **Hello?** How about you there? Any comment? Agkurkuretret met ta maging yo? Are you in doubt? Cloudy parang sa labas. (MT1)*

It could be deemed from the example above that the teacher used the linguistic filler *hello*, which functions as *greetings* (Biber et al., 2004) to get the students' attention. The teacher claimed: "*I use the 'hello' to go with the trend of the younger generation – to deal their generation.*" (MT1). This means that the teacher also uses the filler *hello* to express one's self comfortably with the younger generation.

This agrees with Jonsson's (2016) study, which focused on what is commonly referred to as communicative competence, or more specifically strategic competence that represents how language speakers overcome linguistic breakdowns or gaps in their communicative skill, claimed that speakers

tend to use more fillers in order to express themselves more comfortably.

### 3.6.5. To indicate that I'm listening

This reason is the fifth in the overall tally. The teachers agree with this reason. Thus, college teachers have to maintain a connection with the students while he/she is answering. By using a filler, it is a cue that the teachers is listening intently.

The following are excerpts from the transcriptions which further explain the reasons or context in which the fillers are used:

*Teacher: They are not true. They are figments of the imagination. They are the product of fertile imagination. Therefore they are simply just imagined or invented. Continue, Jackie.*

*Student: Non-fiction ---*

*Teacher: hmmm*

*Student: Fiction emphasizes narratives or story elements, while non-fiction deals with the interpretations of actual happenings or factual materials on the reading. (ET1)*

In the example above, the teacher lets a student read a part of their discussion. As the student started to read, the teacher acknowledged what the student was reading by uttering *hmmm*, which suggests that the teacher was listening. The linguistic filler *Hmmm* or *mhm* satisfies the function categorized by Strensom (1994) as *acknowledge*.

Juan (2006) suggests that in a conversation, as people speak by taking turns, they use fillers to signal either to let the other person take over the speaking or insinuate that he is listening.

The top reasons of teachers for using fillers in this study are in contrary to the results of the study of Goldwater et al. (2009). Their study found out that infrequent words and speaking too quickly caused a higher production of filler words and can occur as a result of nervousness. 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.

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is concluded that college professors utilize linguistic fillers with *discourse markers* as the most frequently used and *explicit editing terms* as the least. Furthermore, college professors usually use linguistic fillers generally to *emphasize a point*.

The study of the types and reasons for using linguistic fillers corroborates with Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Theory with the Strategic Competence as the main framework.

The researcher recommends that professors must be familiar with the different variations of fillers and their functions. This will aid them in making their communication with learners more effective and efficient. It is also recommended that professors observe their use of linguistic filler to avoid the excessive and inappropriate use of fillers that give negative outcomes on the teaching-learning process.

Finally, studies on the use of linguistic fillers among pre-service teachers can be conducted to discern whether similar results would be observed. It is encouraged that in future studies, students' perception of the teachers' use of linguistic fillers will also be explored.

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