
Presence and Relevance of Fillers in English. Teaching Language Textbooks

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I. Abstract

692



One of the main problems that English language learners tend to present is that they do not communicate appropriately in the speaking mode after years of learning, although they have a consolidated knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This reality can be avoided with proper teaching methods, focusing on the features of real speech acts. This paper analyses the importance of one of these oral features, that is, fillers, and the way in which they are introduced in language acquisition by means of English Language Teaching textbooks (from now on ELT textbooks). The materials examined included transcripts and activities selected from two different ELT textbooks of the same level. Results revealed that fillers are commonly inserted in this type of transcripts; however, their frequency and relevance depend on the publishing and the materials selected. These results are discussed and guidelines for further investigation are suggested.

Keywords: Pragmatics, speech acts, fillers, ELT textbooks, language learners, oral communication, informal speech

II. Introduction

In recent years, pragmatics has emerged as a rapidly growing discipline within linguistics. According to Huang (2007: 2), pragmatics is defined as «the systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language», and its main topics of study cover areas such as implicature, presupposition, deixis, and speech acts.

The present paper focuses on the last issue, that is, speech acts, which are, as Huang (2007: 284) indicates, “the uttering of a linguistic expression whose function is not just to say things but actively to do things or to perform acts as well”. Many are the features that characterise speech acts, even though this paper will deal with a specifically and important one: fillers in conversation.

Conversational fillers are meaningless words that speakers use to fill gaps (Cornbleet and Carter, 2001) when they face some trouble in spontaneous and real conversations, like a mistake or error, an incorrect lexical or structural construction, or when they plan what to say next, like a word search or linguistic planning (Rieger, 2003). Following Rieger (2003: 164), there are several types of fillers: i) non-lexical fillers, which include the lengthening of sounds or repetitions; ii) quasi-lexical fillers, which cover expressions like ‘uh’ or ‘uhm’; and, finally, iii) lexical fillers, which are prefabricated constructions used in conversation, such as ‘well’, ‘you know’, ‘I mean’, etc.

Fillers can also be found with other names according to different authors, such as filled pauses or hesitation markers. Nonetheless, Davis and Maclagan (2010: 190) make clear that «the terms fillers, filled pauses and hesitation markers are used interchangeably [...], the choice of them

depends on the context and focus of discussion». Taking this reflection into account, the term used throughout this paper for the analysis will be fillers.

Taking into consideration fillers together with other conversational features within the field of English Language Teaching (from now on ELT), researchers assert that one of the problems that language learners from all levels generally present is that they have a wide and consolidated knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but they are not fluent in the speaking mode; a reality which should be avoided by using more direct approach communicative activities in the teaching process (Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1992).

Bearing in mind the ideas outlined above, the aim of the present research article is to analyse whether fillers are presented in ELT textbooks and how they are presented to language learners through those educational materials used by both teachers and learners.

III. Objectives

Bearing in mind the ideas outlined above, the aim of the present research article is to analyse whether fillers are presented in ELT textbooks and how they are presented to language learners through those educational materials used by both teachers and learners.

IV. Method and Materials

In order to determine the presence of fillers in educational materials, a set of two ELT textbooks were randomly selected and examined, focusing on speaking and listening activities. Firstly, the several units of both texts were analysed in detail in order to see whether fillers are taught through specific sections in the speaking or listening activities. Secondly, some transcripts of listening activities in each textbook were chosen in order to identify examples of fillers, which were subsequently classified in several tables according to their type and frequency, following the categories established by Rieger (2003: 164), i.e. lexical, quasi-lexical and non-lexical fillers.

Although there is not an established list of fillers, the present research followed the list provided by Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992: 44), among other examples given by the theoretical approach. In spite of this, it was essential to consider if a word was a meaningless unit or not in the specific context of situation so as to differentiate correctly whether it was a filler.

The materials selected for the present study were the textbooks *Upstream Intermediate* (by Express Publishing) and *New Cutting Edge Intermediate* (by Longman). The purpose of both ELT textbooks is to

achieve in language learners a B2 level in English language according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Moreover, in relation with the aim of this paper, both ELT textbooks assure that they attempt to imitate real speaking, based on what is printed on their back covers, so they should contain fillers, as they can be found in daily conversations. Specifically, *Upstream Intermediate* includes: «realistic, simulating dialogues featuring people in everyday situations»; whereas *Cutting Edge Intermediate* asserts that its «new reading and listening material brings the real world to the classroom».

On the other hand, as regards to the second part of the research, two transcripts were selected from each textbook so as to carry out their examination: i) a monologue and ii) a dialogue. Particularly, the four transcripts analysed (see Appendices) were:

- a. *Upstream Intermediate*: the transcript in pages 192 and 193, titled «Tapescript for Exercise 8a (p. 22)», corresponding to the listening activity number 8a in page 22, which contains a dialogue. It is necessary to mention that it was not possible to select a proper monologue because of the evident absence of fillers in them.
- b. *New Cutting Edge Intermediate*: the transcript in pages 166 and 167, titled «Recording 5», corresponding to the listening activity number 3a in page 66, which includes three different monologues; and the transcript in page 172, titled «Recording 1», a dialogue corresponding the listening activity number 2 in page 103.

V. Results

This section of the present paper contains the results of the analysis of both ELT textbooks, including the analysis of the different units and the transcripts selected.

4.1) ELT Textbook 1: *Upstream Intermediate*

4.1.1. Analysis of the units

Upstream Intermediate contains a specific practical section in Unit 6 (page 93), which covers the main features of fillers as well as its applications in real conversations through three exercises for practice: two listening activities and one speaking activity.

4.1.2. Analysis of the transcripts

A) Transcript 1 (monologue)

After examining the transcripts corresponding to monologue activities, it was not possible to select an appropriate one because they did not include enough fillers to be considered relevant for the present research.

B) Transcript 2 (dialogue)

In the dialogue selected, 6 different fillers were identified, which covered only two types of fillers and appeared 20 times in total as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Fillers in a dialogue (*Upstream Intermediate*)

Type of Filler		Fillers (Individual Frequency)	Total Frequency
Non-lexical fillers	Lengthening of sounds	-	-
	Repetitions	-	-
Quasi-lexical fillers		oh (4)	6
		hmm (2)	
Lexical fillers		so (4)	14
		well (7)	
		I see (2)	
		you know (1)	
Total		6 different fillers	20

4.2) ELT Textbook 2: New Cutting Edge Intermediate*4.2.1. Analysis of the units*

The examination of the syllabus, through the different skills, and all the units, determined that this ELT textbook does not include any specific activity directed to the acquisition and practice of fillers.

4.2.2. Analysis of the transcripts

A) Transcript 1 (monologue)

In the monologue selected, 22 different fillers were identified, which exemplified all types of fillers and appeared 41 times in total as Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2. Fillers in a monologue (*New Cutting Edge Intermediate*)

Type of Filler		Fillers (Individual Frequency)	Total Frequency
Non-lexical fillers	Lengthening of sounds	women... (1)	9
		this book is... (1)	
		this book stars... (1)	
		Paris... (1)	
		the... (1)	

		the staging... (1)	8
		this... (1)	
		done... (1)	
		fantastic... (1)	
	Repetitions	women... and women (1)	
		this book is... this book stars (1)	
		a, a lady (1)	
		very, very, very easy (1)	
		I've ever seen, ever (1)	
		the staging...the staging's (1)	
	this...this is (1)		
	really, really (1)		
Quasi-lexical fillers	er... (5)	22	
	erm... (7)		
	um.. (9)		
	yeah (1)		
Lexical fillers	actually (2)	2	
Total	22 different fillers	41	

Table 3. Fillers in a monologue (*New Cutting Edge Intermediate*)

Type of Filler		Fillers (Individual Frequency)	Total Frequency
Non-lexical fillers	Lengthening of sounds	women... (1)	9
		this book is... (1)	
		this book stars... (1)	
		Paris... (1)	
		the... (1)	
		the staging... (1)	
		this... (1)	
		done... (1)	
		fantastic... (1)	
	Repetitions	women... and women (1)	8
		this book is... this book stars (1)	
		a, a lady (1)	
		very, very, very easy (1)	
		I've ever seen, ever (1)	

		the staging...the staging's (1)	
		this...this is (1)	
		really, really (1)	
Quasi-lexical fillers		er... (5)	22
		erm... (7)	
		um.. (9)	
		yeah (1)	
Lexical fillers		actually (2)	2
Total		22 different fillers	41

Table 4. Fillers in a dialogue (*New Cutting Edge Intermediate*)

Type of Filler		Fillers (Individual Frequency)	Total Frequency
Non-lexical fillers	Lengthening of sounds	grass... (2)	5
		scarf... (1)	
		how had they... (2)	
	Repetitions	how had they... how had... (1)	2
they didn't put them on the grass (1)			
Quasi-lexical fillers		hmm (1)	5
		oh (1)	
		yeah (2)	
		eh? (1)	
Lexical fillers		so (3)	13
		well (2)	
		let me think (1)	
		actually (3)	
		or something (1)	
		I mean (1)	
		y'know (1)	
	I see (1)		
Total		17 different fillers	25



VI. Discussion

After analysing the results obtained in the previous Tables, we can assert that ELT textbooks tend to include several examples of fillers among their listening activities in order to imitate real conversational situations. Besides, focusing on the materials examined, it has been proved that they fulfil the premise stated on their back covers, that is, to include listening material from realistic and dialy situations. Despite of this, the frequency of fillers and types illustrated depend on the material and the publishing selected.

New Cutting Edge Intermediate employs a larger quantity of fillers in its transcripts than *Upstream Intermediate* in both the monologue and the dialogue. Specifically, in the monologues of *Upstream Intermediate*, there is a visible absence of fillers. What is more, *New Cutting Edge Intermediate* includes a wider variety of fillers, covering and exemplifying all types of fillers, whereas *Upstream Intermediate* only uses quasi-lexical and lexical fillers in their transcripts.

VII. Conclusion

Regarding the aim of the present paper, the results conclude that fillers are inserted in listening activities in the ELT textbooks analysed, especially in the case of *New Cutting Edge Intermediate*, which might respond to their important role in informal and everyday conversations as well as in contemporary and innovative teaching methods for English for foreign learners.

Nevertheless, the present study has limitations that should be considered for future research. For instance, it has included only the analyses of two ELT textbooks, belonging to the same level (intermediate-B1/2). Consequently, further research could be carried out, taking into consideration other publishers, levels and materials or comparing the quantity of fillers appearing in ELT textbooks with the number of fillers in real conversations.

In conclusion, fillers introduced in ELT textbooks offer a valuable approach to real and spontaneous conversations in order to promote and consolidate English language learners' oral skills through direct communicative activities and to overcome the lack of fluency that they tend to present in the speaking mode.

VIII. References

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IX. Appendices

APPENDIX 1: *Upstream Intermediate* "Tapescript for Exercise 8a (p. 22)", pages 192 and 193.

A: So, what do you think of life in England, Amy?

B: Oh, I don't think it's all that different from life in America, really.

A: Oh, how's that?

B: Well, people tend to do the same things at the same stages in their lives. We have the same milestones, if you know what I mean.

A: Hmm, I'm not sure I do. Give me an example.

B: OK. Well, children here in Britain start elementary school at the age of five, don't they?

A: Yes, that's right.

B: Well, it's the same in the US.

A: Oh, I see. But then things are a little different after that, aren't they?

B: Yes, I suppose so. In America, children go to junior high school between the ages of 12 and 14, and you don't have junior high schools here, do you?

A: Not usually, no. Children here go straight from primary, or elementary school to secondary school.

B: Yes, but they leave school at the same age as children in the US.

A: Really?

B: Yes. In America, you can leave school when you are 16, or you can wait until you graduate at 18. If you leave school at 16, you can get a job right away, but if you leave at 18, you can either get a job, or you can go to college. It's the same here, isn't it?

A: Yes, you're right. So, for how long do people go to college in the US?

B: Well, they usually stay in college for four years, which means that they leave when they are twenty-two, but they can also go to junior college, which means that they can leave when they are twenty.

A: I see. So, the education systems are similar in both countries.

B: Yes, but it's not only that. People in the US and in Britain tend to leave home, get married and have children at around the same ages, too.

A: Do they?

B: Yes. People usually leave home at 18 in both countries, because that's when they move away to go to college.

A: That makes sense. So, how old are people in the States when they get married, then?

B: The average age for men is about 27, but women are usually a little bit younger than that – around 25 so that's an average age of about 26. Women tend to have their first child at about 27 on average.

A: Hmm, that's interesting. I think things are pretty similar here.

B: They are. I've studied this a lot, you know!

A: I didn't realise you were so interested in social issues. What other things have you found out?

B: Well, I can tell you that people in America usually buy their first house when they are in their mid thirties at about 35.

A: Really? I would have thought they would be in their twenties.

B: No, most people want to wait before buying property these days, so they rent houses or apartments for a few years first.

A: And what about retirement? How old are people when they stop working?

B: Well, you can stop working when you are 55, but most people don't retire until they are 65 or older. You can get a social security benefits from the age of 62, though.

A: I can't believe you know so much about all this.

B: Well, it's just something I find interesting. I like to find out about how people live around the world and compare life in different countries.

A: And which country would you most like to live in?

B: Oh, I would have to visit them all before I could decide on something like that!

APPENDIX 2: *New Cutting Edge Intermediate "Recording 5"*, pages 166 and 167.

A) I'd like to talk to you about a book that um... I just read while I was on holiday and it's called 'Behaving Badly' and it's by an English writer called Isabel Wolff. Her stories are always about women... and women in their twenties in London at the moment which is why I like them. Erm... this book is... erm... this book stars... a, a lady called Rose who is actually a pet therapist. It's a love story and erm... it's about how Rose has been having a bit of a hard time with men and how slowly she meets somebody and rebuilds her confidence and falls in love again. The book's very, very, very easy to read and erm... one thing I really liked about it was the humour. It's written with a fant – it's just got so many lines in it that are really witty and they make you laugh out loud. Erm... a weak point about it could be that the story is possibly a little bit predictable. I'd recommend it to anyone who likes to really switch off

when they read so it was great for a holiday it was nothing too challenging. It was just pure escapism.

B) I think the best film I've ever seen, ever, probably is 'Moulin Rouge'. It was directed by an Australian man called Baz Luhrmann and it stars Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman. It's based in Paris... Moulin Rouge is a club and it's basically the story of a poet and an actress who er... fall in love and have a lot of problems and finally end up together. I think it's er... what I really like about the film is the way it's like theatre in the cinema. The songs are absolutely fantastic. The... er... the staging... the staging's marvellous, the dance routines are absolutely um... are inspiring quite frankly. And one of the things I didn't really like about it was, mostly at the beginning of the film, which is extremely fast-moving, and frankly if you look at the screen it gives you a headache. I know a lot of people don't like films with songs in but this... this is done... this does that really, really absolutely fantastically I'd recommend it to anyone.

C) About two weekends ago, I went to see a concert um... in Earls Court in London. Um... it was Justin Timberlake. Er... it was called Justified. Er... I'm not the biggest fan of Justin Timberlake, but my friend got me a ticket so I went along with her. And actually I was really impressed by him. Um... he writes all the stuff himself. He is an amazing singer, which was good to find out. He was incredible singing live. Um... the best thing I thought about the concert was his dancing and the dancers. They were just absolutely fantastic... and the lighting was amazing. The musicians were incredible and erm... it was really loud and fun and the atmosphere was brilliant. Um... the only bad thing about it was that I was sitting quite far back so I couldn't really see his face very well but I didn't have anything in the way of my view so it was OK. Um... I'd definitely recommend going to see Justin Timberlake because it is a big erm... and exciting show. Um... yeah, I really enjoyed myself.

APPENDIX 3: *New Cutting Edge Intermediate* "Recording 1", page 172.

A: So, there was a carrot, a scarf and some coal in the middle of some grass...

B: Yes.

A: ... but no one had put them there.

B: That's right. No one had put them on the grass.

A: So, how had they... how had these things got into the field?

B: Well, that's what you've got to find out, isn't it?

A: Hmm. Let me think. Had someone actually taken these things onto the grass? I mean they hadn't fallen from an aeroplane or something.

B: No, they hadn't fallen from an aeroplane. Someone had taken them into the field, but they didn't put them on the grass.

A: They didn't put them on the grass... so, how had they... ?

C: Had they put them somewhere else? Somewhere higher up, not on the grass? Is that right?

B: Yeah, you're getting there.

C: Yeah, I think I know this actually. Had there been snow on the ground at one stage, and that snow had melted?

B: Yeah, you've got it.

C: Yeah, and they'd made a snowman – y'know, carrot for the nose, coal for the eyes, scarf...

A: Oh, I see.

C: ... and when the sun came out, the snowman melted and the things ended up on the grass even though no one had actually put them there.

B: That's it! Simple, eh?

A: Well, it is if you know the answer!

B: I've got another one. See if you can get this one...