The use of conversation fillers in English
by Indonesian EFL Master's students*

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Fitriati, Sri Wuli, Januarius Mujiyanto, Endang Susilowati, and Perwari Melati Akmilia. 2021. The use of conversation fillers in English by Indonesian EFL Master's students. *Lingusitic Research* 38(Special Edition): 25-52. Fillers can be beneficial for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and have many functions. Although fillers are useful in spontaneous speaking, some learners have not been aware of how and when to use fillers in spoken communication. Some research studies investigated the use of fillers by EFL learners, but none has focused on a casual conversation in English. This article reports on a study that aims at investigating and examining the types and functions of fillers produced by Master's students of English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL Master's students). This group of learners is at the advanced level of English language learners, so it is necessary to look at their oral communication skills, such as casual conversations because this type of communication is relatively not easy for learners to engage. This is a qualitative case study that employs a conversation analysis. The participants are at a state university in Semarang, Indonesia. The data were collected from audio recordings which were then transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed by using Rose's (1998) theory of types of fillers and Stanstrom's (1994) theory of functions of fillers. The findings reveal that: (1) the students frequently used lexicalized fillers, followed by unlexicalized ones. The dominant lexicalized filler is *so*, whereas the dominant unlexicalized filler is *emm*, and (2) Fillers produced by the students function as hesitation, empathizer, mitigation, time-creating devices, and editing term. The findings are further discussed with the theory of communicative competence. Finally, this article presents some pedagogical implications of this study on teaching speaking to learners of English as a foreign language. **(Universitas Negeri Semarang)**

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, there has been some research focusing studies on the types and functions of fillers. Fillers are sounds or words or phrases that could appear anywhere in the utterance and could be deleted from the utterances without causing any changes (Baalen 2001). In line with that, Bygate (as cited in Santos et al. 2016) explains that fillers are expressions like *well, erm, hmm, you see*, *I mean* used in speech to fill in pauses. During spoken interactions, speakers are likely to use those expressions to create a delay that enables them to carry on the conversation. Thus, fillers are not part of the main message, but they make the sentences meaningful. Although fillers do not carry meanings in communication, they are used as communication strategies by speakers. They are applied to implicate, for example, that the speakers are searching for a word, are deciding what to say next, want to keep or cede the floor (Clark and Trees 2002). As in the Indonesian context, when an English as a foreign language (EFL) speaker and listener or interlocutor face communication problems, like lexical problems, they attempt to find strategies to keep the communication taking place smoothly and obtaining communication goals.

Developing communicative competence, especially communication strategies, is crucial to enable speakers to speak a foreign language fluently and to achieve the communication goal. Learning about communication strategies enables learners to become active speakers and listeners (Zulkurnain and Kaur 2014). Celce-Murcia (2007) argues that learners who can use the strategies effectively, i.e., who have strategic competence, tend to learn languages better and faster than those who are strategically inept. She conceptualized strategic competence as knowledge of communication strategies and how to use them. One of the communication strategies mentioned by Celce-Murcia (1995, 2007) is stalling or time gaining that includes fillers, hesitation devices, and gambits as well as repetitions (e.g., repeating what the other has said while thinking). As one of the communication strategies, fillers play significant roles, like filling the pause (e.g., *er, emm, eh….*), being used for self-correcting (e.g., *I mean…*), hesitating (e.g., *what is that…*), asking for help (e.g., *what is the English of…*), etc.

One of the indicators of successful language learning is learners' ability to use a language communicatively. In daily life, spoken communication or interaction happens naturally and spontaneously. Due to the nature of speaking, some cases may come up. In a face-to-face interaction or conversation, a speaker may produce spontaneous

utterances to keep the conversation flowing or make pauses in his/her talk. Moreover, the interlocutor or the addressee may provide various short responses to the speaker who speaks for an extended period. Hence, creating a good interaction requires the two speakers' efforts since simultaneously, the intelligibility of the speaker's speech seems to be of equal importance as they should be mutually understood for successful communication (Lee 2014).

Using a second or foreign language communicatively, on the other hand, is not easy and effortless for foreign language learners. English, especially as a global language, encompasses many types of L2 (second language) English varieties since it is spoken throughout the world (Park et al. 2020). Hence, it needs lots of effort, commitment, and awareness of interaction rules (Santos et al. 2016). It is indeed true since English is not commonly used in their daily communication. In Indonesia, for example, English is considered a foreign language and is only learned at school. Thus, Indonesian learners communicate in English only in the classroom context. Outside the classroom, they use their mother tongue or the national language, the Indonesian language. This situation explains why speaking in a foreign language is not easy.

EFL learners encounter difficulties in using the language since the English language is not used in their daily lives. A study conducted by Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014) reveals that communication difficulties commonly faced by English language students are resource deficit, processing time pressure, own-performance problem, and other performance problems. They further found that mainly the difficulty has resulted from students' lack of vocabulary attainment. As we can see from our experiences and observations, EFL learners commonly fail to maintain fluent speech in spontaneous speaking. They tend to have paused and may spontaneously utter random and meaningless words to fill the pauses.

Furthermore, studies of fillers become paramount, especially for EFL learners since they have various functions. The functions of fillers depending on the situation of the speaker. Stenstrom (1994) suggests that fillers have five functions: hesitation, empathizer, mitigation, editing term, and time-creating devices. Fillers and hesitation devices are commonly used among speakers as a strategy of processing and thinking time among them (Iliyas 2014). In addition, Erten (2014) asserts that speakers use fillers when they think and/or hesitate during their speech. Laserna et al. (2014) argue that speakers use fillers or filled pauses to either act as an unconscious sign of speech disfluency or serve as a signal sent by speakers to convey a particular message. They add that listeners also

tend to view filled pauses to indicate that they are unsure about what is being said.

Most studies investigated English fillers used by English native speakers (e.g., Clark and Tree 2002). Iliyas (2014) studies the usage of fillers and hesitation devices among students from a non-English major at a university in Malaysia. Her study is different from this present study in which this current study focuses on fillers used by English language students. This study is crucial to be conducted to gain a close picture of students' strategic competency and how the findings can inform them about their language competence and take further action as they are English language teachers and prospective teachers. As far as the researchers are concerned, research focuses on the utility of English fillers in the Indonesian context has been conducted only by a few researchers. For example, Kharismawan (2017) investigated the use of fillers in Barack Obama's speeches. Similar to Kharismawan (2017), Nur, Swastika, and Matin (2019) looked at the employment of fillers in a speech by Valentino Rossie, while Fatimah (2017) analyzed fillers used by a lecturer and students in EFL classroom interaction, and Navratilova (2015) took the data of fillers from students' argumentative talk. Therefore a closer examination on the use of fillers by Indonesian learners in casual conversation in English needed to be conducted. The students seem not to be aware yet of how and when to use fillers in communication. Indeed, it is interesting to explore the use of fillers in the EFL context and explore some pedagogical implications for teaching English.

This present study investigates the types and functions of fillers uttered by EFL Master's students in their casual conversation. Besides, this study examines some pedagogical implications of fillers in the teaching of English. Twenty Master's students in one class were selected purposefully in this current study. They take the major in English language education. They are advanced English learners, as shown by their TOEFL-like scores, which are above 450 when they took the graduate entrance test. These Master's students obtained a bachelor's degree in English language education from various local universities in Indonesia, and some of them are English language teachers at schools. Therefore, this study will give an insight into how they manifest their language competence through fillers usage.

Based on this background, this study focuses on examining the extent of usage of fillers as communication strategies among the learners, specifically during their casual conversation in English. The study tries to answer two questions:

(1) What types of fillers are uttered by EFL Master's students in their friendly and natural conversation?

(2) How do the fillers function in their conversation? The findings will provide significance theoretically, pedagogically, and practically in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical lenses

The study of fillers in language learning has a close relationship with communicative competence. To communicate in any foreign language, individuals need to develop not only the necessary linguistic competence but also the appropriate communicative competence (Holmes 2013; Chaika 2008; as cited in Santos et al. 2016). In other words, knowing how to pronounce words correctly, the use of grammatical rules appropriately, and relevant vocabulary are not sufficient to speak a foreign language successfully. Hence, we need to develop our understanding of the language function in a certain context that enables us to know what and how to say something to someone we are speaking to, where we are speaking, and what we are speaking about (Santos et al. 2016). Thus, using a foreign language requires us to develop our communicative competence which involves not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural knowledge, interactional skills, and communication strategies. In this case, fillers take part in communication since they belong to communication strategies, especially oral communicative competence.

Moreover, to achieve communication goals, making use of speaking strategies is very important. This has been emphasized by Celce-Murcia (2007) that learners who can make effective use of strategies (strategic competence) tend to learn languages better and faster than those who are strategically inept. One of the speaking strategies included in strategic competence is the use of fillers. Using fillers in communication helps speakers improve speaking naturalness and fluency, especially in spontaneous speech. In spontaneous speaking, speakers use fillers to make the speech sound natural and hold the floor. Pallawa (2013) found that one of the frequent conversation strategies used by students is fillers. He sums up that speaking strategies in conversation or communication help students get useful feedback from each other on their performances. In short, speaking strategies especially fillers simultaneously help students overcome their problems of insufficient linguistic knowledge of the target language.

In linguistics or applied linguistics, some experts such as Stenstorm (1994), Erten (2014), Bonano (2015), and Santos et al. (2016) provide definitions of fillers. Stenstorm, (1994) defines fillers as lexically empty items with uncertain discourse function, except to filler a conversational gap. He asserts that during oral interactions, speakers are likely to use expressions such as *well, I mean, actually, you know, let me think* to create a delay or hesitation to maintain the interaction taking place smoothly. According to Erten (2014), fillers are discourse markers used by speakers to think and/or hesitate during their speech. In line with that, Bonano (as cited in Navratilowa 2015) states that fillers are a "verbal bridge". They include expressions like *um, ah*, and words such as *like, so, ok*, which are used as a bridge to say what to utter next. Santos et al. (2016), furthermore, explain that fillers are also known as pausing or hesitation phenomena which are "a commonly occurring feature of natural speech in which gaps or hesitations appear during the production of utterances." They add that in natural speeches, people who speak slowly often use more pauses than people who speak quickly. In short, we can simply say that fillers are lexically empty items in certain utterances spoken by speakers to fill the pauses, to think, or to hesitate during their speech.

Fillers, which are also called filled pauses, have their types. Stenstrom (1994) categorizes fillers into two types. Those are silent pauses and filled pauses. Silent pauses are unfilled pauses when they occur in the middle of phrases and words. Meanwhile, filled pauses are hesitation in spontaneous speech partly or wholly taken up by a speech sound like *ah, err, uh, umm,* etc. Furthermore, Rose (1998) classifies filled pauses into two types: unlexicalized filled pause and lexicalized filled pause. Unlexicalized filled pauses are non-lexemes (non-words) filled pauses used by a speaker to indicate hesitation while he/she thinks what next utterances to say such as *ehm, uh, ee, ah, um,* and so on. Meanwhile, lexicalized filled pauses are fillers in the form of words or short phrases such as *like, well, yeah, you know, I mean*.

In a normal conversation, people use fillers and hesitations to show a need for a word or simply to plan their next utterance (Santos et al. 2016). As hesitation devices to fill the communication gaps, fillers have various functions depending on the situation of the speaker. Stenstrom (1994) asserts that there are five functions of fillers. They are *hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing terms, and time-creating devices*. Hesitations are pauses that appear in an utterance when a speaker has a difficult decision in using the words, such as *ee, umm, err, Uhm*, etc. Then, the speaker can use fillers as attention-getting devices or empathizing. They are used to check whether or not the

listener pays attention. The examples of fillers as empathizing purposes are *well, you know, right, hey*, etc. Next, fillers can also serve as mitigating devices. Fillers can mitigate utterances in order not to hurt the addressee's feelings (as a solidarity marker or politeness device). Furthermore, fillers also function as an editing term to correct speech errors in the speaker's utterances, such as *I mean, um, huh, ee*, etc. Last, fillers are used as a time-creating device to give some time for the speaker to think about what to say next. The common form of fillers used as the time creating is the lexical repetition.

2.2 Review of previous studies

There have been some scholars who researched fillers, such as Clark and Tree (2002), Barr (2009), Khojastehrad (2012), Erten (2014), Laserna et al. (2014), Navarretta (2015), Navratilova (2015), Pamolango (2016), Fatihurrahman (2016), Kharismawan (2017), Ansar (2017), Fatimah, Febriani and Apollonia, 2017; Riana, Murni and Sumarsih (2018), Stevani et al. (2018), Firiady and Mahendra (2019). Moreover, studies of fillers and their relation with communicative competence and communication strategies have been conducted by some scholars including Pallawa (2013), Iliyas (2014), Jonsson (2016), and Santos et al. (2016). The studies show various findings.

Some of those scholars focused their studies to examine the types and functions of fillers. Navratilova (2015) focused her study to examine the types and functions of fillers used by male and female students in argumentative talks. The study revealed that male and female students mostly produced unlexicalized fillers, followed by lexicalized fillers. Both male and female students produced fillers to fill a pause, to hesitate, to hold conversation turn, to empathize, to mitigate, to interrupt, and to edit their speech errors. Next, Pamolango (2016) examined the fillers used by Asian students in English questions and answers. The result of his study is in line with that of Navratilova's research. He found that students produced more unlexicalized than lexicalized fillers. They used fillers as a turn holder, as a mark of hesitation, as an empathizer, as a time-creating device, and as an editing term.

In line with those studies, Ansar (2017) investigated the kinds of fillers, vernacular style, and careful style used in conversation between student and language center staff. The findings showed that there are ten fillers used by the participants. Most of them were used to show the speaker's feelings, to make a statement less harsh, to include the listener

in the conversation, to make the simple statement, to reduce faults in making a statement, and to make the utterances more polite. Another study that supports the previous studies was conducted by Kharismawan (2017). He explored the types and functions of the fillers used in Barack Obama's speeches. The results of the study show that Obama produced both unlexicalized and lexicalized fillers. Furthermore, this study also reveals five functions of fillers used by Obama, namely hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, editing terms, and time-creating devices. The study concludes that learners of foreign language (FL) should know that fillers function not only as a distraction from speaking but also as a way to improve interaction.

Besides, some scholars were interested in conducting studies dealing with the types and functions of fillers used in classroom interaction (Erten 2014; Fatimah, Febriani and Apollonia 2017; Riana, Murni and Sumarsih 2018). Erten (2014) revealed that students tend to use fillers after they were taught about fillers and provided some activities which were relevant to practice using fillers in spoken interaction. Meanwhile, Febriani and Apollonia (2017) found that both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers were used by students and the lecturer in their interactions. In harmony, the fillers were also used by the kindergarten student in telling pictures in the classroom activities (Riana, Murni and Sumarsih 2018). In short, those studies confirm and support the theory stating that fillers are useful to support the flow of speech in interaction.

In addition to that, Clark and Tree (2003) investigated the use of fillers *uh* and *um* in spontaneous speaking. They concluded that speakers monitor their speech plans for upcoming delays worthy of comment. When the speakers discover such a delay, they tend to produce *uh* or *um*. Speakers can use these announcements in turn to implicate, for example, that they are searching for a word, are deciding what to say next, want to keep the floor, or want to cede the floor. *Uh* and *um* are conventional English words, and speakers plan for, formulate, and produce them just as they would say some words

Some other scholars examined fillers and their relation to communication strategies. Iliyas (2014) focused his study to look into the use of fillers and hesitation devices as a communication strategy among students in group discussions. His findings show that fillers and hesitation devices are generally used among speakers during group discussions. The findings also revealed that there are differences in terms of the usage of fillers and hesitation devices as communication strategies between the high and the low proficiency learners. In line with that, Pallawa (2013) found that one of the communication strategies used by speakers is fillers. The fillers help students overcome the conversation or

interaction problems due to insufficient linguistic knowledge of the target language.

Dealing with communication strategies for public speaking, Firiady and Mahendra (2019) investigated the use of fillers used by speakers in delivering a public lecture. The results showed that the filler words '*so, err,* and *um*' were frequently used by the speakers. They used fillers to introduce the speaker's ideas, to gain the audience's attention, or to give time for the speakers to search for the word.

Besides, Santos et al. (2016) present fillers and development of oral strategic competence in foreign language learning. They showed that not only the teaching of fillers has been neglected in the foreign language textbooks, but foreign language teachers, in general, also have overlooked or taken for granted that just because fillers are used in the students' L1; they will naturally develop their use in the foreign language that they are learning. Furthermore, they emphasized that teaching students how and when to use fillers or hesitation strategies is also important to warn them about the overuse of fillers. They concluded that FL students need to be made aware of fillers and the foreign language teachers tend to overlook or take for granted, thus forgetting that these small things can make a big difference, especially to students who are still in the process of learning to develop not only communicative competence but strategic competence when speaking in the FL.

Based on the theoretical lenses and previous studies discussed above, fillers function for EFL learners in many ways. However, learners have not been aware yet of how and when to use fillers in communication. The main concern of this present study is an exploration of the types and functions of fillers in students' casual conversations. The types and functions of fillers vary following the linguistic competence and strategic competence of speakers. There are several reasons why this study focuses on Master's students of English language education. It is because they are advanced learners of English. They obtained Bachelor's degrees in English language education so, it assumes they can speak English fluently enough. One way of observing their fluency is examining their oral language use in, particularly casual conversations. Assessing the students' casual conversation is needed because first, as the name suggests, it is casual – it needs interactivity, spontaneity, and naturalness (Thornbury 2005). Second, by examining fillers usage in casual conversations, it can explore their real-life communication strategies. And third, our preliminary observation showed that some students seemed to struggle to have casual conversations in English. In addition, casual conversation skills are not taught in textbooks and language classes. Therefore, it is no wonder that Master's students may

have the ability to talk about random topics but struggle greatly to have a natural conversation and be more spontaneous in English. Therefore, this study is urgent to provide pedagogical implications on teaching English as a foreign language. The findings of this study will help identify the areas lecturers might need to improve on.

3. Methods of the study

3.1 Research design

The study implemented a qualitative approach, and a case study was the research design. It attempted to describe the fillers usage among English language learners. The "case study of illustrative type was utilized to provide an in-depth example and description" (Iliyas 2014: 167) about the fillers used by the language learners in the casual conversation. The scope of the study is one selected group of Master's students majoring in English language education at a public university in the academic year of 2019/2020 in Semarang city, Central Java Province, Indonesia. They were in the second semester.

For this study, a Conversation Analysis was employed. Conversation analysis is a set of methods for working with audio and video recordings of talk and social interactions (Jack Sidnell, as cited in Nordquist, 2019; Kurniawan, Lubis, Suherdi and Danuwijaya 2019; Loi and Miin-Hwa Lim 2019). The researchers were interested in studying how language was employed in social interaction and worked inductively with empirical data recordings of naturally occurring talk or conversation (Flowerdew 2013: 117).

3.2 Context and participants

The research participants were twenty students of a Master's program in the Department of English language education at a university in Indonesia. Their age is around 23 to 26 years old. The main reason for choosing them as participants is that they are assumed to have advanced English proficiency; they have a TOEFL-like score above 450 in an English examination entry test to the university. Besides, they have studied English for many years since secondary school (at age 13 or even before 13). Thus, this study intends to examine their competence in using English and evaluate their

speaking fluency in their usage of fillers in their spontaneous conversation.

3.3 Data collection techniques

The data of this study were gathered from audio recordings of the students' conversations. As an elicitation, the participants were asked to perform casual conversations in pairs outside class hours with various topics that lasted for 12 – 15 minutes. Casual conversation in pairs is chosen as a unit of analysis in this study because it is spontaneous speaking. As it is natural, the students may talk about any topics they like to. This situation makes them feel free without being constrained by particular topics of discussion. The casual conversations appear to represent their language competence because they are interactive, two-way communication, spontaneous, and the students can choose a partner to talk to as they may feel convenient.

The participants did their casual conversation in English at home, boarding house, canteen, campus lobby, or anywhere else as comfortable as they felt to have the chats. They were asked to record their conversation by using recording devices or mobile phones. They were given a week time to do this task, including making the transcriptions. The students were told to transcribe their conversations. The transcription system focused on transcribing all utterances produced by the two speakers in one conversation. The transcription system chosen in this study was broad transcripts. "A broad transcript captures the essence of what is said, the words themselves or even their intended meaning" (Walsh 2011: 70). This way helped the researchers in identifying the fillers as the focus of the study. The identification of fillers was based on turn-taking. Turn-taking in conversation analysis means when people in a conversation take turns in speaking (Flowerdew 2013; Walsh 2011).

Then, the recording and the transcript of each pair were given to another pair to check. This strategy is called member checking. It means that a pair of students checked the transcript of the conversation of another pair of students, and they discussed the transcripts in the class "to see if they agree, argue with, or want to add to" the transcripts (Rallis and Rossman 2009: 266). This way improves the credibility of the data. After that, the researchers analyzed the data.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

The steps of analyzing data are as follows. First, the recordings and the transcripts that had been triangulated by the research participants were given to the researchers to analyse. The transcripts were analyzed by the research team to identify the fillers by highlighting, marking, and coding the utterances. The data of the filler types were categorized based on the taxonomy proposed by Rose's (1998) theory. The theory from Rose (1998) was selected to be used in this present study because it developed from Stenstrom's (1994) theory of filler types. Stenstrom's theory (1994) was employed in this current study because she describes how conversation works and provides a systematic account of the structure of spoken discourse and strategies speakers use to have a conversation. Further, her theory was developed by Rose (1998) which focused his research on the communicative value of filled pauses in spontaneous speech and related his findings to English language teaching. In his taxonomy, Rose classifies filled pauses proposed by Stenstorm (1994) into more detailed categories.

After categorizing the filler types, the data were analyzed to examine the functions of fillers according to Stenstrom's (1994) theory. Stenstrom's and Rose's taxonomy is used to analyzing spoken interaction or spoken discourse. Stenstrom provides a practical taxonomy with examples. The results of the analyses were tabulated to clearly show the filler usage. Finally, the researchers interpreted the findings. To help established trustworthiness of interpretation of the data analysis is to triangulate – that is, to analyze the data with a team of co-researchers (Rallis and Rossman 2009: 266). The co-researchers (i.e., the authors of this article) discussed the findings to open up alternative interpretations and strengthen the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

According to Mouter and Noordegraaf (2012), the attempt to discuss the reliability of the coding of the data is called intercoder reliability. In this study, multiple researchers (a research team of four people agreed on how to code the same contents. Our research team could code relatively consistently. We have adequate background knowledge about the theoretical foundation and have shared agreement on the procedures of analyzing the data.

4. Findings

4.1 Types of fillers used by students

To address the first research question (what types of fillers are uttered by EFL Master's degree students in their casual conversations), the number of tokens for each type of fillers in the transcripts of the students' conversations was counted. The findings show that the students in this present study used lexicalized fillers more than the unlexicalized ones. As Rose (1998) explains, unlexicalized fillers are non-lexemes (non-words) filled pauses used by a speaker to indicate hesitation while he/she thinks what to say next. Meanwhile, lexicalized filled pauses are fillers in the form of words or short phrases. The types and the occurrence of the fillers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types and occurrence of fillers used by students

No.	Types of Fillers	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Lexicalized Fillers	305	54.76
2	Unlexicalized Fillers	252	45.24
Total		557	100

Table 1 reveals that there are 557 fillers found in the transcript of EFL Master's students' conversations consisting of 305 lexicalized fillers and 252 unlexicalized fillers. Lexicalized fillers are mostly found in the conversations with the occurrence of 305 out of 557 fillers (54.76%). Meanwhile, unlexicalized fillers occur 252 times (45.24%). The finding indicates that the students tend to use lexeme words to fill the pause, hesitate, think, or say the next utterances. Details of the findings related to the types of fillers are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Lexicalized fillers

No.	Fillers	Number	No.	Fillers	Number
1.	So	44	17.	Well	3
2.	Yeah	44	18.	Exactly	2
3.	Ok	41	19.	The voice	2
4.	What is it	26	20.	Great	2
5.	Right	22	21.	And you	2
6.	I see	20	22.	And then	2
7.	By the way	18	23.	Really	2

8.	You know	15	24.	It means	1
9.	I mean	11	25.	Alright	1
10.	I think	10	26.	You mean	1
11.	Of course	7	27.	Maybe	1
12.	Yes	5	28.	Okay then	1
13.	I guess	4	29	You can	1
14.	Oh my God	3	30.	I can	1
15.	Actually	3	31.	I understand	1
16.	Then	3	Total		305

Table 3. Unlexicalized fillers

No.	Fillers	Number	No.	Fillers	Number
1	Emm	88	9	Eh	3
2	Hmm	59	10	Aha	2
3	Oh	43	11	Uw	1
4	Ah	26	12	Un huh	1
5	Aaa	15	13	Yup	1
6	Eee	6	14	Huh	1
7	Wow	3			
8	Yaa	3	Total		252

Lexicalized fillers are fillers in the form of words or phrases. As can be seen in Table 2, there are thirty-one forms of lexicalized filler words uttered by the students in their conversations. The five most frequent lexicalized fillers are *so, yeah, ok, what is it*, and *right*. The word *'so'* and *'yeah'* are the lexicalized fillers dominantly found in the conversation which similarly occurred 44 times in the students' talks, followed by *ok* (41 times), *what is it* (26 times), and *right* (22 times). The examples of lexicalized fillers in the conversations can be seen in (1) and (2).

(1) AD : "Well, thanks. *So*, I heard you have been married?"
    AJ : "Yes, that's right. I am a mother right now."
    AD : "Congratulations, Ajeng! I'm happy to hear that.
(2) ME : "Meatball? For the ifthaar?"
    EN : "Yes. Do you still remember hmm *what is it* the *mercon* meatball?"
    ME : "Oh my God. haha the spicy one?"

As can be seen in (1) and (2) , filler 'so' and '*what is it*' belong to lexicalized fillers

since both fillers are in the form of words or phrases.

Unlexicalized fillers, on the other hand, are non-lexemes (non-words) filled pauses which speakers use to indicate hesitation while the speakers think what to say next utterance. As shown in Table 3, there are 252 unlexicalized fillers uttered by the EFL Master's students consisting of fourteen filler words. The four dominant unlexicalized fillers used in the conversations are the fillers *emm, hmm, oh,* and *ah*. The filler *emm* is dominantly used with a number of occurrence 88 of 252. Then, it is followed by *hmm* (59 times), *oh* (43 times), and *ah* (26 times). Here are the examples of unlexicalized fillers as can be seen in (3) and (4).

(3) EF : "Do you watch his video when Rans did a prank to his mom?
    AR : " *Emm...* Which one?"
    EF : "In his mom's birthday."
(4) RE : "*Ah*, how about your thesis?"
    RI: "*Ah, hmm*, I just... I still have some revisions, but *emm* tomorrow *eee*
        today I have an appoinment to meet Prof. Yan.
    RE : "*Hmm...*"
    RI: "And tomorrow I will meet Bu Issy..."

In (3) and (4), we can see that the students used filler words to fill the pause and to think about what to say next. Filler '*emm', 'ah', 'hmm'*, and '*eee'* used by the students indicate unlexicalized fillers since the expressions are not in the form of words (non-lexemes) or phrases.

4.2 Functions of fillers used by students

This section discusses the findings concerning functions of fillers used by the students. As proposed by Stenstrom (1994), at least there are five functions of fillers: hesitating, empathizing, mitigating, time creating, and editing terms. These all five functions of fillers are used by the students in their casual conversations. The details of the finding are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Function of Fillers Used by the EFL Master Students

No.	Types of Fillers	Number	Percentage (%)
1.	Hesitation devices	128	22.98
2.	Empathizing devices	246	44.17
3.	Mitigation devices	64	11.49
4.	Time Creating devices	101	18.13
5.	Editing Term	18	3.23
	Total	557	100

Table 4 indicates that in the production of fillers, the students used all the functions of fillers proposed by Stenstrom (1994). Fillers as empathizer are the most frequent function used by the students with frequency 128 or 44.17%, followed by fillers as hesitation with an occurrence number of 128 or 22.98%; fillers as time creating devices with an occurrence number of 101 or 18.13%; fillers as mitigation with occurrence number of 64 or 11.49%; and fillers as editing term with occurrence number of 18 or 3.23 %. The dominant use of fillers as an empathizer indicates that the students tend to use fillers as attention-getting devices or attention from the listener to be involved in what the speaker says. It also functions as a response to inform the speaker that a message is received and understood. The followings are descriptions of the functions of filler in the students' conversations.

4.2.1 Hesitation devices

Hesitation is the second most dominant function of fillers used by the students. Fillers that indicate the function of hesitation can be seen in (5) and (6).

(5) HK : "So, how do you overcome your stomachache?"
    FS : "*Emm..* I drink a lot of water and reduce eating spicy food"
    HK : "Does it work?"
    FS : "Yes. It's better."
(6) EN : "What's going on?"
    ME : "How about our planning to go to *emm what is it* the Great Grand
        Mosque of Central Java?
    EN : "Oh yeah. I almost forget about it. When will we go there?"
    ME : "*Hmm..* how about *emm* fifteen of Ramadhan?

EN : "Fifteen of Ramadhan?"
ME : "Yes. Fifteen of ramadhan."

In (5), the filler '*emm*' was uttered by student FS by adding a slight pause. This is because FS required time to answer HK's question. Therefore, the filler '*emm*' functioned as a hesitation device to give FS time to think about what to say next. Moreover, in (6), the filler '*emm*' was uttered by ME by adding a slight pause and then followed by filler '*what is it*' as well as the filler '*hmm*' uttered by adding a slight pause. This indicates that those fillers appeared to give the speaker time to think because she was not sure what to say next. Thus, the fillers function as hesitation.

4.2.2 Empathizing devices

Empathizing devices or empathizer is the most dominant function of fillers found in this study. Fillers functioned as empathizers can be seen in (7) and (8).

(7) AR : ".... *So*, Rans can buy his car from his vlog? It's amazing!"
    EF : "Yeah. emm.. It's amazing. Rans was so excited and Niana was the first person who enter the car. Hahaha (*laughing*)
    AR : "Yeah, I watch it, they bought 40 large packs of French fries, *right*?"
    EF : "Yes, and the first time the server did not believe that they bought 40 packs. *So,* the server said: 1 large French fries? And Rans replied: No, Not 1, but 40 40 large packs of French fries."
(8) RI : "I think I will finish my revision as soon as possible so that tomorrow I can meet *Bu* Issy, *Bu* Wiwik, and if it is possible I will meet *Pak* Faridi, too, to have their signatures. I wish... I hope.. I can what is it eee.. do the data analysis as soon as possible so that I can what is it..."
    RE : "Continue to the next chapter?'
    RI : "Continue to the next chapter.
    RE : "*Ah,* I see. *So,* when will you go to your hometown?"
    RI : "*Ah, you know* we still have classes till 29, *right*?

As can be seen in (7), the words '*so*' and '*right*', and '*so*', '*you know'*, and '*right*' in (8), belong to filler words that function as empathizing devices in which they were uttered to get the listener's attention as well as to involve the listener's to what the speaker said. Besides, as empathizing devices, fillers are also used to show a response to inform the speaker that his/her message is received and understood. Filler '*ah*' in extract 8 shows the function.

4.2.3 Mitigation devices

Fillers can be used as a solidarity marker or politeness device. It means that fillers are used to make the speech more polite. Fillers that indicate the function of mitigation can be seen in (9) and (10).

> (9) EN : "... We plan to go there (MAJT), but you will be with *Mba*k Fitri. What about me?"
>   ME : "How about eee if you ask your friend in your boarding house?"
>   EN : "*OK*, but I'm not sure. I'll try because two of my friends in my boarding house are in period. So, I need to ask them whether they're available or not at the time."
> (10) HE : "Mbak Rulia, *by the way*, I have to go now."
>   RU : "Will you go to a private course?"
>   HE : "Yes, Mbak. I have some clasess today.'
>   RU : "OK. Take care."

In those examples, '*Ok*' and '*by the wa*y' are fillers as mitigating devices. EN uttered filler '*Ok*' then followed by *I'm sure* indicates that she wanted to say 'no' in a more polite way. Moreover, the phrase '*by the way*' uttered by HE was not an attention-getting device. Rather, it is a mitigating device to end the conversation. Hence, those fillers functioned as mitigation.

4.2.4 Time creating devices

The usual form of fillers used for time creating is lexical repetition. Fillers as

time-creating devices mean that the fillers give some time for the speaker to think about what to say next. (11) and (12) show fillers that function as time-creating devices.

(11) KI : "How about the preparation of your party?"
　　 AN : "Haha *(laughing)* the preparation is because it's quite.. *I have* so many ... *I have eee* several months to have the preparation. So, I think I just do several things, the important ones."
　　 KI : "In November, right? So, *you just ... you just* still have five months."
　　 AN : "Yeah. Five until six. Why? haha *(laughing)*"
　　 KI : "Yeah... yeah... I know... emm.. last year *I was ... I was* like yourself."
　　 AN : "Hmm.."
(12) AG : "What do you think about Pikachu?"
　　 AR : "Hmm... It's cute as the trailer showed us."
　　 AG : "*The voice... emm... the voice...* do you feel familiar with the voice?"
　　 AR : "You mean the voice of the actor? Yes, I come to recall that the voice is kinda too manly for such cute creature."

(11) and (12) show that there are some repetitions of words and sentences that indicate time creating. In (11), AN repeated the sentence '*I have*' twice followed by a slight pause and KI repeated the words '*you just*' and '*I was*' indicating that they were thinking what to say next. Then, in (12), AG repeated the phrase '*the voice*' which also indicates the time creating.

4.2.5 Editing term

The last function of fillers found in this study is editing term. Fillers that indicate the function of the editing term are used to correct speech errors in the speakers' utterances. In this case, these fillers function as self-correction. Fillers functioned as editing terms can be seen in (13) and (14).

(13) AJ : "Do you want to buy my batik?"
　　 AD : "Do you promote your batik?'
　　 AJ : "hahaha *(laughing)* Of course! Why not?"

AD : "Tell me about your product! May be I will be interested."

AJ : "With my pleasure. This batik is a product of Unggul Jaya Corporation in Pekalongan.. It is one of popular batik coorperations in Pekalongan. *Emm I mean* not only in Pekalongan, but also in Grobogan, Semarang, Surabaya, Tuban, etc."

(14) AR : "I'm quite surprised now knowing the fact that Ryan Reynolds is behind those two contradictive characters?"

AG : "emm.. meaning?"

AR : "Oh c'mon! Dreadpool and Pikachu are the total opposite, right? *I mean* like superhero and Pokemon?

AG : "Oh yes yes. That's the most hilarious part I agree."

As can be seen in (13) and (14), AJ used filler '*emm I mean*' and AR used filler '*I mean*' to correct their previous utterances. By using the fillers, the speakers clarify their speech.

5. Discussion

The research findings have provided evidence that there are various fillers used by the Master's students. The findings confirm the theory proposed by Rose (1998) that there are two types of fillers produced by students, namely lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers. Lexicalized fillers are more frequently used by the students, which appeared 305 times or 54.76%. This finding contradicts the findings of Navratilova (2015) and Pamolango (2016), which show that unlexicalized fillers were used more dominantly than lexicalized fillers in non-native English speakers' conversations. One factor that may cause such a different finding is because the students of Master's program that are assumed to have advanced English proficiency level have been familiar with relatively a wide range of vocabulary attainment so that they tend to use lexeme words to fill the pauses in their talk. This is also strengthened by the findings indicating that there were 31 forms of lexicalized filler words identified in the present study.

Although lexicalized fillers were dominantly used by the students, the unlexicalized filler '*emm*' was the most frequently used filler. Filler '*emm*' occurred 88 times of 252 unlexicalized filler. This finding supports Stevani et al. (2018) in terms of the most

frequently used simple filler. One of the factors that may affect the students to use unlexicalized filler 'emm' in their speech is because it is a simpler one. Students often uttered this filler by adding a slight pause. It indicates that the filler gave the speaker time to think as she/he seemed to hesitate what to say next.

This present study also shows that all of the speakers produced fillers in his or her talk. As the conversation is "the prototypical form of language use" and 'fluent speech is rare" (Clark and Tree 2002: 73), the use of fillers is usual. Using certain fillers is highly natural for native and non-native speakers of English. As supported by Khojastehrad (2012) and emphasized by Stevani et al. (2018), it is almost impossible to find speakers who did not use any filler at all while speaking even among the native speakers. It is also asserted by Pamolango (2016), that not only students from Asia as non-native English speakers produced more fillers, but also foreign language students who use English as the first language (native speakers). Further, Pamolango claims that the more difficult the language we use, the more fillers are produced. It naturally happens to speakers because they sometimes need to think or feel unsure about utterances they want to say. In this case, fillers proved their functions as a communication strategy to help speaking sound naturally (Iliyas 2014) and were useful in interaction (Riana, Murni and Sumarsih 2018).

In terms of filler functions, the findings of this study have similarities with and differences from some previous studies. In terms of similarities, this present study and the previous ones similarly found that the students used fillers to help them achieve five functions i.e. hesitation devices, empathizing devices, mitigation devices, time creating devices, and editing terms. On the other hand, the differences appear in terms of the most frequent function of fillers used. The students of this present study used fillers mostly as empathizing and fillers functions as editing terms were the least found. These findings are not in line with the findings of Clark and Tree (2002), Kharismawan (2017), and Stevani et al. (2018) who discovered that speakers mostly used fillers as a mark of hesitation to search for words what to say next. One factor that may cause these differences is that because this study focused on casual conversation, the students tend to use fillers more as empathizing to invite the listener to involve in the conversation attentively and indicate a response for the listener to inform the speaker that the message is received and understood.

The variation of types of fillers and their functions used by the students in this present study indicate their level of communicative competence. Celce-Murcia (1995,

2007) clearly explains that fillers by language users correlate with their linguistics competence and strategic competence. Linguistic competence includes lexical and syntactical knowledge. When the students use fillers because they feel hesitant and create time to think, it may be because they lack vocabulary resources. It also may be because they lack knowledge of sentence structure. Furthermore, the use of fillers is influenced by the level of strategic competence that is knowledge about communication strategies and how to use them. In terms of strategic competence, as Celce-Murcia (1995, 2007) emphasizes, the use of fillers by students in this study might have been influenced by at least three factors: First, psycholinguistic factors affect students in using fillers. They use fillers to overcome problems in reaching a communicative goal, for example, "avoiding trouble spots or compensating for not knowing a vocabulary item". Second, the students use fillers influenced by interactional factors. Some students use fillers because they appeal for help or other cooperative problem-solving behaviors which happen during the communication. Celce-Murcia (2007) further explains this is a negotiation of meaning and repair mechanism. The third factor influencing the use of fillers in the communicative competence theory is communication continuity or communication maintenance. Fillers are used by the students because they want their communication to keep going despite the communication difficulties they faced. They prefer to take time to think and make alternative speech plan. However, the findings indicate that students seem to overuse fillers in their conversations. It may come to some inferences that they should be taught explicitly to use fillers more appropriately by practicing speaking the English language more intensively.

This study has some pedagogical implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language. Firstly, to the group of EFL Master's students in the study, although they appear to have been able to use fillers appropriately based on their functions in their casual conversation, it seems that sometimes they overuse them. Therefore, lecturers should acknowledge this and make them improve their communication strategies. To EFL lecturers in general, since fillers are not explicitly involved in the teaching of speaking, teachers or lecturers need to teach various kinds of strategies to make EFL students aware of fillers use, including when and how fillers are used properly. As proven by Erten (2014), students tend to use fillers after they were taught about fillers explicitly. Besides, Jones and Carter (2014) investigated the use of two different teaching frameworks to teach the same spoken discourse markers. The study concluded that different teaching strategies or frameworks can produce different results although they are used to teach the

same thing. It may be used by teachers or lecturers as their consideration to design English lessons related to the teaching of spoken discourse. Secondly, teachers or lecturers need to encourage students to be involved in spontaneous verbal communication confidently so that they can use fillers appropriately. If spoken discourse markers are not explicitly introduced to students, they may use fillers inappropriately, causing overuse or less use of the fillers. This is supported by the finding of Bu's (2013) study that different individual identities result in different frequencies of discourse markers, including fillers. Thirdly, teachers or lecturers should never take for granted the overuse of fillers. Students need to be explicitly taught the positive and negative use of fillers so that they can use fillers properly to make their speaking sound natural spontaneously. Although there might be no teaching issue for the acquisition of fillers, being spoken discourse markers, the purpose is to increase learners' awareness of fillers, which is the very nature of speaking (Pamolango 2016). These are in line with what Santos et al. (2016) suggest that foreign language students need to be aware of the use of fillers and foreign language teachers tend to overlook or take for granted that these small things can make a big difference, especially to students who are still in the process of learning to develop not only linguistic competence but also strategic competence when speaking in a foreign language.

Although some experts argue that the use of fillers is normal for speakers, the most effective speech occurs when filler words are used moderately. Duval et al. (2014) assert that the overuse of fillers reflects speech disfluency that may cause massage not conveyed optimally. Duval also emphasizes that the overuse of filler words ultimately negates the speaker's credibility. It can reflect that the speaker lacks preparation so that it can decrease his/her credibility. This present study shows that the way students used unlexicalized filler '*emm*' in their speech frequently may indicate speech disfluency in which they tend to think or hesitate while looking for words or ideas to say next. If this happens frequently it will decrease the speaker's credibility. Thus, to be able to use fillers properly, the students should have a better understanding of fillers and the importance of fillers.

Furthermore, increasing EFL students' understanding and knowledge of how and when fillers are used in verbal communication will help students improve their communication strategies as well as develop their communicative competence. Teaching a language means training students to use the language communicatively, effectively, and meaningfully. As Bygate asserts (as cited in Khojastehrad 2012), EFL teaching is basically struggling to prepare learners to be able to use the language efficiently in a

real-life situation and employ communication skills in the target language. Thus, teachers or lecturers need to teach the students about fillers explicitly so that they are aware of the important role fillers play in conversation.

6. Conclusion

This study has discussed the types and functions of fillers used by EFL Master's students in casual conversations. The findings show that the students produced both lexicalized and unlexicalized fillers as proposed by Rose (1998). The five most frequent lexicalized fillers uttered are *so, yeah, ok, what is it*, and *right*. *So* is mostly used for empathizing. It indicates that the students tend to use lexeme words to fill the pause, hesitate, think, or say the next utterances. These findings are different from those of previous studies concerning the types of fillers used by non-native speakers.

In terms of the functions of fillers, this study reveals that the students used fillers to achieve five functions as proposed by Stenstrom (1994), namely hesitation, empathizer, mitigation, time-creating devices, and editing term. The fillers produced by the students were mostly used for empathizing, which indicates that the students tended to use fillers as attention-getting devices or attention for the listener to be involved in what the speaker says as well as a response to inform the speaker that the message is received and understood. These findings are different from some earlier studies' findings which found that speakers used fillers as a mark of hesitations more dominantly than other functions.

Increasing EFL students' understanding and knowledge of how and when fillers are used in verbal communication is important. Although fillers are useful in spontaneous speaking, the overuse of fillers can decrease the speaker's credibility and reflect speech disfluency. Therefore, to make students use fillers proportionally, teachers or lecturers need to teach students about the importance of fillers explicitly and provide students ample opportunities to practice speaking English.

To sum up, this study provides some pedagogical implications. Firstly, teachers or lecturers need to teach various kinds of strategies to make EFL students aware of fillers use, such as when and how fillers are used properly. Secondly, teachers or lecturers need to encourage students to get involved in spontaneous verbal communication confidently. Thirdly, teachers or lecturers need to teach the students explicitly about the positive and negative uses of fillers so that they can use fillers properly to make their speaking sound

natural. In short, increasing EFL students' awareness of the importance of fillers in verbal communication will help them improve their communication strategies as well as develop their communicative competence.

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