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Exploring the Use of Hesitators in Kurdish Learners of English Conversation

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Abstract

Speakers frequently utilize fillers to gain time while they generate thoughts. This behavior is known as the pause or hesitation phenomenon. The study aims to identify the most commonly used hesitators during spoken interactions. It will categorize hesitators into various groups, helping to identify which types are more prevalent and which present challenges for learners. Through the classification of hesitators, the study will highlight particular difficulties learners encounter with their language usage. Analysis showed that students used hesitators, such as silent hesitator and filled “uh”, “ah”, “eh and “um,” an average of 38 times per class, largely during complicated discussions. Hesitators acted as time-gaining devices, markers of uncertainty, and turn-taking facilitators. Their overuse occasionally stifled fluency, while their effective use aided communication. Teachers are called to increase awareness of the usage of hesitators, present alternative tools, and encourage their polysemous interpretation.



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1. Introduction

Hesitators are more widely recognized as “filled pauses”, which are utterances made by speakers during conversation to signal a pause for consideration of what to say next or that they have not finished their speech. Common ones include “ah,” “um,.” They help us buy time while we process what someone has just said, or help with turn-taking in dialogue. Despite being commonly classified as a type of disfluency because of their interfering nature with the flawless production of speech, hesitation markers are considered a natural aspect of the spoken language. They are based on and reflect different cognitive processes producing speech, and serve pragmatic purposes by cueing listeners on the speaker's communicative intent. This clerical role indicates that hesitation markers can serve as both the symptoms of cognitive delays and cues for listeners, emphasizing their importance in the art of communication (Leeuw, 2007).

Studies on hesitators have shown that people produce speech disfluencies, such as "uh," "er," and others to fill their thinking time, which ultimately leads to valuable information on second language acquisition. They are often caused by the search for an appropriate lexical item to mirror the speaker's cognitive load, which can be higher if the context is unexpected or unknown. Disfluency is important in learning a language. For example, understanding that disfluencies serve as markers of transition in thinking may help students accept and appreciate pauses as part of the linguistic flow, rather than thinking of them as indicators of something that is missing. Additionally, the study of hesitators can also provide insight into the cultural/disciplinary differences impacting speech, enabling language teachers to adapt their practices to address specific struggles with fluency experienced by students (Schachter, et al., 1991).

Hesitators have a notable impact on the course of conversation. The frequent use of hesitators by speakers often leads to pauses that create confusion or misinterpretation for listeners, who might think that the speaker is unsure or not confident enough. This can take away attention from what is being said, and direct it towards how the speech is spoken, including all delivery and timing events. Moderate levels of hesitators can promote smoother interactions by giving speakers time to organize their thoughts without surrendering their turn. Of course, some stall between thought and expressed sentences is to be expected, but there must be a relative balance between how many there are or it will hinder effective communication with the audience, potentially resulting in it withdrawing from engaging in the conversation entirely (Gilquin, 2008).

Hesitators are inserts, often spontaneous utterances like ‘ah,’ ‘uh,’ or ‘um,’ emerge during conversations when individuals briefly lose their focus. These fillers reflect that the speaker remains engaged, indicating they are still paying attention to the dialogue. Moreover, they assist listeners in keeping track of the conversation during pauses. Inserts contribute to effective communication by revealing insights into the speaker's thoughts and emotions at that moment. They bridge pauses, ensuring that discussions continue smoothly despite interruptions. Thus, they are essential for preserving engagement and clarity in interactions (Goffman, 1981).

Moreover, Biber, et al. (2002) state that they are expressions mainly found in mostly in spoken language and are not an integral part of the sentence structure. Instead, they can be added as desired in both speech and writing. These expressions are often marked by pauses or punctuation, conveying emotional reactions or conversational meaning. For instance, exclamations like ‘Oh,’ ‘Ah,’ or ‘emm’ reflect hesitation in conversation.

1.1 The Position of Hesitators

According to Boonsuk, et al. (2019, p. 8), hesitators can be found in initial, medial, and final positions. For example:

1. Initial position: *Erm*. When my mother was alive, I was very happy.
2. Medial position: It was clear that *uh*, he wasn't going to do it.
3. Final position: She said she'd be back soon... I guess, *uh*.

The findings of their study indicate that hesitation markers predominantly occur in the medial position within utterances. Goldman-Eisler (1958) states that hesitators are distributed without an obvious system. About half of the pauses in the spontaneous speech investigated occurred within clauses.

1.2 The Functions of Hesitators

Hesitations are not merely pre-linguistic; they act as supplementary events that assist in delineating and defining linguistic units. Rather than serving as basic data for structural analysis, their role emphasizes their directed connection to language forms. Filled pauses indicate to the listener that the speaker intends to continue speaking, thus maintaining conversational flow (Maclay & Osgood, 1959). According to Cenoz (1998), hesitators can serve several functions. They can function physiologically to enable the speaker to breathe. Additionally, they can serve as a cognitive mechanism to facilitate the planning of speech and as a communicative tool to aid the listener in recognizing divisions within the speech flow.

These elements in conversation reveal the speaker's uncertainty, showing they have not finished their thoughts yet. Inserts like 'uh' or 'um' are the most common hesitators used among speakers. The phrases indicate that the speaker is uncertain, either due to his environment or challenges in fluency with the language he is using (Biber, et al., 2002). Speakers frequently utilize fillers to gain time while they generate thoughts. This behavior is known as the pause or hesitation phenomenon. In a speech, moments of stillness or hesitations can be marked by sounds such as 'um', 'er', 'mm', and similar expressions. The most typical forms of pauses include silent intervals and filled pauses or hesitations. In daily conversations, various techniques are employed to correct oneself when making mistakes, either unintentionally or due to misunderstandings, and this process is known as other repairs. When a speaker rectifies his error, it is called self-repair; if it is done by someone else, it is known as another repair (Das, 2023).

1.3. Types of Hesitators

1.3.1 Silent Hesitators

Silent hesitators are pauses in speech when there is a gap in fluency. Silent hesitators have two major forms: Listener judgment plays a crucial role in identifying instances of unusually long silence and the non-phonemic lengthening of phonemes. For example, what one speaker perceives as an unfilled pause may not be regarded the same way by another speaker who delivers at a slower pace (Maclay & Osgood, 1959). For example:

4. **Speaker A:** What do you think about the design?
Speaker B: Maybe we should change the design.

1.3.2 Filled Hesitators

Filled hesitators are verbal pauses where the speaker uses sound signals. One particular type of disfluency is filled pauses like 'ah', 'uh', 'ahm', and 'uhm'. Filled pauses are a frequent phenomenon in human communication. They can be put at any position in an utterance and are used when a speaker encounters planning and word-finding problems (Clark & Tree, 2002). Filled hesitators are used by the speaker for complex word choices, proposes that speakers form utterances using structured "phonemic clauses." and that pauses are used to organize the phonemic clause

immediately following (Goldman-Eisler, 1958). For example:

5. **Speaker A:** Do you have any idea what language is?

Speaker B: *Umm*, language is a specialized sound-signaling system.

1.4 The Reason for Hesitation

There are many reasons for hesitation. Commonly, people hesitate during speaking to take a breath, prepare to continue speaking, try to decide what to say, etc. According to Carrol (2008), there are three underlying reasons why speakers hesitate during conversations.

The first reason is linguistic planning which is a complex cognitive task that requires considerable mental resources. When individuals attempt to formulate their thoughts into coherent speech, the intricacies of language, including grammar, vocabulary, and context, demand significant cognitive effort. This cognitive load can lead to pauses and hesitations as speakers navigate through their ideas and structure their sentences effectively. Another reason is that planning an entire utterance at once poses significant challenges for speakers. The intricate nature of language means that constructing a complete sentence involves multiple cognitive steps, including selecting appropriate words, organizing them grammatically, and ensuring clarity of thought. Due to this complexity, speakers often find it more manageable to develop their statements in smaller, more manageable portions. The third reason is that when speaking, individuals commonly plan only a portion of their utterance at any given time, instead of trying to construct the entire message in one go. This segmented approach helps reduce cognitive overload and allows speakers to focus on the immediate linguistic tasks at hand. However, it can also lead to interruptions and hesitations as they transition between different segments.

2. Methodology

The researcher used a mixed method. A descriptive qualitative approach is used to examine the occurrence and intended meaning of hesitators used by Kurdish learners in English conversation in their speaking performance. Moreover, a quantitative approach is used to examine the occurrence frequency of hesitators. The study analyzes the types, function, and frequency of hesitators, aiming for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, data was systematically collected on the topic using class observation techniques, including note-taking and voice recordings. These recordings were subsequently reviewed to extract relevant data. The observations focused on third-year students in the English Department at the College of Education, Salahaddin University-Erbil, during the 2024–2025 academic year. As for analysis, speech recordings were transcribed and coded for hesitator types. A statistical tool, namely MS Excel was used to determine correlations between hesitator usage, proficiency levels, and conversational complexity in learners' spoken conversation. Then hesitators were categorized according to their types and sub-types.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

To analyze the data, the hesitators used by the third-year students of the English Department in the College of Education at Salahaddin University-Erbil for the academic year 2024-2025 were counted, and their percentages were computed. As shown in Table (1), the most frequently used hesitator was filled "um" (36.84%), followed by filled "eh" (31.58%). Filled "ah" came third, with a percentage of (15.79), followed by silent pauses accounting for (10.53%), while filled "uh" is the least favored hesitator among Kurdish learners of English conversation with an occurrence of 2 times (5.26%).

Table 1: General Distribution of Hesitators

Type of Hesitator	Frequency	Percentage	Function	
Silent: (.....)	4	10.53%	A non-verbal pause that suggests deep thought or uncertainty.	
Filled:	Um	14	36.84%	Indicates hesitation while thinking about what to say next.
	Eh	12	31.58%	Expresses uncertainty to gain time or difficulty in finding the right words.
	Ah	6	15.79%	Used to signal a pause before responding, often for clarification or recall.
	Uh	2	5.26%	Shows hesitation due to nervousness or searching for an idea.
Total	38	100%		

The analysis of the data revealed that Kurdish learners of English favor certain types of hesitators in their English conversation. The above table provides the distribution of hesitators focusing on types, frequency, and function. The findings indicate that Kurdish learners clearly favor filled hesitators rather than silent ones. The learners heavily rely on filled “um”, i.e. before verbalizing their speech, they process their thoughts. Furthermore, speakers rely on hesitators during complex speech or while talking about abstract concepts.

3.2 Discussion

The results demonstrate that hesitators are a crucial part of the conversation of Kurdish learners' spoken English. These elements serve various functions including gaining time, signaling uncertainty, and clarifying thoughts. Therefore, the preference for "um" and "eh" tells us that learners rely more on these verbal markers than silent pauses or "uh." This can be attributed to the influence of the Kurdish language, where users may insert similar elements in conversation. According to the findings, the silent and filled hesitators were used frequently. Among all hesitators, 10.53% were categorized as silent pauses. It indicates that speakers often face a lack of certainty or lack of lexical words while they process their speech.

6. we need to signal the speaker that we understand.

The mentioned statement illustrates that the speaker is having thoughts while speaking English, which is due to being uncertain about the speech. The speaker relied on the silent hesitator for better planning. Moreover, the silent pause is found in the medial position. This aligns with previous studies (Goldman-Eisler, 1958) that found silent pauses to be predominantly medial within utterances. Silent pauses also indicate deep cognitive processing, suggesting that learners are mentally structuring their responses before verbalizing them. The most common filled hesitator used in the study was “um,” which made up 36.84% of the instances. It is used mainly as a time-gaining device that enables speakers to gather their thoughts before saying them aloud. Maclay & Osgood (1959) note that excess use of hesitation markers interrupts the natural development of conversation, giving the impression that the speaker is not confident. In a professional and academic environment, speakers who downplay fillers are more likely to be viewed as competent and eloquent.

7. *Um*, so, I have to make sure you get it.

In the above example. “um” demonstrates the difficulty in finding the right words to generate a correct sentence. According to Clark & Tree (2002) in the case of filled pauses such as “Um,” speakers facing difficulties in lexical retrieval use them to make sure that the conversation flows consistently. So, the prevalence of “um” among Kurdish speakers of English indicates that they depend on fillers when trying to form complicated or abstract sentences. This aligns with previous findings that non-native speakers often use such fillers while organizing their speech, revealing

cognitive processing in second-language acquisition. The second most commonly used filled hesitator was “eh,” accounting for 31.58% of the occurrences. This also serves as a marker of vacancy, a hint that the speaker does not have the precise word yet or is struggling to arrive at an answer. While “um” gives people time to gather their thoughts, using it too often can affect the rhythm and clarity of their speech. Clark & Tree (2002) further state that although hesitation markers such as "um" and "uh" can be used to indicate planning difficulties, they can also be overused which might make the speaker appear to throw out his words to create a whole sentence, which, in return, might ruin the impact that the speech has on the audience.

8. Sounds like *eh* she’s walking in Encyclopedia.

In the given example, the element is used in the medial position to gain time. As per (Biber, et al., 2002) hesitation markers such as “eh” are communicative tools that allow the audience to identify boundaries in discourse. The high occurrence of this filler in Kurdish language learners of English indicates their reliance on it to buy time, especially when processing novel vocabulary or more intricate syntactic structures. This reliance may also stem from linguistic transfer from Kurdish, where similar hesitation markers exist. The filled hesitator “ah” made up 15.79% of measured hesitations. It often comes right before a response, helping speakers jog their memories or organize their thoughts. Hesitation markers, as established in research by Goffman (1981), are communication tools that assist the speaker in conveying that the conversation is still ongoing; however, the addition of these fillers introduces inefficiencies in communication due to the time lost in producing the sentence. The use of filler expressions like “eh” would reduce the dignity of a speaker engaged in formal speech.

9. Erbil is *ah* special to us.

In the given instance, the use of “ah” indicates that some thoughts are getting involved in the speech. According to Goldman-Eisler (1958), such fillers reflect a speaker’s cognitive involvement, indicating that they are actively processing and organizing what to say. The fact that Kurdish learners apply “ah” so often indicates that it is an essential part of their response structure, especially for recall-based questions. Moreover, the tendency to include this type of filler indicates that language learners may have difficulty with spontaneous speech, emphasizing the importance for language teachers to build their students' fluency by engaging them in conversations. The least used filled hesitator was “Uh” which appeared twice (5.26%). This filler usually denotes a pause due to nervousness and/or struggling to find the right words.

10. *Uh*, I don’t know if you can see.

The use of “uh” demonstrates that the speaker is doubting his speech. Research by Maclay & Osgood (1959) suggests that “uh” is common in stressful scenarios where speakers are insecure about their verbal output. As observed from Kurdish learners, there is very little use of "uh," so it seems that when Kurdish learners hesitate, they prefer "um" or "eh" instead, which may make sense as they are more comfortable with it, where an "um" at the start of the word may be more familiar than a hesitating "uh". This result underscores the impact that linguistic background has on the use of fillers, indicating that more tailored instruction in language can help overcome issues with fluidity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of hesitators in the conversation of Kurdish learners of English provides a window into their fluency and cognitive processing stages. The top hesitator of “um” (36.84%) suggests that learners hinge on this use to sort their ideas before speaking out loud. Similarly, “eh” (31.58%) acts as an uncertainty marker, indicating the trouble of learners to find the right words. “ah” (15.79%)

is mostly used for recall and clarification which indicates that speakers relied on it to form the structure of their responses. The least used filled hesitator is “uh” (5.26%), which implies that this filled marker is being avoided by learners since they were showing an inclination towards other fillers, and through the influence of Kurdish, they are avoiding such a filler.

These findings explain that hesitation markers serve as cognitive tools that aid speech planning. The prevalence of filled hesitators rather than silent pauses and the absence of a clear indication of a stoppage demonstrates that the Kurdish learners attempt to keep the speech flowing despite occasional difficulties. On the downside, an overindulgence in hesitators might inhibit fluency, so there is a need for teachers to present strategies to limit an overreliance on these. Language educators can improve students' oral performance by making them cognizant of hesitator functions and learning alternative discourse strategies. Further research should also consider the potential impact of culture, language, and non-native speakers' background on hesitation patterns.

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ليكوليه ووه له به كارهيناني نامرازه دوودليه كان له گفتوگوي ئينگليزي فيرخوازي كورد

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پوخته

ئاخيوهان زورچار بۆ به دهستهيناني كات له كاتي به رهه مهيناني بيروكه كاندا، ده برينه پر كه ره وه كان، يان نيشانه دوودليه كان به كار ده هينن. ئەم رەفتارەش بە وهستان يان دياردهي دوودلي ناسراوه. ليكوليه ووه كه به دووي دياريكردني شوي نيشانه كانني دوو دلي له كاتي كارليكي ئاخواتندا ده كاته ئامانج. نيشانه كانني دوودلي به كاتيگوري ده كرين بۆ سه ر دوو گرووي جوړاو جوړ. يارمه تي ناسينه وه ي يان دياريكردني كام جوړيان له هه موويان باوتره و كاميان چالينجيك ده خاته به رده م فيرخوازان. شيكرده وه ي ئاماري ده ريخستوه كه فيرخوازان به تيكراي (38) جار له وانه يه كدا ده برينه بيدهنگ و پر كه ره وه كاي وهك (ئو، ئا، ئي، ئم) يان به كار هيناوه. به زوريش له ماوه ي وتوويزه ئالوزه كاندا. نيشانه كانني دوودلي وهكو هوكاري به دهستهيناني كات و ديارخه ري نه بووني دلنياي و ئاسانكاري بۆ نوره گرتن بۆ قسه كردن رهفتار ده كهن. له كاتيكا به كار هيناني چالاكانه يان يارمه تيده ره له په يوه نديكردندا، به لام زيده روي كردن له به كار هينانيان جاروبار ته گه ره ده خاته به رده م ئاخواتن به شيوه يه كي ره وان. پيشنيازي نه وه بۆ ماموستايان ده كات كه وريابي بدن له زور به كار هيناني ده برينه پر كه ره وه كان و په نا بيه نه به ر هوكاري جيگه وه ي ديكه و وروژاندي ليكده انه وه ي فره و اتا

ووشه سه ره كيه كان: نامرازه دوودليه كان، جوړه كان، ده ركه وته، كوردي، وتوويز

استكشاف استخدام المترددين لدى متعلمي اللغة الكردية في المحادثة باللغة الإنجليزية

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المخلص

يستخدم المتحدثون بشكل متكرر كلمات زائدة لاكتساب الوقت اثناء توليد الأفكار، وهي ظاهرة تُعرف بالتوقف أو التردد في الكلام. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد أكثر كلمات التردد شيوعاً في التفاعلات الشفهية. وتعمل على تصنيف هذه الكلمات إلى فئات مختلفة، مما يساهم في تحديد الأنواع الأكثر انتشاراً وتلك التي تمثل تحديات خاصة لمتعلمي اللغة. من خلال هذا التصنيف، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الصعوبات المحددة التي يواجهها المتعلمون في استخدام اللغة. كشف التحليل أن الطلاب استخدموا كلمات التردد، مثل الترددات الصامتة والترددات الممتلئة كـ "اه، أي، أم، أو" بمعادل (38) مرة في كل حصّة، خاصة أثناء المناقشات المعقدة. وقد أدت هذه الترددات وظائف متعددة. حيث عملت كأدوات لاكتساب الوقت، ومؤشرات على عدم اليقين، ووسائل لتيسير تبادل الأدوار في الحديث. وعلى الرغم من أن الإفراط في استخدامها قد يعيق الطلاقة، فإن توظيفها بفعالية أسهم في تعزيز التواصل. وتوصي الدراسة بضرورة زيادة وعي المعلمين والمتعلمين باستخدام كلمات التردد، وتقديم استراتيجيات بديلة لإدارة هذه الظاهرة، وتشجيع المتعلمين على فهم وظائفها المتعددة في التواصل اللغوي.

كلمات المفتاحية: المترددين، الأنواع، التكرار، الكردية، المحادثة