



Listening to Real-World English, Part 2: Filled Pauses

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This article is the second in a three-part series on developing language learners' ability to listen to real-world spoken English. The [first article](#) discussed connected speech and provided a lesson plan, and the third will discuss backchanneling.

In many real-world speaking contexts, the speaker is composing and uttering at the same time. This results in numerous hesitation phenomena that are common to unplanned (unscripted) speech. In English, filled pauses are perhaps the most salient type of hesitation phenomena. They can be nonlexical (*um* or *uh*) or lexical (e.g., *you know*, *like*) and serve a number of purposes. Often, speakers unconsciously use these fillers while planning what they are going to say next. By verbalizing the pause, the speaker indicates that he or she does not want to give up the floor. Indeed, filled pauses are much more common than unfilled (silent) pauses among advanced English speakers. Sometimes, a speaker's repetition of a word or phrase is essentially a filled pause; the speaker repeats the word or phrase while processing what to say next.

Numerous research studies have shown that spoken texts with hesitation phenomena can be more challenging for lower ability second language (L2) listeners than texts without them. Griffiths (1991) argued that filled pauses present comprehension difficulties for L2 listeners because these listeners do not recognize them as filled pauses, but instead try to assign semantic meaning to them.

Rationale

There are numerous filled pauses in the spoken text used for the lesson provided here, and drawing listeners' attention to these pauses should serve to make learners much more aware and conscious of just how prevalent they are in unplanned, real-world spoken English. Because learners will both hear and see the filled pauses in the spoken texts and in the transcripts, the ubiquity of filled pauses in spoken language should be particularly salient for the learners (Wagner, 2014).

It is likely that some or most of the students will be aware of the typical filled pause in English (*uh* or *um*), but the idea that expressions such as *you know*, *like*, and *I mean* also serve as filled pauses in English may be new. Even if they have heard these words or phrases used in different contexts, they probably were not made aware of how commonly they are used in English as

fillers, and the discussion of how these fillers function in English will serve as a useful consciousness-raising task.

One of the discussion questions asks the students if they are surprised that the vast majority of the pauses are filled pauses (rather than silent pauses). Silent pauses are much more common in L2 English speech than in native language (L1) speech, and discussing this question, as well as hearing the filled pauses in the L1 speakers' conversation, will help learners become aware of this. In addition, asking the students if they use silent pauses in their own speech should serve to reinforce this notion.

The following lesson is designed to make L2 listeners aware of what filled pauses sound like, and also to make listeners aware of just how common they are in spoken English.

Lesson 2: Understanding Filled Pauses

Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Audiotext: “Tiger Farm” and basic transcript• Appendix A: Student handout (“Tiger Farm”: Comprehension Activities)• Appendix B: Student handout (“Tiger Farm”: Filled Pauses)• Appendix C: “Tiger Farm” transcript (0:00 to 1:21) that indicates the filled and unfilled pauses, repetitions, and backchannels
Audience: WIDA level 2; CEFR A2
Objective: Students will be able to identify filled pauses in real-world speech.
Outcome: Students will <ul style="list-style-type: none">• listen to an audiotext,• identify filled and silent pauses in the audiotext, and• evaluate their experiences with pauses in speech.
Duration: 45 minutes–1 hour

Procedure

1. Break students into groups of four and introduce “Tiger Farm” through the prelistening activity (Appendix A, Part 1), which taps into learners’ background/contextual knowledge. This audiotext is from www.elllo.org, which is an excellent resource for finding authentic, real-world spoken texts for L2 lessons. In this audio clip, two speakers are discussing a “Tiger Farm” in Thailand in which people can interact with live tigers. The entire text is 4 minutes and 5 seconds, but only the first 1 minute and 21 seconds are used for this teaching task, and only the first 42 seconds are used to focus on the filled and unfilled pauses aspect of the lesson (with advanced listeners, the entire text can be used, and the lesson expanded).
2. Move into the while-listening task (Appendix A, Part 2), focusing on overall comprehension. Play the text from 0:00 to 1:21.

3. In their groups of four, students discuss Postlistening Task A (Appendix A, Part 3), focusing on comprehension of the text. Then, have them review Postlistening Task B (Appendix A, Part 3), and allow them to listen to the audiotext again before answering the questions in their groups.
4. After the comprehension activities, draw students' attention to the filled pauses by asking the class if they heard any pauses or hesitations in the "Tiger Farm" text. Students will volunteer responses to the rest of the class. Follow up with an explanation about how pauses can be unfilled (silent), or they can be filled, in which the speaker says a word or makes a sound while pausing. Stress that these pauses occur in almost all speech, that they are incredibly common among native-speaker speech, and that most speakers and listeners are not even aware of them. You can even use yourself as an example, stating how commonly you have filled pauses in your own speech.
5. Ask, "What do filled pauses sound like in English?" Give students 1 minute to work in pairs to come up with all the examples of filled pauses they can think of in English, and then share out with the class. Write all the filled pauses on the board (making sure to include common fillers such as *uh*, *um*, *you know*, *like*, and *I mean*), and also tell the class that pauses can also include repetitions, such as repeating a word or series of words.

Then ask, "What do filled pauses sound like in your native language?" and lead a short class discussion. If the class has an L1 in common, they can discuss it as a class. If there are many L1s represented, students can volunteer what they sound like in their respective L1s.

6. Hand out the student handout "Tiger Farm": Filled Pauses (Appendix B), which includes a transcript of the "Tiger Farm" text, and give students 1 minute to read the transcripts. Then, explain that there are many pauses in the text and that students should try to listen for the pauses and write down on the transcript every pause that they hear. If there is a silent pause, the students should indicate that by writing "SP." Play the audiotext again (only the first 41 seconds).
7. After the text finishes playing, students work in the same pairs to compare their transcripts and discuss any disagreements or discrepancies. Next, play the text again, instructing the learners to see if they hear any additional pauses and to modify their transcription if necessary. After the second playing, lead a class discussion of which pauses were present, and/or distribute or display a completed transcript of the text with all the pauses noted (Appendix C), and discuss which were most common. If appropriate, you can play the text a third time, so that learners can follow along with the transcript to simultaneously see and hear the pauses in the text.

After the final listening, give students about 2 minutes to answer the follow-up discussion questions in the handout (Appendix B). Lead a class discussion explaining that advanced English speakers have pauses in their speech when they are thinking about what to say and how to say it. Also, advanced English speakers tend to use filled pauses, rather than

silent pauses, when speaking. Ask the class if they use any of these filled pauses when they are speaking English, and how they feel about using them.

8. (Optional) Tell students that you also naturally use filled pauses in your spoken language, and that for the next few days, students should shout out “filled pause” every time they hear you use a filled pause in your speech.

Conclusion

Hesitation phenomena, especially filled pauses, are ubiquitous in unplanned spoken language, yet many L2 listeners are unaware that this is the case, and thus can have difficulty comprehending spoken texts with numerous filled pauses. This lesson serves to draw learners’ attention to filled pauses, making them salient both aurally and visually through the use of transcripts.

The next lesson in this series will focus on introducing and drawing learners’ attention to backchanneling.

References

- Griffiths, R. (1991). The paradox of comprehensible input: Hesitation phenomena in L2 teacher talk. *JALT Journal*, 13(1), 23–38.
- Wagner, E. (2014). Using unscripted spoken texts in the teaching of second language listening. *TESOL Journal*, 5, 288–311.

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Appendix A

“Tiger Farm”: Comprehension Activities

Part 1. Prelistening Discussion Questions

In groups of four, discuss these questions (3 minutes):

- What is the closest you have ever gotten to a dangerous animal? How did you feel?
- Have you ever touched a tiger?
- Do you like zoos? Why or why not?

Part 2. While-Listening Task

Now listen to “Tiger World.” Listen for overall comprehension—listen for as much information as you can, and after listening you’ll discuss what you’ve heard in small groups.

Part 3

Postlistening Task A

After listening to the text, in the same groups of four, discuss (3 minutes):

- Who were the speakers in this text?
- What is “Tiger World”?
- Have you ever been to a place like “Tiger World”?
- Was there anything you didn’t understand? (If so, see if your partners can help you out)

Postlistening Task B

Read over these questions, and then you’ll listen to the text again. After listening, see if you and your group can answer these questions:

- Why does Todd compare the tigers in “Tiger World” to “cows or pigs or horses”?
- What does “raised in captivity” mean?
- Are the tigers dangerous?
- Would you like to visit a place like “Tiger World”? Why or why not?

Appendix B

“Tiger Farm”: Filled Pauses

Listening While Noting the Filled Pauses

The following is a transcript of the text that does not show any of the pauses. Read over the transcript first, and then we'll listen again.

While you are listening, fill in/write down wherever there is a filled pause.

When there is a silent pause, write “SP”.

Paul: Hey, Todd, I saw your pictures with you and some tigers. Where, where's that, man?

Todd: That was at a place in Southeast Asia. It was in Thailand, actually.

Paul: Right.

Todd: Yeah, it was pretty cool. I was a bit dubious of it. I saw the little advertisement of Tiger World and Tiger Zoo, or whatever it was. I went and took a tuk-tuk out there and checked it out, and it was pretty cool.

Paul: How are the tigers treated within the zoo, the Tiger Land?

Todd: Well, it's actually quite weird, in that it was like a zoo but you can go in and touch the tigers...

In pairs, compare your transcripts. See if you came up with the same pauses.

Now listen again, to see if you missed any.

Follow-up Discussion

After listening the third time, discuss these questions in groups of four:

- There were many more filled pauses than silent pauses in the text. Why do you think this is? Was this a surprise?
- Why do the speakers have these pauses (both filled and unfilled) in their speech? Why do these occur?
- Do the filled pauses have *meaning*?

Appendix C

Transcript for “Tiger Farm” (0:00 to 1:21)

Paul: Hey, Todd, **um**...I saw your pictures of the, **um**...with you and some tigers. **Where, where's** that, man?

Todd: **Uh**, well, that was at a place in Southeast Asia. **Uh**, and **it was in, uh, it was in** Thailand, actually.

Paul: Right.

Todd: Yeah, it was pretty cool. **Um, I, I** was a bit **(SP)** dubious of it. **I mean**, I saw the little advertisement (Mm Hmm) of Tiger World (Mm Hmm) or Tiger Zoo, or whatever it was. And, **um**, I went and took a tuk-tuk out there and checked it out, and it was pretty cool.

Paul: How did the, **um**, how are the tigers treated within **the, the, the (SP) the** zoo, the Tiger Land?

Todd: Well, it was actually quite...weird, in that **um**, it was, **uh (SP)** like a zoo but you can go in and, and **like**, touch the tigers...**(0:42)**

Paul: Oh, wow!

Todd: —and be around the tigers. And so, they seem to have a pretty big area to roam around, (Mmmm) **um**, and I guess they have a pretty good life. **(SP)** I guess the deal is that they were all...raised in captivity, (Mmmm) so...they kind of give you a little spiel when you go in, (Mm Hmm), and they explain **(SP) um**, that the tigers are raised in captivity, just like you would raise cows or pigs or horses or anything like that. So they're bred for the farm, (Mm Hmm), and even though they're still really deadly, (Mm Hmm), basically, **(SP) you know**, that's why they're there, because they were bred **to, to, to** be there.

Paul: Bred to entertain.