

TEACHING COLLOQUIAL ENGLISH DIALOGUES WITH HESITATION WORDS, LINKS AND FEEDBACK

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Cursanții care studiază engleza americană contemporană ca o limbă străină pentru a înțelege și a produce un dialog spontan au nevoie de a exersa și înțelege funcțiile cuvintelor de ezitare într-un dialog spontan neformal. Însușirea polisemiei lexicale și a varietății funcțiilor sintactice și semantice a cuvintelor și expresiilor de ezitare sunt absolut necesare pentru menținerea stilului de vorbire orală dialogată cotidiană în cadrul unui dialog colocvial.

Cuvinte-cheie: dialog spontan, stil colocvial, cuvinte de ezitare, polisemia lexicală, funcțiile sintactice.

One of the greatest challenges when learning English is mastering the spoken language. Conversational English presents problems in terms of both understanding and delivery as it can differ from standard “textbook” forms. Understanding everyday English conversation in the US requires knowledge of colloquial expressions, regional variation in accent and dialect, phrasal verbs, connected speech, slang and cultural references. Conversational English is often delivered at speed and with frequent changes of topic, which is not an easy task for learners of English as a second language.

Another major barrier to understanding English conversation is that the Americans often speak quickly, use non-standard forms and regional accent. Accent usually relates to differences in pronunciation alone, while dialect forms refer to both pronunciation and content (grammar, vocabulary, etc.). When the Americans speak quickly, they use connected speech and short forms, hesitation words, links and a different style of conversation feedback, which can also make it more difficult to understand conversational English.

Filler words are words (and phrases) that are used to fill silence when an interlocutor in a dialogue is speaking. They are words that do not add any real value to the sentence. They let the speaker keep the leading role in the conversation. Their actual name is “discourse markers,” but they are much more commonly known as “filler words.”

Many filler words actually have other meanings, so not every “like” is a filler word, for example. We can see a real example of this in the following conversation from the US show “Community” when Pierce tries to stop Shirley from using filler words:

Shirley: Okay. These brownies are, uh—

Pierce: Uh!

Shirley: They, um—

Pierce: Um!

Shirley: These brownies are delicious. They taste like—

Pierce: Like!

Shirley: They taste like heaven.

In the final sentence “like” is used to compare brownies to heaven, so it is not a filler word in this context.

Sometimes certain filler words (“like,” “literally” or “believe me”) are used when the Americans are writing online in website comments, chats or social media, since conversations online are very similar to spoken conversations.

Students of English as a second language learn that filler words are used for a number of reasons:

- *To show that the speaker is thinking.* Filler words are used when the speaker needs to think about his answer or statement. For example: “I have *basically*... ten more years of college.”
- *To make a statement less harsh.* When the speaker tries not to embarrass a person with something stuck between his teeth by saying: “*Well*, you have, *um*, you have a little something in your teeth.”
- *To make a statement weaker or stronger.* While filler words do not add anything to sentences, they can be used to change the sentence *tone*—the attitude of the sentence. For example:
a) “I think kittens are cute” is just a regular statement. b) “*Actually*, I think kittens are cute” shows contrast—that someone else doesn’t agree, and c) “*At the end of the day*, I think kittens are cute” is something a speaker says as a conclusion to a discussion about kittens and their cute whiskers.
- *To try and gain more time.* Filler words are an excellent way to gain time for thinking when the speaker does not know how to answer a question, or when he does not want to. For example, if the teacher asks: “Where’s your homework?,” the response might sound like this: “*Uhh. Umm. Well, you see..* My dog ate it.”
- *To include the listener in the conversation without ending the sentence.* A conversation takes at least two people. Some filler words and phrases can include the other person in the conversation For example: “It was a really big bear, *you know?*”

This sentence includes the listener without ending the speaking turn.

Learners of English need to understand in practicing making and listening to dialogues that a fluent English speaker does not speak perfectly without stopping. In reality, native English speakers use filler words, as they need to pause and think, to be unsure of how to answer, or even to forget the right word to use, when they need to put their thoughts together.

Every language has its own set of filler words. Learning English filler words will help students of English sound natural and closer to a native speaker speech. However, overusing filler words can make students of English sound unprofessional. It can make it also difficult to follow the ideas.

Some students think that filler words are bad, and should be used as little as possible. For an English learner, though, they can be a very helpful way to speak more fluently and confidently. Still, it is a good idea to develop exercises to use filler words in learning to speak at interviews and in various professional settings.

Having analyzed dialogues offered by Intermediate level conversation practice, were identified the most common filler words and phrases used in American English:

1. *Well*

“Well” can be used in a few different ways. It can be used it to show that the speaker is thinking.

“*Well*, I guess \$20 is a good price for a pair of jeans.”

It can also be used to make a pause in a sentence.

“The apples and cinnamon go together like, *well*, apples and cinnamon.”

It can be used to gain time.

“*Well*... fine, you can borrow my car.”

2. *Um/er/uh*

“Um,” “er” and “uh” are mostly used for hesitation, such as when the speaker does not know the answer or does not want to answer.

“*Um, er, I uh* thought the project was due tomorrow, not today.”

3. *Hmm*

“Hmm” is a thoughtful sound, and it shows that the speaker is thinking or trying to decide something.

“*Hmm*, I like the pink bag but I think I’ll buy the black one instead.”

4. *Like*

“Like” is sometimes used to mean something which is not exact.

“My neighbor has *like* ten dogs.”

Usually, though, the word is used when the speaker needs a moment to figure out the next word to use.

“My friend was *like*, completely ready to *like* kick me out of the car if I didn’t stop using the word ‘*like*’.”

5. *Actually/Basically/Seriously*

“Actually,” “basically” and “seriously” are all adverbs—words that describe actions. All these words can be used as fillers which change the strength of a statement. For example, the word “actually” is used to point out something the speaker thinks is true, when others might not agree:

“*Actually*, kittens are really cute!”

“Basically” and “seriously” change the sentence in a slightly different way. “Basically” is used when the speaker summarizes something, and “seriously” is used to show how strongly the speaker takes the statement.

“*Basically*, the last Batman movie was *seriously* exciting!”

Other adverbs that are often used as fillers are “*totally*,” “*literally*” and “*clearly*.”

- The word “*literally*” means “something that is true,” but many times in conversation it is used with a different meaning: to state strong feelings.
- “*Totally*” means “completely,” and is used to emphasize something.
- The word “*clearly*” means the same as obviously, and is used to state something that is very obviously true.

For example: “*Clearly* you *totally* didn’t see me, even though I was *literally* in front of your face.”

6. *You see*

“You see” is used to share a fact that the speaker assumes the listener does not know.

“I was going to try the app, but *you see*, I ran out of space on my phone.”

7. *You know*

“You know” is used to share something that the speaker assumes the listener already knows.

“We stayed at that hotel, *you know*, the one down the street from Times Square.”

It can also be used instead of an explanation, in cases where the speaker feels that the listener understands what he means.

“When the elevator went down, I got that weird feeling in my ears, *you know*?”

8. *I mean*

“I mean” is used to clarify or emphasize how the speaker feels about something.

“*I mean*, he’s a great guy, I’m just not sure if he’s a good doctor.”

It is also used to make corrections when the speaker wants to correct himself.

“The duck and the tiger were awesome but scary. *I mean*, the tiger was scary, not the duck.”

“The cave is two thousand—*I mean*—twenty thousand years old!”

9. *You know what I mean?*

“You know what I mean?” is used to make sure the listener is following what the speaker is saying.

“I really like that girl, *you know what I mean*?”

10. *At the end of the day*

“At the end of the day” is a phrase that means “in the end” or “in conclusion.”

“*At the end of the day*, we’re all just humans, and we all make mistakes.”

11. *Believe me*

“Believe me” is a way of asking the listener to trust what the speaker is saying.

“*Believe me*, I didn’t want this tiny house, but it was the only one I could afford.”

It’s also used to emphasize what the speaker is about to say.

“*Believe me*, this is the cheapest, tiniest house ever!”

12. *I guess/I suppose*

“I guess” and “I suppose” are used to show that the speaker is hesitant, or not really sure about what he is saying.

“I was going to eat dinner at home, but *I guess* I can go eat at a restaurant instead.”

“I guess” is used more often in speech, but “I suppose” can sound a bit smarter.

13. *Or something*

“Or something” is a sentence ending which means that the speaker is not being exact.

“The cake uses two sticks of butter and ten eggs, *or something* like that.”

14. *Okay/so*

“Okay” and “so” are usually used to start sentences, and can be a sign that a new topic is starting.

“*So* what are you doing next weekend?”

They can also be used to introduce a summary.

“*Okay, so* we’re going to need to buy supplies for our trip this weekend.”

15. *Right/mhm/uh huh*

“Right,” “mhm” and “uh huh” are all affirmative responses—they all mean a “yes” response.

“*Right*, so let’s prepare a list of all the things we’ll need.”

“*Uh huh*, that’s exactly what he told me too.”

Some of these words and phrases can be hard to use correctly, since the meaning is so subtle and slight, but regular practice can make it comprehensible for English learners.

In conclusion, it is important to mention that filler words are an important tool to organize a natural colloquial dialogue, they function both as linking elements in a dialogue and as necessary feedback on the part of the listener to prove interest in the ongoing conversation.

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