

# Business Communication Students Learn To Hear A Bad Speech Habit

Reginald L. Bell, (leggieb@hotmail.com), Prairie View A & M University  
Lei “Paula” Liang-Bell, (lei\_liang@pvamu.edu), Prairie View A&M University  
Bettye Deselle, (bettye\_dessle@pvamu.edu), Prairie View A&M University

## ABSTRACT

*Students were trained to perceive filled pauses (FP) as a bad speech habit. In a series of classroom sensitivity training activities, followed by students being rewarded to observe twenty minutes of live television from the public media, no differences between male and female Business Communication students was revealed. The practice of teaching students to regard FP as a “bad” speech habit was supported by the literature. Male and female students learned to recognize FP they heard professional and non-professional speakers make.*

## INTRODUCTION

*M*artin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “The War Address,” required outstanding deliveries to be fully appreciated. They had to verbalize their manuscripts with forceful vocal fluency that aided them in achieving their desired purposes. Imagine the power of FDR’s thunderous voice, as it was heard on national radio broadcasts December 8, 1941, when he first personified “a date which will live in infamy”. Business Communication students are believed to improve their vocal fluency if they learn to avoid “bad” speech habits. Utilizing filled pauses (FP) in abundance contributes to what (Howell & Sackin 2001) called fluency failure. Sprague and Stuart (2000) in their popular *Speaker’s Handbook* dedicated nearly an entire page to recommendations on eliminating FP. They advise students:

*Do not be afraid to pause between sentences or thoughts when you speak. But avoid filling those pauses with distracting and meaningless sounds and phrases. When a speaker is nervous, a one-second pause can seem like a ten-second stretch of dead air, and the temptation to fill it with something can be great...other irrelevant repetitions may have grown out of an unconscious need to apologize for inadequacies of expression (p. 339).*

Students make measurable progress in Business Communication courses as a direct result of integrating and mastering concepts rooted in pedagogic theory and science.

They learn the correct preparation of a sentence outline; they attain an awareness of mechanical articulators; they learn appropriate pronunciation and enunciation of words and phrases; they learn proper inflection of voice, pitch, quality and emotional content; they learn physical delivery, including gesticulation and eye contact; they receive guided practice and timely feedback; they learn to avoid FP by becoming sensitive to their own use of distracting and meaningless sounds and phrases. It is hard to say how many Business Communication teachers rely on peer reviewed published articles as scientific evidence to guide their course designs; however, it is safe to say that many will engage in teaching practices based on logic and not necessarily statistical based research published in academic journals.

Statistical inferences can be made by observations drawn from a population sample. The Central Limit Theorem allows a researcher to use a representative sample drawn from a large enough population to assume the population is normally distributed. Statistically inductive arguments are weaker than logical deductive arguments. Hypothesis testing is an inductive rational method of thinking. A probability can never be a certainty. Business Communication instructors will have trouble avoiding deductive inferences about their own classroom populations if they base their own teaching in logic: statements of certainty. Business Communication instructors might deduce a

students' ability to develop a speech topic with an example similar to the following:

- The properly ordered speech has an introduction first, a body second, and a conclusion last.
- The student's speech was properly ordered.
- The student has prepared a speech that contains an introduction first, a body second, and a conclusion last.

The conclusion drawn becomes necessary if both the primary and secondary premises are true. The practice, although the deductive conclusion cannot be generalized to a population, would be perfectly reasonable, didactically speaking; furthermore, the method would be valid for a teacher who observes a student's behavior and confirms progress that student has made directly. Teachers could make hundreds of such deductive syllogisms in the classroom environment over a career, exposing thousands of students to their methods, and paving the way for pedagogic practices that might be accepted by the profession. A Business Communication professor may deduce students would be capable of improving vocal fluency and achieving a desired speech purpose by avoiding the over-use of FP (Sprague and Stuart, 2000).

It is acceptable pedagogic practice the teachers insist student presentations include forceful vocal delivery—vivid, vital, interesting language, and they avoid irrelevant, repetitions words and phrases. Furthermore, the lack of empirical evidence on the fundamentals of good speaking is not sufficient to castigate those ideas as poorly asserted platitudes (Hugenberg and Hugenberg 1997). There is classroom verification that gives the concept of teaching good vocal delivery high face validity.

Hence, the following question was undertaken: Is there a difference in male and female Business Communication students regarding their observations of FP they heard in the public media after being exposed to classroom sensitivity training activities? The purpose of this study was to compare how male and female Business Communication students differed after they received instruction on how to reduce their own usage of FP.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to determine if differences exist between male and female Business Communication students regarding their perceptibility to observe (on their own) FP they heard in the television media after undergoing sensitivity training. The study might provide evidence that the practice of using sensitivity training to correct a bad speech habit FP is effective. The study could enhance Business Communication pedagogy if teachers determine male and female students use fewer FP during their presentations and if they are able to detect more FP used by others after undergoing sensitivity training. The Oral communications unit in Business Communication courses could be improved. Much could be learned if students' tallies were compared with their gender. The study was needed for several reasons.

### **NEED FOR THE STUDY**

Business Communication teachers seek knowledge of this type for professional improvement. Instructors must be prepared to agree on the didactics in teaching business students oral communication as a component of their Business Communication courses. The practice of teaching students to avoid using FP as an accepted instructional method needs to be evaluated empirically. Business Communication courses are subject to a wide variety of teaching practices delivered by instructors who may have little to no experience teaching a course on public speaking. Individuals with a vested commitment to teaching Business Communication, writing Business Communication texts, and teaching units on oral communication would benefit. A review of related literature was conducted to determine if evidence that FP are associated with fluency failure and speech disorders. A few articles were found.

### **RELATED LITERATURE**

Lallgee and Cook (1969) in a seminal paper sought to test a popular theory that FP increase as a product of anxiety. They found an increase in FP was not a product of anxiety on both content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and function words (pronouns, particles). They determined the FP did not increase when pressure to speak and

continue speaking was higher. Their study was delimited to dialogue and the monologue was not tested in that study.

Cook (1971) examined a well-known theory that FP and found it was not correct. The researchers examined the occurrence of FP in the spontaneous speech of 11 subjects and found that FP occurred significantly more often than would be expected before pronouns, conjunctions, 'well', 'yes', 'no'. Cook (1971) also found FP occurred significantly less often than would be expected before nouns, verbs and adverbs, prepositions and auxiliary verbs and FP occurred about as often as would be expected before adjectives.

Erard (2004) in New York Time article titled "Just Like, Er, Words, Not, Um, Throwaways" said that FP are problematic and plague speech-recognition system in particular. Imagine a doctor at surgery using "um" and being misunderstood by others as saying thumb.

Howell and Sackin (2001) conducted a replication study of a paper by Beattie and Bradbury (1979) and confirmed their finding reported. They confirmed that a change in word repetition rate (FP) does increase on function words and not content words when silent pause is eliminated by punishment. They conducted repeated measures on four subjects.

Turner and Dindia (1995) examined 11 verbal communication behaviors to study the discrimination between the verbal behavior of males and females. They found that females engaged in more justifiers, intensifiers, and agreement than males whereas, males engaged in more vocalized pauses and also received more vocalized pauses than females. Men in the study exhibited more vocalized pauses than women. Turner and Dindia(1995) stated "vocalized pauses are commonly perceived as manifestations of discomfort and a lack of fluency in the situation", p90.

After reviewing the related literature, FP were found in several studies to be the variable of interest. Researchers treated that variable as a generally accepted component or factor in fluency failures and speech disorder. The pedagogic practice of business communication teachers who train their students to hear FP as a bad habit is valid.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY**

Students enrolled in two business communication courses taught at a medium size regional university received four class periods of instruction on avoiding "FP" in monologues. There were a total of 70 students enrolled in two courses that met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Students were given a one-point quiz the first period of training, prior to any instruction on FP. Fewer than five percent of the students could identify what a "filled pause" was. The students' training began immediately following the pre-diagnostic quiz.

All students received handouts on the parts of speech. They received a mini lecture on filled pause from chapter 25 of *The Speaker's Handbook* (Sprague and Stuart, 2000), a supplement on vocal improvement, and an opportunity to engage in a one-minute impromptu speech. Students participated in several dialogues while assembled in student-led discussion groups. The third period of training was more involving.

The instructor asked students to call off a number, one through six; they were assigned to a group with the same corresponding number. Students were asked to retrieve their parts of speech document to and to discuss using information from their packets. Each group was given ten minutes to read its assigned passage from the handout, five minutes to discuss the assigned passage within the group, and five minutes to discuss six questions assigned to each group. There was one question per student. In groups with seven members, two students would share a question. Each member of the six groups was responsible for sharing his or her answer with the entire class. The instructor called on each student by name from the roster. Each student had to stand and deliver his or her answer while avoiding the use of FP.

Each student was required to stand and talk for at least one minute. While the student was speaking, the instructor would call attention to the student's use of a filled pause. The student was then asked to restate the answer and try not to use any filled pause such as "and so on and so forth," "right?" "I mean," "um," "uh," "err," "ok," "y'know," "see" "like," and "or whatever" (Sprague & Stuart, 2000). Training continued for a forth period with

students being required to deliver a one-minute impromptu speech titled, “My Most Painful Physical Experience”. The presentation was worth three quiz points. Students were told in advance that the score would be purely based on an impromptu speech that contained an introduction, a body and a conclusion (a moral to the story). They also were told to avoid using filled pause because it was a bad habit and should be avoided.

After the fourth period of training, students were asked to go home and observe a television program of their liking for twenty minutes. They were asked to select two persons they identified as a professional speaker and a non-professional speaker. They were told to select a television program of any kind they believed to feature a professional speaker and non-professional speaker. Students were asked to observe each speaker one at a time for ten minutes, even if the two speakers were engaged in conversation. The students observed both speakers for a total of twenty minutes. Students were asked to keep a tally of the number of FP they heard from each speaker. Students viewed a wide variety of programs and speakers as shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 below.

**Table 1**  
**Ten Minutes Of Filled Pause Tallies For TV Personalities Students Identified As Professional Speakers**

<b>Professionals</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
*Not Named	21	35.0
**Jerod/Subway	1	1.7
A.J. And Free	1	1.7
Aaron Brown	1	1.7
Al Sharpton	1	1.7
Andrea Watkins	1	1.7
Big Tigga	1	1.7
Dan Rather	1	1.7
David Letterman	1	1.7
Dianne Sawyer	1	1.7
Dr. Phil	1	1.7
George Bush	5	8.3
Heidi Collins	2	3.3
Jenny Jones	2	3.3
Jonny Wanes	1	1.7
Larry King Live	7	11.7
Lou Dobbs	2	3.3
O'Reilly Factor	1	1.7
O'Rielly Factor	1	1.7
Paula Zahn	1	1.7
Peter Jennings	1	1.7
Regis/Kelly	1	1.7
Rick Santorum	1	1.7
Ricky Lake	1	1.7
Sherry Williams	1	1.7
Ted Koppell	1	1.7
Tom Brokov	1	1.7
Total	60	100.0

\* Represents student tallies for television personalities that were not named by students who either viewed programs in progress or failed to identify the name of the speaker during their twenty-minute observations. \*\*Tally score is indicative of a student’s misunderstanding of the assignment.

**Table 2**  
**Ten Minutes Of Filled Pause Tallies For TV Personalities Students Identified As Non-Professional Speakers**

<b>Guests</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
*Not Named	28	46.7
50 Cent	1	1.7
Al Sharpton	1	1.7
Bob Woodward	4	6.7
Bzk	1	1.7
Caryn	1	1.7
Chris Dodd	2	3.3
Clara Harris	1	1.7
Colin Powell	2	3.3
Dj Clue	1	1.7
Dr. Andrew Weil	1	1.7
Duncan Hunter	1	1.7
Gary Hart	2	3.3
Hannity	1	1.7
Jack Straws	1	1.7
James Kimmel	1	1.7
Jason	1	1.7
John King	2	3.3
Kenneth Pollack	1	1.7
Marsha Mattax	1	1.7
Michael Elliot	1	1.7
Molly More	1	1.7
Rick Santorum	1	1.7
Wally Zinks	1	1.7
War Analyst	2	3.3
Total	60	100

\* Represents student tallies for TV personalities that were not named by students who either viewed programs in progress or failed to identify the name of the speaker during their twenty-minute observations.

**Table 3**  
**News Shows Students Observed For Twenty Minutes**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
*Not Named	44	67.7
48hours	1	1.5
ABC	1	1.5
ABC13	2	3.1
CBS	2	3.1
Chan13	2	3.1
CNN	7	10.8
C-span	1	1.5
Fox	1	1.5
Fox 26	1	1.5
NBC	1	1.5
Network News	1	1.5
Nightline	1	1.5
Total	65	100.0

\* Indicative of program viewed by student but not named.

**Table 4**  
**Talk-Shows Students Observed For Twenty Minutes**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
20Minutes	1	1.5
C-Span	1	1.5
ESPN 2	1	1.5
CNN-live	1	1.5
Nightline	1	1.5
Fox	2	3.1
BET	2	3.1
Network	3	4.6
CNN	16	24.6
*Not Named	37	56.9
Total	65	100.0

\* Indicative of program viewed by student but not named.

**Table 5**  
**Special News Reports Students Observed For Twenty Minutes**

<b>Report Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
*Not Named	55	84.6
Bin Laden	1	1.5
Fox Sports	1	1.5
Iraq War	1	1.5
MTV	1	1.5
Presidential Press Con.	1	1.5
Random Interviews	5	7.7
Total	65	100.0

\* Indicative of program viewed by student but program/report was not named.

Students were also asked to record the person's name, gender and what television show they had watched. Students were offered a bonus point as an incentive for participating. Their participation was completely voluntary. Sixty students participated and recorded 1,193 FP. A null hypothesis was written.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

There is no difference between male and female students enrolled in two Business Communication courses regarding their ability to detect and tally FP they heard while observing programming in the television media after undergoing classroom sensitivity training.

## RESULTS

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test for mean differences between male and female students. No significant differences existed between male and female students and the tallies they submitted after observing non-professional and professional speakers for twenty minutes, with a  $p = .281$  for non-professionals and  $p = .264$  for professionals. The null hypothesis was accepted. The 494 tallies for the 29 male students did not differ significantly from the 699 tallies for the 31 female students. Sixty students tallied what they believed to be 1,193 FP they heard in the television media. Cross-tabulation of students' gender and professional/non-professional speakers revealed no significant differences using a Chi-Square test for nominal variables.

Students indicated they observed 13 female (21.7% within gender) non-professional and 47 male (78.3% within gender) non-professional speakers. Students indicated they observed 20 professional female (33.3% within gender) and 40 professional male (66.7% within gender) speakers. Students did not have a tendency to select same gender speakers; they did not favor their own gender in tally scores they submitted: Females did not tend to tally

significantly fewer FP for females and males did not tend to tally significantly fewer FP for males; however, the television media does seem to be biased towards men, who represented nearly three quarters of the television personalities observed. The descriptive statistics and tally scores for both male and female students are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
**Gender, Means, Standard Deviations, Significance and Tally Variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	Male (29)	Female (31)	Total Tally	Sig.
Non-Prof. Tally	5.38	7.078	338	465	803	.281
Prof. Tally	7.55	7.762	156	234	390	.264

Note: N = 60.

## DISCUSSION

Business communication teachers require students to present on business topics nearly every semester. Presentation skills include avoiding the use of FP. Teaching students to avoid the bad speech habit of filled pause is suggested by (Sprague and Stuart, 2000) as good practice. The comparison of male and female students' tallies of FP they heard in the television media for this study does not prove that filled pause is a "bad speech habit"; the fact that it is considered to be a bad habit by experts give the assumption face validity. Some empirical evidence is available where filled pause is used as a treatment variable in speech disorder research; see (Lallgee & Cook, 1969; Cook, 1971; Howell & Sackin, 2001; Erard, 2004). What this study revealed was sensitivity training works similarly well for both male and female students.

A cognitive transformation seemed to have occurred in the students who developed an awareness of the bad habit. Both groups were not significantly different in what they heard and tallied as FP. Furthermore, on a two points quiz immediately following the instruction and fieldwork assignment, 95 percent of 60 Business Communication students for both courses could list five or more types of FP. The ten non-participating students performed just as well as the 60 participating students on the post-quiz, indicating the instructional methodology was effective for all 70 students.

Sixty students heard what they believed to be FP from people they labeled as professional and non-professional speakers. They were able to count and tally what they heard; thereby, enhancing their own sensitivity and reifying the instruction that filled pause is a bad speech habit. Although it cannot be guaranteed that students actually recorded FP each time or that what they heard was actually a filled pause each time they recorded a tally, the instruction proved to be salient for them. The two Business Communication courses and 60 student participants were assumed normally distributed; in addition, students were likely to know what FP were while they listened and tallied. They had been trained and could list at least five types of FP on a post-quiz. The classroom activities did lead to a reduction in the students' use of FP in their own monologues.

All students were required to present an extemporaneous small group presentation near the end of the semester. Most students had a noticeable reduction in FP as they were observed speaking. Students used fewer FP after having been through a series of classroom activities. Although the instructional methods were not conducted as a controlled cause/effect experiment, the impact of the interventions was apparent. The implication of this instructional development study sets the groundwork for what could be a cause/effect experiment.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Students could be sensitized through four periods of classroom training to detect the use of FP in others and themselves. The researcher could then select from the public media one hour of programming saturated with FP (such as Larry King Live) and record them. Sensitivity trained students could then view video with varying intervals of time and filled pause saturation. The researcher would count the video recorded FP in advance and make an inventory of low, medium and high saturation. Three trained speech experts would count independently the number of FP

presented in the 60 minutes of recorded programming. This would reduce rater bias because inter-rater reliability is increased when the scores of three independent judges are averaged. Judges would count FP (“and so on and so forth,” “right?” “I mean,” “um,” “uh,” “err,” “ok,” “y’know,” “see” “like,” and “or whatever”).

Demographic variables could be collected, such as grade level, gender, and major. Those demographic variables would be compared to tallies made by students as they observe the recorded video. Different groups could be exposed to different intervals of filled pause saturated video. The factorial two-way ANOVA comparisons in a controlled experiment would further clarify the impact of sensitivity training on business communication students and how they could be taught to hear a bad speech habit and avoid it.

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