

# Teaching Strategic Use of Hesitation Markers

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**Although handbooks on public speaking often state that hesitation markers should be avoided altogether, research has shown that some hesitation markers in the right positions can in fact aid communication while other hesitation markers should be avoided. This paper presents the results of a usability study on visual learning material about the strategic use of hesitation markers. Initial results indicate that language users are generally unaware of the difference between different phonetic formats of hesitation markers and their associated positive and negative effects. This usability study is thus a first step toward a more nuanced general understanding of the effect of hesitation markers in public speaking.**

## INTRODUCTION

Many guidebooks on public speaking condemn hesitation markers (such as “uh” and “uhm”) as negative and advise speakers to avoid all types of voiced hesitation markers altogether. However, research has shown that the really disturbing hesitation markers are relatively loud and open (“äh” with a long vowel as in ‘bād’) whereas closed (“uh”) and nasal sounds (“mm”) go largely unnoticed while still fulfilling discourse structuring functions. In this study, I present the process of developing and testing learning material based on the assumption that the conscious and strategic use of hesitation markers can be beneficial in public speaking.

Preliminary results of the conducted usability test indicate that language users are not consciously aware of the different functions of hesitation markers but generally open to the idea of a distinction between disturbing and useful hesitation markers. The qualitative analysis of the usability test data thus delivers promising results for future designs of learning materials on public speaking. The quantitative pre- and post-intervention analysis did not yield conclusive results regarding the effect of the learning material on the study participants’ speaking behavior. A possible reason for the inconclusiveness of the results may be found in the study design which might have included too many stimuli for the participants to pay attention to their speech production.

## METHOD

The study was set up as a think-aloud usability test [1-3] in which one study participant at a time looked at a paper-based draft of learning material about hesitation markers (cf. Figure 1). The hesitation marker material was part of a larger usability testing setup which included the testing of various other learning materials (e.g. about grammatical issues).

The usability test sessions were video-taped and analyzed using usability testing analysis methods (cf. [1]) as well as conversation analysis [4] as a qualitative, data-

driven approach to the analysis of interaction. Furthermore, presentation-like speech was elicited before and after showing the participants the learning material to determine whether the intervention (i.e. working with the material) had an impact on the participants’ use of hesitation markers. To this end, these presentation-like utterances were transcribed and coded with regard to the different types of hesitation markers used.

## RESULTS

Preliminary results of the qualitative analysis suggest that language users do not consider hesitation markers as something that can be used strategically in public speaking contexts, but that they are able to distinguish between open and closed/nasal sounds when presented with this distinction including examples. Furthermore, the think-aloud approach taken in this study uncovers both content- and layout-related usability issues which inform future designs of the material. The quantitative analysis of the participants’ use of hesitation markers before and after working with the learning material is still in progress. A cursory look at the data indicate that there is little difference between the two presentation-like speech production events.

## DISCUSSION

The finding that language users do generally not think about hesitation markers as a category that consists of formally and functionally distinct entities opens up the opportunity to spread awareness of the different forms and functions of hesitation markers in the context of public speaking. Learning material that presents different forms of hesitation markers (e.g. open vs. closed sounds) and relates them to different (communicative) functions can help to improve public speaking skills. With regard to the specific study at hand, the preliminary observation that the specific learning material does perhaps not have a significant effect on the participants’ use of hesitation markers can probably be attributed to the test design itself. Apart from the hesitation marker material, the usability study included several other learning materials

on other aspects of language. This means that the participants' attention was split between different cognitively challenging aspects of language that court the participants' attention.

Design processes are iterative, and the findings of this study inform the redesign of the learning material draft, which can then be tested again in order to develop useful and user-friendly learning material on the strategic use of hesitation markers..

## REFERENCES

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