

Removing Vocal Fillers—Teacher’s choice: "Um Day" (Cerebral) or “Call of Duty: Filler Ops!” (Rambunctious)

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Genre

Oral communication, speech anxiety effects, peer coaching and feedback, unconscious communication behavior, experiential learning

The Assignment

Students learn to recognize their unconscious vocal fillers while delivering a brief (1 to 2-minute), impromptu speech. This assignment helps to reduce these common, and often times distracting, verbal ticks.

First, students create a list of simple topics writing their ideas on small pieces of paper. Examples: last birthday, favorite movie/food/hobby—subjects with short preparation time. Next, students take turns speaking. After a participant has drawn a topic they speak for a minimum of 60-seconds, endeavoring to avoid using any vocal fillers.

This Favorite Assignment offers two very different approaches to building student skill growth resulting from a collaboration between two leading business communication teachers (Hunt & Jamil). The first brings playground-style fun to the classroom. The second is a more thoughtful and well-mannered approach. Teachers can select the experiential learning method that best suits their desired classroom atmospherics.

Lively classroom fun The audience is asked to answer the “call of duty” with sponge / ping pong balls. Every time the speaker uses a vocal filler the listeners pelt them with these harmless objects. In an equally effective and less aggressive variation a bell is rung each time a filler is heard. In another popular version, participants clapped their hands once each time they hear a vocal filler. This learning experience can become a competition. Students record each time a filler is used. Prize goes to the student uttering the least number of vocal fillers.

Last aggressive feedback method Some teachers may prefer not to encourage their students to throw things in class. A more cerebral option is available. The student audience notes any vocal fillers used during the presentation. During a post-presentation debrief the audience brings the vocal fillers to the speaker’s attention.

Target Learners

Any level students

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Know that filler words are habitual
- Establish awareness of unconscious filler word behavior
- Use the power of the ‘crowd’ for assistance

- Develop impromptu speaking skills
- Develop oral presentation skills.
- Recognize effects of speech anxiety
- Reduce vocal fillers in oral presentation.

Time to Complete the Assignment

5-minutes Participants create topics
30-seconds Student speech preparation
1 to 3-minutes Speaking time

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

Special attention needs to be made both before and after this assignment to make it clear that this isn't a form of ridicule, rather a way to point out unconscious behavior so they can build their speaking skills.

- Paper and pen/pencil (this can be provided by students)
- A hat (if preferred) to mix up topics.
- Explanation of assignments purpose to reduce uncertainty and minimize communication apprehension.

Evaluating Outcomes

The immediate feedback by the class is most useful. If desired a small speech delivery rubric may be incorporated.

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Directions to instructor