

# Investigating Filled Pauses Found in English Students' Conversation

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## ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the types and functions of filled pauses in English students' conversations. Speaking is considered the most difficult skill to learn. As students learn English, they do not make a conversation in English outside the class. As a result, when students make a conversation with no knowledge, they will have some problems. Consequently, they tend to make any filled pauses such as "uhh." This study used a qualitative method, i.e., content analysis, and the key instruments were the researchers. Meanwhile, the participants were the third-semester students of the English Department of IAIN Batusangkar. In analyzing the data, the researchers listened to all 56 students' audio recordings, transcribed the conversation, and analyzed the data. The study's finding indicated two types of filled pauses found in English students' conversations - non-lexicalized and lexicalized filled pauses. Then, the researchers found six functions of filled pauses: communicative, affective & cognitive, retrieving the right word, formulating the correct description, preparing to make repairs, and responding to a question.

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## Introduction

Human capability to speak accurately and properly in expressing thoughts, sending wishes, and others is crucial. Listeners can comprehend what the speaker talks about because of the speaker's ability. Gert and Hans (in Efrizal, 2012) state that speaking is speech or utterances produced by the speaker to be known. Then the listener processes to know the speaker's intention. Every person produces thousands of words every day, although some may produce more. There are three crucial reasons for getting students to speak in the classroom. First, speaking gives students the opportunities to practice real-life speaking in the safety of the classroom. Second, speaking allows students to try to use any or all of the language. Third, speaking gives students more opportunities to use the element of language stored in their brains. Speaker gives information and shares their ideas clearly through conversation. Speaking is considered the most

difficult skill to learn. Researchers agree that developing English speaking ability for students in non-speaking English countries is difficult since they lack an English-speaking environment. Most Indonesian students who learn English in school or university have no opportunity to develop speaking abilities outside the school or university. As they learn English in school or university, they do not make a conversation in English outside the class. The limited speaking practice makes them lack an English-speaking environment. They are not confident speaking English, as they are afraid of making mistakes. Conversations refer to casual communications that usually happen in daily life. It can be said that conversations are classified as less formal communications since the topics of conversations are related to daily things such as introducing friends, asking for agreement, offering something, and so on. In an English conversation, a speaker needs to speak clearly and accurately to make the listener understand what the speaker is saying. In the English Teaching Department of IAIN Batusangkar, the students should be able to make a conversation in English. After all, it helps them present a paper in a class and explain the lesson material.

Considering the role of English conversation, the English Teaching Department of IAIN Batusangkar provides public speaking skills for students. English for Tourism is one of the compulsory subjects for students. The subject provides them with speaking skills related to English in tour guiding activities. In this subject, students should know what they want to say. Besides, they need to know the vocabulary and grammar, greet and welcome guests, inform, offer, arrange, describe, show, explain, and deal with tour guiding activities. As students do not know essential points in tour guiding activities, they will have some problems in conversations. They do not know the important points in tour guiding activities. They will have some problems when conversing with the guests or tourists. For example, they make any filled pauses such as *umm* and *uhh*. That is to say, the knowledge about these points is important to be comprehended by the speaker.

Filled pauses are usually associated with cautious and hesitant speech. According to Rose and Watanabe (2019), filled pauses are conventionalized phonemic forms with no proportional value and delay message transfer. In this condition, the listeners can judge that the speaker is not good at creating a sentence. It is because he cannot give a suitable package of his speaking. It will not catch the listeners' attention. Furthermore, the used number of pauses such as "*umm*" or "*err*" frequently can destroy speaking effectiveness. It may indicate that the speaker is getting speech disfluency. In the English for Tourism mid-term test, students were expected to deliver some information dealing with tourism to a guest. However, when the guest requests information beyond the students' understanding as a tour guide, they will be confused and hesitant to provide information to the guest. Frequently, they create filled pauses. A less fluent conversation will harm the speaker's performance and the communication process. For example, students tend to use

umm or uhh when they speak English, leading to incomprehensive speech. It will also confuse other students. Moreover, Pistono et al. (2019) clearly explained that filled pauses were influenced by affective factors (such as increased anxiety) and cognitive demand.

Hewings and Rose (1998) categorized filled pauses into non-lexicalized and lexicalized. Non-lexicalized filled pauses are non-lexemes (non-words) filled pauses that the speakers use to indicate hesitation while the speaker thinks of what to say for the next utterance. Lexicalized filled pauses, however, are fillers in the form of a word or short phrases, such as *like, well, yeah, sort of, you know, if you see what I mean*, and so on. Bellen (2001) states some examples of non-lexicalized filled pauses, such as *ehm, uh, err, ee, ah, um*, etc. Similarly, Juan (2006) also explains that *ehm, uh, err, ee, ah, um*, and other vocalizations that belong to non-lexicalized filled pauses are the most effortless sounds made while speaking. Afterward, he calls them “neutral vowel sounds.”

Goto et al. (2002) identify two important functions of filled pauses. The first one is the communicative function. In conversation, a speaker uses filled pauses to take a turn while and can still prepare a subsequent utterance. Meanwhile, the listener waits for the speaker to interrupt the turn. Filled pauses also carry affective and cognitive functions, that is, to have fluent conversations by sharing mental states among interlocutors. To this extent, a speaker unconsciously utilizes filled pauses to express mental states, such as shyness, anxiety, hesitation, and humility, and to deliver different thinking processes. On the other hand, a listener interprets filled pauses as indicators for inferring the speaker’s mental and thinking states. In addition, filled pauses sometimes enable a listener to predict the speaker’s subsequent utterance. Moreover, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) categorized functions of filled pauses into four: 1) retrieving the right word, 2) formulating the correct description, 3) preparing to make repairs, 4) responding to a question.

Experts have stated filled pauses differently. Goto et al. (2002) postulate filled pauses as natural hesitation that indicates a user having trouble thinking of or recalling a subsequent word or phrase. Sometimes, the students know so many words, but they find difficulties to utter them. It can be seen from the filled pauses that the students use during discussion or presentation. In English, for instance, filled pauses are typical “umm” and “uhh,” which are similar in other languages (Rose, 2017). Rose and Watanabe (2019) define filled pauses as conventionalized phonemic forms that carry no proportional value (though they may have a pragmatic purpose) and delay message transfer. The label-filled pause is somewhat controversial, with one point of contention being their nature. Some researchers argue that they are not “pauses” but are intentionally chosen devices used to communicate expectations about problems in language production. According to Kosmala and Crible (2021), filled pauses are commonly associated with hesitation, as they are said to arise when speakers are uncertain (Smith, Vicki L., 1993) or when they have choices to make.

Clark and Fox Tree (2002) explain that filled pauses such as “um” and “uh” has different meaning. They state that filled pauses “um” are described as a signal to major or long delays. Whereas “uh” is a signal to short delay or minor delay. Benus (2013) argues that the function of filled pauses is categorized into two. The first one is organization. In this function, filled pauses as organizing a speech or recalling words. The distribution of this function is between clauses, before clauses, before phrases, and within a clause. The second one is the introduction. In this function, filled pauses act as an introducer. The distribution of this function is within the clause.

Goto et al. (2002) highlight that the essential reason that filled pauses are inevitable in spontaneous utterances is that they are uttered when the thinking process cannot keep up with the speaking process. When speaking speed becomes faster than preparing its content, a speaker uses filled pauses until the next speech content resulting from the thinking process arrives at the speaking process. There are two important functions of filled pauses. They are communicative function and affective and cognitive functions. Regarding communicative function, a speaker uses filled pauses to keep a conversational turn while taking enough thinking time to prepare a subsequent utterance. On the other hand, a listener hearing filled pauses usually waits for the speaker’s subsequent utterance without interrupting the turn. With regard to the second function, filled pauses are essential to have a smooth conversation by sharing mental states among interlocutors, a speaker unconsciously uses filled pauses to express mental states, such as diffidence, anxiety, hesitation, and humility, and also to express different thinking states, such as retrieving information from memory and seeking an appropriate expression for a listener. On the other hand, a listener interprets filled pauses as indicators for inferring the speaker’s mental and thinking states. In addition, filled pauses sometimes enable a listener to predict the speaker’s subsequent utterance. Moreover, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) argue that functions of filled pauses are: retrieving the right word, formulating the right description, preparing to make repairs, response to a question.

The basic meaning of the speaker using filled pauses in his speech is that the speaker initiates to announce to the listener that the speaker is trying to delay his speaking, both major and minor, regardless of whether they are able or unable to produce the utterance after the filler. According to Clark and Fox Tree (2002), there are three typical reasons for using filled pauses by the speaker. They are as follows. Speakers have reasons for *wanting* or thinking they are expected to be speaking at t (filler); Speakers have reasons for *initiating* a delay in speaking at t (filler); speakers have reasons for *announcing* that they are initiating a delay in speaking at t (filler). Furthermore, if the typical reason for a delay is the inability to proceed, speakers should often use “uh” and “umm” to implicate “I am unable to proceed.” That is reflected in the first five interpretations. (1) the speakers are currently experiencing a planning problem, (2) the speakers are searching

memory for a word, (3) the speakers are hesitating about something, (4) the speakers are in doubt or uncertain about something, (5) the speakers are still “engaged in speech-productive labor” such as what to say or how to say it.

The previous research has been conducted by Afriani et al. (2014) and Benus (2013). Afriani et al. (2014) investigated filled pauses used by students during the discussion in Speaking Class of the English Department of STKIP PGRI SUMBAR. The result shows three main points. They are types of filled pauses frequently used, the reasons, and the problems of filled pauses used by students in class discussion. The students often used unlexicalized-filled pauses. Benus (2013) argued that filled pauses are employed to organize the speaker’s utterances or recall words. Considering that communication is done by having different topics, including tourism, it is also important to examine the use of filled pauses in conversations of tourism. Thus, the present study explores filled pauses used by the English Department students in a tourism course. This study can contribute to the completion of the previous studies as well as to the observation of learner language.

## Method

### Research Design

This research was categorized as descriptive qualitative research using the content analysis method. It concerns providing a descriptive understanding of a social setting or activity from the perspective of the research participants. In this research, the researcher relies on himself as the main data collection instrument. Moleong (2021) states that qualitative research intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the subject of content research. Gay et al. (2011) state that qualitative research seeks to probe deeply into the research setting to understand the way things are, why they are in that way, and how the participants in the context perceive them. It means that qualitative research describes a situation, population areas, indication, event, and happening. According to Fraenkel et al. in DİNÇER (2018), content analysis can be broadly defined as systematic coding of qualitative or quantitative data based on specific themes or categories. Chelimsky (1989) adds that content analysis is a set of procedures for collecting and organizing information in a standardized format that allows analysts to make inferences about written and other recorded material characteristics and meaning.

### Technique of Data Collection

This study used transcription to collect the data. The researchers transcribed the students’ audio recordings from the midterm test of English for Tourism subject. According to the International Rescue Committee Research Toolkit, transcription provides a written account of

spoken words. In qualitative research, individual or group interviews are transcribed and generally written verbatim (exactly word-for-word). Lorenza (2007) adds that the process of transcription may differ depending on its end-use. Transcripts used mainly to select quotes and sound bites may not need the same level of details as transcripts which would be systematically reviewed, grouped into themes (often through a coding process), and analyzed for content. This research used the content analysis procedure. Six steps were employed in content analysis (Morales, 2017). Those steps were as follows: deciding to use content analysis, determining what material should be included in the content analysis, selecting units of analysis, developing the coding categories, coding the material, and analyzing and interpreting the result.

## Results

### Types of Filled Pauses

The present study found two types of filled pauses in English students' conversations: non-lexicalized and lexicalized. The non-lexicalized filled pauses can be shown as follows.

Table 2. Sample of Non-Lexicalized Filled Pause

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Types</i>
50	18	"Uhh...on the first day, uhh.....December nineteenth, the Payakumbuh <i>botuang</i> festival is held with <i>bajamba</i> meals, art performance from Bengkulu, Riau, traditional music, and then, this festival with add December twenty."	Non-Lexicalized

In document 50, non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh" found in utterance 18, the speaker used "uhh" while explaining the festival in Payakumbuh. The speaker had some trouble to recall subsequent utterances. Therefore, the speaker's non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh" to control the conversation. Therefore, the speaker unconsciously signaled "uhh" as a delay. The speakers use filled pauses when they organize utterances or recall some words. Sometimes, the students got a problem to utter their sentences. Someway, when they thought, they made a pause in their speaking.

Table 3. Sample of Lexicalized Filled Pause

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Types</i>
23	24	"Mmm....uhh... I mean umm..... <i>nasi baka</i> for umm.....uhh...the people has a traveling far."	Lexicalized

Table 3 shows that in document 23, utterance 24, the speaker signaled "I mean" as a lexicalized filled pause. The speaker tried to group words but did not want to give up the claim to the floor. As a result, he signaled "I mean" as a delay to complete the utterance. Filled pauses are inevitable

in spontaneous utterances is that they are uttered when the thinking process cannot keep up with the speaking process. When the speed of speaking becomes faster than the speed of preparing its content, a speaker uses filled pauses until the next speech content resulting from the thinking process arrives at the speaking process. It means that when the speakers hesitate to formulate the sentence, the speaker use filled pauses to get some extra time to prepare the next sentence.

### Functions of Filled Pauses

#### a. Communicative Functions

Table 4. Sample of Communicative Function

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Function</i>
8	3	"Yes, I have several <b>uhh</b> ...several recommendations here, but I want ask you, <b>uhh</b> ...what thing that you are interested in, sir?"	Communicative

The table shows that the communicative function of filled pauses were found in students' English conversation. In document 8, filled pauses found in students' utterances are non-lexicalized filled pauses, which is "uhh." Many delays signaled by "uhh" were caused by problems in formulating an utterance. In document 8, utterance 3, the speaker took enough thinking time to prepare the next utterance. Filled pause "uhh" can be used as a delay to prepare the next utterance from the speaker. Filled pauses such as "uhh" were used by the speaker to keep a conversational turn while taking enough time to prepare the subsequent utterance.

#### b. Affective and Cognitive Functions

Table 5. Sample of Affective and Cognitive Functions

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Function</i>
5	6	" <i>Baju panghulu</i> generally wear <b>uhh</b> ...by customary leader."	Affective and Cognitive
29	32	"Actually not different, but <b>uhh</b> ... <b>uhh</b> ...maybe in this <i>Pasaman</i> , <b>uhh</b> ... <i>lamang</i> make <b>uhh</b> ...with, no, not with, but <i>lamang</i> make <b>uhh</b> ...with <b>uhh</b> ...even like <b>umm</b> ....before we are <b>uhh</b> ... <b>umm</b> ....no, before we <b>umm</b> .....before Ramadan, sir."	

The two samples reflect that affective and cognitive functions of filled pauses were found in students' English conversations. The speakers in both samples used non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh." In document 5 utterance 6, it is clear that the speaker expressed thinking state. The speaker used "uhh" to retrieve information from the speaker's memory. For achieving smooth

conversation, the speaker unconsciously used non-lexicalized filled pauses to express their mental states. This mental state shows the students' capability when speaking or making conversation in English. Another example is found in document 29, utterance 32. The speaker used too many non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh" in his utterance. The speaker expressed his thinking state to explain and to finish his sentence. The speaker tried to retrieve the information about the differences between *lamang tapai* in Lima Kaum with *lamang tapai* in Pasaman. When the speakers retrieved the information from their memory, non-lexicalized filled pauses would help them control this situation. It can be said that filled pauses can be the process that happens as a cognitive process of the speakers. Thus, it can determine the occurrence of filled pauses in creating sentences.

c. Retrieving the Right Word & Formulating the Right Description

Table 6. Sample of Retrieving the Right Word & Formulating the Right Description

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Function</i>
29	26	"Uhh...umm..... <i>apa namaya umm.....rendang or sarabi, sir.</i> "	Retrieving the Right Word
18	21	" <i>Kaba</i> is <b>uhh</b> ...information <b>uhh</b> ...from <b>uhh</b> ...our daily life, sir."	Formulating the Right Description

In document 29, utterance 26, the speaker is trying to retrieve the right word about the kind of dish by using "uhh" as a delay in his utterance. He knows that he is trying to formulate an utterance by signaling "uhh" to retrieve the right word. Many delays signaled by "uhh" and 'umm' are caused by formulating an utterance. The delays precede the problematic parts and filled pauses can signal the delays. In document 18, utterance 21, the speaker tried to formulate the right description about *kaba* by using filled pauses "uhh." The speaker used filled pauses to take thinking time, to retrieve information to formulate an utterance. When formulating an utterance, the speaker sometimes uses "uhh" to find the appropriate description of the speaker's explanation.

d. Prepare to Make Repairs & Response a Question

Table 7. Sample of Prepare to Make Repairs & Response a Question

<i>Doc</i>	<i>Utt</i>	<i>Utterance</i>	<i>Function</i>
14	3	"Okay, I want <b>uhh</b> ...this is <b>uhh</b> ...area is <i>Istana Pagaruyung.</i> "	Prepare to Make Repair
6	21	"Uhh..... <i>pinyaram</i> necklace <b>uhh</b> .....meaning <b>uhh</b> .....sorry, sir. I'm sorry, sir."	Response to a Question

In document 14, utterance 3, the speaker tried to explain Istana Pagaruyung. The researchers found that the speaker is preparing to repair the utterance. When the speaker states, "I want," she



knows she is wrong. Then, she signaled “uhh” as a delay to repair “this is.” The speaker signaled “uhh” to prepare to repair as a function of filled pauses. When the speaker formulated the utterance, the speaker also thinks about what to say next and the appropriate word to complete their sentence, so the speaker uses “uhh”. In document 6, utterance 21, “uhh” is signaled as a delay by the speaker to respond to a question. The speaker is explaining about the necklace from West Sumatera. Then, the lecturer asked the student about the meaning of the necklace. The speaker was unable to respond to a question from the lecturer in a timely fashion, so she signaled the delay “uhh”, and even apologized for it (“I’m sorry, sir.”). The student unconsciously signaled “uhh” to respond to a question as a function of filled pauses. In answering a question, the speaker is obligated to answer quickly. Nevertheless, sometimes, the speaker takes too much time thinking about the best answer or how to answer it. Thus, the speakers tend to use filled pauses such as “uhh” as a solution to think about the answer.

## **Discussion**

The results of the present study show the use of two types of filled pauses in English students’ conversations: non-lexicalized filled pauses and lexicalized filled pauses. Besides, the researchers found six functions of filled pauses. In general, students used filled pauses in their English conversation because they knew so many words, but they found it difficult to utter them. This supports the idea of Hewings and Rose (1998), who state that speakers use filled pauses when they want to establish a signal control in a conversation. In this case, when the speakers doubt their explanation or the words that are used, filled pauses can help them control this condition. In other words, speakers tend to use filled pauses when they need extra time to control their speaking. Related to this view, many students tend to pause the conversation. For example, when students have problems formulating a sentence, they will pause unconsciously. This is also relevant with Thornbury (2006), revealing that filling a pause is a convenient way of signaling that the speaking turn is not finished yet.

Filled pauses such as “uhh” are used by the speaker to keep a conversational turn while taking enough thinking time to prepare a subsequent utterance. When the speakers are getting hesitant to formulate the sentence, the speaker uses filled pauses to get some extra time to prepare the next sentence. For example, in document 13, utterance 13, the speaker uses non-lexicalized filled pauses “uhh” to take enough thinking time to prepare a subsequent utterance. Hence, when hearing a filled pause by the speaker, the listener usually waits for the speaker’s subsequent utterance without interrupting the speaker’s turn, allowing him/her to complete the sentence. This corresponds to Goto et al. (2002)’s study reporting that one of the functions of filled pauses is communicative function. This is also supported by Benus (2013), stating that the speakers use

filled pauses when they organize utterances or recall words. Sometimes, the students got a problem when speaking, so they make pauses. The students thought about what the right words was to say next. While thinking, they found the appropriate words for their sentences.

The second function is affective and cognitive function. For achieving smooth conversation, the speaker unconsciously uses non-lexicalized filled pauses to express their mental states. This mental state reflects the students' capability when speaking or making conversation in English. Take a look at the example of document 5, utterance 6. The speaker signaled "uhh" in his utterance, followed by his final sentence because the speaker hesitated about the appropriate word. Goto et al. (2002) added the example of this mental state, such as hesitation, anxiety, shyness, and humility. This is the affective function of filled pauses. Another example is found in document 29, utterance 32, in which the speaker used too many non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh" in his utterance. The speaker expresses his thinking state to explain and finish his sentence. The speaker is trying to retrieve the differences between *lamang tapai* in Lima Kaum and *lamang tapai* in Pasaman. When the speakers are retrieving the information from their memory, non-lexicalized filled pauses will help them control this situation. Goto et al. (2002) state that the cognitive function of filled pauses is to express the thinking states, such as retrieving the information from memory and seeking an appropriate expression for a listener. Related to this, Tardy (in Afriani, Zainil, & Zaim: 2014) states that filled pauses can be used to slow speech production while cognitive operations are carried out. It can be said that filled pauses can be the process that happens as a cognitive process of the speakers. Thus, it can determine the occurrence of filled pauses in creating sentences. Moreover, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) argue that the function of filled pauses is categorized into four. The first one is retrieving the right word. Problems in formulating an utterance cause many delays signaled by "uhh" and "umm". The delays precede the problematic parts and filled pauses can signal the delays.

In this case, non-lexicalized filled pauses "uhh" helped the speaker show the listeners the identification of upcoming words. Then, there was a hope that listeners would help at that time. The second one is formulating the correct description. The speaker uses filled pauses to take thinking time, to retrieve information to formulate an utterance. Sometimes, when formulating an utterance, the speaker uses "uhh" to find the appropriate description of the speaker's explanation. For example, in document 18, utterance 21, the speaker signaled "uhh" in his utterance as a delay to formulate the proper description about kaba, which in English means the information from someone. According to Afriani et al. (2014), the speaker used filled pauses to clarify their sentence or words. In this case, filled pauses helped the speaker to formulate the correct description for a while. The speaker thought about the best description for the listener to clear the sentence. That was the way of the speaker to formulate the proper description. The third function is preparing to

make repairs. When a speaker formulates an utterance, the speaker also thinks of what to say and the appropriate word to complete their sentence. Hence, the speaker uses “uhh” in it. Sometimes, the speaker is mispronouncing a word or giving a word that is not suitable. In this case, the speaker used filled pauses to repair to clarify the sentence. According to Clark and Fox Tree (2002), this delay may reflect the time needed to detect the problem and formulate the repair. The last finding is responding to a question as a function of filled pauses. Delays in utterance such as “uhh” are caused by many problems (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002), and for this function, it is to respond to a question. In answering a question, a speaker is obligated to answer quickly. However, sometimes the speaker takes too much time to think about the best answer or how to answer it. Thus, the speakers tend to use filled pauses such as “uhh” as a solution to think about the answer. According to Clark and Fox Tree (2002), if the typical reason for a delay is the speaker’s inability to proceed, the speaker should often use *uh* and *um* to implicate “I am unable to proceed.” In this case, the speaker cannot answer the question and then uses filled pause “uhh” to implicate “I am unable to answer.” As a result, the speaker needs more time to think about the best answer to the question. Although filled pauses is a usual thing in the natural limit, Adini et al. (2021) suggest that lecturers diminish the use of fillers.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that students generally use two types of filled pauses in English conversation: non-lexicalized filled pauses and lexicalized filled pauses. Interestingly, filled pauses that are used mainly by the students are non-lexicalized filled pauses. Those were “uhh,” “umm,” “mmm,” “hmm,” and “eee.” However, the students also used the expression of lexicalized filled pauses, such as “I mean”, “like” and “yeah”. Further, the researchers found six functions of filled pauses used by students in their English conversation. They include communicative, affective, and cognitive functions, retrieving the right word, formulating the right description, preparing to make repairs, and responding to questions. However, this study has some limitations, e.g., the limited number of subjects and the data collection setting. Future studies should investigate larger number of research subjects in a more authentic context.

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