Filling Social Space with Fillers: Gains in Social Dimension after Studying Abroad in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Fillers do not merely fill pauses in speaking. They play important cognitive and social functions in discourse. This paper examines how learners' use of such fillers developed among five male English-speaking learners of Japanese while studying abroad for one academic year in Japan. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of fillers in Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) conducted before and after study abroad reveal that while their use of fillers prior to studying in Japan seemed to be driven almost exclusively by cognitive needs (e.g., searching for words), upon return the learners' fillers more frequently served social/interpersonal purposes (e.g., mitigating comments of negative evaluation), demonstrating that language gains may be missed in studies that emphasize quantitative rather than qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Study abroad experiences allow second language (L2) learners to socialize with Japanese speakers more so than at home. From the perspective of language socialization (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), study abroad provides opportunities for novice speakers to learn a new language by using it to socialize and by learning from expert speakers of the language through explicit guidance or participation in social routines. Thus, study abroad is expected to facilitate the acquisition of aspects of language that are important for interaction and for interpersonal relationships.

While it has often been reported that L2 Japanese learners overuse the informal plain style or haphazardly mix the *desu-masu* and plain styles after they study abroad (e.g., Marriott 1995), Iwasaki (2010), qualitatively analyzing L2 learners' style shifting, found that L2 learners shifted between the two forms in a way that reflected the social meanings

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of these forms. For instance, those who were overusing the plain forms consistently shifted to *desu-masu* when asking the interviewer questions. But the learning of other aspects of language that are closely related to social interactions such as modality markers has been little studied. This study examines L2 learners' interview data, focusing on an often-neglected aspect of language that some previous studies have found to bring about effects that foster interpersonal relationships—fillers.[1]

2. Background

2.1. What are fillers, and what functions do they have?

Fillers are generally construed as "a sound, word, or phrase (as "you know?") used to fill pauses in speaking" (Merriam-Webster Online). This construal gives one an impression that fillers are meaningless elements that merely fill pauses and that do not contribute to speakers' messages.

However, some researchers argue that fillers do signal certain messages. Clark and Fox Tree (2002), for example, argue that speakers use *uh* and *um* to announce that they expect there to be a minor (*uh*) or major (*um*) delay in speaking, and that speakers plan to produce these fillers. Others who contend that speakers do not plan for the use of these fillers nonetheless acknowledge that listeners are highly sensitive to such hesitation disfluencies in speech and utilize them as cues to predict what might be said next or to evaluate the speaker's confidence in what they are saying (e.g., Corley and Stewart 2008). Kjellmer (2003) argues that speakers "make use of fillers unconsciously in aiming for certain effect that s/he achieves without understanding how it was brought about" (181). Kjellmer analyzed such fillers as *er* and *erm* in a British English corpus and found that besides "hesitation proper," fillers were used for signposting speaker turns, attracting attention, highlighting, and marking correction.

Moreover, the use of fillers as mitigators in the realization of such potentially face-threatening speech acts as refusal, request, and apology is discussed (e.g., House and Kasper 1981). It is evident that fillers serve some communicative functions, which fill in the potentially contestable interpersonal space.

2.2. Japanese fillers

Maynard (1989) considers fillers to be one of the features of conversational language that are "designed in response to the context of situation and sociocultural value of the speech community" (23). She

classified fillers into two categories: language-production-based and socially-motivated (while acknowledging that some fillers may result from both cognitive and social factors). Speakers use the first type when smooth speech is hindered, and the second type to fill potential silence and avoid potential embarrassment by creating the impression that verbal interaction is being carried on or to indicate hesitancy and give listeners an impression that they are less imposing. Below, I call the functions of the second-type fillers "social functions" (to avoid the connotation of intentionality implied by the term, "motivated") and summarize the social functions of commonly used lexical fillers in Japanese.

Some Japanese fillers are lexical in that they can be recognized as words: *ano(o), etto, ma(a), nanka, yappari*; some are phonetic non-lexical fillers such as *a, aa, e, ee, (u)n, n:*. There are also phrasal fillers such as *nante iu ka* 'how should I put it'. Among the well-studied fillers are lexical fillers *ano* (Cook 1993, Sadanobu and Takubo 1995) *ma(a)* (Fukuda-Karlin 2003, Kawada 2007), and *yappari* (Maynard 1991).

Sadanobu and Takubo (1995) regarded *ano(o)* and *etto* as monitoring devices of mental operations in discourse, which have pragmatic consequences. Speakers use *etto* to shut off the interface with the interlocutor in order to secure a large capacity in their mental buffer to carry out effortful operations in their mental database, and use *ano(o)* when they attempt to plan their language to make it suitable for the message they intend to deliver. Thus, speakers are likely to use *etto* when deciding what to say and *ano(o)* when deciding how to put their messages into words. As a result of these monitoring functions, *etto* signals a momentary halt of the interface with the listener, and *ano(o)* conveys a cautious and considerate attitude towards the listener.

Cook (1993) considers the filler *ano* as the extension of the demonstrative *ano* 'that' to the domain of affect (i.e., attitudes and feelings). Just as the demonstrative *ano* is used to point to an object that is located at the same distance both from the listener and from the speaker, the filler *ano* aligns the speaker and listener on the same side with respect to the subsequent utterance, which "creates interpersonal tuning between interlocutors" (Cook 1993: 23). As a result, *ano* can solicit the listener's cooperation, highlight information, and function as a positive politeness marker.

Fukada-Karlin (2003) proposes that the basic function of *maa* is to indicate "the speaker's attitude that the utterance used with the marker may not satisfy the addressee's expectations about how much it

contributes to achieving the joint goal of the current discourse" (55). Among the functions that derive from this are: the speaker signaling her answer is not as accurate, complete, or clear as expected; the speaker softening her tone of disagreement to the addressee or reducing her commitments to statements with shocking, negative, or embarrassing contents. Kawada (2007) found that *maa* as a filler is used to provide information that is not shared by the addressee, and as a hedge it also marks the speaker's subjective judgments. Pertinent to the current study is that he also compared the same speakers' use of *maa* in giving lectures, engaging in task-based dialogues, free conversations, and interviews, and found that *maa* was used more frequently in lectures and interviews than in free conversations or task-based dialogues, due to the functions mentioned above.

Like *maa*, *nanka* is also used to signal uncertainty, to indicate hesitancy (and thus to be less imposing), and to soften negative comments (Emmett 2001). Due to these functions, *nanka* facilitates conversations and promotes interpersonal relationships. This function of *nanka* can be explained by the expressive function of non-interrogative *nan(i)* (Maynard 2000), which "serves as an 'anti-sign' referring to unspeakable moments of language" (Maynard 2000: 1209). By using *nan(i)* as a filler, the speaker can avoid specificity—for psychological, social, and interactional reasons. A variety of fillers utilizing *nan(i)* such as *nani ne*, *nanka* and *nan to iu ka* 'how should I put it' can all be considered as "adding the effects of noncommitment to specificity" (1228).

Yappari is generally used when the speaker assumes that the interlocutor shares some knowledge with him/her (Maynard 1991). Such an assumption of shared knowledge between interlocutors encourages interpersonal rapport and empathy. Because the use of *yappari* requires the speaker to think in order to relate his/her views to a known fact, its use gives the listener an impression of the speaker's thoughtfulness. Its use as a filler can signal to the listener that "the speaker is involved in interaction (because he or she is thinking) and some utterance is expected" (49). It can also soften awkward moments in interaction such as when the speaker makes less preferred statements or presents opposing views.

The functions of the other Japanese fillers do not seem to be as extensively studied, but in her comprehensive review of studies on fillers, Yamane (2002) summarizes her earlier findings: *a* is used to initiate a conversation; *e:, anoo,* and *nanka* to talk about the main message; *iya,*

nanka, and *maa* to encourage the listener to pay attention and participate in the interaction.

2.3. Fillers in L2 acquisition studies

There seems to be increasing awareness of the communicative values of fillers, but research in L2 acquisition does not always reflect this. In the 1980s and 1990s, many researchers extensively studied temporal variables such as speech rate, pause length, and filled pauses (pauses filled with fillers) in L2 speakers' production (e.g., Dechert, Mohle and Raupach 1984). Filled pauses were often quantified (their frequencies and total lengths) as indicators of disfluency. Likewise, in studies of language gains during study abroad, fillers or filled pauses were also examined as one of the features of disfluency (Segalowitz and Freed 2004).

Interestingly, and somewhat contradictorily, native-like use of fillers was found to help L2 learners' fluency. Hasselgren (2002) found that fluent English learners used "smallwords," including such fillers as *well, right, you see, oh, ah*, and *I mean*, in a more native-like way than less fluent learners in terms of quantity, range, and distribution across turns. Rieger (2003) found that while weaker intermediate learners of German left some of their hesitation unfilled, stronger students used German lexical fillers that fulfilled additional functions.

Kondo (2004) examined frequency/types of fillers and their functions in transcribed L2 Japanese OPI data. She found that the types and functions of fillers used by L2 Japanese speakers depended on their proficiency levels. There was an increasing use of *ano(o)* among the Intermediate speakers and *soo desu ne, sono, nante iu ka,* and *ma* among speakers of Advanced level or above. Advanced level speakers also used fillers for interpersonal functions. But because the corpus only represented each L2 learner at a single point in time, the L2 development of Japanese fillers is yet to be uncovered.

As seen above, the analysis of the frequency of fillers alone can tell us very little about L2 learners' language development. Moreover, as Lennon (2000) pointed out, it is not simply the temporal factor that determines a listener's perception and impression of fluency. Rather, fluency can only be assessed in a given context. For weighty subject matter, for instance, slower, hesitant speech may engage listener attention and can be considered appropriate. Hence, in order to understand L2 learners' development in their use of fillers, each instance

needs to be assessed for its potential effects on the listeners in each local context of interaction.

3. Current Study

Because previous studies on L2 fillers were often limited to identifying the frequency and types of fillers, the social dimension of L2 fillers has been largely neglected. This social dimension is likely to be an aspect of language that may be developed through language socialization during study abroad but has not been assessed. Hence, the current study examined L2 learners' use of fillers before and after they studied abroad to shed light on the development in their use of fillers—in particular the social, interpersonal, or interactive effects that those fillers can bring about.

3.1. Data

Audio files of five students who studied abroad in Japan were analyzed. The learners were given pseudonyms: Greg, Henry, Alan, Sam, and Peter. They went to Japan to study for one academic year; two went to Hyōgo (Greg and Alan), the other three went to Aichi, Tokyo, and Ibaraki. They participated in Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) conducted by a certified OPI tester (the author) prior to their departure and after their return. The OPIs upon return were conducted over the phone, which is considered equivalent to the face-to-face OPI for the purpose of assessing proficiency though the absence of visual cues may potentially increase the use of fillers.[2]

It should be noted that OPIs diverge from natural informal *conversations* because they are interviews. The interviewer shifts topics; there is little room for interviewees to give backchannels or to initiate turn-taking. Moreover, the interviewer asks challenging questions which interviewees often make an effort to answer. In doing so, they are likely to use more fillers than in informal conversations—another characteristic of formal interviews (e.g., interviews for scholarships or jobs). Hence, what is examined here is how L2 learners respond in interviews, another mode of interaction that is just as important as informal conversations.

Role plays were excluded because the types of role plays given to interviewees in OPIs differ according to proficiency level. Crucially, fillers play greater interpersonal roles in some speech acts such as requests, apologies, and refusals. Role plays for advanced levels, which are typically situations with complications, tend to include apologetic sequences in which interpersonal fillers are important, whereas in role

plays assessing Intermediate level candidates' ability to carry out transactional tasks, the use of fillers tends to sound disfluent. Table 1 shows the length of each entire OPI and the total time of the analyzed parts (i.e., the total length of time each candidate speaks in the segments, excluding role plays and the interviewer's speech time).[3]

	Before Study Abroad			After Study Abroad		
	Level	Length	Analyzed	Level	Length	Analyzed
Greg	I–L	29'56"	16'41"	I–M	26'24"	17'3"
Henry	I–M	27'28"	17'27"	I–M	30'16"	16'48"
Alan	I–H	28'46"	21'18"	A–L	31'6"	21'15"
Sam	I–H	30'48"	19'47"	A–M	27'33"	16'4"
Peter	A–L	31'8"	19'33"	A–H	28'30"	13'12"

Table 1. Lengths of audio recordings of the OPI interviews and OPI ratings.
'I' refers to Intermediate, 'A' Advanced. 'L,' 'M,' 'H' refer to Low, Mid, and High.

3.2. Participant profiles

All five participants were male students in their early twenties studying Japanese at the same university in the United States. Greg had studied Japanese for one year, and the other four for two years prior to their departure. *Yookoso!* (Tohsaku 1999a, b) was used as the textbook in the first three semesters. It introduces *ano(o), eeto(o), soo desu nee,* and *eeto desu nee* early in the first volume as fillers that speakers use when they "are trying to think of what to say next or are stalling for time in answering a question" (22), but such fillers were rarely used in the dialogues. In the textbook used in the fourth semester, *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* (Miura and McGloin 1994), *ano(o),* and *eeto*, and *soo desu ne* were used only two or three times in dialogues, respectively.

All participants either majored in Japanese or were considering it as a minor or a second major. At the home institution, Peter and Henry lived in a campus "language" dormitory where exchange students from Japan were also living on the same floor. In Japan, Peter lived in a dorm

while the other four lived with Japanese families at least for the first semester. Henry left his host family in the second semester and shared a house with three students (both Japanese and foreign students).

Table 1 shows the participants' proficiency before and after study abroad. The post-study-abroad OPIs were sent to Language Testing International of ACTFL for second ratings in order to obtain official ratings to ensure that the ratings after study abroad were not biased by the tester's knowledge about the learners' pre-study-abroad proficiency. Four of the five improved their OPI ratings, but Henry remained at Intermediate-Mid level.

3.3. Method of analysis

The transcripts, which had originally been prepared for analyzing other aspects of language (e.g., Iwasaki 2010), were carefully checked and compared with the audio files. Special attention was paid to fillers to make sure that short fillers such as *a* and *e* were not missed, and that the number of times fillers were used in instances of repetition were accurate. Attention was also paid to prosody because whether a form such as (*u)n* is a filler similar to English *hmm*, or an informal affirmative response (equivalent of English *yeah*) depends on how it is said.

Fillers were transcribed according to how they sound to Japanese ears using romanization (and colons for lengthening) that correspond to Japanese. This approach was adopted partly because it was virtually impossible to determine whether an unstressed and often mumbled lengthened vowel was English *uh* or Japanese *a(:)* when audio-recorded. More importantly, to assess the development of the social use of fillers, what they sound like to other Japanese ears needs to be considered. Thus, fillers that are possibly borrowed from English but could be heard as Japanese fillers, such as *uh* and *hmm* were coded as Japanese fillers *a* (or *a:*) and *n* (or *n:*), but fillers that sounded like *um* or *erm*, which did not sound like Japanese fillers, were coded as *am* or *a:m*.

Fillers coded were drawl (elongated word-final vowels such as *soshite:* 'and'), *a:, a, e:, ano(o), sono(o), etto, (u)n(:), ma(a)*, *nanka*, *nani, yappari*, phrasal fillers (e.g*., soo desu nee* 'that is so, isn't it?' *etto ne* 'filler + interactional particle *ne* 'right?''), and others. Those that rarely occurred were tallied as "others" unless they occurred often for a given participant. Occurrences of variants of each type were not examined; hence, for example, *etto, etto:, e:tto:* were all classified as the same type. If such fillers as *un* and *soo desu ne* were clearly used as responses to

mean "yeah" or "that is right," they were not considered fillers, but ambiguous cases were included.

The fillers were further coded either as socially useful or not. Judgment was made as to whether each filler could bring about effects that help social interaction in each given context. If a filler satisfies criteria (a) and/or (b), it was coded as having such social effects.

(1) a. it has any of the interpersonal functions identified in previously studies
b. the inclusion of the filler sounds better than omitting it and does not give the impression of disfluency

Examples in (2) illustrate a socially useful filler (bolded and underlined) and disfluent fillers (bolded only).[4]

(2) Henry's pre-study-abroad OPI (when asked where he was going camping).

1 H: *Doko ni,* ***<u>ano,</u>*** *mada wakaranai kedo,* ***ano,*** *hoka no hito ga*
where DAT F yet know-NEG but F other GEN people NOM
kuruma de, ***ano***
car by F

2 *Bo, tsurete ikimasu.*
m(e) take-GER go-AH-NONPAST
'Where.. well, I don't know yet, but someone else will drive me there.'

In Line 1 when Henry was stating that he does not know, his hesitancy with *ano* sounds polite. But the other two *ano* make his utterance sound disfluent.

Further, (3a–b) are used to acknowledge the non-target-like use of fillers whose effects may not be fully realized, but can be considered as emergent use of socially-oriented fillers.

(3) a. in cases of non-target-like repeated uses of the same fillers in the contexts in which fillers do play a role, only one instance is considered to have an interpersonal effect
b. in cases where the selected filler may not be the most desirable filler in a given context, it is considered to have social value if it sounds more appropriate than non-use of any fillers

The first filler in (4) shows an example of (3b).

(4) Greg's post-study-abroad OPI (when asked about activities other than studying).

1 G: ***<u>e:to: n:</u>***, *sono kikai ga atta* ***ga:***
F F that opportunities NOM exist-PAST but,
2 ***etto****: watashi wa* ***eto:*** *benkyoo dake deshita.*
F I TOP F study only COP-AH-PAST
'Well, there were such opportunities, but I only studied.'

The target-like filler starting his utterance in Line 1 that indicates hesitancy to provide his negative response (not taking advantage of opportunities while in Japan) would be *ano, ma,* or possibly *nanka.* Thus, *e:to:* is non-target-like, but it sounds better to indicate hesitancy by *e:to:*.

Two native speakers coded all fillers independently after discussing coding schemes using one of the 10 interviews (Henry's post-study-abroad interview, which had a relatively small number of fillers) in order to examine the reliability of a coding system that requires a degree of subjective judgment. One of the coders was the author, and the other was a female native speaker in her 20s, who had completed her master's degree in Japanese applied linguistics.

A total of 2661 fillers were coded independently; the two raters agreed about the present/absent status of favorable social effects for 2255 fillers (84.7%, Cronbach alpha value of 0.72, which is considered to be moderately good agreement).[5] Most of the disagreement concerned the coding of non-target fillers (3b) or repetitions of fillers. For example, the first *e:to:* in (4) above was coded socially useful only by the first rater but was later agreed to be socially useful; in other cases, similar non-target-like fillers were coded socially useful only by the second rater. And another cause of rating disagreement relates to the extent of hesitancy. In the case of (4), it is a context in which hesitancy is socially appropriate, but there was some disagreement as to how much hesitancy is appropriate. Both first and second raters agreed on the usefulness of the second filler (*n:*), but only the first rater coded the elongated *ga:* as useful. The raters met and discussed such disagreements and decided on the agreed coding.

4. Results

The summary of frequency and number of types of fillers used by the five participants are shown in Table 2. Note that the type *ano(o)* includes both *ano* and the lengthened version *ano:,* likewise *sono(o)* and *ma(a)* include both short and lengthened versions. The filler type *etto* includes all alternate realizations of this type (e.g., *eto, e:to: etto:, e:to*). The number of types does not include filler types that occurred only once in

the data for a given participant since one occurrence of a filler, especially that of short fillers such as *e* or *a*, can be an accident rather than an indication of the participant's use of fillers.

	Before				After			
	Total	Types	Per min.	Social	Total	Types	Per min.	Social
Greg	391	5	23.4	22 (5.6%)	381	8	22.3	75 (19.5%)
Henry	203	6	11.6	41 (20.2%)	122	8	7.3	70 (57.4%)
Alan	469	8	22.0	52 (14.1%)	367	11	17.3	142 (35.2%)
Sam	282	6	15.1	39 (15.5%)	205	11	12.8	85 (41.7%)
Peter	269	10	13.7	96 (35.7%)	94	10	7.1	79 (83.2%)

Table 2. Summary of frequency and number of types of Japanese fillers.

The frequency of fillers per minute ranges from 11.6 to 23.4 before, and from 7.1 to 22.3 after study abroad, showing substantial individual variability. There is a slight trend for decrease in frequency after study abroad, but the decrease is notable with only two of the five participants: Henry, from 11.6 fillers per minute to 7.3, and Peter, from 13.7 fillers per minute to 7.1. But the fact that the post-OPI was conducted via telephone might have contributed to the limited decrease of fillers. The types of fillers tended to be more varied after study abroad, except for Peter, who already used ten types prior to study abroad. Crucially, what is common across all five participants is that the proportions of socially useful fillers increased. Below, each individual's use of fillers is discussed.

Greg

Greg was the only learner who had studied Japanese just for a year. As Table 2 indicates, his utterances contained many English fillers, transcribed as *a:m* and *am* (a total of 84), and *a:* (possibly English *uh*) and *n:* (possibly English *hmm*). He rarely used lexical fillers that were clearly Japanese prior to study abroad. His utterances in (5) display disfluency most likely caused by language production difficulty. Though

this context is where hesitancy is appropriate, raters did not code them as socially useful (except for the fifth filler *a:,* which only the first coder initially considered socially useful.)[6] In (5), Greg responds to a question about his high school (note that fillers are articulated less clearly and often in a softer voice than the rest of utterances, and thus they are less distractive than they look in these transcriptions).

(5) G: ***am, n:, a:*** *chisakute* ***a:m: a:*** *warui gakkoo,* ***a,*** *desu.*
F F F small-GER F F bad school F COP-AH-NONPAST
'Um, hmm, uh, it is a small and uh bad, ah, school.' [7]

Socially useful fillers were rare in Greg's pre-study-abroad OPI. The potentially social ones were limited to the kinds of fillers that are similar to English in their form and potential effects. For example, in (6), Greg is asked what he thinks about his major (computer science), and his filler *n:* 'hmm' signals to the listener that he is engaged in a thought process, possibly indicating that he is taking the interlocutor's question seriously.

(6) G: ***a:*** ***n:*** *yasashii to omoimasu*.
F F easy QT think-AH-NONPAST
'Uh, hmm, I think it is easy.'

Upon return, he abandoned the use of English fillers altogether; instead, he relied on the Japanese filler *etto* (243 of 383 tokens), which he had only used 3 times before. Though most social fillers were again similar to English (*n:* to indicate the engagement in thought, and *a* 'ah' to indicate noticing, either remembering or correcting something), there was a larger proportion of such social uses of fillers (19.5% as compared to 5.6% before). His use of *etto* may also occasionally indicate active engagement in thought. In (7), Greg is trying to remember the exact date on which he returned to the United States.

(7) G: **a:** *hakkiri* **n:** *oboete inai kedo,* ***etto,*** ***n: eeto*** *sengetsu-no* (…)
F clearly F remember-GER NEG but F F F last-month-GEN
e:to: *mikka* (…) *gurai.*
F 3rd-day about
'Uh.., I don't remember clearly, hmm but it was around the third of last month.'

His use of fillers may signal to the listener his best effort to remember the accurate date—analogous to the use of fillers by English speakers

when they provide exact times rather than approximate times (Gibbs and Bryant 2008). This example also shows that the potential social value of fillers depends on the actual content of the utterance.

Greg's use of fillers was still often an indication of disfluency. Yet, more of them are used in contexts in which fillers have social values, e.g., the need to think carefully before answering or hesitating before presenting an opinion that may not be favorable. In (8), the interviewer asked Greg a question about his calligraphy class.

(8) 1 G: ***e:to:*** (laugh) ***n:*** *so,* ***sono:*** *ji o kaku no ga suki-datta kedo.*
F F F character ACC write N NOM like-PAST but
'Well, hmm, well, I liked writing characters, but'

2 (laugh) ***etto, sono:*** ***sono:*** *jugyoo no seido wa* ***e:*** *chotto*
F F F class GEN method TOP F little
wakari-nikui to omoimashita.
understand-hard QT think-AH-PAST.
'Well, hmm, I thought the method of the class was hard to understand.'

Greg expresses his negative evaluation of the classes, and his first few fillers can signal polite hesitancy.

Henry

Although Henry did not improve his proficiency according to the OPI ratings, changes in his use of fillers indicate his development. The total number of fillers noticeably decreased, but his social use greatly increased. Prior to study abroad, Henry predominantly used *ano(o)* (102 of 203 tokens), and his fillers featured more use of social fillers as compared to Greg's, constituting 20.2% of the total. In (9), Henry is trying to identify who his best friends are.

(9) 1 H: *shin'yuu,* ***n:to ne****, muzukashii shitsumon.*
best-friend F difficult question
'My best friend..that's a difficult question.'

2 ***ano****,* ***eto****, ichiban taisetsu na hito wa,* ***ano ano*** *san-nin*
F F most important are people TOP F F 3-CL
arimasu.
exist-AH-NONPAST
'Well, um there are three important people for me.'

In Line 1, he uses a filler that consists of *n:to* and an interactional sentence final particle *ne*, which suggests to the interactant that he is

engaged in a thought process, and *ano* in Line 2 can highlight the upcoming information.

Upon return, his social fillers further increased to 57.4% (70 of 122 tokens), and they include the appearance of fillers that Kondo (2004) commonly observed among advanced speakers, such as *ma* and *nanka.* The exchanges in (10) show his uses of fillers for interactive purposes.

(10)

1 I: *de, ima, sochira no ano: otenki wa doo desu ka*.
'So, how is the weather there?'

2 H: *ima no tenki*?
now GEN weather
'The weather now?'

3 I: *hai*.
'Yes.'

4 H: *un, kekkoo ii desu*.
yeah quite good COP-AH-NONPAST
'Yeah, it's pretty good.'

5 ***nanka*** *atsukunai shi, samukunai kara, chooroi* tenki*.
F hot-NEG and cold-NEG because perfect-good weather
'Well, it isn't hot or cold; so it is perfect.'
**chooroi* was interpreted as *choodo ii*

6 I: *a, soo desu ka*.
'Ah, is that so.'

7 H: *demo,* ***ano,*** *aki desho*?
but F autumn COP-CONSULTATIVE
'But well, you know it is autumn, right?'

8 I: [*hai*]
'Yes.'

9 H: [***ano***]*, yoku,* ***ano****, kyoo igai ni ame ga yoku furu kara,*
F often F today except rain NOM often fall because
'Well, because it rains often except for today…'

10 *ki no ha ga, no iro ga, kawaranai.* [*zutto*] *midori*
tree GEN leaf NOM GEN color NOM change-NEG long-time green
'The color of tree leaves does not change, it stays green.'

11 I: [*soo nan desu ka*]
'Is that so?'

12 H: *de, mo, momiji,* ***nanka,*** *aka toka, ha toka, ki no ha?*
but autumn-tints F(somehow) red such leaf such tree GEN leaves
'And, you know, autumn tints, red leaves and such, tree leaves …?'

13 I: *hai*
'Yes'

14 H: *ga aka ni naru toka sore wa mada okotte inai kara,*
NOM red become such that TOP yet happen-GER has-NEG because
'Because such as (leaves) turning red has not happened yet'

15 *chotto* ***n:*** *ame ga furisugi to omoimasu.*
bit F rain NOM fall-excess QT think-AH-NONPAST
'Hmm, I think there has been a bit too much rain.'

Rather than describing the weather himself, he interacts with the interviewer. The use of *ano* in Line 7 and the sentence-ending *desho* 'right?' work together to align the interlocutor with his side (Cook 1993) in order to jointly construct the talk.

Alan

Both in pre- and post-study-abroad OPIs, Alan was a very willing speaker even when challenging questions (e.g., technology in society) were asked, which might have been a reason for his frequent use of fillers. *Ano(o)* was by far his dominant filler before study abroad (207 of 469 in pre- and 190 of 362 in post-OPIs). Before study abroad, most were indicative of language production difficulties. Even those fillers with the potential for social effects may have failed to achieve such effects due to their over-frequent usage, as seen in (11). Prior to (11) Alan had mentioned the difficulty of finding a course that teaches his "favorite" math.

(11)

1 I: *suki na suugaku to iu no wa donna suugaku desu ka.*
'What kind of math is what you call your favorite math?'

2 A: ***a:*** *omoshiroi suugaku desu yo.*
F interesting math COP-AH-NONPAST SFP
'It's an interesting math.'

3 ***ano, a: a:*** *zenbu no suugaku ga* ***a:*** *suki da to omoimasu*
F F F all GEN math NOM F like COP QT think-AH-NONPAST
kedo
but
'Well, um, um I think I like all math but…'

4 ***<u>ano:</u>*** ***a:*** *sensee ga* ***a:*** *yokunai to,*
F F teacher NOM F good-NEG COND
'Well, ah, if the teacher is not good'

5 *watashi wa amari,* ***ano, a:*** *naraemasen.*
I TOP very well F F learn-POTENTIAL-NEG
'I can't learn very well.'

6 ***ano,*** *soshitara sensee ga,* ***a:*** *oshiete nai to,*
F if-so teacher NOM F teach-GER NEG COND
'If so, well, if teachers do not teach'

7 ***ano,*** *watashi wa,* ***a:*** *taihen* ***a:*** *hatarakimasu kedo, anmari,* ***ano,***
F I TOP F extremely F work but very F
naraemasen.
learn-POTENTIAL-NEG
'I work very hard, but I cannot, uh, learn well.'

Ano is generally a useful filler for softening statements of negative evaluation. However, it is possible in (11) that Alan's use of *ano* may fail to achieve this softening effect due to its excessive frequency. In the current analysis the usages only in lines 4 and 5 were coded as having social effects. The proportion of social fillers constituted only 14% of all fillers (66 of 469) before he studied abroad.

Upon return, his use of fillers remained very frequent (17.3 per minute), and his dominant filler was still *ano(o).* The most notable change, however, was the variety of fillers that he employed, including some phrasal fillers such as *doo desu ka nee* 'I wonder.' In (12) when asked about Japanese youth and American youth, he had difficulty answering questions as indicated by his silent pauses, yet he made his best effort to respond before giving up, and his effort was communicated to the listener.

(12)

1 I: *ja, amerika to nihon de zuibun chigau to omomasu ka*.
'Then do you think American and Japanese youth* are quite different?'
*The interviewer and Alan had been talking about young people in Japan prior to this sequence.

2 A: ***a:*** (…) ***yappari*** *chigau tto itte ii to omoimasu.*
F F(as-expected) different QT say-GER good QT think-AH-NONPAST
'Erm, as expected, I think you can say that they are different.'

3 *kedo, doo chigau ka tte kiitara, motto muzukashii, muzukashiku*
but how different Q QT ask-COND more difficult, difficult
narimasu.
become-AH-NONPAST

'But if you ask me how different, the question becomes more difficult.'

4 ***ano: n:*** ***soo desu ka nee*** (…), ***doo desu ka nee*** (….)
F F SO COP Q SFP how COP Q SFP
'Well, hmm, let's see, I wonder…'

5 ***n:*** ***a: ano ano: a*** (….) *so sore ni tsuite no kanji wa*
F F F F F it about GEN feeling TOP
arimasu kedo,
exist-AH-NONPAST but
'Hmm, er, well, I have some feelings about it, but'

6 *tabun eigo de mo setsumei amari dekimasen.*
perhaps English with even explanation well can-AH-NEG
'perhaps even in English I cannot explain it very well.'

Despite his disfluency, his use of fillers may work to retain the listener's continued attention by conveying to her his efforts to be actively engaged in thought and interaction.

Sam

Before study abroad, Sam used some English-like fillers (3 instances of *a:m*) and fillers similar to English (*a:*), though he also frequently used Japanese fillers such as *etto* (81 times). When asked about his dorm, he replied:

(13)

1 S: *ryoo* ***wa:*** *chotto urusakute benkyo-shinikui desu.*
dorm TOP a little noisy study-hard COP-AH-NONPAST
'The dorm is a bit noisy and hard to study.'

2 I: *ja, kawaritai to omoimasu ka.*
'Then would you like to change (your housing)?'

3 S: ***nto,*** *kawaritai n desu kedo,*
F change-want N COP-AH-NONPAST but
'I would like to change it but'

4 ***a, to,*** *apaato wa chotto takai kara*,
F F apartment TOP little expensive because
'Well, because apartments are expensive…'

5 ***a:*** *chotto takaishi, daigaku kara tooishi,*
F little expensive-and university from far-and
'well, they are a bit expensive, and far from the university, so..'

6 *ryoo ni,* ***a:*** *ryoo ni ite,* ***a:*** *choto ryoo ni imasu.*
dorm LOC F dorm LOC stay-GER F little dorm LOC stay-AH-NONPAST
'I stay in the dorm.'

Some of his fillers such as those in Lines 4 and 6 may be used due to language production difficulties, but others, along with the use of a hedging *chotto* "a bit," (Line 1) soften his negative evaluation of the dorm being too noisy.

Upon return, Sam happened to be asked about his dorm again. If the use of fillers (including drawls such as *chotto:*:) and repairs are taken as signs of disfluency, he would be considered more "disfluent" than before.

(14)

1 I: *ano, ryoo wa donna tokoro desu ka.*
'Well, what is your dorm like?'

2 S: ***e:*** *chott****o::*** *urusai desu.*
F little noisy COP-AH-NONPAST
'Well, it is.. a bit noisy.'

3 ***etto****, gakusee wa* ***n*** *gayagaya hanashite, hanashite iru,*
F student TOP F noisily speak-GER speak-GER are
hanashite iru node,
speak-GER are because
'Well, because students are noisily speaking,'
ano*:* ***nanka*** *paati shitari,* ***e:to*** *sakendari site iru node,*
F F party do-such F yell-such do-GER are because
'Umm, because they have parties, and, um yell,'
chotto benkyoo shinikui toki mo arimasu.
little study do-hard time also exist-AH-NONPAST
'At times, it is hard to study.'

He used a variety of fillers including drawls, *etto, n, nanka,* and *anoo* (as well as other hedging devices, *chotto*, and *toki mo aru*). When compared to (13), he elaborates the unfavorable situation in more detail and in a more agreeable way in (14).

Further, when he was asked his opinion about the traditional Japanese employment system, in which security and promotion are based on seniority, he was able to express his unfavorable opinion in an agreeable manner as seen in (15).

(15)

1 S: *he:* ***a: soo desu ne.*** *Sore, muzukashi-i.* ***Un,*** *muzukashii*
F F F(let's see) that difficult-NONPAST F difficult
desu kedo,
COP-AH-NONPAST but
'Er, let's see… that's difficult. Hmm it's difficult, but'

2 ***maa,*** *warui shokunin wa moo.. kaikoshite ii n ja nai*
F bad employee TOP anymore lay-off alright N COP-NEG
desu ka,
COP-AH-NONPAST Q
'Well, wouldn't it be all right to lay off bad employees?'

3 *…to omoimasu kedo.*
QT think-AH-NONPAST but
'…I think.'

4 ***eto,*** *kaisha ni warui eikyoo o oyobosu kamoshirenai.*
F company DAT bad influence ACC give might
'Well, (otherwise) it might have a bad influence on their company.'

Sam's opinion, despite its content, does not sound imposing or assertive because of his use of fillers that work together with a variety of hedging expressions. For instance, his use of *maa* in combination with *ja nai desu ka* represents an observed native speaker strategy used when providing support for opinions (Iwasaki 2009).

Peter

Peter was the most proficient speaker among the five. Before he studied abroad, he often used the idiosyncratic filler *nantəka* (22 of 269 tokens), which sounded like either *nantoka* 'somehow' or *nanteka*, which might have been his shortened form of *nante iu ka* "how shall I put it?" Prior to (16) he had mentioned how important the basics were in practicing the violin, and the interviewer mildly challenged his opinion by stating that repetitious practice of the basics may be boring for learners.

(16)

1 P: ***n: soo desu ne. ano: n:****nya*
F F(right) F F
'Hmm, yeah, well, hmm (but)'

2 *futsuu no hito ni tsumaranai to omou ka mo siremasen kedo,*
average GEN people for boring QT think might but
'Most people may think that it is boring, but'

3 ***e:*** *kihon ga iroirona reberu na n desu.*
F basics NOM various level COP N COP-AH-NONPAST
'Uh the basics have various levels.'

4 ***nanteka****, futsuu ano kihon bakari renshuu shinakute*
F ordinarily F basics only practice do-NEG-GER
'Usually, even if you do not exclusively practice the basics'

5 ***ano****:* ***dooyutto*** *nantoka mochiron dandan joozu, joozu ni*
F F (?) somehow of-course gradually skillful skillful DAT
narimasu kedo,
become but
'well, you will somehow gradually become good at it, but'

6 ***e:*** *kihon no hoo ga daiji, to iu kangae deshita.*
F basics GEN side NOM important QT say thought COP-AH-PAST
'My thought was that it was the basics that were more important.'

Upon return, Peter no longer used such idiosyncratic fillers. In addition, he only used a small number of fillers (94 tokens), which mostly served some communicative, social purposes (83.2% of the time). In (17), he discusses the differences between sports and martial arts.

(17)

1 I: *budoo to supootsu no chigai tte iu no wa doo iu chigai desu ka*.
'How do martial arts and sports differ?'

2 P: ***a, nanka*** *saikin sugoi dibeeto-sareteru n desu kedo,*
F F recently hotly debate-do-PASSIVE N COP-AH-NONPAST but
'ah, somehow it is debated hotly recently,'

3 *kendo wa supootsu ka budoo ka dotchi deshoo.*
kendo TOP sports Q martial-arts Q which might
'Is kendo possibly a sport or a martial art?'

4 ***ma*** *shiai toka, ni shuuchuu-shitara,* ***ma,*** *doo kangaete mo*
F tournaments such DAT concentrate-COND F which think-GER even
'Well, if you only think about tournaments, no matter how you think'

5 *supootsu ni yoku nite-iru n desu kedo*,
sports DAT very is-similar N COP-AH-NONPAST but
'it is very similar to a sport, but'

6 *reigi toka mo daizi desu kara,* ***nanka*** *honto ni*
manner such also important COP-AH-NONPAST because F really
budoo da to omoimasu.
martial-arts COP-NONPAST QT think-AH-NONPAST

'because manners are also important, I think it is indeed a martial art.'

Peter actively used fillers such as *maa* and *nanka* that are not introduced or whose functions are rarely discussed in textbooks, bringing about several effects discussed in previous studies. For example, in Line 4, he used *ma,* which may indicate Peter's "attitude that the following utterance may not satisfy the addressee's expectations about how much it contributes to the joint goal" of the interlocutors (Fukada-Karlin 2003: 65). Put simply, Peter's comment at this point that kendo is "similar to a sport" is likely to be contrary to the interlocutor's expectation (and the more common belief that it is a martial art). However, Peter then clarifies this comment in Line 6 and returns to the shared position that kendo is indeed a martial art.

In sum, while the frequency of fillers decreased noticeably only in Henry's and Peter's utterances, the use of fillers among all five participants indicates their language development. Not only did they not use English(-like) fillers or idiosyncratic fillers after they studied abroad, they used fillers often in contexts where fillers served social purposes. For instance, they often used fillers such as *n:* and *ano*: when trying to express an opinion, giving the impression that they are making their best effort to respond in the most suitable manner, and used *ma*, *ano* or *nanka* when they provided somewhat negative or unexpected comments. Consequently, these fillers helped to fill potentially uncomfortable or contestable social space that could be caused by silence or direct responses.

Considering the limited types and functions of fillers discussed in textbooks, social interactions that these participants experienced in Japan undoubtedly helped them develop their use of fillers.

5. Conclusion

The current study shows that language gains that learners achieve during study abroad include aspects of language that are not measured by conventional testing, namely, the ability to interact socially to achieve joint goals with their interlocutors. Language use in this perspective does not merely constitute the production of language, but it also involves social actions, of which the production of "language" is only a part. The workings of fillers diverge from conventional elements of language in that they have more to do with non-verbal behavior (e.g., Takubo 2005). Speakers opt to utter fillers of their choice rather than staying silent (e.g.,

conveying their engagement in thought processes) or immediately articulating the intended message (e.g., conveying their hesitancy due to the content of the message) regardless of whether they are fully aware of their decisions to do so.

There are limitations to this study, however. The current study has a very small number of participants, and it does not have a control group due to the difficulty of identifying and finding a group of students who are equivalent to those participating in a one-year study abroad in terms of instructional hours (and other variables that should be controlled). Thus, this study shows language gain during study abroad in an aspect of language that has largely been neglected in L2 studies—without asserting that such gain could only be attained through study abroad. Though the scarcity of input available in textbooks may suggest that the study abroad environment may be more advantageous, we need to await future studies to confirm this.

It is hoped that future L2 research will vigorously examine multiple aspects of communication such as pauses/silence, head nodding, gesture and facial expressions, and their interactions in context in order to achieve a better understanding of the capacity to communicate.

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NOTES

[1] Fillers are also called hesitation markers, or discourse markers, or classified into sets of elements labeled interjections or hedges.

[2] It is also foreseeable that the ways in which speakers shift topics or provide listener responses may differ between phone and face-to-face interactions, but

because the OPI segments examined here are primarily responses to the interviewer's questions, qualitative differences in filler use are not readily foreseeable.

[3] Japanese OPIs require two role-plays for candidates who approach Superior Level in order to evaluate their ability to use formal as well as informal language.

[4] The following notation is used for glosses: NOM nominative marker, ACC accusative, GEN genitive, DAT dative, LOC locative, TOP topic marker, GER gerund, Q question marker, QT quotative, NEG negative, COND conditional, COP copula, F filler, N nominalizer, SFP sentence final particle, AH addressee honorific, CL classifier. Salient pauses are indicated by parentheses. The number of periods indicate approximate number of seconds: e.g., (..) means a pause of about 2 seconds.

[5] Researchers do not seem to agree whether Cronbach alpha is an appropriate measure for inter-rater reliability when the data are coded for dichotomous values (0, 1). The Kappa coefficient was 0.56, which indicates acceptable inter-rater reliability.

[6] The fillers in the English translation are used only to indicate the approximate extent of disfluency or hesitation, and are not meant to exactly correspond to Japanese fillers.

[7] Because of the number of fillers, it was agreed that what would have been potentially socially useful sounded disfluent as well.

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