Distribution of Hesitation Discourse Markers Used by Iranian EFL Learners during an Oral L2 Test

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Abstract

Previous st udies o n hesi tation st rategies used by beginner or ad vanced L2 l earners revealed t hat beginners mostly leav e th eir hesitation p auses un filled which ca uses t heir sp eech t o s ound disfluent, a nd   advanced learners tend to use various fillers in order to sound like native speakers.

The present p aper reports o n a st udy w hich i nvestigated t he distribution of hesitation discourse markers including silen t pauses, silen t pauses and fillers, f illers, and n on-lexical words used b y Iran ian u niversity students in an oral (L2) test.

The st udy e xamines t he l ocation of t he discourse m arkers of hesitation acr oss utterances produced by t he participants. The respondents were a group of students registered in the Tertiary English Language Program at a university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The aim was to identify the frequency of all h esitation strategies used in four lo cations of In itial, Midd le, and Final position of the u tterances to find out th e mo st frequent l ocation of hesitation during an oral (L2) test.

Keywords: hesitation strategies, oral L2 test, distribution, fillers, pauses

1. Introduction

This p aper r eports on a study w hich aim s to d iscover the d istribution pattern of hesitation d iscourse markers across the utterances produced by Iranian university students who had studied English as a fo reign language in their home counry. This article begins with reviewing the literature of related studies carried ou t on h esitation strategies, and th en pr oceeds with an ov erview of t he research design, data collection proce dure, and data analysis organized in the frame of results. Finally, the last section of the paper develops the contributions of the present research to the domains of EFL and ELT in the conclusion part.

1.1 Hesitation and Hesitation Strategy

Hesitations are pauses of varying lengths, which are not usually left unfilled. They usually occur when a speaker finds himself/herself in a po sition where he/she lack s t he words to use or strug gles with cog nitive o r v erbal planning. Even native speakers fill h esitations when they speak and use fillers including non-lexical fillers like lengthening or stretching sounds, quasi-lexical fillers, repeating lexical items, and finally lexical fillers. (Rieger, 2003)

Several researches have been carried out to i nvestigate the phenomenon of hesitation in Eng lish as a second or foreign language besides the remedies used by the speakers who cannot find their desired words or structures. This phenomenon app ears eith er in cogn itive or verbal p lanning stag es, and is categ orized as a typ e of communication st rategy being used t o help t he s peaker t o kee p t he ground of speech d uring hesi tation. A s Richards and Schmidt (2002) state, com munication strategies help to compensate for weakn esses i n bu ilding and m aintaining ef ficient c ommunication, an d e nable t he s peaker t o m ake up or improve breakdowns i n communication efficiently. Little more (2003) fo und o ut th at learn ers of different c ognitive styles use d ifferent types of CSs, and Nakatani and Sayer (2005) discussed that the more communication strategies are focused, the more pervasive effect will be left on students' awareness to employ appropriate strategies in interviews.

1.2 Disfluencies

It has been frequently asked whether or not disfluencies are perceived. Although many students are quite good in basic listening and speaking skills, their oral communication skill seem stronger than the others. Those who are privileged with this competence have been proved to be are more successful at schools and other areas of their lives. Studies have shown the possibility of teaching oral communication strategies in L2 which can be further practiced, improved, and applied by the learners successfully.

Disfluencies are strategic devices which signal the speaker's "under construction utterance". They have also been characterized as the automatic effects of cognitive burdens, particularly during speech production management (Nicholson et al, 2003). Spontaneous speech contains all kinds of disfluency phenomena such as silent pauses, hesitations, repetitions, fillers, grammatical errors, misselected lexical items, self-corrections, prolongations, false starts, slips of the tongue, etc., which occur because of disharmony between speech planning and execution stage. In fact, speech disfluencies are defined as phenomena interrupting the flow of speech without adding propositional content to an utterance. (Menyhárt, 2003)

1.3 Function of Disfluencies and Hesitation

Studies have shown that disfluencies have different functions. Some researchers have claimed that pause fillers (e.g. 'uh' and 'um') serve the discourse function of turn taking. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) agree with this lexical role and discuss that "their communicative function will be lost if they are not recognized". (Lai.Gorman Yuan., & Liberman, 2008)

Silent pauses have been known to facilitate breathing, and enable the speaker to harmonize his/her speech processes, and at the same time allow the listeners to better comprehend and digest what they have heard. Other types of disfluency phenomena are known as "errors", which are almost always distracting for the listener. Recently, a study on hesitations and disfluencies in speech, showed there is an instance of disfluency for every six words in spontaneous speech, although, in longer monologues the frequency of error is for every 3.6 words.(this does not include silent pauses) (Menyhárt,2003).

According to Maclay & Osgood (1959) FPs can be used to control the conversational "ball". They may be used to take the lead of the conversation away from the counterpart of the interaction (Murata, 1994), and keep a conversational turn to ensure no one is taking over one's turn.

FPs have been mostly categorized as a kind of hesitation disfluncy including false starts, restarts, silent pauses, and filled pauses.(Maclay & Osgood,1959).

If a speaker "pauses long enough to receive the cue of his own silence, he will produce some kind of signal ([m, er]. . .) which says, in effect, 'I'm still in control—don't interrupt me!'" (Maclay & Osgood, 1959).

Beattie (1977) studied this phenomenon in some naturally-occurring conversations, and discovered that interruptions were occurring more frequently during silent pauses rather than in the presence of FPs.

Besides looking after the speech discourse structure, speakers need to signal the beginning and ending of their conversational turns to others too. It is commonly believed that interlocutors are freer to interrupt in interactive situations rather than the public situations. Therefore, it is entirely important for the speakers to maintain the control of conversations in which FPs are of great use proactively but at the same time cooperatively. (Rose, 2008)

The classification of unfilled and filled pauses under cognitive/non-language-specific, and semantic/language-specific groups receives some support from the way native speakers perceive L2 learners. Studies have shown that the frequency and particularly the distribution of unfilled pauses might influence negatively on the way native speakers of English perceive and judge L2 learners' proficiency level (Dewaele, 1996; Lennon, 1990; Trofimovich& Baker, 2006), although using typical hesitation markers adds on proficiency in speech. (Schmid &, Fa¨gersten, 2010)

Researches have shown that hesitation pause group is not really homogenous. In particular, silent pauses emerge in a really different pattern from that of the FPs'. For example, silent pauses (and other HPs excluding FPs) represent speaker's anxiety more than FPs (Goldman-Eisler, 1961; Kasl & Mahl, 1965; Krause & Pilisuk, 1961; Mahl, 1956; Ragsdale, 1976). It can be simply inferred that listeners who judge frequent hesitation negatively, build their negativity based on FPs, rather than the other HPs, or even the interaction between FPs and other HPs. (Rose, 2008)

1.4 Previous Studies on Hesitation and Disfluencies

Hieke (1981) was one of the first few researchers who discovered that non-native speakers use more self-repairs compared to native speakers. Wiese (1984) found out that L1 and L2 productions entailed different processes in his study of self-repairs. Wiese also showed that L2 speakers employed a larger number of self-repairs than L1 speakers did. He stated that L2 speakers' error in speech is more than L1 speakers', and L2 speakers tend to correct their own errors more than L1 speakers do. He also proposed that L2 speakers required more time to plan their utterances due to their inadequate knowledge of their L2, and they showed less automatization in processing their second language when compared to what they did in their L1. O'Connor (1988) studied the speech of beginner and advanced L2 learners and found out that beginners use fewer self-repairs than advanced learners. They tend to employ various kinds of self-repair such as corrective repairs (rather than anticipatory repairs (covert repairs), but advanced learners utilize more anticipatory self-repairs. Temple (1992) focused on self-repair in the speech of L1 and beginner L2 users. She analyzed speech and repair frequency in both groups and found out that native speakers seem to speak twice as fast when compared to non-native speakers because of the frequent and skillful application of fillers. In contrast, non-native speakers mostly leave their hesitation pauses unfilled, produce more false starts, and leave more errors uncorrected. (Rieger, 2003)

Although disfluencies cannot be separated from the spontaneous speech, listeners still discard repetitions and filled pauses easily. In fact, disfluencies are a cross linguistic fact of life, which have not been affected by inter-language differences in distributions. (Lai. Gorman.Yuan., & Liberman,2008)

The findings of some comparative studies on disfluency markers among monolinguals and bilinguals have shown that a bilingual's task is cognitively more complex; because, she/he accesses two linguistic systems and need to manage both of them simultaneously. This may cause an increase in the emergence rate of CDMs in speech particularly in the weaker language of the speaker. According to Grosjean (2001), the dominant language might be influenced too; because mostly all linguistic systems remain almost active in a bilingual's mind at all time.

As a result, it can be no longer surprising to find higher frequency of disfluency markers among bilinguals and a different distributional pattern from those by monolinguals. (Schmid & Fa¨gersten, 2010)

1.5 Previous Studies on the Distribution of Hesitation Discourse Markers

Maclay and Osgood (1959) carried out a study to find out the distribution pattern of hesitation markers across utterances whithin different lexical categories; however they did not take speakers' sociolinguistic differences into account. The results showed that filled and unfilled pauses might appear anywhere in the utterances, but in particular filled pauses are more likely to precede function words or at phrase boundaries, whereas unfilled pauses mostly occure before lexical words or within syntactic boundaries". (Purvis, 2008)

In another similar research, Andersen (2001) focused on the distribution of English discourse marker: *like*. Andersen mainly studied the distribution of this lexical unit in terms of its function. Similar to Maclay and Osgood, Andersen focused more on the syntactic environment rather than the sociological factors. (Purvis, 2008)

On the other hand, Bailey and Ferreira (2003) carried out a psycholinguistic study focusing on the perception of short discourses. The findings of the study showed that listeners are more sensitive to short discourses.

The two following sentences are examples of what they presented to the respondents:

"Sandra bumped into the busboy and the uh uh waiter told her to be careful."

 and

"Sandra bumped into the busboy and the waiter uh uh told her to be careful."

They found out that in case filled pauses preceded the head noun (which is "the waiter" in the above example) of the second clause, the respondents tended to interpret the noun as a lexical unit starting a new clause instead of the direct object of the previous clause. Thus, it was discovered that, in case a filled pause appears in a place which might be perceived like a discourse boundary, then a listener would consider it like a discourse boundary too. (Rose, 2008)

1.6 Discourse Management

Conversation analysts commonly believe that filled pauses mostly emerge in two major locations within a discourse structure: whether at the "discourse segment boundaries", or at the "beginning of conversational turns". Generally, discourse structure is perceived like a hierarchical structure consisting of some levels, and each level might contain one or more instances of the preceding level. For instance, Stenstrom (1994), having adapted from

Sinclair and Coulthard's model (1975), defines five hierarchically arranged levels of spoken discourse structure: transaction, exchange, turn, move, and act. (Rose, 2008) The cognitive representation of each level has relevant features like the discourse purpose of each level besides a general sequence mapping of the levels it contains. When an individual speaks, he/ she plans the discourse segments before crossing any particular discourse boundaries and regardless of the hierarchy levels. Furthermore, planning any discourse segment encompasses planning all hierarchically lower segments it includes. Therefore, beginning a new turn seems to involve greater planning rather than starting a new act. As a result, higher discourse boundaries which emerge in the higher levels of the hierarchy are expected to show greater language planning. This prediction was first suggested by Swerts (1998) who made a comparative analysis on the emergence of FPs at "strong" and "weak" discourse boundaries. He discovered that the initial phrase being followed by a strong discourse boundary could more likely contain an initial filled pause rather than a middle filled pause or in some cases no filled pause at all. In contrast, those phrases followed by a weak discourse boundary have the lowest probability of containing initial filled pause.

1.7 Communication Strategies in EFL Context

For most people, the main purpose of learning a foreign language is gaining the ability to communicate. Even nowadays, being able to communicate effectively is more important than being able to read and write in a foreign language. Thus, communication strategies have turned out to be crucial components of EFL material and course books these days. (Ya-ni, 2007)

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) language teaching methods like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) have lost their popularity because of their inadequacy in preparing students for real communication out of the classroom. (Baleghizadfeh, 2010)

According to Wenden and Rubin (1987), an English-speaking environment should be created to the largest extent so that students can be exposed to natural conversation quite frequently, hear more of target language and learn to produce new utterances in L2. In this way, they have the opportunity to practice and evaluate themselves to see how much they have learned and also get strongly motivated to learn and use the target language correctly. Although many schools might have incorporated English in their language course curriculum but the frequency and the extent of training might not be adequate. (Ya-ni, 2007)

The reason why Iranians who speak English as their foreign language encounter communication problems in L2 can be attributed to the environment and educational system governing schools and universities. The only way to learn English in Iran is through formal instruction in classrooms where the language teachers are native speakers of Farsi. It is less likely to find an opportunity to interact with native speakers of English unless they might be found as few tourists (Karimnia, & Salehi Zadeh, 2007). Persian learners of English mostly find it difficult to communicate efficiently in the target language because they had not been trained in a way to develop their communicative competence.

Rossiter (2003) carried out a study to find out the effects of teaching communication strategies on the second language performance. The research focused on two classes of adult immigrants in Canada of which one class was assigned as the control group and another one received 12 hours of direct communication strategy training. The students sat for two oral tasks consisting of picture story narratives, and object descriptions, which were conducted in Week 1, Week 5, and Week 10. The post-test results showed a direct effect of the communication strategy training on the variety of strategies used in the object description task. Interestingly, the variety of the strategies used in this task was considerably higher than those employed by the respondents in the narrative part of the test. (Lam, 2006)

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

In order to investigate the pragmatic markers Iranian EFL learners use during hesitation, the researcher selected a population of TEP (Tertiary English Program) students in a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who had already taken IELTS exam and received a score of 5.5. Thus, the language competence of the population was almost the same, but their language background was checked for a higher congruency scale. The instrumentation which was used at this stage was a LBQ questionnaire (language background questionnaire), which helped the researcher to identify the most congruent participants in terms of their language background.

The respondents were six males and six females whose first language was Persian, and these respondents had learned their L2 (In this case, the English language) initially at a school, and then continued in language institutes or private classes in their home country.

Each participant h ad to tak e part in an oral L2 test consisting of 4 part s: Introduction, Conversation (G eneral) Questions, R etelling a pas sage, a nd Pi cture descri ption. Each of t hese t asks t ook ab out 10-12 m inutes. T he collected dat a y ielded ab out 14 0 m inutes of English i nteraction between t he student as t he s ubject and t he researcher played the part of an interviewer.

2.2 Research Instrument

The research instruments which were used in this study included a Language Background Questionnaire to find the most congruent subjects regarding their language background, twelve unseen passages(never seen before by the respondents) to give them to read and retell after a limited time, twelve unseen pictures(never seen before by the res pondents) t o s how t hem random ly f or a desc ription based o n t heir im agination, a nd fi nally 3 set s of general questions ex tracted from th e assessm ent d atabase of a lang uage institu te.(with th e prior perm ission granted from the institute).

2.3 Data Collection

For t he data co llection ph ase, th e researcher recorded the sessi ons a nd the n t ranscribed t he recordings of t he interview sessio ns. Th ese reco rdings ca ptured all the   pauses a nd e ven in coherent so unds th e respondents produced. T he reco rdings were chec ked f or seve ral t imes i n or der not t o ski p eve n a short si lent pa use. T he researcher th en i dentified the h esitation strateg ies used by th e participants an d th en co ded th em a s d rawling, pauses, repeating wo rds, u sing h esitation filler words and producing incoherent vocals. No t all p ragmatic markers lik e "I t hink" ind icated a hesitation strategy, so the researcher had to e nsure that the a nalyzed data actually functioned as hesitation in utterance.
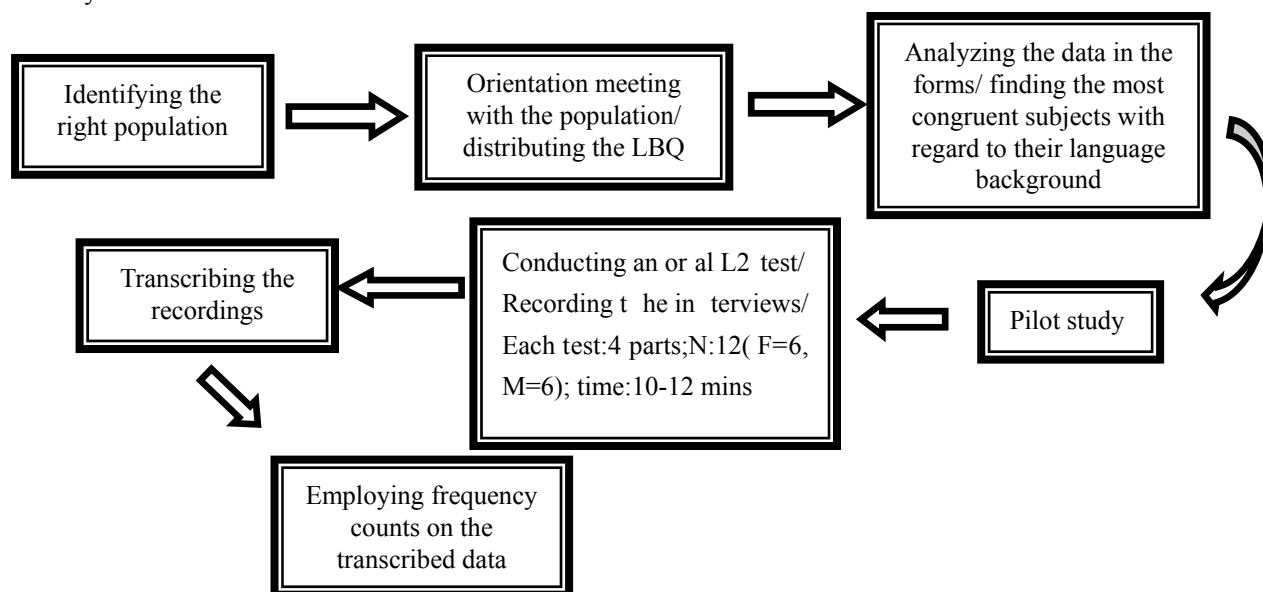

Figure 1. Procedures employed in the study

2.4 Method

The session s with the resp ondents were d igitally recorded. Th e findings of t he pilot study con tributed to th e reliability of the results by showing that the participants needed to read the passages in a timely manner that was around 1 -2 m inutes t o get a gi st of w hat t hey ha d t o read. Also the s ubjects o f the passages we re varied t o prevent the passing and sharing of the general idea of the texts among the respondents. The topics centered on social, historical, and environmental issues.

Each se ssion began with s ome explanations about t he format o f the te st by the r esearcher, and pr oceeded w ith conversation qu estions. Th is later continued with retelling a p assage as th e th ird part, and fin ally d escribing a picture was the fourth part of the test.

3. Result

This section presen ts th e an alysis o f the t ranscribed data ab out the d istribution p attern of h esitation strateg ies employed by Iranian university st udents during an oral L2 test. For this purpose, each hesitation marker group was studied individually to find out where they mostly occur in a sentence: Initial, Middle, or Final position.

The summary of the findings is provided in the following tables for each hesitation strategies besides a figure depicting the statistics clearly.

3.1 Repeated Words

According to the summary data table.1, the frequency of Repeating Words in the middle position is considerably higher than the initial and final locations, which implies that the participants tended to repeat words mainly in the middle of the sentences (30 times). The data table also shows that the smallest number of repeated words was produced in the final position (only once).

Table 1. Distribution of repeated words

Hesitation strategy	initial	middle	final
Repeated Word	8	30	1

3.2 Hesitation Filler Words

Referring to summary table.2, it can be inferred that the participants of this study tended to use the Hesitation Filler Words like "I think", "You know" in the middle of their sentences more than the other positions. However, the difference between the first and the second highest groups does not seem considerable.

Table 2. Distribution of hesitation filler words

Hesitation Strategy	Initial	Middle	Final
Hesitation Filler Words	22	25	1

3.3 Drawling

According to the summarized data table.3, it is discovered that drawling the words almost always occurred in the middle of the sentences rather than the two other locations. However, this strategy showed a different result regarding the final position. The frequency of drawling for the final position stands in the second highest location of emergence in contrast with the previous distribution patterns of hesitation discourse markers identified in this study.

Table 3. Distribution of drawling

Hesitation Strategy	Initial	Middle	Final
drawling 1		93	3

3.4 Pause

Based on the findings, the respondents tended to keep silent while hesitating what to say next quite frequently in the middle of the sentences, which tops over the two other locations. The difference between the most frequent location and the two other positions is quite considerable which is shown in table.4.

Table 4. Distribution of pauses

Hesitation Strategy	Initial	Middle	Final
Pause 5		54	6

3.5 Hesitation Fillers as Vocals

Based on the results obtained from the analysis on the transcribed data, the participants of the study produced incoherent sounds during hesitation mostly in the middle of their sentences. The initial position was identified as the second mostly recorded location of hesitation. The summary of the data is shown in table.5.

Table 5. Distribution of hesitation fillers as vocals

Hesitation Strategy	Initial	Middle	Final
Hesitation Filler as Vocals	65	348	9

3.6 Analysis on Each Hesitation Filler Vocal

It can be inferred from data table.6; that all hesitation incoherent vocals produced by the participants of this study have been identified mainly in the middle position of the utterances (353 times), and the second most frequent place recorded for the initial location (67 times), and finally the least frequent position has been found for the final location of the utterances.

Table 6. Distribution of each hesitation filler vocal

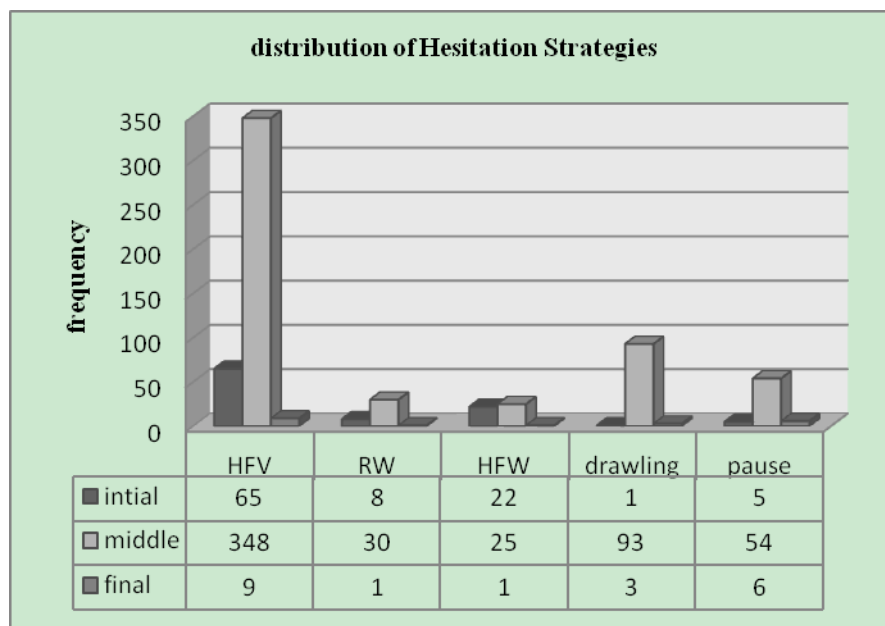| Hesitation Filler as Vocal	Initial	Middle	Final
Eee			
Uuh	31	278	8
Mmm			
Eem	19	26	0
Uum	11	38	0
total			
	4	6	1
	2	5	0
	67	353	9

Figure 2. A comparative analysis on the distribution of hesitation strategies

Based on the findings illustrated in figure.2, the distribution pattern of hesitation discourse markers produced by the participants of the study is mainly found in the middle of the sentences(550 times), while the initial position is recorded as the second most frequent position of hesitation emergence with the frequency of 101 times.

On the other hand, it is shown that the least possible position of producing hesitation discourse markers is at the end of the utterances (20 times).

4. Conclusion

The overall aim of this paper was to investigate the distribution pattern of hesitation discourse markers produced by EFL learners in an oral L2 test. The results of this paper show clear indications of the dominant occurring position of the identified hesitation markers in the middle of the sentences.

Referring to Barr (2001), Beattie (1979) who claimed:"Hesitation mostly occurs at the beginning of a sentence or phrase, probably as a result of the greater demand on planning processes at these junctures", the findings of the present research showed a different result. Based on the analysis of the transcribed data, the highest frequency of hesitation marker (550 times) belongs to the mid-position, which is considerably higher than the initial position with the rate of 101 times. The big difference between the frequencies of middle and initial positions can represent that the Iranian EFL respondents do not struggle much with planning process at the beginning of a sentence. In other words the respondents did not attempt much at the beginning of their speech to plan the coming words. They think and speak simultaneously leading to a considerable increase of hesitation in the middle of their sentences. Moreover, the aim of studying the final position of the utterances as another location of emerging hesitation was to investigate whether the respondents suddenly end their talk due to hesitation in finding appropriate words or structure to convey their message. For instance, some respondents first hesitated about the coming utterance, and as they could not decide what to say, they preferred to end the conversation right away. This was identified as the hesitation at the final position of a sentence. This also proves that Iranian EFL learners cannot follow an efficient planning process in L2 which can be the result of not being instructed well to use English communicatively.

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