

Successful speakers... use a variety of ways to manage hesitation

At Trinity College London, we have studied the scripts from hundreds of our speaking exams. We wanted to find out what makes some test takers more successful than others. One thing that test takers who perform better do is use a variety of ways to manage hesitation.

Here is an example taken from a GESE exam.

Activity 1

Read the conversations between a test taker <TT> and an examiner <E> aloud.

How does the test taker show he or she is hesitating?

Is it only the test taker who makes hesitation sounds?

Corpus extract

<TT> You should, erm, erm, ask her if she would like to play, to play, to swim...

<E> (silent-waiting to understand what the test taker is saying)

<TT> ...another...another sport...but, erm, if she likes it very much, erm, erm, she, erm, she...she...

<E> Yes, she does and erm, you know, she's very good, she's really very good at playing football.

<TT> Erm and erm, it is a good idea to make, erm, er, all the possible arrangements for her to play football.

Trinity tip

It is natural for all speakers to hesitate while they are speaking. Sometimes they are searching for the right word and sometimes they are searching for an idea. However, if you make too many 'erms' and 'ers', the conversation becomes difficult to understand and uncomfortable to listen to.

Activity 2

Talk and make notes. Work in threes. Two of you speak together. The third person sits behind (so you can't see him or her) and notes down how many times you make hesitation sounds. Choose from these topics:

- What I ate yesterday
- Why I like my best friend
- What I would do if I won the lottery

Now do the activity again, choosing from these topics:

- How can we help to protect the environment?
- Do you think there should be more facilities for disabled people in your town?
- What is the most important thing you have learnt in your life so far?

When did you make the most hesitation sounds?

Activity 3

Read

There are some expressions you can use instead of 'erm' or 'er'. These expressions will help to make your speech sound more natural.

For example:

'Well...'

(this is very useful when you start to talk and want some time to think)

What time do you usually get to work?

Well...usually around half eight or nine.

'I mean...'

Does he often ask you to lend him money?

Not often...I mean...he's only asked a couple of times.

'you know'

Is she a good cook?

She's...you know...she's not bad but she's not exactly good.

'hold on'

(this means wait)

What's the name of that place we went to last night?

Oh it's...hold on...it's...hold on...GoodFood!

'right' 'ah, right'

I've just been told I have to work every Saturday this month.

Right...and is it just for this month?

'like'

Did you do anything interesting at the weekend?

I was like... really tired so I stayed home all day Saturday.

Activity 4

Read this conversation aloud with a partner. Every time there is a hesitation sound think of what else you could say instead. Choose from the words and phrases above.

<A> Tell me a bit about your family.

 Erm _____, I've got two brothers and one sister so, erm _____, it's quite a big family.

<A> And do you all still live at home?

 Em _____, my brother, er _____, my elder brother is at university so he's, erm _____, he's not always there.

<A> Are you the youngest in the family?

 Well, no, my sister is only eleven so she's, erm _____, she's the youngest.

<A> What do you like doing together as a family?

 Erm _____, together? Do you mean erm _____ eating together?

<A> Yes, or other activities. Do you do any sports together, go skiing, go walking together, that kind of thing?

 Erm _____, erm _____, we don't really do any sports together but in the summer we sometimes, erm _____, sometimes go to the beach together.

<A> And is there a restaurant or somewhere that you like going to together?

 Yes! It's called, erm _____, Crazy Taste!

Activity 5

Now speak to your partner again on the same topic as in activity 2. Try and use some of the expressions above. Which do you think is clearer; the direct questions or the 'rising intonation' questions?