Searching
For Words
Is Behind
'Um' or 'Ah'

Research has shown that the inclination to "um" or "ah" during conversation is not indicative of nervousness; rather, it is the mind's way of buying time while foraging for the proper word or phrase. And now a study published in the March issue of The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology is helping to further decipher the enigma of these unconscious mutterings by contending that what we talk about affects how often we, uh, well, you know.

The study contends that when art or literature are discussed, more "filled pauses" are elicited than when the topic is physics or mathematics. This is because the choices available for describing the arts are much greater than those for science.

"The sciences are characterized by fewer synonyms for their basic terms, thus affecting the number of options in the working vocabulary of the discipline," the Columbia University researchers wrote. "Consider a statement such as E=mc^2. There are no options — it cannot be e or c — it is mc^2 and that is that. In contrast, consider the statement, 'What Shakespeare probably meant in that passage from Lear was...'. The options seem limitless."

The study was conducted by Dr. Stanley Schachter, along with two graduate students, Nicholas Christensen and Frances Bilous, and an undergraduate, Bernard Ravina.

The researchers counted the "ums" and "ahs" produced by 45 teachers lecturing undergraduates in 10 academic areas. Biology lecturers paused the least, averaging 0.97 "ums" a minute, while English literature professors were the most pause-prone, averaging 4.54 a minute.

One seeming irregularity was the relatively low rate, 1.65 a minute, displayed by philosophy lecturers. "Although this exception was a great surprise to us," wrote the researchers, "it was not to most of the philosophers with whom we have spoken on the matter. On the whole, they consider their field, with its historic concern with logic and continuing emphasis on the philosophy of science and on analytic philosophy, closer in mode of thought to the natural sciences than the humanities."

The researchers were able to rule out many factors, including age, sex, teaching experience and native language, that might affect the "um" output, but they conceded that their "non-experimental field demonstration" still leaves room for the suggestion of alternative theories.