

Discourse Marker Use by L1 Chinese ESL Speakers
Binmei Liu

This study examines the effect of speech contexts, the L1, the influence of natural exposure of English, and the influence of overall oral proficiency on English discourse marker use in the speech of L1 Mandarin Chinese ESL speakers in the US.

The participants included five American L1 English graduate students and ten L1 Chinese graduate students from the University of Florida. The Chinese students were divided into two groups according to the amount of natural English exposure, and their oral proficiency scores on the Test of Spoken English (TSE).

Participants were interviewed in English. Each L1 Chinese speaker was also interviewed in Chinese. Then two L1 Chinese students and one American student were grouped together to have a conversation.

Analysis of the English markers reveals that the American students used *like*, *just*, *sort of/kind of*, *I mean*, *then*, *well*, *basically* and *anyway* significantly more than the Chinese students. However, the Chinese students used *I think* and *yeah/yes* significantly more than the American students. Analysis of the Chinese markers shows that the L1 Chinese speakers used *wojuede* “I think” and *dui* “yeah/yes” at a high rate too. This finding suggests that the L1 may have negative transfer on their English discourse marker use.

The higher natural English exposure group used English markers *like* significantly more than the lower exposure group of the Chinese students in both speech contexts. However, none of the English markers shows significant difference between the higher oral proficiency group and the lower oral proficiency group. The findings in this study suggest that natural exposure of English plays a more important role than overall oral proficiency to the English discourse marker use by the ESL speakers.