

## **The adoption of “like” and “not like” usage by Saudi international students at a US University**

Khalid Ahmad Siddiq  
*Herat University, Afghanistan*

### **Abstract**

Language change has been a very natural phenomenon throughout the history. Languages adapt, acquire, add, or ultimately quite sadly they extinct. In current study's case, language user acquired, adapt, add features from the source if they spent time and interact with the native speakers of a language and L2 speaker while immersed in the target language culture and linguistic environment. Therefore, it is inevitable to ignore the native feature acquisition process. The current study primarily aimed to look into the adoption and usage of English particle *like* as a discourse or pragmatic marker by Saudi female students at an American university in the United States. The results show that the length of the participants stay in the US and the amount of interaction with the American English users have largely influenced their usage of loose language and gap-filler “*like*” in their spoken English.

**Keywords:** pragmatic markers, discourse markers, Saudi international students

### **Introduction**

Discourse markers are defined as a lexical item to let the conversation flow smoothly and allow the speaker to either participate in the interaction or keep the floor. Many researchers have shown their specific concerns about the change in native English speaking individuals while neglecting the fact that English is no longer a language confined in a box of natives (Kachru, 1985). This study investigates the specific effects and usages of *like* in the spoken English of Saudi students in terms of their length of residence in the United States and the amount of interaction with American English users.

### **Discourse Markers (DMs) vs. Pragmatic Markers**

Discourse markers are considered to be as both linguistic and paralinguistic, or nonverbal elements that signal relations between “units of talk” (Schiffrin, 1987, p.31). In addition, according to Schiffrin (1987), DMs

are defined “by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets defining discourse units” (p. 39-41).

Studies on DMs have been extensive in 80s and 90s because it was found that they have prominent role, not only in pragmatic and discourse analysis studies but also in studies of language acquisition and language pedagogy, and in research on sociolinguistic topics.

In many studies, DMs have been associated with “more general analysis of discourse coherence, [or more precisely], how speakers and hearers jointly integrate forms, meaning, and actions to make overall sense out of what is said” (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 49). The same thing; however, in a different context is said by George Yule (1996, p. 3) when he was defining pragmatics, less said, more communicated. This can be *more* applicable when we think of discourse markers facilitating the flow of speech.

In order to make the point, Fraser (1990, 1999) describes pragmatic markers as a non-propositional part of sentence meaning that are analyzed into various signals. In addition, he asserts that these signals “are the linguistically encoded clues which signal the speaker’s potential communicative intentions” (1996, p, 168). Fraser (1996, p. 167-170) further divides the messages pragmatics markers can be associated with into four types:

1. Basic message: in this the markers banks upon the sentence proposition as its content. For example, a sentence like, “I regret, that he is still here”, is an expression of ‘regret.’
2. Commentary messages: this type of the markers add a comment on the basic message. In a sentence or utterance like “stupidly, Sara didn’t fax the correct form in on time”, the marker “stupidly” indicates to the presumption of the speaker about the action done by Sara.
3. Parallel messages: Fraser considers this to be an optional signal which indicates to a meaning “separate from the basic and any commentary messages.” For example, he give the example of “John, you are very noisy.”
4. Discourse messages: another optional signal “specifying how the basic message is related to the foregoing discourse. He explicates it as “Jacob was very tired. So, he left early.”

Although the research in the area of discourse analysis and discourse markers is quite vast, no one so far have come up with a single straight-forward terminology and its classifications. Brinton (1996) while defining DMs states that the short words or phrases were traditionally called “filler” (p. 6). Because the frequency of occurrence in oral discourse was quite high,

they are referred to discourse markers. However, point to be noted, Brinton is only calling the same markers has pragmatic markers. We, now, know that all of the DMs are not fillers. Therefore, assuming all gap-fillers will be an unrealistic task. Subsequently, the current study will consider pragmatic markers as a subsidiary of discourse markers. DMs will be considered an umbrella covering both discourse markers and pragmatic markers as such.

Furthermore, it is persistently maintained that DMs are words or phrases that function within the linguistic system to establish relationships between topics or grammatical units in discourse (as traditionally with the use of words like *because, so, then, say, hmm, oh...*). Consequently, they also serve pragmatic functions (and have been termed *pragmatic markers*, Brinton, 1996). DMs or *pragmatic markers* (as used by Brinton, 1996; Andersen, 2001) were traditionally considered to be used by a speaker to comment on the state of understanding of information about to be expressed (with phrases like, *you know*); they may also be used to express a change of state (like, *oh*) or for subtle commentary by the speaker suggesting that “what seems to be the most relevant context is not appropriate” (like, *well*). However, today this pattern is much more complex. As the age of globalization emerged, many people starting travelling, moving from one place to another and adapting or sometimes, adopting language features.

Actually, to some extent falsely, a few traditional researchers have regarded DMs as universally syntactically optional in the sense that removal of a DM does not alter the grammaticality of its host sentence. On the contrary, many studies have arrived to a conclusion that DMs do have a particular syntactic slot in a sentence (Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang, 1990; Dailey-O’Cain, 2000).

### ***Types of Discourse Markers***

Hypothetically, when people interact to each other tend to speak in turns which may be either in regular intervals or scattered sequences (Yule, 1996). In the meantime, speakers and interlocutors strive to keep the “floor” and to continue speaking. In order to maintain the floor and to keep the turn of interaction, the speakers require a certain lexical items to represent their turn continuity. Consequently, linguists have marked certain “discourse markers” as those lexical items to assist speakers to ensure the “floor” for a desirable period of time. In short, speakers, in casual conversational interactions, tend to keep “floor” for as long as they want. However, it is more likely that speakers need to fill the gaps where the interlocutor(s) may interrupt the speaker(s); therefore, the need to use discourse markers such as *hmmm, well, and like* is pointed out.

The increasing pragmatic search and investigations regarding discourse makers has been continually focused on *like* as a strange and very

fast growing discourse marker in informal spoken language (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000, p. 60-61; Tagliamonte, 1999, p. 1897; Anderson, 2000, p. 209-210; Barbieri, 2005, p. 250-253). Anderson (2000) calls *like* a “pragmatic marker” (p. 148) because he believes that *like* is a lexical item the use of which is strictly confined to the contextual boundaries and more preferably used in a complete informal spoken context (p. 147-149). Many studies have pointed out four specific usages for *like*: quotative, loose language, focuser, and gap-filler.

Barbieri (2005) observes the use of quotatives in four different registers: “casual conversation, university service encounters and workplace conversation, university students’ study groups, and academic office hour consultations” (p. 222). The study indicates that except in the office hour register, in other three registers speakers have used both *say* and *be like* occurring with more or less the same frequency. It is also indicated that *be like* is established very fast and overcoming the very traditional quotative *say*. In contrast, *go* and *be all* are more or less infrequent while *go* appeared to be used almost as frequently as *be like* in casual conversations (Barbieri, 2005, p. 240-255).

Blyth, et al. (1990) in their study about the gender of the speaker and “sequence of quotatives in narrative,” (p. 221) indicated that *be like* showed up in a significant correlation with both of male and female participants and it is been revealed that *be like* is more frequent in narratives than in dialogues. The results showed that male speakers tend to use more *be like* than women, which contradicts the findings of the hypothesis and the attitudinal survey in this study (Blyth, et al., 1990, p. 222-225). In addition, the same has been found by Tagliamonte and D’Arcy (2004) among the Canadian youth. They compared their data with that of the previous studies they found a drastic incline in the usage of *be like* as quotative marker. Furthermore, they have found that it is now gramaticalized.

Dailey-O’Cain (2000) investigates the usage of “focuser *like*” throughout the different age groups (p. 60). First, Dailey-O’Cain (2000) observes the corpus data from informal American English in which she finds that focuser *like* occurs in the same slots which corresponded with the previous findings of other researchers. According to Underhill, focuser *like* frequently occurs “as a marker of new information and focus” (as cited in Dailey-O’Cain, 2000, p. 61). For example, Dailey-O’Cain (2000) quotes Underhill, “Man, get in the car, like now.”

Many studies showed concerns about who uses *like* more in terms of gender. It was so strange that everyone believes that women use *like* more than men (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000, p. 69). In contrast, Dailey-O’Cain’s corpus indicates clearly that men tend to use *like* more often than women (p. 65-66). However, it is shown that people judge using *like* as more “attractive,”

“cheerful,” “friendly,” and “successful” (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000, p. 75) language use. In contrast, as a negative aspect, researchers found that people associated the traits of less educated, less intelligent, and less interesting language usage with those who incorporate *like* in their spoken interactions (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000, p. 75). It is also found in other studies that *be like* is more commonly used in working class individuals (Macaulay, 2001).

All research dealing with the usage of “pragmatic makers” (Anderson, 1998; Anderson, 2000) *like* and other discourse markers looked at them in various contexts. Tree (2006) studied the occurrence of *like* in contrast to other discourse markers such as *um* and *uh*, *you know*, *oh*, *well*, *I don’t know*, and *I mean* in storytelling (p. 723). The subjects in this study were asked to tell their stories twice to two different groups of listeners. The data revealed that *like* occurs as the most common discourse marker among all others. The frequency of *like* was equal to the frequency of all other discourse markers combined (Fox Tree, 2006). The findings of Tree’s (2006) study indicate that *like* often occurs at similar or at exact position of the utterances in story-telling indicating that the upcoming utterance is a “loose use of language”. For example:

- (8) First Telling: and he walked up with *like* the bottle  
Second Telling: and my brother had *like* a Heineken bottle
- (9) First Telling: he’s *like* legendary  
Second Telling: he’s *like* a legend practically
- (10) First Telling: we *like* had this huge party  
Second Telling: we had *like* this gnarly party (Tree, 2006, p. 730-731)

Many studies in regard to *like* supports that in most of dialogues, interactions and utterances *like* occur either almost at the same or exact slot or location (Macaulay, 2001, p. 7-9; Tree, 2006, p. 738). The corpus data indicates that speakers tend to use the word with a specific frequency and similar location which provides a firm ground for my current study (Tagliamonte, 2005, p. 1901; Macaulay, 2001, p. 7-9; Tree, 2006, p. 738). Also, Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999), in their study, indicate that *like* and *be like* does not appear without meaning and/or syntactical role and slot (p. 166-168). The most frequent slot for *like* occurrence is “before a noun phrase” (Tagliamonte, 2005, p. 1902) and the second frequent location is at the beginning of a “sentence” (p. 1902).

As it is indicated in the previous literature, all forms of *like* as discourse marker comes specifically in a particular slot and implies a certain pragmatic meaning. This study will especially look at four usages of *like* across the informal-spoken discourse among international students at a US

University to not only find the usage patterns, but also to find out the cause of this language adaptation across other varieties of Englishes.

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, the participants are invited to take part in the study through personal contacts and meeting them in different international students' parties and gatherings. This study specifically looks into two subject groups. First group consists of 5 female individuals from Saudi who spend less than a year, but not less than six months in the United States. Subjects are picked from Interlink language center with an incentive of one hour module credits. After the arrangement with the center, the announcement was spread through their teachers and administration. Despite the incentive, only five participants showed up.

In contrast to the first group, the subjects in the second group included 5 females with two to three years period of residence in the United States. All of them were graduate students at the same University. They have been invited through two student organizations. Three of the subjects were in the US for three years, while two others were there for two and a half and two years respectively. Overall, this study consists of two groups of five female Saudi students each and were grouped based on their length of residence in the United States.

### ***Data collection***

The format of the data collection is in line with the mainstream techniques in sociolinguistics. The data is collected in two forms. First, the subjects were required to fill out a background survey. This tool was used by William Labov during his study on the dialect of New York City (1966). This allows the researcher to gain socio-economic and other dependent variables that may affect the overall cause of the variation. After filling up the survey, they were interviewed. The interview also followed the pattern of a sociolinguistic interview, a technique first introduced by Labov (1966). The details about each form of the data collection are provided in the followings.

The first segment of the data is being collected through a background survey. This survey serves as a filter to see if the specific language use which is the concern of this study is affected by the factors other than merely residence. In addition, it is used to find out about four specific variables: (a) if they had any American friend(s), (b) how often did they interact with their American friend(s), (c) how long had they been in US, and (d) on an average daily basis, for how long do they speak to their American friend(s).

Consequently, this survey may lead me to find if there is any effect of their close acquaintances or the residence or the time of interaction or altogether.

The second segment of the data is collected through traditional sociolinguistic interviews (Labov, 1966). The interviews lasted between 40 to 50 minutes depending on the participants desire to interact. The questions ranged from sharing memories to lifestyle, from food preference to telling stories and many others depending on where the discussion will lead the communication, eventually. The first 15 minutes of the interview was only used as ice-breaker to shape a comfortable environment around the subjects to allow them speak genuinely. While observing the discussion, I found that subjects felt very relaxed after first 15 minutes of the interview. The interviews were voice recorded in the library with their prior verbal consent and permission.

### ***Data analysis***

The data is grouped based on two general criteria: (a) length of residence, and (b) having native speaking friends (in our case Americans). As many sociolinguistic researchers have pointed out, the fragment of the data which is taken under consideration is the 15 minutes in the middle of the interview when the interaction is felt to be much genuine. The participants are divided in two groups based on their period of residence. Further, every group is divided into two subgroups: friendship with domestic students, and the time for interaction with them. The dependent variable was the usage of *like* and the independent variable included period of residence, friendship, and the time for interaction with native speakers.

Furthermore, the data is analyzed comparatively in two forms of intergroup relationships and intragroup relationships. First, the data is being analyzed based on the difference found in each group. Then the statistics received from each group is being compared. Each group, described in the following, has its specific characteristics.

Length of residence: This segment is further categorized into two specific groups: (a) less than a year, but not less than 7 months, (b) more than a year up to three years. The data is analyzed considering the length of their residence and the usage of *like* in four situations abstracted from previous literature: (1) loose information, (2) quotative use of *like*, (3) focuser use, and (4) gap-filler. First, I counted the situations and utterances in which either of the above four usages of *like* was possible. Then, I counted the situations and utterances where *like* was used. The same process was undertaken for both groups in this segment of the data.

Having native friends: This part of the data is also subdivided into four specific groups: (a) friends and more often interaction, (b) friends and less often interaction, (c) no friends and more often interaction, and (d) no

friends and less often interaction. Considering the previously stated four situations, in which *like* can appear, this portion of the data is analyzed. The same procedures are undertaken to sort and examine the data.

Findings and Discussion

After transcribing the interviews Group A, participants with more than 2 years of residence in the US in total spoke from 863 to 1086 words during their 15-minute interaction. On the other hand, Group B participants who stayed in the US from 6 months to one year in total spoke from 556 to 682 words. Participants in Group A in average spoke 974.2 words while Group B spoke 607 words (see Table 1).

Furthermore, as predicted participants with longer period of residence showed an effect of *like* in their spoken English. As shown in the table below, it is shown that most of their *like* usage is at the loose language category. The participants almost did not use *like* in quotative and focuser categories. This reveals that the participants are yet not that creative in *like* usage as native speakers are. The participants statistically used *like* in the first category far more than the other categories which supports my hypothesis that there is an effect of the native spoken English on the international English in terms of the discourse marker *like* in this case.

Table 1  
Group A (Between 2 to 3 years of residence in the US)

No.	Word Count	#Like	% Like	Loose Language	Quotative	Focuser	Gap-Filler
1	1086	6	0.55%	4	1	0	1
2	863	7	0.81%	6	0	0	1
3	951	9	0.95%	9	0	0	0
4	965	10	1.04%	9	0	0	1
5	1006	6	0.60%	6	0	0	0
Avg	974.2	7.6	0.789%				

Moreover, participants seemed to use the discourse/pragmatic marker *like* at the same slot where native speaking individuals will place it. For example, a participant in response to a question about her children attitude toward American schools states, “... but he <like> try to run away from school.” This is identified as a gap-filler because I found a certain pattern of gesture and lengthening tone while saying the gap-filler which allows the speaker or responder to think and grasp an idea. While observing



it on the surface in a written context, the lexicon seems more a focuser *like*. In other words, the participant utters *like* in a long tone which indicates that she is thinking and by using this word she is buying time from the interlocutor. In addition, she is ensuring the control of the “floor” and “turn.” Another participant while narrating a story from her child’s school problems at the beginning of their residence at the US says that “... so, he <like> “mommy I can’t just ask my teacher to go to pray. It embarrasses me in [sic] from of my friends.” This participant used *like* here to mark a quotation. Although this was the only incidence in which *like* was used as quotative, it supports that the more international students are exposed to native spoken English, the more they will acquire these tiny bits of language.

The examples for *like* representing loose information were very widely present in this particular dataset. The instances are as follows:

1. ... but <like> not an hour, I mean, a day...
2. I stay here <like> for ten days [sic]...
3. I study [sic] for almost <like> one and half month or so during last summer...
4. Then I have to go back home in July 7 and its <like> seven days of Ramadan.

It’s notable that all the instances, in which *like* occurred to represent loose language, were when the participants were narrating a story. As in Fox Tree’s study, it was pointed out that native speaking individuals tend to use *like* more often to mark the information after it is loose information in telling stories.

In contrast, Group B did not show any acquisition of any form of *like* in their spoken English. As table 2 shows below, the participants in this group did not show any progress at all toward acquisition of *like*.

**Table 2**  
**Group B (Between 6 months to 1 year residence)**

No.	Word Count	#Like	% Like	Loose Language	Quotative	Focuser	Gap-Filler
1	556	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
2	583	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
3	591	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
4	682	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
5	623	0	0.00%	0	0	0	0
Avg	607	0	0.000%				

To further analyze the data, I ran the test called one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the data. This time not only the data is being analyzed by number of *likes* used during the interaction, but also the period of interaction, friendship, and period of residence is taken in account. The *p*-value has been set on  $\leq 0.05$ . The results appeared as shown below.

**Table 3**  
**One-way ANOVA**

		Sum Squares	of <i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<b>Like</b>	Residence	160.00	1	160.00	128.00	.00
	Friendship	60.70	3	20.23	1.11	.42
	Interaction	160.00	3	53.33	32.00	.00

The results indicating significant differences appear in two rows only. In the analysis of the data in terms of both groups, it is revealed that the more the participants stayed in the US, and the more they have had interactions with native speaking individuals, the more they have adopted the usage of *like*. As a result, the significance measured through one-way ANOVA indicates that the participants have noticeable differences in the length of residence and the time of interaction.

Participants in both Group A and Group B had American friends; however, having American friends does not effect on their language in terms of *like* usage. Group B in their background survey sheet stated that they rarely speak to their American friends although 3 out of 5 of them checked one friend on the scale. To better visualize the information on the background survey, the following chart reflects of it:

**Table 4**  
**Group B background survey result**

Participants	Period of Residence	#American Friends	Duration of Interaction
1	About a year	1	Once a month
2	About a year	1	Once a month
3	About a year	1	Once a month
4	About a year	0	Never
5	About a year	0	Never

Despite some interaction and having friends, participants of this group did not adopt the *like* usage at all. They did not use *like* in their entire 40 to 50 minute interview even once. On the other hand, participants of Group A adopted this lexicon item and used it as shown in the native

speaking individuals' studies as discussed in the literature review. Participants spend more time in the US and interacted more often than Group B. Consequently, they acquired this lexicon into their spoken language and used it for the same purpose as native speakers would use it. To be mentioned, Group A does not appear to use *like* in "focuser" location for which I implore further research with a larger group of participants to investigate this usage.

### **Final Thoughts: Vocabulary learning and the four strands**

Participants in this study showed a significant difference in terms of their length of stay and time spend on interaction with native speaking individuals. This study proposes further research with a larger group of students to support or negate the results found in this study. *Like* is not only a fast growing discourse marker in native English speaking spoken or informal language, but also it is getting commonly used as discourse marker by international students who are coming to and interacting with American students and friends. This study corresponds with many previously mentioned studies in literature review section which indicated that *like* is used for certain purposes like: loose language, quotative, focuser and gap-filler (Dailey-O'Cain, 2000; Tagliamont, 2005; Anderson, 2000; Barbier, 2005; Fox Tree, 2006). Although quotative and focuser *like* appeared less frequent than loose language and gap-filler *like* in the Saudi female students interaction at Indiana State University, it still provides some occurrence which may increase in future with more interaction and longer period of stay in the United States.

### **The author**

Khalid A. Siddiq is currently an Assistant Professor of linguistics at Herat University. He has taught English language in Afghanistan for over eight years. He had done two researches at the university about teaching large classes and teaching literature through language activities. He has conducted several projects and research on language variation, language teaching, and phonetics.

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