

Exploring Students' Preferences of the Differences between British and American English

¹Abdul Muid, ²Iwan Setiawan, ³Bibit Suhatmady

^{1,2,3}Master of English Language Education, Mulawarman University, Indonesia

e-mail: ¹abdulmuid.vidatra@gmail.com, ²setiawansmd01@gmail.com, ³bibitsuhatmady@fkip.unmul.ac.id

Abstract

The differences between American and British English have drawn more attention in the continually changing field of English language instruction. This study aimed to investigate students' preferences regarding the distinctions between British and American English in terms of spelling and lexical usage. Conducted using a quantitative approach, the research involved administering a vocabulary test to 129 ninth-grade students in a private junior high school in Bontang. The findings indicated a prevalent inclination towards American English, with a majority of students showing a preference for American English spellings and terminologies over British English counterparts. Specifically, the data revealed that American English was mostly favored in 63.4% of the cases analyzed, highlighting the significant influence of American English on the linguistic choices of students. These results contribute to a better understanding of how language variations impact language preferences among students, shedding light on the dominance of American English in contemporary educational settings.

Keywords: American English, British English, Preferences, Spelling, Lexical Usage

INTRODUCTION

Language, as a dynamic and ever-evolving entity, adapts to the culture developed by its speakers. English, involving billions of speakers globally, bears witness to incessant change and evolution. It has not only become a means of communication but also reflects the rich cultural heritage, history, and values that shape its society. The English language is shaped by global speakers because they use it differently and in diverse settings, affecting its usage (Leotescu, 2020). English is also seen as a vital tool for efficient communication (Y. I. Gunawan et al., 2024) and might open doors to wider educational opportunities (Mudra, 2024).

According to (Crystal, 2000), English is currently spoken as a first, second, or foreign language by around 1.5 billion people worldwide. This widespread use emphasizes the language's usefulness in connecting people from all over the world. English plays an important role in our interconnected global society, whether it's facilitating international business transactions, developing cross-cultural understanding, or allowing individuals to explore the huge domain of internet information. Learning English has become increasingly important today due to rapid expansion of the business and industrial sectors, which are increasingly globalized (Lastari et al., 2024).

Despite its popularity, the journey of learning English is not the same for everyone. For some, it is a tool for academic and professional progress, opening the door to a world of possibilities.

Many see it as a form of communication that crosses borders, allowing people to share their views and ideas globally. However, for some, English represents a challenge to be learned and mastered to navigate an interconnected world.

English has many variations such as Australian English, Singaporean English, Thai English, etc. Nonetheless, British and American English are unquestionably the two most competitive variants. (Yaman, 2015). They are considered the two main native dialects of the English language (DaCosta & Arias, 2021). Beyond phonetic differences and subtle pronunciation variations, these two forms differ in expressions, idioms, and cultural allusions that significantly impact communication.

Linguists such as Crystal (2003) and Trudgill (2010) note that the divergences between British and American English are multifaceted, encompassing lexical, syntactic, and phonological dimensions. These differences not only reflect historical linguistic developments but also bear relevance to the sociocultural contexts in which they have evolved. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for effective communication, particularly in educational settings where students navigate these linguistic crossroads. Additionally, American and British English have impacted one another and contributed to the linguistic development of both dialects, particularly in vocabulary and spelling (Abu Fares, 2019).

In this era of globalization and interconnectedness, a scholar (Jenkins, 2007) argues that language learners must be equipped to comprehend and navigate various English varieties. This journal seeks to contribute to this discourse by exploring the preferences of students in discerning and utilizing British and American English. By investigating factors such as cultural exposure, media influence, and educational context, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between language and culture.

The importance of studying language preferences in education is underscored by studies such as that of (Smith and Brown, 2018), which highlight the impact of linguistic choices on students' cognitive processes and academic performance. The article aims to unwind the complicated webs that mold linguistic preferences via the eyes of students, exposing wider implications for language instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative method. The research was conducted in one of the private junior high schools in Bontang. The students in the ninth grade during the school year 2023–2024 made up the population of this study. 129 students serve as the population as well as the sample. There are five classes in the ninth grade. Every student in the ninth grade participated in the sample collection. The data was obtained through a vocabulary test. American and British word choices made up the test. The students' responses were examined to determine which variety they utilize most frequently. The questions about preferences and the differences between English varieties were included in the surveys given to the students to learn about their recognition of American and British English. The questionnaire results were analyzed to determine the prevalence of American and British spelling variations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study revealed the students' preferences of American and British English as well. The study's findings are displayed as follows:

1. Student's English Variety

The following table provides an overview of the distribution of English varieties among participants in the study. It presents the percentages of American English and British English usage, highlighting the prevalence of each variant within the dataset.

Table 1. Distribution of English Varieties Among Participants

No.	English Variety	Percentage
1	American English	61.91 %
2	British English	38.09 %

Table 1 shows us the percentage distribution of each English variant in the study. It indicates to us how much of each variety there is overall. 61.91% of the data analyzed, according to the study, correlates to American English. This suggests that American English accounts for more than half of the study's English language data. In the meanwhile, British English accounts for 38.09% of the data examined. This suggests that British English accounts for little less than 40% of the study's English language data.

In summary, the table communicates the relative prevalence of American English and British English in the dataset, providing a quick and easy-to-understand overview of the study's findings on the distribution of English varieties.

This finding aligns with previous research conducted by (Hermini, 2019) revealed that students use American English at a rate of 58.8%, which is greater than their use of British English at 41%. American English is the students' preferred English dialect.

2. Spelling patterns usage in American and British English

A thorough analysis of how participants used particular word pairs in British and American English is shown in the following table. In order to show how common American and British spelling preferences are in the dataset, it displays the frequency and proportion of each spelling variant.

Table 2. Comparison of British and American English Word Usage Among Participants

No.	Words	British English			American English		
		Choice	Frequency	Percentage	Choice	Frequency	Percentage
1	burnt/burned	burnt	51	39.5%	burned	78	60.5%
2	dreamt/dreamed	dreamt	25	19.4%	dreamed	104	80.6%
3	colour/color	colour	48	37.2%	color	81	62.8%
4	behaviour/behavior	behaviour	63	48.8%	behavior	66	51.2%
5	metre/meter	metre	8	6.2%	meter	121	93.8%
6	centre/center	centre	9	7.0%	center	120	93.0%
7	fibre/fiber	fibre	14	10.9%	fiber	115	89.1%
8	tyre/tire	tyre	27	20.9%	tire	102	79.1%
9	marvellous/marvelous	marvellous	63	48.8%	marvelous	66	51.2%
10	organise/organize	organise	27	20.9%	organize	102	79.1%
11	defence/defense	defence	39	30.2%	defense	90	69.8%
12	favour/favour	favour	84	65.1%	favor	45	34.9%
13	neighbour/neighbor	neighbour	103	79.8%	neighbor	26	20.2%
14	omelette/omelet	omelette	98	76.0%	omelet	31	24.0%
15	licence/license	licence	34	26.4%	license	95	73.6%
16	recognise/recognize	recognise	25	19.4%	recognize	104	80.6%
17	humour/humor	humour	48	37.2%	humor	81	62.8%
18	travelling/traveling	travelling	79	61.2%	traveling	50	38.8%
19	grey/gray	grey	60	46.5%	gray	69	53.5%
20	catalogue/catalog	catalogue	40	31.0%	catalog	89	69.0%
	Total in Percentage			36.6%			63.4%

The data shows the preferences of students in using American and British English in term of spelling usage for 20 different words or phrases. Here's a breakdown:

In examining students' spelling preferences between British and American English variants for specific words, notable patterns emerge. First and foremost, the choice between "burnt" and "burned" reveals a distinct inclination among students, with 60.5% favoring the American spelling "burned" over the British "burnt," which is preferred by 39.5%. This highlights a majority preference for American English orthography in this particular instance.

Regarding the verbs "dreamt" and "dreamed," the data demonstrates a significant slant in favor of the American English form, with 80.6% of students selecting "dreamed" as opposed to 19.4% selecting the British version. This clear preference highlights how common it is for students in the poll to utilize the American spelling in their vocabularies.

The difference between "color" and "colour" is even more indicative of a trend: 62.8% of students choose the American spelling "color" over the British spelling "colour," which is preferred by 37.2%. This difference indicates that students are generally inclined to use American English spellings when making this lexical choice.

The difference between "behavior" and "behaviour" is somewhat less pronounced: 51.2% of students choose the American spelling "behavior" and 48.8% choose the British spelling "behaviour." The proximity of these percentages highlights a more evenly distributed preference, suggesting that students are using both forms fairly.

Moving on to the topic of measurements, 93.8% of students prefer the American word "meter" over the British spelling "metre," which receives only 6.2% of the vote. This strong inclination toward the American version highlights a discernible pattern in the linguistic decisions pertaining to metric units.

When "center" and "centre" are taken into consideration the difference becomes even more noticeable. A startling 93.0% of students say they prefer the American "center," with just 7.0% saying they prefer the British "centre." This sharp difference shows how heavily this particular word leans toward American English.

Similar trends can be seen in the data on "fibre" and "fiber" usage, with 89.1% of students favoring American "fiber" over British "fibre," which is preferred by just 10.9%. This significant majority indicates that the American spelling is widely preferred.

American spelling "tire" is preferred over British spelling "tyre" by 79.1% of pupils versus 20.9% for "tyre." In the context of automotive nomenclature, this overwhelming preference points to a persistent tendency in favor of American English spellings.

When comparing "marvellous" and "marvelous," the findings show a somewhat equal preference, with 51.2% choosing the American term and 48.8% choosing the British one. This almost equal distribution points to a more complex and unique spelling decision made by each student.

The preference for "organize" over "organise" is evident, as 79.1% of students select the American spelling while just 20.9% select the British variation. This large majority highlights a general preference for American English spelling when it comes to organizational concepts.

In the context of "defence" versus "defense," a clear majority emerges in favor of the American spelling, with 69.8% of students choosing "defense" over the British "defence," which is preferred by 30.2%. This trend suggests a prevailing inclination towards the American variant among the surveyed students.

Regarding the two terms "favour" and "favor," a sizable majority of students—65.1%—choose the British spelling "favour," but only 34.9% select the American spelling "favor." This clear linguistic preference for the British version suggests that, in this specific situation, British English is preferred.

The difference between "neighbour" and "neighbor" shows that students preferred the British spelling more than the American one, with 79.8% selecting "neighbour" and 20.2% selecting "neighbor." In terms of neighborly terminology, this overwhelming majority indicates a great affection for British English.

The statistics about "omelette" and "omelet" in the culinary sector demonstrates a significant inclination towards the British spelling, with 76.0% of students choosing "omelette" over the American form, which is selected by just 24.0%. Among the students polled, this culinary term seems to be more commonly used in the British English version.

When asked to choose between the spellings "licence" and "license" in a licensing context, pupils clearly prefer the American word "license," with 73.6% choosing it over the British spelling "licence," which is preferred by 26.4%. This majority preference demonstrates how common the American version is when it comes to licensing-related issues.

The terms "recognize" and "recognise" stand in sharp contrast to one another: a whopping 80.6% of students select the American spelling "recognize," while just 19.4% prefer the British form "recognise." This blatant preference for the American version points to a general trend in this lexical choice that favors American English.

The data on "humour" and "humor" shows a fairly equal distribution in the area of phrases connected to humor. Out of all the pupils, 62.8% favor the American word "humor," whereas 37.2% prefer the British spelling "humour." This even distribution points to a complex and unique decision made by each pupil for this specific spelling.

When asked to compare the spellings of "travelling" and "traveling" in relation to transportation, 61.2% of students choose the British word "travelling," while 38.8% prefer the American form "traveling." There appears to be a linguistic connection between travel terminology and British English, as seen by the majority's preference for the British form.

Students' preferences for the British and American definitions of "grey" are roughly evenly divided, with 46.5% of them preferring the former and 53.5% selecting the latter. This evenly distributed data shows that spelling preferences for this phrase connected to color are notably flexible.

In the bibliographic context, "catalogue" is preferred over "catalog" by 69.0% of students, whereas 31.0% prefer the British spelling. This indicates a clear majority preference for the American word. This majority decision is consistent with the larger pattern of American English being used more frequently in bibliographic nomenclature.

In summary, the data demonstrates a steady tendency among students to prefer American English spellings over other lexical possibilities. The general pattern indicates a widespread effect of American English orthography in the vocabulary of the surveyed pupils, even though some preferences are more marked than others. This result was consistent with past studies. According to (Alftberg, 2009) & (Gunawan & Aminah, n.d.) students tended to use American English more than British English in vocabulary and pronunciation. Most students preferred American English over British English and they also appeared to be aware of the distinctions between the two languages.

For the given word pairs, American English spellings received a majority share of 63.4%, while British English spellings received a total of 36.6%. This resounding majority in support of American English points to a general trend among the students polled toward the spelling rules connected to American English. This finding aligns with the previous study (Yoestara & Wahyuni, 2022) American English (AmE) was chosen by students over British English (BrE), with percentages of 55.3 and 44.7%, respectively. In terms of spelling, American English is more popular than the British variation.

The results support a pattern that was evident in all of the word pairs: American English spellings were preferred over British ones more often. This majority's choice is consistent with more general findings about the impact of American English on international communication, which are partially attributable to exposure to the media and culture.

It is worth noting that the students not only exhibited a preference for terms in American English but also exhibited an understanding of the differences between the two language variations. This understanding could result from exposure to international media, where American English frequently appears prominently and lends itself to a wider vocabulary and expressions.

According to (Leotescu et al., 2023) when discussing spelling, a crucial aspect to consider is the word's origin. Words with Latin and Greek roots remained spelled the same in British English, although this group of words saw a simplification in spelling as a result of the American spelling reform.

The data highlights the dynamic nature of language usage in light of these facts, highlighting the fact that there is no one "correct" way to spell any particular term. The frequency of both American and British English terminology in various settings points to some degree of linguistic flexibility driven by personal preferences, exposure to other cultures, and the particular linguistic requirements of a particular situation.

In conclusion, students' differing spelling selections between American and British English terms demonstrate how flexible and fluid language is. Instead of carefully following one standard over another, people seem to use language in a variety of ways. This linguistic adaptability is evidence of how English has changed throughout time as a universal language, influenced by many situations and influences.

3. Different lexical usage in American and British English

The following table provides a comparative analysis of the usage of specific vocabulary words in British and American English among participants. It highlights the frequency and percentage of each lexical choice, showing the prevalence of American and British terms in the dataset.

Table 3. Comparison of British and American English Vocabulary Usage Among Participants

No.	Words	British English			American English		
		Choice	Frequency	Percentage	Choice	Frequency	Percentage
1	flat/apartment	flat	17	13.2%	apartment	112	86.8%
2	lift/elevator	lift	89	69.0%	elevator	40	31.0%
3	pavement/sidewalk	pavement	31	24.0%	sidewalk	98	76.0%
4	petrol/gasoline	petrol	33	25.6%	gasoline	96	74.4%
5	holiday/vacation	holiday	108	83.7%	vacation	21	16.3%
6	rubber/eraser	rubber	17	13.2%	eraser	112	86.8%
7	shop/store	shop	73	56.6%	store	56	43.4%
8	autumn/fall	autumn	85	65.9%	fall	44	34.1%
9	film/movie	film	52	40.3%	movie	77	59.7%
10	motorbike/motorcycle	motorbike	24	18.6%	motorcycle	105	81.4%
		Total in Percentage	41.0%				59.0%

Regarding housing terminology, there is a clear favorite among the students polled. Just 13.2% of students, or 17 students, choose the British English word "flat," whereas 86.8% of students, or 112 students, prefer the American English phrase "apartment." The pronounced inclination towards the American term "apartment" rather than the British phrase "flat" suggests that most students prefer it when describing a place to live.

Regarding vertical transportation, the usage data for the terms "lift" and "elevator" provides insight into language choices. In British English, 89 students (69.0%) prefer the term "lift," whereas in American English, 40 students (31.0%) prefer the phrase "elevator." In this instance, the British word "lift" sticks out as the one that students who were polled chose to describe this kind of transportation most frequently.

Examining the terminology used in pedestrian infrastructure, "pavement" and "sidewalk" become different. Whereas 31 students (24.0%) like the British English term "pavement," 98 students (76.0%) favor the American English phrase "sidewalk." It is

evident that when students are referring to the paved path beside a road, "sidewalk" is the preferred option.

Data on terminology connected to fuel, in particular "petrol" versus "gasoline," show an interesting pattern. Out of all the pupils, only 33 students (25.6%) prefer the British English term "petrol," whereas 96 students (74.4%) prefer the American English phrase "gasoline." When it comes to fuel for cars, students who were polled showed a definite preference for the American term "gasoline" over the British phrase "petrol".

In terms of holiday terminology, there is a clear preference among students surveyed, with 108 students (83.7%) opting for the British English term "holiday," while only 21 students (16.3%) favor the American English equivalent, "vacation." Evidently, the term "holiday" holds significant sway and is overwhelmingly more popular among the student population.

Shifting the focus to writing instruments, the data on "rubber" and "eraser" usage reveals a distinct preference. A mere 17 students (13.2%) opt for the British English term "rubber," whereas 112 students (86.8%) choose the American English term "eraser." Consequently, "eraser" emerges as the undisputed preferred term in this context.

Examining choices related to retail establishments, the distinction between "shop" and "store" becomes apparent. While 73 students (56.6%) lean towards the British English term "shop," 56 students (43.4%) opt for the American English term "store." Although "shop" is more commonly used, the difference is relatively close, indicating a somewhat balanced preference among the surveyed students.

In the realm of seasonal nomenclature, the preference for "autumn" versus "fall" is evident. A majority of 65.9% of students favor the British English term "autumn," while 34.1% opt for the American English term "fall." Clearly, "autumn" emerges as the more popular term in this particular lexical choice.

Transitioning to the world of entertainment, the data on "film" and "movie" usage suggests a preference for the American English term. Remarkably, 77 students (59.7%) select "movie," whilst 52 students (40.3%) select the British English term "film." Consequently, "movie" turns out to be more frequently employed in this context among the students assessed.

Finally, when it comes to two-wheeled transportation, the disparity between "motorbike" and "motorcycle" is pronounced. Only 24 students (18.6%) prefer the British English term "motorbike," while an overwhelming 81.4% or 105 students favor the American English term "motorcycle." Clearly, "motorcycle" stands out as the dominant term in this lexical choice among the surveyed students.

In summary, the data indicates varying preferences among students for American and British English terms. The trends suggest that, in many cases, American English terms are more commonly used among the surveyed students. This result is consistent with earlier studies carried out by (Akindele, 2019). Moreover, American English is used more often because it is easier and more often used in everyday conversation than British English which seems more formal (Obos et al., 2022)

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of the study provide valuable insights into students' preferences regarding American and British English, encompassing three key aspects: the overall distribution of English varieties, spelling patterns usage, and different lexical choices.

1. Distribution of English Varieties:

Table 1 reveals a notable preference among the surveyed students for American English, constituting 61.91% of their language usage. In contrast, British English accounts for 38.09%. This distribution aligns with previous research, such as the study of (Hermini, 2019), which indicated a higher usage of American English among students. This preference suggests a significant impact of American English as the preferred dialect among the surveyed students.

2. Spelling Patterns Usage:

Table 2 delves into spelling preferences for specific word pairs, highlighting a consistent inclination toward American English spellings. Notable patterns emerge across various terms, with American English consistently garnering a majority share of 63.4%. The data affirms the students' strong preference for American English orthography, reflecting broader trends observed in global communication. This trend is consistent with the previous findings of (Yoestara & Wahyuni, 2022), reinforcing the prevalence of American English in student usage.

3. Different Lexical Usage:

Table 3 explores lexical choices in specific contexts, showcasing students' preferences for American or British terms. The data shows that students' lexical preferences follow a variable but continuous pattern, with a noticeable tendency toward American English phrases in various settings. Although there are significant variances, the overall proportion indicates that American English terms (59.0%) are preferred over British English terms (41.0%) by a clear majority. This result is consistent with the larger pattern found in the study, suggesting that American English has a widespread influence on the students' language preferences. The consistent trend aligns with an earlier study (Akindele, 2019), indicating a persistent preference for American English in lexical choices.

In conclusion, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of students' linguistic preferences. The general preference for American English, which is seen in the distribution as a whole, spelling selections, and lexical usage, highlights how prevalent American English is in the students' linguistic environment. This linguistic flexibility, together with knowledge of the differences between American and British English, illustrates how language is dynamic and shaped by exposure to media and cultural influences. The results add to the growing body of knowledge regarding the growth of the English language and the widespread influence of American English in international communication.

REFERENCES

- Abu Fares, A. A. F. M. (2019). British English and American English: History and Differences. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2(1), 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.1.14x>
- Akindele, J. A. (2019). *British or American English? A Survey of Variety Preference in the English of L2 University Undergraduates*.

Alftberg, A.-K. (2009). *British or American English?*

Crystal, D. (2000). Emerging Englishes. *English Teaching Professional* 14, 3-6.

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press.

DaCosta, P. T., & Arias, F. R. (2021). On the Influence of British/American English in the Dominican EFL College Education. *Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo*.

Gunawan, A., & Aminah, N. (n.d.). *English Students' Awareness Of American English And British English Differences*.

Gunawan, Y. I., Haikal, M. D., Riansyah, R. R., Rizky, D. A., & Afrizal, M. N. (2024). Improving Students' English Public Speaking Skill toward Campus Visit Program. *Globish: An English-Indonesian Journal for English, Education, and Culture*, 13(1), 106. <https://doi.org/10.31000/globish.v13i1.9963>

Hermini, H. (2019). Students' Perception toward American and British English in Cokroaminoto University. *Ideas: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v7i1.724>

Jenkins, J. (2007). *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*. Oxford University Press.

Lastari, D. S., Putra, A. S., Putra, A. S., & Rohim, A. (2024). Investigating the Utilization of TikTok Application to Improve Nursing Students' English Speaking Skills. *Globish: An English-Indonesian Journal for English, Education, and Culture*, 13(1), 81. <https://doi.org/10.31000/globish.v13i1.10544>

Leotescu, D., Leotescu, G., & University of Craiova. (2023). Driven by A Mutual Language? British Versus American English . *Professional Communication and Translation Studies*, 14, 131–138. <https://doi.org/10.59168/LJMP7741>

Mudra, H. (2024). Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English: Insights from Pre-service EFL Teachers. *Globish: An English-Indonesian Journal for English, Education, and Culture*, 13(1), 66. <https://doi.org/10.31000/globish.v13i1.9956>

Obos, A. I., Susilo, S., & Ping, M. T. (2022). Exploring EFL Students' Awareness Of The Differences Between American And British Varieties. *Lingua*, 18(2), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.34005/lingua.v18i2.2123>

Smith, A., & Brown, B. (2018). The Impact of Language Variation on Cognitive Processes in Educational Settings. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(2), 123-145.

Trudgill, P. (2010). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Penguin.

Yaman, İ. (2015). *Exploring ELT Students' Awareness of the Differences between the British and American Varieties of English*.

Yoestara, M., & Wahyuni, J. (2022). University Students' Preferences and Recognition: British English Vs. American English. *International Journal of Education, Language, and Religion*, 4(1), 47. <https://doi.org/10.35308/ijelr.v4i1.5561>