

Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes towards British and American English
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Abstract

British and American English are currently the two most influential varieties of English around the world. The present study investigates the attitudes of seventeen teachers from the department of English at Badji Mokhtar University towards these two cognate forms. This issue has been explored through a questionnaire which was carefully designed to serve the purpose. The findings revealed the teachers' awareness of the necessity of acquainting Algerian university students with both British and American varieties. Nonetheless, some teachers remain reluctant to the consideration of the latter.

Keywords: *British english, american english, teachers' attitudes, teaching english.*

Résumé

De nos jours, l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise est devenu un phénomène mondial. L'anglais britannique et l'anglais américain en particulier sont les deux modèles les plus utilisés à travers le monde. Cet article a pour but la révélation des opinions de dix-sept enseignants d'anglais à l'Université Badji Mokhtar vis-à-vis ces deux formes importantes. Le questionnaire qui a été utilisé dans cette étude a clairement démontré que les enseignants sont convaincus que le système éducatif algérien devrait promouvoir l'anglais britannique ainsi que l'anglais américain. Certains enseignants restent quand même septiques à l'introduction de ce dernier.

Mots clés: *Anglais britannique, anglais américain, opinions des enseignants, enseignement de la langue anglaise.*

ملخص

يعدّ تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في عصرنا ظاهرة عالمية. ورغم وجود عدة نماذج لتدريس هذه اللغة، فإن النموذجين الإنجليزي والأمريكي هما أكثر النماذج انتشارا في العالم. تحاول هذه الدراسة تحليل آراء سبعة عشر أستاذا للغة الإنجليزية في جامعة باجي مختار - عنابة - من خلال استبيان ورّع عليهم، وأكدوا أن النموذجين المذكورين من أحسن النماذج ملاءمة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات الجزائرية. فضل جُلهم النموذج البريطاني، وتحقّق آخرون على النموذج الأمريكي رغم شعبيته.

الكلمات المفاتيح: *النموذج البريطاني، النموذج الأمريكي، آراء الأساتذة، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية.*

Introduction

The spread of English outside the British Isles has resulted in the emergence of other varieties of English. British English, which is the original variety from which other forms have developed, is currently being challenged by American English. Nowadays, native and foreign language speakers of English do not necessarily accept these new varieties, but British and American English are considered as the most powerful and influential models for teaching and learning English around the world.

This paper will begin with a short literature review clarifying the concepts of British and American English. A subsequent section will be devoted to a comparison of the two varieties and to a summary of some of the most significant differences. An examination of the status of these two varieties and a discussion of related attitudes will be also included at the end of this part.

The literature review will be followed by a study conducted at the Department of English (University of Annaba), which investigates teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards British and American English. This will include a description of the target group and of the method utilized in the study. Finally, the results of the investigation will be analyzed and further implications will be discussed.

1. British English

The term British English generally refers to the variety of English which is used in the British Isles as the primary language of the British population. The British Isles incorporate five countries: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, as well as some smaller adjacent islands. England is particularly the dominant country; hence, "*British English* is used

explicitly or implicitly to refer to the type of English spoken in England" (Hansen in Schneider 1997: 59).

Nevertheless, English as it is used throughout Britain, is far from being constant or homogeneous because it is continuously influenced by factors such as: social class, geography, education, age and even gender. These aspects result in a number of distinct, yet generally intelligible dialects which reveal grammatical, lexical and phonological deviations from the standard form ⁽¹⁾.

Standard British English is the norm for teaching and learning British English around the world, and it is associated with one specific accent which is Received Pronunciation (RP) ⁽²⁾. The latter is in reality the most defined and thoroughly described British accent, which ultimately became the model for teaching pronunciation to foreign or Commonwealth learners of British English.

2. American English

The United States of America is a federation of fifty states located to the North of America. American English is the variety of English which is used by the majority of Americans in the US, but it is not recognized as the official language by the American government. American English is "... [the] product of the continent's settlement history, with individual accents and dialects having resulted from unique mixtures of settlers from different regions of the British Isles and elsewhere and their ways of speaking" (Kachru et al. 2006: 58).

Although primarily based on English dialects from the British Isles, American English later developed its own distinct flavor because of a number of historical developments ⁽³⁾. American

English speech is particularly celebrated for its distinctive pronunciation which is the result of a number of phonological features, some significant grammatical characteristics, but mostly a lexicon which has been largely enriched in order to satisfy the needs of a multilingual society⁽⁴⁾.

The American variety is generally considered to be more homogeneous than its British counterpart; in spite of this, it demonstrates some social, regional and ethnic variation across the territory. The concept of Standard American English is generally used to refer to the most accurate and acceptable form of English which is mainly designed for institutional, governmental and scientific purposes. General American (GA) accent in particular is the pronunciation goal for American native speakers as well as learners of American English⁽⁵⁾.

3. British and American English in Comparison

Britain and the US have been described by George Bernard Shaw as two countries divided by a common language. Indeed, differences between British and American English do exist, and are discernable at the levels of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar and usage. Experts have estimated that around 4,000 words and expressions of everyday use are employed differently on both sides of the Atlantic⁽⁶⁾.

It is argued that the most obvious divergence between these two major varieties is the intonation of the language. Other phonological differences can be also detected in stress patterns and in the articulation and distribution of consonant and vowel sounds (Algeo, 2006). Examples of contrasting British – American pronunciations include: *doctor* /'dɒktə -

'da:ktər/, *wrath* /rɒθ - ræθ/, *missile* /'mɪsaɪl - 'mɪsəl/, *tomato* /tə'ma:təʊ - tə'meɪtəʊ /, *cigarette* /,sɪgə'ret - 'sɪgəret/, *laboratory* /lə'bɒrətɪ - 'læbrətɔ:ri/, etc.

Lexical distinctions are rather extensive and striking especially for common people who may easily remark how the same items are differently referred to by speakers from the two countries. In other words, what is labeled: *rubbish*, *autumn*, *petrol*, *holiday*, *curtains*, *sidewalk*, and *trainers* in Britain, is often designated as: *garbage*, *fall*, *gasoline*, *vacation*, *drapes*, *pavement*, and *sneakers* in the US.

Moreover, one cannot help but notice how a considerable number of words are written differently in British and American English. These orthographic differences are chiefly the result of the spelling reform of American English which sought to rationalize this variety, and make it more systematic (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Therefore, British *behaviour*, *centre*, *jeweller*, *organise*, *aesthetic*, *programme*, and *disc*, have the subsequent spellings as their American variants: *behavior*, *center*, *jeweler*, *organize*, *esthetic*, *program* and *disk*.

With regard to grammar, Crystal (1995) argues that grammatical distinctions between Standard British and American English are rather small. Among which he cites the following: the American use of *have* instead of *have got* in British, the use of a *simple past tense* in American where British uses the *present perfect*; in addition to differences in *word order*, *irregular verbs*, and the use of *prepositions* (311).

It should be noted, however, that despite the various phonological, orthographic, lexical and grammatical

distinctions, British and American English share a lot of similarities which are the result of their common origin. Although confusion may sometimes arise from these differences in use, the two varieties remain generally intelligible since they are constantly influencing each other.

4. Attitudes towards British and American English

At the dawn of this new millennium, no one can deny the fact that English has become a global phenomenon. Indeed, English is currently spoken by around two billion speakers all over the world; both as first, second and foreign language (Jenkins, 2003). Accordingly, new varieties of English such as Canadian, New Zealand, Australian, Malaysian, Caribbean and South African English have emerged as a result of the spread of English beyond the British Isles.

Despite the emergence of 'New Englishes', British and American English are currently the two most powerful and influential varieties of English as it is spoken, written, and taught around the world. Certainly, "... these two varieties are the ones spoken by most native speakers of English and studied by most foreign learners. They have a special status as the two principal national varieties of the language ..." (Algeo, 1).

For a long time, British English has been considered as the dominant norm in English language teaching; after all Britain is the homeland from which English has originated, and eventually proliferated to other parts of the globe. Nevertheless, the twentieth century has witnessed the rise of the US as an economic and political world leader, and the diffusion of American culture and media. Hence, the emergence of American English as another prominent

variety for teaching and learning English. 'Which variety is the most influential today?' is the question which has been addressed by a number of scholars.

In the 1960s, the American scholar Mencken (in Kirkpatrick) had already observed that American English was influencing British English, and that the former is judged by Americans to be "... better on all counts – clearer, more rational, and above all, more charming" (57). Also, Gimson (1976) contends that, the fact that over 300 Americans speak English as a first language, had a significant influence on the role of British English and RP in the English-speaking world. He states that "... European countries continue on the whole to teach RP, whereas much of Asia and South America follow the American model" (89).

On the same lines, Algeo confirms that "... American has more native speakers than British and is rapidly becoming the dominant form of English in non-native countries other perhaps than those of Western Europe". He goes further by saying that "Much European established academic bias favors British as a model; but evolving popular culture is biased toward American" (ibid.).

The above views clearly demonstrate the changing nature of these two varieties. We can conclude our review of the literature by saying that there is ample evidence that American English has been challenging and influencing British English in different ways; although British English is also affecting American English, though less frequently. One particular aspect which has been explored by researchers is for instance, the adoption of *Americanisms* by British users⁽⁷⁾.

5. University teachers' perceptions and attitudes of British and American English

In order to determine Algerian university teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards British and American English, we conducted a study on English language teachers from the Department of English at Badji Mokhtar University of Annaba. The first section of the questionnaire (see *Appendix*), which we have carefully designed, was administered to seventeen teachers in an attempt to investigate the above issue. The survey had two principal aims. The first aim was to understand how the teachers felt about these two varieties, and the second was to reveal the variety which is promoted in their classes.

The sample population for this investigation is a group of seventeen EFL (English Foreign Language) university teachers from the University of Annaba who have answered the questionnaire. The participants were randomly chosen as current teachers from the above-cited department. The *Biographical Information* section of the questionnaire revealed the following facts: (1) All seventeen subjects teach English at the University of Annaba; (2) Fourteen teachers hold a magister degree, while only three hold a doctorate degree; (3) Nine teachers have been teaching English for a period between 5 to 10 years, three teachers for 11 to 20 years, four teachers for more than 20 years, and only one teacher has a teaching experience of less than 5 years.

The whole questionnaire, which actually includes twenty questions, was originally designed not only to test the issue discussed in this article, but also to consider another problem which is that of teaching English as an

International Language. For practical reasons, however, only the first section of this questionnaire is included in the *Appendix*. The *biographical* section incorporates three questions revealing basic information about the participants (already discussed in the previous paragraph), whereas *Section I: British and American English* consists of ten questions. Nine out of the ten questions are either *multiple choice* or *yes/no* questions, and only one question requires justification on the part of the respondents. Finally, it should be noted that the questionnaire was delivered in two different ways: an electronic form was emailed to some participants, but it was provided to others in a printed form.

The analysis of the first section of the questionnaire has revealed some interesting facts about how teachers feel towards British and American English and why. To begin with, the teachers were asked to indicate the variety they speak (**Q 4**). Ten teachers (60%) argued that they speak British English; five (30%) stated that they speak a mixture of British and American English; one teacher (5%) could not identify the variety she speaks; and another one (5%) left the question unanswered.

The answers selected by the respondents for the next question (**Q 5**) confirmed that the English they speak is the result of a combination of important factors which have a direct or an indirect influence on their speech. In fact, most of the answers included three or four elements; among which *media*, *training*, and *former teachers* frequently appeared.

With reference to the written form, the same number of teachers (ten i.e. 60%) claimed to write British English; six (35%) affirmed using a mixed spelling, while one teacher (5%) failed

to answer the question (Q 6). Once again, the variety written by the respondents seems to be the outcome of multiple factors; namely, *training* and *former teachers* (Q 7).

A further aspect, which has been addressed by one of the questions (Q8), is the teachers' familiarity with the differences between the British and American varieties. The results show that: eleven teachers (65%) are somehow familiar with these distinctions; five teachers (30%) are very familiar; while only one teacher (5%) states that she is not really familiar with these features. Moreover, all seventeen teachers unanimously declare to discuss these differences with their students (Q9).

In addition to that, questions (Q 10) and (Q 11) respectively demonstrate that the majority of the teachers (fifteen i.e. 88%) allow their students to mix British and American English in class, whereas only a minority (two i.e. 12%) does not. Nevertheless, nine out of the fifteen teachers (60%) tolerate mixing only at the level of speech, while six teachers (40%) accept mixing in speech as well as writing.

The last two questions of this first section of the questionnaire were actually crucial in uncovering teachers' attitudes towards the two most influential varieties of English. Indeed, while 41% (seven teachers) prefer their students to use British English, only 12% (two teachers) have selected both varieties. Eight teachers (47%), however, claim no preference for either variety as they answered 'it doesn't matter' (Q 12).

The first segment of the last question (Q 13) revealed that three teachers (18%) think that the Algerian educational system should support British English, while one teacher (6%)

answered American English. The greater part (thirteen teachers i.e. 76%) believes that both varieties should be promoted in Algeria. The second part of this last question included the respondents' justifications of their declared positions; the latter will be described in the two following paragraphs.

On the one hand, the teacher who selected American English pointed out that it is 'the most spread' variety. On the other hand, those who have chosen British English explained that it is *much clearer* and *more suitable* for university studies than American English. One particular respondent argued that British English is *already supported* by the Algerian educational system given the amount of treaties and conventions signed between the two countries. She goes further by emphasizing that American English is *not completely marginalized* since training conventions are also made with the US government.

The comments provided by the category of teachers who selected both varieties were actually more diverse, and shed light on some essential current issues in the field of EFL teaching. The revealed facts can be outlined in the following points:

- Both British and American are equal varieties of English that is why they should be promoted by the Algerian educational system.
- British English is widespread because of historical reasons, but American English is becoming more influential because of the current political, economic and technological power of the US.
- Students are nowadays more exposed to the American variety because of the media (TV, internet, etc.), that is why they favor it.

- Students' awareness should be raised with regards to the distinctions between the two varieties.
- It is not preferable to mix British and American English in writing.
- The choice of the variety is not really important as long as it does not impede effective communication and intelligibility.
- As a result of the globalization process, students should be exposed to as many varieties of English as possible since they will not necessarily use English to interact with native-speakers.

Before concluding this discussion, it is worth mentioning that due to the limitations of the study, it would be unrealistic to present this data as a complete representation of the situation in all Algerian universities, or even generalize the perceptions or attitudes to all Algerian university teachers of English. Further enquiry is clearly prerequisite to clarify and test the validity and reliability of some of the findings.

6. Teaching British and American English in the Algerian Universities

The Algerian educational system has been supporting British English for a long time. This is not really surprising given the fact that Europe, and France in particular, have adopted the British model for years. Some changes have been observed by researchers as it was noted in section 4; American English is obviously gaining more ground at the international level. Despite the teachers' reluctant positions, it is currently essential to familiarize Algerian students with both varieties. The Algerian government is evidently moving towards this direction since collaboration programs are being designed with both British and American authorities.

As a result of the extensive use of English by more second and foreign language speakers than by natives, learners of English should be exposed not only to British and American English, even if these are the two most influential varieties. Other varieties such as Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, etc. should be incorporated within EFL curricula to acquaint Algerian students with other linguistic forms and cultural aspects. After all, English is no longer the property of the British or the American people; it has become an 'International' language.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have managed to gain some understanding of the situation at the Department of English of the University of Annaba, and to reach some plausible insights about the teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards British and American English. Hence, British English and some 'mixed form' of English are used as models for teaching English. The teachers seem to have developed these varieties as a result of a combination of factors; namely, the media, training and former teachers. They claim to be rather familiar with both British and American English, and to recognize the outlining differences; although this needs to be confirmed by further studies.

Most importantly, however, is the teachers' awareness of the necessity of bringing about some change. They believe that Algerian students should be familiarized with both varieties, and exposed to some other forms in order to be able to communicate effectively in various contexts with native as well as foreign speakers of English. This actually asserts the growing position of

American English, and the emergence of English as a global language. Nevertheless, some teachers remain unenthusiastic to the introduction of

American English since they deem British English the only variety which is worth of study.

End Notes

- 1- See Gramley and Patzold, chapter 10 or Melchers & Shaw, chapter 4 for a description of the varieties of British English.
- 2- See Crystal, 2008 p. 404 for a definition of the term RP, and Mugglestone in Graddol et al. pp. 162-5 for an account on the current reality of this accent.
- 3- See Strevens, pp. 147-8 for a description of the historical events which have influenced the development of American English.
- 4- See Ash in Ronowicz and Yallop, pp. 238-53 for a description of the linguistic characteristics of American English.
- 5- See Laver, pp. 58-9 for a comprehensive definition of GA.
- 6- See Darragh (2000) or Davies (2005) for a detailed account on the differences between British and American English.
- 7- See Bauer (2002) or Thomas et al. (2004) for or a discussion of Americanisms in British English.

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Appendix: Teachers' Questionnaire**TEACHER'S QUESTIONNAIRE**

Dear Colleague,

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out teachers' attitudes and feelings towards British and American English, and to enquire about their knowledge/ impressions regarding the rise of English as an international language.

You are kindly requested to fill in your responses by ticking (✓) the corresponding box or answering the questions as precisely as you can. A final optional section is included for you to add any comments you consider helpful for this investigation.

Thank you for your collaboration!

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

1. **University:**
2. **Degree:** B.A. / Licence M.A. / Magister Ph.D. / Doctorate
3. **Teaching Experience:**
 Less than 5 years 5 - 10 years
 11 - 20 years more than 20 years

SECTION I: BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

4. **Which variety of English do you speak?**
 a. British English b. American English c. A mix of the two
 d. I don't know e. Other _____
5. **The variety you speak is the result of?**
 a. Media (TV, internet, etc.) b. Travel c. Training
 d. Former teachers e. Personal preference f. Textbooks
 g. Other _____
6. **Which variety of English do you write?**
 a. British English b. American English c. A mix of the two
 d. I don't know e. Other _____
7. **The variety you write is the result of?**
 a. Media (TV, internet, etc.) b. Travel c. Training
 d. Former teachers e. Personal preference f. Textbooks
 g. Other _____
8. **How familiar are you with the differences between British and American English?**
 a. Very familiar b. Somehow familiar
 c. Not really familiar d. Not familiar at all
9. **Do you talk to your students about these differences?**
 a. Yes b. No
10. **Do you allow your students to mix British and American English in class?**
 a. Yes b. No
11. **If yes, is it in:**
 a. Speech b. Writing c. Both

12. **Which variety do you prefer your students to use?**

- a. British English b. American English
c. It doesn't matter d. Other _____

13. **In your opinion, which variety of English should the Algerian educational system support?**

- a. British English b. American English c. Both
d. Other _____

Please justify:
