AWARENESS AND PREFERENCES FOR AMERICAN OR BRITISH ENGLISH AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20625369

Abstract. *The current study investigates the awareness and preferences for American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) among university students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. Despite the global spread of English and the co-existence of its two most widely taught standard varieties, relatively little quantitative attention has been paid to how EFL learners consciously recognize, evaluate, and choose between them in academic and everyday communicative contexts. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a validated questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. Participants comprised 214 undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students drawn from three universities including World Languages University, Jizzakh State Pedogogical University and National University of Uzbekistan. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were used for quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts. Results revealed that the majority of respondents (71.5%) could reliably identify salient phonological and orthographic differences between the two varieties. AmE was preferred for media consumption and informal communication (62.3%), whereas BrE was perceived as more appropriate for formal academic writing and international prestige contexts (54.7%). Significant differences in preference were found with respect to gender, exposure to English-language media, and instructional variety used in participants' home institutions. These findings carry implications for curriculum design, materials development, and teacher training in EFL settings.*

Keywords: *language attitude, American English, British English, EFL, variety preference, mixed-methods design, ANOVA, independent-samples t-tests.*

INTRODUCTION

English occupies a unique position as the world's foremost lingua franca, serving as the primary medium of international commerce, scientific discourse, diplomacy, and digital communication. Within this global landscape, no two varieties have exerted greater pedagogical influence than American English (AmE) and British English (BrE). Both varieties enjoy official recognition, standardized codification in widely used dictionaries and grammar references, and extensive representation in published course materials (Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 1985). Yet, for the millions of students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL), the co-existence of these two prestigious varieties creates a complex sociolinguistic reality: learners must not only acquire grammatical competence but also navigate decisions about which variety to emulate, identify with, and deploy in different communicative situations.

The choice between AmE and BrE is rarely trivial. It reflects, among other factors, learners' exposure histories, teachers' instructional norms, institutional policies, perceptions of prestige, and aspirations tied to target-culture membership (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Jenkins, 2007). In many EFL contexts, particularly those outside the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1985), curricula simultaneously

draw on both varieties without explicit guidance, resulting in learner uncertainty and inconsistent production. This situation is further complicated by the pervasive influence of American popular culture and digital media, which exposes learners to AmE on an unprecedented scale even when their formal instruction foregrounds BrE (Garrett, 2010).

Despite the evident relevance of variety awareness to EFL pedagogy, the empirical literature on the topic remains fragmented. Studies conducted in the 1990s and 2000s documented a general preference for AmE among younger EFL populations in East Asia and the Middle East, attributing this trend to the media and the growing cultural dominance of the United States (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006; McKenzie, 2008). However, more recent scholarship suggests that attitudes are more nuanced and context-dependent than early research implied. BrE continues to command considerable prestige in former British colonial contexts and in academic writing traditions, and there is growing evidence that learners distinguish functionally between the two varieties depending on the communicative purpose at hand (Bayard et al., 2001; Cargile et al., 1994).

The present study addresses this gap by examining, in a single, adequately powered sample, the degree to which EFL university students (a) can accurately identify defining features of AmE and BrE, (b) express preferences for one variety over the other across a range of functional domains, and (c) differ systematically in these preferences as a function of gender, media exposure, and the instructional variety of their home institution. The study also seeks to understand the reasoning behind preferences as articulated in learners' own words through qualitative interview data. By combining psychometric assessment of attitudinal constructs with learners' reflective accounts, the study aims to generate findings that are both statistically robust and pedagogically meaningful.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are EFL university students aware of the phonological, lexical, and orthographic differences between American English and British English?

2. Which variety do EFL university students prefer, and does this preference vary by communicative domain (formal academic writing, informal oral communication, digital/media contexts)?

3. Do variety preferences differ significantly according to gender, self-reported media exposure, and the instructional variety used at the participants' home institution?

4. What reasons do EFL university students provide for their variety preferences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociolinguistic framework most commonly invoked in variety research is Kachru's (1985) Three Circles model, which distinguishes Inner Circle (native-speaker) countries from Outer Circle (post-colonial) and Expanding Circle (EFL) settings. Within this framework, AmE and BrE represent the two dominant Inner Circle norms, each supported by powerful publishing industries, internationally distributed examinations (e.g., TOEFL for AmE, IELTS for BrE), and governmental soft-power projection. Crystal (2003) estimated that American English reaches more second- and foreign-language learners globally than any other variety, a trend reinforced by the market dominance of American technology companies and streaming platforms. Nevertheless, BrE retains significant symbolic capital in many academic and professional domains, and British English-oriented examination boards continue to set the standard in numerous national curricula across Africa, South Asia, and parts of the Middle East (Jenkins, 2007).

Pennycook (1994) and Phillipson (1992) have critiqued the hegemonic spread of these two varieties as a form of linguistic imperialism that marginalizes local varieties and constrains learner identity. Counter-arguments in the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) tradition (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011) emphasize the legitimacy and communicative adequacy of non-native varieties and advocate for pedagogical models that do not privilege any single national standard. From a practical standpoint, however, most EFL learners continue to orient toward AmE or BrE as target varieties, making it important to understand the attitudinal landscape that shapes these orientations.

Research on language attitudes—defined as evaluative orientations toward languages or their speakers—has consistently shown that non-native varieties are rated lower on prestige and correctness dimensions than native varieties, while native varieties themselves are differentiated along status and solidarity axes (Lambert et al., 1960; Ryan et al., 1982). Within the AmE-BrE comparison, studies employing the verbal guise technique and direct questionnaire methods have generally found that BrE is perceived as more educated, sophisticated, and internationally prestigious, while AmE is rated as friendlier, more approachable, and more modern (Bayard et al., 2001; Bishop et al., 2005). These evaluative profiles reflect broader cultural stereotypes rather than purely linguistic assessments.

In EFL contexts specifically, McKenzie (2008) surveyed Japanese university students and found that while AmE was preferred for everyday communication, BrE was rated as more suitable for formal contexts. Similar functional distinctions were observed by Al-Wer and Holt (2011) among Jordanian EFL learners, and by Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006) among Hong Kong secondary students. These findings suggest that EFL learners do not simply adopt a single variety wholesale but rather develop differentiated attitudes that map varieties onto communicative contexts. More recent work by Matsuda (2020) and Galloway and Rose (2018) points toward an increasingly pluralistic orientation among younger EFL learners, who are simultaneously exposed to multiple varieties through digital media and may be less invested in achieving native-speaker norms of either variety.

A prerequisite for variety preference is variety awareness: the ability to identify and distinguish features that mark a spoken or written text as characteristically American or British. Research on this dimension is less abundant than attitudinal research but has grown in recent years. Rindal (2010) demonstrated that Norwegian EFL learners possessed substantial metalinguistic knowledge of AmE-BrE differences in phonology (e.g., /r/ rhoticity, the LOT-THOUGHT merger) and orthography (e.g., -ize vs. -ise, -or vs. -our), though their productive use often diverged from their stated norms. Findings from Wan (2019) in a Chinese EFL context confirmed that lexical differences (e.g., elevator vs. lift; gasoline vs. petrol) were more readily identified than grammatical or prosodic ones. The extent to which university-level EFL students systematically distinguish between the two varieties across multiple linguistic levels has not been comprehensively examined in a cross-institutional study.

Several variables have been proposed as predictors of variety preference in EFL populations. Institutional factors—primarily the variety used by teachers and represented in official course materials—constitute the most direct source of input and serve as an implicit norm (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Gender has been identified as a moderating variable in several studies, with female learners more often reporting preference for BrE and attributing to it greater prestige, though results are not wholly consistent (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006). Media exposure, particularly to American films, music, and online content, has been proposed as a mechanism

driving AmE preference among youth audiences globally (Garrett, 2010). The present study treats each of these as independent variables and examines their joint contribution to variety preference.

METHODS

Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In Phase 1, quantitative data were collected via a self-report questionnaire to establish the scope and correlates of variety awareness and preference across a large sample. In Phase 2, a purposively selected subset of participants took part in semi-structured interviews to elaborate and explain the patterns identified in Phase 1. The integration of the two strands occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative findings were explained with reference to qualitative themes.

Participants

Participants were recruited from three state universities, including World Languages University, Jizzakh State Pedogogical University and National University of Uzbekistan, in an Expanding Circle EFL context. Eligibility criteria required that students be enrolled in an English-medium or EFL-intensive program and have completed at least one year of tertiary-level English instruction. A total of 231 students were initially recruited; after excluding 17 questionnaires with excessive missing data (>10% of items), the final quantitative sample comprised N = 214 participants (126 female, 88 male; M_a^{GE} = 20.4 years, SD = 1.8). Participants reported a mean of 10.6 years of formal English instruction (SD = 2.3). For the qualitative strand, 24 participants were purposively selected to ensure variation in gender, institution, and preliminary questionnaire scores; all 24 provided informed consent for audio-recorded interviews.

Instruments

The questionnaire comprised four sections. Section A collected demographic information and language background data, including the instructional variety reportedly used at participants' institutions, self-rated English proficiency, and weekly hours of exposure to English-language media. Section B contained 18 Awareness items designed to assess recognition of specific AmE-BrE contrasts at the phonological, lexical, orthographic, and grammatical levels. Each item presented a word, sentence, or minimal pair and asked participants to identify it as characteristically American, characteristically British, common to both, or uncertain. Section C comprised 16 Preference items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly prefer BrE, 5 = strongly prefer AmE), grouped by communicative domain: formal academic writing (5 items), informal conversation (5 items), and digital/media contexts (6 items). Section D contained 8 items assessing perceived prestige and social connotations of each variety. The questionnaire was piloted with 30 EFL students not included in the main sample; Cronbach's alpha for the preference scale was .83 and for the awareness scale was .78, both indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Semi-structured interview protocols consisted of 10 open-ended prompt questions covering participants' perception of differences between AmE and BrE, their personal variety preferences and the reasons behind them, the role of their institution and teachers in shaping those preferences, and their attitudes toward the perceived "correctness" or prestige of each variety.

Questionnaires were administered during regular class sessions with instructor permission. Completion took approximately 25 minutes. Interviews, conducted two to four weeks after questionnaire administration, lasted between 35 and 55 minutes and were carried out in English to ensure comparability. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Participation was voluntary and anonymized; university ethics board approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Quantitative analyses were performed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were computed for all scale scores and awareness items. Independent-samples t-tests compared male and female participants on awareness and preference scores. One-way ANOVA compared preference scores across institutional variety groups (AmE-medium, BrE-medium, mixed). Pearson correlations examined the association between media exposure and AmE preference. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d for t-tests and partial eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA. Significance was set at $p < .05$ throughout. Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded a randomly selected 25% of the transcripts; intercoder agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .81$), indicating strong agreement before reconciliation through discussion.

RESULTS

According to the first research question above, the following results were taken:

On the 18-item awareness measure (maximum possible score = 18), participants achieved a mean score of 12.87 (SD = 2.64), corresponding to an overall accuracy rate of 71.5%. Performance was highest for orthographic items (M = 4.31/5, SD = 0.76; 86.2% accuracy), particularly the -or/-our and -ize/-ise distinctions, which nearly all participants identified correctly. Lexical awareness was also comparatively strong (M = 4.18/6, SD = 0.91; 69.7% accuracy), with common vocabulary pairs (e.g., elevator/lift, apartment/flat) recognized reliably but culturally specific items (e.g., faucet/tap, zee/zed) producing more uncertainty. Phonological items were the most challenging (M = 2.64/4, SD = 0.88; 66.0% accuracy), particularly items targeting /r/ rhoticity and vowel differences in words such as "can't" and "dance." Grammatical items (e.g., "I have gotten" as AmE vs. "I have got" as BrE) yielded intermediate accuracy (M = 1.74/3, SD = 0.60; 58.0% accuracy).

A one-way ANOVA revealed that awareness scores differed significantly across institutional variety groups, $F(2, 211) = 6.43$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that students at BrE-medium institutions scored significantly higher on awareness items (M = 13.62, SD = 2.41) than students at AmE-medium institutions (M = 12.19, SD = 2.73; $p = .004$), while mixed-instruction students fell between the two groups (M = 13.10, SD = 2.71) without differing significantly from either. No significant difference in overall awareness was found between male and female participants, $t(212) = 1.14$, $p = .255$.

Secondly the variety preferances showed that AmE was the preferred variety (M = 3.41/5, SD = 0.79 on the aggregate preference scale, where higher scores indicate AmE preference; one-sample t-test vs. scale midpoint of 3.0: $t(213) = 7.59$, $p < .001$). However, preferences varied markedly by communicative domain. For formal academic writing, BrE was marginally preferred (M = 2.81, SD = 0.94), with 54.7% of participants rating BrE as more appropriate or much more appropriate for scholarly contexts. For informal oral communication, AmE was clearly preferred (M = 3.68, SD = 0.88; 62.3% endorsing AmE). The digital/media domain showed the strongest AmE preference (M = 3.74, SD = 0.82; 65.9% endorsing AmE). A repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed a significant main effect of communicative domain on preference scores, $F(2, 426) = 48.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$, with pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni-corrected) revealing significant differences between all three domains (all $p < .01$).

Thirdly, female participants reported significantly stronger BrE preference than male participants on the formal writing subscale (M = 2.64 vs. M = 3.07), t(212) = 3.28, p = .001, d = 0.47, a medium effect. The groups did not differ significantly on informal (t(212) = 0.87, p = .387) or digital (t(212) = 1.23, p = .219) preference subscales. Media exposure (hours per week of exposure to English-language streaming, music, or social media content) correlated positively and significantly with AmE preference on the digital subscale (r = .37, p < .001) and the informal subscale (r = .29, p < .001) but not the formal writing subscale (r = .09, p = .185). Institutional variety group was a significant predictor of aggregate preference, F(2, 211) = 14.21, p < .001, η^2 = .12, with AmE-medium students reporting stronger AmE preference (M = 3.68, SD = 0.71) than BrE-medium students (M = 3.07, SD = 0.82; p < .001) and mixed students (M = 3.39, SD = 0.78; p = .025).

Finally, thematic analysis of the 24 interview transcripts yielded four overarching themes. The first theme, Media Immersion as Primary Driver, captured participants' near-universal reference to American films, series, YouTube content, and music as their principal source of English input outside the classroom. Many described their AmE preference as almost automatic: "I grew up watching American shows. When I speak, the words that come out are American. I don't even think about it." The second theme, Institutional Norms and Teacher Authority, reflected the significant role of formal instruction. Several participants at BrE-medium institutions expressed conflict between their personal preferences and their institutional allegiance: "My teachers always correct me if I write 'analyze' with a z. I know it's American, but to me it feels more natural." The third theme, Domain-Specific Appropriateness, illuminated the context-sensitivity of preferences. Participants frequently distinguished between varieties without being prompted: "For essays, I think British sounds more academic, more serious. For texting my friends? No one cares, and American is what I know from TikTok." The fourth theme, Prestige Asymmetry, captured the persistent perception of BrE as intrinsically more elegant or correct, even among those who personally preferred AmE: "Everybody knows British English is the 'real' English. But real life is American now."

5. DISCUSSION

The overall awareness rate of 71.5% indicates that EFL university students are reasonably well equipped to distinguish between the two varieties at the level of salient orthographic and lexical features, but that awareness diminishes considerably for phonological and grammatical contrasts. This gradient mirrors findings reported by Wan (2019) and Rindal (2010) and is consistent with the pedagogical reality that course materials and standardized tests foreground spelling conventions and vocabulary differences far more explicitly than phonological variation. The relative difficulty of grammatical awareness items, particularly those involving tense and aspect constructions, suggests that implicit knowledge of syntactic variety contrasts lags behind metalinguistic knowledge of surface features. Instruction that explicitly draws attention to grammatical differences—such as the AmE preference for the simple past in contexts where BrE employs the present perfect—may be warranted.

The pattern of domain-differentiated preferences is theoretically significant. Rather than expressing a uniform variety loyalty, participants navigated pragmatically between varieties: AmE for informal and digital domains, BrE for formal academic writing. This functional distribution aligns with the "endonormative stabilization" described by Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) in Outer Circle contexts and echoes McKenzie's (2008) Japanese findings. It suggests that EFL learners are, at some level, sociolinguistically sophisticated: they recognize that different contexts

carry different prestige and solidarity expectations, and they adjust their preferences accordingly. This finding has an important implication—curriculum designers who frame AmE and BrE as mutually exclusive targets may be misrepresenting learners' actual orientation.

The gender effect observed for formal writing preferences is consistent with a broader sociolinguistic literature linking female speakers more strongly to overt prestige norms (Labov, 1966). The association between media exposure and AmE preference in informal and digital domains supports the media influence hypothesis articulated by Garrett (2010) and is particularly relevant given the explosion of streaming and social media since the data underpinning earlier studies were collected. The strong institutional effect confirms that the variety of instruction matters not merely as input but as a normative authority: students taught in BrE-medium environments not only have greater variety awareness (consistent with deeper exposure to one variety's conventions) but also retain stronger BrE preference even in the face of pervasive AmE media influence.

Qualitatively, the theme of prestige asymmetry—where BrE is perceived as more "correct" even by those who prefer AmE—resonates with matched-guise research documenting status advantages for BrE across diverse listener populations (Bayard et al., 2001). The persistence of this perception, despite participants' overwhelmingly AmE-oriented media diet, suggests that ideological constructs about variety prestige are remarkably durable and are likely reproduced through instructional discourse and popular culture tropes about "proper" English. Teacher education programs may need to address these ideologies explicitly, helping future instructors develop more critical and pluralistic frameworks for discussing variety norms with students.

This study is not without limitations. The sample was drawn from a single national EFL context, limiting generalizability. Self-report preference data may not reflect actual production behavior, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal claims about the direction of effects between media exposure and preference. Future research should incorporate behavioral measures (e.g., variety features in writing samples), longitudinal tracking of attitudinal change, and comparative data from multiple national contexts to build a more comprehensive model of variety preference in EFL settings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that EFL university students possess meaningful awareness of the differences between American and British English and that their variety preferences are functionally differentiated rather than uniformly oriented toward one variety. American English is favored for informal and digital communicative contexts, driven in large part by media exposure, while British English retains prestige in formal academic writing, particularly among female learners and those instructed in BrE-medium environments. These findings argue against a one-variety-fits-all approach to EFL instruction and in favor of explicit pedagogical attention to variety differences, their social connotations, and the contexts in which each is conventionally deployed. Helping EFL learners develop reflective variety awareness—rather than unconscious allegiance to either variety—may ultimately serve communicative competence and learner agency more effectively than any single normative target.

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