

# Varieties of English and Saudi EFL learners' Acquisition of Spelling and Pronunciation: Inculcating 'Good' Language habits

By

*Paiker Fatima and Mazhar Hameed*

Department of English, College of Science and Arts, Methnab, Qassim University, SAUDI ARABIA.

## Abstract

*British and American English are the popular varieties of English Language. All communication whether formal or otherwise, employs one or more of these. Like most foreign language learners, the learners of English in schools and colleges as well as universities in Saudi Arabia show scant application to language learning. In most cases, college students of English adopt the vocabulary and grammatical structures that they are exposed to in the movies and other multimedia entertainment that they have, which is about all the exposure to English for them. The curriculum too has weaknesses that need to be addressed to enable the Saudi EFL learner to become at the least, a functional user of the language. It is observed that many learners are also unable to clearly make a choice between the two standard varieties of English and rather tend more towards American usages as they see and hear in their favourite American movies. Needless to say, however, many of these usages fall outside the purview of 'formal' English which the EFL teachers would like their Saudi learners to imbibe. This study consequently, presents the Saudi students' preferred pronunciation and spelling out of the two varieties and also explores their awareness of the variety adopted by them.*

**Keywords:** *EFL, learners, spelling, pronunciation, language habits*

## 1. Introduction

English language teaching in the EFL context, has been one concentrated and often difficult effort in the direction of bringing the learners as close to the native speaker model as possible. Being a leading colonial power, British English came to perforate the language scene of the colonies to a dramatic extent. Even after dissolution of the British colonial power, however, English remained at the focus as a symbol of prestige and power. On the other hand, the superiority of America as a technological power centre, led to the formation of a different though equally strong language axis that we know as American English. However, for the EFL learner, not yet rehearsed in the finer nuances of the language, the danger lies not in their choice of either of the two varieties, but in the possibility of using what they know of either or both varieties at the same time. Thus, in academic writing, especially at the higher education level, a learner spelling colour as 'colour' and 'color' in the same breath will only draw the reader's attention to their confusion with the two English varieties and not the real content of the paper. This is precisely what the EFL teaching community in Saudi Arabia have to educate the EFL learners in. When we compare British and American English, we see that differences with respect to spelling, vocabulary and grammar are really minor as compared to the remarkable divergence in pronunciation. Many outdated and long abandoned features of BE (British English) are still retained by AE (American English). Thus, AE preserves the 'r' in general and the letter 'a' in 'fast' is distinctly flat. Both of these were abandoned in King's English by the end of the eighteenth century. Statement of the Problem English learners in Saudi Arabia are victims of a peculiar problem. A big number of them are unaware of the differences between British and American English, even after doing three years of English studies in college. There is an actual concern among them about whether to adopt the British or American variety. Some tend to use both the varieties simultaneously, creating a poor piece of writing whenever they attempt one. Different pronunciation for the same word in the two varieties is a veritable problem with their speaking skills. This is a descriptive study that chronicles the specific problem areas arising out of confusion about the language variety for Saudi EFL learners. This study also aims to suggest measures to help learners overcome this handicap.

## 2. Literature Overview

In the MacMillan Dictionary, British English is defined as “the form of spoken and written English that is considered acceptable by most people”. As the case of other languages, other languages, such as, German, French and also the Scandinavian languages deeply influenced (British) English. However, it can be observed that the varieties of English have derived from British English. Eventually, It spread to all corners of the world, outside Britain, and became a cosmopolitan, secular and world language that it today owing to the British colonization that once covered three fourths of the world. British English is in fact a term used to make a distinction between the forms of written English used in the United Kingdom from other spoken forms of English. (Wikipedia contributors A, 2005). However, it has come to represent the English spoken in the U.K., in spite of the fact that there are several dialects spoken therein. English is also spoken with different pronunciation not only in the Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also within England itself. Moreover, many inhabitants of these places, continue to speak English as in their native land even when they emigrate to England.

It has been proved that accent, pronunciation and import of various words of English vocabulary are affected by the mother tongue/first language, and it is this reason that there are variations in the ways English is spoken and written. Moving to the American scene, we know that American English, at first, was brought to America by colonists from England in the 17th century as British English and its other varieties from other European countries. Now, it is generally defined as being the chief accent of any American English that is somewhat free of outstanding regional influences (Wikipedia contributors B, 2005). Melchers (1998, p.263) says that a distinct variety of English is in use in a few Mid- Atlantic countries. It is called Mid-Atlantic English. This variety of English is a mix of American and British English. So, Melchers asserts that Mid- Atlantic English refers to “something which has both British and American (1998,p.263) characteristics, or is designed to appeal to both the British and the Americans”. Although American English has evolved and developed through the years to acquire the coveted status of a world language yet it is still not given that celebrated status which British English possesses. If we consider the views of Modiano (1996, p-135), there is a fit case in favour of Mid-Atlantic English to be in a strong position, rather being the strongest candidate, to be world language for the reason that it provides more clarity and ease of communication which are required in a cross-cultural setting which is a reality in the currently emerging scenario.

### ***Major differences between British English and American English***

We know from various studies made in the past that the most striking and apparent differences between British English and American English can be observed/noticed in vocabulary as well as pronunciation, and these are very important. One cannot converse nor can he/she write if vocabulary is not there. Similarly, for speaking a language, vocabulary apart, one has to have a proper pronunciation.

If we look at the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ - i.e. the /r/ sound after a vowel in words like store, car and father - there is an additional obvious difference between British English and American English. It is noticed that people who speak British English do not pronounce the /r/ sound while the people speaking American English do pronounce it as any other. Some words are pronounced differently in British English and American English like Methane, Interpol; spellings are the same in both kinds of English. In addition to this, there are also words that differ in terms of stress. For instance, in words like address, magazine and cigarette, people who speak British English stress the last syllable, while people speaking American English stress the first syllable. Some words used with same spellings mean differently in American and British English; for example, ace, amber, gay. Time telling is different in Britain and America. To denote 10:15, the British would say quarter past ten while it is common in America to say quarter after or a quarter after ten. So also the style for writing the date.

### ***Attitudes towards British and American English***

The happy result for the users of American English was that American English began to be regarded as a distinct variety of English. However, the Americans were often accused of corrupting the English language by introducing new and unfamiliar words. But a strange fact surfaced that the Americans continued to use terms that had become obsolete in England. Perceiving the injustice in the uncalled for criticism of the users of American English, the Americans began to defend their use of English and also demanded parity for their speech with British English (Baugh, 2002, p-390). Odenstedt (2000,p-136) says that British English is considered to be the more prestigious variety while American English is regarded as vulgar by many people. Odenstedt (2000, p-137) adds that despite this value judgment American English is regarded as "slower, clearer and easier to follow, while the 'slurred' quality of British speech makes it more difficult to understand". Tottie (2002,p-1) says that until recently, "American English was considered less educated, less cultured and less beautiful than British English" but (Tottie, 2002,p- 245) says that "with its status in media, international business, computing and science, American English has gained a status as the world language". Cultures are absorbed in a language and that element cannot be eliminated. American English is the need of the modern times, and it suits the IT industry and serves best the interests of the mercantile community. It is noticed that there is further outcome of American English which is encouraging for American English;

most teachers, having been brought up with British English usage, will now try with added enthusiasm to pass this variety on to their pupils without any embarrassment or shyness. American English has come to stay as easy, clear, popular and convenient language.

### **3. Methodology**

The sample of the study comprised 20 bright/above average students of English at the College of Science and Arts, Methnab, Qassim University. Two tests were administered to the group: one, each subject was asked to read aloud a twenty word English list and the responses were recorded electronically. Two, they were asked to choose the correct spelling out of the two options given to them in a list of twenty words. These responses too were statistically analysed later. The aim was to arrive at a generalization as far as the preferred pronunciation and spelling is concerned.

### **4. Results and Conclusion**

Of the twenty words asked of them to be read, thirteen ie. 65% demonstrated American features of pronunciation. The remaining seven words ie. 35% were read aloud in the British way. This was the uniform response of sixteen subjects whereas the remaining four subjects read all of the twenty words with a pronounced American accent. Here is the analysis of the twelve words read with American pronunciation. 1. Path 2. Grass 3. Dance 4. Half Words 1-4 pronounced with a flat 'a'. 5. Hot 6. Got 7. Shot 8. Lot Words 5-8 do away with the rounded 'o' and are pronounced with an 'a' sound as in 'father' but shorter than the latter. 9. Necessary 10. Trajectory 11. Repertory 12. Secretary Words 9-12 were pronounced stressing all the syllables as opposed to the British way of pronouncing only the first syllable and shortening the following one. 13. Been The long /i:/ is replaced by the very short sound so that the word sounds like 'bin'. The remaining seven words were as follows: 14. Father 15. Water 16. Beneath 17. Early 18. America 19. Uniform 20. Living In the spelling selection test, fourteen out of the twenty subjects opted for the simpler, 'American' version of the spelling where redundant vowels or repeated letters are commonly found (such words were nine out of a total of twenty). These are as follows: 1. Color 2. Honor 3. Demeanor 4. Traveler 5. Center 6. Theater 7. Fiber 8. Padiatrics 9. Characterize Thus, the customary mid-word 'u' is dropped, double letters are replaced by the single letter, diphthongs give way to the single vowel sound, and the 'z' replaced the 's' spelling the word phonetically. The remaining words were: 10. Basic 11. Second 12. Population 13. Typical 14. Porter 15. Station 16. Change 17. Element 18. General 19. Culture 20. Independent

When interviewed, and asked the reason(s) for their individual choice of the 'British' or 'American' spelling or pronunciation, the observed researcher observed their inability to distinguish between the two. As for pronunciation, students very clearly prefer the American to the British pronunciation due to the influence of movies they watch regularly and the e- programs accessible to them. Similarly, they were not aware that in British English words may be spelled differently. This shows that their knowledge of the differences is not sound. This, in turn, necessitates more care on the part of teachers who should at least teach the students the differences and keep the choice open to them. It is also necessary to create whole atmosphere for teaching/learning British or American English, as required. This needs trained, proficient and committed teachers. At the initial stage, non-Arabic speaking teachers may be hired as they will not use any other language than English while teaching, and even outside the classes. This will motivate the students to learn accent, pronunciation, meaning in context, apart from building in them the much needed confidence, so necessary for promoting communication ability.

## 5. Recommendations

The researcher makes the following recommendations: The teachers teaching English must be able to make clear distinction between British English and American English, develop positive attitude to teach EFL with enthusiasm and full interest. They must motivate the students by presenting the emerging global scenario with communication at the core of human relations in all forms for participating in the world society. They should be properly trained and re- trained periodically to be updated with the latest trends in teaching English. English may be introduced from the Montessori stage. A child will acquire the second language fast and easily as he feels need like in case of first language.

As of now, teaching of English language in Saudi Arabia begins from only the fourth grade while in advanced countries, it is taught right from the pupil's entry into play- way/Montessori stage. Talking about Saudi Arabia, it should be taught from the first grade since, as per many research studies, especially the Critical Age Hypothesis,

It is clear that the child acquires a second language acquisition easily and naturally if exposed and trained in it early on along with learning of the first language. A child acquires language as a natural instinct to learn. English language time should be the most enjoyable and awaited for the early learners as compared to the other subjects.

As children are curious to know more and more, relevant or irrelevant, at this age, the teachers ought to be patient, friendly and not unnecessarily authoritative. In such an environment, children will open up and ask questions making learning a better and more meaningful experience. Curricular spectrum has to be calibrated carefully to meet the requirements of teaching British English or American English drawing out clearly the differences between the two as regards vocabulary, grammar, sentence-structure, tenses, use of prepositions, connectors, active/passive voice, etc. There has to be accent on quality and not much concern for quantity. English with a clear distinction between the British and American varieties may be taught like an art with its craft (or skill) part in right proportion. Teachers must act natural to bring to bear emotional self of the learners to learning with positive attitude. Teaching English with a clear distinction between British English and American English requires more attention and focus than other subjects require for the simple reason that British or American English has to be taught with social and cultural ethos and thus more hours/sessions must be arranged for classroom work. Though the study enabled the researcher to arrive at some very pertinent generalisations, yet, further research with a larger number of subjects may be the need of the hour to suggest wider pedagogical and policy changes.

## References

- Baugh, A. C. 2002. *History of the English Language*. Fifth Edition. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge.
- Melchers, G. 1998. Fair Ladies, Dancing Queens: A Study of Mid-Atlantic Accents. In Lindquist, Hans, Klintborg, Staffan, Levin, Magnus & Estling, Maria (eds.). *The Major Varieties of English: Papers from MAVEN 97, Vaxjo 20-22 November 1997*. Vaxjo University: ActaWexionensia, 263-271.
- Modiano, M. 1996. *A Mid-Atlantic Handbook: American and British English*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Odenstedt, B. 2000. *The History of English*. Lund. Studentlitteratur.
- Tottie, G. 2002. *An Introduction to American English*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. Wikipedia contributors A. 2005. *British English*.
- Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 10:14, December 12, 2014 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=British\\_English&oldid=34478902](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=British_English&oldid=34478902).
- Wikipedia contributors B. 2005. *European colonization of the Americas*. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 09:41, December 12, 2014 [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=European\\_colonization\\_of\\_the\\_Americas&oldid=34460850](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=European_colonization_of_the_Americas&oldid=34460850).