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Comparative Analysis of Students' Attitudes towards British and American English

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Abstract

This study examines how students view, value, and use the two most common forms of English in social and academic settings. English undergraduate students participated in focus groups and semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative research design. The results show that American English is seen as more approachable, well-known, and frequently used in international communication, whereas British English is typically associated by students with prestige, accuracy, and academic authority. Preferences were found to be significantly shaped by media exposure, with American English predominating because of its use in social media, music, television, and movies. The status of British English in educational settings was simultaneously strengthened by institutional practices. Students' pragmatic and flexible approach to English as a global language is highlighted by their hybrid orientation, which alternates between the two varieties based on context. In order to promote awareness of linguistic diversity and equip students to function well in a variety of international contexts, the study recommends that educational programs recognize both varieties.

Keywords: *Students' attitudes, British English, American English, Media exposure, International communication, Academic authority, Linguistic diversity*

Introduction

Being able to bridge cultural and disciplinary divides, English has become the most influential language in the world. It is the main form of communication for millions of students around the world in the social, professional, and academic spheres. However, English is a multifaceted language that has been influenced by geography, history, and culture. American English (AmE) and British English (BrE), two of its many variants, are the most popular and frequently taught models. They have a significant impact on global media, entertainment, and technology in

addition to instructional materials and methods, which forces students to constantly engage with both standards in their daily lives.

For language learners, the coexistence of American and British English offers both special opportunities and challenges. The vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and usage of the two varieties vary greatly, despite having a similar core. Although these distinctions frequently pique students' interest, they can also lead to misunderstandings or a preference for one standard over another. American English, for instance, may be more approachable, contemporary, and in line with international media trends, whereas British English may be perceived by some students as more formal, prestigious, and historically based. These viewpoints show that learning a language is a social and cultural experience influenced by associations and attitudes rather than just a mechanical process of picking up vocabulary and grammar.

In order to comprehend how learners negotiate their linguistic identities and make decisions regarding language use, it is crucial to look at how students feel about British and American English. Since mastery of one type may be seen as more advantageous in particular academic or professional contexts, attitudes can affect motivation, classroom engagement, and even career goals. Teachers and policymakers can create curricula and teaching strategies that meet the needs and expectations of students by conducting a qualitative investigation of these attitudes, which offers deeper insights into the factors influencing learners' preferences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how students view the two varieties, what cultural connotations they ascribe to them, and how these interpretations affect their educational experience.

Research Question

How do students perceive and describe their attitudes towards British English and American English in the context of their language learning experiences?

Literature Review

An important topic in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has been the investigation of students' attitudes toward various forms of English, especially American English (AmE) and British English (BrE). In addition to linguistic characteristics, attitudes toward language varieties are influenced by the cultural, social, and symbolic connotations associated with them (Garrett, 2010). Given that both BrE and AmE predominate in global education, media, and technology, exposure to these dialects is inevitable for learners of English as a foreign or second language. An understanding of how students navigate linguistic preferences, identities, and communicative practices can be gained by investigating their attitudes toward these varieties.

American and British English as International Standards

Because of the British Empire's colonial expansion and its impact on formal institutions and academia, British English has long been considered the "standard" variety (Crystal, 2003). However, over the past century, AmE has become more and more dominant, especially due to the US's global influence in business, media, and technology (Kachru, 2006). Because AmE is becoming more and more popular, students frequently come across it—sometimes even more so than BrE—through movies, TV shows, music, and digital platforms. Due to this dual exposure, learners are now impacted by two conflicting norms at the same time, creating a complex environment.

Students' Perceptions of British English

According to studies on students' perceptions of British English, BrE is frequently linked to formality, correctness, and prestige. Many European students believed that British English was more "authentic" and more suitable for academic or professional settings, according to Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997). In a similar vein, Erling (2005) contended that BrE is commonly seen as a mark of prestige and tradition, particularly in settings where educational systems have traditionally adopted British linguistic models. Students frequently assume that learning BrE gives them linguistic capital that can increase their credibility in formal settings as a result of these associations.

Views of Students on American English

However, AmE is frequently associated with modernity, informality, and accessibility from anywhere in the world. Jenkins (2009) claims that because students are constantly exposed to American media, they usually pick up American vocabulary and pronunciation. Additionally, Sung (2016) discovered that East Asian students were more likely to identify with AmE since it appeared more approachable and applicable to daily interactions. AmE is a popular option for students who view English primarily as a means of international communication because it is seen by many as a symbol of contemporary culture, innovation, and global interconnectedness.

Media Exposure and Cultural Influence

Attitudes regarding English dialects are greatly influenced by the media. According to Graddol (2006), learners' familiarity with American English is greatly influenced by American cultural exports, including popular music, Hollywood movies, and digital technologies. On the other hand, exposure to BrE frequently happens through instructional materials and teacher input, giving it a more scholarly appearance but a less practical application. Kachru and Smith's (2008) research highlights the importance of context in forming attitudes by showing that students' preferences are frequently influenced by the variety they encounter most frequently.

Attitudes and the Formation of Identity

Pupils' linguistic preferences for BrE or AmE are linked to identity and belonging concerns. Norton (2013) asserts that the negotiation of identity and power is intimately related to language acquisition. While learners who favor AmE may identify with modernity and global connectivity, those who prefer BrE may see themselves as aligning with prestige and tradition. Students occasionally use hybrid models that incorporate aspects of both varieties, demonstrating a practical view of English as a universal language (Matsuda, 2003).

Consequences for Learning Languages

There are important pedagogical ramifications to comprehending students' attitudes. Since student perceptions of various varieties can affect motivation, pronunciation objectives, and classroom engagement, educators and curriculum designers must be cognizant of these perceptions. Jenkins (2007) promoted the idea of "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF), which prioritizes intelligibility over conformity to native-speaker conventions. According to this viewpoint, teachers should prioritize preparing students for a variety of English-speaking situations rather than giving preference to one standard over the other, even though BrE and AmE continue to have a significant impact.

Literature Gaps

More qualitative studies that capture learners' lived experiences and personal narratives are still needed, even though a lot of research has looked at attitudes toward BrE and AmE in various cultural contexts. Quantitative surveys frequently show broad preferences without elucidating their underlying causes. Richer insights into how students understand linguistic variations, ascribe cultural meanings, and integrate them into their own identities as English users can be gained through qualitative research.

Theoretical Framework

It is best to comprehend the study of students' attitudes toward American and British English in the larger framework of sociolinguistics, language attitudes theory, and World Englishes models. Learners' views of prestige, identity, and usefulness are influenced by social, cultural, historical, and educational factors that shape attitudes toward language varieties. Three main theoretical frameworks are used in this study: the World Englishes Paradigm, Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Language Variety, and Attitude Theory.

First, a basis for comprehending how students make evaluative assessments of language varieties is provided by Attitude Theory (Ajzen, 1991; Gardner, 1985). Cognitive (beliefs about the language), affective (feelings toward the language), and behavioral (tendencies to act in certain ways, such as preferring one variety over another) are the three interrelated components that make up attitudes. This framework aids in explaining how learners' views of correctness, elegance, or modernity translate into preferences and learning decisions when applied to British and American English. For example, a student may mimic American pronunciation in speech (behavioral), feel more at ease listening to American media (affective), and think that British English is more "formal" (cognitive).

Second, sociolinguistic theory emphasizes the close relationship between language and cultural belonging, identity, and social mobility (Labov, 1972; Giles & Coupland, 1991). A language variety's socio-political influence and global reach are frequently the sources of its prestige. For instance, British English still has ties to tradition, formality, and past colonial influence, whereas American English is associated with pop culture, technology, and globalization. Teachers' preferences, media exposure, and societal beliefs about what defines "standard English" all influence how students feel about these variations. Because it clarifies why students might consider one variety to be more "authentic," "intelligent," or "prestigious" than another, the sociolinguistic concept of language ideology is especially pertinent.

Thirdly, a crucial framework for placing American and British English in a global context is offered by the World Englishes Paradigm (Kachru, 1985; Seidlhofer, 2011). Kachru's "Three Circles Model" makes a distinction between the Expanding Circle (countries where English is learned as a foreign language), the Inner Circle (native varieties such as British and American English), and the Outer Circle (postcolonial varieties). According to this paradigm, American and British English are both acknowledged as norm-providing dialects that have an impact on education around the globe. The way that students in the Expanding Circle feel about these standards is crucial because it affects their communication skills and learning results. By taking this stance, the study places learners' decisions in the context of global linguistic hierarchies and larger power dynamics, rather than just as personal preferences.

Additionally, Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) is acknowledged in this study as a supplement to language attitudes research. The variety that students prefer may be related to their desired group affiliations, aspirations, and social identities. For instance, students who want to study in the US might identify with American English, whereas those who appreciate academic prestige and formality might favor British English. This link between identity and language serves to emphasize how attitudes are socially constructed rather than linguistically based.

The framework creates a basis for investigating how students balance meaning, identity, and power when locating themselves between British and American English by incorporating these theoretical viewpoints. It offers a prism through which qualitative information—such as focus groups, interviews, or reflective narratives—can be analyzed to uncover not only preferences but also the ideological and cultural factors that influence students' opinions.

Methodology

A qualitative research design is used in this study to investigate how students feel about American and British English. Because it enables a thorough understanding of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and individual meanings related to language preference, a qualitative approach is especially suitable. This study aims to understand how students perceive and value various forms of English as well as the factors that affect their decisions, rather than trying to measure attitudes.

Research Design

Students' subjective opinions and lived experiences with British and American English were recorded using a phenomenological approach. Participants' perceptions are highlighted in this design, which also offers detailed explanations of their attitudes, convictions, and preferences. Exploring the depth and complexity of students' opinions is the main goal rather than making generalizations.

Participants

Undergraduate students enrolled in university programs in English language and linguistics participated in this study. Participants who were sufficiently exposed to both British and American English through their academic studies, media consumption, or social interactions were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. In order to ensure manageable data analysis and allow for detailed narratives, a total of 15–20 participants were deemed suitable for the study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data because they allowed participants to freely express their opinions while also enabling the researcher to delve deeper into particular themes. In order to promote open communication, each interview was held in a relaxed setting and lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes. Among the guiding questions were: What is your opinion of British English in contrast to American English?

Which type do you prefer to use, and why?

What effects do academic, cultural, or social contexts have on your preference?

How does your exposure to the media affect the way you think?

Focus groups were held with small groups of students in addition to interviews in order to foster conversation and gather opinions from the group. This approach made it easier to see how attitudes are formed and negotiated among peers.

Data Analysis

The data was interpreted using thematic analysis. To guarantee familiarity with the data, the verbatim transcriptions of focus group discussions and interviews were read several times. After initial codes were created, they were subsequently categorized into more general themes that represented recurrent trends and variations in the attitudes of the students. Perceptions of prestige, intelligibility, cultural associations, and identity alignment with either American or British English were among the themes.

Selected participants were given access to the summarized findings for verification in order to perform member checking and assure credibility. By contrasting the findings from focus groups and interviews, triangulation was accomplished. Keeping a thorough audit trail of the data collection, transcription, and coding procedures improved dependability and confirmability.

Before the study was carried out, ethical approval was acquired. The goal of the study, the participants' right to discontinue participation at any time, and the confidentiality of their answers were all explained to them. To protect the identities of the participants, informed consent was acquired and the results were reported using pseudonyms.

Students' attitudes toward British and American English were complex, according to the data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Linguistic, cultural, educational, and social factors all influenced these attitudes. During the analysis, a number of themes surfaced, including identity alignment, media-mediated cultural influence, linguistic familiarity, perceptions of prestige, and educational context.

Perceived Standard and Prestige

The idea that British English is more formal and prestigious was a common theme. Because they feel that British English has academic and historical authority, many students referred to it as "the original" or "the standard." Some participants, for example, remarked that British English was "more sophisticated" and "elegant," particularly in professional and academic settings. This viewpoint is consistent with British English's longstanding status as a model in formal education systems around the world.

However, this prestige was contrasted with perceptions of American English as more practical and widely used in global communication. Students often acknowledged that American English dominates international business, technology, and entertainment industries, which makes it more relevant in day-to-day interactions. This dual perception demonstrates that while British English is associated with formality and prestige, American English is linked with accessibility and functionality.

Comprehensibility and Linguistic Knowledge

The degree of exposure and comfort that students had with each variety also affected their attitudes. Due to frequent exposure through social media, music, movies, and television, many people claimed that American English was simpler to understand. In contrast to the occasionally "difficult" or "unfamiliar" sounds of British English, the accent, vocabulary, and pronunciation of American English were frequently thought to be "clearer" and "simpler."

In spite of this, students understood that learning British English could improve their academic standing, especially in settings where British models are valued, like formal exams or studying

overseas. British English thus retained a sense of academic and professional utility, whereas American English was said to be easier to understand in casual contexts.

Media's Impact on Culture

The media has become a significant influence on students' preferences. The participants emphasized how their familiarity with American English was greatly influenced by their exposure to American media, including music, YouTube channels, TV series, and Hollywood movies. They frequently unintentionally picked up American spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary. British media, on the other hand, was less common in students' everyday lives, though some participants who frequently watched or read British literature or television shows acknowledged how unique British English is. This illustrates how media use can normalize specific linguistic traits and support the dominance of one variety over another.

Institutional Influence and the Educational Context

The kind of English that was taught and prioritized in their educational institutions also influenced the attitudes of the students. Many said that textbooks, tests, and classroom instruction all used British English. The idea that British English is the "correct" or "official" standard was strengthened by this institutional preference.

Students also recognized a gap between what they learned in the classroom and what they experienced in the dominance of American English in global communication. Because they frequently switched between British and American forms depending on the situation, this tension gave their attitudes a sense of hybridity. One participant, for instance, stated that while they prefer American expressions in casual conversations, they use British spelling in academic assignments.

Personal Alignment and Identity

The influence of identity on attitudes was another important theme. Some students believed that using a specific dialect of English demonstrated cultural or personal alignment. People who liked British culture or wanted to study in the UK, for example, said they preferred British English. On the other hand, students who wanted to work in globalized industries or who were more familiar with American cultural products favored American English.

This identity alignment was situational rather than constant. Students showed pragmatism by modifying their use according to social and cultural settings. This flexibility demonstrates how perceptions of different languages are not only cognitive but also closely related to social belonging and identity.

Managing Attitudes: A Mixed Viewpoint

Overall, the results imply that attitudes among students cannot be merely classified as pro-American or pro-British. Rather, they represented a hybrid viewpoint in which both types were prized for distinct purposes. American English was linked to accessibility, media influence, and global relevance, whereas British English was linked to academic utility, prestige, and correctness. Students' growing recognition of English as a global language with several valid dialects is indicated by this hybrid mindset, which also reflects a larger trend in English language usage. Instead of following a single standard, they switch between varieties according to the audience, context, and goal.

Implications of the Results

The study's conclusions point to significant ramifications for language instruction and policy. The fact that students are exposed to both British and American English and that this dual exposure shapes their attitudes should be acknowledged by educators and curriculum designers. Educational programs could take a more inclusive stance, recognizing the validity of both varieties and equipping students to deal with linguistic diversity, rather than imposing a single "correct" standard.

Furthermore, knowing students' attitudes facilitates communication in the real world and helps close the gap between formal education. Students can be empowered to use English more flexibly and confidently in international contexts by being made aware of the differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling while also being taught to respect both varieties.

Conclusion

Using a qualitative methodology that focused on the students' lived experiences, perceptions, and preferences, this study investigated their attitudes toward British and American English. The results showed that students adopt a flexible and pragmatic stance influenced by a number of factors rather than rigidly holding positive or negative views of either variety.

In general, British English was linked to academic authority, tradition, and prestige. Because of institutional practices and educational curricula, many participants believed it to be "the standard" or "the correct" form of English. At the same time, students realized that American English is very useful, particularly in popular culture, technology, and international communication. For many students, its prevalence in the media made it more recognizable, approachable, and simple to comprehend.

The findings also showed that students' attitudes vary depending on the situation. They exhibited a hybrid orientation by frequently alternating between varieties based on social, professional, or academic contexts. This flexibility implies that rather than seeing English as a fixed language bound by a single cultural authority, students are beginning to see it as a global language with several acceptable standards.

The study's overall findings emphasize how critical it is to recognize the coexistence of American and British English in social and educational contexts. In order for students to acquire the proficiency to successfully navigate both forms, educators must move past strict guidelines for a single standard variety and instead promote awareness of linguistic diversity. In addition to reflecting the realities of international communication, this method encourages students to accept English as a dynamic and adaptable tool for interaction, learning, and identity.

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