

*Research Article*

# University Students' Preferences and Recognition: British English Vs. American English

\*<sup>1</sup>Marisa Yoestara, <sup>2</sup>Juwita Wahyuni

\*<sup>1</sup>University of Serambi Mekkah, Indonesia, [marisayoestara@serambimekkah.ac.id](mailto:marisayoestara@serambimekkah.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> University of Serambi Mekkah, Indonesia, [juwitawahyuni13@gmail.com](mailto:juwitawahyuni13@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

British English (BrE) or American English (AmE) are two common English varieties known and used in Indonesia in almost all level of formal education, including in university. This study was intended to find out two folds, which are; (1) the varieties of English the university students prefer to use in spelling and pronunciation; and (2) their ability to recognize the differences between these varieties in vocabulary. The design of this study was a descriptive design which involved 30 students of the English Department at the University of Serambi Mekkah from various semesters but with an average level of English capability. Questionnaire and oral test were used as the instruments to find out the students' preferences of English varieties in spelling and pronunciation; while, written test is used to find out the students' ability to recognize the difference of vocabulary within the two varieties. The result of the questionnaire and oral test was analysed by using percentage formula to find out which variation was more dominant in both spelling and pronunciation. Meanwhile, the written test result was checked for its true and false answer in order to decide how far the students could recognize the difference of vocabulary between BrE and AmE. The result showed that more than half of the students preferred to use American English variety in terms of spelling and pronunciation, 55.3% and 60.1% respectively. The results of this study also revealed that 65.2% of the university students had the ability to recognize the differences between BrE and AmE in terms of vocabulary.

## Keywords

British English (BrE); American English (AmE); spelling; pronunciation; vocabulary

## Introduction

In this era, it is undeniable that English has been recognized as a powerful language and has a special place in society. This language is not only used for communication globally, but also for business, tourism and even has become a language for science (Björkman, 2013). Therefore, having a capability in English is a great asset since it allows people with this capability to easily travel around the world, communicate with speakers from all over the world, and even easily get a job. The fact that speakers of English spread widely all over the world makes this language has many variants in its usage. Bolton



(2006) has conceptualized the spread of English in three circles: the inner circle (norm-providing) varieties, the outer circle (norm-developing) varieties, and the expanding circle (norm-dependent) varieties. Among all of those varieties, the most common and influential varieties to be used, particularly in Indonesia are British English (BrE) and American English (AmE); which are called the norm-providing varieties and considered as the inner circle varieties. These two varieties have a special status since these varieties are mostly spoken by native speakers and are generally taught to foreign learners. Kerrigan (2008) explains that the term British English (BrE) refers to the variety of the English language spoken and written in Great Britain or England. This variety was also known as UK English. Meanwhile, American English (AmE) refers to English variety that are widely spoken and written in the U.S (Schneider, 2007), and is also familiar with the term of US English. There are some differences between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE), which include the differences in pronunciation, including intonation and stress (Algeo, 2006); grammar (Tottie, 2002); vocabulary (Lindell, 2014), and spelling (Gelderen (2006).

Several previous studies have reported the different preference for English varieties used, especially in expanding circle country. For example, Barber et al. (2009) reported the English variety used and taught at school in the expanding circle countries are either British English or American English, depended on the school policy. Another study by Alftberg (2009) showed that secondary students in Swedish generally prefer American English to British English in vocabulary and pronunciation even though they mixed both of variety in its application. In terms of the students' awareness in differentiating between both of the varieties, Lindell (2014) concluded that the students were able to differentiate between British and American English but were not consistent in using the varieties because all of them are accustomed to mixing both varieties.

However, such study has never been conducted in Aceh, Indonesia. A study that particularly analyze the students' preference and recognition of English varieties was needed in order to extend teachers, lecturers, and instructors' understanding on what variation to teach and how to better introduce the variation they choose to teach. Therefore, the researcher is interested to conduct a study to find out the students' preferences of spelling and pronunciation of the English varieties in English Department of University of Serambi Mekkah, and whether or not they have the ability to recognize the vocabulary differences between the two varieties. The findings from this study could be useful as the basic for the teachers/lecturers/instructors to check out their students' preference and recognition so that they could adjust and make the process of teaching and learning English more fun.

## Method

The research design used in this study was descriptive research design. According to Creswell (2014), descriptive study aims to investigate and describe a social phenomenon, which in this study is the university students' preferences of English varieties in spelling and pronunciation, and their ability to recognize the difference between the varieties in vocabulary.



The research participants of this study were 30 students who were studying in the English Department at University of Serambi Mekkah. They were from various semester (Semester 1-6), but all of them have average level of English capabilities. For fairness reasons, five students were taken from each semester.

There were three different instruments used in this study. They were questionnaire, oral test, and written test. To find out the students' preferences in spelling, the researcher asked the students to fill out the questionnaire which consisted of 20 items. In this questionnaire, the students were required to tick the word they preferred or tended to use daily in their spelling. Meanwhile, to find out their preferences in pronunciation, the researcher asked the students to do an oral test, pronouncing 40 words. Finally, to find out the students' ability in recognizing the vocabulary differences between the varieties, the researcher used written test (translation test) which consisted of 18 items. In this test, they only needed to give a tick to which translation they considered British variation and which translation they considered American one.

The data gained from the questionnaire and oral test were calculated for the percentage in order to find out which variation was more dominant in both spelling and pronunciation. Meanwhile the data gained from the written test was checked for its true and false in order to decide how far could the students differentiate between the vocabulary of British English (BrE) variation and American English (AmE) variation.

## Results

### The Students' Preference of English Varieties in Spelling

The students' preferences of English varieties, particularly whether the students prefer the spelling of British English (BrE) or American English (AmE) are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Student's spelling preferences in writing

BrE spelling	Number	AmE spelling	Number
Centre	23 (76.7%)	Center	7 (23.3%)
Colour	17 (56.7%)	Color	13 (43.3%)
Analyse	7 (23.3%)	Analyze	23 (76.7%)
Licence	13 (43.3%)	License	17 (56.7%)
Dialogue	16 (53.3%)	Dialog	14 (46.7%)
Defence	18 (60 %)	Defense	12 (40%)
Neighbour	27 (90 %)	Neighbor	3 (10%)
Organise	5 (16.7%)	Organize	25 (83.3%)
Behaviour	13 (43.3%)	Behavior	17 (56.7%)
Catalogue	17 (56.7%)	Catalog	13 (43.3%)
Oestrogen	4 (13.3 %)	Estrogen	26 (86.7%)
Paediatric	7 (23.3 %)	Pediatric	23 (76.7%)
Metre	5 (16.7 %)	Meter	25 (83.3%)
Travelled	17 (56.7 %)	Travel	13 (43.3%)
Fuelled	17 (56.7 %)	Fueled	13 (43.3%)
Cheque	3 (10 %)	Check	27 (90%)
Tyre	6 (20 %)	Tire	24 (80%)
Offence	19 (63.3%)	Offense	11 (36.7%)
Humour	11 (36.7%)	Humor	19 (63.3%)
Travelling	23 (76.7%)	Traveling	7 (23.3 %)
Total in Percentage	44.7%		55.3%

It is obvious that overall the English department students in the University of Serambi Mekkah preferred American English (AmE) compared to British English (BrE), 55.3 and 44.7% respectively. American English is more preferred compared to British variety for spelling. The overtly express preference for American variety spelling was shown in the word *check* which obtained score 90% (27 people), followed by the words *estrogen*, *meter*, and *organize* which share the same score, up to more than 80%. The next most chosen spelling of American English were *tire* and *analyze* which were around 75 to 80%. However, there were also some words that the students more prefer to spell in BrE, for example the word *neighbour* (90%) as well as the words *centre* and *travelling* (76%).

## The Students' Preference of English Varieties in Pronunciation

The following table illustrates the university students' preferences of English varieties in pronunciation.

Table 2. Students' preferences in pronunciation on a daily basis

Sound	BrE	AmE	Sound	BrE	AmE
<b>1. a &gt; æ sound</b>			<b>3. iə : iː</b>		
Dance	0 (0%)	30 (100%)	Here	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Draft	28(93.3%)	2 (6.7%)	Near	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Can't	7 (23.3%)	23(76.7%)	Clear	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Ask	28(93.3%)	2 (6.7%)	Fear	1(3.33%)	29 (96.7%)
The grass	2 (6.7%)	28(93.3%)	Cheer	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
<b>2. t &gt; d sound</b>			<b>4. ɛə : ɛː</b>		
Better	24 (80%)	6 (20%)	Bear	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Water	28 (93.3%)	2 (6.7%)	Wear	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
City	30 (100%)	0 (0%)	Care	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Native	30 (100%)	0 (0%)	Dare	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
	BrE	AmE		BrE	AmE
Bottom	30 (100%)	0 (0%)	Repair	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
<b>5. /r/ voicing</b>			<b>7.uə: uː</b>		
Door	0 (0%)	30 (100%)	Poor	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
More	1(3.3%)	29 (96.7%)	Sure	1(3.3%)	29 (96.7%)
Short	0 (0%)	30 (100%)	Tour	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
Star	0 (0%)	30 (100%)	Pure	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
The floor	0 (0%)	30 (100%)	Cure	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
<b>6. ɔ &gt; ʌ sound</b>			<b>8.nt &gt;n sound</b>		
Bottle	6 (20%)	24 (80%)	Twenty	26(86.7%)	4 (13.3%)
Economy	9 (30%)	21 (70%)	Winter	30(100%)	0 (0%)
Shock	29(96.7%)	1 (3.3%)	Centre	30(100%)	0 (0%)
Stop	29(96.7%)	1 (3.3%)	Counter	30(100%)	0 (0%)
Operate	29(96.7%)	1 (3.3%)	Plant	0 (0%)	30 (100%)
<b>BrE</b>	<b>39.9%</b>		<b>AmE</b>	<b>60.1%</b>	

The result of the pronunciation preference in the English varieties (BrE or AmE) showed a consistent result with the spelling preferences' result, in which the university students preferred the American English (AmE) over British English (BrE), around 60.1% and 39.9% respectively. The highest preferences towards American English pronunciation can be seen in category *a > æ sound* with the word *dance*, where 100% of the total students pronounced this word in American English variety followed by the word *grass* which obtained above 90 % of the total score. Interestingly, there were some words that the students preferred to pronounce in British English style, it shows in the table that the British English pronunciation of *draft* and *ask* scored more than 90 % of the total vote.



## The Students' Ability to Recognize Differences of Vocabulary within English Varieties

Table 3 depicts the result of the students' ability to differentiate the vocabulary between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE).

Table 3. Students' ability in recognizing the vocabulary differences between BrE and AmE

BrE	AmE	True	False
Flat	Apartment	22 (73.3%)	8 (26.7%)
Lift	Elevator	20 (66.7%)	10 (33.3%)
Pavement	Sidewalk	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Petrol	Gasoline	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Holiday	Vacation	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Rubber	Eraser	22 (73.3%)	8 (26.7%)
Shop	Store	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Autumn	Fall	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Film	Movie	18 (60%)	12 (40%)
Sweet	Candy	19 (63.3%)	11 (36.7%)
Motorbike	Motorcycle	18 (60%)	12 (40%)
Lorry	Truck	23 (76.7%)	7 (23.3%)
Aeroplane	Airplane	22 (73.3%)	8 (26.7%)
Fullstop	Period	22 (73.3%)	8 (26.7%)
Given name	First name	21 (70%)	9 (30%)
Football	Soccer	20 (66.7%)	10 (33.3%)
Headmaster	Principal	18 (60%)	12 (40%)
Car park	Parking lot	12 (40%)	18 (60%)
Total percentage		65.2%	34.8%

Based on the figure above, it showed that the total percentage number of the correct answer was slightly above 65%. Meanwhile, the total percentage number of the incorrect answer was below 35%. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students have the ability to recognize the differences between British English and American English variety. The highest score of the total correct answer was in the word *lorry/truck* and the word *flat/apartment* which gained a total score of above 75%. 22 out of 30 students chose the correct variety which is *lorry* for British English and *truck* for American English as well as the word *flat* for British English (BrE) and *apartment* for American English (AmE). Similarly, with the words *rubber* (BrE) /*eraser* (AmE), *aeroplane* (BrE) /*airplane* (AmE), *full stop* (BrE) /*period* (AmE) which achieved the percentage result of more than 70% for total number of correct answers.

## Discussion

Related to the first focus of this study which is finding out the English varieties the university students prefer to use in both spelling and pronunciation, it was found that most of the university students preferred to use American English (AmE) variety in spelling with the number of percentages reaching 55.3%. Although given the fact that there were some words that they tended to spell in British English (BrE) variety, American English was still dominating in term of spelling. Similarly, this study also shows that the majority of the students preferred to use the American English (AmE) variety for the pronunciation with the number of percentages 60.1%. This result is consistent with the previous study by Alftberg (2009) where students in Swedish generally tend to use and prefer American English more than British English in pronunciation. However, this study has found an additional result, in which they not only preferred American English (AmE) in terms of pronunciation, but also in terms of spelling. This choice could be because of many factors that need further research to analyze.

The second focus of this study deals with whether the university students had the ability to recognize the vocabulary differences between the two varieties. The result was clearly seen from the total percentage



number of correct answers the students got (65.17%). This finding confirmed that most of the university students had the ability to recognize the differences between British English and American English in term of vocabulary. This finding was similar to what was found by Lindell (2014), in which both studies showed that students are able to differentiate between British and American English. However, further study was also needed to find out whether or not the students could differentiate the English varieties in other components, such as pronunciation, spelling, or grammar.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the students preferred to use American English variety in terms of spelling and pronunciation compared to British English variety. It was proven by the total score for spelling in the distributed questionnaire gained by the American English variety was 55.3%. Similarly, the pronunciation test score also showed that the students tend to pronounce the word in the American English variety rather than the British English variety. It could be seen by the total score which was obtained by American English pronunciation preference, which was 60.15%. Moreover, in terms of the students' ability to recognize the difference between American English and British English, it can also be concluded that the students had the ability to recognize the differences between British English and American English in terms of vocabulary. It was showed by the total correct answer gained by the students in the written test of deciding the correct translation for each word, 65.17%.

Based on the above findings it is suggested that the teachers, educational policy makers, and other relevant parties to consider American English variety to be taught in formal schools. However, if they decide to teach British English variety, more socialization of the BrE is needed in order to make the students more familiar with it and the difference between the variations.

This study result was still very limited to the students' preferences in spelling and pronunciation, and the students' ability to recognize the vocabulary differences. Further study was expected to explore other aspects in English, such as grammar. Moreover, since the sample of this study is limited to the English department students, similar research should be conducted elsewhere in Aceh with a bigger number of samples for the new findings that will either validate or contradict the results of this study; and therefore, give a more conclusive understanding to the problem.

## Author Contribution

Both authors had contributed actively in the process of preparing the study to be conducted, data collection, and writing the paper.

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