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British English vs. American English: A Study of Learners' Perceptions, Vocabulary and Spelling Practices

Ana Koceva

Abstract

This research paper investigates the differences between British and American English by examining the learners' perception on the two standard varieties, their vocabulary acquisition, and specifically the spelling practices in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It represents a comparative study that includes two groups of EFL learners: secondary school students and university students. Data were collected through a mixed-format questionnaire and an in-class task. The questionnaire primarily explored learners' perception toward British and American English, as well as their beliefs on the manner of vocabulary acquisition in general. This was followed by a task designed to elicit participants' spelling preferences and usage patterns. The analysis of spelling is focused on common orthographic variations between the two English varieties. The paper aims to reveal differences in awareness, consistency and preference for vocabulary use and spelling conventions, as well as variations in the attitudes toward the two standard varieties. The findings contribute to better understanding of how EFL learners engage with language variation and determine the role of educational context in shaping linguistic choices, offering implications for future teaching practices and teaching material design.

Keywords: EFL, spelling, British English, American English.

Introduction

Language acquisition is essentially equated with vocabulary acquisition. It is both the first phase of learning a new language and the crucial one, since it has a direct impact on the overall learner's ability to communicate effectively. Due to the high impact, the central position and the position of vocabulary as part of the teaching and the learning process of English as a Foreign language, the spelling of the words and the exposure to variation in spelling can create both opportunities and challenges for learners. Therefore, the textbook materials and teaching instructions are highly important in the presentation of new lexical items and their spelling during the EFL teaching process as part of formal education. Often, textbooks are considered as the guideline used by teachers and applied by learners, particularly for spelling conventions, since it follows one specific standard variation such as British English (BE) or American English (AE). However, more contemporary textbooks frequently include comparisons between these two variations by highlighting the key differences in specific words or the differences in the spelling of those words. Despite the relevance of the issue, research that focuses on British and American spelling conventions in North Macedonia is relatively limited. The focus is usually on proficiency and error analysis, or on the teaching strategies in relation to new vocabulary (Xhaferi, 2009; Nikolovska, 2019; Idrizi, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to analyse EFL learners' perception of vocabulary acquisition alongside the learnt spelling conventions of EFL learners in secondary and tertiary education. The primary focus of the paper is on vocabulary development with specific attention to spelling variation between British and American English. The paper seeks to raise awareness on the impact of spelling variation in EFL contexts and provide insights that will help improve future teaching practices.

Theoretical framework

The fact that English represents a global language and the most spoken foreign language around the world entails multiple variations within the language in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Moreover, the long historical development of English together with the continuous borrowing from numerous other languages has further ensured that variability is inevitable part of the English language. All of these variations are especially important for learners of English as a foreign language, because they can cause confusion, ambiguities and negatively impact the learning process. Furthermore, as shown in the study by Ay and Uzun (2017),

ambiguity is present even for English teachers, whose perceptions and attitudes toward the two standard varieties and their practical use of the English language often do not correlate.

This paper focuses on the two main national varieties: British English and American English, which are often followed in educational foreign language programs. The two varieties share common grammar rules and overlap in most of the vocabulary, but there are significant differences in pronunciation and spelling. Although British and American English do not have major differences that can cause a significant miscommunication, and “speakers are generally able to comprehend one another despite the variations (Rushiti, 2024, p. 79); the orthographic conventions still create challenges for EFL learners especially in their early and intermediate stages of English instruction (Sammour-Shehadeh, et al., 2025). Moreover, even at university level students face difficulty in distinguishing American versus British English (Bylykbashi, 2025).

British English is often considered more conservative that follows older forms, while American is more contemporary and follows the latest spelling reforms and often incorporates more simplified forms. The key distinctions of spelling differences between British and American English vocabulary are detected in: word endings, vowel usage and consonant doubling.

First, word endings represent the most prominent differences between the two varieties. For example, British English retains the -our ending derived from French in words such as: *colour*, *honour* and *labour*, while American English uses a simplified -or ending or *color*, *honor*, *labor*. Another distinction is the -ce versus -se ending, where British English differentiates between noun and verb forms (*practice* vs *practise*), while American English has a single standardized form (*practice*). The -ise versus -ize variation further reflects this difference where -ise is the preferred variation in British English, while -ize is the accepted ending in American English. Another variety that occurs is the -re ending in British English in words such as *centre* or *metre* compared to *center* and *meter* in American English.

Secondly, there are divergences in vowel usage. British English often preserves the classical spelling using -ae or -oe diagraphs (*anaemia*, *manoeuvre*), whereas American English simplifies the forms and uses only one vowel such as *anemia* or *maneuver*. Also, American English frequently omits certain silent vowels or letters that are retained in British English; therefore, we have *program* vs *programme*, *catalog* vs *catalogue* etc. These changes reflect a broader tendency of American English toward orthographic economy and phonological transparency.

Thirdly, consonant related differences, especially consonant doubling, further highlight the differences in spelling rules. In British English often consonants are doubled in inflected forms such as *labelled* and *cancelled*, while in American English there is only one consonant or *labeled* and *canceled*. This notion, emphasizes the different conventions related to stress and suffixation. Additional consonant variations appear in lexical choices such as *tyre* or *cheque* in BE compared to *tire* and *check* AE.

Understanding these variations is essential for ensuring clarity, consistency and appropriateness in writing, particularly in international contexts where adherence to a specific standard is often required. Therefore, having awareness of standardized conventions will help achieve consistency in writing, specifically in international, professional and academic communication. Hence, the main aim of this study is to determine the tendencies of EFL students in Stip, North Macedonia and to check their awareness and ability to differentiate between the two above-mentioned varieties. This will contribute in future improvement of the teaching materials and the teaching process of EFL students that are part of the Goce Delcev University in Stip, North Macedonia.

Methodological framework

Research design

This study uses a quantitative comparative research method aimed at examining lexical preferences among learners of English as a foreign language with a special focus on the differences between British English and American English vocabulary. It is based on the assumption that instructional input plays a decisive role in shaping learner's lexical choices. In the analysed educational context, English teaching is based predominantly on British textbooks, which are officially prescribed by the Ministry of Education and are used in classroom practice. Accordingly, the main hypothesis is that British vocabulary is prevalent among learners of English due to the continuous exposure to British-oriented teaching materials in formal education. The main aim of the research is to empirically test this hypothesis by analysing learners' productive lexical choices and comparing them across two educational levels. More specifically, the research questions that are addressed are the following:

- Which lexical variety (British or American) is more prevalent in learners' vocabulary?
- How do learners report to learn new English vocabulary?
- Are learners able to distinguish between British and American English as two separate varieties?

These research questions are designed to examine the dominant lexical variety, and also to determine the relations among teaching instruction, informal input and learners' awareness of language variation.

Participants

The participants of the study are 120 learners of English as a foreign language with a similar proficiency level, but in different educational setting. The first group includes 60 fourth-year secondary school students in the age range between 17 and 19, enrolled at the Secondary Vocational School "Kole Nehtenin" in Stip, North Macedonia. The second group includes 60 first-year university students, aged between 19 and 21, and enrolled at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Goce Delcev University in Stip, North Macedonia. All participants were assessed at a B1 proficiency level according to the CEFR reference for languages. The same proficiency level across the two groups served as a control variable of the linguistic competence. This allows the possible differences in lexical preference to be more reliably related to the instructional background and exposure, rather than to proficiency discrepancies. Moreover, the comparative structure of the sample enables the investigation of whether British vocabulary prevalence remains stable beyond secondary education or shifts with increased exposure to diverse input sources at the university level.

Instrument

Data was collected using a questionnaire that included two components (see appendix 1 and 2). The first part includes multiple choice and open-ended questions designed to elicit information about learners' exposure to English and their personal perception of the instructional variety. The participants responded to three multiple choice questions addressing the following:

- how do they learn new words (textbook, teacher, TV series, Internet or other);
- which variety are they currently learning and using at school/university;
- how frequently they engage with English-language content.

These questions helped determine the key factors relevant to the research, including primary input source, institutional orientation toward a specific variety and overall frequency of English exposure. Also, the participants were given the opportunity to fill out their own response for each question, if they do not agree with the listed options.

The second part was an individual written translation task that included 18 very simple sentences. Each sentence contains a target lexical item (see the full list in table 1) that represented a word with distinct forms in British and American English. The missing word was translated in brackets in Macedonian at the end of each sentence. Moreover, the words that were chosen are usually acquired in lower levels of English learning (A1 or A2) with the aim to avoid difficulties in completing the task due to proficiency level. This task was designed to measure the productive lexical knowledge and preference of the learners, rather than a passive recognition of the varieties. Responses were categorized in two groups and quantitatively measured. The initial categorization served as the primary indicator for determining which variety is prevalent in the learners' vocabulary.

Table 1

Target lexical items within the in-class task

Macedonian translation	British spelling	American spelling
боја	colour	color
чест	honour	honor
омилен	favour	favor
сосед	neighbour	neighbor
центар	centre	center
километар	kilometre	kilometer
литар	litre	liter
театар	theatre	theater
организира	organise	organize
анализира	analyse	analyze
критикува	criticise	criticize
дијалог	dialogue	dialog
каталог	catalogue	catalog
дозвола	licence	license
одбрана	defence	defense
вежба	practise	practice
програма	programme	program
сива	grey	gray

Note. Original compilation by the author based on lexical items selected from multiple English language textbooks.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted during regular lessons by the regular teachers, but with supervision of the researcher. Participants completed the questionnaire and the translation task individually and without an access to external materials or digital devices. The total completion time ranged between 20 to 30 minutes. Participation was voluntary and respondents were informed that the information will be used for academic research purposes. Also, anonymity was ensured and participants were informed that their responses will not have any influence on their academic evaluation. The complete procedure was implemented in accordance with established ethical standards for educational research.

The collected data was processed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages. Then comparative analysis was applied to identify the differences between the two sample groups. Finally, relations between the different types of acquired data was analysed and determined. Overall, the questionnaire ensured uniform administration across participants, while the careful selection of the words helped strengthen content validity. Furthermore, the integration of controlled elicitation with self-reported data provided a good systematic basis for testing the main hypothesis.

Results & Analysis

This study investigated learner's perceptions of the type of English they are acquiring, focusing on two groups: fourth-year secondary school students and first-year university students. The analysis starts by focusing on the first part of the questionnaire, which includes the written answers by the participants in relation to vocabulary acquisition and the target English variation. Hence, the results show notable differences between the two groups. In the group of secondary school students, 23 responded that they believe they are learning American English, while 17 identified British English as the target variety. In addition, 17 students reported that they did not know which variety they were learning, and small number of students (3) indicated that they are learning both varieties. These findings suggest that although there is some awareness of both English varieties, perceptions remain divided with a slight tendency toward identifying American English as the dominant form. In contrast, the responses from the university students reveal a different pattern. Only 8 students identified American English as the variety they are learning, while a considerably higher number (23 students) selected British

English. However, uncertainty remains prominent since there are 23 students that do not know what variety they are learning and an additional 6 believe they are learning both. Herein, this distribution shows that although more university students recognize British English as the instructional model, a substantial proportion are still unsure about the variety they are exposed to.

Furthermore, the answers in the anonymous questionnaire reveal that the Internet is the primary source of vocabulary acquisition for both groups. A large number of participants reported learning new words through online platforms, social media and television, which provide frequent and varied exposure to English. Unfortunately, results indicate that teachers and textbooks have a minimal role in vocabulary learning, suggesting that formal instruction is perceived as less influential than informal exposure. In relation to the question regarding exposure to English content, most participants expressed that they engage with English often, very often or on a daily basis. The exact percentages per group are presented in table 2 below. This exposure occurs outside the classroom and is largely driven by digital media consumption. Hence, these findings suggest that students' vocabulary development is strongly shaped by informal learning environments rather than structured educational contexts.

Table 2

Frequency of English exposure outside school/faculty

	Never	rarely	sometimes	often	daily
Secondary school students	5%	15%	2%	34%	44%
University students	0	20%	4%	46%	30%

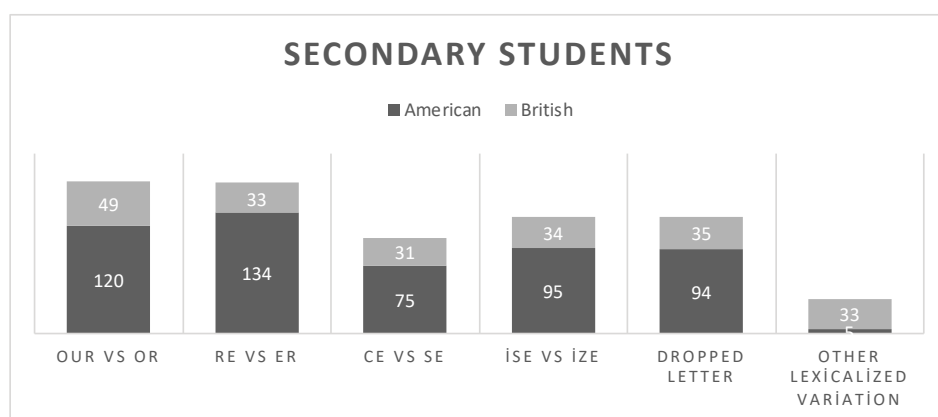
Note. Authors' own quantitative analysis based on the collected data.

The second part of the questionnaire includes a compilation of 18 sentences that students were required to complete by filling in a missing word, with its translation in Macedonian provided in brackets. The purpose of the task was to elicit specific lexical items representing the main spelling contrasts between American English and British English. The selected words cover all previously identified categories of variation. The design of the task ensured that students' responses would provide measurable evidence of their preference for either American or British spelling conventions. Hence, the results from secondary school students (see table 3) show a clear tendency toward American English forms across most categories. In -our vs -or distinction, students produced 120 American forms compared to 49 British

forms. A similar pattern is evident in -re vs -er category with 134 American forms and only 33 British forms, as well as in -ce vs -se, and -ise vs -ize. The dropped letter category again reflects the trend of American forms (94) compared to British forms (35). However, in the last category, which includes other variations (such as grey vs. gray, and program vs. programme), British forms (33) outnumber the American ones (5) suggesting that in less regular and more lexicalized cases, students may rely more heavily on forms encountered in formal instruction.

Table 3

Spelling tendencies of secondary school students

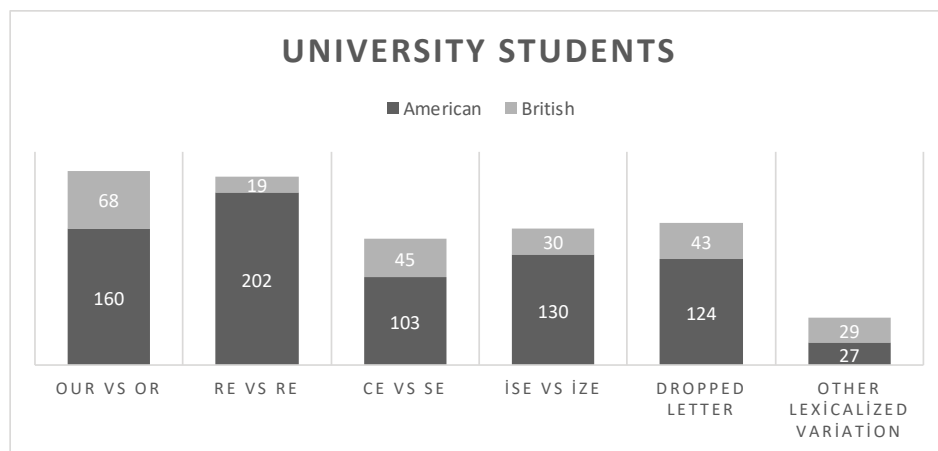


Note. Authors' own analysis based on the collected data.

The results from the group of university students (see table 4) show shared tendencies. In all major categories, American English forms are even more dominant than in the previous group of students. For instance, in -our vs -or category, university students produce 160 American and 68 British forms. Also, the difference is particularly striking in the -re vs -er category, where 202 American forms were recognized against only 19 British forms. Similar patterns and frequencies are observed with the other categories: -ce vs se, -ise vs -ize and the dropped letter forms. However, unlike the group of secondary students, university students show a balance in the 'other variation' category with 27 American and 29 British forms, indicating a more mixed usage in less systematic cases.

Table 4

Spelling tendencies of university students



Note. Authors' own analysis based on the collected data.

From an analytical perspective, the comparison between the two groups reveals a consistent dominance of American English spelling, despite both groups use textbooks following British norms. This suggests that factors beyond formal instruction play a significant role in shaping learners' written production. Exposure to global media, digital communication and online resources, where American English is highly prevalent probably contributes to this preference.

Furthermore, the data indicates a developmental trend: as students' progress from secondary school to faculty, their use of American forms not only persists, but becomes pronounced. This might be due to increased exposure to authentic American English input, as well as greater engagement with international and digital environments. Simultaneously, the persistence of the British forms in certain categories, suggests that classroom instruction still exerts some influence, especially in cases that rely more on memorization than on general spelling rules.

Discussion

The findings of the study reveal a complex interaction between learners' exposure to British and American English and their actual language use. Despite the fact that formal and institutional instruction as well as teaching materials are based on British rules and norms, both secondary school and university students show a strong preference for American English spelling rules. This discrepancy highlights

a gap between pedagogical input and learner output, which suggests that formal instruction is not the only, nor the primary source of influence on students' linguistic choices. This notion is also confirmed through the students' perception of teachers as playing a relatively minor role in their vocabulary development, despite regular English instruction in formal educational settings. Furthermore, the limited awareness of English varieties suggests a gap in EFL instruction, as students may use different lexical items from different varieties without understanding the contextual or cultural difference. One possible cause for the lack of clarity and the presence of ambiguity might be the comparative UK and USA examples that are included in the official textbooks. Although the main aim is to raise awareness of variation, which was highlighted in previous research (Bikelienė, 2015), the materials may also blur the distinctions between the two varieties if they are not accompanied by explicit instruction.

In contrast, the findings confirm the strong reliance on informal, media-based sources for vocabulary acquisition among both groups of EFL learners, which correlates with previous studies (Nikolovska, 2011). Moreover, the dominance of Internet-based learning reflects broader changes in language exposure patterns and highlights the growth of learner autonomy. Research shows (Putri et al., 2026) that the use of online applications such as Duolingo contributes substantially to vocabulary development.

The prevalence of American spelling aligns with participants' media consumption habits and supports previous research that confirms significant influence of media exposure on lexical choices. Although both groups of EFL learners favour the American spelling, this tendency is significantly stronger among university students, who have higher frequencies of AE in nearly all categories. This suggests a developmental trend in which increased exposure to English through academic materials, online content etc. reinforces the American norms over time. Therefore, learners do not align toward the prescribed British standards, but continuously move further away from it. However, British English is not entirely absent from learners' competence. For example, in the category of 'other variations', where spelling differences are less systematic and more dependent on individual lexical items, the British forms appear more frequently, especially for secondary school students. This indicates that formal instruction stills plays a role in shaping learners' language competence, and this role can be improved and reinforced through teaching material and curriculum changes. Moreover, the need for more explicit instruction and additional instruction is consistent with previous research (Koceva et al., 2023;

Koceva et al., 2024) focused on British vs. American variation in the language of EFL learners in North Macedonia.

These findings have several implications for EFL teaching. First, they emphasize the importance of explicitly addressing language varieties in the classroom. Regardless of what the intended mode is or what the target variety is, the distinctions between British and American forms should be clearly communicated and reinforced through instructional teaching materials. Secondly, educators need to recognize learners' extensive exposure to multiple varieties outside the classroom and adopt a flexible approach, which will encourage awareness and appropriateness rather than rigid adherence toward a single standard. Incorporating discussion about English as a global language and its variability during classes can only help learners and improve their learning process.

Despite its contributions, the study also has a few limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and the focus on only two groups in specific educational context limits the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is needed to expand the scope by including larger and more diverse sample, as well as additional methods for data collection. However, the present study will still greatly contribute as both quantitative and qualitative analysis on real language use by EFL learners in North Macedonia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that learners' use of English as a foreign language is shaped by a complex interaction of formal instruction, informal exposure and individual linguistic awareness. Vocabulary is primarily acquired through informal exposure, particularly via the Internet and the digital media, rather than through teacher and classroom instruction. British English is the official teaching model and remains the formal teaching standard; however, American English clearly dominates in practise and learners have a significant tendency toward American English spelling conventions. Herein, the paper confirms the discrepancy between the intended instructional model and the actual student output. Since awareness of British and American differences remains limited, there is need for major changes in the teaching process and the teaching materials in North Macedonia. Teachers should put greater attention to raising learners' awareness of the British and the American English variety by increasing the number of activities and including more explicit instruction. Moreover, incorporating the students' learning preferences

into the teaching practise may help bridge the gap between formal education and informal language exposure.

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