

## **A Guide to EFL Teachers and Learners on the Differences between British and American English**

**Asst. Professor**

**Natiq Taha Abdul-Kareem**

**Bilad Al Rafidain University College**

**[alazawinatiq@gmail.com](mailto:alazawinatiq@gmail.com)**

**Key Words: British English , American English , differences , independence**

**الكلمات المفتاحية : الانكليزية البريطانية ، الإنكليزية الامريكية ، الاختلافات ، الاستقلالية**

**DOI:10.23813/FA/93/23**

**FA/202301/93A/451**

---

### **Abstract**

English, as an international language, has many varieties such as Indian English, Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, British English (UK English) and American English (US English), but the two main varieties are British English and American English.

This study sheds light on the main differences between the last two mentioned varieties of English which are widely used all over the world.

EFL teachers and learners should be acquainted with these differences in order to benefit from them when they deal with this foreign language, i.e, English, and avoid falling into a lot of troubles as they use inconvenient words when they are chatting or conversing with US citizens.

The study covers four language aspects: spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. It is worth mentioning

here that the differences between these two varieties of English are few and limited.

**الدليل لمدرسي ومتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية في الاختلافات ما بين  
الانكليزية البريطانية والامريكية  
أ.م. ناطق طه عبد الكريم**

**الملخص :**

الانكليزية ؛ كلغة عالمية ، لها العديد من الانواع أو الاشكال ، فهناك  
الانكليزية الهندية ، الكندية ، الاسترالية ، النيوزلاندية ، البريطانية ، والامريكية ،  
ولكن الشكلين الرئيسيين هما الانكليزية البريطانية والامريكية .

هذه الدراسة ذات اهمية كبيرة لكل من مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية  
ومتعلميها ، تسلط الضوء على أهم الاختلافات الرئيسية بين اشكال اللغة الانكليزية  
الاثنتين المذكورتين أخيراً ، واللذان تستعملان على نطاق واسع في جميع انحاء العالم  
أما كلغة أولى ، أو ثانية أو اجنبية .

مدرسوا اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية ومتعلموها عليهم أن يطلعوا على هذه  
الاختلافات من أجل الاستفادة منها عند تعاملهم مع هذه اللغة كي لا يقعوا بأخطاء أو  
يعرضوا أنفسهم الى مواقف صعبة لعدم الالمام أو معرفة الفروق في معاني الكلمات  
المستخدمة .

الدراسة تغطي اربع مجالات لغوية هي : التهجي ، المفردات ، التلطف والقواعد  
وهنا من الجدير بالذكر ان نشير بأن الاختلافات ما بين الانكليزية البريطانية  
والانكليزية الامريكية قليلة ومحدودة مقارنة بأوجه التشابه بينهما .

## **Introduction**

Language is a social phenomenon. Therefore, it reflects the philosophy of the society it grows in. Although the majority of the settlers of the New World were British, they decided to establish a new autonomous country that has its own distinguished culture.

To realize this goal, the US authorized the issuance of a national currency, the US dollar, as a step of a financial independence. Then, on September 24, 1847, Webster Dictionary was issued as a step of cultural independence. In his dictionary, Noah Webster aimed at making the American spelling straightforward and different from British spelling. This dictionary marked the beginning of American Spelling differences.

The purpose behind making all the alternations were the following.

1. Simplifying the spelling system.
2. Showing the independence from the former British.
3. Being different from the former British. A good example which supports this point is that Brits conclude letters with "Yours sincerely" whereas Americans conclude them with "Sincerely yours ".

### **The Problem**

In Iraq, EFL learners are taught British English as the standard language, so they follow British English spelling rules in writing and the Received pronunciation when speaking English. They have prescribed books such as Rapid Review of English Grammar, Oxford Practice Grammar, An Introductory English Grammar and Introductory Transformational Grammar: These books were written in British English. At the same time, their course books include: Select Readings and Person to Person: Communicating Speaking and listening skills which were written in American English

Consequently, learners usually raise many questions such as: Why does the word "traveled" end in single "l"? Why does the word "colour" take the spelling "color" ? Is the spelling of these words incorrect? And why does the writer use "cell phone" and not "mobile phone"? They ask these questions and the like because they do not have any idea about American English. Such questions need to be answered by their teachers precisely.

Moreover , those learners may fall into a lot of troubles as they use inconvenient words when they are chatting or conversing with US citizens and find themselves in unpleasant situations, for example:

- a) If one of those learners has an American classmate at his college and he wants to borrow his rubber. His classmate will certainly be embarrassed because he will think that he is talking about a condom, not about an eraser

( See page 11"e")

b) If an American citizen meets a woman who learnt British English at a university, a press conference, a political meeting, etc. and he wants to ask her about her pants, she will certainly assume that he is asking her about her underwear, not about her trousers.

c) If someone who speaks British English asks an American citizen about the location of the Export Department , for example, the American citizen, for instance, will direct him to the first floor, but that person will go to the ground floor.

When he does not find that department there, he will certainly think that he was misled by the American citizen. (See page 11 (a))

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that EFL teachers and learners should be competent at using both British and American English.

### [1] Spelling

There is no complete match between spelling and pronunciation in English. For instance, the words: seat, head and great have the letters (ea), but these letters are pronounced differently in each one. Riddell (2003: 77).

In order to avoid this difficulty, American English spelling was mostly changed according to how the words sound when they are spoken.

a) In British English, the letter "L" "is doubled in words if the letter "L" is preceded by a vowel and the suffix begins with a vowel, too.

In American English, the "L" is not doubled, for example:

counsellor → counselor

marvellous → marvelous

jeweller → jeweler

cancelled → canceled

travelling → traveling

b) Some nouns that end with " ogue " in British English, end with "og" or "ogue" in American English, for example:

monologue → monolog / monologue

dialogue → dialog / dialogue

catalogue → catalog / catalogue

analogue → analog / analogue

c) In British English, words ending with 're', the 're' was replaced with 'er' in American English, for example:

theatre → theater

centre → center

litre → liter

fibre → fiber

metre → meter

❖ In British English, " meter " is an instrument used for measuring a quantity .

❖ " re " in the following words are used in both British and American spelling:

acre . massacre, mediocre, ogre .

d) Words which end in 'our' in British English, they end in 'or' in American English, for example:

colour → color

behaviour → behavior.

labour → labor

neighbour → neighbor

rumour → rumor

e) In British English, some nouns end with 'ence' whereas in American English, they are spelled 'ense' for example :

licence → license

defence → defense

offence → offense

pretence → pretense

vice (workbench tool) → vise

f) In British English, verbs that can be spelled with either "ise" or "ize", are always spelled "ize" in American English, for example:

apologise / apologize → apologize

recognise / recognize → recognize

realise / realize → realize.

nationalise/nationalize → nationalize

❖ Many British People tend to use " ise " exclusively.

g) In British English, verbs that end in "yse" are always spelled: "yze" in American English, for example:

analyse → analyze

breathalyse → breathalyze

paralyse → panalyze

h) British spelling sometimes has a doubled consonant letters, whereas American spelling omits one of the doubled consonant letters, for example:

woollen → woolen

carburettor → carburetor

whirr → whir

kidnapping → kidnaping

worshipper → worshiper

i) American spelling tends to omit the final silent in some words

for example:

axe → ax

annexe → annex

glycerine → glycerin

grille → grill

gramme → gram

programme → program

❖ In British English, the word 'program' is used when we talk about a computer

j) The words: acknowledgement, judgement and ageing can be used in British English with or without "e", but in American English, they are written without "e"; acknowledgment, judgment and aging.

k) In British English, the following words do not have doubled consonant letters, whereas in American English they have:

instalment → installment

skilful → skillful

wilful → willful

instil → instill

fulfil → fulfill

enrol → enroll

appal → appall

benefited → benefitted

l) Words which have the letters "ae " or "oe" in British English, these letters are changed to "e" in American English, for example:

archaeology → archeology

encyclopaedia → encyclopedia

anaemia → anemia

mementoes → mementos

manoeuvre → maneuver

foetus → fetus

m) There are some differences with the past and past participle of some irregular verbs between British and American spelling.

Americans tend to use the -ed suffix, whereas Brits tend to use the-t suffix more than-ed suffix: Examples of these verbs are: burn, learn, leap, dream, spill and smell .

n) Here is a list of words of the main differences between British and American spellings

British English	American English
Maths	math
thereabouts	thereabout
grey	gray
cheque	check
gaol	jail
cosy	cozy
jewellery	jewelry
aeroplane	airplane
tyre	tire
plough	plow
zip	zipper
enquire	inquire
whisky	whiskey
frying pan	frypan
thus	thusly
through	thru
linesman	lineman
moustache	mustache
mum	mom
storey	story
speciality	specialty
soya bean	soy bean
sulphur	sulfur
pyjamas	pajamas
transport	transportation
sceptic	skeptic
disc	disk

- ❖ In British English, the word "disk" is used for a computer.
- o) Here is a list of some abbreviations which: shows the differences in writing between British and American English :



<u>British English</u>	<u>American English</u>
AD	A.D.
AM	A.M.
Asst	Asst.
BA	B.A.
BC.	B.C.
MA	M.A.
Dr	Dr.
PM	P.M.
St	St.
UK	U.K.
UN	U.N.
US	U.S.
USA	U.S.A
Yr	Yr.

## [2] Vocabulary

<u>British English</u>	<u>American English</u>
lift	elevator
flat	apartment
holiday	vacation
holiday maker	vacationist
trousers	pants
braces	suspenders
night dress	night gown
tie	necktie
tights	panty hose
vest	undershirt
track suit	sweats
waist coat	vest
trainers	sneakers
jumber	sweater
shoelace	shoestring
motorway	expressway / freeway
lorry	truck
bonnet	hood
boot (the back of a car)	trunk
windscreen	wind shield
wing mirror	side mirror

<b>Indicator (of a can)</b>	<b>turn signal</b>
<b>mudguard</b>	<b>fender</b>
<b>silencer</b>	<b>muffler</b>
<b>spanner</b>	<b>wrench</b>
<b>car park / parking area.</b>	<b>parking lot</b>
<b>number plate</b>	<b>license plate</b>
<b>saloon</b>	<b>sedan</b>
<b>petrol- station/ filling station</b>	<b>gas station</b>
<b>petrol</b>	<b>gas</b>
<b>fill with petrol</b>	<b>gas up</b>
<b>paraffin</b>	<b>kerosene</b>
<b>taxi stand / taxi rank</b>	<b>cab stand</b>
<b>tram</b>	<b>street car</b>
<b>pram</b>	<b>baby carriage</b>
<b>crisps</b>	<b>chips</b>
<b>potato crisps</b>	<b>potato chips</b>
<b>maize</b>	<b>corn</b>
<b>biscuit</b>	<b>cookie</b>
<b>fizzy drink</b>	<b>soda</b>
<b>sweets</b>	<b>candy</b>
<b>takeaway</b>	<b>takeout</b>
<b>spring onion</b>	<b>green onion</b>
<b>packet</b>	<b>package</b>
<b>parcel</b>	<b>package</b>
<b>rubbish</b>	<b>trash / garbage</b>
<b>dustbin</b>	<b>trash can</b>
<b>tin</b>	<b>can</b>
<b>waste-paper basket</b>	<b>waste basket</b>
<b>thermos flask</b>	<b>thermos bottle</b>
<b>vacuum flask</b>	<b>vacuum bottle</b>
<b>tap</b>	<b>faucet</b>
<b>wallet</b>	<b>billfold</b>
<b>queue</b>	<b>line</b>
<b>pavement</b>	<b>sidewalk / pedestrian path</b>
<b>football</b>	<b>soccer</b>
<b>mobile phone</b>	<b>cell phone / cellular phone</b>
<b>water pistol</b>	<b>water gun</b>
<b>underground</b>	<b>subway</b>
<b>rubber</b>	<b>eraser</b>
<b>public toilet</b>	<b>rest room</b>
<b>social security</b>	<b>welfare</b>
	<b>rail road</b>

<b>rail way</b>	<b>nail polish</b>
<b>nail varnish</b>	<b>bulletin board</b>
<b>notice board</b>	<b>rummage sale</b>
<b>jumble sale</b>	<b>pen pal</b>
<b>pen friend</b>	<b>braid</b>
<b>plait</b>	<b>near-sighted</b>
<b>short-sighted</b>	<b>far-sighted</b>
<b>long-sighted</b>	<b>turtle</b>
<b>tortoise</b>	<b>flash light</b>
<b>torch</b>	<b>bake shop</b>
<b>bakery</b>	<b>store</b>
<b>shop</b>	<b>store keeper</b>
<b>shop keeper</b>	<b>sales clerk</b>
<b>shop assistant</b>	<b>drugstore</b>
<b>pharmacy / chemist's shop</b>	<b>mail</b>
<b>post</b>	<b>mailman</b>
<b>postman</b>	<b>mailbox</b>
<b>post box /letterbox</b>	<b>witness stand</b>
<b>witness box</b>	<b>shopping cart</b>
<b>trolley</b>	<b>exercise book</b>
<b>workbook</b>	<b>blinders</b>
<b>blinkers</b>	<b>given name</b>
<b>first name</b>	<b>parenthesis</b>
<b>bracket</b>	<b>racetrack</b>
<b>racecourse</b>	<b>rooster</b>
<b>cock</b>	

### **Some British words and phrases that have different meanings in American English.**

a) In British English, the first floor of a building is above the ground level or the ground floor.

In American English, it is the ground floor, in other words, it is the floor at street level.

Example:

Ali lives in the ground floor. (British English).

Ali lives in the first floor. (American English).

b) In British English, " hire " is used for a short time, whereas " rent " is used for a long time, for example:

She hired a costume for the wedding.

I will rent a house for six months.

c) In British English, " a garden " which is a piece of land belonging to a house, is used if it has plants, grass, flowers, and " a yard " is used if it is made of concrete or stone.

In American English " a yard" is used whether it has plants, grass, flowers or not, but if it is large and also has grass, it can be called a garden.

d) In Britain, "a ton" (a unit of weight) is equivalent to 2240 pounds.

In America, it is equivalent to 2000 pounds.

e) In British English, " a rubber " is an eraser for a pencil, whereas in American English, it is a condom.

f) In British English, " peckish " means slightly hungry whereas in American English, it means irritable, angry or annoyed.

g) In American English, "through" is used to mean including. We are staying Wednesday through Friday.

h) In British English, "break" is a short period of rest in work or study, for example:

a ten-minute break (between classes at school) .

" recess" is longer period of time when business or work stops, such as period when a parliament or court is on holiday, for example:

The Parliament is in recess.

In American English, "recess" is a break or a short period of free time between classes at school, for example:

A ten-minute recess

i) Brits usually use " to be sick " to mean that a person bringing up the contents of the stomach through the mouth, whereas Americans use " to be sick" to mean " be ill "

### [3] Pronunciation

**The main differences in pronunciation between British and American English are:-**

a) In British English, " r " is pronounced if it is followed by a vowel sound, whereas in American English, it is pronounced where there is a letter "r" in spelling, i , e, in all positions.

( Marks: 2007: 52)

b) In British English, many words are pronounced with the sound [j], whereas in American English, the sound [j] is dropped, for example:

(Hancock : 2003: 28,44) ( Marks: 2007: 54)

news | nju:z | → | nu:z |  
 dew | dju: | → | du: |  
 student | stju:dnt | → | stu:dent |  
 stupid | stju: pid | → | stu: pid |  
 tutor | tju: tə | → | tu:tə |  
 produce | prədju:s | → | prədu:s |  
 tune | tju:n | → | tu:n |

c) In American accents the letter " t " is pronounced like a " d ", when it is between two vowel sounds, so the word "writer"sounds like "rider " and the word. "fruity" sounds like "fruidy." ( Ibid: 18).

d) Here are some words which are commonly used in daily life and have different pronunciation in British and American English, ie, American pronounce them differently:

<b><u>British English</u></b>	<b><u>American English</u></b>
v <u>i</u> tamin   i	ai
bo <u>o</u> th   ð	θ
cl <u>e</u> rk   a:	ə :
diagn <u>o</u> se  z	s
tom <u>a</u> to   a:	ei
ast <u>h</u> ma   s	z
bl <u>o</u> use   z	s
I <u>s</u> lam   z	s
amp <u>e</u> re   eə	iər
g <u>o</u> ne   ɔ	ɔ:
at <u>e</u>   e	ei
sandw <u>i</u> ch   tʃ	dʒ
miss <u>i</u> le   misail	misl
schedu <u>e</u>   ʃedju:l	skedʒul
eczema   eksimə	igzi:mə
veh <u>i</u> cle   vi: əkl	vi:hikl
As <u>i</u> an   eiʃn	eiʒn
Malays <u>i</u> a   məleiziə	məleiʒə

Tunisia | tju: niziə | | tu: ni:3ə |

### e) Pronouncing Numbers

22 April The twenty-second of April [British English] or  
April the twenty-second

April twenty-second (American English)

$\frac{1}{4}$  a quarter (British English)

a fourth (American English).

$\frac{3}{4}$  three quarters (British English)

three fourths (American English)

0.762 nought point seven six two. (British English)

zero point seven six two ( American English)

(Marks : 2007: 133)

### [4]Grammar

a) In British English, the verb "protest" is followed by a preposition "against " or "about"

In American English, it is used without a preposition, for example:

- The demonstrators protested against the government's decision.( British English).

The demonstrators protested the government's decision.(  
American English)

b) The word "ache" is usually used in compound such as: toothache, stomach, ache , backache, headache, heartache, etc.

- In British English, "ache" is used without "a" or " an " except with "headache", for example:

- She has got toothache.

- He has got a headache.

- In American English, "ache" is used with "a" or " an " especially when talking about a a particular attack of pain, for example:

- She has an awful toothache.

- He has a terrible toothache.

c) The Brits use ( different from / to), whereas Americans tend to use (different than ) .

- The film was different to anything I had watched before. (British English)

- The film was different than anything I had watched before.  
(American English)

d) The Brits use (do/make a deal), but they tend to use "do" more.

• American use (make a deal), for example:

- They have done / made a deal with a Turkish company.

- They have made a deal with a Turkish Company.

e) In British English, "shall" or "will" can be used interchangeably to express the future, whereas in American English, will is normally used:

- I shall/will fly to Cairo next week. (British English)

- I will fly to Cairo next week. (American English )

f) In British English, "at" is used when talking about the weekend, whereas in American English "on" is used:

- What will you do at the weekend?

-What will you do on the weekend ?

g) In British English, "to" is used after the verb "write", for example:

- Yesterday, I wrote to her.

• In American English, "to" is not used after the verb "write"

- Yesterday, I wrote her.

h) In British English, " Shall I "or "Shall we " is used to ask for advice or an opinion, whereas in American English, "Should I " or "Should we " is used for this purpose :

- Shall I phone him?

- Should I phone him?

i) In British English, collective nouns which are singular in forms, but refer to a group of people or things such as: team, class, committee, and government can be followed by either singular or plural verbs whether the members of the group have the same attitudes or different.

- In American English, collective nouns are followed by singular verbs.

j) In British English, "needn't" is used to express non-necessity ,whereas in American English , "don't need to" is the usual form, for example:

- You needn't attend the meeting tomorrow

- You don't need to attend the meeting tomorrow.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this study is to draw a comparison between British and American English in the areas of spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. It also tackles the difficulties encountered by EFL learners when writing, reading, speaking and listening. The result of the study gives evidence that ignoring the differences between these two varieties of English leads to misunderstanding and awkward situations when learners communicate with native or non-native speakers of English.

## **Recommendations**

In the light of this finding, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Both British and Americans English are international languages; therefore, it is essential for EFL teachers and learners to be cognizant of them orally and orthographically.
2. It is preferable that EFL Learners practise the two varieties of English independently inside educational institutions, for example, their course -books could include a chapter that focuses on the differences between these two varieties. Teachers could present materials in the fields of linguistics, morphology, phonetics and reading that revolve round these problematic language aspects. This state can familiarise learners with these varieties of English.
4. It is of paramount importance that practitioners in English-speaking countries cooperate in this respect to make their learners have good knowledge of the various orthographical and pronunciation differences of both British and American English.



## References

1. Hancock, Mark (2003) *English Pronunciation in Use*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.
2. Marks, Jonathan (2007) *English Pronunciation in Use*. Elementary. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK
3. Riddell, David (2003) *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. Hodder Education, London, England.
4. *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary* (2006) Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

## 5. Internet Sites

6. [https://www.onestopenenglish.com/support-for-teaching-grammar/differences-in-american-and-british-english-grammar-article/152820\\_article](https://www.onestopenenglish.com/support-for-teaching-grammar/differences-in-american-and-british-english-grammar-article/152820_article).
7. <https://www.spellzone.com/pages/british-american.cfm>
8. <https://www.businessinsider.com/british-words-that-mean-something-different-in-america-2018-3>
9. [https://www.indy100.com/lifestyle/english\\_words-different-britain-america-2658371460](https://www.indy100.com/lifestyle/english_words-different-britain-america-2658371460)
10. [https://www.ef.com/wwen/blog/language/Why US-and-UK-english-sound-so-different](https://www.ef.com/wwen/blog/language/Why-US-and-UK-english-sound-so-different)
11. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343207537>