British and American English in the Classroom in Cairo and in Kuwait

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Teachers of ESL/EFL abroad are very quickly faced with the fact that there are two major varieties of English being used worldwide. In any particular location there is usually a strong preference for either British English or for American English.

The community consensus as to which variety is better is often solidified and perpetuated in Ministry of Education policies implemented through choice of textbooks and set exams. This dichotomy of preference does not reflect the real world of usage. Both varieties are used internationally and both varieties should be respected.

ESL/EFL teachers can contribute to this objective by noting British and American English differences objectively in the classroom so often that students become aware of them and accept them with equanimity. This procedure should eliminate students' emotional attachments to one variety or the other for quite unscientific reasons. In the course of daily teaching, good ESL/EFL teachers should show that they not only tolerate the differences, but indeed, enjoy knowing them and talking about them.

Before teachers can attain this level of performance, they must learn where in the broad common core of English they occur, master the details of the specific differences, and then not be afraid to deal with them as they are relevant day-by-day. Only if teachers can do this can they meet international English language students' needs adequately.

Tolerate and Enjoy the Differences

Generally, students of English want to know both varieties—British and American. Their curiosity can be satisfied and increased by alert, informed English language teachers. An attitude of tolerance instead of intolerance, interest instead of indifference, and excitement instead of complacency can result from enlightened guidance into the not so mysterious world of American and British English differences.

Although the British and Americans do share "one common language," the variations are obvious enough to create communication complications even for native English speakers who mix in the international realm. The more aware people are of the differences, the more they like to talk about them and generally enjoy them. So why not share this pleasure with English language students?

I feel that it is almost deceitful not to tell students about the differences as specific relevant cases arise in the classroom. If, however, a teacher does not know the differences, knows only a few of the differences, or simply does not care about the differences, no relevant examples will arise in the classroom. Ignorance will obviate any such opportunity.

Learn the Differences

The best way to learn the major recurring differences between British and American English would probably be to live for an extended period in the United States and in England and to study in each country so as to absorb the standard form of each variety from an environment of educated native speakers. The second-best way might be to surround oneself with a bevy of native Americans and native Englishmen/women who are language conscious and who enjoy sharing linguistic observations.

Unfortunately, the first and best way is expensive and time-consuming. The second-best way is not always possible and is also time-consuming. Also, the results of these two ways will be uneven and quite unreliable unless the learner approaches his/her quest very systematically and devotes almost full time to it.

Fortunately, British and American English language usage differences have been the focus of scholars from the beginning of the rebellion of the Colonies, so teachers can avail themselves of sundry commentaries and several studies on the topic. Such commentaries and studies are not always systematic, easily accessible, or comprehensive, but they help.

Of course, every English language teacher should have a good American dictionary and a good British dictionary to refer to constantly. However, dictionary searches can be time-consuming and very frustrating. Not all terms can be found. Also, even when a usage label (Am. or Br.) is given, the researcher invariably comes up with many other related questions which cannot be answered in the typical restrictive dictionary format.

Thwarted in our desire to learn the many differences in the best way, by living and studying for a long time in both the United States and in England, one of my British colleagues, Mary Ghali, and I concentrated our efforts on existing studies, research into native speaker usage, and exploitation of American and British friends.

The results are presented in *American and British English Preferences: Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation, Prepositions, and Vocabulary,* which employs a consistent two-column format, with blanks to show which items do not commonly occur in the other variety, with different related items grouped together, and with +'s to indicate preferences whenever detectable. Our hope is that we have produced an attainable, comprehensive reference so that busy English language teachers can and will look up terms or constructions which they and their students wonder about as they proceed through their textbooks and through their daily school work.

The worst way to deal with British and American English differences is to guess about the facts. If you do not know, do not guess. Try to find out what the facts are. "Look it up"—just as you expect your students to look things up. The rewards will more than justify the effort, both for you, the teacher, and for your students.

Mention and Deal with the Differences

Armed with a rather extensive knowledge of the differences after more

than ten years of focusing on this phenomenon, I found that occasions to mention differences popped up in almost every class I taught and almost every day. To test myself to be sure that I was not creating the situations, I wrote down every incident when I told my students about a British-American difference in my classes from spring through fall, 1982. The spring semester I was at the English Language Institute of the American University in Cairo and the fall semester I was at the English Language Centre of Kuwait University. I suspect that English teachers around the world might come up with very similar lists if they were to keep a record.

The following items are listed in about the same order they occurred in the classroom to try to convey the actual sequence over time within ordinary teaching situations, rather than according to linguistic or skill classifications, which are much neater than actual occurrences. As an American, I noticed the differences readily because of the British English background of the students, and the differences were even more striking when using British textbooks.

The differences are often much more complex than any American-British two-column equivalent list can reveal. We learned this fact very well as we investigated specific differences to enter into our book. Because of the complexity of the comparisons, we thought it desirable to draw conclusions as to what to teach, based on our analyses. We labeled these conclusions "Advice to the Teacher" (ATT) and included them throughout the Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation sections. We did this to help teachers to decide "what to do" quickly. Often the advice is to "Note both. Accept either." but not always.

Actual Examples of British and American English Differences Which Arose in the Classroom in Cairo and in Kuwait

Note: These lists are in no way definitive or comprehensive. They merely show some differences which I actually dealt with as I was teaching two different student populations in similar settings in two different countries. Their value is to stimulate beginning and experienced teachers to be alert to differences and to enlighten their students as to British and American English differences.

Group I

Where: The American University in Cairo, The English Language Institute
When: Spring, 1982
Description: U.S.A. bound, adult university graduates, British English background, American textbooks.

American	British
1. Do you have a pencil? Have you got a pencil?	1. ---------- Have you [got] a pencil?
2. flat tire, ---------	2. flat, tyre, puncture

3. + shot, injection	3. injection, jab (coll.)
4. soccer football	4. soccer, football, Association Football American football
5. student /student/	5. student /styudent/
6. + the older, the elder	6. + the elder, the older
7. Sports are good for us.	7. Sport is good for us.
8. to erase, clean (the blackboard) to erase [pencil] [pencil] eraser	8. to erase, clean, rub [words] out to erase, rub out [India] rubber, eraser
9. Did you use to smoke? ----------	9. Did you use to smoke? Used you to smoke?
10. billion	10. milliard, a thousand million
11. Let's not do it ---------- Let's don't do it. (non-standard)	11. + Let's not do it. Don't let's do it. ----------
12. caboose	12. brake-van
13. to + pass /overtake	13. to overtake
14. phonograph, + record player	14. + record player, pick-up, gramophone
15. The group is helping.	15. The group are
16. streetcar, trolley	16. tram
17. time is up / -------	17. time is up/over
18. assignment (work, school, univ.) homework (school or univ.) to assign/give homework	18. assignment (work) homework (school) work (university) to --- / give [a] homework
19. Handwriting: ℓ (I)	19. Handwriting I , 𝓘 , 9
20. on April 10	20. on April the 10th
21. on TV	21. on the TV
22. to put a clock ahead	22. to put a clock forward/on
23. Hello, ---, ---	23. Hello, Hullo, Hallo
24. in/--- a village	24. in/at a village

Key to symbols: ( ) = explanation, [ ] = optional, + = preferred, ----- = doesn't occur,
underlined = point of difference

25. draft, conscription, --- draftee to draft	25. ---, conscription national service cónscript, n. to conscrípt, v.
26. + faucet, tap, spigot	26. tap
27. exclamation point	27. exclamation mark
28. at home, home	28. at home, ---
29. a tube of lipstick	29. a lipstick
30. to make a decision	30. to make/take a decision

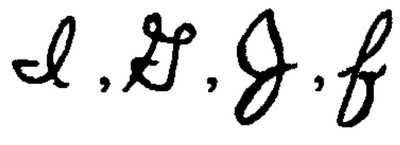
Group II

Where: Kuwait University English Language Centre, Faculty of Commerce Unit
When: Fall, 1982
Description: Adult university undergraduates, British English background, British textbooks

American	British
1. The School of Commerce	1. The Faculty of Commerce
2. science, engineering	2. Science, Engineering
3. 7:15 a.m., ---	3. 7:15 a.m., 7.15 a.m.
4. spring, fall	4. Spring, Fall
5. to erase (pencil) dust rag/cloth (for dust only) [blackboard] eraser	5. to erase, rub out duster [blackboard] rubber, duster (if a piece of cloth)
6. tonight, ---	6. tonight, to-night
7. distributor, dealer	7. dealer, distributor. stockist
8. parentheses ( ) brackets [ ]	8. [round] brackets, parentheses ( ) square brackets [ ]
9. Hello, ---, ---	9. Hello, Hullo, Hallo
10. the United States, n. ---	10. the United States, n. ---- United States, n.
11. period	11. full stop
12. "January ___ first"	12. "January the first"
13. on television/TV, ---- to watch TV	13. on television/TV, on the TV to watch [the] TV

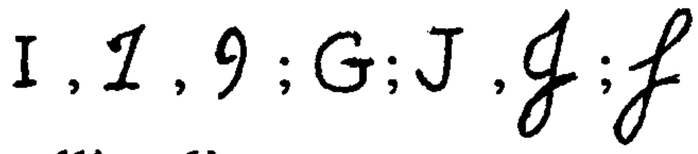
14. December 15, 1982
15. November 10, 1980
16. Do you have time to stay today?
    Have you got time to stay today?
17. He doesn't have a pencil, does he?
    He hasn't got a pencil,
    has he? / does he?
18. on vacation
19. You're welcome.
20. He's vomiting.
21. Mrs., Mr.
22. Address Punctuation:
    Hotel Atlas
    3 Via Rasella
    Rome
    Italy
23. +I didn't have time to do it.
    I had no time to do it.

    ---
24. Could you please help me?
    Surely.
25. instruction
    tuition [fees]
26. apartment
    apartment building/house
27. Handwriting:



28. spelling lists:
    1. international
    2. suitable
    3. England

14. December 15 1982
15. November 10th [,] 1980
16. ---
    Have you [got] time to stay today?
17. ---
    He hasn't [got] a pencil,
    has he? / ---
18. on holiday
19. Don't mention it.
20. He's being sick.
21. Mrs_, Mr_
22. Address Punctuation:
    Hotel Atlas,
    3, Via Rasella,
    Rome,
    Italy.
23. + I didn't have time to do it.
    I had no time to do it.
    I hadn't time to do it.
    I hadn't got time to do it. (rare)
24. Could you please help me?
    Of course. With pleasure.
25. instruction, tuition
    tuition fees
26. flat
    block of flats
27. Handwriting:



28. spelling lists:
    1. International
    2. Suitable
    3. England

    or

    1. INTERNATIONAL
    2. SUITABLE
    3. ENGLAND

29. high/secondary school (ages 14-18)

30. marking system:
check (✓)
correct (no mark)
wrong (✓)

29. secondary [modern]/grammar/ comprehensive school (different types of schools, ages 11-16 or 18)

30. marking system:
tick (✓)
correct (✓)
wrong (X)

Conclusion

There is no intrinsic value in the items presented in the above lists and many are not as complete as they could be. The lists only prove that over time and in different settings British and American English differences will occur frequently if the teacher is aware of them and competent to explain the facts to the students. My two lists of thirty items suggest that a difference would arise at least once every other day in a twelve-week term. The fact that vocabulary items dominated the list for Group I was a result of the oral-aural objectives, whereas the writing objectives for Group II gave rise to more spelling and punctuation differences. Notice that some of the very same points arose in both groups. "Have" differences are so complex that we had to devote thirty pages to that verb alone in our book. No doubt other teachers have dealt with some of these same differences in their classrooms. If not, one must wonder, "Why not?".

My American English background contrasted with the British English background of the students in both groups may account for my sensitivity to the differences (plus, of course, my deep interest in this phenomenon). But I am suggesting that all English language teachers can and should increase their knowledge of the exact differences and that they should share that knowledge with their students. My experience has only been in the Middle East where there is a strong heritage of British influence. It is possible that in traditionally American influenced areas, such as Latin America, the differences would be less relevant. But then too, it would seem to me that the fact that these differences exist in the dominant core of "international English" would lead teachers and students to want to know about them.

Teachers functioning in systems where a local Ministry of Education dictates whether to follow British or American usage may consider my suggestion to teach both varieties wishful thinking. Maybe. But with the mobile populations of the 1980's, the shrinking of the world through rapid transportation, and the abundance of multi-national companies using international English, any system claiming to teach students English should develop an attitude of respect for both major varieties as part of the students' general education. Such an attitude can result from repeated objective attention to differences as they arise spontaneously and are related to the English lesson in hand. Modern students' needs are greater than for just one prestigious variety of English.

Some students may ask "Which is better, British or American English?" Others may even insist that one is better. But with a teacher showing constant respect for both varieties and objectively dealing with differences day-after-day, student attitudes should evolve toward tolerance, enlightened interest, and even exciting discovery. Some linguists like to accuse teachers of "overemphasizing" the differences even when they merely "mention" them. This is unfair and unjustified in view of the many differences which do exist and which are relevant to almost any classroom situation. I am not asking teachers to play up the differences; neither should they play them down. They should just "play it right," by dealing with differences accurately whenever they are relevant.

British and American English
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