



Pronunciational Swings: British and American Influences on the English Pronunciation of English as a Second Language Learners in Sri Lanka

¹Sankaja Amaraweera , ²Sucheru Dissanayake

^{1,2}English Language Teaching Unit, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences,
Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, Sri Lanka
Corresponding Author* – sankaja.a@sliit.lk

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 10 September 2023

Accepted: 01 November 2023

Keywords:

Standard British English; Standard American English; ESL Learners' Pronunciation; British and American Influence; American and British Accents

Citation:

Sankaja Amaraweera , Sucheru Dissanayake. (2023). Pronunciational Swings: British and American Influences on the English Pronunciation of English as a Second Language Learners in Sri Lanka. Proceedings of SLIIT International Conference on Advancements in Sciences and Humanities, 1-2 December, Colombo, pages 134-140.

ABSTRACT

In Sri Lanka, which used to be British Ceylon for nearly 15 decades, BrE used to hold a dominant position in all aspects of life. Under globalisation, a shift is observed taking place towards AmE due to numerous developments in science, technology, industry, commerce, politics, and popular culture. Academics and professionals depend on audiovisual recordings of presentations produced either in Standard British English (BrE) or Standard American English (AmE) and broadcast in public media. Against this background, this paper examines the dynamicity of English pronunciation in Sri Lanka caused by BrE and AmE, to which the ESL learners on the island are daily exposed. It also investigates the extent to which BrE and AmE respectively influence English pronunciation in Sri Lanka, filling a notable gap in the existing literature. The research provides valuable insights into some emerging trends in English pronunciation in Sri Lanka, the conditions that influence the Sri Lankan speakers' attitudes toward the two varieties of English, and the support the ESL teachers can derive from their awareness of pronunciational swings between BrE and AmE in organising teaching practices and materials. Further, some major pronunciation differences between BrE and AmE are explored, highlighting both disparities and exceptions consistent in

certain phonetic features. Finally, it explores the dynamicity of English pronunciation in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the need to consider both local and global factors in ESL teaching, with suggestions for effective language learning and communication in global contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, while Standard British English with R.P. (received pronunciation) is considered in many nation-states, where English is spoken as a second or foreign language, the most prestigious variety and as the model to follow suit, American English has emerged as a serious contender and is claimed by some to have surpassed Standard British English in influencing English around the world. As Mair (2013) notes, “at the risk of causing offence to British readers, the hub of the ‘World System of Englishes’ is Standard American English” (p. 260). Standard American English, as the hub of this system is highlighted as the variety that has the potential to exert its influence on all other varieties and is “a potential factor in the development” of these varieties (Mair, 2013, p. 261). Thus, examining the extent to which these two varieties influence present-day ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) users has become a notable area of research. The present study is also an attempt to understand which variety of English, BrE or AmE, holds a stronger rein over the English pronunciation of ESL learners in Sri Lanka.

The major influence on the English used by Sri Lankans is BrE as a result of Sri Lanka’s colonial past. However, it is pertinent to examine if this idea is still valid, or if any shift can be identified in the local context in line with the changes that Mair (2013) presents. The present study sheds light on the emerging trends in English pronunciation in Sri Lanka as a result of the influence of these two major pronunciation models. The findings of this research will further contribute to understanding

ESL learners’ attitudes towards the two major varieties. The implications will also be useful to ESL teaching professionals to educate their students on prominent pronunciation varieties, and the present global trends in English pronunciation, and to consider these areas in ESL lesson material preparation and evaluation.

1.1. British English Vs American English pronunciation

Differences between BrE and AmE can be seen mainly in grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, stress, and pronunciation. The present research focuses only on the effect of these two varieties of English on the pronunciation of ESL speakers.

A most prominent difference is noticed in the production of /r/ (Hosseinzadeh et.al, 2015). BrE has a non-rhotic /r/ while AmE has a clearly rhotic /r/. In the word ‘car’, the Cambridge Online Dictionary suggests /kɑː/ as the BrE pronunciation and /kɑːr/ as the AmE pronunciation. Considering the vowel ‘O’, it is pronounced with narrowed lips by the BrE speakers as /ɒ/ but in AmE, it is pronounced with rounded lips as /ɔː/. The short /ɒ/ in BrE which is commonly used as an open back rounded short sound suffered a change in AmE as an open-mid back rounded long vowel /ɔː/. For instance, the words *dog* and *job* are accented in BrE as /dɒg/ or /jɒb/ where as in AmE they change as /dɔːg/ and /jɔːb/ (Gomez, n.d.).

The third difference is the pronunciation of the vowel /a/. A front vowel sound /aː/ is used in BrE whereas a back vowel sound /æ/ is used in AmE. Thus, one would ‘go to a /klæs/ to finish /tæks/’ in the US nonetheless a British would ‘go to a /klaːs/ to finish / taːks/.

The ‘t’ sound is a plosive dental /t^h/ in BrE while it is an alveolar flap /r/ in certain words between vowel sounds in AmE (Lindell, 2014). Hence, it sounds more like a /d/ in words such as *water*

/ˈwɔːrə/, *butter* */ˈbʌrə /* and *writer* */ˈraɪə/* in AmE and accented as */wɔːtər/*, */ˈbʌtər /* and */raɪtər/* (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2015).

Apart from these four, there are differences found in the pronunciation of words such as ‘mandatory’ and ‘laboratory’. In BrE, ‘mandatory’ is pronounced as */ˈmæn.də.tər.i/* while there is a change in the penultimate syllable in AmE, as */ˈmæn.də.tɔːr.i/* (CUP, n.d.). In BrE, the suffix “ory”, which is preceded by an unstressed syllable, is pronounced as */əri/* and the same in AmE is pronounced as */Oːri/* (Gómez, n.d.). In this research, the participants’ pronunciation of the above sounds and words was examined in comparison with the BrE and AmE phonologies.

1.2. A brief overview of recent research on the BrE and AmE influence on speakers of ESL and EFL

Recent studies have examined the major differences between BrE and AmE along with their influence on non-native speakers of English. Gilquin’s (2018) study seeks to identify which variety of English, BrE or AmE, is a more important source of influence on other varieties, as an institutionalised second language and as a foreign language. The frequency of twenty pairs of items distinctive between BrE and AmE was calculated in data from the Global Web-Based English Corpus (GloWbE) and the EF-Cambridge Open Language Database (EFCAMDAT). While the analysis showed a greater influence of AmE, it was also revealed that local contextual factors also play a key role in determining the type of influence. The study by Lindell (2014) aims to understand the ability of 97 Swedish learners of English to distinguish between American and British English spelling and vocabulary. The results revealed that the participants had some awareness of the difference between the two varieties but were inconsistent in sticking to one variety and habitually mixed both. A similar study by Alftberg (2009) examined

the awareness among school goers on BrE and AmE vocabulary and pronunciation. The higher influence of AmE was identified including the participants’ tendency to mix both varieties. Further, it was found that male participants had a higher preference towards AmE compared to females, and were more aware of which variety they used including the general differences between AmE and BrE.

Fei-Hsuan & Rou-Jui (2016) investigated the listening comprehension ability in BrE and AmE of Taiwanese undergraduates and their attitudes towards the two varieties. While no significant differences were found in listening comprehension scores, differences in attitudes were evident subsequent to the data analysis. The researchers thus highlight the importance of being exposed to different varieties of English to achieve successful international communication. Further, the study by Yoestara and Wahyuni (2022) aimed at identifying university students’ preferred variety of English in spelling and pronunciation and their ability to distinguish the differences between BrE and AmE vocabulary. The findings revealed the preference of more than half the participants towards AmE in spelling and pronunciation and the ability of the majority to recognize the differences in vocabulary.

Considering research done in Sri Lanka, a study very relevant to the present topic was done by Widyalkara (n.d.), examining the level of infiltration of AmE into Sri Lankan society. The sample group involved hundred undergraduates who were speakers of Standard Sri Lankan English. This research included a 25 word instrument on the use of orthography and pronunciation of these students. A shift towards the pronunciation and spelling norms of AmE was the key finding of this study, thereby demonstrating the rising popularity of AmE among the youth, in line with similar international research in this area.

As discussed above, it is clear that the influence

of BrE and AmE around the world has been investigated in areas such as spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, apart from pronunciation. However, there is a significant gap in the Sri Lankan context pertaining to this research area, evident by the difficulty faced by the authors in finding relevant studies done locally. The present study is thus an attempt to fill this gap.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to identify which variety of English, Standard British English or Standard American English, has the greater influence on the English pronunciation of Sri Lankan ESL learners at present. The study also aims to find the reasons for the higher or lower influence of each variety on ESL learners and any notable deviations from the overall pronunciation influence.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research includes a sample of sixty (60) participants. They are tertiary level ESL learners between the ages of 18-25. These participants were selected as they represent the dominant group who would be using English in the professional world and wider society in future. Thus, data obtained from such a sample would more accurately reflect the existing and emerging trends in English pronunciation in Sri Lanka. The consent of the participants was obtained prior to data collection.

A quantitative method was used for data collection and analysis. To identify the influence on pronunciation, the researchers selected five sets of words reflecting the differences between BrE and AmE as discussed in section 1.1 above. The sets of words were *car/party*, *bath/behalf*, *job/what*, *butter/matter* and *mandatory/laboratory*. The participants were instructed to read the individual words out loud and then read out sentences which included these words. Each word

was allocated one sentence. The responses were recorded and transcribed into an MS Excel sheet. Accordingly, the total number and percentages for each varieties' influence on the pronunciation of the selected words were calculated using MS Excel. Furthermore, the participants were given a questionnaire (created through Microsoft Forms). The questions were based on which English they preferred, BrE or AmE, and the English movies/ TV shows/ cartoons they had watched. The researchers analysed these responses and referred to secondary sources to identify the possible reasons for the influence of each variety of English.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basic statistical indicators are utilised to compare the differences between the pronunciation of the two Englishes.

Sounds	AmE	BrE	Other
Rhotic and non-rhotic [r]	3	57	0
Change of /ɑ:/and [æ]	4	56	0
Change of [ɒ] and [ɔ:]	2	56	2
Change of [t ^h] and [r]	3	55	2
Suffix -ory	7	53	0

Figure 1: Frequency of BrE and AmE sound occurrences

Figure 1 displays the frequency of the different sound occurrences of the five mentioned sound changes. A significant number of BrE pronunciations are highlighted indicating a considerable use of BrE pronunciation among the participants. This is further examined in the following graph.

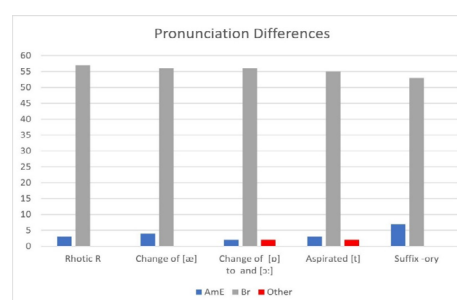


Figure 2: Pronunciation Differences between AmE and BrE

Figure 2 compares the pronunciation variations between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) across five categories. In all cases, BrE consistently exhibits a notably higher frequency of usage than AmE. For instance, in the “Rhotic R” category, BrE employs this sound 57 times, whereas AmE does so only three times, highlighting a significant contrast in the use of the “Rhotic R” sound. Thus, it can be considered that the pronunciation of the rhotic [r] is not commonly seen in Sri Lankan speakers of English. The common usage is the non-rhotic [r] sound. Similar distinctions are observed in the use of the “/ɑ:/” and “/æ/” sounds (56 times in BrE and four times in AmE) indicating the vowel sound /ɑ:/ is noticeable in the Sri Lankan context than the diphthong “/æ/” of AmE pronunciation.

The transformation of “[ɒ]” to “[ɔ:]” is not significantly prominent in the current context, for the BrE pronunciation is used 58 times and the AmE pronunciation only 2 times. The plosive dental “/tʰ/” of BrE was used 57 times and the alveolar flap of AmE /r/ in three instances. However, a slight difference from the previous trend can be seen with the words using the suffix –ory (07 times in AmE and 53 times in BrE). This chart demonstrates the substantial pronunciation differences that exist between American and British English, emphasizing that BrE phonetic features are employed more frequently than those of AmE.

3.1 Participants’ Preferred Variety of English

Even though the pronunciation of the participants displays a major inclination for BrE, their actual preference was also examined. Figure 3 below exhibits the choices of the participants.

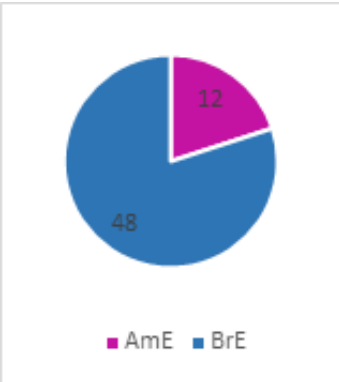


Figure 3: Preferred variety of English of the participants

Considering the preference of English, majority of the participants (80%) expresses a preference for British English. The rest of the participants (20%) favour AmE.

Considering the pronunciation and the preferred variety, it is evident that the variety which was introduced to Sri Lanka still plays a dominant role in the preference and the usage of English.

3.2 Exposure to Popular Media

Apart from the preference and the usage of the two varieties, participants exposure to popular media in English is also examined.

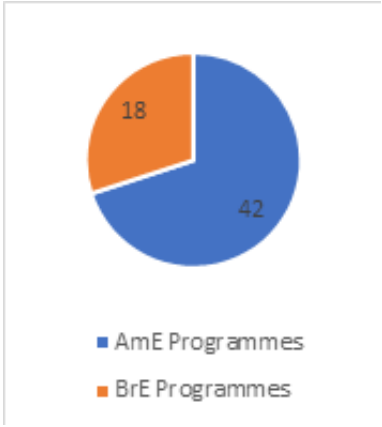


Figure 4: Programmes viewed by participants

Based on the country of production, the variety of English used in the programmes were British and American. Therefore, the participants who watched American produced programmes were exposed to AmE. As indicated in Figure 4, the

participants were significantly exposed to AmE, approximately 70%. The exposure to BrE was only 30%. However, considering participants' pronunciation of the selected word sets, the influence was prominently of BrE contrary to the findings of some of the previous studies discussed in the literature. Thus, the BrE influence is higher in the Sri Lankan context than the AmE influence. Hence a significant transformation cannot be seen in the pronunciation of Sri Lankan ESL learners despite the immense exposure to the AmE due to popular media.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings presented in this paper reveal that both BrE and AmE exhibit distinct pronunciation differences, especially in the use of the 'r' sound, vowel pronunciation, and specific word pronunciations. It becomes evident that BrE tends to maintain a higher frequency of certain phonetic features compared to AmE irrespective of the current developments in the Sri Lankan society. However, the data also demonstrates exceptions, such as the pronunciation of words ending with the suffix '-ory,' where the AmE influence shows a rising popularity.

This preference for BrE is intriguing, given the substantial exposure of Sri Lankan ESL learners to American English through popular media. The participants' viewing habits, as reflected in their exposure to British and American-produced programmes, indicate a predominant influence of AmE. However, the disconnect between exposure to AmE and the prevalence of BrE pronunciation suggests a resistance in the dominance of BrE rooted in historical and cultural contexts. Thus, while globalization and media influence have marshalled in a wave of American English exposure, the study reveals that the historical legacy of British English remains a potent force in shaping English pronunciation in Sri Lanka.

This paper enriches our understanding of the

ongoing evolution of English pronunciation in Sri Lanka, as influenced by BrE and AmE. It highlights the importance of considering both local and global factors that contribute to the preferences and practices of ESL learners. The findings can be instrumental for ESL teaching professionals in adapting their pedagogical approaches and materials to align with the dynamic trends in English pronunciation, thus fostering effective language learning and communication in the international arena.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors' sincere gratitude goes to all the participants of this study who participated with much enthusiasm.

REFERENCES

- Alftberg, A. (2009). *British or American English? Attitudes, awareness and usage among pupils in a secondary school*. (Dissertation, University of Gavle). DiVA. Retrieved from <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hig:diva-5545>
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Mandatory. In *Cambridge dictionary*. Retrieved September 15, 2023 from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pronunciation/english/mandatory>
- Fei-Hsuan, L., Rou-Jui S. H. (2016). Listening comprehension ability and language attitudes: American vs. British English. *Sino-US English Teaching* 13(9), 671-680. doi:10.17265/1539-8072/2016.09.001
- Gilquin, G. (2018). American and/or British influence on L2 Englishes – Does context tip the scale(s)? In S.C. Deshors (ed.) *Modeling World Englishes: Assessing the Interplay of Emancipation and Globalization of ESL Varieties* (pp. 187-216). John Benjamins.

- Gunasekara, M. (2003). The internationalisation of English and Sri Lankan English. *Sri Lankan Journal of Social Sciences* 26(1&2), 93-108.
- Hosseinzadeh, N. M., Kambuziya, A. K. Z., & Shariati, M. (2015, April 28). British and American Phonetic Varieties. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(3), 647. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0603.23>
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2014). World Englishes. In C. Leung and B. Street, *The Routledge Companion to English Studies* (pp. 33-45). Routledge. <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315852515.ch3>
- Lindell, C. (2014). British or American English? - An investigation of awareness of the differences in British and American vocabulary and spelling. (Dissertation, Halmstad University). DiVA. Retrieved from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A688472&dswid=-2679>
- Mair, C. (2013). The World System of Englishes: Accounting for the transnational importance of mobile and mediated vernaculars. *English World-Wide* 34(3), 253-278.
- Schneider, E. W. (2011). *English around the world: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.google.lk/books/edition/English_Around_the_World/--y1kBBiPIIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=inauthor:%22Edgar+W.+Schneider%22&printsec=frontcover
- Widyalankara. (n.d.). *Infiltration of American English into the Sri Lankan society*. [Abstract]. Academia.edu. Retrieved September 1, 2023, from https://www.academia.edu/20856141/Influence_of_American_English_on_Sri_Lankan_English
- Webpgomez. (n.d.). British and American English Pronunciation Differences. Webpgomez. <https://www.webpgomez.com/english/404-british-and-american-english-pronunciation-differences>
- Yoestara, M., & Wahyuni, J. (2022). University students' preferences and recognition: British English Vs. American English. *IJELR: International Journal of Education, Language, and Religion*, 4(1), 47-53. doi: 10.35308/ijelr.v4i1.5561