

The English World in Taiwan – Why Taiwanese Use American English

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I. Introduction

English is a global language used all over the world. Aside from English-speaking countries, most countries have English as their second language, which students are required to learn at schools. However, English differs from country to country, resulting in numerous dialects. After examining the content of English textbooks and listening to the spoken English in Taiwan, it is very obvious that Taiwanese students are taught American English. The objective of this paper is to examine the differences between these two forms of English and discuss the reasons for the dominance of American English in Taiwan.

II. Analysis

A. Major Discrepancies between American and British English

Many varieties in English have been formed due to the differences in cultural backgrounds, historical developments and the migration of people. Among the considerable number of dialects, British English and American English are the two forms which are regarded as standards and are used commonly. British English and American English are discrepant in two most conspicuous written forms, spelling and the usage of vocabularies. In addition to the written form, the other discrepancy people may notice is the different pronunciation in spoken English.

a. Spelling

Spelling is the most noticeable difference in written English, and the history behind it cannot be neglected. Inheriting, American English diverged in a few ways after it was introduced to the Americas during the colonial period back in the early 17th century. In the 18th century, the British spelling was standardized due to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, which current British English spellings follow. Later in 1828, Noah Webster, a strong advocate of spelling reform, published *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which initiates the first formalization of the differences between the two dialects. Webster's dictionary is considered to be the most influential on the current American English. The intention of Webster was to show people through language that a different dialect should be used in this newly independent nation. He advocated that words should be spelled phonetically and that silent letters should be deleted to avoid confusion.

American spellings are more relevant to Latin, while British spellings are closer to Middle English. One very significant spelling difference between the two dialects is perhaps the “silent U”. For instance, people may see the words “behaviour” instead of “behavior”, or “favourite” instead of “favorite” in the areas where British English is spoken. Moreover, the difference between “-re” and “-er” spelling is also commonly observed. The words in American English ending in “-er” such as “center” or “theater”, are usually spelled as “centre” or “theatre” in. Table 1 lists some other examples of different spellings between the two dialects.

Table 1: Example of spelling discrepancies between British English and American English

British English	American English	Example (British/American)
-our	-or	colour/color
-iour	-ior	behaviour/behavior
-yse	-yze	analyse/analyze
-ise	-ize	categorise/categorize standardize/standardize
-isation	-ization	categorization/categorization
-re	-er	centre/center metre/meter
-ough	-	doughnut/donut hiccough/hiccup
a double consonant before ING and ED	-	travelling/traveling
different spellings in verbs or nouns	-	practise(V.) practice(N.)/practice license(V.) licence(N.)/license

(Sources: <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwesl/egw/jones/differences.htm>)

b. Lexicon

American English and British English diverge in terms and phrases as well. The divergence in vocabulary originated from the 19th century to the mid 20th century. The differences can be categorized into two. First of all, different words may be used for the same thing. For example, the word “flat” in British English is used, instead of “apartment” in American English. Secondly, some words which are frequently need in both British English and American English mean differently. For example, “football” refers to “soccer” in British English but means “American football” in American English.

c. Pronunciation

Some words are pronounced differently in British and American English. The most apparent difference is the accent. American English adopts General American (GenAm) pronunciation, which most Americans and Canadians use. Its most obvious feature is that it is rhotic, which means the letter “r” is always pronounced. On the other hand, British English, considered to be “non-rhotic”, is known as Received Pronunciation (RP). Another difference in pronunciation is the difference in stress. In many loanwords from French such as ballet and cafe, RP puts its stress on the first syllable, while GenAm on the second. Last but not least, these two forms of English are pronounced differently from each other when it comes to the vowel “o”. In Britain, the ‘o’ vowel is pronounced with rounded lips and the tongue back in the mouth, whereas Americans, who do not have this vowel, pronounce it as “ah”, with the lips unrounded.

B. Popularity of Learning English in Taiwan

In this competitive society, parents are pushing children more and more in all aspects, especially in English learning. Many children are sent to cram schools to learn English at very young age. International schools, bilingual programs, and English cram schools are particularly common in Taiwan because of the trend of learning English in the past decades. It is common to see students going to cram schools after class or on weekends to learn English. It is obvious that parents in Taiwan think highly of English skills and consider good English the key to success. Additionally, many families have CDs and DVDs of English songs and stories. Parents believe that listening to and watching these can improve children’s English and are willing to spend money on such learning materials. At an older age, some children are sent abroad to study, usually to North America more than the other English-speaking countries, with the intention of improving their English. In sum, Taiwanese parents and children attach much importance on English, which is symbolic of a bright future.

C. The Real Reasons for the Dominance of American English in Taiwan

For the past decades, the majority of the elites in Taiwan have gotten their advanced degrees in the USA, and this undoubtedly affects the formulation of many policies and strategies in Taiwan. This directly or indirectly influences the parents’ preference of American English. Aside from this factor, other reasons may be as following:

a. Foreign Teachers

As English becomes more and more important due to globalization, the education system in Taiwan puts great emphasis on this language. To accentuate bilingualism and also to satisfy parents’ expectations, schools and cram schools hire foreign teachers from English-speaking countries. As a result, the form of English, American English or British English, which foreign teachers use will shape their students.

Table 2 lists the work types and number of foreigners who are approved to work in Taiwan in recently years. The table indicates that next to technical jobs, teaching is the second popular job for foreigners in Taiwan. Table 3 shows the distribution of nationality of those approved foreign workers. Among the foreigners from English-speaking countries, the number of Americans and Canadians, 7046, in total, exceeds that from United Kingdom, which British English is a standard. This clearly reveals that people in Taiwan are exposed to American English rather than British English.

Table 2: Work types and the number of foreigners approved to work in Taiwan

Work type	Technical jobs	Religious or artistic jobs	Cram school (language) teachers	School teachers	Overseas Chinese or foreigners’ investments	Athletes or coaches
Approved case	13139	1487	5801	2327	1453	44

(Sources: <http://www.evta.gov.tw/files/60/718052.pdf> accessed on 2010.03.29.)

Table 3: Distribution of nationality of those approved foreign workers in Taiwan.

Nationality	Japan	USA	Canada	UK	South Africa	Australia
Approved case	6973	4986	2060	1190	808	517
Nationality	Germany	India	France	Singapore	New Zealand	others
Approved case	670	811	420	505	219	1904

(Sources: <http://www.evta.gov.tw/files/60/719050.pdf> accessed on 2010.03.29.)

b. Course Materials

Apart from the nationality of English teachers, course material is also an important factor. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company and McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., the leading publishing companies from the USA, publish textbooks and technical materials for young readers and adults. These two companies publish very large amounts of books for English or to be more specific, American English learners. The course materials of English learning published by these two companies are often chosen in bilingual schools, cram schools in Taiwan. Obviously, American English is used by these two American companies. Thus, American English, especially in spelling and usage, plays a more influential role than British English on the learners in Taiwan.

c. Media

Hollywood, the capital of entertainment industry in US, is most known for being the historical center of movie studios and movie stars. It started in the late 19th century, and as years passed by, it has become the most famous movie-producing city, from which the movies are sold to many countries throughout the world, including Taiwan. Among the numerous foreign films in Taiwan, those produced in Hollywood outnumber the other sources. Hollywood movies, produced in California, USA, star some famous American actors or actresses, for example, Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie. Undoubtedly, those American actors speak American English therefore people in Taiwan, especially moviegoers, become used to the accent of American English. Statistics show that the movie *Transformers*, also a Hollywood movie, was the box office movie in Taiwan last year. Thus, the popularity of Hollywood movie in Taiwan is observed and the influence of American English is obvious.

CNN (Cable News Network) is a US cable news network founded in 1980 by Ted Turner. It is the first network which provides 24-hour news programs, considered to be the second largest cable news network behind FOX News Networks. CNN is available in 212 countries and can be seen by over one billion people around the world, including Taiwan. However, the biggest broadcasting channel in the United Kingdom, BBC (British Broadcasting Company) cannot be viewed in Taiwan. Obviously, these two programs use their local English, that is; CNN uses American English and BBC uses British form. This suggests that, in the respect of media, American English is the mainstream in Taiwan and has more influence on Taiwanese too.

III. Conclusion

Because of the factors, such as foreign teachers, course materials, movie industries and media, American English becomes the predominant subject of English education in Taiwan. It has gradually been embedded in parents' knowledge that "good English" is equivalent to "American English". However, there is no good or bad nor right or wrong as far as the two English dialects are concerned. Each dialect has its own history background; therefore we should show them equal respect. Nevertheless, it is suggested that learners in one form of the English should be consistent when speaking or writing so that people don't get confused.

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