

The American Impact: How American Culture Has Been Reshaping English Language Learning in and out of the Classroom

Zsombor Váczi

Abstract: In numerous countries around the world as well as in Hungary since the appearance of English as a Foreign Language in the classroom, British English has always been set as the standard variety to be taught. The vast majority, if not all, of the course books used in the Hungarian classrooms are based upon or prioritize British English. Hardly ever will a language learner hear American voices in the audio materials that accompany a course book series. The boom of technology in the twenty-first century, the proliferation of the digital world and the growing popularity of social media have long opened the doors to a conspicuous American impact with regard to content consumption among teenagers. In the past years, students have been zealously discussing American songs, movies, TV series, streaming services, video channels, influencers or computer games. The language varieties they encounter in such contents often stand in conflict with the language varieties their course book materials offer. A small-scale study carried out with the participation of about 100 students between the ages of 13 and 19 sets out to reveal which varieties of English students prefer nowadays based on their content consumption. The study relies on an anonymous online survey consisting of both closed- and open-ended questions. The results aim to provide a key to how we teachers of English should change our attitude to teaching English in the classroom in the future.

Keywords: American culture, English as a foreign language, Hungary, small-scale study, students' attitudes

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1. British vs. American English Around the World and in the Classroom

English has undeniably become a lingua franca. Statistics vary on how many people speak English today, but all of the sources reveal a number around 1.5 billion, out of which approximately 400 million people speak the language natively. The population of the United States (~342 million) far outweighs that of the United Kingdom (~68 million). These numbers lead us to a still unresolved contradiction that is further projected to the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms of Hungary and many other countries in the world up to this day, namely: while the number of people speaking American English as their mother tongue is higher than those speaking British English as their native language, British English appears to have been prioritized in all fields of EFL teaching and assessment across Europe. “In Europe, due to its proximity to Britain, British English was usually the model presented in teaching materials.” (Richards n.d.)

Ever since the emergence of English as a foreign language in Hungarian classrooms, there are little to no English textbooks of American origin. The textbook series utilized in Hungarian classrooms scarcely mention British-American differences or anything about the American culture; they usually appear in the form of footnotes or brief intermezzos in some of the chapters. The audio materials of the textbooks or the listening comprehension recordings of language and final exam papers predominantly deploy British English speakers. Hardly ever can an American voice be heard. To what reasons may lie behind this fact, Algeo provides a straightforward answer:

The prestige of British English is often assessed, however, in terms of its “purity” (a baseless notion) or its elegance and style (highly subjective but nonetheless powerful concepts). Even those Americans who are put off by “posh accents” may be impressed by them and hence likely to suppose that standard British English is somehow “better” English than their own variety. From a purely linguistic point of view, this is nonsense; but it is a safe bet that it will survive any past or future loss of British influence in world affairs. (Algeo 2009)

He also claims that “despite the historical prestige of British, today American English has become the most important and influential dialect of the language” and “is rapidly becoming the dominant form of English in non-native countries other perhaps than those of Western Europe” (Algeo 2009). The influence of the American culture shows conspicuously with the students’ rapidly growing interest in streaming services (Netflix, YouTube, Twitch etc.), video games (often played online with friends or foreign people), music, movies or series, and social media—including social networking apps and gaming platforms, such as Discord. Examples of this can already be found in classroom settings around the world.

Whenever it comes to a textbook listening task, some of the students—including many participants of the research project—seize the opportunity to express that British English sounds “weird” and it is much easier for them to comprehend American English. The students in their critical comments mostly refer to the intonation and pronunciation being further from their language and more difficult to grasp and reproduce. A typical example would be any word in which the phoneme ‘r’ is silent, such as “morning”, “fork”, “bird” or “word” itself, whereas in

American English these ‘r’ sounds are audible, bringing it closer to the written form and thus making it easier to pronounce. It would be imperative to examine how their preferences affect the actual outcome of their language acquisition process. The following findings rely solely on observation: over the course of eight years, the vast majority of fluent speakers in our classrooms have begun to develop or fully mastered an American accent. Besides, several beginner or elementary level students are also able to imitate the American accent perfectly when it comes to pronouncing simple phrases or reading a text out loud. Meanwhile, they turn out to be unwilling or unable to imitate any sort of British variety, despite the massive exposure to British English through the countless listening tasks.

The boom of smart phones with high-speed internet connection in the past decade has unquestionably expanded the walls of the EFL classroom and prompted an overhaul of the ways we approach language teaching and learning. The immediate accessibility of virtually any content has further been strengthening the assumed American influence, widening the gap between the aspirations of the EFL teacher and the outside world as perceived by the learners. “School is no longer the sole influence for learning English and as a consequence of this the motives for learning are no longer the same.” (Ledin 2013)

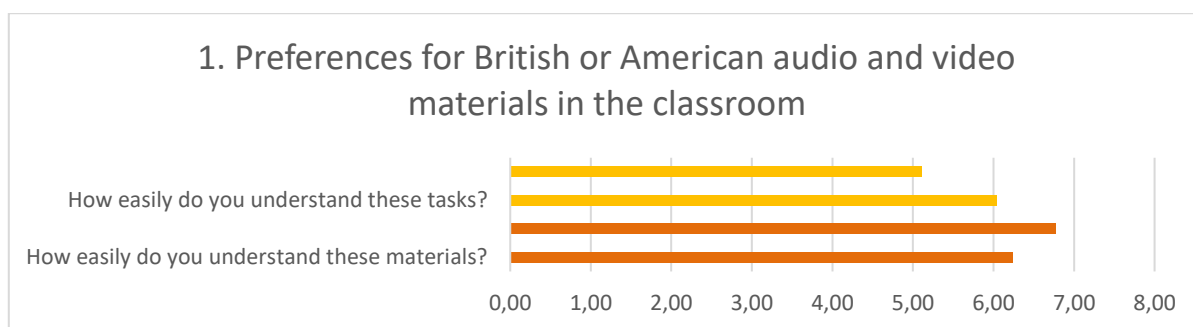
2. Research Methods and Participants

In order to gain a deeper insight into the above-mentioned tendencies, I have conducted a small-scale questionnaire-based research project at my school. The anonymous survey titled *English In and Out of the Classroom* consists of 9 scales or checklists regarding students’ preferences for different varieties of English and content consumption in the target language, as well as 2 open-ended questions about culture and dream traveling destinations, and 1 follow-up question for additional comments. The participants were students of various ages, ranging from fifth grade through twelfth grade with a total of 94 respondents. The original questionnaire was written in Hungarian to avoid language barriers in lower-level groups.

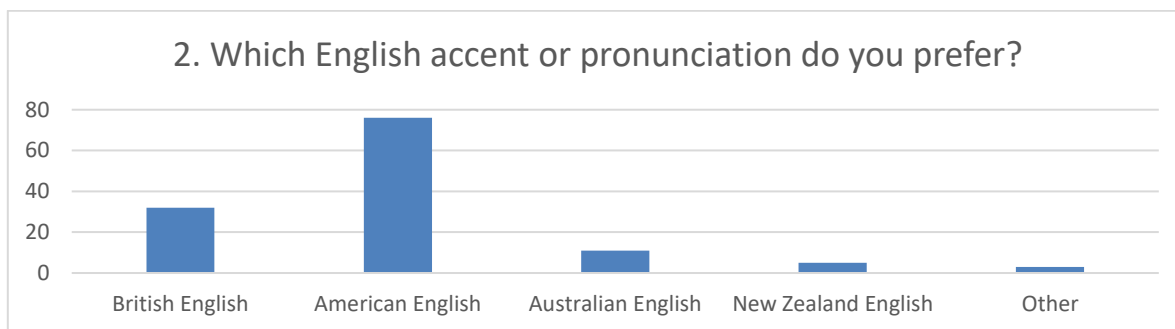
2.1. Limitations of the Research

Some of the respondents have dyslexia or other sorts of specific learning difficulty which may have hindered the accurate comprehension of the questions or answers. A slight number of responses to the open-ended questions or unique extra answers in the checklists imply misunderstanding or inattention. It is also paramount to note that, depending on their age, not all participants have the same access to computers, smart devices, or the internet, which may distort the results regarding content consumption. Ultimately, while filling out the survey, some students were uncertain about the varieties of English and the main differences between them. In a few cases, they requested clarification, which occurred exclusively with primary school students.

3. Results

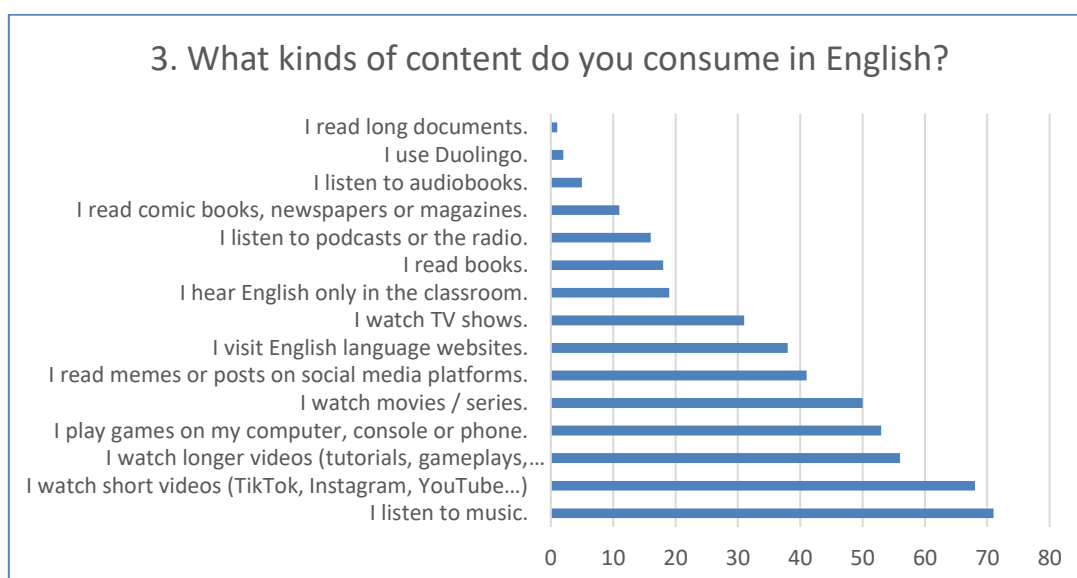


The first four questions above aimed at exploring my students' preferences for either British or American English materials. The results show that American videos or audio recordings are slightly more popular and easier to understand than British listening tasks in the textbooks or workbooks. It is important to note, however, that since American materials usually mean authentic YouTube videos, movie excerpts, TED talks or radio programs that are not adjusted to the level of the class, they are more likely to appear in higher level groups. Nonetheless, British listening tasks are implemented in all classrooms regardless of their level. Therefore, we can conclude that the popularity of American materials proves to be higher, which is further reinforced by the results shown below.



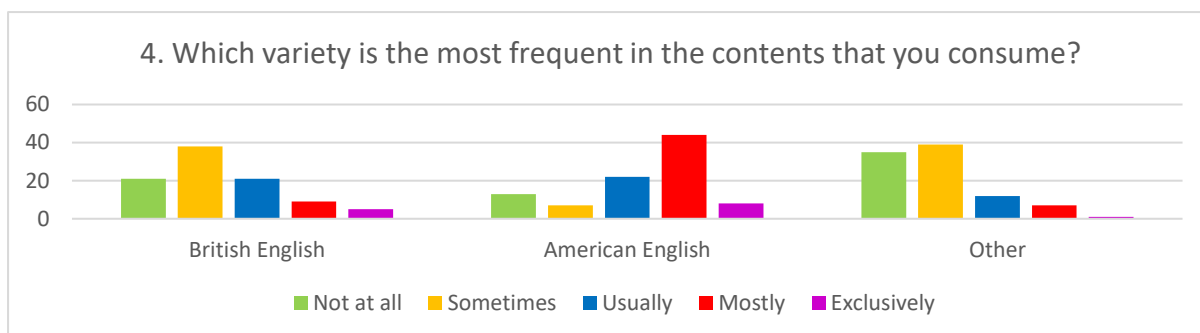
The next set of questions focuses on content consumption in English. Almost all respondents seem to be fond of music, which may come as no surprise—we can agree that foreign songs have always been a quintessential source of language input. Nevertheless, music could be regarded as an ‘all-purpose tool,’ and another survey would probably confirm that while music is often used as a means of language learning both in and out of the EFL classroom, many people do not focus on the lyrics; it merely serves as a source of pleasure played in the background.

The second most popular answer deserves more attention. The era of short videos began with the appearance of TikTok in 2016. Other social media platforms followed suit in the upcoming years with the emergence of shorts on YouTube, Instagram, as well as other applications. As can be seen from the results, it has quickly become a predominant genre over the internet. There is a great deal of teachers or language coaches posting short tutorial videos. With their inexhaustible creativity and often high-end technical background, this novel genre could easily become an independent approach to language teaching and learning both because the videos are brief and compact, and because the algorithm turns out to repeat the videos that we choose to watch to the end while presenting similar new videos to us.

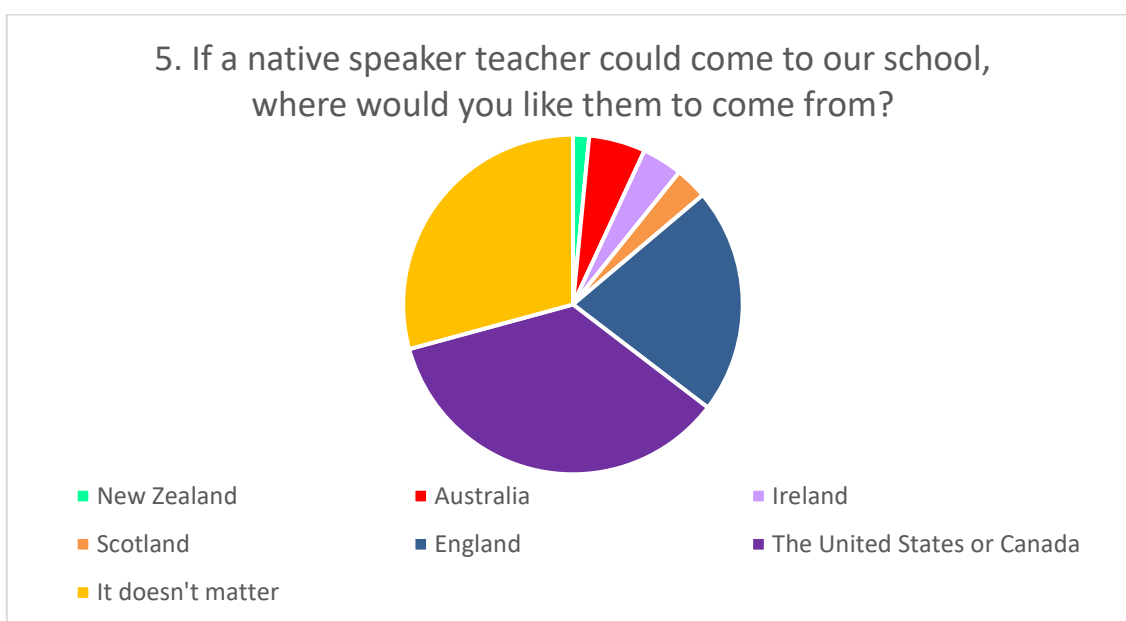


Besides watching or listening to a wide range of content (including music, short and long videos, movies, or series), playing video games online—which also appears to be near the top of the list—fulfills another important function from the perspective of language learning, that is, interactivity. The participants of any multiplayer game use the chat window to write messages or use headphones to talk with one another while playing. Which variety appears to be the most frequent in these games? Many of the major video game publishers (such as Rockstar Games, Electronic Arts, Lucasfilm Games or Blizzard Entertainment) are American. Based on the students’ accounts, their default language is English, which means that they are massively exposed to American English while playing these games.

Video games, movies, series, and various types of video materials play a crucial role in the lives of the younger generations. Many of the students define these media as the sole factors in successfully mastering a high-level and fluent English. Furthermore, the results below clearly show that the predominant variety in the contents they consume is indeed American English.



The two open-ended questions were the following: “If you could travel to any English-speaking country for free, which country or city would you most like to go to?”, “What is the first holiday that comes to your mind from an English-speaking area?” The winner in case of the traveling destinations was North America. 54 respondents would travel to the United States or Canada, whereas only 38 respondents would choose the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, or India. The holidays turned out to be more balanced with 17 students answering Thanksgiving or Independence Day, 11 students answering Halloween, and 9 people answering Saint Patrick’s Day.



Lastly, the students were asked from which country they would prefer to have a native speaker teacher in the classroom. Again, a person of North American origin received the highest number of responses with 35%, while the UK came in third place with only 28%. 29% of the students would be happy with any person provided that they are native speakers.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, the influence of American English on the students' content consumption and language learning process is beyond doubt. They expressed an unequivocal preference for American English, which shows both in their inclination towards the American accent and the contents they consume. It was no surprise that in the survey the number one traveling destination would also be North America. Moreover, when it came to mentioning a holiday from an English-speaking country, two of the four most common answers were Thanksgiving and Independence Day, both of which originate from and are closely related to the United States.

With the rapid development of technology and the spread of new trends becoming faster and faster through social media, the gap between traditional EFL classrooms and the reality that the students perceive outside of the formal learning environment will keep growing wider, should we fail to intervene. We EFL teachers must try our best to adapt to the changes not only from a methodological but also from a linguistic perspective. The results of the present research evidently confirm that the curriculum should place more emphasis on both American English and the concept of English as a lingua franca. Thanks to the enormous amounts of readily available online content, students will no longer have the erroneous impression that British English is a superior or solely acceptable standard over other varieties. Nevertheless, EFL teachers do have a responsibility in promoting the diversity of the language as well as in creating a harmony between the classroom and the world beyond its walls.

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