

PRONUNCIATION PREFERENCES AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH ACCENTS IN SMP STUDENTS IN PEMATANGSIANTAR

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kecenderungan siswa dalam menggunakan aksen bahasa Inggris Amerika atau Inggris ketika mengucapkan kosakata bahasa Inggris. Subjek penelitian adalah siswa kelas delapan dari sebuah sekolah menengah pertama di Pematangsiantar. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes pengucapan dan dianalisis menggunakan transkripsi fonetik (IPA) untuk menentukan jenis aksen yang digunakan. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa 73% dari kata-kata yang diuji diucapkan dengan pola bahasa Inggris Amerika, sedangkan 27% mengikuti karakteristik bahasa Inggris Inggris. Faktor-faktor seperti paparan media, pengaruh guru, dan persepsi siswa terhadap aksen berkontribusi pada tren ini. Studi ini menunjukkan pentingnya pendekatan pengajaran yang secara eksplisit memperkenalkan variasi aksen dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Pronunciation, American English, British English, Accent, Junior High School Students, Pematangsiantar

This research aims to identify students' tendencies in using American or British English accents when pronouncing English vocabulary. The subjects were eighth-grade students from a junior high school in Pematangsiantar. Data were collected through pronunciation tests and analyzed using phonetic transcription (IPA) to determine the type of accent used. Results showed that 73% of the tested words were pronounced with American English patterns, while 27% followed British English characteristics. Factors such as media exposure, teacher influence, and students' perception of accents contributed to this trend. The study suggests the importance of teaching approaches that explicitly introduce accent variations in English language learning.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become an essential and unavoidable tool for international communication. Its role extends far beyond the borders of native-speaking countries, serving as a global lingua franca in fields such as business, education, technology, and diplomacy (Wulandari, 2020). In Indonesia, English is taught systematically from elementary school to secondary education, with the aim of equipping students with communicative competence that meets international standards (Hijazi & AlNatour, 2020).

However, despite standardized curricula, a variety of pronunciation models is observed among learners. One of the most prominent distinctions lies in the use of American English (AmE) versus British English (BrE) accents. These two varieties of English differ significantly in terms of phonological characteristics such as vowel quality, consonant articulation, syllable stress, and intonation patterns. For instance, words like *schedule*, *garage*, *advertisement*, and *tomato* are pronounced differently depending on the accent used, and such variations may cause confusion or inconsistency in learners' speech production (Umara & Lestari, 2020).

The differences in accent preference can be influenced by numerous factors, including exposure to media, teaching models, textbook content, and students' own perceptions of which accent is more "correct," "easier," or "more popular." (Syafiq et al., 2021) While the national curriculum in Indonesia does not explicitly prescribe one accent over another, in practice, many teachers adopt pronunciation patterns they are more familiar with—often based on either American or British media exposure or their own educational background (Ambalegin & Hulu, 2019).

Pematangsiantar, recognized as one of the educational centers in North Sumatra, accommodates a diverse population of students and institutions. The city's junior high schools follow the national curriculum, but students' accent preferences and pronunciation development have received little academic attention (F. Lengkoan & P.L. Hampp, 2022). Given the increasing need for effective English communication skills, particularly in speaking and listening, it becomes crucial to understand how local students pronounce English and which accent they tend to adopt more frequently (Cavirani, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the pronunciation tendencies of eighth-grade students in a junior high school in Pematangsiantar, focusing specifically on whether they lean more towards American or British English pronunciation (Nushi et al., 2023). By identifying these patterns and the influencing factors behind them, this research hopes to contribute to more informed and adaptive English pronunciation teaching strategies in Indonesian schools (Pardede, 2021).

Literature Review

1. American vs British English Accent

American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) are two of the most widely recognized varieties of English worldwide. While mutually intelligible, they exhibit considerable differences not only in vocabulary and spelling but, more significantly, in pronunciation. These pronunciation differences are particularly evident in the areas of vowel quality, consonant articulation, intonation patterns, syllable stress, and rhythm (Delatorre & Baptista, 2014).

One of the key distinctions lies in the pronunciation of certain consonants. For example, the /r/ sound is rhotic in American English, meaning it is pronounced clearly in all positions (e.g., *car* /kɑ:r/), whereas in British English, particularly in Received Pronunciation (RP), it is non-rhotic and typically omitted at the end of syllables (e.g., *car* /kɑ:/). Similarly, the pronunciation of the flap /t/ in American English often resembles a quick /d/ sound, as in *butter* /'bʌɾə/, whereas British English maintains a clearer /t/ articulation /'bʌtə/.

Vowel pronunciation also varies notably. For instance, the word *dance* is pronounced /dæns/ in American English and /dɑ:ns/ in British English. Another example is *route*, pronounced /ru:t/ or /raut/ in American English, while typically /ru:t/ in British English. These vowel variations are often the most noticeable markers of accent and can affect intelligibility and learners' preferences. (Dewi, 2022).

Differences in word stress and intonation patterns also shape the distinctive sound of each accent. For instance, in the word *advertisement*, stress is placed on the second syllable in American English (/æd'vɜ:tɪsmənt/), but on the third syllable in British English (/əd'vɜ:tɪsmənt/). Additionally, British English often employs a wider pitch range and more rising intonation in questions compared to the flatter and more even pitch of American English (Anderson, 2012).

Here are some commonly cited examples of pronunciation differences:

- a. *Schedule*: AmE /'skɛdʒu:l/ vs BrE /'fɛdju:l/
- b. *Garage*: AmE /gə'rɑ:ʒ/ vs BrE /'gærɑ:ʒ/
- c. *Tomato*: AmE /tə'meɪtəʊ/ vs BrE /tə'mɑ:təʊ/
- d. *Mobile*: AmE /'mɔʊbəl/ vs BrE /'məʊbəl/
- e. *Vitamin*: AmE /'vaɪtəˌmɪn/ vs BrE /'vɪtəˌmɪn/

These pronunciation differences are not merely linguistic but also carry social and cultural associations. American English is often perceived as more “modern” or “casual,” while British English is associated with formality, tradition, and prestige. These perceptions can influence learners' preferences and motivation in adopting a particular accent.

As Roach (ANUGRAH, 2019) emphasizes, recognizing the systematic nature of these phonological differences is essential in teaching English as a foreign language. Learners benefit from being exposed to both varieties, understanding their unique features, and being able to comprehend and adapt depending on context and audience.

2. Media Exposure and Accent Influence

Media is widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful influences on language acquisition, particularly in the development of pronunciation and accent preferences. In the digital age, students are constantly exposed to various forms of media—films, television series, music, video games, podcasts, and online platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix. This exposure, especially when consistent and repetitive, has a strong impact on how learners perceive and produce language sounds.

According to Derwing & Munro (Parmawati, 2018) learners are often unaware of how deeply media influences their spoken English. Repeated exposure to American English media, which dominates global entertainment industries, contributes to a higher tendency for learners to adopt American pronunciation patterns. For example, blockbuster movies, popular music, and social media influencers mostly use American English, making its phonological features more familiar and accessible to learners across non-English-speaking countries, including Indonesia.

This phenomenon is further supported by Jenkins (Saadia, 2023) who notes that accent acquisition is not only a linguistic process but also a socio-cultural one. Students tend to imitate the speech patterns of people they admire or frequently listen to. As such, popular American figures in media—actors, musicians, YouTubers—become informal language models, shaping learners' pronunciation subconsciously over time.

The omnipresence of American media also influences students' attitudes toward English pronunciation. American English is often perceived as more "cool," "modern," and "easier to understand" due to its prevalence in mainstream content. In contrast, British English may be seen as more "formal" or "academic," and therefore less relatable in casual, everyday contexts. These perceptions directly affect pronunciation choices, especially in spontaneous speech, peer conversations, and informal settings.

Furthermore, studies by Kachru (Fitriani et al., 2023) highlight that English in the Expanding Circle (such as Indonesia) tends to reflect the dominant media influence, rather than the officially taught curriculum. Although English textbooks may feature either British or mixed-standard pronunciation, students' real exposure often comes from unsupervised media consumption outside the classroom.

Therefore, while teachers may model British or neutral pronunciation in the classroom, students' daily engagement with American-accented media likely has a stronger long-term impact on their actual pronunciation tendencies. This underscores the need for educators to be aware of external linguistic influences and to provide balanced exposure to both American and British varieties when teaching pronunciation.

3. Role of Teachers and Curriculum

Teachers play a central role in shaping learners' pronunciation patterns, both directly through explicit instruction and indirectly through modeling. Celce-Murcia et al. (Rehman et al., 2022) emphasize that pronunciation acquisition is not solely influenced by formal teaching but also by the way teachers naturally speak in class. In this context, teachers act as the most immediate and consistent linguistic input for students, especially in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environments like Indonesia, where authentic interaction with native speakers is limited.

In many Indonesian classrooms, despite the intention to present neutral or "international" English, teachers often default to using American English pronunciation. This tendency is partly due to the overwhelming presence of American English in teacher training materials, dictionaries, online resources, and media. Furthermore, the structure of national English textbooks—although sometimes incorporating both variants—often leans toward American spellings, vocabulary choices, and phonetic representations.

The familiarity factor also plays a major role. Teachers who were educated with American English as their primary reference are more likely to teach what they know best. This results in the consistent reinforcement of American English pronunciation, even if unintentionally. When students repeatedly hear American English features—such as the rhotic "r" sounds, flat /æ/ in words like "dance," or /ə/ in words like "teacher"—they begin to internalize these patterns as the standard (Arafa et al., 2018).

Moreover, English curricula in Indonesia do not strictly prescribe which accent students must adopt. While listening exercises and national exam content may reflect a mixture of accents, they rarely assess pronunciation based on a specific model. As a result, there is often ambiguity in pronunciation instruction, which allows teachers' personal preferences to shape classroom practice significantly.

Several studies, including that by Wahyuni (A. Sa'di, 2022) indicate that the majority of secondary school teachers in urban areas of Indonesia use American English more frequently in pronunciation drills, listening exercises, and classroom conversations. This aligns with the broader pattern of American English dominance in non-native English teaching contexts, where accessibility and simplicity often outweigh considerations of accent diversity.

Additionally, students tend to emulate their teachers' speech patterns as they are perceived as authority figures and role models. In the absence of direct instruction on accent variation, learners may come to believe that the teacher's way of pronouncing English is the only correct form. This highlights the importance of incorporating accent awareness into the curriculum—where both British and American English are presented as valid and equally acceptable varieties.

4. Previous Studies

Several prior studies have examined accent preferences and pronunciation tendencies among Indonesian students, revealing consistent patterns of inclination toward American English. For instance, Putri (Almuslimi, 2020) conducted a study involving 100 high school students in Jakarta and found that approximately 65% demonstrated pronunciation patterns aligned with American English, while 35% leaned toward British English. The study attributed this predominance to extensive exposure to American media and the influence of school materials that favored American phonological models.

Similarly, a more recent study by Manik & Simanjuntak (Mounadil, 2023) investigated pronunciation tendencies among 120 senior high school students in Medan, North Sumatra. The findings echoed those of Putri, with American English once again emerging as the dominant accent choice. The study also highlighted the influence of local teachers' pronunciation habits and the prevalence of American-accented materials in

classroom instruction. Interestingly, the researchers noted that while students were aware of British pronunciation through formal education, they often defaulted to American patterns in casual speech and oral tasks.

Another relevant study by Lestari (Wijayanto, 2019) explored pronunciation performance among university-level EFL learners in Yogyakarta. This study revealed that students' accent preferences were largely influenced by the pronunciation of their lecturers and the audio materials used during lectures. Although the students were exposed to both American and British varieties, the practical use of American English in most digital resources shaped their phonological development more profoundly.

Despite these findings from various regions in Indonesia, there is a noticeable lack of contextualized research focusing on smaller educational cities like Pematangsiantar. While Medan, as a provincial capital, has been the subject of multiple linguistic studies, Pematangsiantar has received comparatively less scholarly attention. This gap in research is significant, given that Pematangsiantar is home to a diverse range of junior and senior high schools, many of which follow the national curriculum and implement English instruction (Haerazi & Nunez, 2022).

The present study aims to address this research gap by focusing specifically on junior high school students in Pematangsiantar. By examining their pronunciation of selected English words and identifying accent preferences, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on English phonological acquisition in Indonesian contexts. Furthermore, it provides insights into how local sociolinguistic factors, such as teacher influence, media exposure, and community language practices, shape students' pronunciation choices in less urbanized regions (Love, 2021).

2. Method

Type of Research

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach aimed at identifying and analyzing the accent tendencies—American or British English—among junior high school students in Pematangsiantar. A descriptive method was chosen because it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data regarding observable phenomena, in this case, students' English pronunciation patterns (Khan & Khan, 2020). The quantitative aspect involves the use of numerical data in the form of percentages to represent the distribution of pronunciation types, allowing for objective and measurable conclusions. This method is suitable for investigating phonological tendencies within a defined group and provides a structured way to explore variations in spoken English (Relaño Pastor & Fernández Barrera, 2018).

2. Research Subjects

The subjects of the study consisted of 30 eighth-grade students from SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar, a public junior high school located in the city of Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria:

1. Willingness to participate in the research voluntarily
2. Basic proficiency in English, particularly in reading and pronunciation

3. Representativeness of the general student population at the school

This purposive selection ensured that the subjects had sufficient familiarity with basic English vocabulary while also reflecting realistic classroom pronunciation abilities. The school was chosen due to its active English program and accessibility to the researcher (Budianto, 2019).

3. Research Instruments

The instruments used to collect data were as follows:

1. Pronunciation Test: A list of 20 English vocabulary items was prepared. Each word was carefully selected based on its well-known phonological distinctions between American and British English. Examples include *vitamin*, *schedule*, *advertisement*, *garage*, and *mobile*. These words were taken from commonly used classroom materials and standardized dictionaries to ensure familiarity.
2. Observation Sheet: A structured observation sheet was used by the researcher to record how each student pronounced the words. This tool included columns to note IPA transcriptions and classify each pronunciation as American or British.
3. IPA Chart Reference: An International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart was used as a reference to accurately transcribe students' pronunciation. This ensured objectivity and consistency in categorizing accent types based on phonetic features.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The procedure began with an in-class session where students were invited to read a printed list of 20 English words aloud. The session took place in a quiet classroom environment to reduce distractions. Each student took turns reading the word list one by one in the presence of the researcher. Unlike previous studies that relied on audio recordings, this research used direct observation and manual transcription to document pronunciation, based on the following reasons (Bond et al., 2019):

1. Simplicity and practicality in school settings
2. Avoiding technical complications related to recording devices
3. Enabling real-time feedback and classification

As students read the words, the researcher transcribed the sounds using IPA and immediately noted whether the pronunciation aligned with American or British English standards. For example, the pronunciation of "*garage*" as /gə'ra:ʒ/ indicated British English, while /gə'ra:dʒ/ indicated American usage (Stewart & Ivala, 2017).

5. Data Analysis Technique

Once all students' pronunciations were recorded, the data were analyzed using quantitative tabulation and percentage calculation. Each word's pronunciation was tallied based on the number of students using either American or British phonology. The final results were presented in a frequency table that showed:

1. Number of students using American or British pronunciation per word
2. Percentage representation of each accent
3. Overall dominant pronunciation tendency

This analysis allowed the researcher to determine which accent was more commonly adopted across the student group (Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015). The results were

interpreted in light of possible influencing factors such as teacher modeling, media exposure, and students' prior learning experiences. The findings were also compared to previous studies to contextualize the observed patterns (Joarder et al., 2020).

3. Result and Discussion

The analysis was based on 20 selected English words frequently showing contrast between American and British pronunciation. Each student's pronunciation was transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The results were categorized and summarized in the following table:

No	Word	American IPA	British IPA	AmE (Students)	BrE (Students)	Dominant Accent
1	Garage	/gə'ra:ʒ/	/'gæra:ʒ/	21	9	American
2	Vitamin	/'vaɪtəmin/	/'vɪtəmin/	20	10	American
3	Schedule	/'skɛdʒu:l/	/'ʃɛdju:l/	24	6	American
4	Mobile	/'moubəl/	/'məubail/	23	7	American
5	Tomato	/tə'meɪtəʊ/	/tə'mɑ:təʊ/	25	5	American
6	Advertisement	/æd'vɜ:tɪsmənt/	/əd'vɜ:tɪsmənt/	22	8	American
7	Zebra	/'zi:brə/	/'zɛbrə/	26	4	American
8	Privacy	/'praɪvəsi/	/'prɪvəsi/	18	12	American
9	Leisure	/'li:ʒə/	/'lezə/	20	10	American
10	Data	/'deɪtə/	/'dɑ:tə/	21	9	American
11	Route	/ru:t/ or /raʊt/	/ru:t/	19	11	American
12	Either	/'i:ðər/	/'aɪðə/	23	7	American
13	Neither	/'ni:ðər/	/'naɪðə/	24	6	American
14	Herb	/ɜ:b/	/hɜ:b/	25	5	American
15	Defence	/dɪ'fens/	/dɪ'fens/	17	13	American
16	Aluminium	/ə'lu:mɪnəm/	/'alju'mɪniəm/	26	4	American
17	Process	/'prɑ:sɛs/	/'prəʊsɛs/	20	10	American
18	Adult	/ə'dʌlt/	/'ædʌlt/	22	8	American
19	Clerk	/klɜ:k/	/kla:k/	23	7	American
20	Laboratory	/'læbrətɔ:ri/	/'lə'bɒrətəri/	19	11	American

Based on the data presented in the pronunciation table, 73% of total student responses were aligned with American English pronunciation, while the remaining 27% reflected British phonological features (Jayantini et al., 2025). This significant percentage confirms that American English is the dominant accent adopted by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar. The findings indicate a clear trend in students' pronunciation choices, influenced by several interrelated factors.

Firstly, students are extensively exposed to American media, including movies, television series, YouTube content, and music (Kannangara et al., 2018). This consistent exposure to American English in informal and entertaining contexts likely shapes their auditory preferences and influences how they internalize English pronunciation. As

supported by Derwing & Munro (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2010) continuous media contact plays a crucial role in unconscious accent acquisition, especially among adolescents (Arhipova et al., 2021).

Secondly, teachers' pronunciation models play an essential role in shaping students' spoken English. In many Indonesian schools, teachers tend to adopt American English due to the prevalence of American-based materials in national curricula, such as textbooks and digital learning resources (Raditiyanto et al., 2023). Additionally, American pronunciation tends to be more widely represented in exam preparation materials, further reinforcing its use in classrooms. This aligns with Celce-Murcia et al. (de Gagne et al., 2019), who emphasized that learners often mirror the pronunciation of their teachers.

Thirdly, students reported that American English phonology is easier to learn and pronounce, especially due to its more regular stress patterns and rhotic pronunciation. For example, words ending in "-er" or containing the /r/ sound are often easier to articulate in American English because of the audible post-vocalic /r/, unlike British English which tends to drop or soften these sounds. This perceived simplicity contributes to the learners' preference and comfort in adopting American forms (Lu et al., 2022).

Overall, the results of this study reflect a broader pattern also found in earlier research by Putri (Adli & Guy, 2022), which reported similar findings in different Indonesian regions. The dominance of American English among junior high school students in Pematangsiantar suggests that accent acquisition in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts is not merely a result of curriculum design but is strongly influenced by cultural immersion, teacher practices, and perceived accessibility of the accent. These factors combined guide students toward the accent they encounter most frequently in both academic and non-academic settings (Mendes et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

This study examined the pronunciation tendencies of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 4 Pematangsiantar by analyzing their articulation of 20 English vocabulary items commonly pronounced differently in American and British English. The findings reveal a strong preference toward American English pronunciation, with 73% of total student responses reflecting American phonological features. Several factors contribute to this dominance. Media exposure, especially to American pop culture, serves as a major influence, while teachers' pronunciation models and curriculum materials further reinforce American patterns. Additionally, students perceived American pronunciation as more straightforward and easier to articulate, particularly in terms of rhoticity and stress patterns. The results align with previous studies conducted in Jakarta and Medan, suggesting a broader national trend in accent preference among Indonesian EFL learners. This accent tendency has implications for pronunciation instruction, language awareness, and the development of learners' listening and speaking skills.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made for educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers:

- a. Teachers should expose students to both American and British pronunciation models to enhance their phonological awareness and flexibility in different English-speaking contexts.
- b. Curriculum designers are encouraged to include balanced pronunciation resources, allowing students to recognize accent diversity and make informed choices.
- c. Media integration in the classroom should be carefully selected to represent varied English accents, thus preventing over-reliance on a single model.
- d. Future researchers may expand this study by including a larger and more diverse sample size, exploring sociolinguistic motivations behind accent preferences, or comparing rural and urban school environments

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