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The Accent Dilemma: Navigating Perceptions of British and American English

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Abstract
In higher education, where English serves as the lingua franca and medium of instruction, the debate on British (BrE) and American (AmE) accents remains a critical issue. This study investigates the beliefs and perceptions of English language teachers at the postgraduate level in Pakistan about these two varieties. It also investigates how their perceptions influence the teaching of a particular variety the academic environment. Using qualitative design, and semi-structured interviews, this study explores English language teachers' perceptions in a postcolonial context. Findings identify a significant ideological tension: teachers admit the historical prestige of BrE while simultaneously recognizing the global utility of AmE. This conflict leads English language teachers into inconsistent classroom practices. Moreover, a prevalent belief in accent as a key to success and societal status significantly influences teachers' assessment of students' abilities. The study concludes that these beliefs may create linguistic insecurity and maintain unfair standards in English language classrooms. The study urges teachers to refrain from copying native-speaker accents and focus on mutual intelligibility. The study recommends reforms in teacher training and assessment to reflect English as a diverse and global language.

Keywords: Teacher Beliefs, World Englishes, Accent Perception, Postgraduate Education, Pakistan EFL.

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1. Introduction

English as lingua franca has changed and restructured the higher education in fast changing world. English is not merely taught as subject; it has become the medium of instruction from primary to university level and the primary medium of scholarly production across the globe. Given the post-world context, emerged two models of English – British (BrE) and American (AmE), which continue to hold a symbolic capital till today. These two varieties of English are still the reminiscent of colonial powers and retain strong hold on contemporary media. In education, these two varieties have traditionally served as the pedagogical benchmarks in English Language Teaching in colonies.

While the world has long embraced the concept of World Englishes (Kachru, 1985), the prestige and ideological weight of BrE and AmE still persist in academia. The choice of which accent or model to teach is not accidental; it is deeply tied to issues of identity, prestige, intelligibility, and academic background. At the university level, these concerns become even more pronounced. Students are expected to attain high proficiency not only for comprehension but also for argumentation, conference presentations, and international publication. Instructors play a critical role in shaping students' preferences for a particular model of English. This makes it essential to examine English language teachers' beliefs regarding which model they would prefer their students to learn and use.

An English teacher at the postgraduate level is more than an instructor; they are a mentor, an academic socialiser, and an evaluator. Their implicit and explicit beliefs about the "correctness," "appropriateness," or "prestige" of certain accents can influence everything from the feedback they provide on oral presentations to the materials they select for their courses. These beliefs, often formed through a complex interplay of their own training, exposure, and linguistic background, can

create a hidden curriculum that subtly privileges one accent over another. This study, therefore, turns its attention to these teachers, seeking to understand the nature of their beliefs regarding British and American accents and how these perceptions inform their pedagogical practice in the advanced academic setting of postgraduate education.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

At the postgraduate level, a student's accent can significantly impact their perceived credibility and future career. This study investigates a critical problem: the potential for postgraduate English teachers to hold hierarchical beliefs about accents that favor British or American models over other global varieties of English.

Such a bias, whether conscious or not, risks fostering student insecurity, compromising the fairness of oral assessments, and contradicting the mission of international universities to value diverse perspectives. Despite extensive research on language attitudes in other settings, the beliefs of this influential group of educators remain a critical and unexamined blind spot. This research aims to fill this gap, providing crucial insight for developing more equitable and globally-minded academic environments.

1.2. Research Questions

The objectives are:

1) What are the beliefs and attitudes of postgraduate English teachers regarding the academic prestige of British versus American English accents?
2) Do these teachers express a preference for one accent model over the other for pedagogical purposes, and what reasons do they provide for this preference?

3) How do teachers' personal and professional backgrounds relate to their beliefs about these two major accents?
4) In what ways do these beliefs reportedly influence teachers' classroom practices and their assessment of postgraduate students' spoken English?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Global Status of English: From Standard to Standards

The global spread of English has created a linguistic landscape far more complex than a simple dichotomy between British and American norms. Braj Kachru's (1985) influential "three circles" model: comprising the Inner Circle (e.g., UK, USA), Outer Circle (e.g., India, Nigeria), and Expanding Circle (e.g., China, Brazil)—provided a framework for understanding the diverse contexts of English use. This model challenged the notion that the Inner Circle owned the language, arguing instead for the legitimacy of different "World Englishes." Following this line of thought, scholars like Jennifer Jenkins (2007) have focused on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), proposing that in communication between non-native speakers, the primary goal is mutual intelligibility, not adherence to a native-speaker standard. Jenkins' work suggests that focusing strictly on either BrE or AmE models may be pedagogically counterproductive in a world where most interactions in English do not involve a native speaker at all. Despite this theoretical shift towards linguistic pluralism, the ideological power of Inner Circle varieties remains potent.

2.2. Accent, Ideology, and Linguistic Capital

Accents are never neutral; they are imbued with social and cultural meaning. The concept of "Standard Language Ideology" describes the belief that a uniform, idealised form of a language exists, and that this standard is inherently superior to other varieties (Lippi-Green, 2012). Both Received Pronunciation (RP) in

Britain and General American (GenAm) in the United States have functioned as such standards. Their prestige is not a result of any intrinsic linguistic quality but is a product of their association with historically powerful social groups, education, and media (Milroy & Milroy, 1999).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) provides a useful lens through which to view this phenomenon with his concept of "linguistic capital." In this view, the ability to use a prestige accent is a form of capital that can be exchanged for social and economic opportunities. Students and teachers are often acutely aware of this, perceiving an RP or GenAm accent as a key to accessing international academic circles or prestigious careers. This perception creates a powerful incentive to prioritise these accents in the classroom, even when instructors intellectually support the idea of linguistic diversity. Research has consistently shown that non-standard accents, including regional and foreign accents, can trigger negative stereotypes and lead to discrimination in housing, employment, and even the justice system (Giles & Watson, 2013). This societal reality places English teachers in a difficult position, caught between promoting linguistic equality and preparing students for a world where accent bias is rampant.

2.3. Teacher Cognition and its Pedagogical Consequences

The field of language teacher cognition explores what teachers think, know, and believe, and how this internal landscape shapes their professional practice (Borg, 2003). As M. F. Pajares (1992) noted in his seminal review, beliefs are a "messy construct" but are arguably the most significant predictor of an individual's behaviour, including a teacher's instructional choices. Beliefs are often established early and are resistant to change, filtering new information and guiding action in the classroom.

In the context of pronunciation teaching, teachers' beliefs directly influence whether they teach pronunciation at all, what model they use, how they correct errors, and how they assess student speech. A teacher who believes that a near-native accent is both attainable and necessary for success will likely adopt very different methods from a teacher who prioritises intelligibility and communicative effectiveness within an ELF framework (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2015). These beliefs can manifest in subtle but powerful ways, from consistently praising a student who approximates a target accent to implicitly penalising another whose strong L1 accent persists despite clear and effective communication.

2.4. Studies on Accent Preference in ELT

Existing research indicates a complex picture of accent preference. Many studies suggest that while learners and teachers may intellectually support the idea of variety, they often demonstrate a preference for Inner Circle accents in practice. For instance, Scales and his colleagues (2006) found that while learners of English were open to different varieties, they still preferred to learn from teachers with native (specifically American) accents. Similarly, a study by Timmis (2002) revealed that a majority of international students preferred to learn a native-speaker accent, citing reasons related to correctness and employment opportunities.

However, these preferences are not monolithic. Some studies show a strong preference for BrE in certain European and Asian contexts due to historical ties and perceptions of it being more "elegant" or "educated," while AmE is often preferred for its perceived connection to global media and business (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997). The key takeaway from this body of work is that attitudes are context-dependent and often contradictory. What remains critically underexplored, however, is how these dynamics play out at the

postgraduate level, where the stakes of academic performance are at their peak and where teachers wield immense influence as gatekeepers to the international academic community. This study is designed to address that specific, high-stakes context.

3. Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design to examine English teachers' beliefs about British and American accents at the postgraduate level. A qualitative approach is considered most appropriate in contexts when research aims to explore attitudes, perceptions, and the reasoning behind them which cannot be explored fully using quantitative approach alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The philosophical aspect grounded into interpretivism, as the study sought to analyse and understand the subjective experiences and interpretations of the participants themselves. A multiple case study approach was used. This approach treats each English language teacher as a different case while allowing cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2018).

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection Tools

The data collection process completed in two phases. In first phase, an online survey questionnaire containing 12 Likert scale questions about British English and American English accents was emailed to 50 English language teachers. The questionnaire also gathered demographic information such as years of experience, country of training, L1 etc. This phase informed the purposive selection of sample of English Language teachers for the second phase.

The second phase of the data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with five selected ELTs. The semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility to probe deeper into emergent themes and individual narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews based on the research explored participants' background, beliefs, perceptions of Prestige, pedagogical choices and perceived

student impact. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 25 to 30 minutes.

3.2.1.Participants and Sampling

The study selected those English language teachers who were currently teaching or had recently taught English to BS students in various universities of Khyber Pashtunkhwa. Based on the preliminary survey, participants were invited for interviews. These criteria selection was as follows:

- Minimum Education: MPhil preferably PhD
- 10-15 Years of teaching experience at the postgraduate level.
- Teaching context: University or Postgraduate college

Moreover, their consents were obtained and they were assured that their real names would not be revealed at any stage. Additionally, the collected data would be destroyed once themes were established and findings were recorded.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data from the survey questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics using SPSS ver. 24.

Interview Data: The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis. The analysis chose to follow the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). For coding and development of themes, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate and manage the coded data.

4. Questionnaire Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of data collected from the preliminary survey and the semi-structured interviews. The analysis aims to address the research questions by first providing a broad overview from the survey data, followed by an in-depth thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The discussion integrates these findings, interpreting them within the specific socio-cultural and

educational context of Pakistan and linking them to the broader academic literature.

Table 1: Key Findings from the Preliminary Teacher Survey.

Finding	Result	What This Reveals
The Professed Goal	85% of teachers state their primary goal is intelligible pronunciation.	This shows alignment with modern, globally-accepted pedagogical principles that prioritize communication and mutual understanding over native-like imitation.
The Prestige Belief	68% of teachers believe BrE is the most proper/prestigious model.	This reflects a persistent, traditional hierarchy that values one accent (BrE) over others, rooted in historical ties, colonial legacies, and academic traditions.
The Pragmatic Belief	72% of teachers believe an AmE accent is more beneficial for careers.	This indicates an awareness of global market forces and the instrumental value of AmE in international business, media, and technology sectors.
The Core Conflict	60% of teachers show contradictions between professed goals and beliefs	This contradiction reveals a tension between pedagogical ideals and sociocultural perceptions: while teachers advocate for clarity and communicability, their attitudes toward accent prestige and utility risk shaping classroom practices in ways that undermine their stated goal.

4.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Thematic analysis of the five semi-structured interviews revealed four major themes that captured the nuances of teachers' beliefs and their reported pedagogical practices.

Theme 1: The Enduring Shadow of the Raj: Institutionalised Prestige of BrE

The most prominent theme was the deeply embedded perception of British English as the "gold standard." This belief was not merely a preference but was described as an institutional and historical inheritance. Participants frequently linked the prestige of BrE to Pakistan's colonial past and its enduring influence on the educational and civil service systems.

Dr. Anwar, a senior professor with over 25 years of experience, articulated this view clearly:

"We cannot escape history. Our system, from the courts to the universities, was built on a British model. The Queen's English, as we used to call it, is simply seen as more… scholarly. It has a certain gravitas that American English lacks. Our official documents, our textbooks—they still follow the British convention."

This sentiment illustrates how Standard Language Ideology (Lippi-Green, 2012) operates in this context. The prestige of BrE is not seen as an arbitrary choice but as a naturalised, historical fact. Another participant, **Ms. Hina**, linked this to assessment:

"In a PhD viva, for instance, a crisp British accent immediately signals a certain level of education. It's not fair, perhaps, but it's a reality. It carries symbolic weight."

This symbolic weight is a direct reflection of Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, where the accent is not just a way of speaking but a credential in itself, one that is particularly effective within the formal structures of Pakistani academia.

Theme 2: The "American Dream" Effect: AmE as the Language of Aspiration

Counterbalancing the historical prestige of BrE was the unanimous recognition of American English as the language of contemporary global opportunity. Teachers saw AmE not as an academic standard but as a practical tool for their students' futures. This perception was overwhelmingly tied to media, technology, and access to the US-dominated global economy.

Mr. Bilal, a younger EAP instructor, explained:

"My students aren't watching the BBC. They are watching Netflix, they follow American YouTubers, they want to work for Google. When they think of 'international,' they think of America. So, when I correct their pronunciation to a British standard, I sometimes feel I am teaching them a language for a world that is fading."

This quote captures the disconnect between the institutional standard and the students' lived reality. The influence of AmE was seen as a bottom-up force, driven by student desire and global trends. As **Ms. Sadia** noted:

"Many of our best students apply for Fulbright scholarships to the US. They consciously try to adopt an American accent to 'fit in.' They see it as a key to accessing that world. Who am I to say they are wrong?"

This pragmatic acceptance shows teachers navigating between the "Inner Circle" norms of Kachru's (1985) model, recognising that different spheres of life may demand different linguistic currency.

Theme 3: The Pedagogical Tightrope: A Classroom of Contradictions

This theme encapsulates the practical challenges teachers face when their ideological beliefs, the institutional curriculum, and student aspirations collide. Most teachers reported a sense of confusion and compromise in their actual classroom practices.

While the official curriculum and textbooks (often from Oxford or Cambridge University Press) promote BrE, teachers felt a pressure to at least acknowledge AmE. This often resulted in a "mixed model" approach.

Ms. Hina described her method:

"Honestly, it's a bit of a mess. I will teach the British pronunciation of 'schedule' or 'either,' because it's in the book. But then a student will use the American version in a presentation, and it sounds perfectly fine. Do I 'correct' them? It feels wrong to. So I often say, 'The British say X, the Americans say Y, both are fine as long as you are consistent.' But I am not sure if this helps them or just confuses them."

This "pedagogical tightrope" illustrates the tension between teaching a codified standard and adopting an ELF-oriented approach focused on intelligibility (Jenkins, 2007). The default position for many was to fall back on the BrE standard for formal instruction while allowing for AmE in practice, creating a potential hidden curriculum where BrE is taught but both are accepted.

Theme 4: Accent as an Academic Gatekeeper

Regardless of their personal preference, almost all participants believed that a student's accent played a significant role in their academic journey, acting as a powerful gatekeeper. They felt that a "non-standard" or heavily L1-influenced accent could disadvantage a student, while a "native-like" BrE or AmE accent could provide an unearned advantage.

Dr. Anwar stated this bluntly:

"Let us be realistic. A student giving a conference presentation with a clear, polished British accent will be perceived as more intelligent and credible than a student with a thick local accent, even if their research is identical. We know this is bias, but our job is to prepare students for the world as it is."

This quote highlights the ethical dilemma faced by teachers, as discussed by Timmis (2002). They feel a responsibility to prepare students for a world where accent discrimination is real (Giles & Watson, 2013). This belief directly influences their feedback, with many admitting to focusing more on accent reduction for students they perceive as having "strong" or "problematic" accents, conflating phonetic form with communicative competence.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a vivid picture of English teachers in Pakistan demonstrating how they are negotiating between history, globalisation, and pedagogy. The data confirm that the BrE/AmE remain active in this context engaged in ideological and practical struggle.

BrE maintains a powerful postcolonial legacy, central to the educational system and embedded in the social and political fabric. This confirms the current literature on Standard Language Ideology, which argues that a variety is elevated for historical and political, rather than linguistic, reasons. However, this study adds a new aspect by demonstrating how this BrE is now in direct competition with the political and economic pull of AmE.

The classroom teaching of Pakistan is marked by compromise and contradiction. On one side, teachers show their support for the lingua franca and vow to promote mutual intelligibility. On the other hand, their actual classroom practices involve the teaching of either BrE or AmE. This practice often results in inconsistent feedback and continues to heighten students' and their portents' concerns about the choice of accent. Such concerns reflect what Labov (1972) describes as "linguistic insecurity," where learners feel that their speech is inadequate and feel feel insecure and anxious.

It is pertinent to mention that the belief in accent as a gatekeeper to success highlights the sensitive nature of this issue. Teachers teaching English language

are shaping students' access to the international academic community. To prioritise one accent and neglect others may have significant consequences for students' confidence, and future opportunities.

To conclude, the beliefs of English teachers are not a simple preference for one accent over another. They are a mix of historical background and legacy, market demand, and concern for their students' futures. It is unfortunate that success in today's world is still judged and acknowledged by the way one speaks, despite the strong opposition and academic debate.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that postgraduate English teachers in Pakistan are caught in a deep ideological conflict regarding British and American accents. They are torn between upholding the institutional prestige of British English, a powerful remnant of the colonial past, and acknowledging the overwhelming practical utility of American English in a globalized world. This fundamental tension forces them to walk a "pedagogical tightrope," navigating between curriculum standards that prescribe British English and the reality of students who are more exposed to and influenced by American English. The result is often an inconsistent "mixed model" approach in the classroom, which risks confusing students and perpetuating their linguistic insecurity. Most significantly, these teachers function as powerful academic gatekeepers, holding a widespread belief that a "native-like" accent is a key determinant of a student's success. This creates a biased evaluative environment where the phonetic form of speech can overshadow the intellectual substance of ideas, rewarding linguistic conformity over true communicative effectiveness. In essence, this accent dilemma is a microcosm of a larger struggle between postcolonial identity, global aspirations, and the pluralistic reality of modern English.

7. Recommendations

To address this, a fundamental shift is needed. In the classroom, pedagogy should prioritize mutual intelligibility and communicative effectiveness over mimicking native-speaker norms, and teaching materials must be updated to include a diverse range of World Englishes. These practices must be supported by institutional reforms, including mandatory teacher training on global Englishes and revised assessment policies that reward clarity and effective communication. Such changes will help dismantle outdated linguistic hierarchies, build student confidence, and align English education with the language's global, pluricentric nature.

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