

WARM UP

1 Are you learning British English or American English?

BRITISH ENGLISH VS AMERICAN ENGLISH

One of the most obvious differences between British English and American English is the pronunciation, but there are also variations in grammar, spelling and vocabulary. American English often uses the past simple while British English uses the present perfect (*I already did it – I've already done it*); *have got* is usually used to talk about possession in British English while *have* is used in American English; prepositions are often used differently, e.g. *Write me soon* in American English versus *Write to me soon* in British English. With regards to spelling, American English often has a single consonant while British English has a double consonant (*traveling – travelling*) and it uses the spelling *-ize, -or* and *-er* whereas British English traditionally prefers *-ise, -our* and *-re* (*organize – organise, color – colour, center – centre*). Variations in slang and colloquial expressions naturally exist in the two nations, but even everyday words can be different – *pants* and *trousers*, *elevator* and *lift*, *autumn* and *fall* – which can lead to misunderstandings.

ACTIVITIES

READING COMPREHENSION

2 Read the text and, in pairs, say which of the variations between British and American English you were already aware of.

3 FCE Read what five people think about British and American English. For each question, choose the correct person/people. The people may be chosen more than once.

Which person or people...

- 1 mentions a misunderstanding? _____
- 2 talks about global English? _____
- 3 talks about a comprehension problem? _____
- 4 had visitors from the USA? _____
- 5 has a traditional outlook? _____
- 6 points out differences in vocabulary? _____
- 7 does not like distinguishing between American and British English? _____
- 8 mentions the influence of television on language? _____
- 9 received a complaint about his/her accent? _____
- 10 makes a criticism about the written language? _____

A We all know about the American going shopping in the UK and getting frustrated because the shop assistant just shows him underwear when he wants to buy a pair of trousers, but I never imagined I'd be in a similar situation in the States when I arranged to meet a business associate. He was waiting for me on the ground floor while I was on the first floor, as that's what he told me. Or at least that's what I'd understood because it actually means the ground floor! It took over half an hour of waiting and an embarrassing phone call to sort it out.

B I've been teaching English as a foreign language for about 7 years now and I'll always remember one of my first students, Mario. During our lessons he would always complain that he couldn't understand me or my accent. Then he went on a study trip to Brighton in England. When he came back he told me American accents were actually easier than British ones as everyone there speaks with their mouth closed!

C I recently met some distant relatives from the States. They're my dad's cousins or something. Anyway, they were visiting us in the UK for a few days and there were two teenage boys, roughly the same age as me, and what I found strange was how often they didn't understand some of the things I said while I understood them all the time. My dad said it's because I watch so much TV that I've picked up American words and slang without knowing it. He's probably right.

D Some people might say that I'm too old-fashioned, but I really don't like how American spelling is becoming so commonplace here in England. Why should I see 'organise' with a z instead of an s in my English newspaper? If I'm reading an American novel, I expect to see American spelling and that's fine with me. We each have our own spelling rules and I think we should stick to them and keep the languages separate.

E There are so many Americans and Britons today for whom English is a second language, and so many people in the world who are learning English as a foreign language, that I don't think it makes much sense talk about American and British English being different. There are hundreds of versions of English being spoken around the world and I think they are all equally valid as long as we can all understand each other.

VOCABULARY

4 Can you match these common British English words with their American equivalent?**British English**

- 1 estate car
- 2 biscuit
- 3 ground floor
- 4 petrol
- 5 pavement
- 6 sweets
- 7 tap
- 8 underground

American English

- a gas
- b subway
- c candy
- d station wagon
- e first floor
- f cookie
- g sidewalk
- h faucet

SPEAKING

5 Discuss these questions in pairs.

- 1 Do you find American or British accents easier to understand?
- 2 Would you like your accent to be American or British English? Or another English?
- 3 Do you use American or British spelling? What about vocabulary?
- 4 Are you more in contact with American or British English (e.g. through TV, websites, music)?