

AMERICAN VS BRITISH SPELLING PREFERENCES IN SPOKEN TOURISM ENGLISH BY EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The issue of spelling variation between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) in English-language tourism communication is often overlooked in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, particularly among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In reality, such variations can significantly influence how professionalism and message clarity are perceived in global communication contexts. This study aims to explore the spelling preferences used in spoken tourism English among two EFL learners, employing a qualitative case study approach. The research subjects were two fifth-semester students from Universitas Aisyah Pringsewu which were selected using purposive sampling. Data were gathered through transcripts of role-play simulations and reflective interviews, and analyzed using thematic coding and a linguistic observation rubric. The findings reveal that both participants predominantly used AmE spelling, influenced more by exposure to digital media than by systematic linguistic awareness. Nevertheless, BrE forms still emerged, particularly in contexts perceived as formal or institutional. These results highlight a limited metalinguistic awareness of spelling variation, which contributes to inconsistent register use in professional tourism communication. Therefore, it is recommended that English language instruction for tourism explicitly incorporate training on spelling variation and contextual usage to foster communicative competence that is both professional and adaptable in international settings.

Keywords: English for Tourism, spelling variation, British English, American English, EFL learners

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Introduction

English serves as the primary medium of communication in the global tourism industry. As a lingua franca, it functions not only as a tool for cross-cultural interaction but also as a marker of professionalism and credibility in service delivery (Ennis, 2021; Jenkins, 2014; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). In real-world applications, English usage in tourism varies widely, particularly between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE), which differ significantly in terms of spelling, pronunciation, and lexical choices (Bolton, 2012; Ennis, 2021; Koceva et al., 2023; Trudgill & Hannah, 2017). These variations become even more complex in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, especially when learners are required to engage in spoken interactions within

tourism-related environments (Hynninen & Solin, 2017; Kachru, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Several previous studies have highlighted that EFL learners exhibit varying preferences between BrE and AmE. For example, Yoestara & Wahyuni, (2022) found that most university students tend to favor AmE spellings due to extensive media exposure and the perceived global dominance of American English. Meanwhile, Muid et al. (2024) observed that while learners may be aware of the distinctions between BrE and AmE, they often demonstrate inconsistency in applying these variations, particularly in spelling and pronunciation. Similar findings were reported by Cortes & Csomay (2015), Ranta (2010), and Sung (2016) who emphasized that students' exposure, teacher preference, and instructional materials influence their

adoption of English variants. These findings suggest the presence of linguistic confusion that may hinder effective communication in formal contexts such as tourism interactions (Alshumaimeri, 2022; Melitz & Toubal, 2014).

Despite these insights, most existing research remains focused on written forms or learners' general perceptions, rather than actual language use in spoken and professional settings (Basturkmen, 2010; S. Evans, 2013; Hyland, 2006). This highlights a notable gap within English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly English for Tourism. In real-life interactions between tourism professionals and international visitors, the choice of spelling variant not only reflects linguistic competence but also serves as a pragmatic strategy in constructing professional identity and service credibility (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-salminen, 2013; Pratiwi et al., 2023; Rose & Galloway, 2019).

Technological developments in natural language processing (NLP) further underscore the functional role of spelling variation. For instance, Nielsen et al. (2023) showed that AI language models are capable of distinguishing and responding to regional spelling differences, reinforcing the argument that orthographic variation carries both semantic and functional significance. Similar conclusions are echoed in applied linguistics and computational studies (Eisenstein, 2013; Zampieri et al., 2022), which highlight how variant sensitivity enhances machine understanding in cross-cultural applications.

This study aims to address the identified gap by examining the spelling preferences in spoken English among two EFL learners engaged in tourism-themed simulations. By focusing on spoken English interactions, the study provides fresh insights into how learners

navigate language variation in context-specific educational settings. According to Liao & Hu (2016), learners' perceptions of accents and language varieties influence their comfort and engagement in communication, especially in listening and speaking activities. Additional research by Csizér, K., & Kormos, (2009), and Kalaja & Barcelos (2006) supports this notion, revealing that learner attitudes toward English varieties significantly shape their language behavior and interactional confidence.

This research offers two main points of novelty. First, it investigates spelling choices as they appear in oral speech, rather than solely in written form. Second, it explores how these choices manifest in simulated tourism scenarios that mirror real-world communicative needs in the workplace (Elder, 2008; Long, 2005; Richards & Schmidt, 2013). The findings are expected to contribute both to the theoretical discourse on language variation in ESP and to the practical development of more contextually grounded EFL tourism curricula (Basturkmen, 2025; Fitria, 2020; Woodrow & Guest, 2017).

Within the context of tourism globalization, choosing between English language variants, particularly BrE and AmE spellings, is not a purely linguistic matter, but one closely tied to how speakers construct their professional identity and communicative credibility (House, 2014; Nickerson, 2005). Although English is the dominant medium of intercultural communication in the tourism sector, awareness of spelling variation is often underemphasized in ESP instruction. Some previous researches of Cortes & Csomay (2015), Muid et al. (2024), Trudgill & Hannah (2017), and Yoestara & Wahyuni (2022) have shown that inconsistency in using BrE and AmE

may stem not only from habitual exposure to one variant but also from a lack of metalinguistic awareness, which can impair the effectiveness of professional communication (Matsuda, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Building on these findings, the present study offers a more context-sensitive and in-depth approach. Unlike prior research that mainly examined written language or general attitudes, this study focuses on actual language performance in spoken tourism English, simulating real workplace scenarios (Basturkmen, 2010; Long & Crookes, 1992). A qualitative exploratory case study design was chosen to closely examine the decision-making processes involved in spelling selection during interactive communication. Participants were purposively selected based on their academic background and prior experience with tourism-related simulations, ensuring they represented prospective professionals in the field.

Data were collected through spoken role-play simulations, stimulated recall interviews, and a spelling variation checklist. These instruments were designed to not only capture the forms used but also to uncover the reasoning and awareness behind the learners' choices. Thematic linguistic analysis was then applied to identify recurring patterns, usage contexts, and emergent themes such as consistency, media influence, instructional norms, and linguistic identity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dornyei, 2007; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015).

By combining a contextualized approach with reflective techniques and a focus on professional spoken interaction, this research addresses a critical gap in ESP scholarship. It also contributes to the advancement of English language pedagogy that is more context-aware, adaptable, and internationally oriented (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Jenkins, 2014; Rose & Galloway,

2019). Ultimately, the study aims to move beyond description and offer practical insights for developing more effective, awareness-based curricula in EFL tourism education.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative approach, utilizing an exploratory case study design. Such a framework allows the researcher to explore in depth how two EFL learners express their preferences for British or American spelling systems in spoken English within tourism-related contexts. This design is particularly appropriate as the focus of the study lies in understanding meaning-making processes, language choices, and the pragmatic considerations that underlie the use of different spelling variants in authentic, task-based speech.

The case study method is especially suitable given the limited number of participants (two individuals), and the aim is not to generalize findings, but to gain a rich understanding of a specific linguistic phenomenon within a particular setting (Yin, 2014). This approach also enables the researcher to capture the cognitive processes and language strategies employed by the learners when dealing with spelling choices in real-time, interactive spoken discourse.

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012). The main criteria included: (1) being fifth-semester students of English Education at Universitas Aisyah Pringsewu; (2) having completed English for Tourism as part of their ESP courses; and (3) having prior experience in role-play or simulation tasks related to tourism services. These criteria ensured that participants had adequate background knowledge of both British

and American English variations, as well as familiarity with communicative tasks in tourism contexts. The small sample (two students) aligns with the exploratory case study design that prioritizes depth of analysis over generalization (Yin, 2014).

To collect data, the study employed three primary instruments. The first was a set of role-play tourism task, consisting of two simulation sessions where participants acted as a hotel receptionist and a tour guide. These scenarios were designed to reflect realistic interactions with international tourists and to elicit the use of vocabulary containing divergent BrE-AmE spellings, such as traveller/traveler, centre/center, and organise/organize. The design of the role-play tasks was guided by four communicative indicators commonly required in tourism encounters (N. G. Evans, 2024): (1) welcoming and assisting guests (e.g., hotel check-in conversation), (2) explaining services or packages (e.g., tour itinerary, facilities), (3) describing features (e.g., rooms, destinations, or local culture), and (4) handling guest inquiries or problems (e.g., asking for directions, service complaints). Each indicator was embedded in both simulation scenarios to ensure authentic language performance and to provide opportunities for participants to naturally produce spelling-related variants in spoken forms. All sessions were audio-recorded for subsequent analysis.

The second instrument was a stimulated recall interview, conducted after the simulations. In this session, the researcher replayed excerpts from the recorded interactions and asked participants to explain their reasons for selecting certain word forms. To ensure consistency, the interview followed a semi-structured guideline consisting of five indicators adapted from (Gass &

Mackey, 2013): (1) awareness, whether the participant realized using a specific spelling form (BrE or AmE); (2) reasoning, why they chose the variant (habit, exposure, instruction, or preference); (3) perceived appropriateness, whether they considered the variant suitable for a tourism context; (4) influence of learning sources, the role of media, classroom instruction, or peer interaction; and (5) reflection on professionalism, their perception of how spelling choice may affect credibility in tourism service. These indicators enabled the researcher to trace both the cognitive and affective dimensions behind the participants' language decisions, providing insights that may not have surfaced spontaneously during the simulations.

Lastly, a spelling variation checklist was used. This list consisted of common BrE-AmE vocabulary within the tourism domain and was utilized to map each participant's spelling preferences and measure the consistency of their language use across tasks.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using a thematic linguistic analysis approach. The process began with verbatim transcription of the recorded spoken data, ensuring that every occurrence of BrE-AmE spelling variants (e.g., traveller vs. traveler, programme vs. program) was accurately captured. The transcripts were then subjected to manual coding, where each instance of spelling choice was categorized according to its context of use. For example, in the hotel receptionist scenario, the researcher coded instances such as "*programme*" when describing hotel activities or "*color*" when referring to room facilities. In the tour guide scenario, codes included the use of "*centre*" or "*center*" when explaining destinations or tourist attractions.

Following this coding stage, the researcher identified recurring patterns of preference across tasks. For instance, one participant consistently used BrE forms (e.g., programme, organise) during formal explanations of itineraries, reflecting classroom-based exposure. In contrast, AmE variants (e.g., color, center) often emerged spontaneously in informal moments, such as casual interactions with simulated tourists, suggesting media influence. These usage contexts were then organized into broader themes, such as deliberate versus incidental use, patterns of preference, metacognitive awareness, and professional representation, each directly linked to the authentic tourism interactions observed in the role-play.

The next stage involved thematic interpretation, where the researcher derived meaning from the coded data by organizing it into core themes, such as consistency of use, media influence, pedagogical norms, and linguistic identity. This approach allowed for a deep exploration of the social, educational, and personal factors influencing the learners' linguistic decisions.

To ensure data validity, triangulation of instruments was conducted, along with member checking, whereby participants were invited to review and confirm the initial interpretations made by the researcher based on their data.

Findings

This section presents the findings from spoken simulation tasks, checklist analysis, stimulated recall interviews, and observation rubrics. Thematic analysis generated four key themes regarding learners' spelling variation in spoken English for tourism simulations.

1. Deliberate and Incidental Use of BrE and AmE in Simulated Tourism Contexts

Throughout two role-play simulations, participants employed lexical items that reflected either British English (BrE) or American English (AmE) spelling conventions. While the task was oral, several orthographic preferences surfaced through spoken forms that reveal underlying exposure and internalization of different English norms.

Table 1. Examples of BrE-AmE Lexical Variation in Spoken Role-Play Tasks

No	Lexical Item	BrE Variant (P1/P2)	AmE Variant (P1/P2)	Communicative Function
1	traveller	✓ / –	– / ✓	Welcoming international guests
2	Organise	✓ / ✓	– / –	Explaining travel package
3	Centre	✓ / ✓	– / –	Referring to city destinations
4	Colour	✓ / –	– / ✓	Describing room interior
5	Programme	✓ / ✓	– / –	Presenting tour itinerary
6	Behaviour	✓ / ✓	– / –	Commenting on guest conduct
7	check-in	✓ / ✓	✓ / ✓	Referring to hotel arrival process

Participant 1 consistently used BrE forms such as *traveller*, *organise*, and *colour*, in alignment with classroom instruction. Participant 2 demonstrated varied usage, such as saying "*I think the color of your room is lovely*" suggesting familiarity with AmE vocabulary through digital immersion. This

inconsistency emerged not from lack of knowledge, but from unconscious retrieval during spontaneous speech.

"*I never thought about which one I use. "Color" just came out, probably because I watch a lot of American vlogs.*" Participant 2

In contrast, Participant 1 consciously aligned with BrE forms:

"I always try to follow the British spelling. We learned it in class and I think it sounds more proper for tourism."

This distinction illustrates both incidental exposure and conscious professional alignment at play in participants' choices.

2. Patterns of Spelling Preferences across Lexical Items

To explore whether these choices reflected broader patterns, a lexical checklist was developed to track consistency of BrE and AmE usage. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of observed variants.

Table 2. Checklist of BrE–AmE Spelling Preferences by Participant

Lexical Item	BrE (P1)	BrE (P2)	AmE (P1)	AmE (P2)
Traveller	2	0	0	2
Organise	2	2	0	0
Centre	2	2	0	0
Colour	2	1	0	1
Programme	2	2	0	0
Behaviour	2	2	0	0
Realise	2	2	0	0
check-in	2	2	2	2

Most words show BrE dominance, reflecting instructional background. Notably, *traveller* and *colour* are points of divergence, likely influenced by Participant 2's digital input. *Check-in* appeared uniformly across both variants, suggesting that lexical items with minimal orthographic divergence or those frequently encountered in global contexts may exhibit convergent pronunciation and understanding.

The mixed application of variants indicates a hybrid linguistic repertoire, where learners draw from multiple English norms depending on familiarity,

fluency, and perceived communicative appropriateness.

3. Metacognitive Awareness and Attitudinal Positioning

The interviews revealed varying degrees of awareness regarding spelling choice and cultural positioning. Participant 1 demonstrated high metacognitive control:

"We were taught British English, so I try to maintain that. It feels more polite when talking to tourists from the UK or Europe."

This reflects an orientation toward performative linguistic alignment with a professional role. Participant 2, however, displayed unawareness and influence from informal learning contexts:

"I guess I use American spelling because it's everywhere online. I don't think tourists will mind, but I didn't know it could matter."

This contrast illustrates two orientations such as formalist-professional: spelling as a marker of expertise and politeness, and functional-global: spelling as interchangeable and intuitive.

This suggests that learners' linguistic identity is shaped not only by pedagogy but also by internal negotiations of perceived communicative adequacy and sociolinguistic capital.

4. Language Performance and Professional Representation

A rubric-based observation was used to assess participants' language delivery in terms of spelling-linked vocabulary, communicative clarity, and professionalism. Table 3 presents this performance summary.

Table 3. Summary of Observed Language Performance in Role-Play Tasks

Assessment Category	Participant 1	Participant 2
Pronunciation and Fluency	Fluent and clear	Adequate
Lexical Appropriateness	Consistently formal	Mixed registers
Spelling-Driven Lexical Choice	BrE consistent	Inconsistent
Awareness of Interlocutor	High	Moderate
Role-play Professionalism	Very high	Good

Participant 1 displayed professional consistency and polished language use, reflecting a conscious orientation toward British norms as a performative act of professionalization. Participant 2, while communicative, lacked consistency, revealing the tension between informal exposure and formal role expectations.

Interestingly, both participants were equally comprehensible, but Participant 1 was perceived by observers (including two external assessors) as “more confident and appropriate for front-desk hospitality roles” due to linguistic formality.

Discussion

This study investigated the emergence of British and American spelling variants in oral simulation tasks conducted by EFL learners in a tourism-focused ESP setting. The findings highlight a nuanced interplay between instructional exposure, digital input, and learners’ metacognitive and sociolinguistic orientations. Four major insights are discussed below.

1. Orthographic Preferences Surface Even in Oral Production

Despite the spoken nature of the simulation, participants exhibited distinct orthographic preferences that influenced lexical choice, suggesting a deep cognitive entrenchment of spelling norms. This supports previous psycholinguistic findings that written input significantly shapes mental representations of words even in oral tasks (Li & Pei, 2024; Yang et al., 2022).

Participant 1's consistent use of

BrE forms reflects the influence of formal instruction. In contrast, Participant 2's inconsistent usage underscores the impact of informal digital immersion, particularly through American-dominated media (Taguchi & Kim, 2016; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). This aligns with studies on global Englishes that highlight how learners’ lexicons are often formed through a blend of local instruction and global exposure (Rose & Galloway, 2019).

Novelty: While prior studies have examined spelling variation in writing (Kachru, 2005), this research demonstrates that orthographic preference can unconsciously shape oral lexical choices, an underexplored phenomenon in ESP-speaking tasks.

2. Variation in Spelling Reflects Divergent Linguistic Identities

The findings reveal a divergence between two learner identities: the formalist-professional identity oriented toward correctness, and the functional-global identity shaped by accessibility and global media. Participant 1's deliberate use of BrE spelling indicates an alignment with perceived professional norms an effort to construct an expert tourism persona. This supports Block's (2015) concept of performative identities, where learners adopt linguistic forms that project social roles.

Meanwhile, Participant 2's reliance on AmE variants despite being unaware of such variation reflects a naturalized global English user identity, consistent with Canagarajah's (2012) idea of translingual competence, where learners negotiate norms fluidly rather than rigidly adhering to one standard.

This highlights the plurality of English ownership in international communication (Jenkins, 2014; Matsuda, 2012), raising pedagogical questions about which varieties should be foregrounded in ESP curricula.

3. Spelling Variants Influence Perceived Professionalism

An important finding was the influence of spelling-driven lexical choice on perceived professionalism. Observers rated Participant 1 as more appropriate for tourism service roles due to consistent BrE usage and formal lexical tone. This aligns with research that links linguistic formality with professionalism in service encounters (Leung, 2013; Nickerson, 2005).

The finding challenges the assumption that intelligibility alone is sufficient in ESP communication. Instead, learners' linguistic choices cdown to spelling carry symbolic capital that affects how they are perceived in workplace-simulated tasks (Bourdieu, 1991).

Novelty: While the pragmatics of ESP speaking has been widely studied by Basturkmen (2025), and Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), this study is one of the first to show how orthographic alignment (e.g., BrE vs. AmE) shapes spoken impressions of professionalism in simulated tourism interactions.

4. Toward Reflective Orthographic Awareness in ESP Pedagogy

The disparity between participants' awareness underscores the need for explicit reflection on language variation in ESP classrooms. Current tourism English materials often privilege British forms (Bouzidi, 2009), yet learners engage daily with American English through media. Without guidance, this leads to hybrid but unreflective usage that may undermine communicative appropriateness in

context-specific roles. This research supports calls by researchers such as Fang & Baker (2025), and Rose & Galloway (2019) to integrate Global Englishes approaches into ESP acknowledging linguistic diversity while teaching metacognitive strategies for form-function-context alignment.

Instructors can foster orthographic awareness not to enforce prescriptive norms, but to encourage intentional language use tied to context, role, and audience.

5. Theoretical and Pedagogical Contributions

This study advances the field in several key ways:

- a. Theoretical contribution: It extends the application of World Englishes and identity theory into the intersection of orthography and spoken ESP performance an area rarely explored in existing research.
- b. Pedagogical contribution: It advocates for a shift from merely teaching "standard English" toward promoting reflective linguistic decision-making, where learners choose language forms purposefully based on role, context, and target interlocutor.

As such, this research introduces the construct of "spoken orthographic awareness" the capacity to manage one's internalized spelling-driven vocabulary even during oral production in professional contexts.

Conclusion

This study reveals that spelling preferences in spoken tourism English among EFL learners are influenced more by habitual digital media consumption than by formal linguistic awareness. The two participants in this research exhibited a dominant tendency toward American English (AmE) spellings such as *traveler*, *organize*, and *color* although

British English (BrE) forms occasionally appeared, particularly in more formal or institutional contexts, such as *centre* and *theatre*. These findings suggest that the participants' language choices were not the result of deliberate stylistic planning but rather spontaneous reflections of informal exposure and learning experiences.

The occurrence of inconsistent spelling within a single utterance further highlights a gap in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, especially within the context of tourism. Learners have yet to develop full control over language register and variant usage appropriate for professional settings. This lack of metalinguistic awareness underscores the need for more reflective and context-driven language training in English instruction particularly for students and future practitioners in the tourism and hospitality industry. A pedagogical shift toward raising learners' awareness of language variation could better equip them for the demands of international communication in professional tourism environments.

Suggestion

In light of this study's findings, it is recommended that English language instruction for tourism purposes explicitly incorporate spelling variation as a fundamental element of the

teaching material. Educators should design instructional approaches that foster linguistic awareness not only in grammar and vocabulary but also in the understanding of register and appropriate levels of formality. This focus is essential, as spelling choices can shape perceptions of professionalism and credibility in global tourism communication.

Moreover, the use of authentic materials from both British and American English variants should be strategically balanced to provide learners with concrete and contextual comparative insight. The implementation of stimulated recall techniques may also serve as an effective reflective strategy, enabling learners to identify their habitual language patterns and enhance their metalinguistic awareness.

In the long term, academic institutions and program administrators are encouraged to develop task-based training modules and evaluation frameworks that address micro-linguistic elements, including spelling systems, register usage, and message clarity. These initiatives will help cultivate human resources who are not only verbally fluent but also linguistically precise and contextually sensitive essential qualities for professionals operating in the international tourism sector.

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