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Emma Page is an English teacher, writer, wife and mother living in Bournemouth, UK. Initially gaining a degree in Professional Broadcasting, Emma spent six years at the BBC helping to create some of its most iconic dramas before setting off to conquer the world. She landed in Sydney, Australia and discovered a new passion: teaching. Now with six years' experience teaching multinational classes of adults and young adults in London and Australia, and a Delta from Cambridge 2012 Emma currently specializes in exam classes and writing skills. Emma's ELT interests also include exploring the benefits of lexical syllabuses, blended learning and skills-based learner-centric lessons.



Us and the US

The English have a tendency to be rather territorial about language. Our American cousins **rile us** with their simplified spellings and grammar though some of us grudgingly accept that aluminum is probably correct — think platinum. Then again there is paladium... But, for the most part, the absence of the u in color / colour, the s in math / maths and the constant replacement of f for s in words like specialize / specialise **drives us potty**. Imagine then the difficulties I faced when I started to **fall for** an American photographer back in 2006.

Picture this. I am standing in the dimly-lit kitchen of my then-boyfriend's mother's house in Vancouver, Washington. Unlike its Canadian namesake, this Vancouver is an uninspired town across the river from Portland, Oregon from which it couldn't be more different. Whereas Portland is an energetic youthful city peopled by designers, artists and digital creatives of every kind, Vancouver is a suburban sprawl of uniform low-rise beige neighbourhoods spattered with open-air shopping malls bigger than some English villages. Rather than use their legs to **perambulate** between the stores, the locals choose to drive around in circles until they are able to pull up directly outside the shop they want, buy whatever it is they are after before getting back in their car to drive to another shop on the other side of the same mall. This is an alien concept to people in the UK who are still shocked by the idea of motorised scooters for old people.



I am staying with OH after meeting him some nine months earlier as I studied for my Celta in Sydney, Australia. A whirlwind romance blossomed against the spectacular backdrop of Sydney harbour and we needed to find out if the sparks that flew back then were really the start of something special or just a holiday romance. (I'll give you a clue — we have been married for nearly three years now). As a result, I **ditched my plans** to see the world and moved in with OH and his mum for three months.

It's now 2pm but I'm still in my pyjamas as I open the door of their **humongous** American fridge-freezer to stare into its depths. I see a block of hard yellow cheese the size of a house brick, a pack of sliced pre-formed ham big enough to feed a classroom of hungry twelve-year-olds, a multipack of sugar-free red jelly that his mum has as a treat, and not a lot else. It's lunchtime and, as I don't have a car, I am housebound. The nearest store is a thirty-minute walk away along roads with no pavements as walking here is only done in parks with dogs. I choose a few things, close the door and eat my pitiful fare in front of the giant widescreen TV.



OH calls from work.

“Hey, darling, written anything today? What did you have for lunch?”

“Oh, I’ve written tonnes, I reply cheerfully despite the fact I haven’t opened my laptop yet. “But I wasn’t hungry so I just had some ham and jelly.”

There is a pause on the line. “Ham and jelly?”

“Yup, I wasn’t really hungry.”

“So did you put the jelly on the ham?” comes the confused response.

I gawp at the phone receiver in a cartoon-like manner. “Yuck, why would I do that?”

“Well, how did you eat it?”

At this point, I’m starting to think OH may not be getting enough sleep (he works shifts) and is a little delirious so I reply speaking slowly and clearly as if to someone mentally challenged.

“With a spoon.”

“What straight from the jar?”

“Of course.”

OH is indignant. “But you’d kill me if I did that.”

How hard is this to understand, I wonder.

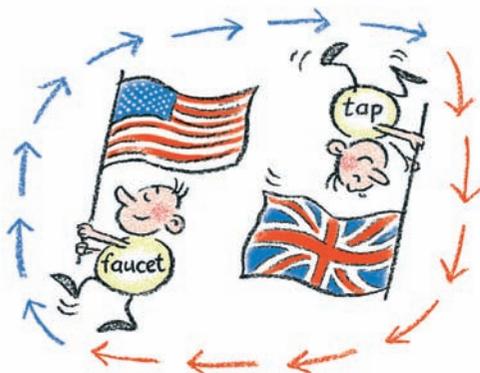
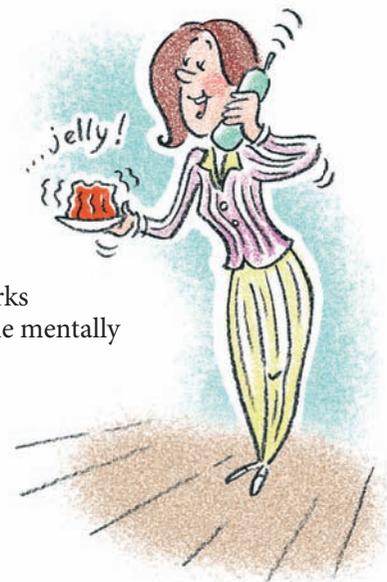
“What was I supposed to eat it with?”

“You could have put it on some bread.”

“Bread? Why would I... Oh” (the penny drops) “You mean jam, don’t you?”

Through the whole conversation, OH has been picturing a jar of strawberry jam in his head while I have had a pot of strawberry jelly or as the Americans would call it Jell-O. To them, jelly is a clear jam with no bits in it and they would always use the brand-name Jell-O for the wobbly dessert. He thought I had eaten a jar of jam and some ham for lunch.

This is just one example of numerous cultural differences which can crop up and cause confusion between my husband and me, even now six years down the line.



Many people think that the English they learn at school is correct with a capital C. For example, they learn that we get water from a tap and then they watch a film and hear the word faucet. Which is right? Well, the answer is both but one is British English and the other is American English.

If I told OH that I was walking down the pavement and nearly got hit by a car he might say it was my own fault. A bit unfair, I would say, but to him the pavement is the part of the street where the cars go. In Britain that is called that the road while what we call the pavement an American would call the sidewalk. Confused? You will be. It’s not only vocabulary which differs across the wide expanse of the Atlantic our grammar is different as well. One of the main consequences of this is

that the British often believe Americans to be rude or uncultured or uneducated or all three. In fact, this cultural difference in language nearly derailed the path of true love in New Zealand, September 2006 when a young English writer and American photographer decided to tour the north island in a campervan.

OH had invited me to go to New Zealand with him after my Celta course finished. Being in an adventurous mood and having no plans beyond the end of the following week I accepted. We finalised details and booked a cheap (read small) campervan. Being in such a small space with a relative stranger requires a mature attitude and a lot of mutual respect. Falling in love with each other helps a lot, too. But long term confinement can cause small irritations to blow up out of all proportion if you are not careful. For example, every day we had to tidy up the camper and get ready for the day’s drive ahead. This involved folding up the bedding and turning the bed platform back into two small sofas as well as washing up in the miniscule sink, tidying away the breakfast dishes and getting fresh clothes out etc. The tiny living area in the van was therefore a chaotic cauldron for about an hour every morning.



Both of us were working away, him in the kitchen area, me perched precariously on the bed / sofa when OH said “Give me the dustpan”. His back was to me and, as I looked up, he just stuck out his hand to take the dustpan without looking round. I bristled. Your teacher-trained eyes may have spotted why this would annoy me already. It’s not so much that he didn’t look at me, more that he used the imperative. To my British ears, this sounded like an order from someone more senior than me and I’ve never been good at taking orders from anyone, let alone a boyfriend. Rephrasing it as it sounded from my point of view, I heard OH *order Emma to hand over the dustpan or else...* This produced feelings of anger, of repression and of resentment; who died and made him king, I thought.

“What?!” came the tense-voiced response.

OH looked up and repeated “Give me the dustpan”.

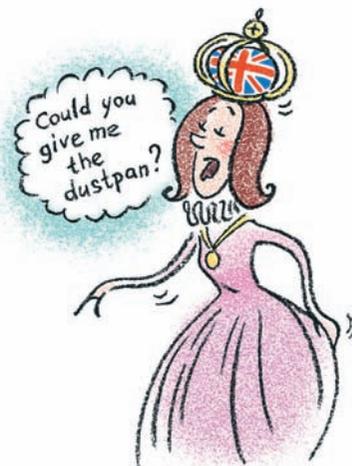
“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I replied, ice dripping from each syllable.

“Um, (long pause) the brush?”

I passed it over but remained sulky for a while. We had some “quiet time” and I calmed down after which we had the first of many chats about our linguistic differences.

To me, if you are making a request to an equal it is essential that you use *please* to head the request i.e. *please give me the dustpan* or even better use a modal *could you give me the dustpan* or use *mind* — *do you mind giving me the dustpan*. This is polite and shows respect for the person you are talking to. To use the imperative immediately puts a social distance between the speaker and receiver; if used with someone who perceives themselves to be your equal or, even worse, your superior you risk causing serious offence.

To OH as an American, there is no difference in register between all of these and he has a tendency to use the shortest form possible, which is the imperative. As a result, I often have to bite my tongue and remember that his apparent lack of manners and rudeness is just a difference in linguistic culture and not an intentional insult. Widen this out to the British and American people and you can see how many such encounters have resulted in the British thinking the Americans have no manners.



To even call the British English and American English languages by the same name is somewhat misleading. Our languages diverged over three centuries ago with the establishment of the United States. Physical distance and the lack of modern methods of rapid communication started the trend. Isolated from the homeland and influenced by the many different nationalities coming together in the enormous new landscape American English developed its own vocabulary and rules. They consciously simplified spellings in Webster’s 1828 dictionary and, over the centuries, have developed a tendency to omit prepositions e.g. in a news broadcast, the news anchor might say “Following events in Japan March 2011, the nuclear industry has experienced a public backlash” while an English broadcaster would say “Following events in Japan **in** March 2011...” And it irks us no end that this preposition is missing! And don’t get me started on how they say specific dates or days of the week — the word **on** is not optional.

Bring in the Australian variety, the Canadian variety and all the other local forms of English around the world and you can see that mine is a language which I can no longer call my own. Fast forward into the future and many believe that the English used in the Indian sub-continent will be the most commonly spoken form of the language. As a result, the debate about what English variety to teach is a common one in staffrooms I have worked in. Even within the UK borders there are varieties which employ their own colloquialisms and pronunciations, sometimes even their own vocabulary. The consensus tends to be that you teach what you know and highlight the alternatives where possible. Therefore, I might lead a lesson on prepositions and dates in which the British English conventions are highlighted but, at the end, I might show them a news clip from CNN and ask them to spot the difference.

Taking this into the Russian classroom, you might be starting to wonder what this means for your students. Does it even matter? Well, the short answer is yes. Although some minor confusion might occur between native speakers, the ubiquitous nature of American films means most native speakers of any variety understand American English even though the reverse may not always be true. The big BUT comes when non-native speakers *mix* the varieties of English they use. This can be very difficult for a native speaker listener to understand. In fact, the IELTS test thinks it is so important that an exam entrant will be penalised if they mix spellings. As a result, I teach that learners need to pick a variety and stick to it.

Classroom resource

1. Make short lists of UK English and US English vocabulary in different sets.
2. Give each group of learners a different list of vocabulary and ask them to write a story or dialogue using the words.
3. Ensure they keep their special words secret.
4. Ask the groups to swap their stories or watch each other's performances and spot the US or UK words or spellings. Award bonus points if they know the synonyms.

Here are some examples in the set of travel and transport which you might use. There are many more and <http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/british-and-american-terms> has a useful list.

British English	American English
the pavement	the sidewalk
the road	the pavement
the indicator	the turn signal
a car park	a parking lot
a motorway	a freeway
a lift	an elevator
the Underground	the Subway
the boot	the trunk (of a car)
a torch	a flashlight
to give someone a lift	to give someone a ride (in a car)
a lorry	a truck
motorway services	a rest stop
Petrol	gas
a tyre	a tire

Mini-Glossary

OH — this is a common abbreviation used in web-forums and on Facebook meaning Other Half. It helps retain privacy. People use it to mean their partner whether married or not. Here it means my husband

DS — this means Dear Son and is used in the same way as OH

DD — this means Dear Daughter and is used in the same way as DS and OH

to rile someone — this means to annoy or irritate, almost to the point of being angry. It always takes an object and is often used in the passive with an agent. PS *riled* PP *riled*

to drive someone potty — is an expression meaning to make someone feel angry because of your actions; potty can be used informally to mean crazy and to drive someone crazy can mean to make them angry through your behaviour

to fall for someone — is an indirect way to say you are falling in love with someone

to perambulate — this is an old-fashioned term meaning to walk; not used commonly in speech it may still be used to create a literary style

to ditch something — this verb needs an object and is commonly used with *plans* or *someone*; its general meaning is to finish or stop something. With *plans* it means to stop following that plan; with *someone* it means to end the relationship with that person. In a story, someone might ditch their gun and that would mean they throw it away

to be humongous — this means extremely large; it is an informal extreme adjective

a cauldron — this is a large metal pot used for cooking; it is often associated with witches boiling up magic potions over an open fire. If a situation is a cauldron, it is a chaotic busy tense situation that could easily explode into an argument