

REDUCED VOWELS IN SE ASIAN ENGLISH: SHOULD WE BE TEACHING THEM?

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ABSTRACT

Reduced vowels in monosyllabic function words and also the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words are found to occur less frequently in the varieties of English spoken in Singapore, China, Brunei and the rest of ASEAN than in standard British or American English. However, the relative absence of reduced vowels does not seem to cause any misunderstandings in the region and may in fact in many cases enhance intelligibility. Under these circumstances, it is suggested that there is no need for language teachers to place undue focus on the use of reduced vowels by their students. While the absence of reduced vowels may increase the perception of syllable-based rhythm, there seems to be no reason why stress-based rhythm should be imposed in societies where syllable-based rhythm is the norm.

INTRODUCTION

Use of English throughout the world is becoming increasingly widespread, to the extent that there are now more second-language speakers of English than native speakers (Crystal, 2003). Furthermore, New Varieties of English (NVEs) are emerging, both in the outer-circle countries such as Singapore, Brunei, India and Nigeria and the expanding-circle countries such as Russia and China (Kachru, 1985), and many features of these NVEs differ quite substantially from the Englishes found in such inner-circle countries as Britain and the USA.

There is also nowadays quite wide acceptance that ownership of English no longer belongs just with the inner-circle countries. Not only do the expanding and outer-circle countries have a right to contribute to the development of English, but in addition there is no need for second-language speakers of English always to make reference to native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2004).

One feature that is commonly found in NVEs is the relative absence of reduced vowels (schwas), both in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words and in monosyllabic function words. In this paper, the extent of this feature of English pronunciation is considered for the Englishes found in ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Brunei as well as in China, and the importance of teaching reduced vowels is then questioned.

REDUCED VOWELS IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

It is widely established that Singapore English tends to use full vowels in certain situations in which some other varieties of Englishes, such as RP British English, use a reduced vowel (Tay, 1982; Brown, 1988). For example, the first syllable of *control* tends to have a full vowel in Singapore English but a schwa in RP.

However, it is simply not true that a schwa never occurs in Singapore English. Heng and Deterding (2005) report that, in polysyllabic words in which the first syllable is

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unstressed, a full vowel tends to occur when there is an ‘o’ in the spelling (eg *computer*, *official*), but a schwa often occurs when there is an ‘a’ in the spelling (eg *ability*, *approach*). Deterding (2005) investigated this further, and the incidence of full and reduced vowels in the recordings of 38 undergraduate students from the National Institute of Education (NIE) reading prepared sentences is shown in Table 1. It can be seen that there is a strong tendency for a full vowel to occur in the first syllable of *absorb* and *adventure* but a reduced vowel is more likely in the first syllable of *tradition*, *attack* and *adapt*, while *according*, *abroad* and *afford* always begin with a schwa.

Table 1: **Incidence of reduced vowels and full vowels in the unstressed first syllable of polysyllabic words for 38 Singapore undergraduates (from Deterding, 2005)**

	full	/ə/
<i>absorb</i>	29	9
<i>adventure</i>	24	14
<i>tradition</i>	13	25
<i>attack</i>	9	29
<i>adapt</i>	7	31
<i>according</i>	0	38
<i>abroad</i>	0	38
<i>afford</i>	0	38

To understand these data, we need to consider the syllable structure of these words. Using [.] to indicate a syllable break and adhering to the Maximum Onset Principle (whereby consonants as far as possible belong with the following syllable), we see that *absorb* is [æb.zɔːb] and *adventure* is [æd.ven.tʃə], while *afford* is [ə.fɔːd] and *abroad* is [ə.brɔːd]. It immediately becomes apparent that a full vowel tends to occur in closed syllables (where there is a following consonant within the same syllable) while a schwa is more likely to occur in open syllables (where there is no following consonant in the syllable). Discussions with a wide range of Singapore respondents confirms that this pattern is very common.

In fact, the use of a full vowel in the unstressed initial syllable of a polysyllabic word also occurs in some varieties of British English, including in the north of England, where Wells (1982: 363) lists *advance*, *computer*, *consider*, *continue*, *examine*, *expect* and *object* (v.) as all having a full vowel in the first syllable. He suggests this occurs with Latin prefixes such as *ad-*, *con-* and *ex-*, but it is interesting to note that all the words he lists have a closed initial syllable, and Anthea Fraser Gupta (personal communication), who herself comes from Yorkshire in the north of England, confirms that the rule involving closed syllables that has here been proposed for Singapore English seems to be exactly right for her pronunciation.

REDUCED VOWELS IN CHINESE ENGLISH

Thirteen young students (3 female and 10 male, aged 18 or 19) from various parts of China were recorded after they had been in Singapore for about twelve weeks taking an intensive course in English at NIE (Deterding, 2006). They all read the North Wind and the Sun passage (IPA, 1999: 39):

The North Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger when a traveller came along wrapped in a warm cloak. They agreed that the one who first succeeded in making the traveller take his cloak off should be considered stronger than the other. Then the North Wind blew as hard as he could, but the more he blew the more closely did the traveller fold his cloak around him; and at last the North Wind gave up the attempt. Then the Sun shone out warmly, and immediately the traveller took off his cloak. And so the North Wind was obliged to confess that the Sun was the stronger of the two.

The realization of the vowels in some of the monosyllabic function words and the first syllable of *considered* and *confess* was analyzed, to determine if reduced vowels or full vowels occur in these tokens, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Potentially reduced vowels for young speakers from China (from Deterding, 2006)

	full	/ə/
monosyllabic function words <i>(that (x2), than, to, of)</i>	62	3
first syllable of polysyllabic words <i>(considered, confess)</i>	17	9

It can be seen that the overwhelming majority of function words have a full vowel, but the unstressed initial syllable of polysyllabic words does sometimes have a schwa. One possible explanation for this pattern is that words tend to be memorized in isolation by learners in China, and under these circumstances, the standard form of polysyllabic words will often be adopted, but the weak form of function words (which often has a schwa) will rarely be learned.

Further investigation was conducted on the English of ten experienced teachers of English from China (7 female and 3 male, aged between 25 and 35). During their first few weeks in Singapore while enrolled in a Postgraduate Diploma in English Language Teaching at NIE, they were recorded reading the North Wind and the Sun passage, and the incidence of vowels in some monosyllabic function words and the first syllable of *succeeded*, *considered* and *confess* was investigated. The results are shown in Table 3.

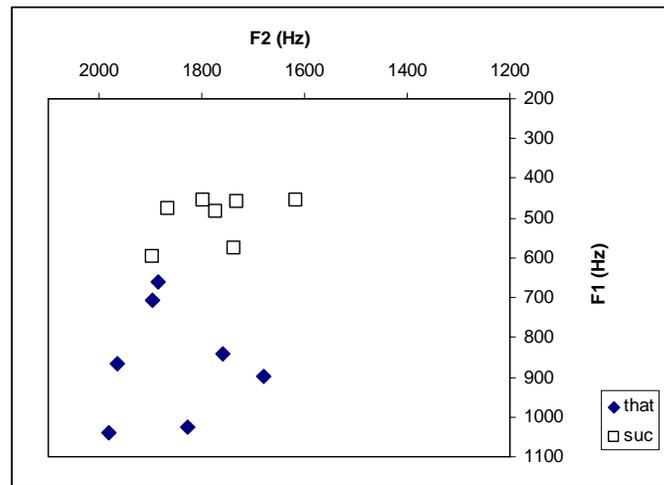
Table 3: Potentially reduced vowels for English teachers from China

	full	/ə/
monosyllabic function words <i>(that, as, to, of)</i>	35	5
first syllable of polysyllabic words <i>(succeeded, considered, confess)</i>	3	27

The pattern for these English teachers is very clear: almost all the unstressed first syllables of polysyllabic words have a reduced vowel, but there is generally a full vowel in the function words. In fact, many of these speakers seemed quite resistant to the use of reduced vowels in function words, apparently believing that such pronunciation is lazy.

The above results depended on auditory judgements. It is not easy to measure the quality of the vowel in the first syllable of *considered* and *confess*, because there is generally anticipatory nasalization for the /n/, and the linear prediction algorithm on which computerized formant tracks are generally based does not work for nasalized vowels (Ladefoged, 2003: 137). However, measurements (using PRAAT Version 4.3.12, Boersma & Weenink, 2005) of the vowel in *that* can be compared with the vowel in the first syllable of *succeeded*, as neither involves a following nasal consonant. A plot of the first two formants of the vowels of these two words for the seven female English teachers from China is shown in Figure 1. This indicates that all seven instances of *succeeded* have a mid vowel in its first syllable, but five out of seven instances of *that* have an open vowel. These data confirm the auditory impressions, that the first syllable of *succeeded* tends to have a schwa, but the function word *that* is more likely to have a full vowel.

Figure 1: **Measurements of the first two formants of *that* and the first syllable of *succeeded* for the seven female English teachers from China.**



The overall pattern is confirmed: not only do learners of English in China use full vowels in monosyllabic function words, but so do their teachers, though both groups may use reduced vowels in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words.

REDUCED VOWELS IN BRUNEI ENGLISH

Salbrina (2006) recorded undergraduate students from Brunei reading the North Wind and the Sun passage, and an auditory analysis of the incidence of full and reduced vowels from eight of these students is shown in Table 4. It can be seen that the overwhelming majority of these vowels are full, both for monosyllabic function words and the unstressed initial syllable of polysyllabic words.

Table 4: **Potentially reduced vowels for undergraduates from Brunei.**

	full	/ə/
monosyllabic function words (<i>that, as, to, of</i>)	29	3
first syllable of polysyllabic words (<i>succeeded, considered, confess</i>)	18	6

The pattern for the Brunei speakers is a little different from the subjects from China: even quite proficient speakers from Brunei are likely to use full vowels in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words, so in this respect their pronunciation is similar to that of speakers from Singapore and also Yorkshire. This contrasts with the proficient speakers from China who are more likely to adopt an RP British or American standard pronunciation and use reduced vowels in polysyllabic words. But the fact remains that there is a tendency to avoid reduced vowels in some circumstances in the English found in many places in South-East Asia. We will now consider some data for other ASEAN countries.

REDUCED VOWELS IN ENGLISH THROUGHOUT ASEAN

On the basis of recordings of conversations between small groups of people from different ASEAN countries, Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) investigated features of the pronunciation of the English Lingua Franca that is emerging throughout the region, and they report many instances of full vowels in unstressed syllables, including the following:

Singapore :	the communicative [kɔmju:nikeɪtv] approach	{gp2-c:77}
Indonesia :	it's officially [ɔfɪʃəli] launched	{gp3-n:49}
Brunei :	I can't compare [kɔmpeə] now	{gp1-k:34}
Myanmar :	from [frɒm] there we can [kæn] continue [kɔntɪnju:]	{gp5-f:02}
Philippines :	you have to [tu:] spend a lot of money	{gp5-f:35}
Thailand :	when I first came to [tu:] Singapore	{gp6-c:77}
Cambodia :	we think that [dæt] maybe on the last day	{gp1-a:31}

With the widespread occurrence of full vowels in words such as these, it is unlikely that this feature of pronunciation ever results in misunderstandings among speakers from ASEAN countries. In fact, Deterding and Kirkpatrick suggest that use of full vowels may in some circumstances actually enhance intelligibility. We now consider this issue.

INTELLIGIBILITY

While it may be true that, for listeners from inner-circle countries such as Britain and America, a lack of reduced vowels hinders intelligibility, perhaps because it interferes with the identification of stressed syllables, there are many cases where full vowels actually enhance important distinctions between words. For example, *proscribe* and *prescribe* are almost exact opposites, but if a reduced vowel is used in the first syllable of both words, as is entirely possible in RP British English (Jones et al. 2003: 426, 432),

then they become homophones, which seems a bit unfortunate for antonyms. And writing *could of* instead of *could have* is very common in Britain, but this error is unlikely to occur among speakers who maintain a full vowel in both *of* and *have*. So, if the pronunciation of students enables them to make valuable distinctions between different words and also to avoid common spelling mistakes, why should teachers attempt to change these features of pronunciation?

It was shown many years ago that inner-circle English is not necessarily the most easily understood internationally. For example, Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) showed that the recording of an American speaker was less intelligible internationally than speakers from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Japan, and subsequently Smith and Bisazza (1982) showed that the key to intelligibility is some familiarity with the variety of English that is spoken, something that was confirmed by Kirkpatrick and Saunders (2005) for students in Australia listening to Singapore English.

When so many NVEs tend to avoid reduced vowels, not just in South-East Asia but also in the Caribbean and West Africa (Wells, 1982: 570, 639; Gramley & Pätzold, 2004: 270, 319), it does seem likely that use of full vowels instead of reduced vowels may enhance rather than hinder international intelligibility. Maybe speakers from Britain and America need to learn to use full vowels more often if they want to be easily understood around the world.

RHYTHM

One key function for reduced vowels is to help carry the distinctive stress-based rhythm of inner-circle varieties of English, where there is an underlying tendency for an alternation of strong and weak syllables, and where weak syllables often have a schwa. Indeed recent research has confirmed that there is a measurable difference between the rhythm of British English and a more syllable-based variety such as Singapore English (Deterding, 2001) and also that one way of detecting this difference is by comparing the duration of the vowels of neighbouring syllables (Low, Grabe & Nolan, 2000).

However, it is not true that syllable-based rhythm only occurs in NVEs. Crystal (1995) argues that it actually occurs sometimes in British English, for example when talking to infants, in television slogans and when the speaker is being sarcastic. Crystal (2003: 172) further notes that rap, which has a clear syllable-based rhythm, provides an influential model for many young people in America and Britain, and he ponders whether this kind of rhythm might actually become the norm one day.

TEACHING RHYTHM

Many textbooks on pronouncing English regard rhythm as vitally important, and some even insist that familiarity with the metrical foot and the resulting alternation of strong and weak syllables provides the essential framework on which the rest of the sound system of English hangs. For example, Teschner & Whitley (2004) introduces the metrical foot and the concept of strong and weak syllables in chapter 1, well before vowels and consonants are introduced (chapters 4 and 5).

While it is certainly true that rhythm is an important component of speech, and furthermore that learners need to be able to understand speech which includes many

reduced syllables, including those with a schwa and also those where the vowel is entirely dropped or absorbed by a neighbouring consonant (Shockey 2003: 22), one wonders whether adoption of stress-based rhythm, including the alternation of strong and weak syllables, really is essential for all learners of English. One can make a clear distinction here between what listeners need to comprehend, as they are indeed likely to encounter many speakers of inner-circle English, and how they themselves should sound. Crystal (2003: 172) warns against the fostering of an unnatural form of rhythm in societies where it is inappropriate, and Kirkpatrick (2004) argues that the acceptance of syllable-based rhythm in the classroom in ASEAN countries and many other parts of the world can be liberating both for teachers and for learners.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown that there is a widespread tendency to avoid reduced vowels in the Englishes spoken in South-East Asia, including Singapore, Brunei, the rest of ASEAN, and China. Furthermore, it has been argued that use of full vowels rather than reduced vowels may actually enhance rather than hinder intelligibility in some situations. Although reduced vowels may serve to carry stress-based rhythm, it is not clear that this kind of rhythm really needs to be taught in places where it is not the norm.

For listening comprehension, it is important for students to be able to understand speech that has regular use of reduced vowels, as this kind of speech predominates in inner-circle varieties of English. However, in dealing with pronunciation, it is suggested that there are more important things to focus on when teaching students in places where syllable-based rhythm and a lack of reduced vowels are more common.

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