The Role of Noun Phrases in Misunderstandings in Brunei English in ELF Settings

Ishamina Athirah and David Deterding

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

ishamina.athirah@gmail.com
dhdeter@gmail.com

Abstract

Innovative usage of noun phrases is among the most widely reported features of new varieties of English throughout the world and also in discourse in ELF settings, but its effect on intelligibility has not been extensively investigated. In an attempt to remedy this, 10 conversations in English between Bruneians and people from elsewhere were recorded, and a total of 153 tokens were identified in which the non-Bruneians did not understand the Bruneian speakers. In 20 of these tokens, the grammar of a noun phrase may be one factor in giving rise to the misunderstanding, involving added or absent articles, innovative use of plurals, and the unexpected gender of a pronoun. Further analysis suggests that non-standard grammar was probably the main factor in just four of these tokens, two involving an added article before a proper noun, one with a spurious *-s* on the end of *other*, and one in which *she* was used to refer to a male. There were many instances of non-standard grammar in noun phrases throughout the conversations, but this rarely caused a problem, which suggests that the innovative structure of noun phrases seldom impacts on the intelligibility of Brunei English in ELF settings.

Keywords: misunderstandings, intelligibility, noun phrases, Brunei English

Kesan frasa-frasa kata nama terhadap kebolehfahaman Inggeris Brunei dalam konteks ELF

Abstrak

Penggunaan inovatif frasa kata nama adalah antara ciri-ciri varieti baru Bahasa Inggeris yang paling banyak dilaporkan di seluruh dunia dan juga dalam wacana dalam konteks Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa perantaraan (ELF), namun kesannya terhadap kebolehfahaman belum disiasat secara meluas. Dalam usaha untuk memperbaiki sebahagian perkara ini, 10 perbualan dalam Bahasa Inggeris diantara orang-orang Brunei dan orang asing telah dirakam, dan sebanyak 153 token telah didapati di mana orang-orang bukan rakyat Brunei tidak memahami pembicaraan orang Brunei. Dalam 20 token tersebut, tatabahasa yang digunakan dalam frasa kata nama mungkin menjadi satu faktor yang menimbulkan salah fahaman, yang melibatkan penambahan atau ketiadaan artikel, penggunaan inovatif perkataan jamak, dan pemberian jantina yang tidak dijangka kepada kata ganti. Analisis lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahawa tatabahasa yang tidak standard mungkin menjadi faktor utama dalam empat token sahaja, dua melibatkan penambahan artikel sebelum kata nama khas, satu menggunakan −s palsu pada hujung perkataan other, dan satu menggunakan kata ganti she untuk merujuk kepada seorang lelaki. Terdapat banyak contoh tatabahasa tidak standard yang digunakan dalam frasa-frasa kata nama sepanjang perbualan-perbualan, tetapi ianya jarang menyebabkan masalah. Ini mengusulkan bahawa struktur inovatif frasa kata nama jarang mempunyai kesan terhadap kebolehfahaman Inggeris Brunei dalam konteks ELF.

Kata kunci: salah fahaman, kebolehfahaman, frasa kata nama, Inggeris Brunei

1 Introduction

Since Jenkins' (2000) seminal work on pronunciation and Seidlhofer's (2001) call for more research on the description of ELF, many studies have discussed features that are important for maintaining intelligibility in ELF communication (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey 2011). While Seidlhofer (2004) points out that plenty of research has focused on phonology and pragmatics, there has been less work on grammar. Cogo and Dewey (2006: 73) suggest that this may be because of the requirement for a larger corpus in order for reliable findings to emerge.

Over the last decade, certain grammatical structures that do not conform to the standard rules of English have been identified as commonly occurring in ELF, and it has been suggested that many of them may be communicatively effective rather than a hindrance to intelligibility (Jenkins 2009: 145; Seidlhofer 2011: 124). Hülmbauer (2013: 48) similarly notes that ELF speakers commonly use unconventional lexico-grammatical features which should be regarded as linguistically creative rather than deviations from a standard, and this usage often enhances successful communication. However, it is important to investigate these issues further, to try to evaluate the effect of unconventional grammar on intelligibility in ELF settings. Here, we will adopt the terms 'non-standard' and 'innovative' to refer to unconventional use of grammar.

Morphemes associated with noun phrases, particularly the plural *-s* morpheme and the use of articles *a* and *the*, are some of the earliest grammatical morphemes acquired by children, and it has been claimed that second language learners usually follow a similar order in their learning (Krashen 1987: 12). However, these grammatical morphemes often seem to be communicatively redundant, so for example the meaning of *two book* is clear without a plural *-s* suffix, and superfluous morphemes like this are regularly omitted by ELF speakers. Moreover, it has been reported that logical plurals such as *furnitures* and *equipments* occur widely in the various Englishes spoken throughout Asia and Africa (Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008: 53) as well as in ELF corpora (Pitzl, Breiteneder and Klimpfinger 2008), and even Ban Ki Moon was reported to use the plural *evidences* when urging more research on a vaccine for swine flu (Seidlhofer 2011: 125). For article usage, Cogo and Dewey (2006) note that the occurrence of *a* and *the* in ELF communication may be determined more by the emphasis intended for the noun rather than the rules of standard grammar. Finally, speakers of Malay and Chinese get by perfectly well with no distinction between male and female third person pronouns, and so some speakers of English in Southeast Asia sometimes seem not to be too concerned about the distinction between *he* and *she*.

One may also note that the plural *-s* suffix is nearly always phonetically salient, the presence or absence of an article results in a change in the number of syllables, and the distinction between *he* and *she* is usually perceptually quite clear, so the auditory salience of these morphemes contrasts with some other grammatical morphemes such as the past tense *-ed* suffix. Not only is the past tense morpheme often hard to detect at the end of words such as *helped* and *walked* in conversational speech, but we might note that native speakers also regularly omit it in phrases like *finished them*, *pushed now*, *raised gently* and *loathed beer* (Cruttenden 2014: 314).

Given the widespread use of innovative grammar in noun phrases in ELF discourse and also its phonetic salience, it is important to investigate the extent to which it interferes with intelligibility. Cogo and Dewey (2012: 77) note that there are almost no cases in their ELF corpora in which misunderstandings are caused by the use of non-standard features of grammar, such as the innovative use of articles and the morphology of nouns, but this claim should be examined further. Even though it

seems likely that use of innovative features of grammar like these do not cause too many misunderstandings in ELF settings, it is important to find out whether this is true or not, using corpora of ELF conversations. English language teachers often place considerable emphasis on ensuring that plurals, articles, and the standard use of pronouns follow the normative rules of English grammar; but for the purpose of maintaining intelligibility in ELF communication, it is possible that these efforts are misguided.

This paper therefore investigates the extent to which innovative grammar in noun phrases affects intelligibility when Bruneians are talking in English to non-native speakers from elsewhere. Feedback obtained from the non-Bruneian participants was used to identify instances where misunderstandings occurred, and we will just focus on those that might have arisen from innovative grammatical usage involving noun phrases, specifically the non-standard use of articles, plural marking on nouns, and the gender of pronouns. But first we will provide an overview of Brunei English and then a brief discussion of the nature of misunderstandings.

2 Brunei English

Brunei English refers to the variety of English spoken in Brunei Darussalam. Malay is the official language of Brunei and various dialects of Chinese are used by most of the minority Chinese population, but English is also widely spoken and has for long had an official place in the mass media with two daily English newspapers as well as several local English-language radio stations (Ożóg 1996). This is due to the country's historical links with Britain as a British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 (Hussainmiya 2006) and also the introduction of a bilingual education system in 1985 (Jones 2012). Under this system of education, Malay was the medium of instruction for the first three years of primary school, and then, from Primary 4 onwards, all subjects were taught in English with the exception of Malay language, religious studies and physical education. In 2009, a new education system was introduced called SPN21 (*Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21,* 'National Education System for the 21st Century'), which saw a partial shift in the medium of instruction, so mathematics and science that were previously initially taught in Malay are now taught in English right from the start in Primary 1 (Jones 2012), but it is too early to determine what effect these changes will have on the use of English in Brunei.

Although it has been observed that the commonly used lingua franca in Brunei is Brunei Malay (Martin and Poedjosoedarmo 1996), English is sometimes the language of choice between different ethnic groups, notably between the Malays and Chinese, and also for Bruneians of all ethnic origins with people from elsewhere (Poedjosoedarmo 2004).

Descriptions of the features of Brunei English include the analysis of its grammatical features by Cane (1996) and a recent study by Deterding and Salbrina (2013) that explored a wide range of features, including the phonology, lexis and discourse as well as grammar. Some grammatical features of Brunei English are shared with forms employed in ELF interactions elsewhere, including pluralising uncountable nouns like *furnitures* and *stuffs*, the omission or addition of articles, the innovative use of a preposition between some verbs and their objects, the use of the present tense to describe past events, and the intermittent absence of the *-s* suffix on third-person present-tense verbs (Cane 1996: 221; McLellan and Noor Azam 2012: 80; Deterding and Salbrina 2013: 70).

Despite this descriptive work, there has been little research on how intelligible Brunei English is in international settings. Deterding and Salbrina (2013: 122) briefly note that, based on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) proposed by Jenkins (2000), misunderstandings might arise as a result of some features of pronunciation in Brunei, such as a lack of distinction in vowel length and the variable placement of the intonational nucleus, but they note that there is no evidence that pluralising nouns such as *furnitures* and *advices* causes a problem. However, the suggestions about any effect on intelligibility of grammatical features such as these need to be investigated.

3 Misunderstandings

Kaur (2010) proposes a difference between 'misunderstandings' and 'non-understandings': a 'misunderstanding' occurs when the listener interprets a word or utterance with a meaning that is not intended by the speaker, whereas there is a 'non-understanding' when the listener is unable to make sense of a word or utterance. However, Pitzl (2005) shows that the categorisation of failures in comprehension is in many cases not absolute, as instances range from a total lack of understanding to more or less complete understanding, and Deterding (2013: 13) notes that in reality it is often difficult to classify instances as misunderstandings or non-understandings, as listeners may make a guess about the meaning of words or utterances but not be certain. This paper will therefore use the term 'misunderstandings' to refer to all instances in which some words are not understood by the listener, and we will not attempt to differentiate between misunderstandings and non-understandings.

Mauranen (2006: 135) found little evidence of misunderstandings in her study of ELF communication in an academic setting because there was a tendency for the speakers to prevent them occurring by rephrasing their utterances and by providing additional explanations. However, it is also probable that some misunderstandings that occurred in her data were not detected because her analysis was based on instances of misunderstanding that were signaled by one of the interlocutors, and participants were likely to have been following the 'let-it-pass' strategy (Firth 1996) and therefore not have indicated cases where they did not understand something. We will now discuss how the tokens of misunderstanding in the current study were identified.

4 Data and methodology

The corpus used in this study consists of ten audio recordings collected over a period of six months in late 2013 and early 2014. Each recording involved two participants, a Bruneian and a non-Bruneian, so we are concerned with how well the latter understood the former. A total of seventeen participants took part in the study and they are identified by their gender (F or M) followed by a two-letter code representing their country of origin. Details of the participants are shown in Table 1. Sixteen of the participants were students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and one, MFr, was a visiting researcher at the university. All the non-Bruneian participants had been in Brunei for less than one year when the recordings took place. All participants listed English as either their second or foreign language. When asked to rate their fluency and proficiency in English, they gave a range from 'very good' to 'fair'. These participants were selected partly because they were all able subsequently to meet the researchers to help identify instances of misunderstanding and also to clarify speech that was unclear to the researchers.

Table 1: Participants, with the Bruneians listed first

Participant	Sex	Country	Age	L1	Occupation
FBr1	F	Brunei	33	Malay	Undergraduate student
FBr2	F	Brunei	31	Malay	Undergraduate student
FBr3	F	Brunei	24	Malay	Undergraduate student
FBr4	F	Brunei	19	Malay	Undergraduate student
FBr5	F	Brunei	19	Malay	Undergraduate student
MBr1	M	Brunei	24	Malay	Masters student
MBr2	M	Brunei	26	Malay	Masters student
MBr3	M	Brunei	30	Malay	Undergraduate student
FCh1	F	China	28	Cantonese	PhD student
FCh2	F	China	21	Cantonese	Exchange student
FCh3	F	China	21	Mandarin	Exchange student
FCh4	F	China	19	Mandarin	Exchange student
FMd	F	Maldives	32	Dhivehi	Masters student
FOm	F	Oman	33	Arabic	Masters student
FVn	F	Vietnam	28	Vietnamese	Masters student
MFr	M	France	30	French	Visiting researcher
MKo	M	Korea	23	Korean	Exchange student

In each recording, the Bruneian participant was being interviewed by the non-Bruneian. The researchers prepared a set of questions for the non-Bruneian participants, but this only served as a guideline to help give them some ideas, as many of them were able to come up with their own questions spontaneously and did not use the questions prepared by the researchers. A total of just over 3 hours and 39 minutes of recordings was collected, with each recording lasting an average of about 22 minutes.

The recordings are listed in Table 2. The identifying code for each recording consists of two-letters representing each of the countries of origin of the participants, the first country listed being the country of the interviewee and the second being that of the interviewer. Three participants took part in two separate recordings: MBr3 in Br+Fr and Br+Ko; FMd in Br+Md1 and Br+Md2; and MBr1 in Br+Md2 and Br+Om.

Table 2: Recordings

Code	Participant 1	Participant 2	Duration (min:sec)
Br+Ch1	MBr2	FCh1	20:48
Br+Ch2	FBr3	FCh2	22:46
Br+Ch3	FBr4	FCh3	20:56
Br+Ch4	FBr5	FCh4	20:27
Br+Fr	MBr3	MFr	22:28
Br+Ko	MBr3	MKo	21:04
Br+Md1	FBr1	FMd	21:45
Br+Md2	MBr1	FMd	21:31
Br+Om	MBr1	FOm	22:29
Br+Vn	FBr2	FVn	25:12
			Total : 3:39:26

The conversations took place in a quiet room at UBD. A Handy H4n recorder was used, and the data was saved in WAV format. After the recordings were completed, the researchers transcribed them. Where there were unclear words and

phrases, the researchers went back to the participants to ask for clarification. As noted by Deterding (2013: 25), it is important to be able to obtain feedback from participants because it allows one to correct transcription that is not clear, and it also enables one to identify instances of misunderstanding that are not signaled in the recordings. In fact, the majority of instances of misunderstandings in ELF communication such as this do not result in any obvious communication breakdown, as speakers in ELF interactions have a tendency to adopt a 'let-it-pass' strategy in the hope that failure to understand a few words will not matter in the long run (Firth 1996; Kirkpatrick 2010: 130; Mortensen 2013: 35).

Since the aim of the study is to investigate the intelligibility of Brunei English for listeners from elsewhere, the researchers relied substantially on this feedback from the non-Bruneian participants. In obtaining the feedback, instances were identified in which misunderstandings might have occurred. This was done by selecting short extracts from the recordings and asking the non-Bruneians to listen to them and transcribe what they heard, though we should admit that we cannot be sure on the basis of this kind of subsequent feedback that a misunderstanding did actually occur in all instances.

In this study, we will use the term 'token' to refer to a word or phrase that was identified as been misunderstood by the non-Bruneian participants. A total of 153 tokens of misunderstanding have been identified from the corpus. A few are signaled in the recordings, but the majority only emerged via feedback from the non-Bruneian participants.

Only the tokens that involve the grammar of noun phrases will be discussed in this paper. In many cases, it is likely that the innovative grammar actually had little or no part in causing the misunderstanding. However, we present all tokens in which non-standard noun phrase usage occurred as part of or close to words that were misunderstood. In some cases, the grammar seems to have played some part even if it was not in fact the main factor in causing the misunderstanding, though in other instances it probably had little role in causing the misunderstanding. As noted by Pitzl, Breiteneder and Klimpfinger (2008) in their discussion of the <pvc> ('pronunciation variations and coinages') tag for transcribing the VOICE corpus, it is often hard to determine what the precise cause of a misunderstanding is, and multiple factors are regularly implicated.

5 Results

Of the 153 tokens of misunderstanding, 36 were found to include non-standard grammatical usage. As already mentioned, in some cases the innovative grammar may not actually have been a major factor in causing the misunderstanding, but it is important to investigate the tokens in detail in order to determine the extent to which innovative grammar impacts on intelligibility. Here, we will only attempt to analyse 20 out of these 36 tokens since this paper will just focus on tokens involving noun phrases. Although this just deals with a small proportion of the data, and other factors such as unexpected pronunciation and unfamiliar lexicon are more important in loss of intelligibility, it is beyond the scope of the current paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the misunderstandings that occurred.

These 20 tokens will be discussed in sub-sections based on a classification of grammatical features. These subsections are: added articles with proper nouns, added articles with common nouns, absence of articles, unexpected plural marking, omitted plural marking, and the gender of pronouns.

5.1 Added articles with proper nouns

Kirkpatrick (2010: 104) reports that distinctive article use is common in Asian varieties of English. However, in his study of misunderstandings in ELF in Southeast Asia, Deterding (2013: 114) found that in a total of 183 tokens of misunderstanding, just one might have been partly caused by the unexpected use of an article, as he suggests that the use of an article with a proper noun may have contributed to a failure to understand the words *Black Swan* (the title of a film). In fact, even in this case, the main factor causing this misunderstanding was almost certainly pronunciation, with [r] instead of [l] in the first word, so the added article was probably a minor contributory factor.

In the current study, six tokens of misunderstanding have been identified in which there was a non-standard occurrence of the definite article *the* before a proper noun. These are listed in Table 3, in which the location of the extract in seconds from the start of the recording is also shown. In these examples, the misunderstood words are bold and underlined.

Table 3: Occurrence of a definite article before proper nouns

Tok.	Location	Context
1	Br+Om:353	the kick one? the kick (.) you know **the kick-ass two** @
2	Br+Om:704	you know like **the an- atlantis city** (.) the @
3	Br+Vn:852	i love to see erm food channel in **the astro**
4	Br+Vn:867	or **the hell's kitchen**
5	Br+Ch2:141	yeah **the (.) korea** was the last one i: not only visited
6	Br+Ko:1004	to take me <@> to the </@> **to the <spel> u b d </spel>**

In Token 1, the listener FOm explained to the researcher that although she knew that *Kick-Ass Two* referred to a film, she was not familiar with the phrase.

In Token 2, when asked about the kind of books he likes to read, MBr3 talked about the seven wonders of the world and mentioned *Atlantis City*. FOm was not familiar with *Atlantis City* and she heard it as *Atlantic City*. As with Token 1, we conclude that the cause of these words not being understood is lexical.

In two examples from Table 3, Tokens 3 and 4, FBr2 was telling FVn about how she likes to cook and also watch television programs on cooking. FBr2 used an article before the proper nouns *Astro*, the name of a television cable company based in Malaysia, and *Hell's Kitchen*, the name of a television show. FVn was not familiar with these names and therefore failed to understand FBr2. Furthermore, she heard *house kitchen* instead of *Hell's Kitchen* because FBr2 had L-vocalisation in *Hell's*, pronouncing the word as [heʊs]. Therefore, although the speakers had an unexpected definite article in both these examples, the main cause of the misunderstanding was the use of unfamiliar names, although pronunciation also contributed to the misunderstanding of *Hell's Kitchen*.

In Token 5, the speaker FBr3 was talking to FCh2 about her last vacation. FCh2 explained that she heard *previous year* instead of *Korea* partly because of the definite article before *Korea* in FBr3's speech. In discussing this token, FCh2 explained that *previous year* made sense since she knew that FBr3 was talking about her last vacation. The wider context is shown in (1).

(1)   Token 5 (Br+Ch2:141)
       Context: FBr3 is talking about the countries she had travelled to

1   FCh2:   yeah ah how how many countries have you been travel <1> have
2   travelled </1>
3   FBr3:   <1> e:rm </1> probably three erm
4   FCh2:   three
5   FBr3:   yeah malaysia singapore and korea
6   FCh2:   AH
7   FBr3:   yeah **the korea** was the last one i: not only visited but i studied
8   there? also like <2> the erm what you did </2>
9   FCh2:   <2> ah discovery year? </2>
10   FBr3:   yes yes at discovery year

Finally, in Token 6, the listener MKo explained that he heard *today* instead of *to the* because he did not expect *the* before the proper noun *UBD*. Furthermore, the speaker MBr3 used a plosive [d] for the consonant at the start of *the*. Although pronunciation may also have been a contributing factor in this misunderstanding, the main cause was probably the insertion of the unexpected article before the proper noun.

In conclusion, it seems that the unexpected use of the article may have been the main cause of misunderstanding in two tokens: 5 and 6. However, innovative use of *the* before proper nouns is not usually a problem.

Deterding and Salbrina (2013: 68) report that the non-standard addition of an article before the names of countries is rare in Brunei English, though omission of *the* before *UK* and *USA* does often occur. In contrast, this study did find a few examples of unexpected *the* with the names of countries and other places. Some examples that did not result in misunderstandings are summarised in Table 4. It can be seen that there are two occurrences involving the names of countries, *Singapore* (Br+Md2:62) and *Oman* (Br+Om:1027), and two others refer to places in Brunei, *Temburong* (Br+Om:527) and *Bangar* (Br+Om:555). In all the examples in Table 4, the article in question is shown in italics, but it is not bold or underlined as no misunderstanding occurred.

Table 4:   Instances of an unexpected article with names of places and countries that did not cause misunderstandings

Location	Context
Br+Ch1:76	it was the middle *the* june until the end of june
Br+Fr:285	it close to the what do you call that the big mall *the* parkson?
Br+Md2:62	my last vacation i went to:: (.) *the* singapore with my family
Br+Md2:139	i am excited (.) to go ah to go to? was erm *the* universal studio
Br+Om:527	most of *the* temburong are you know uh (.) hh filled with forest
Br+Om:555	*the* bangar? bangar area?
Br+Om:1027	how how about (.) at *the* oman at oman is it yeah

5.2 Added articles with common nouns

In this study, only one token of misunderstanding has been found in which there is the unexpected use of an article with a common noun. This is shown in (2). Here, the speaker FBr2 was telling the listener FVn that one of her hobbies is fishing and therefore she talked about where she goes fishing and what she likes to catch. In this

case, in standard usage, an article would not precede *shrimp*, and FVn heard *trip* instead of *shrimp*.

(2)   Token 7 (Br+Vn:100)
       Context: FBr2 is talking about one of her hobbies

1	FBr2:	i like to travel a::nd (2) fishing
2	FVn:	and fishing?
3	FBr2:	yeah
4	FVn:	a::h
5	FBr2:	i love i love to erm fish erm \<tsk\> the **shrimp** the big **shrimp**
6	FVn:	ah
7	FBr2:	yeah
8	FVn:	but is there any place here erm you can go fishing?
9	FBr2:	yeah \<1\> you can \</1\>
10	FVn:	\<1\> at the \</1\> at the sea at the beach right?
11	FBr2:	yeah yeah we have ah (.) but i often go to the river? not the beach

Although this innovative use of an article may have contributed to the misunderstanding, one other factor might be the pronunciation of the listener. FBr2's pronunciation of *shrimp* has the expected fricative [ʃ], but FVn heard [t]. Perhaps FVn has a problem with [ʃ], as this voiceless fricative does not occur in Vietnamese (Maddieson 1984: 322). Indeed, Honey (1987: 240) reports that one of the consonant sounds that Vietnamese speakers of English have particular difficulty with is [ʃ]. This example illustrates that one should consider the role of the listener as well as the speaker when analysing tokens of misunderstanding.

The conclusion that the addition of unexpected articles does not have a big impact on intelligibility concurs with the findings of Cogo and Dewey (2012) and also with Deterding (2013: 114) and several other studies. In fact, in the ten recordings analysed in this study, in total there are 16 occurrences of the unexpected use of an article with a common noun, but apart from Token 7 involving *the shrimp* discussed above, these did not seem to cause any problems. A few examples are listed in Table 5, where once more the spurious articles are shown in italics.

Table 5:   Some instances of unexpected articles with nouns that did not cause misunderstandings.

Location	Context
Br+Ch1:321	we're so exposed to *the* filipino food
Br+Ch1:252	i don't really have much of *a* spare time right now
Br+Fr:762	she has \<spel\> p h d \</spel\> in *the* criminologist
Br+Ko:141	i'm giving *a* counseling to my students
Br+Om:567	there is some sort of *a* resort

5.3 Absence of articles

Let us now consider the unexpected absence of articles. In his ASEAN ELF data, Kirkpatrick (2010: 105) found several examples of the absence of articles before nouns, and Deterding and Salbrina (2013: 66) reported that the absence of articles also occurs in Brunei English, both in conversational speech and in news reports in local newspapers. In this study, five tokens of misunderstanding were found in which there was the innovative absence of an article before a noun, and they are listed in

Table 6. (The symbol Ø indicates the missing article, and '…' in Token 12 indicates that some words have been omitted from the context that is shown.)

Table 6: Misunderstandings involving the absence of articles before nouns

Tok.	Location	Context
8	Br+Md2:1137	well ah it's (.) Ø **role playing strategy game** you know
9	Br+Ch2:428	it's quite nice it (.) from Ø **cuisine** (.) ah traditional games
10	Br+Ko:1265	she's erm Ø criminologist working with <spel>**j p m**</spel>
11	Br+Fr:72	because i have Ø **lack** of confidence when (.) speaking
12	Br+Fr:802	i have Ø certificate … so **i've taught** in primary school

In Token 8, the speaker MBr1 was describing video games that he likes to play. The listener FMd explained that she did not understand *role playing strategy game* because she was not familiar with the phrase, so the main cause of this misunderstanding is lexical usage.

In Token 9, the listener FCh2 explained that she heard *playing* instead of *cuisine*. The wider context is shown in (3). When asked by the researchers, FCh2 said that she was familiar with the word *cuisine*, so in this case lexical knowledge was not a factor.

(3)　Token 9 (Br+Ch2:428)
　　Context: FBr3 is talking about cultural things in Brunei

1	FBr3:	local magazine that covers erm everything about brunei at the same
2		time i was learning about my country as well like even though like
3		brunei is a small country but there's actually so much more? to to it
4		like some cultures that i never like learn when i was younger?
5		it was really nice to: learn that now
6	FCh2:	ah
7	FBr3:	cause i'm i'm like i'm grown up and i understand better? so it's
8		quite it's quite nice k- from **cuisine** ah traditional games like do
9		you know about gasing?

The main issue here is that FCh2 could not find a link between *cuisine* and *games*, and she explained to the researchers that she guessed FBr3 said *playing* because it was followed by the word *games*. Perhaps if the speaker had inserted *the* before *cuisine*, there is a chance that the listener would have heard the word correctly.

In Token 10, the misunderstood word is the initialism *JPM* (which stands for *Jabatan Perdana Mentiri*, 'the Prime Minister's Office'). Earlier in the utterance, there is the absence of the article *a* before *criminologist*, but it seems unlikely that this contributed to the misunderstanding of *JPM*.

In Token 11, the speaker MBr3 described how he feels about speaking English. MFr heard *less* instead of *lack* and the main cause of this mishearing is pronunciation, as MBr3 used a mid-vowel [e] instead of the expected open vowel [æ]. Although the main factor here is pronunciation, it is possible that if the speaker had inserted *a* before *lack*, MFr might have understood the word correctly.

The context of Token 12 is shown in (4). The misunderstood words are *i've taught*, for which the listener MFr heard *after*. MBr3 was speaking fast and pronounced [f] instead of [v] in *i've*, and he also dropped the final [t] in *taught*, using instead a glottal stop at the end of the word, so this token of misunderstanding almost certainly arises from pronunciation. A little earlier in the extract, there is no *the* before *certificate*. Although there is no indication that this omission of the article before *certificate* contributed to the misunderstanding of *i've taught* a few seconds later, it is

included here because it involves the innovative absence of an article near to a token of misunderstanding. (The occurrence of *educations* in line 1 of this example will be discussed in the next section.)

(4)   Token 12 (Br+Vn:802)
       Context: MBr3 is talking about his previous jobs

1   MBr3:   i have Ø certificate in erm in <tsk> diploma in primary educations?
2   MFr: mm
3   MBr3:   so **i've taught** in primary school so during my time

In all the five tokens shown in Table 6, it appears that the absence of articles did not play a major role in the misunderstandings, though it is possible that it was a contributory factor in Tokens 9 and 11.

In the ten recordings analysed in this study, in total there are 57 occurrences of the innovative absence an article, but it seems that almost none of these caused a misunderstanding. Some examples are listed in Table 7.

Table 7: Absence of articles before nouns that did not cause misunderstandings.

Location	Context
Br+Ch2:682	china has the best players in Ø badminton world
Br+Ch3:79	i've read maybe Ø couple of books
Br+Fr:112	my father? got married with Ø indonesian woman
Br+Ko:118	where we can have Ø discussion with the lecturers
Br+Md2:313	you know it's difficult for bruneians to get Ø job
Br+Vn:967	i'm giving him Ø chance until this primary one

In conclusion, out of twelve tokens of misunderstanding in the vicinity of non-standard article use discussed in this section and the two previous sections, only two tokens (Token 5 *the Korea* and Token 6 *the UBD*) of the innovative occurrence of an article before a proper noun are suggested to be the main cause of the misunderstanding. In a few other examples, such as Token 9 *Ø cuisine* and Token 11 *Ø lack of confidence*, the absence of articles may have contributed to the misunderstanding, but we have identified other features as the probable main cause (though, as always, and as noted by Pitzl et al [2008], it is often hard to be sure exactly what the cause of a misunderstanding is). We can therefore conclude that in ten out of the twelve tokens, the presence or absence of an article probably played only a minor role in the misunderstanding.

In fact, Kirkpatrick (2010: 105) notes that identifying non-standard forms of article usage is often problematic as many varieties of English treat uncountable nouns such as *furniture* and *stuff* as countable, and omission of an article before a plural noun is standard usage. The plural marking of nouns will be discussed in the next section.

5.4 Added plural marking

Previous studies have shown that the non-standard use of plural forms for uncountable nouns is common in many new varieties of English including Brunei English (Cane 1996; Deterding and Salbrina 2013) and Singapore English (Deterding 2007: 42). In their analysis of a corpus of ASEAN speech, Kirkpatrick and Deterding (2011) reported that the regularisation of the count/non-count distinction on nouns did not cause any problems. In this study, there are occurrences where non-standard

plural marking of uncountable nouns was used by the Bruneian speakers, such as *stuffs*, *foods*, *fictions* and *musics*, and in these cases, there is no evidence that this non-standard plural marking caused any misunderstanding. However, there are a few other occurrences of unexpected plural marking that may have contributed to misunderstandings. These are listed in Table 8.

Table 8: Non-standard plural marking

Tok.	Location	Context
12	Br+Fr:802	diploma in primary *educations*? … so **i've taught** in primary
13	Br+Ko:196	i have a good *grades* … grades my <spel> **c g p a** </spel>
14	Br+Ko:835	the **others part** is the sungai? i mean the ri:ver
15	Br+Fr:17	in **forensic** linguistics? … her tutorial *students*
16	Br+Fr:726	i have **five** siblings … from one *parents* … from my father

Token 12 has already been discussed in Section 5.3, and the wider context was shown in (4). MBr3 pluralised *educations* but this almost certainly had no impact on the misunderstanding, because the misunderstood words were *i've taught*. MFr heard *after* instead *of i've taught* because of MBr3's pronunciation.

As noted in the previous section, it is sometimes difficult to classify whether some examples represent non-standard use of an article or innovative plural marking. We can see this in Token 13, the wider context of which is shown in (5). It is unclear whether it should be regarded as an unexpected article *a* before *good grades* or an unexpected plural noun. Furthermore, it is possible that what sounded like an article *a* could actually just be a pause particle.

(5)   Token 13 (Br+Ko:196)
       Context: MBr3 is talking about his current undergraduate studies

1   MBr3:   erm hopefully hopefully i have a good *grades* have hopefully i can
2   maintain grades my <spel> **c g p a**? </spel> and then get some
3   recommendations from lecturers?

In fact, it is unlikely that the usage of *a* together with *grades* contributed to the misunderstanding, because the misunderstood word is actually the initialism *CGPA* (*Cumulative Grade Point Average*, referring to a grade system used in the undergraduate programs at UBD). We can therefore classify the main issue as lexical.

In Token 14, the speaker MBr3 inserted the suffix *-s* in *others* and the listener MKo heard *other spot* instead of *other part*. It is likely in this example that the insertion of the *-s* suffix on *others* is the main cause of the listener's mishearing, though one might alternatively analyse this spurious [s] as an issue of pronunciation rather than grammar.

Token 15 is shown in (6). MBr3 pluralised *students* while referring to himself. However, this almost certainly had no impact on the misunderstanding. In fact the misunderstood word was *forensic*, a word that the listener MFr was not familiar with, so the problem is lexical.

(6)   Token 15 (Br+Fr:17)
       Context: MBr3 and MFr are talking about a tutor at UBD

1   MFr: ah so how did you:: know with ah ishamina
2   MBr3:   a::h she's my tutor? in **forensic** linguistics? erm his erm her tutorial
3   *students* and then i know her for: i think two months ah since two
4   month yeah

Token 16 is shown in (7). MBr3 pluralised *parents* after using the singular *one*. It is however not clear if this caused any misunderstanding, because the misunderstood word was *five*, caused by MBr3's pronunciation. MFr explained that he heard *four* because MBr3 was speaking fast. He pronounced *five* as [fʌʔ], using the short vowel [ʌ] instead of the expected diphthong [aɪ] and a glottal stop instead of the final consonant [v].

(7)   Token 16 (Br+Fr:726)
       Context: MBr3 is talking about his family members

1   MBr3:   erm some of because ah my siblings are (.) i have s- erm i have **five**
2   siblings from my one from one *parents* i mean from my father

We may also observe that all five tokens listed in Table 8 are from MBr3's speech, so it seems that a spurious *-s* is typical for this speaker rather than a common feature of Brunei speech.

We can concur with the findings of Deterding (2013: 110) that unexpected plural marking is not a major issue affecting intelligibility in ELF communication. In fact, in the ten recordings analysed in this study, 14 occurrences of plural marking on singular and uncountable nouns have been found, and none of them suggested any evidence of misunderstanding. Some examples involving *musics, foods, stuffs* and *parts* are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Some plural marking on singular and uncountable nouns that did not cause misunderstandings.

Location	Context
Br+Ch3:521	actually it's because of the idols i'm into korean s- *musics*
Br+Ko:469	plus erm with erm *foods* with the meals and then compared to
Br+Md1:897	they give you themes to teach erm like *foods* or family
Br+Om:706	it's more cheaper in brunei yeah the (.) the *stuffs* that they sell
Br+Vn:1094	we have a *parts* time study as well my friend in ah my school

5.5 Absence of plural suffix

In addition to the spurious addition of plural *-s*, there are also three tokens where the absence of a plural suffix may have contributed to a misunderstanding. They are listed in Table 10.

Table 10: Absence of plural suffix

Tok.	Location	Context
17	Br+Vn:223	well i bought a lot of **key chai::n**
18	Br+Ko:96	several linguistic *program* … interested in? **sociolinguistic**
19	Br+Ko:97	erm **neurolinguistic**? and then there's er one language and

Token 17 is shown in (8). FBr2 used the singular *key chain* after the plural quantifier *a lot of*. Although this may have contributed to the misunderstanding, the main cause is probably the speaker's pronunciation. FBr2 lengthened the word *chain* and this made it unintelligible to the listener FVn.

(8)   Token 17 (Br+Vn:223)
       Context: FBr2 is talking about her trip to Paris.

1   FBr2:   well i bought a lot of **key chai::n** <1> a:nd </1>
2   FVn: <1> you bought </1> a a lot of what?
3   FBr2:   key chains
4   FVn: key ch-
5   FBr2:   <2> key chains yea:h </2>
6   FVn: <2> key ah: key </2> key chains <3> yeah ah ah: </3>
7   FBr2:   <3> i- key chains for your keys? yeah </3>

It seems that FBr2 realised not only that her pronunciation was problematic but also that the absence of a plural marker in *key chain* was unexpected, because when she repeated the phrase in line 5, she used the plural form *key chains*. We may also consider that the purchase of key chains as souvenirs might have contributed to the misunderstanding. It is currently a popular thing for Bruneians to buy, but for someone from elsewhere, it may seem to be an odd choice for souvenirs. Perhaps we could conclude that this misunderstanding actually occurred for cultural reasons.

Tokens 18 and 19 are shown in (9). MBr3 did not have a final plural *-s* in *program* even though it follows the quantifier *several*, but there is no indication of a misunderstanding here. The two words that were misunderstood are *sociolinguistic* and *neurolinguistic*, and we might note that MBr3 did not have a final *-s* in either of them. However, it seems unlikely that the absence of a final *-s* in these two words is what caused the misunderstanding.

(9)   Tokens 18 and 19 (Br+Ko:96)
       Context: MBr3 is talking about linguistics courses that he is interested in.

1   MBr3:   yes erm there ARE several erm there are several linguistic
2   program that i'm interested in? **sociolinguistic**
3   MKo: sociolinguistics
4   MBr3:   yeah **sociolinguistic** erm **neurolinguistic**? and then there's er one
5   language and society?

In fact, the misunderstanding lies in *socio* and *neuro*, as MKo heard *for sure* and *nearer* respectively, and the main causes of the misunderstandings are pronunciation. For Token 18, MKo explained that he heard *for sure* because he was not familiar with MBr3's pronunciation [sɒʃɒlɪŋgwɪstɪk] and was only familiar with the standard General American (GA) pronunciation [soʊsɪoʊlɪŋgwɪstɪk] (Wells 2008: 755). In this case, MBr3's use of medial [ʃ] may reflect RP pronunciation rather than the GA pronunciation that MKo was more familiar with. In addition, of course, the use of [ɒ] in the first two syllables of *sociolinguistic* may have been a factor.

For *neurolinguistic* in Token 19, MKo explained that he heard *nearer* instead of *neuro*. This probably occurred because he was confused by MBr3's pronunciation [niːrɒlɪŋgwɪstɪk], in which the first syllable is not too dissimilar from the RP [njuː]. MKo was only familiar with the standard GA pronunciation [nʊroʊlɪŋgwɪstɪk] with no [j] after the initial [n] (Wells 2008: 537).

From (9), it can be seen that MKo actually understood MBr3 correctly, as he said *sociolinguistics* in line 3. It seems that he was checking to see if the word he guessed was correct, so it is uncertain if *sociolinguistic* should be classified as a token of misunderstanding or not. It is classified as one because MKo appears to be asking for clarification.

In the tokens above, it appears that the absence of plural marking did not play a major role in causing the misunderstandings, and pronunciation seems to be the main cause. We can concur with Deterding (2013: 110) that the absence of plural marking is not a major issue affecting intelligibility in ELF communication. In fact, in the recordings analysed in this study, there are 63 occurrences of the absence of an expected plural suffix that did not show any evidence of causing a misunderstanding. Some examples are listed in Table 11.

Table 11: Absence of plural suffix that did not cause misunderstandings

Location	Context
Br+Ch3:704	my other family members the adult *one* they they have like
Br+Ko:67	okay i have erm (.) six *sibling*?
Br+Ko:947	my sister-in-law is a lecturer in one of the *university*
Br+Md2:139	most of the *place* that i: i am excited (.) to go to
Br+Md2:1146	maybe @@ (.) we've done a lot of *thing* together
Br+Vn:279	well (.) obviously i have a lot of *assignment* to do

In conclusion, out of the eight tokens involving plurals discussed in this section and in Section 5.4, there is only one token (Token 14, *others part*) in which the unexpected occurrence of a plural suffix may have been the main cause of the misunderstanding, though even this token might be classified as idiosyncratic pronunciation on the part of MBr3.

5.6 Gender

In the speech of some Bruneians, there seems to be a tendency to confuse the pronouns *he* and *she*. In this study, there is one token in which the gender of a pronoun causes a misunderstanding. As shown in (10), the speaker MBr3 was talking about his father, but then in line 3 he used a female pronoun to refer to him. This caused confusion for MKo who asked for clarification in line 6.

(10) Token 20 (Br+Ko:876)
Context: MBr3 is talking about his father's religious beliefs.

1	MBr3:	since erm my father is not the is not ah originally muslim?
2	MKo:	mhm
3	MBr3:	erm **she's** erm erm **she's** no religion at all actually?
4	MKo:	mhm
5	MBr3:	ah
6	MKo:	your father
7	MBr3:	my father erm and then i am converted to islam?

In fact, two other instances have been found in which an unexpected pronoun was used, but neither seemed to cause a problem. In line 3 of (11), MBr1 refers to his brother as *her*, but this does not seem to confuse FOm; and in line 4 of (12), MBr1 surprisingly corrects himself and ends up referring to his brother as *she*; but FMd did not report a problem with this.

(11) Br+Om:846
    Context: MBr1 is talking about where his brother's live

1   MBr1:   yeah about the house you know my (.) my brother that's that's married
2   (.) the the third (.) the third brother (.) he lives with (.) ah he lives at
3   our house sometimes and sometimes he goes to (.) to *her* wife's
4   FOm: yeah
5   MBr1:   d- yeah
6   FOm: so it's like that

(12) Br+Md2:257
    Context: MBr1 is discussing traveling on one's own or with family

1   FMd: ah is it because is it the culture is like that ah <1> the parents don't
2   allow </1>
3   MBr1:   <1> no no no </1> becau- because my brother ah (.) i think he (.) h-
4   *she* travel like (.) i i don't know i lost count already? he travel a lot
5   with his friends

Overall, in the ten recordings, there are 156 uses of third person singular pronouns (93 of *he* and 63 of *she*). All apart from those discussed in (10) to (12) have the expected gender, and only token 20 (as shown in [10]) seemed to give rise to a misunderstanding.

6 Discussion

The grammar of noun phrases, particularly the standard use of articles and the plural suffix on nouns, is often emphasised by English language teachers. For example, Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) reported that, in the writing of 53 adult immigrants to New Zealand, about 25% of the errors that they identified involved articles or other issues with nouns. However, it has regularly been reported that innovative grammar in noun phrases is common in new varieties of English around the world (Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008: 53) as well in ELF interactions (Seidlhofer 2011: 125), and it has also been claimed that non-standard usage can sometimes actually serve to enhance the intelligibility of speech in ELF settings (Cogo and Dewey 2012). It is therefore important to investigate this last claim further and determine the extent to which non-standard grammar might contribute to misunderstandings in ELF interactions.

It seems that functional morphemes such as the plural *-s* suffix are often discounted in ELF contexts when the meaning is already clear, so phrases like *six sibling* and *one of the university* do not cause a problem, and plurals such as *furnitures* and *stuffs* are also widely used. In fact, use of a singular noun after *one of* has been reported to be very common in Brunei English (Deterding and Salbrina 2013: 54), and plurals such as *equipments, infrastructures*, *jewelleries* and *stuffs* are widespread (Deterding and Salbrina 2013: 53). The current study confirms that they do not seem to give rise to misunderstandings. Furthermore, the addition or omission of articles does not usually appear to be problematic.

Confusion between male and female third person pronouns may also occur quite widely in the English spoken in the region. It might be influenced by Malay, in which there is only one third person pronoun *dia* to refer to both genders, and in fact the gender of younger siblings is also not distinguished, as *adik* can be either younger brother or younger sister. Furthermore, although all of the Bruneians in the current

study were Malay, the English spoken in the region is probably influenced by Chinese, as there are many Chinese people not just in Brunei but also in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore; and spoken Chinese does not differentiate the gender of third person pronouns. Although a distinction is made between the male and female pronouns 他 and 她 in writing, they are both pronounced as [ta] on a high-level tone. It is possible that speakers in Southeast Asia are quite tolerant of variable pronoun usage, partly influenced by the indigenous languages spoken in the region.

Overall, out of the 153 tokens of misunderstanding in the 10 recordings analysed in our corpus, we found that only a total of five of them (3%) are mainly caused by innovative use of grammar. In addition to the four tokens discussed in this paper, there is just one further token, in which *close and knit* spoken by MBr2 to describe his close-knit family was misunderstood as *close and neat* by FCh1, largely because of the unexpected *and* in this phrase. FCh1 confirmed that she knew the phrase *close-knit*, so this was not a lexical issue, and it arose largely because of the spurious conjunction in the middle of the phrase (though the relatively long vowel in *knit* may also have been a factor).

The research reported in this paper therefore lends support to the hypothesis that innovative grammar is rarely a major factor in causing misunderstandings in ELF interactions, and for the purpose of enhancing intelligibility, teachers should focus more on pronunciation and lexis. Of course, teachers will argue that much of their work is concerned with writing, and that adherence to standard grammatical usage is vitally important for written work when their students are taking exams or when they are engaged in other formal activities such as applying for jobs or writing professional reports. Nevertheless, in ensuring the intelligibility of speech in ELF interactions, it seems that there are other factors that are more important.

7 Conclusion

The main issues that caused the 20 misunderstandings analysed in the current study are summarised in Table 12.

Table 12: Summary of main issues

Main issue	Tokens
Added article	5 (the Korea), 6 (the UBD)
Added plural suffix	14 (others part)
Gender	20 (she)
Pronunciation	7 (shrimp), 11 (lack), 12 (i've taught), 16 (five), 17 (key chain), 18 (sociolinguistic), 19 (neurolinguistic)
Lexicon	1 (Kick-Ass Two), 2 (Atlantis City), 3 (Astro) 4 (Hell's Kitchen), 8 (role playing strategy game), 10 (JPM), 13 (CGPA), 15 (forensic)
Miscellaneous	9 (cuisine)

Altogether, there are only four tokens in which grammar seems to be the main factor. These tokens involve the innovative use of articles with proper nouns, with *Korea* in Token 5 and with *UBD* in Token 6, the added suffix on *other* in Token 14, and the unexpected use of a female pronoun in Token 20.

Other innovative grammatical features outlined in this study that occur in the remaining 16 tokens of misunderstanding include the unexpected presence and absence of articles, and the use or absence of the plural -*s* suffix. In these tokens,

however, it seems that the main causes of the misunderstandings are mostly pronunciation and also unfamiliar lexicon.

We therefore conclude that non-standard features of the noun phrase may have played only a minor role in the misunderstandings, and we suggest that there is little evidence that such innovative grammar interferes very much with intelligibility in ELF communication by speakers of Brunei English. Further research should look at a wider range of speakers, to investigate if innovation in noun phrases and other aspects of grammar might interfere with intelligibility in various contexts, and also the extent to which listeners from a wide range of different countries might be confused by some aspects of the grammar shared by speakers of English in Southeast Asia.

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Appendix: transcription conventions

The transcription conventions are based on those outlined in VOICE (2007), with the addition of underlined/bold font to indicate misunderstood words and italics to highlight non-standard usage that was not misunderstood.

<1> , </1>	overlapping speech
:	lengthened sounds
@	laughter
?	rising intonation
(.)	short pause
<tsk>	tutting sound (alveolar click)
<spel> , </spel>	individual letters spelled out
italicised	non-standard usage that does not cause misunderstanding
<u>underlined and bold</u>	words or phrases that are misunderstood
…	omitted speech

Bionotes

Ishamina Athirah is a PhD research student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Her research focuses on the intelligibility of Brunei English. Her previous publications include 'Identification of Bruneian ethnic groups from their English Pronunciation', published in *South East Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 11: 37–45.

David Deterding is a Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. His research focuses on the description of varieties of English in Southeast Asia and also the acoustic description of speech. His most recent books are *Brunei English: A new variety in a multilingual society* (together with Salbrina Sharbawi), published by Springer, and *Misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca: An Analysis of ELF Interactions in South-East Asia*, published by De Gruyter Mouton.