

Norms for pronunciation in Southeast Asia

DAVID DETERDING*

ABSTRACT: Some pronunciation features that are not found in Inner Circle varieties of English are shared by the Englishes of Singapore, the rest of ASEAN, and China, and in some cases they serve to distinguish pairs of words which are no longer differentiated by many speakers in Britain. As these features of pronunciation do not interfere with comprehension and in some cases they actually enhance intelligibility, they can be promoted as part of the standard English that is emerging in Southeast Asia. However, there is likely to be less agreement about some other features, as for example, it may be argued that the relative absence of reduced vowels and the use of syllable-based rhythm do have an impact on intelligibility, so whether these features are encouraged as part of the regional standard English will remain more controversial. In addition to considering these features, this paper discusses the status of final consonants that are commonly deleted in British and American English, specifically whether the regular omission of these sounds by speakers in Southeast Asia should be encouraged.

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that, in the world today, there are more second-language users than native speakers of English (Crystal 2003: 62). Furthermore, quite apart from second-language users of English, there is a wide range of well-established New Varieties of English (NVEs) in Outer Circle countries such as Singapore, India and Nigeria (Kachru 1985; 2005: 14), and many speakers in these places have an excellent command of the language, and indeed it is often their first language, even though their pronunciation often differs quite substantially from that of speakers in Inner Circle countries such as Britain, the USA and Australia. Under these circumstances, it is nowadays quite widely accepted that ownership of English no longer belongs just with the Inner Circle countries. Speakers from the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries have a right to contribute to the development of the language, and furthermore there is no need for reference always to be made to Inner Circle norms (Jenkins 2000: 94; Kirkpatrick 2004).

This paper will consider the norms for English pronunciation that seem to be emerging in Southeast Asia. There are many features of pronunciation found extensively in the region which do not occur in Inner Circle Englishes, but which do not seem to interfere with comprehension, and in some cases they might even enhance intelligibility. If a feature of pronunciation is used by a wide range of speakers and does not stop them being easily understood internationally, there seems little reason to try to eradicate it.

Here, reference will be made mainly to RP British English pronunciation, because that is the standard that has traditionally been adopted in much of Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei. Of course, many speakers in the region look instead to an American standard, especially in the Philippines and Vietnam, and some of the issues that will be discussed, such as the pronunciation of triphthongs and also the status of the

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Jalan Tungku Link, Gadong, BE1410, Brunei. E-mail: dhdeter@gmail.com

centring diphthong /ʊə/, are not relevant for rhotic accents such as those of most American speakers. However, other similar issues are still pertinent. For example, many Americans do not differentiate *very* from *vary* or *writer* from *rider*, so should we urge learners who do make these distinctions to drop them? Crucially, should we be encouraging speakers in Southeast Asia to adopt all the features of an external standard when some of those Inner Circle features may actually have a detrimental effect on intelligibility? But first we need to consider the concept of intelligibility in more detail.

INTELLIGIBILITY

Intelligibility is, of course, hard to pin down, as there are many levels involved in our perception and understanding of the English spoken by other people (Kachru and Nelson 2006: 67). Here, much of the discussion will refer to features of pronunciation that serve to maintain distinctions between words, partly because this is fairly straightforward to establish, though it is acknowledged that there are other vitally important aspects of intelligibility, including sentence-level comprehension and utterance-level interpretability (Smith 1992). In focusing on word-level intelligibility, this study considers just the most basic of the three levels discussed by Smith.

Before we start to think about international intelligibility, it is important to acknowledge that lack of intelligibility between different speakers of English is not a new phenomenon (Smith and Nelson 2006: 428) and furthermore it is not necessary for every speaker always to be understood by people from elsewhere. For example, Smith and Nelson (2006: 429) discuss the situation where speakers of English in India can converse quite freely among themselves and it is of no consequence if people from the Philippines would not be able to understand them. However, international communication is becoming increasingly important in the modern world, so it is of interest to consider what features of speech can allow speakers of one variety to be understood by people from elsewhere.

It was shown many years ago that native-speaker English is not necessarily the most easily understood internationally. For example, Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) show that the recording of an American speaker was internationally less easily understood than speakers from places such as India, Malaysia and Japan, and Smith and Bisazza (1982) report that a key factor in intelligibility is familiarity with the variety of the language that is being spoken. Recently Kirkpatrick and Saunders (2005) similarly report that students in Australia who are likely to have had some exposure to Singapore English can understand this variety more easily than those from other parts of Asia who may not have encountered it before.

One key aspect that needs to be considered is intelligibility by whom. In the past, there has sometimes been a tendency to use native speakers as the benchmark for listening intelligibility, but in the modern world the overwhelming majority of exchanges in English do not involve a native speaker, so constant reference to native speaker judgments is no longer always appropriate (Seidlhofer 2005).

Bearing in mind that English from an Inner Circle country such as America or Britain is internationally not necessarily the most easily understood in other places, we can consider which features of the pronunciation of NVEs might actually improve intelligibility, especially for listeners from Outer and Expanding Circle societies. In fact, Trudgill (2005) points out that non-native listeners depend heavily on bottom-up processing as they are often less proficient than native speakers in dealing with contextual cues. Furthermore, for

international communication around the world, there is often little common cultural background between the speakers, and this exacerbates the problems listeners have in drawing inferences from context. As a result, Trudgill argues that, in order to ensure efficient international communication, as many segmental cues as possible should be maintained in the speech signal, and he therefore argues against the *Lingua Franca Core*, the system of reduced contrasts that is proposed as a focus for teaching English by Jenkins (2000: 159; 2005).

This study will suggest that there are indeed some features of pronunciation found widely among Inner Circle speakers which result in a reduction of the number of contrasts available, and we should not necessarily encourage all speakers to adopt these features of pronunciation just because native speakers do, though of course all users of English will need to be able to deal with speech that incorporates these features if they want to be able to understand people from Inner Circle countries.

This paper will investigate a few of the features of pronunciation found widely in Southeast Asia and discuss what effect they might have on the intelligibility of the variety of English that seems to be emerging in the region.

DATA

This paper will be based on descriptions of Singapore English (Deterding 2003; 2005a; Lim 2004; Wee 2004) and the English found throughout the ASEAN region (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006) as well as the English of speakers from China (Deterding 2006a). Reference will also be made to the Englishes of Malaysia (Baskaran 2004), Brunei (Mossop 1996), the Philippines (Tayao 2004a; 2004b) and Hong Kong (Hung 2002). In addition, some new data will be analysed, to determine how extensive the features of pronunciation under discussion are among young educated speakers of the various ethnic groups in Singapore.

The new data consist of recordings of 33 female undergraduates from the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore reading the *Wolf* passage, a short text based on a fable by Aesop and specially adapted to allow detailed analysis of the vowels and consonants of English (Deterding 2006b). The full text of the *Wolf* passage as used in the current research is included in the Appendix.

At the time of the recording, the subjects were all aged between 19 and 22 except for one who was 25. The recordings were made at the start of a module on phonetics in the second semester of their first year of study at NIE. The speakers had just had a brief overview of phonetics during a course on introductory linguistics in their first semester, but at the time of the recording none had received any further training in the subject. All the speakers had selected English as a specialist subject to study at NIE. All have excellent ability at English, and for many of them, it is their first language.

Of the 33 speakers, 24 are ethnically Chinese, five are Malay and four are Indian. Although this imbalance is not ideal, it does reflect the ethnic make-up of Singapore, where the overwhelming majority of the population is Chinese, and at least there is some non-Chinese data, to allow the analysis to be extended to the other two main ethnic groups.

The recordings were made directly onto a computer, with a microphone placed just a few inches from the lips of the speakers, in the Phonetics Lab at NIE. This ensures a high quality of recording in order to facilitate phonetic analysis.

The pronunciation in the text was investigated by means of careful, repeated listening to short words and phrases using Praat Version 4.3.12 (Boersma and Weenink 2005). We will now consider the pronunciation of various vowels in the recordings of the Wolf data, the occurrence of reduced vowels and their effect on rhythm, and the deletion of final consonants.

TRIPHTHONGS

The vowels in words such as *fire* and *hour* are traditionally described as triphthongs in RP British English and transcribed as /aɪə/ and /aʊə/ respectively (Roach 2000: 24). Currently in Britain, English is undergoing a process of smoothing in which the middle element is omitted so both of these vowels may be [aə]. As a result, pairs of words such as *tyre/tower*, *sire/sour* and *shire/shower* are homophones for some speakers (Cruttenden 2001: 139). Indeed, Ladefoged (2001: 29) lists /aə/ as one of the vowels of British English. If this is becoming the current standard pronunciation for British English, do learners need to imitate it? Surely contrasts between words are important and should be maintained wherever possible, so a style of pronunciation that loses valuable distinctions does not have to be imitated.

In contrast, in Singapore *fire* and *hour* are generally pronounced as [faɪjə] and [aʊwə]. They both have two clear syllables with a linking [j] or [w] between them (Lim and Low 2005), and there is little possibility of /aɪə/ and /aʊə/ sounding the same.

In the Wolf passage, there is one instance of a triphthong, in *diet*. (Unfortunately, there are no instances of /aʊə/ in the text.) The perceived pronunciation of *diet* for the 33 Singaporean students is shown in Table 1. It can be seen that a monosyllabic triphthong is the most common realisation of this vowel, though an inserted [j] does occur with some speakers. The smoothed version of the vowel occurs with just one Indian speaker.

The frequency of an inserted approximant for all three groups is much less than the 75 per cent for an inserted [j] in /aɪə/ for read speech reported by Lim and Low (2005: 70). The words investigated in the latter study were *fire*, *hire*, *higher* and *buyer*, all of which have no final consonant and the last two of which consist of two morphemes. It is not surprising that the incidence of an inserted approximant is different in *diet* which consists of a single morpheme and where the vowel is followed by /t/. However, it is interesting to note that even with *diet*, many speakers in Singapore insert [j].

The use of very clear bisyllabic articulation of the triphthongs, often with an intervening [j] or [w], is also found in the English spoken throughout the ASEAN region. For example, Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) report that speakers from countries such as Indonesia, Brunei, Cambodia and Myanmar all pronounce *our* and *hour* as [aʊwə], and for Brunei

Table 1. Pronunciation of the vowel in *diet* by 33 Singaporean students

	[aɪə]	[aɪjə]	[aə]
Chinese	15	9	0
Malay	4	1	0
Indian	2	1	1
Total	21	11	1

English, Mossop (1996) gives the pronunciation of *our* as [aʊɜ], with a lengthening of the final element.

If speakers use pronunciations such as these which are easily intelligible and maintain important distinctions between words, there seems little reason why they should slavishly adopt an alternative pronunciation just because many speakers in Britain have it. Indeed, Cruttenden (2001: 304) specifically identifies smoothing on the triphthongs as a feature that does not need to be imitated even though it is common in southern England.

THE DIPHTHONG /ʊə/

The diphthong /ʊə/ is nowadays increasingly rare in RP British English (Roach 2000: 21), although some older speakers still use it. Wells (2000: 592) reports that 57 per cent of his British respondents prefer [pɔ:] instead of [pʊə] for the pronunciation of *poor*, and for young people the preference for [pɔ:] is over 80 per cent, a strong indication that this variant is winning out. For *sure*, the overall preference for [ɔ:] is only 46 per cent, but again as most young people prefer [ɔ:] over [ʊə], Wells (2000: 752) gives it as the first pronunciation. Clearly [ɔ:] is fast becoming the norm in these words in Britain. Once again, this means there are some homophones for pairs of words that used to be distinguished: many people in Britain no longer differentiate *poor/paw*, *sure/shore* or *tour/tore*.

For the recordings of the Wolf passage analysed here, the vowel in *poor* was classified as [ʊə] if it was perceived to be different in quality from the vowel in *more*. As shown in Table 2, 30 subjects were judged to use [ʊə] in *poor*, and [ɔ:] was found for just two Chinese subjects and one Indian (not the same person who uses [æ] in *diet*).

Clearly, the overwhelming majority of young Singaporeans distinguish *poor*, *sure* and *tour* from *paw*, *shore* and *tore* respectively. Baskaran (2004) gives /ʊə/ as the vowel in *poor* in Malaysia, and Hung (2002) does the same for Hong Kong English, so it seems likely that the traditional British pronunciation still prevails in much of Southeast Asia. If most speakers in the region distinguish /ʊə/ from /ɔ:/, there seems to be no reason to encourage them to adopt a British style of speech which does not maintain this distinction.

THE CLOSE BACK VOWELS /u:/ AND /ʊ/

Currently, in England, the close back vowels /u:/ and /ʊ/ are becoming increasingly centralized, and /ʊ/ is also becoming unrounded (Cruttenden 2001: 121, 123), a trend that is confirmed especially for young speakers by recent acoustic measurements

Table 2. Pronunciation of the vowel in *poor* by 33 Singaporean students

	[ʊə]	[ɔ:]
Chinese	22	2
Malay	5	0
Indian	3	1
Total	30	3

(Hawkins and Midgley 2005). This tendency is not reflected in Singapore, where the close back vowels are still generally fully back (Deterding 2003), and acoustic measurements from Hong Kong suggest that they are fully back there as well (Hung 2002), though it seems that the English in Brunei may be following the British pattern (Salbrina 2006).

The modern British style of pronunciation can result in *good* being heard as *gig* by listeners in the rest of the world (Deterding 2005b). If speakers maintain a fully back pronunciation for /u:/ and /ʊ/, there seems little reason to encourage them to change, though of course, for listening purposes, some exposure to the modern British pronunciation may be helpful. Indeed, Cruttenden (2001: 303) suggests that a fully back version of /u:/ is perfectly acceptable, even if it might sometimes sound hyper-correct.

INCIDENCE OF REDUCED VOWELS

Maintaining a conservative style of pronunciation for the three features discussed above, the triphthongs, /ʊə/, and the close back monophthongs, will probably not be too controversial, as there seems little doubt that all three of these features enhance intelligibility. Now, however, we will consider something that has far more extensive consequences for the pronunciation of English and may not meet with such widespread agreement: the relative absence of reduced vowels (schwas) in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words and also in the weak forms of many monosyllabic function words.

It is widely reported that many NVEs, such as that of Singapore, tend to use full vowels in certain situations in which Inner Circle varieties such as RP British English and American English use a reduced vowel (Tay 1982; Brown 1988; Low and Brown 2005: 153). However, it is not true that a schwa is completely absent in Singapore. First, let us consider the environments in which it does occur in polysyllabic words and note that the pattern found in Singapore is actually matched rather closely in at least one variety of British English.

In investigations of Singapore English, Heng and Deterding (2005) report that, in polysyllabic words in which the first syllable is unstressed, a full vowel tends to occur when there is an 'o' in the spelling (e.g. *computer*, *official*), but a schwa often occurs when there is an 'a' in the spelling (e.g. *ability*, *approach*), and Deterding (2005a) shows that there is a tendency for a full vowel to occur at the start of *absorb* and *advantage* (where the first syllable is closed off by a consonant, /b/ and /d/ respectively) but a reduced vowel always occurs in *afford* and *abroad* (where the /f/ and /b/ after the initial vowel belong in the second syllable).

In fact, a very similar pattern for the absence of a reduced vowel in the unstressed initial syllable of some polysyllabic words also occurs 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. Wells 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.

The Wolf data was analysed, to obtain an estimate of the incidence of reduced vowels in Singapore. The vowel in the first syllable of three polysyllabic words was investigated: *concern*, *successful* and *convinced*. For monosyllabic function words, the vowel in five

Table 3. Incidence of reduced vowels by 33 Singaporean students

	Content words		<i>of, as, that</i>		<i>to</i>	
	Full	Reduced	Full	Reduced	Full	Reduced
Chinese	64	8	68	4	27	21
Malay	10	5	14	1	8	1
Indian	10	2	11	1	3	5
Total	84	15	93	6	38	27

words was investigated: *of* (line 2 of the text), *to* (line 3), *as* (line 9), *that* (line 9), and *to* (line 10). The results are shown in Table 3, where the results for *to* are presented separately from the other three function words. (One Malay speaker omitted the *to* in line 4, so the totals for the Malay speakers are one fewer than expected.)

These results confirm that, for all three main ethnic groups in Singapore, the overwhelming majority of the vowels in the first unstressed syllable of some polysyllabic words and also some function words are full vowels rather than the reduced vowels that would be expected in many Inner Circle varieties of English, though the vowel in *to* is more often reduced than the vowels in *of*, *as* and *that*.

Avoidance of reduced vowels also tends to occur in the English of speakers from China. Deterding (2006a) investigated the English of thirteen young students (aged 18 or 19) from various parts of China and found that function words such as *that*, *than*, *to* and *of* nearly always have a full vowel, but a schwa sometimes incurs in the first syllable of content words such as *considered* and *confess*. A hypothesis for this pattern is that, in China, lots of time is spent memorising long lists of vocabulary in isolation, with a surprisingly widespread belief that the best language learner is someone who learns the whole dictionary, and as a result the standard pronunciation of polysyllabic words may be adopted but the weak forms of function words are less likely to be learned. When teaching these students, it is also noticeable that they are very reluctant to use reduced vowels in function words, believing that such pronunciation is lazy.

In fact, the absence of reduced vowels can be found throughout the ASEAN region. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) report many instances of full vowels in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words, including *officially* as [ɔfɪʃəli] by an Indonesian, *compare* as [kəmpeə] by someone from Brunei, and *continue* as [kɒntɪnju:] by a speaker from Myanmar. In addition, they note the use of full vowels in function words, such as *to* as [tu:] by speakers from Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. For the Philippines, Tayao (2004a) reports a tendency for all but acrolectal speakers to use full vowels in unstressed syllables, and in Malaysia, Baskaran (2004) notes that full vowels occur even in the first syllable of words such as *around* in which a schwa would be expected in Singapore.

With the widespread occurrence of full vowels in many words, it is unlikely that this feature of pronunciation often results in misunderstandings in Southeast Asia. In fact, Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) report that misunderstandings found in their data of conversations between speakers from different ASEAN countries mostly involve unexpected substitutions, such as *holes* pronounced as [hounz] by a speaker from Laos, *saucе* as [ʃɔ:s] by a speaker from Vietnam, and *pearl* as [bɑ:l] by someone from Myanmar,

and they suggest that use of full vowels may in some circumstances actually enhance intelligibility. This issue is now considered further.

REDUCED VOWELS AND INTELLIGIBILITY

While it may be true that, for listeners from Inner Circle countries such as Britain and America, a style of speech with relatively few reduced vowels is harder to understand because reduced vowels can help with the identification of stressed syllables, there are also some cases where the use of full vowels actually enhances distinctions between words. For example, *prescribe* and *proscribe* 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 (Wells 2000: 602, 610), then they become homophones, which seems a bit unfortunate for antonyms. Similarly, in an actual instance of misunderstanding, while interviewing a student in Brunei, I asked her what she had done during her last vacation, and I used a schwa in the first syllable of *vacation*. The student looked momentarily stunned, as she thought I was asking about her last vocation. Finally, 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 words and also to avoid common spelling mistakes, should teachers be attempting to change these features of pronunciation?

Many NVEs tend to avoid reduced vowels, not just in Southeast Asia but also in the Caribbean and Africa (Wells 1982: 570, 639; Gramley and Pätzold 2004: 270, 319). As a result, it seems likely that use of full vowels instead of reduced vowels may enhance rather than hinder intelligibility for many listeners throughout the world, though probably not for Inner Circle listeners. In fact, one might argue that speakers from Britain and America need to learn to use full vowels more often if they want to be easily understood internationally. For example, it is useful for expatriates to know that, in Singapore, *maintenance* is often pronounced not as [məɪntənəns] but as [məɪnteɪnəns], with no reduced vowel in the second syllable, so it is helpful if they are able to pronounce it that way if they find they are not being understood (though of course it is also valuable for Singaporean speakers to be familiar with the Inner Circle way of pronouncing the word so they can understand it when it is said that way).

Let us now consider the perception of stress in more detail. Although Jenkins (2000: 150; 2005: 201) actually excludes word stress from her proposed Lingua Franca Core (LFC) of the essential pronunciation features which are needed for international communication, most teachers of English believe that maintaining clear stress patterns is vital, as for example, *important* may be misheard as *impotent* if the stress is perceived to be on the first syllable. If we accept that word stress is valuable, then the fact that reduced vowels contribute substantially to the perception of stress is something that should be kept in mind. However, if we find speakers with careful enunciation of their words, including the clear retention of important stress distinctions, but they use full vowels in many syllables where reduced vowels might be expected in Inner Circle varieties of English, there seems little reason to encourage an alternative style of pronunciation. Indeed, many widely respected and highly articulate speakers, such as Nelson Mandela and Kofi Anan, have fewer reduced vowels than most Inner Circle speakers, but nobody seems to think we should be trying to change the way they speak.

RHYTHM

One key function for reduced vowels is to help carry the distinctive stress-based rhythm of Inner Circle varieties of English, in which there is an underlying tendency for an alternation of strong and weak syllables and the latter often have a schwa. Indeed recent research has confirmed that the difference between the rhythm of British English and a more syllable-based variety such as Singapore English can indeed be measured (Deterding 2001) and also that one way of detecting this difference is by comparing the vowels of neighbouring syllables (Low, Grabe and Nolan 2000). Syllable-based rhythm has also been reported in Malaysia (Baskaran 2004), the Philippines (Tayao 2004b), and throughout ASEAN (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006).

However, syllable-based rhythm does not just occur in NVEs. Crystal (1995) shows that it sometimes arises in British English, for example, when conversing to infants, in television slogans, and when a speaker is being sarcastic. Crystal (2003: 172) further observes that rap, for which the rhythm is entirely syllable-based, offers an influential model for many young people in America and Britain, and he wonders whether this kind of rhythm might one day become the norm.

Many textbooks regard stress-based rhythm as vitally important for the pronunciation of English, 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 is based. For example, Teschner and Whitley (2004), introduce the metrical foot and the concept of strong and weak syllables in chapter 1, substantially before vowels and consonants are described (chapters 4 and 5), and Cruttenden (2001: 300) lists approximation to an Inner Circle style of rhythm as crucial even for minimal intelligibility.

While it is certainly true that learners need to be able to understand styles of pronunciation which include many reduced syllables, including syllables where the vowel is entirely dropped or absorbed by a neighbouring consonant (Shockey 2003: 22), one wonders whether adoption of stress-based rhythm really is essential for all speakers of English. One can make a clear distinction here between what listeners need to comprehend, as they indeed probably need sometimes to understand speakers of Inner Circle Englishes, and how they themselves should sound. Crystal (2003: 172) warns against the fostering of an unnatural form of rhythm in places such as Singapore or the Caribbean where it is inappropriate, and Kirkpatrick (2004), argues that the acceptance of syllable-based rhythm in classrooms of ASEAN countries and many other parts of the world can be liberating both for teachers and for learners. Clearly, the importance of stress-based rhythm in the pronunciation of English is likely to remain a contentious issue.

DELETION OF FINAL CONSONANTS

Let us now discuss one further feature of pronunciation which is widely found in Southeast Asia: the deletion of /t/ and /d/ from the end of word-final consonant clusters. This feature is rather different from the ones discussed above, as those speakers in Southeast Asia who regularly delete final /t/ and /d/ are in some cases actually following the Inner Circle model rather closely. However, the status of this feature in an emergent regional norm needs to be considered carefully, particularly as many teachers insist that it should not be encouraged.

It is well known that, even in Inner Circle Englishes, /t/ and /d/ are often omitted when they occur at the end of a word-final consonant cluster, especially when the next word begins with a consonant (Wells and Coulson 1971: 58), and this deletion has been shown to be common both in the USA (Guy 1980) and RP British English (Fabricius 2002; Temple 2005). As a result, it is perfectly standard pronunciation to drop the /t/ in phrases like *best man*, *last month*, *next May* and *first birthday*. Pinker (1999: 19) notes that *ice-cream* was once *iced cream* and *mincemeat* should really be *minced meat*, but the omission of the /t/ (which is how the *-ed* suffix is pronounced in these words) has become so common that it is even reflected in the spelling. Furthermore, if one considers word-internal consonant clusters, it is almost obligatory to omit the syllable-final /t/ in *Christmas* except occasionally in very careful pronunciation (Wells 2000: 138).

In Singapore, simplification of final consonant clusters is also a common phenomenon (Low and Brown 2005: 131), though the incidence of deletion is somewhat higher than would be expected in British English (Cruz-Ferreira 2005; Gut 2005). In the analysis of the Wolf data, the pronunciation of *forest near*, *forest and*, *fist in*, *feast* and *rushed from* was investigated, to determine the extent of the deletion of the final /t/ in various environments, and the results are shown in Table 4. One Chinese subject misread *forest near* as *mountain near*, so this is excluded from the results, and two inserted *down* between *rushed* and *from*, so these two are also excluded.

In both *forest and* and *fist in*, the second word begins with a vowel, but the rate of deletion is higher for *forest and*. This indicates that Singaporeans are more likely to delete the final /t/ when it is at the end of an unstressed syllable (*forest*) than a stressed one (*fist*). Overall, these results confirm that the deletion rate is quite high for these speakers, especially at the end of unstressed syllables.

Simplification of final consonant clusters has been noted throughout Southeast Asia, for example in Malaysia (Baskaran 2004), Brunei (Mossop 1996) and the Philippines (Tayao 2004b). The question is: should it be encouraged? Many teachers are adamant that deletion should not be accepted, particularly as a high frequency of deletion means that the phenomenon may be extended to environments such as before a vowel where it is less common in Inner Circle varieties, and furthermore, if learners are encouraged to delete consonants, they may not learn the underlying forms and this will cause problems for spelling. But should we be trying to enforce pronunciation of consonants even when speakers from Inner Circle countries typically drop them? Perhaps we should accept this common feature of pronunciation as part of the norm in Southeast Asia, especially as it is so widespread in varieties of English throughout the world. On the other hand, if a speaker is found to enunciate clearly and fluently but eschews deletion of final consonants, there

Table 4. Retention (ret) and deletion (del) of final /t/ by 33 Singaporean students

	forest near		forest and		fist in		feast		rushed from	
	ret	del	ret	del	ret	del	ret	del	ret	del
Chinese	4	19	9	15	16	8	17	7	13	9
Malay	0	5	2	3	2	3	5	0	3	2
Indian	0	4	2	2	3	1	2	2	1	3
Total	4	28	13	20	21	12	24	9	17	14

seems little reason to encourage such deletion just because speakers from Inner Circle countries do it.

Now let us consider the situation for speakers from China. For them, the pattern is quite different, as the tendency is not to drop final consonants but instead to insert a short vowel after the consonant, so *and the sun* may be [ændə ðə sʌn], *wind blew* is often [wɪndə blu:], and *first succeeded* may become [fɜ:stə səkʃi:dɪd]. In fact, this extra vowel occurs even when the first word does not end with a cluster, as with *agreed that* and *at last*. Overall, for these five phrases in the reading of a short passage by 13 young students from China, it was found that the rate of insertion of an extra vowel is 47 per cent (Deterding 2006a). Furthermore, this affects intelligibility quite substantially, as [wɪndə] sounds more like *window* than *wind*. So should we encourage these students to drop final consonants? Would this help to improve their pronunciation?

Speakers of English from China are generally very reluctant to drop consonants, even when they are shown that this is a common pattern in Inner Circle varieties, as they believe that such pronunciation is lazy. If speakers speak clearly and fluently (and manage to avoid the inserted vowel mentioned above), then should one encourage them to use a style of pronunciation that they believe is lazy, especially one that is likely to exacerbate problems in spelling? There is certainly a real issue with the inserted vowel, and this needs to be sorted out, but encouraging the deletion of consonants is perhaps not the best solution, particularly as it will not solve the problem with an inserted vowel in *agreed that* and *at last*.

DISCUSSION

It is generally envisaged that even when RP is the pronunciation norm, there should be a tolerance for deviation, even for speakers with a high level of attainment (Cruttenden 2001: 302). The question is: which features should constitute part of this tolerance and which are essential for maintaining international intelligibility?

Although Jenkins (2000: 159; 2005) proposes an LFC that incorporates just those distinctions that are essential for international communication, some of her choices remain controversial, especially the absence of word stress. For English in Japan, Riney, Takagi, and Inutsuka (2005) suggest that the distinction between /l/ and /r/ should be excluded from the LFC, but although they claim that these sounds are problematic for millions of speakers throughout Asia, there is no evidence from the data in Deterding (2006a) that /l/ and /r/ are conflated in China, and similarly Hung (2002) reports that /l/ is distinct from /r/ in Hong Kong. So it seems that accepting the proposal that the distinction between these two sounds is unimportant is unlikely to meet with wide agreement outside of Japan. The identification of a fixed LFC that everyone will agree on is likely to be extremely difficult.

For the features of Southeast Asian pronunciation considered here, the retention of a conservative style of pronunciation for the triphthongs and also for /ʊə/ will be fairly uncontroversial, as these vowels only affect a small number of words and furthermore in some cases the way they are pronounced in the region maintains distinctions that are often lost in modern British English. Similarly, the use of fully back vowels for /u:/ and /ʊ/ will probably be widely accepted. In fact, it is not difficult to propose additional pronunciation features that are widespread in Southeast Asia and which do not cause any problems for international intelligibility even though they deviate from an Inner Circle model such as RP. For example, monophthongal /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ occur in Singapore (Low and

Brown 2005: 117), Malaysia (Baskaran 2004: 1040), Brunei (Mossop 1996: 201), and throughout ASEAN (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006), and furthermore Cruttenden (2001: 131, 136) acknowledges that [e:] and [o:] may be acceptable variants for these two vowels.

However, some of the other pronunciation features discussed here will be more contentious as potential components of a regional standard. Many people regard reduced vowels as essential in maintaining stress distinctions between words and also in signalling the key words in an utterance, and Cruttenden (2001: 300) lists the role of weak syllables in contributing to the rhythm of English as one of the high priorities in pronunciation. This, of course, is quite different from the position of Crystal (2003: 172) in observing that syllable-based rhythm may be becoming increasingly acceptable in many parts of the world and might even one day become the norm. The status of reduced vowels and stress-based rhythm in NVEs are likely to remain issues that many people will not agree about.

Finally, the deletion of final consonants from some consonant clusters is also certain to be controversial. Even though deletion of /t/ and /d/ is very widespread in Inner Circle varieties of English under certain circumstances, many people believe that it should not be encouraged in emerging varieties of English, as it certainly does sometimes involve loss of important distinctions between words, and also because it can exacerbate problems with spelling. So even though the pattern found throughout Southeast Asia actually closely matches that of British English, many teachers insist it should not be encouraged.

Although the exact features of the newly-emergent norms for English in Southeast Asia are still to be determined, it is clear that there are some that can be accepted and even encouraged, especially those which serve to enhance distinctions between words that may be lost in Inner Circle varieties. Once local norms based on these common features become established in Southeast Asia, speakers of English there can start to believe that the language truly belongs to them, and this can help build confidence among language teachers and users throughout the region (Kirkpatrick 2004).

APPENDIX

The full text of the ‘Wolf’ passage as used in this research. A slightly revised version can be found in Deterding (2006b).

There was once a poor shepherd boy who watched his flocks in the fields next to a dark forest near the foot of a mountain. One hot afternoon, he thought up a good plan to get some company for himself and also have a little fun. Raising his fist in the air, he ran down to the village shouting “Wolf, Wolf.” As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety, and two of them stayed with him for a while. This gave the boy so much pleasure that a few days later he tried exactly the same trick again, and once more he was successful. However, not long after, a wolf was looking for a change in its usual diet of chicken and duck, so it actually did come out from the forest and began to threaten the sheep. Racing down to the village, the boy of course cried out even louder than before, but as all the villagers were convinced that he was trying to fool them a third time, nobody bothered to come and help him, and so the wolf had a feast.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Work on this paper was supported by the National Institute of Education Academic Research project NIE: RI 1/03 LEL: *Theoretical Speech Research and its Practical Implications*.

REFERENCES

- Baskaran, Loga (2004) Malaysian English: phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie and Clive Upton (eds.), *A Handbook of Varieties of English. Volume 1: Phonology* (pp. 1034–46). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Boersma, Paul and Weenink, David (2005) Praat: doing phonetics by computer. Retrieved on 11 May 2005 from <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>.
- Brown, Adam (1988) The staccato effect in the pronunciation of English in Malaysia and Singapore. In Joseph Foley (ed.), *New Englishes: The Case of Singapore* (pp. 174–9). Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Cruttenden, Alan (2001) *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*, 6th edn. London: Edward Arnold.
- Cruz-Ferreira, Madalena (2005) Past tense suffixes and other final plosives in Singapore English. In David Deterding, Adam Brown and Low Ee Ling (eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus* (pp. 26–42). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Crystal, David (1995) Documenting rhythmical change. In Jack Windsor Lewis (ed.), *Studies in General English and Phonetics: Essays in Honour of Professor J. D. O'Connor* (pp. 174–9). London: Routledge.
- Crystal, David (2003) *English as a Global Language*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deterding, David (2001) The measurement of rhythm: a comparison of Singapore and British English. *Journal of Phonetics* 29, 217–30.
- Deterding, David (2003) An instrumental study of the monophthong vowels of Singapore English. *English World-Wide* 24, 1–16.
- Deterding, David (2005a) Emergent patterns in the vowels of Singapore English. *English World-Wide* 26, 179–97.
- Deterding, David (2005b) Listening to Estuary English in Singapore. *TESOL Quarterly* 39, 425–40.
- Deterding, David (2006a) The pronunciation of English by speakers from China. *English World-Wide* 27, 175–98.
- Deterding, David (2006b) The North Wind versus a Wolf: short texts for the description and measurement of English pronunciation. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 36, 87–196.
- Deterding, David and Kirkpatrick, Andy (2006) Emerging South-East Asian Englishes and intelligibility. *World Englishes* 25, 391–409.
- Fabricius, Anne (2002) Ongoing change in modern RP: evidence for the disappearing stigma of t-glottaling. *English World-Wide* 23, 115–36.
- Gramley, Stephan and Pätzold, Kurt-Michael (2004) *A Survey of Modern English*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Gut, Ulrike (2005) The realisation of final plosives in Singapore English: phonological rules and ethnic differences. In David Deterding, Adam Brown and Low Ee Ling (eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus* (pp. 14–25). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Guy, Gregory (1980) Variation in the group and the individual: the case of final stop deletion. In William Labov (ed.), *Locating Language in Time and Space* (pp. 1–36). New York: Academic Press.
- Hawkins, Sarah and Midgley, Jonathan (2005) Formant frequencies of RP monophthongs in four age groups of speakers. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 35, 183–200.
- Heng, Mui Gek and Deterding, David (2005) Reduced vowels in conversational Singapore English. In David Deterding, Adam Brown and Low Ee Ling (eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus* (pp. 54–63). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Hung, Tony T. N. (2002) Towards a phonology of Hong Kong English. In Kingsley Bolton (ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity* (pp. 119–40). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Jenkins, Jennifer (2000) *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, Jennifer (2005) Misinterpretation, bias, and resistance to chance: the case of the Lingua Franca Core. In Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kolaczyk and Joanna Przedlacka (eds.), *English Pronunciation Models: A Changing Scene* (pp. 199–210). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Kachru, Braj B. (1985) Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the Outer Circle. In Randolph Quirk and Henry G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the World* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, Braj B. (2005) *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kachru, Yamuna and Nelson, Cecil L. (2006) *World Englishes in Asian Contexts*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, Andy (2004) English as an ASEAN lingua franca: implication for research and language teaching. *Asian Englishes* 6, 82–91.
- Kirkpatrick, Andy and Saunders, Neil (2005) The intelligibility of Singaporean English: a case study in an Australian university. In David Deterding, Adam Brown and Low Ee Ling (eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus* (pp. 153–62). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Ladefoged, Peter (2001) *A Course in Phonetics*, 4th edn. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.
- Lim, Lisa (2004) Sounding Singaporean. In Lisa Lim (ed.), *Singapore English: A Grammatical Description* (pp. 19–56). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lim, Siew Siew and Low, Ee Ling (2005) Triphthongs in Singapore English. In David Deterding, Adam Brown and Ee Ling Low (eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic Research on a Corpus* (pp. 64–73). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

- Low, Ee Ling and Brown, Adam (2005) *English in Singapore: An Introduction*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Low, Ee Ling, Grabe, Esther and Nolan, Francis (2000) Quantitative characterisations of speech rhythm: syllable-timing in Singapore English. *Language and Speech* 43, 377–401.
- Mossop, Jonathan (1996) Some phonological features of Brunei English. In Peter W. Martin, Conrad Ožóg and Gloria Poedjosoedarmo (eds.), *Language Use and Language Change in Brunei Darussalam* (pp. 189–208). Athens, OH: Ohio University Centre for International Studies.
- Pinker, Steven (1999) *Word and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Riney, Timothy J., Takagi, Naoyuki and Inutsuka, Kumiro (2005) Phonetic parameters and perceptual judgments of accent in English by American and Japanese listeners. *TESOL Quarterly* 39, 441–66.
- Roach, Peter (2000) *English Phonetics and Phonology*, 3rd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salbrina binte Haji Sharbawi (2006) The vowels of Brunei English: an acoustic investigation. *English World-Wide* 27, 247–64.
- Seidlhofer, Barbara (2005) Language variation and change: the case of English as a lingua franca. In Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołaczyk and Joanna Przedlacka (eds.), *English Pronunciation Models: A Changing Scene* (pp. 59–75). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Shockey, Linda (2003) *Sound Patterns of Spoken English*. Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Smith, Larry E. (1992) Spread of English and issues of intelligibility. In Braj B. Kachru (ed.), *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures* (pp. 75–90), 2nd edn. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Smith, Larry E. and Bisazza, John A. (1982) The comprehensibility of three varieties of English for college students in seven countries. *Language Learning* 32, 259–69.
- Smith, Larry E. and Nelson, Cecil L. (2006) World Englishes and issues of intelligibility. In Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru and Cecil L. Nelson (eds.), *The Handbook of World Englishes* (pp. 428–429). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Smith, Larry E. and Rafiqzad, Khalilullah (1979) English for cross-cultural communication: the question of intelligibility. *TESOL Quarterly* 13, 371–80.
- Tay, W. J. Mary (1982) The phonology of educated Singapore English. *English World-Wide* 3, 135–45.
- Tayao, Ma. Lourdes G. (2004a) The evolving study of Philippine English phonology. *World Englishes* 23, 77–87.
- Tayao, Ma. Lourdes G. (2004b) Philippine English: phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie and Clive Upton (eds.), *A Handbook of Varieties of English. Volume 1: Phonology* (pp. 1047–59). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Temple, Rosalind (2005) Los(t) in translation? A view of -t/d “deletion” from east(t) of the Atlantic. Paper presented at the First International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English, Edinburgh, 23–26 June.
- Teschner, Richard V. and Whitley, M. Stanley (2004) *Pronouncing English: A Stress-based Approach with CD-ROM*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Trudgill, Peter (2005) Finding the speaker-listener equilibrium: segmental phonological models in EFL. In Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołaczyk and Joanna Przedlacka (eds.), *English Pronunciation Models: A Changing Scene* (pp. 213–28). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Wee, Lionel. (2004) Singapore English: phonology. In Edgar W. Schneider, Kate Burridge, Bernd Kortmann, Rajend Mesthrie and Clive Upton (eds.), *A Handbook of Varieties of English. Volume 1: Phonology* (pp. 1017–33). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wells, John C. (1982) *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, John C. (2000) *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*. Harlow: Longman.
- Wells, John C. and Colson, Greta (1971) *Practical Phonetics*. London: Pitman.