

Intelligibility in SE Asian English

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Considerable recent research has focused on the description of varieties of English in South-East Asia, including those of Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. However, less attention has been focused on those features of pronunciation that interfere with intelligibility. In fact, it can be argued that some features of pronunciation that are widely reported in the region, such as the use of full vowels in unstressed syllables and the use of syllable-based rhythm, actually enhance the intelligibility of English used in international settings.

Based on my recent research on *Misunderstandings in ELF Settings* (published by De Gruyter), this presentation considers those features of local English usage that give rise to misunderstandings when speakers in South-East Asia are talking in an international setting. It is shown that pronunciation and unexpected lexical usage are the crucial factors, and non-standard grammar is rarely an issue. However, not all aspects of pronunciation are equally important, as avoidance of vowel reduction, use of [t] for voiceless TH, and the omission of [t] from the end of word-final consonant clusters are rarely problematic, while substitution between [l] and [r] and the simplification of initial clusters are much more crucial.

Teachers of English need to take these findings into consideration, as insisting on native-speaker models of pronunciation and the strict adherence to standard grammar are not of prime importance in ensuring that their students can be widely understood around the world.