
Title	Perspectives on spoken grammar
Author(s)	Christine Goh Chuen Meng
Source	<i>ELT Journal</i> , 63(4), 303-312
Published by	Oxford University Press

Copyright © 2009 Oxford University Press

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in *ELT Journal*, following peer review.

The version of record: Goh, C. C. (2009). Perspectives on spoken grammar. *ELT Journal*, 63(4), 303-312 is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccp004>

Notice: Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as peer review, copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source.

This document was archived with permission from the copyright owner.

Perspectives on spoken grammar

Christine Goh

English language teachers' opinions on the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar are beginning to be reported, yet the voices of teachers in East Asia are rarely heard. In this article, the views of teachers from China and Singapore expressed in an online discussion are compared. The discussion, which was part of a taught postgraduate course, focused on the usefulness of British spoken grammar norms and the potential value of spoken grammar knowledge for language learners. There is a broad consensus of opinion about its importance for raising learners' language awareness, but Chinese and Singaporean teachers generally had different attitudes to native-speaker norms, while opinions on some pedagogical issues vary more at the individual level. The similarities and differences are attributed to the teachers' sociolinguistic concerns, understanding of learner needs, and beliefs about grammar that are influenced by the written language. Implications of these teacher perspectives for teacher education are highlighted.

Introduction

Many academic papers have been published on spoken grammar, and the special features of speech have recently been included in several English grammars (see, for example, Biber, Conrad, and Leech 2002). While there is general recognition that language teaching should take account of the difference between spoken and written language, the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar is still a matter of much discussion. McCarthy and Carter (2001: 57) argue its importance to language teaching as follows:

Language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language. Whatever else may be the result of imaginative methodologies for eliciting spoken language in the second language classroom, there can be little hope for a natural spoken output on the part of language learners if the input is

stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written language.

But is a model of spoken grammar derived from a corpus of British spoken English appropriate for all language learners? Given the status of English as a lingua franca for intercultural communication, and a call by some linguists to teach only its ‘core’ features, can we justify teaching a spoken grammar based mainly on spontaneous everyday speech in the British Isles? This issue of using real data from British native-speaker (NS) language was debated by Carter (1998) and Cook (1998), and further examined empirically by Timmis (2002) in his survey of about 600 teachers and learners from various countries. Timmis concluded that while teachers in general thought it was not always necessary for learners to conform to NS norms, learners themselves were in fact keen to do so. In responding to specific questions on spoken grammar, two-thirds of the teacher respondents thought it was important to expose learners to features of spontaneous NS speech, but nearly a quarter of them expressed reservations about the grammaticality of certain spoken grammar forms. Timmis (2005) further showed that UK-based teachers were favourably disposed to the idea of teaching spoken grammar forms. Clearly, a grammar of speech based on British English¹ data would be relevant to the UK context. The question remains, however, as to whether teachers outside the UK would find spoken grammar just as useful for their learners.

Views from China and Singapore

For some preliminary answers to the question, I present here the views of 75 English language teachers from China and Singapore. They were postgraduate students doing applied linguistic courses in the same university. Of the total, 37 were Chinese college and high-school teachers, while the remaining 38 were mainly primary and secondary teachers from Singapore. In an online forum, the teachers discussed the questions below:

- Is linguistic information from British English data revealed in the CANCODE project useful for teaching learners about spoken language?

- Can knowledge of spoken grammar forms improve learners' spoken language performance?

The questions were meant to be open-ended prompts that gave teachers room to explore related issues and perspectives. The discussion was not originally intended to be a procedure for collecting research data. I had set it up as a learning task for a teaching methodology course on listening and speaking. When reading the teachers' responses, however, I found their comments refreshing, interesting, and insightful. It was particularly exciting to see that the teachers were making their voices heard on a discussion topic that had so far been dominated by linguists. I therefore decided to analyse their written comments in a systematic manner and report my observations.

Method

Before they engaged in the online discussions, I introduced the teachers to spoken grammar in class. They also read *The Grammar of Talk: Spoken English, Grammar and the Classroom* by Carter (2003) individually. It was selected because it was relevant for both EFL and 'mainstream' English Language teachers. Furthermore, it contained concise explanations and useful examples of key spoken grammar forms: heads, tails, modal expressions, discourse markers, deixis, ellipsis, tags, flexible positioning of adverbs and adverbials, purposefully vague language, and coordination of clauses. The teachers were also asked to visit a website on the CANCODE project (<http://www.cambridge.org/elt/corpus/cancode.htm>). To ensure that they had enough time to read and respond to one another's comments, teachers were organized into small discussion groups consisting of six to seven members. They were also instructed to post their individual responses to the two questions before responding to the views of other group members. At the end of the course I obtained the teachers' permission to analyse and use their comments.

The analysis was done in two stages. First, each person's initial individual responses to the two questions were examined and allocated to one of three categories, with the Chinese and Singaporean participants distinguished throughout. Next, these and the teachers' subsequent responses to other group members' views were examined for specific issues regarding the teaching and learning of spoken grammar. The analyses focused on features of saliency, frequency, and distribution, and the results were

checked twice; once after a three-week interval and then five weeks later. Perspectives identified in the responses were subsequently selected.

China and Singapore

Before I present the results of the comparisons, it is useful to highlight some similarities and differences about China and Singapore. A common situation in both countries is the ever increasing demand for English instruction at all levels and forms of learning. China, an emerging world superpower, needs English to consolidate its current economic influence and efforts at modernization (Hu 2002), while the resource-scarce city-state of Singapore needs citizens with a good command of the language to reposition itself as a centre for knowledge, learning, and service industries, and to participate in overseas trade (Alsagoff 2007). Whereas Chinese EFL students receive little authentic input from their immediate educational and social environments, students in Singapore have English as a medium of instruction and also study it as a curriculum subject from preschool years. About half of Singaporean students come from English-speaking homes. Many, however, speak a colloquial variety known popularly as ‘Singlish’, the syntax, phonology, and lexical items of which are heavily influenced by vernacular languages in the community.

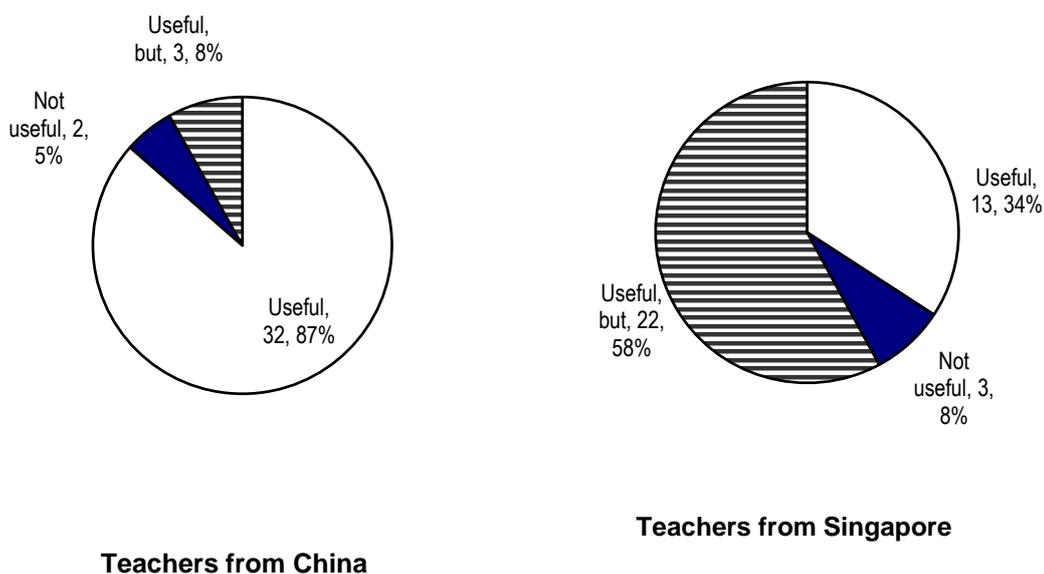
British spoken grammar norms

The first question in the discussion invites teacher opinion on the usefulness of British spoken grammar norms (see Figure 1). Chinese teachers are on the whole happy to embrace the exonormative features that British spoken grammar provides and welcome more linguistic information from other NS varieties. They consider the ability to speak naturally and accurately like a NS from countries such as Britain to be a distinct advantage. Among Singaporean teachers, however, opinion is divided, revealing the complexities in language choice in societies where the local English variety competes with Anglo models for allegiance and acceptance.

‘British spoken grammar norms are useful’

For 87 per cent of the Chinese teachers spoken grammar is not only useful but also essential. They believe that their students need a NS model in order to speak more naturally. They see CANCODE as an important source of instructional input because

Figure 1: British spoken grammar norms



it has been collected from real, naturally-occurring spoken English in NS language environments. The information is considered especially helpful to EFL learners who have few opportunities to develop features of authentic English speech.

It reveals an authentic picture of language use to students, a world full of incomplete sentences, phrases, vague language, discourse markers, etc. (C1)

In contrast, more than 60 per cent of their Singaporean colleagues find spoken grammar based on British English to be less directly useful. The main reason is that Singaporean speakers already have their own natural spoken grammar forms for casual speech through Singlish. Nevertheless, a few teachers do see the British model as a useful point of reference for the learning of Standard English.

It is fine to use British English as the basis for teaching spoken grammar as we need a set of standard rules to follow. (S1)

‘Useful, but ... ’

More than half of the Singaporean teachers say that spoken grammar forms should be introduced to students only for comparison purposes:

It would be useful to use the corpora for spoken Singapore English alongside the findings of the CANCODE corpus. (S2)

Perhaps students are speaking Singlish partly because they observed ‘everybody around me's speaking like this, what's wrong of me in doing so?’ The corpus examples would expose them to the reality that ‘it's a real big world out there!’ (S3)

Some Chinese teachers feel that NS models should not be limited to just British English:

We could add more variety, for example, by using American, Australian, Canadian English, etc. to the teaching of spoken grammar. (C2)

‘Not useful’

Around 5 per cent of the Chinese teachers argue that learners should focus on acquiring written grammar, which can then be modified for speaking.

Given the limited classroom exposure, priority should be given to the instruction of written grammar instead of spoken grammar [...] If a student has a good knowledge of written language, his/her spoken language can be improved more easily provided s/he is exposed in the real-world conversation. (C3)

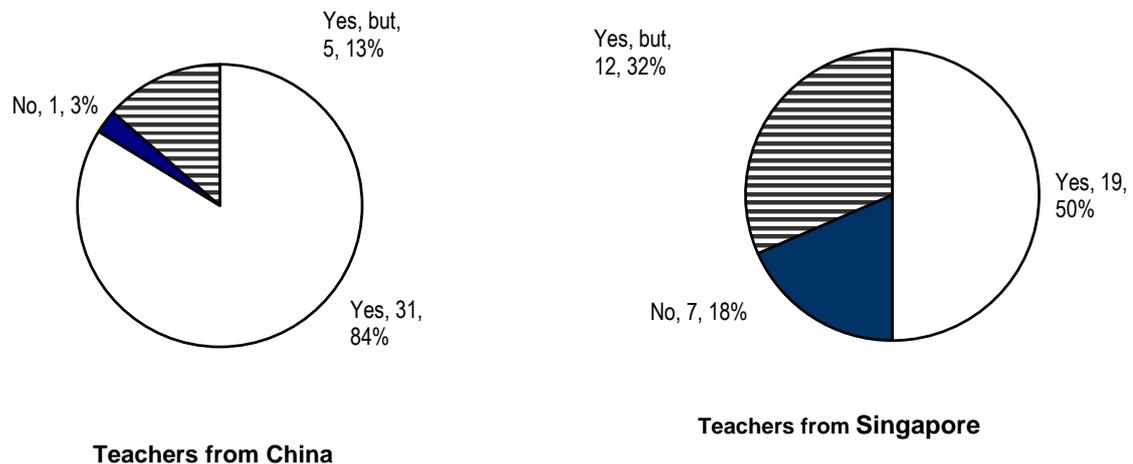
A Singaporean teacher’s comment reflects sociolinguistic sensibilities, particularly the issues of ownership and identity, implying that her students may resist exonormative models:

It is rather artificial and an uphill task to force down the throats of our pupils to speak English using the linguistic information based on British English [...] English does not belong to the people in Britain. (S4)

Spoken grammar and language performance

The second discussion question asks teachers whether they think their students' spoken English performance will improve from knowledge about spoken grammar forms. In general, all 75 teachers agree that it can promote learners' language awareness, particularly about differences between spoken and written language, and between English varieties. While many also believe it can improve spoken output, others have their reservations.

Figure 2: Can spoken grammar improve spoken language performance?



Spoken grammar improves performance

In Figure 2, of the Chinese EFL teachers 83 per cent believe that spoken grammar knowledge can increase their students' confidence and help them speak more naturally.

Increasing learner confidence

The teachers feel that many Chinese EFL learners have the misconception that they should construct 'perfect' sentences modelled after the written language. These learners become anxious and their performance is affected as a result:

They may think too much of the structure of the language, which in fact can prevent the communicating process. For example, the knowledge of ‘ellipsis’ or flexible positioning in spoken grammar might, to some extent, encourage the students to overcome the psychological obstacle and speak out without thinking too much. (C4)

It is very necessary [...] to reduce their anxiety in speaking in English. For example, they may feel relaxed to know there are lot of phrasal utterances and ellipsis in British daily conversations. (C5)

For some Singaporean teachers, confidence for their students comes from an understanding of different speech registers through spoken grammar:

Having knowledge of spoken grammar not only enables pupils to differentiate between written and spoken language but also the different types of speech used in different contexts. With this knowledge, pupils can select and use the appropriate forms in constructing their speech and speak with confidence. (S4)

Producing natural spoken output

Some Chinese teachers remark that the speech of many EFL learners (including themselves) often sounds stilted because it has been modelled on formal written grammar, and believe that knowledge about the grammar of speech will help them sound more natural when they speak.

Speaking was taught to me by using written forms as models [...] I spoke like a TV announcer, always complete sentences with ‘perfect’ grammar. I began to feel uncomfortable when some of the girls imitated my speaking. (C6)

L2 learners are bound to sound bookish without using these features of spoken grammar. This is one reason why many of us were shocked and disappointed when we used English for the first time in real interaction. (C7)

In contrast, some Singaporean teachers think that British spoken grammar forms such as tails and heads will make their students sound ‘foreign’ and unnatural. They nevertheless welcome the idea of discourse markers for organizing speech.

It improves performance, but ...

Some teachers are more cautious about teaching spoken grammar to all learners, as they believe that it will only benefit the advanced learners.

But can students really imitate some features of spoken grammar in their own speaking? I guess no way until they are so good at speaking and they can monitor their speaking, produce continuous utterances, and respond to others by adjusting their own at the same time. It requires really advanced speakers to do that. (C8)

Some also believe that it is better to introduce spoken grammar to learners after they have acquired formal written grammar.

If exposure of these sorts can help us to be more effective speakers and listeners, then there surely cannot be any harm in exposing our students to spoken grammar forms especially when they already are well versed in their written forms. (S5)

The Chinese teachers are also concerned that students who adopt spoken grammar features during high-stake oral examinations may be disadvantaged. They agree that many examiners are not familiar with this type of natural spoken output in English-speaking countries and may therefore expect candidates to produce utterances that are constructed according to written English structures:

I have given some remedial courses for students who are taking the oral exams of CET-4 and CET-6. In preparation for such a course I have talked to my colleagues who participate in marking the official exam [...] students are required to talk as fluently as possible in a formal way and examiners do not value some of the spoken grammar features mentioned in this article. (C9)

Some teachers in Singapore raise similar issues:

We marked students down for not answering in complete sentences. (S6)

Students are expected to speak Standard English which mimics a scripted monologue or dialogue where utterances are well-formed with specific structures. (S7)

It does not improve performance

The small number of Chinese and Singaporean teachers who respond in the negative have one main criticism against spoken grammar. They perceive it to be a characteristic of casual speech and therefore not appropriate for instruction.

I don't think spoken grammar should be taught. We want ourselves and our students to speak fluent educated English not broken English. If we TEACH students speaking according to spoken grammar, the students might be misled and they would regard formal speaking as not necessary. (C10)

The main worry amongst some Singapore teachers is the effect it might have on the quality of their students' writing, as the comments below demonstrate:

I am against explicit teaching of such characteristics as it would confuse students' knowledge of written grammar [...] As it is, in Singapore neighbourhood² schools, we are struggling to help students eradicate traces of spoken grammar³ in their written essays (e.g. contractions, abbreviations, flexible positioning of clauses and even ellipses). Teaching explicit features of spoken grammar would probably do more harm than good, at least with respect to written work. (S8)

These teachers consider most British spoken grammar forms to be inappropriate for formal communication in Singapore. They would prefer their students to produce utterances based on the neat grammar of writing without the 'messiness' of spontaneous speech.

NS norms and spoken grammar

One issue that the teachers focused on was the relevance of NS norms of spoken grammar. Timmis (2002) had earlier reported that many teachers believed that it was unnecessary for learners to conform to NS norms. It has also been argued by others that using such a model could frustrate learners because it sets them up for a standard they may not attain. Many of the teachers involved in the discussion, however, seem to think otherwise. The Chinese teachers are firm in their view on using NS models for their teaching. They consider the models important for their learners, as Chinese EFL learners do not get sufficient spoken English input that can help them produce speech that is natural and authentic. These teachers have taken a sociolinguistics

course and are aware of issues about language variation, standardization, and challenges in applying NS norms. Nevertheless, when they reflect on their own learning experiences and their students' needs ('People do not speak English except in special contexts, such as meeting foreigners, so there is no authentic Chinese English') they assert that NS models are not only crucial ('If they don't have a model to follow, they will be in confusion'), but also empowering ('When your language is not standard, your voice cannot be heard') and motivating ('When we find our oral language echoes much of native speakers' language, our confidence rises').

A likely reason for this attitude is that the Chinese teachers are themselves successful EFL learners who have benefited from NS models in an input-poor environment. This is a situation that may not be appreciated fully by some NS teachers and teachers from Singapore. Interestingly, the teachers' attitude is similar to those of the learners in Timmis' (2002) study. Their opinions also lend support to Kuo's (2006) argument that NS models are appropriate for second language pedagogy as well as appealing to language learners. Furthermore, the teachers' endorsement of the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar lends credence to Kuo's conclusion that a comprehensive native speaker model should 'serve as a complete and convenient starting point' (ibid.: 220). Zhang (2004) also reported the overwhelming preference amongst some Chinese EFL teacher trainees for a NS variety of spoken English. In Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, elementary school EFL teachers have expressed the hope that a proportion of their students will eventually achieve NS proficiency (Butler 2004). In light of what non-native speaker (NNS) teachers want for their learners, there is clearly a need to re-examine current assertions that learners need to be exposed to only selected linguistic features of English.

In Singapore, the role of traditional NS models (for example, British spoken English) is less prominent though not altogether unimportant. The teachers' discussion illustrates the tension that exists in Singaporeans' language choice attributed to opposing orientations towards social-cultural identity and economic capital (Alsagoff 2007). Some teachers argue that since English in Singapore has its own linguistic features and conventions of use, they must be careful not to impose an exonormative model that students may reject. The presence of Singlish which has its own grammatical features means that local students do not need British norms when interacting in a casual style. British spoken grammar features are nevertheless

welcomed as a means of raising language awareness ('The information can be used to complement existing information on grammar ... they will also attain a more balanced perspective'). See also Teacher S3's comment. Others see no harm in referring to British English norms in the Singapore classroom ('We do need some guiding models to follow and we have been using British English forms as a guide to teaching English in Singapore'). Interestingly, when discussing foreign ESL students studying in Singapore (for example, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indonesian students), the teachers recommend that spoken grammar be taught to help these students speak more naturally.

The dilemma that Singaporean teachers face is not lost on their Chinese colleagues during the discussion, with one of them calling on the former to give due emphasis to traditional NS models in the classroom ('Otherwise, when they grow up with a good command of their English dialect (Singlish), they will go far away from what is called "good English"'). This concern is reflected in Alsagoff's observation that for Singaporeans to be globally relevant and economically competitive, they need English that is of 'international currency' which she calls 'International Singapore English', a variety that is exonymously defined, benchmarked against features of Anglo-English, and creates an image of high education attainment, formality, and authority for its speakers (Alsagoff 2007: 35). The Singaporean teachers' views further illustrate issues about language competence and language standards in ELT contexts where a new indigenous English variety exists (Davies 2003).

On the whole, the Chinese EFL teachers welcome the idea of introducing spoken grammar to their students. Where they and their Singaporean counterparts are ambivalent, it is in respect of its apparently ungrammatical nature. Spoken grammar forms such as heads, tails, and ellipsis, for example, are seen as deviations from established notions of 'proper' grammar where sentences follow typical structures, such as SVO or SVC. Some teachers are also constrained by a narrow interpretation of the term 'grammar'. They find it confusing that lexical items in the form of modal expressions (for example, 'hopefully', 'perhaps') are a part of the grammar of English. Coordination of multiple clauses with 'and' as well as the use of vague language (for example, 'sort of', 'kind of like') are also perceived to be speech habits that learners should avoid, particularly in formal interactions.

In addition to conceptual issues, practical concerns have been raised. Assessment of

oral skills in national examinations is said to value a form of spoken output that is based on the written model. Flexible positioning of adverbials, heads, tails, and certain modal expressions are, as one teacher puts it, ‘big mistakes in China’. Another view is that given limited curriculum time for English in colleges and schools, it may be better for teachers to focus on formal written grammar, which could then serve as a basis for producing spoken English. Some Singaporean teachers are also concerned that teaching spoken grammar could exacerbate some students’ poor written grammar. In spite of these reservations, nearly all the teachers agree that spoken grammar has a part to play in their students’ language awareness development.

Conclusion

The teachers show a broad consensus of opinion that spoken grammar knowledge is useful for raising awareness about spoken and written language. The Chinese teachers also believe that by learning to use the grammar of British speech, their learners will speak English more naturally and confidently. Singapore teachers, on the other hand, are understandably more cautious when considering British spoken grammar norms. Although the teachers come from different sociolinguistic landscapes, they share a common goal for their learners’ speaking development—to speak English that is recognized as ‘good’ or ‘standard’ by speakers outside their countries. In China, and perhaps more so in Singapore, mastery of an internationally accepted standard variety of English is seen as a way of increasing the country’s economic and human capital. It is clear that the teachers want a comprehensive model of Standard English for teaching spoken English, albeit for different purposes, and British spoken grammar has a place in this scheme of things.

The debate about the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar by teachers is set to continue as they become more informed about new linguistic developments. Teacher educators can facilitate this by helping teachers and teachers-to-be understand the grammar of speech in the same way they do with written grammar. This can be facilitated through the use of teacher language awareness activities in methodology classes. It is also important that teachers’ knowledge about spoken grammar is not limited only to recognition of its forms or categories. In addition to developing sound conceptual knowledge about spoken grammar, teachers should also explore ways in which the knowledge can be applied to teaching learners how to *use* the spoken

language more effectively to express their communicative needs and to understand what is said by people they interact with. Timmis' (2005) framework for teaching about spoken grammar offers insights on how some of this can be done, but ideas that work for ELT practitioners in the UK need to be evaluated for their relevance for teachers elsewhere. Alternative techniques should be explored so as to address sociolinguistic concerns that are unique to each country. As this article has shown, teachers understand that their learners' spoken English needs are influenced by the linguistic and social environments in which English is learnt. Any attempts at developing teachers' insights into the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar must therefore allow teachers to examine their understanding of it in the context of their own teaching.

Final revised version received September 2008

Notes

1 'British English' is used in its broadest sense to refer to the source of the CANCODE database from which the features of spoken grammar were derived (see Carter and McCarthy 1997).

2 These are schools where most of the students come from non-English speaking homes or homes where mainly Singlish is spoken.

3 Spoken grammar of Singlish (for example, the omission of the copular or auxiliary verb: 'She not nice'; 'Why you like that?')

References

- Alsagoff, L.** 2007. 'Singlish: negotiating culture, capital and identity' in V. Vaish, S. Gopinathan, and Y. Liu (eds.). *Language, Capital, Culture*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Biber, D., S. Conrad, and G. Leech.** 2002. *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Butler, Y. G.** 2004. 'What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan'. *TESOL Quarterly* 38/2: 245–78.

- Carter, R.** 1998. 'Orders of reality: CANCODE, communication, and culture'. *ELT Journal* 52/1: 43–64.
- Carter, R.** 2003. 'The grammar of talk: spoken English, grammar and the classroom' in *New Perspectives on Spoken English in the Classroom*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Cook, G.** 1998. 'The uses of reality: a reply to Ronald Carter'. *ELT Journal* 52/1: 57–63.
- Davies, A.** 2003. *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hu, G. W.** 2002. 'Recent important developments in secondary English language teaching in the People's Republic of China'. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 15: 30–49.
- Kuo, I. C. V.** 2006. 'Addressing the issue of teaching English as a lingua franca'. *ELT Journal* 60/3: 213–21.
- McCarthy, M. R.** and **R. Carter.** 2001. 'Ten criteria for a spoken grammar' in E. Hinkel and S. Fotos (eds.), *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Timmis, I.** 2002. 'Native-speaker norms and international English: a classroom view'. *ELT Journal* 56/3: 240–9.
- Timmis, I.** 2005. 'Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar'. *ELT Journal* 59/2: 117–25.
- Zhang, L. J.** 2004. 'Awareness-raising in the TEFL phonology classroom: student voices and sociocultural and psychological considerations'. *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics* 145/1: 219–68.

The author

Christine Goh is Associate Professor of applied linguistics at the National Institute of Education of the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She is interested in listening, speaking and pronunciation development, metacognition and second language learning, and the influence of teacher cognition on ELT. She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses on first and second language acquisition, ELT methodology for listening, speaking, and pronunciation, and supervises research in her areas of interest.

Email: christine.goh@nie.edu.sg