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A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM APPROACH ON CHINESE EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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LIU JINGTAO



THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

2025



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ABSTRACT

The main of the study is to investigate the effects of flipped classroom approach (FCA) on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills. It employed a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design featuring a quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group component. Convenience sampling was used for the quantitative phase, recruiting 128 students divided into control (n=64) and experimental (n=64) groups, while purposive sampling was utilized for the qualitative phase to select 15 participants across beginner, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels. Data collection strategies for quantitative data included the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) administered as pre- and post-tests and perception questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective notes. Data analysis for quantitative data involved independent samples t-tests and Mann-Whitney U tests to compare groups, paired samples t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to measure within-group changes, and one-way ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests to examine differences across proficiency levels, while qualitative data underwent six-phase thematic analysis with inter-rater reliability verification. Quantitative results revealed that the experimental group achieved significantly higher overall speaking scores compared to the control group, with advanced-level participants demonstrating the most substantial improvement across the five dimensions of speaking (pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and content). Qualitative results identified four themes: perceived improvements in speaking skills, enhanced engagement and participation, challenges and difficulties, and suggestions for effective FCA implementation and six key elements for effective FCA implementation (structured learning phases, blended learning dynamics, learner-centered environment, flexibility, diverse speaking practice opportunities, and systematic assessment). In conclusion, FCA significantly enhances Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills across all proficiency levels. This research has implications for EFL pedagogy by providing empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of FCA in speaking instruction and identifying essential elements for successful implementation in EFL language learning contexts.

KAJIAN KESAN FLIPPED CLASSROOM APPROACH TERHADAP KEMAHIRAN BERTUTUR PELAJAR KOLEJ CINA

ABSTRAK

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk meneliti kesan *Flipped Classroom Approach (FCA)* terhadap kemahiran bertutur pelajar di Cina yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kajian gabungan (*mixed-methods*) dengan reka bentuk kuasi eksperimen. *Convenience sampling* digunakan untuk fasa kuantitatif, dengan menjalankan kajian terhadap 128 pelajar yang dibahagikan kepada kumpulan kawalan ($n=64$) dan kumpulan eksperimen ($n=64$). *Purposive sampling* pula digunakan untuk fasa kualitatif dengan memilih 15 peserta merentasi tahap kemahiran rendah, sederhana, dan tinggi. Pengumpulan data kuantitatif diperoleh daripada *College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET)* yang diberikan sebagai ujian pra dan pasca serta soal selidik persepsi. Data kualitatif pula dikumpulkan melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dan catatan reflektif. Analisis data kuantitatif adalah *independent samples t-tests*, *Mann-Whitney U tests* untuk membandingkan kumpulan, *paired samples t-tests* and *Wilcoxon signed-rank tests* untuk mengukur perubahan dalam kumpulan, serta *one-way ANOVA* and *Kruskal-Wallis* untuk mengkaji perbezaan merentasi tahap kemahiran. Data kualitatif dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik enam fasa dengan pengesahan kebolehpercayaan antara penilai. Dapatan analisis menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan eksperimen mencapai skor keseluruhan bertutur yang tinggi berbanding kumpulan kawalan, dengan peserta berkemahiran tinggi menunjukkan peningkatan paling ketara merentasi lima dimensi bertutur (sebutan, kelancaran, kosa kata, tatabahasa, dan kandungan). Hasil kualitatif menunjukkan peningkatan dalam kemahiran bertutur, peningkatan penglibatan dan penyertaan pelajar, cabaran menggunakan *FCA*, serta cadangan untuk pelaksanaan *FCA* yang berkesan. Enam elemen utama untuk pelaksanaan *FCA* yang berkesan (fasa pembelajaran berstruktur, dinamik pembelajaran bercampur, persekitaran berpusatkan pelajar, fleksibiliti, peluang latihan bertutur yang pelbagai, dan penilaian sistematik) juga dikenalpasti. Kesimpulannya, *FCA* secara signifikan meningkatkan kemahiran bertutur pelajar merentasi semua tahap kemahiran. Implikasi kajian ini membuktikan keberkesanan *FCA* dalam pengajaran bertutur serta mengenal pasti elemen penting dalam pelaksanaan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
CAI	Computer-Assisted Instruction
CALL	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CBI	Content-Based Instruction
CET	College English Test
CET-SET	College English Test-Spoken English Test
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
FCA	Flipped Classroom Approach
FiF	For Ideal Future (Online Teaching Software Platform)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MALL	Mobile-Assisted Language Learning
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
RQ	Research Question
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TBLT	Task-Based Language Teaching

TBL	Technology-Based Learning
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
WTC	Willingness to Communicate
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

APPENDIX LIST

- A Grouping Interview Codes
- B Interview Code Categorisation
- C Interview Theme Derivation
- D Reflective Notes Coding
- E Grouping Reflective Note Codes
- F College English Test Spoken English Test
- G Questionnaire
- H Interview Protocol
- I Reflective Notes Guide
- J Flipped Classroom Teaching Design
- K Evaluation Rubric for CET-SET



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face instruction, has gained significant attention in education due to its potential to enhance learning outcomes (Bryan & Volchenkova, 2016; Platonova et al., 2022). One of the motivations of the establishment of blended learning was to benefit both sides of the online and face-to-face instruction (Güzer & Caner, 2014). As a result, self-paced online learning would be infused with instructor-led training that was undertaken on a face-to-face basis, hence maximising the benefits of both methods. Different researchers, therefore, adopted it as an approach to improve the performance of students by leveraging the benefits of the two modes of learning.





Flipped learning, often referred to as the "flipped classroom," is a branch of blended learning, which has gained significant attention in education (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). Låg and Sæle (2019) conceptualise the flipped classroom as an approach where activities that were conventionally undertaken outside the classroom, such as practicing problem-solving, are moved into the class sessions, whereas the activities completed traditionally in the class, such as information transmission teaching, are completed outside and prior to the class.

Flipped classroom approach (FCA) transforms the procedures adopted within traditional classroom settings. The basic skills and knowledge are acquired through finishing tasks before class or watching micro-videos. As a result, the class time is free and employed to examine learning before class, consolidate the processes of learning content via questions, activities and discussions (Adnan, 2017). As compared to the traditional classes, dynamic, interactive and efficient learning environments are the main goals pursued in the FCA (Chen et al., 2017). The implication is that the FCA can be conducted in foreign language and second language classrooms to improve speaking and listening skills among the learners due to the improvement in language proficiency through peer communication and interactions.

Conducting the study of FCA has been emphasised in China. Research demonstrates that if learners are infused in the processes of classroom teaching, and they are allowed to select their course materials and content, they are able to increase in their participation levels hence improving overall outcomes of learning (Amiryousefi, 2019). The flipped classroom method is considered highly effective for low and high-level students in the Chinese college English classes (Zuo, 2016). The





research also reported that the flipped classroom teaching model enhanced participation of students, their self-autonomy, cooperative learning and independence (Nie, 2015; Huan, 2016). However, studies on flipped classrooms in the language-teaching field, particularly for EFL students focused on speaking skills, remain limited (Chen Hsieh, Wu, & Marek, 2017; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Zarrinabadi & Ebrahimi, 2019).

The current research examines the FCA of blended learning and its effects on students across different English proficiency level and their perceptions on the instructional approach used to enhance their speaking skills. Embracing technological tools and innovative teaching methods like the FCA holds promise in addressing the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners, offering opportunities for enhanced language acquisition and more effective pedagogy in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

In the following sections, the background of the study, problem statement, research objectives and research questions, significance of the research, study limitations and delimitation, and the operational definitions will be discussed in detail, setting the stage for a comprehensive investigation of the FCA and its effects on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills.





1.2 Background of the Study

English Language Teaching (ELT) plays a crucial role in China's educational system, particularly in the context of globalization and the country's rapid economic development. As China continues to strengthen its international ties and participate in global markets, the demand for English language proficiency among its citizens has grown significantly (Li & Hao, 2021). Consequently, the Chinese government has implemented various educational policies and initiatives to promote and improve English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education at all levels.

One of the most significant policy documents guiding EFL education in China is the "National Medium-and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)" (Ministry of Education, 2010). This plan emphasizes the importance of developing students' practical language skills and communicative competence, as well as fostering their intercultural awareness and global perspectives. Additionally, the "Chinese College English Teaching Guidelines" (Ministry of Education, 2020) provide a framework for EFL curriculum design and teaching practices in higher education institutions. In addition to the above two policies, more recent policies, such as the "Education Modernization 2035" plan and the "14th Five-Year Plan for Education Development (2021-2025)," emphasize the need for innovative instructional approaches, including the flipped classroom model, to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning in China.

In Chinese universities, EFL education is typically delivered through the College English course series, which is mandatory for most non-English major





students (Zhang & Wang, 2021). These courses usually consist of a combination of reading, writing, listening, and speaking components, with a total of 16 credit hours distributed across four semesters. The primary learning objectives of the College English curriculum include developing students' language proficiency, communication skills, and cultural literacy (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

Despite the government's efforts to promote communicative language teaching and the development of practical language skills, the dominant teaching practices in Chinese EFL classrooms remain largely focused on grammar-translation, reading, and writing skills (Chen & Liu, 2021). This emphasis on written language and exam preparation can be attributed to the high-stakes nature of the College English Test (CET), which is a national English proficiency test for college students in China (Wang & Zhu, 2020). Consequently, speaking and listening skills often receive less attention in the classroom, limiting students' opportunities for authentic language practice and interaction.

Moreover, EFL education in China faces several challenges and limitations, such as large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and the exam-oriented nature of the education system (Xu & Li, 2021). These factors can hinder the implementation of communicative and student-centered teaching approaches, which are essential for fostering students' speaking skills and overall language proficiency.

As China's economy becomes increasingly intertwined with the global economy, English language skills have become essential for international business, trade, and diplomacy. English proficiency enhances employment opportunities and





opens doors to multinational corporations and global job markets, thereby offering socio-economic advantages to individuals (Yang & Chen, 2021). Wang et al. (2021) have stated that Chinese students who have learned EFL are more likely to earn higher earnings and access more employment opportunities. Speaking a foreign language is believed to improve people's work skills and show their thinking and communication abilities. According to Li and Chen (2022), the mastery of English proficiency is stressed in university academic requirements because potential employers demand it, thereby increasing the competitiveness of Chinese graduates in the job market.

Due to the above phenomenon, it is imperative for higher institution students to master English. However, learning English poses a series of challenges for Chinese students, most notably the linguistic differences between English and Chinese (Liu, 2021). English pronunciation and intonation, in particular, can be difficult to master due to the diverse array of sounds in English. Expanding vocabulary and improving word choice require substantial effort, and cultural differences add another layer of complexity. While students are motivated to excel in English, the existing teaching methods may not always address these multifaceted challenges effectively (Zhang & Li, 2021). Furthermore, over the course of many years, knowledge of the language was more emphasised as opposed to the actual process where language was used; likewise, writing and reading skills were preferred to listening and speaking skills (Gao & Li, 2016). Additionally, insights have shown that most challenges arise due to difficulties faced by college students as they enter the employment sector in other foreign countries outside China. A reason is that English proficiency is important to secure employment among the students (Luo & Daly, 2021).





In China, college students' English proficiency is assessed through the College English Test (CET), which includes a speaking component called the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET). The CET-SET evaluates students' speaking skills based on criteria such as pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and content (Wang & Sun, 2021). As the CET plays a crucial role in determining students' academic and career prospects, it is essential to explore effective teaching approaches that can enhance their speaking proficiency.

The CET employs specific rubrics to evaluate students' speaking skills systematically and fairly. These rubrics incorporate criteria such as pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and content (Wang & Sun, 2021). They provide a structured framework for assessing speaking skills, ensuring standardized and impartial evaluation (see Appendix K). The CET exerts a substantial influence on teaching and learning practices in Chinese higher education, creating a phenomenon referred to as the "backwash effect". This effect, both positive and negative, plays a pivotal role in shaping English language education. On the positive side, CET motivates students to improve their English proficiency, given its significant impact on academic outcomes and future career opportunities (Zhu & Li, 2020). However, this pressure to excel in the CET can sometimes lead to rote learning and teaching methods that emphasize test preparation, potentially stifling creativity and communication skills (Zhu & Li, 2020). The backwash effect is a complex phenomenon with implications for teaching, learning, and students' overall English language competence.





A longstanding debate in ELT revolves around the focus on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, the foundational aspects of language proficiency. While these elements are essential for effective communication, there is an ongoing discussion about the balance between emphasizing these aspects and nurturing more creative and spontaneous language use. The focus on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in the CET and English language teaching in China must be understood in the context of their influence on language acquisition, communication, and students' overall language competence.

In light of these challenges, there is a growing recognition among Chinese EFL educators and researchers of the need to reform and innovate EFL teaching practices to better meet the needs of learners in the 21st century (Xu & Zhang, 2021).

This includes the adoption of new teaching approaches, such as blended learning and the flipped classroom, which have the potential to enhance students' language learning experiences and outcomes. By conducting this study on the effects of the FCA on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to improve EFL education in China and provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers.

1.3 Problem Statement

In the current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education system in China, the teaching of speaking skills often takes a backseat to other language skills such as reading and writing. Despite the extensive mandates for English language education





in China, the predominant focus remains on grammar, vocabulary, and written skills, with limited emphasis on developing students' oral proficiency (Liu, 2019; Gao, 2007). This imbalance in skill focus can be attributed to various factors, including the exam-oriented nature of the education system, traditional teacher-centered instructional methods, and the lack of authentic speaking practice opportunities for students (Wen & Hu, 2018; Cai et al., 2017; Wang, 2018).

The prioritization of written skills over speaking skills in the Chinese EFL classroom has led to a significant gap in students' communicative competence. Many Chinese EFL learners, despite possessing a strong theoretical foundation in English grammar and vocabulary, struggle to engage in fluent and effective oral communication (Du and Guan, 2016; Gao & Li, 2016). A recent study by Shu (2022) found that 68% of Chinese college students reported low confidence in their English speaking abilities, with 52% citing insufficient speaking practice as the main reason for their lack of fluency. This lack of speaking proficiency can have far-reaching consequences for students' academic and professional success, as well as their ability to participate in an increasingly globalized world (Luo & Daly, 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the traditional teacher-centered instructional methods prevalent in Chinese EFL classrooms often fail to provide students with sufficient opportunities for authentic speaking practice and interaction (Zhang, 2019). The emphasis on rote learning, memorization, and drill exercises limits students' ability to develop their communicative skills and engage in meaningful language production (Liu, 2019). A survey by Amoah and Yeboah (2023) revealed that 82% of Chinese EFL teachers





reported using teacher-centered methods, with only 18% incorporating interactive, student-centered activities in their lessons. This lack of interactive and communicative learning experiences can lead to students' reluctance to participate in speaking activities, as well as increased anxiety and lack of confidence in using English for oral communication (He, 2017; Shi, 2015).

The limited exposure to authentic English communication outside the classroom further compounds the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners in developing their speaking skills (Gao & Li, 2016). Without sufficient opportunities to practice and apply their language skills in real-life contexts, students struggle to transfer their classroom learning to authentic communicative situations. This disconnect between classroom instruction and real-world language use can hinder students' motivation and engagement in the learning process, as well as their overall speaking proficiency (Du and Guan, 2016).

Moreover, the cultural factors deeply rooted in the Chinese educational system and society can also pose challenges to the development of students' speaking skills. The Confucian heritage, which emphasizes respect for authority, conformity, and face-saving, can discourage students from actively participating in class discussions and expressing their opinions (Xie, 2010; Rao, 2002). The fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of their peers and teachers can further inhibit Chinese EFL learners' willingness to communicate and engage in speaking activities (He, 2017; Shi, 2015). These cultural barriers can create a learning environment that is not conducive to the development of speaking skills, as students may prioritize accuracy over fluency and avoid taking risks in language production (Yu, 2008).





Additionally, the large class sizes commonly found in Chinese EFL classrooms can pose significant challenges to the effective teaching of speaking skills (Yu, 2001; Hu, 2002). With an average of 70-90 students per class, teachers often struggle to provide individualized attention and feedback, facilitate group discussions, and create opportunities for each student to practice their speaking skills (Guo, 2013). The limited class time and resources further exacerbate this problem, making it difficult for teachers to implement communicative and interactive teaching methods that are essential for developing students' oral proficiency (Chen & Goh, 2011).

The lack of sufficient teacher training and professional development in teaching speaking skills is another factor contributing to the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners (Gao, 2007; Wen, 2016). Many EFL teachers in China, despite their strong language proficiency, may not have received adequate training in communicative language teaching methods and strategies for fostering students' speaking skills (Zhang & Watkins, 2007). This lack of pedagogical knowledge and skills can lead to an overreliance on traditional, teacher-centered approaches that do not effectively address students' speaking needs (Hu, 2005).

To address these multifaceted challenges and gaps in the teaching of speaking skills in the Chinese EFL context, it is crucial to explore innovative instructional approaches that can create a more engaging, interactive, and communicative learning environment. The flipped classroom approach (FCA) has emerged as a promising pedagogical innovation that can potentially transform traditional classroom procedures and enhance students' speaking skill development (Adnan, 2017; Chen et





al., 2017). By shifting direct instruction outside of class time and dedicating class periods to interactive, communicative activities, the FCA can provide students with ample opportunities for authentic speaking practice, peer interaction, and individualized support (Chen Hsieh et al., 2017; Wu, Hsieh, & Yang, 2017).

However, despite the potential benefits of the FCA in addressing the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners in developing their speaking skills, there is a scarcity of research specifically focusing on the impact of this approach in the Chinese EFL context. Previous studies have primarily focused on the effects of the FCA on other language skills, such as listening (Li & Zhang, 2022), reading (Wang & Chen, 2021), and writing (Liu & Wang, 2023), with limited attention given to speaking skills. To bridge this research gap and contribute to the development of more effective instructional practices for teaching speaking skills in China, this study aims to investigate the effects of the FCA on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills and explore their perceptions of this teaching approach. By examining the potential of the FCA to address the linguistic, psychological, cultural, and pedagogical challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners, this research seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations for educators, institutions, and policymakers. The findings of this study may contribute to the development of more effective and culturally relevant pedagogies for enhancing Chinese EFL learners' speaking skills, ultimately improving their communicative competence and success in an increasingly globalized world.





1.4 Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is threefold. First, it aims to investigate the effects of the FCA on the development of Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills compared to the traditional classroom approach; Additionally, it aims to explore Chinese EFL students' perceptions and views regarding the use of the FCA as a means to improve their speaking skills. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the key elements and characteristics that contribute to an effective implementation of the FCA specifically for the teaching of speaking skills.

1.5 Objectives of the Study



- i. To investigate the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL students' speaking skills.
- ii. To explore the students' views on the use of the flipped classroom approach to improve their speaking skills.
- iii. To investigate the elements of an effective flipped classroom approach for the teaching of speaking skills.





1.6 Research Questions

1. What are the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills?
2. What are the Chinese EFL college students' perceptions on the flipped classroom approach in enhancing the speaking skills across the beginner, intermediate and advanced level participants?
3. What are the elements of an effective flipped classroom approach for the teaching of speaking skills?



1.7 Research Hypotheses

To operationalize the quantitative research questions 1, four main hypotheses were developed. These hypotheses provided a clear framework for the quantitative analysis.

First, hypotheses comparing control and experimental groups by post-test scores with sub-hypotheses for specific speaking skills of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, content and vocabulary.

H₀₁: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental group in the post-test.

Ha1: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental group in the post-test.





H_{0i}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their fluency.

H_{a1i}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their fluency.

H_{01ii}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their pronunciation.

H_{a1ii}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their pronunciation.

H_{01iii}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their grammar.

H_{a1iii}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their grammar.

H_{01iv}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their content.





H_{a1iv}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their content.

H_{01v}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their vocabulary.

H_{a1v}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the control and experimental groups in the post-test in terms of their vocabulary.

Second, hypotheses comparing pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group with sub-hypotheses for different proficiency levels of beginner, intermediate and advanced.

H₀₂: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group.

H_{a2}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group.

H_{02i}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among beginner level participants.





H_{a2i}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among beginner level participants.

H_{02ii}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among intermediate level participants.

H_{a2ii}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among intermediate level participants.

H_{02iii}: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among advanced level participants.

H_{a2iii}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test among advanced level participants.

Third, hypotheses on improvement in speaking skills of the experimental group across proficiency levels and specific skills.

H₀₃: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants.





H_{a3}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants.

H_{03i}: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of fluency.

H_{a3i}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of fluency.



H_{03ii}: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking

skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of pronunciation.

H_{a3ii}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of pronunciation.

H_{03iii}: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the





beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of grammar.

H_{a3iii}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of grammar.

H_{03iv}: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of content.



H_{a3iv}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking

skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of content.

H_{03v}: There are significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of vocabulary.

H_{a3v}: There are no significant differences in the improvement of the speaking skills scores of the experimental group from the pre-test to post-test among the beginner level, intermediate level and advanced level participants in terms of vocabulary.





Fourth, hypothesis comparing pre-test and post-test scores of the control group.

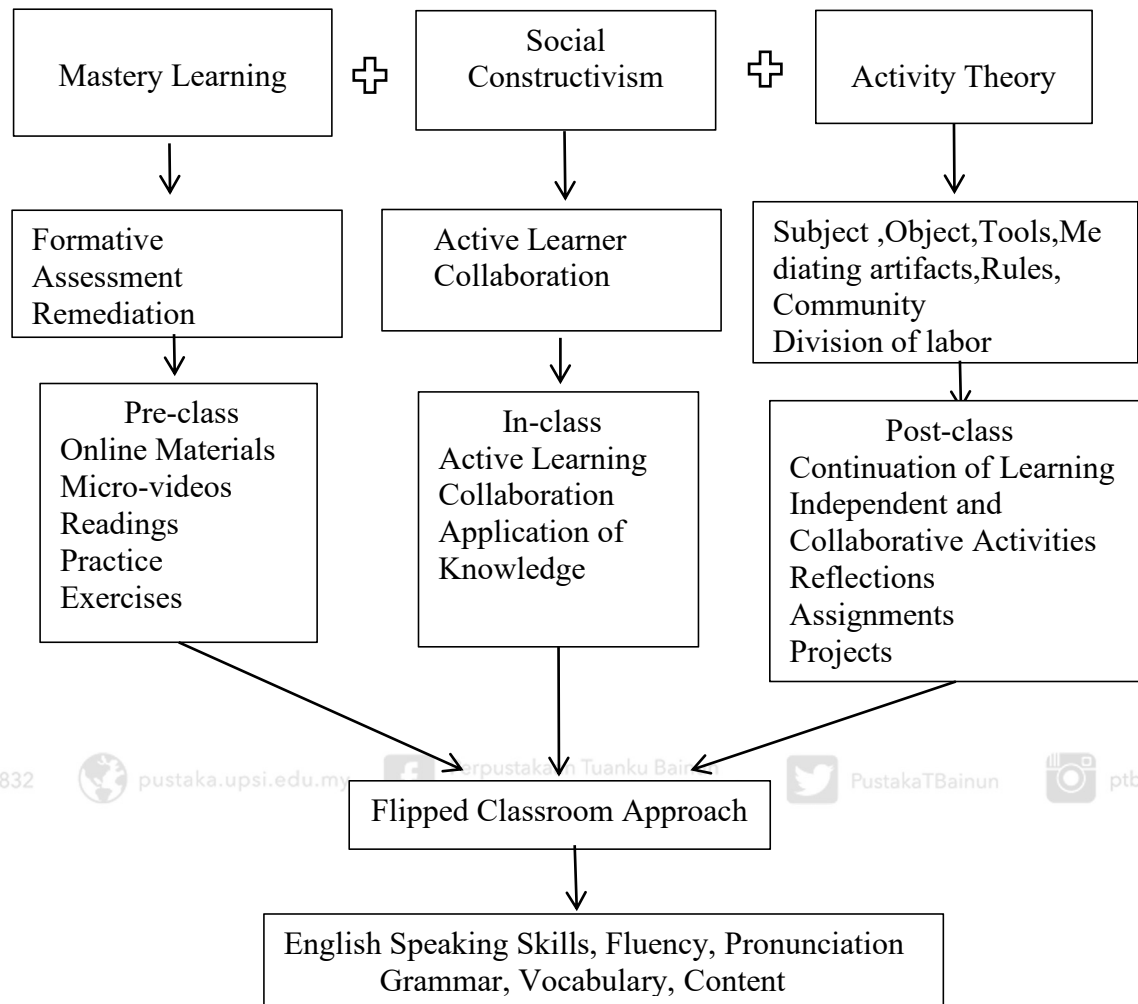
H₀₄: There are no significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the pre-test and post-test of the control group.

H_{a4}: There are significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills test between the pre-test and post-test of the control group.

1.8 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of this study integrates the key theories of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), mastery learning (Bloom, 1968), and activity theory (Engeström, 1987), with the essential elements of the flipped classroom approach and speaking skills, collectively inform the conceptual framework of this study, provide valuable insights into the learning process and the design and implementation of the FCA in the context of Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills development and illustrate the interconnections between these components and their influence on the development of Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills.



Figure 1.1*Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework of this study integrates three fundamental theories: social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), mastery learning (Bloom, 1968), and activity theory (Engeström, 1987) to examine the flipped classroom approach (FCA) in developing Chinese EFL students' speaking skills. Social constructivism emphasizes knowledge construction through social interaction and collaboration, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development, while mastery learning focuses on ensuring students master learning objectives through formative assessment and personalized learning before progressing to advanced content. Activity theory



complements these by conceptualizing the FCA as a complex system where students (subjects) interact with learning materials (objects) through technological tools within a community governed by specific rules and division of labor between students and teachers.

The framework operationalizes the FCA through three distinct phases: pre-class (where students engage with online materials at their own pace, aligning with mastery learning principles), in-class (featuring collaborative activities grounded in social constructivist principles where instructors facilitate rather than dictate learning), and post-class (involving reflections and assignments that reinforce knowledge acquisition). This three-phase approach systematically develops the core components of speaking skills—fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content—by introducing language elements pre-class, providing authentic practice and feedback in-class, and enabling further refinement post-class. This comprehensive framework allows for a systematic investigation of how the FCA influences EFL students' speaking skill development.

1.9 Importance of Research

This research, which focuses on enhancing speaking skills among Chinese EFL learners using the FCA, is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses the challenges Chinese EFL learners face in developing English speaking proficiency, such as linguistic differences between Chinese and English, psychological factors like communication anxiety, and traditional teaching methods that prioritize reading and





writing over speaking skills (Wen & Hu, 2018; Shu, 2018; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Timina, 2015; Cai et al., 2017; Wang, 2018). By investigating the effectiveness of the FCA in this context, the study contributes to the identification of strategies to overcome these challenges and improve Chinese EFL learners' speaking skills.

Second, the research contributes to the rapidly growing body of literature on blended learning and its potential to transform education. The findings will support the Chinese State Council's "13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Education Industry" (2017), which emphasizes the need to improve the adoption of information technology in teaching. By providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the FCA, a form of blended learning, in the context of EFL speaking skill development, this study informs educational policies and practices aimed at leveraging technology to enhance language learning outcomes.

Third, the research generates valuable insights into Chinese EFL college students' perceptions and experiences of the FCA compared to traditional classroom teaching. These insights offer crucial feedback on current teaching methods and learning strategies employed in the universities included in the study. Furthermore, the findings equip teachers and instructors with knowledge about online tools and various blended learning approaches that can be adopted to drive teaching reform and improve students' speaking skills.

In summary, this research advances knowledge on the development of speaking skills in the FCA, contributing to theory and practice in EFL education. Its outcomes have the potential to inform teaching strategies, educational policies, and





future research aimed at enhancing Chinese EFL learners' speaking proficiency and overall language learning experience. Despite the study's limitations in scope and sample size, its findings provide a foundation for further investigation and optimization of the FCA in the context of EFL speaking skill development.

1.10 Study Limitations and Delimitations

This study, like any research, has certain limitations and delimitations that should be acknowledged. In terms of limitations, while this study aims to provide valuable insights into the effects of the FCA on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills, it is important to acknowledge and discuss the potential limitations that may impact the generalizability and interpretation of the results.

One significant limitation of the study is the potential for self-selection bias. As the participants are recruited from a single Chinese university, they may not be representative of the broader population of Chinese EFL college students. Students who choose to participate in the study may have different characteristics, motivations, or learning preferences compared to those who do not participate. This self-selection bias could potentially skew the results and limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of Chinese EFL learners.

Another potential limitation is the possibility of social desirability bias in participants' responses. Given the nature of the study and the data collection methods, such as interviews or surveys, participants may be inclined to provide responses that





they believe are more socially acceptable or desirable, rather than expressing their true opinions or experiences. This bias could lead to an overestimation of positive perceptions or an underreporting of negative aspects related to the FCA, thus affecting the accuracy and validity of the findings.

Furthermore, the lack of long-term follow-up in this study presents another limitation. The research focuses on the immediate effects of the FCA on students' speaking skills, as measured by pre-test and post-test assessments. However, without a longitudinal design that includes follow-up assessments after a significant period, it is not possible to determine the long-term retention and sustainability of the observed improvements in speaking skills. It is plausible that the initial gains may diminish over time, or that the effects of the FCA may vary when considering long-term



Additionally, the study's reliance on a single university setting may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. The specific characteristics of the university, such as its resources, faculty expertise, and student demographics, may influence the implementation and effectiveness of the FCA. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending the conclusions of this study to other institutions or educational settings without considering the unique contextual factors.

Regarding delimitations, the study has a specific focus on investigating the effects of the FCA on the speaking skills of Chinese EFL college students. This focus was chosen to address the identified research gap and to contribute to the knowledge





base on the effectiveness of this instructional approach in the specific context of Chinese EFL education at the tertiary level.

The study is also delimited to the use of the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) as the primary assessment tool for measuring students' speaking skills. While the CET-SET is a well-established and widely used test in the Chinese EFL context, it may not capture all aspects of speaking proficiency, and the results should be interpreted within the constraints of this specific assessment.

Furthermore, the study is delimited to the specific time frame of the intervention, which spans one semester. This time frame was chosen to allow for sufficient exposure to the FCA and to assess its impact on students' speaking skills development. However, the long-term effects of the intervention beyond this time frame are not addressed in the current study.

It is important to acknowledge these limitations and delimitations to provide a clear understanding of the study's scope and boundaries. While these factors may affect the generalizability of the findings, the study's results can still offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of the FCA in the specific context of Chinese EFL college education and contribute to the growing body of research in this field. Future research can build upon the findings of this study by including larger and more diverse samples, exploring the long-term effects of the intervention, and investigating the effectiveness of the FCA in other EFL contexts and language skills.





1.11 Operational Definitions

In this section, key terms and concepts related to the study are defined to ensure a common understanding and to clarify their specific usage within the context of this research. These operational definitions provide a clear and precise description of the variables and constructs being investigated, allowing for a more focused and coherent discussion of the research problem. The following terms are defined: speaking skills, speaking skills components of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, content and vocabulary, speaking proficiency level, blended learning, traditional classroom approach, Flipped Classroom Approach (FCA), and the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET).



Speaking Skills: Speaking skills refer to an individual's competence in using a

foreign or second language for effective oral communication, involving the integration of several key components. These include grammatical accuracy, range of vocabulary, intelligible pronunciation, discourse coherence and pragmatic competence to negotiate meaning appropriately within sociocultural contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Goh & Burns, 2012; Hughes, 2011; Nazara, 2011; Nunan, 2003). Operationally, the present study defines speaking skills as Chinese EFL learners' ability to express themselves orally, fluently, and accurately with meaningful content, demonstrating competence in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, as well as correct intonation, while engaging in the simultaneous coordination of these linguistic subskills for comprehensible and pragmatically successful oral interaction.





Fluency: Fluency refers to the ability to produce spoken language smoothly, without excessive hesitation or pauses, and to express oneself effectively in the target language. It involves the capacity to maintain a consistent flow of speech, avoid undue repetitions or self-corrections, and convey meaning through appropriate pacing and rhythm (Jong, 2019; Lackman, 2010). Operationally, this study defines fluency as Chinese EFL learners' ability to speak English with a natural and consistent flow, maintaining coherence and cohesion in their oral production, while minimizing disruptive pauses, hesitations, or repetitions, and demonstrating the ability to effectively communicate their intended message.

Pronunciation: Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds, stress patterns, and intonation of a language in a manner that is intelligible and comprehensible to listeners. It involves the accurate articulation of individual sounds, the appropriate use of suprasegmental features, and adherence to the phonological rules and conventions of the target language (Gilakjani, 2012; Hismanoglu, 2006). Operationally, this study defines pronunciation as Chinese EFL learners' ability to produce English sounds, stress, and intonation patterns accurately and clearly, enabling them to be easily understood by native and non-native speakers of English, and demonstrating a level of phonological competence that facilitates effective oral communication.

Grammar: Grammar refers to the set of rules and principles that govern the structure and composition of sentences, phrases, and words in a language. It involves the accurate use of verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, word order, and other morphological and syntactic elements that contribute to the formation of well-formed





and meaningful utterances (Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Operationally, this study defines grammar as Chinese EFL learners' ability to construct sentences and phrases using accurate and appropriate grammatical structures, demonstrating a command of English language rules and conventions, and employing correct verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and word order to effectively convey their intended meaning in oral communication.

Content: Content refers to the substance, relevance, and coherence of the ideas and information expressed in spoken language. It involves the ability to provide meaningful, well-organized, and appropriate responses to prompts or questions, demonstrating a clear understanding of the topic and the capacity to effectively convey thoughts, opinions, and arguments (Brown & Yule, 1983; Thornbury, 2005).

Operationally, this study defines content as Chinese EFL learners' ability to express relevant, coherent, and well-developed ideas in their spoken English, providing substantive and logical responses to prompts or questions, and demonstrating the ability to effectively communicate their knowledge, thoughts, and opinions in oral interactions.

Vocabulary: Vocabulary refers to the body of words and phrases used in a language, and the ability to employ them effectively in communication. It involves the range, variety, and appropriateness of lexical items used in spoken discourse, as well as the capacity to select words and expressions that accurately convey intended meanings and suit the context of the conversation (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Operationally, this study defines vocabulary as Chinese EFL learners' ability to use a wide range of appropriate and precise words and phrases in their spoken English,





demonstrating a breadth and depth of lexical knowledge that enables them to effectively express their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in various communicative contexts.

Speaking Proficiency Levels: Speaking proficiency level refers to the categorization of language learners' oral skills based on their ability to communicate effectively in a given language. It is typically determined by assessing various aspects of spoken language, such as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary range, and discourse management (Council of Europe, 2001; ACTFL, 2012). Standardized tests or rubrics are often used to evaluate learners' speaking proficiency and assign them to different levels, such as beginner, intermediate, or advanced, based on their performance. In the context of the current study, speaking proficiency level specifically refers to the categorization of Chinese EFL college students' oral English skills based on their scores in the pre-test using the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET).

College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET): The CET-SET is a standardized national test designed to assess the oral English proficiency of Chinese college and university students (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). It is a compulsory component of the College English curriculum and aims to evaluate students' ability to communicate effectively in spoken English (Huang, 2010). The test measures various aspects of oral language skills, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse management (Wang & Sun, 2021). CET-SET scores are used to determine whether students meet the required levels of oral English proficiency as specified by the College English Teaching Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2020).





In the present study, the CET-SET is employed as a pre-test and post-test instrument to measure the participants' oral English proficiency before and after the implementation of the FCA. The test scores serve as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the flipped classroom intervention in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills. By comparing the pre-test and post-test scores, the study aims to determine whether the FCA has a significant impact on the students' oral English proficiency as measured by the CET-SET.

Blended Learning: Blended learning is an instructional approach that integrates face-to-face classroom learning with online or digital learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006). Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) define it as "a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment" (p. 3). More comprehensively, Verstegen et al. (2016) describe blended learning as "the range of possibilities presented by combining Internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students" (p. 1). It allows for flexibility in the instructional modalities, pacing, timing and accessibility of learning activities (Bonk & Graham, 2006). In the context of this study, blended learning operationally refers to an approach integrating traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with online/digital components to facilitate the development of EFL students' speaking skills, by leveraging the strengths of both delivery modes.

Flipped Classroom Approach: The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model that reverses the traditional instructional approach by delivering instructional content





outside of the classroom, typically through video lectures or readings, and utilizing class time for active learning activities facilitated by the instructor (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Bishop & Verleger, 2013). As defined by Akçayır and Akçayır (2018), “The flipped classroom is a blended learning approach that involves two components: direct computer-based individual instruction outside the classroom and interactive group learning activities inside the classroom” (p. 334). In this study, the FCA operationally refers to a student-centered model where Chinese EFL students gain first exposure to new material through instructor-provided resources outside of class, and then use the face-to-face class time for interactive exercises, projects, discussions, and practice related to that content under the guidance of the instructor. The flipped classroom serves as an independent variable compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom approach in examining its effects on Chinese EFL students' speaking skill



development.

Traditional Classroom Approach: The traditional classroom approach refers to the conventional face-to-face method of instruction where teaching and learning occurs through direct personal interaction between the instructor and students in a physical classroom setting (Means et al., 2014). It involves the use of typical instructional materials such as textbooks, blackboards or whiteboards, and physical classroom activities, as opposed to virtual online modes facilitated through digital technologies. In the context of this study, the traditional classroom approach operationally represents the face-to-face, instructor-led pedagogy employed in the physical classroom environment, utilizing non-digital instructional tools and resources.





1.12 Summary

In summary, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the research by detailing the background, aim, and objectives of the study. The research questions and hypotheses have been outlined, and the conceptual framework, based on social constructivism, mastery learning, and activity theory, has been introduced. The significance of the research to both practice and theory has been highlighted, and the study's limitations have been acknowledged. Finally, key operational definitions essential to the study have been provided to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the thesis.

The subsequent chapter will delve into the literature review, exploring concepts and theories related to speaking skills, technology-based learning, blended learning, flipped learning, and the FCA, setting the stage for a comprehensive investigation of the research questions and hypotheses outlined in this chapter.

