

**ENHANCING ORAL ENGLISH THROUGH AN
ONLINE INTERACTIVE PLATFORM: A CASE
STUDY OF A CHINESE VOCATIONAL COLLEGE**

HUANG RONGRONG

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**ENHANCING ORAL ENGLISH THROUGH AN
ONLINE INTERACTIVE PLATFORM: A CASE
STUDY OF A CHINESE VOCATIONAL COLLEGE**

by

HUANG RONGRONG

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACMC	Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication
CALL	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CET	College English Test
CET-SET	College English Test–Spoken English Test
CLA	Communicative Language Ability
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CMC	Computer-mediated Communication
CoI	Community of Inquiry
CSE	China’s Standards of English Language Ability
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELA	English Language Ability
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
F2F	Face-to-Face
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
JEPeM	<i>Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia</i>
LMS	Learning Management System
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NEEA	National Education Examinations Authority
NETS	National English Test System

PETS	Public English Test System
PIM	Practical Inquiry Model
PRETCO	Practical English Test for Colleges
SCMC	Synchronous Computer-mediated Communication
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPOC	Small Private Online Course
TEM	Test for English Major
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Zone

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**PENINGKATAN KEMAHIRAN LISAN BAHASA INGGERIS MELALUI
PLATFORM INTERAKTIF DALAM TALIAN: KAJIAN KES DI KOLEJ
VOKASIONAL CHINA**

ABSTRAK

Pelajar bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) di China seringkali kurang mahir dalam kemahiran lisan Bahasa Inggeris walaupun kepentingannya diakui untuk daya saing kerjaya. Jurang antara tahap kemahiran sebenar pelajar dengan jangkaan majikan ini berterusan disebabkan oleh penerimaan tidak kritis terhadap Pengajaran Bahasa Komunikatif (CLT) yang mengabaikan konteks dan faktor budaya dalam EFL. Untuk mengatasi batasan ini, kajian ini mencadangkan satu platform interaktif dalam talian yang menggabungkan pendekatan eklektik bagi meningkatkan kompetensi komunikasi lisan. Objektif utama kajian kes kualitatif ini adalah untuk meneroka bagaimana lapan pelajar dan seorang guru menggunakan platform interaktif dalam talian untuk meningkatkan kecekapan komunikasi lisan pelajar EFL di sebuah kolej vokasional di Chengdu, China. Kajian ini turut meneliti corak interaksi yang berlaku di platform interaktif dalam talian, pengalaman serta refleksi pelajar dan guru dalam menggunakan platform tersebut. Data kajian kualitatif ini termasuk tugas lisan, interaksi dalam talian, temu bual, dan refleksi, yang membolehkan triangulasi data dilaksanakan. Skor penilaian tugas lisan dianalisis secara statistik deskriptif dan ditafsir berdasarkan skala penilaian yang ditetapkan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan peningkatan kecekapan komunikasi lisan dalam kalangan pelajar selepas menggunakan platform interaktif dalam talian. Analisis kandungan melalui pengkodan berasaskan kerangka model Komuniti Inkuiri (CoI) dilaksanakan untuk mengenal pasti

corak interaksi dalam talian. Hasil kajian mendapati wujudnya taburan tidak seimbang bagi kehadiran sosial, pengajaran dan kognitif dalam interaksi dalam talian. Beberapa corak interaksi unik dalam konteks EFL di China turut ditemui. Satu kehadiran tambahan, iaitu kehadiran budaya (*cultural presence*), bersama indikator berkait dengan CoI serta tambahan lain, dicadangkan untuk memperkukuh model CoI dalam konteks EFL. Penemuan utama lain termasuk laluan inkuiri berulang untuk menambah baik Model Inkuiri Praktikal (PIM). Indikator tambahan seperti panduan langsung dan maklum balas pembetulan di bawah kehadiran pengajaran turut dikenal pasti. Data temu bual dan refleksi dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik bagi mengenal pasti tema-tema penting. Secara keseluruhannya, platform interaktif dalam talian ini dihargai oleh pelajar dan guru.

ENHANCING ORAL ENGLISH THROUGH AN ONLINE INTERACTIVE PLATFORM: A CASE STUDY OF A CHINESE VOCATIONAL COLLEGE

ABSTRACT

Chinese EFL students often lack adequate oral proficiency despite the recognised importance of English communication for career competitiveness. This employer-expectation gap persists due to the uncritical adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which neglects the EFL contextual and cultural factors. To address these limitations, this study proposes an online interactive platform combining an eclectic approach to enhance oral communicative competence. The main objective of this qualitative case study is to explore how the eight students and a teacher used the online interactive platform to enhance the oral communicative competence of Chinese EFL students at a Chinese vocational college in Chengdu, China. This study also investigated the patterns of interaction that occurred in the online interactive platform, the students' and teacher's experiences and reflections on using the online interactive platform. This qualitative study's data resources include oral task assignments, online interactions, interviews, and reflections, which made data triangulation achievable. The rating scores of the oral assignments underwent descriptive statistical analysis and were interpreted based on the assessment scale. The findings revealed the enhancement of oral communicative competence of the students after engaging in the online interactive platform. Content analysis by coding under the framework of CoI model was employed to derive online interaction patterns. It was founded that there was an uneven distribution of social, teaching, and cognitive presences in online interactions. Several distinctive online interaction patterns were identified in the Chinese EFL

context. An additional presence, which is cultural presence, including its indicators related to CoI and additional ones, was proposed to enhance the CoI model in EFL contexts. Another key finding of this study is the iterative inquiry pathways to refine the Practical Inquiry Model (PIM). An additional indicator of direct guidance and corrective feedback under teaching presence is also identified. The interview and reflection data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes. Overall, the online interactive platform was valued by the students and the teacher.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of the Study

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been continuously exerting an influence on teaching and learning (Livingstone, 2012; Qaddumi et al., 2021; Selwyn, 2007). ICT has the ability to revolutionise higher education and is assuming an increasingly significant role in educational reform and development (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Venkateswaran et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face (F2F) classroom teaching and learning had to be ceased. ICT was widely utilised for online education to maintain learning for learners globally (Daniel, 2020). The pandemic has brought not only unprecedented challenges to teachers and students (Tian et al., 2020) but also provided a catalyst for accelerating the integration of ICT into education (Daniel, 2020).

When ICT is utilised in language learning, we usually refer to Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which has been around since the 1970s (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). When utilised properly, CALL tools can enhance learner interest and drive while providing students with increased target language inputs, engagement opportunities, and evaluation (Fryer et al., 2020; Golonka et al., 2014; Venkateswaran et al., 2024). Moreover, they can provide instructors with a more efficient way of arranging the course. However, if it is at its worst, it may lead to improper input, superficial engagement, and misleading feedback, as well as students' annoyance with technological tools, a diversion from the educational objective, and an excessive focus on delivery method rather than pedagogical goals (Golonka et al., 2014). Therefore,

educators need to ensure that CALL tools are used optimally according to different learning objectives.

The emergence of an innovative technological tool does not render the previous tools obsolete or useless for CALL (Du, 2020). According to Gimeno-Sanz (2016), atomized CALL, as a follow-up stage of integrative CALL, is need-driven instead of technology-driven. Therefore, we should not confine the type of CALL tools to the latest stage of CALL. Instead, we need to identify the best path to integrating CALL tools based on learners' needs and specific teaching objectives. These viewpoints are especially pertinent in this study since the researcher explores the benefits of discussion forum and autonomous learning of the Small Private Online Course (SPOC) platform and the communication function of WeChat to design an online interactive platform to improve oral English communicative competence in Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting.

SPOCs, which refer to Small Private Online Courses (Fox, 2013), can provide possibilities for self-paced and autonomous learning (Fu, 2019), promote asynchronous interaction (Hadad et al., 2021) and provide learners with a more comprehensive, profound and individualised educational experience (Filius et al., 2018; Geronimo et al., 2024). WeChat is a computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool that is functionally similar to Skype and is the most popular online social communication tool in China (Jin, 2018; Ye, 2024). Users could interact synchronously and asynchronously via text, audio, and video CMC (Lei & Liu, 2020; Wang & Crosthwaite, 2021; Xu & Chen, 2020). Therefore, it has several pedagogically beneficial affordances and potential for language learning facilitation (Huang et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2016). Accordingly, the current study demonstrates how the SPOC platform (the Cloud Classroom) and WeChat are

integrated into an online oral English learning environment to enhance oral English communicative competence for Chinese students in a vocational college.

In addition to having the SPOC platform and WeChat, rigorous and meticulous educational design and implementation are also critical. The main functions of SPOC platforms used in this study are the autonomous learning sector and discussion forum. The asynchronous written-text, audio, and video communication are available in the discussion forum of the Cloud Classroom SPOC platform. WeChat is utilised as a communicative CALL tool to provide synchronous interaction between pairs, which can be text-based, audio-based, or video-based communication. When using the online interactive platform to teach oral English, several considerations need to be taken into account: First, in order to improve spoken proficiency, it is crucial to develop strategies that actively engage students in the activities on the online interactive platform and help them value autonomous learning and synchronous and asynchronous interactions as important learning tools. Second, what measures should we take to get students involved in and help them become comfortable navigating both online and conventional speaking environments? Additionally, how is the online interactive environment designed to overcome the obstacles and constraints of implementing the CLT approach in the EFL context? These questions indicate valid concerns about how teachers should make the most of the integration of ICT tools in teaching oral English to design and implement the interactive platform in the present study. By taking a Chinese higher vocational college as a case, this study is planned towards exploring the utilisation of an online interactive platform in teaching and learning speaking skills in a Chinese EFL context.

To conclude, this study investigates how the proposed online interactive platform can enhance multiple aspects of oral communicative competence. Then, the emerging

interaction patterns among students, between students and teachers, and between students and learning materials in the online interactive platform are analysed according to the CoI model focusing on social, teaching, and cognitive presences. Finally, the teacher's and students' experiences and reflections are investigated. This research was conducted in a higher vocational college in Chengdu, China, within the EFL environment.

1.2 Background of the Study

In China, the first initiation to promote the development of ICT in education was the “Education Promotion Plan of Action for the 21st Century” and the “Modern Distance Education Project” launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China at the end of the 1990s (Hu, 2019). In the following decade, consecutive programs, projects and plans are launched by Chinese educational administrative authorities at all levels mainly to facilitate infrastructure construction, hardware and software coverage and network penetration, especially in the rural and distant regions of China. At the same time, China has popularised information technology courses in primary and secondary schools to enhance students' basic information literacy and capability (Chen et al., 2020). Those efforts have consolidated the foundation for further development of ICT in education in China.

The focus is transferred to the implementation and development of ICT in education with the issuing of the “Ten-year Development Plan of ICT in Education (2011–2020)” by the MOE of China in 2012 and “Three Links and Two Platforms Project” (Chen et al., 2020). With the launch of the Education Informatisation 2.0 Action Plan, of which the development goal is “three all, two high, one big” by 2022, the strategic position of ICT has upgraded to excreting a “revolutionary influence on

educational reform” and marked the arrival of a new phrase from application to integrating and innovating ICT in education (Chen et al., 2020).

To date, China has made remarkable progress in integrating ICT into education due to these projects, policies and efforts. An educational informatisation platform with Chinese characteristics and a considerable amount of digital resources has been constructed, and e-learning has been carried out. The quality of education, information application competence of teachers and students and education equity have been improved to a great extent. As a result, China has been recognised as a typical example of starting late but achieving rapid development of ICT in education in the world (Chen & Chen, 2020). Now, ICT in education in China is in the transitional period from application to integration and innovation (Zhu & Wei, 2018), and it is important to address the issue of how to integrate ICT into education effectively and deeply.

To fully understand the background of this study, it is necessary to know the four stages of CALL, namely Behaviouristic CALL, Communicative CALL, Integrative CALL (Warschauer & Healey, 1998) and Atomised CALL (Gimeno-Sanz, 2016). The first stage of CALL features linguistic drills that are repeated over and over again between the 1950s and 1970s. The second stage focuses more on the use of language than on the forms themselves from the 1980s to 1990s, when communicative competence and CLT emerged. The third stage is integrative CALL, which aims to combine numerous skills as well as more thoroughly integrate technology into language learning (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). The atomised CALL moves from “all in one” (p.8) to independent technology-based tools, which are called atoms, requiring researchers to figure out the most effective way to integrate them with a pedagogical approach into larger particles (Gimeno-Sanz, 2016).

CMC applied in language learning is a widely-used type of Communicative CALL (Du, 2020), which includes synchronous and asynchronous forms (Namaziandost et al., 2021). According to the existing literature, CMC is effective in communicative language learning (Yamada & Akahori, 2007). CMC tools have been frequently adopted in EFL contexts to enhance learners' interaction where students have little chance to use their foreign language outside the class (Namaziandost et al., 2021). In the stage of integrative CALL, innovative pedagogical technologies such as the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and SPOC are developed. The SPOC is a type of online education characterised by a reduced student population, an elevated retention rate, and increased instructor interactions compared to MOOC (Filius et al., 2018). Additionally, it can bring positive learning outcomes for language learning (e.g., Lu, 2018; Wang, 2023; Xue & Dunham, 2021).

These technologies in different stages of CALLs have their own features and potential to produce positive learning outcomes in foreign languages (Fox, 2013; Kay et al., 2013; López-Pérez et al., 2011). However, as long as technology continues to progress, there will always be a space for us to discover the best approach to pedagogically utilise these ever-emerging technical innovations and new devices for language learning (Gimeno-Sanz, 2016). In the stage of atomised CALL, it is crucial to make the best use of different tools properly and effectively in EFL education for specific pedagogical objectives (Millis, 2012) and based on learners' needs. Moreover, it should also be noted that the specific contexts of EFL countries should be considered, rather than directly transplanting practices from English as a Second Language (ESL) countries (Li & Li, 2018).

Communicative competence which includes grammatical, pragmatic, and strategic sub-competencies is widely acknowledged as crucial for success in personal,

educational and professional settings (Kamariddinovna, 2024). As a specific teaching approach to develop learners' communicative competence, CLT has achieved success in ESL contexts (Sun & Cheng, 2002) but not in EFL countries because of contextual factors (Lu & Ares, 2015; Wei, 2012). Encountered many constraints and challenges in its application in China, CLT was suggested to transformed into an eclectic approach (Rao, 1996; Liao, 2000) and believed to have positive effects on foreign language teaching (Gao, 2018; Huang, 2010; Rao, 2002).

Despite growing interest in CALL, limited studies have been found on integrating different stages of CALL tools into the online environment to enhance oral English communicative competence for higher vocational college students in Chinese EFL settings. The significance of English communicative competence, the inadequacies of oral English proficiency among Chinese vocational college students and the lack of sufficient research in this area motivate this study to create an online interactive platform based on the communicative CALL tool (WeChat) and integrative CALL tool (the Cloud Classroom SPOC platform) by adopting an eclectic pedagogical approach for higher vocational college students while fully taking the Chinese context into account.

1.3 Problem Statement

One typical comment made regarding Chinese English learners is that they demonstrate weak oral communicative ability and difficulties in using English in real-life situations (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Xing & Bolden, 2019) although they have learned English for at least six years (Gil, 2016; Yuntao, 2019). The same is true of higher vocational college students in China.

Proficiency in English communicative competence is critical for students to have more career opportunities and competitiveness in workplaces (Chen, 2021; Pandey & Pandey, 2014). English Curriculum Standard for Chinese College of Higher Vocational Education (2021) has stressed the importance of developing the English communicative competence of higher vocational students for future careers. It puts forward that the communicative competence among foreign affairs in daily life and workplaces constitutes the basic elements of the core literacies of English subjects. Despite the importance of being widely recognised, the oral English communicative competence of higher vocational students is still at a dissatisfactory level and should be improved urgently (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Qin, 2018).

In this current study, the researcher has done a preliminary study to confirm the above issues of Chinese higher vocational college students with the Director of the English Teaching and Research Office and students in the college where the study is being conducted. The Director highlighted that despite industry demands, particularly in service sectors, for fluent English communication skills, most students lack this competency, which substantially hinders their employment prospects. Moreover, among the 30 randomly selected students interviewed, over 75% acknowledged the importance of English speaking skills for employment and career development, yet expressed dissatisfaction with their current level of oral proficiency. According to the interviews, the students' biggest challenges in their learning of oral English are a lack of effective learning methods, a shortage of confidence and insufficient practice opportunities.

Based on previous literature and research, the following are the main reasons leading to the weak oral communicative competence of Chinese students. First, under the influence of dominant grammar-translation and audio-lingual teaching methods

(Li, 2011) within its examination-oriented system, resulting in teacher-centred classrooms. Instructors predominantly emphasise grammar, reading comprehension, and exam performance at the expense of developing learners' communicative competence and learning interest (Gao, 2018; Rao, 1996). As a result, students put too much emphasis on grammar, memorising vocabulary mechanically, and conducting repeated written drills (Lucenta, 2011; Pan & Block, 2011; Wong, 2016). Since oral English is still not assessed in the Matriculation English Test in most regions of China (Wang & Zhang, 2018; Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021), there are no oral English classes in most middle schools. Students spend little time practising oral English, and their oral English foundation is very weak (Gao, 2018). Besides, when entering college, non-English major college students are required to pass the College English Test (CET) to graduate, but the oral English test is an optional section (Zhang & Elder, 2009). Consequently, many higher vocational students persist in employing secondary school learning strategies, relying on rote memorization for exam success rather than developing communicative competence (Ruan & Jacob, 2009).

Learning English by remembering, recalling and reproducing may be helpful in developing grammatical competence (Entwistle, 1998; Marton & Saljo, 1976; Price et al., 2014), but it is far from sufficient for promoting overall English language communicative competence. To develop communicative competence, which includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), and discourse competence (Canale, 1983), an effective pedagogical approach is needed.

Futhermore, to promote students' English communicative competence, the CLT approach was advocated by Chinese scholars and the MOE since the early 1990s. Consecutive policies and documents were launched to promote CLT in China (Wei,

2012). CLT has emerged and prevailed in ESL countries since the 1970s. However, the implementation of CLT in Chinese EFL contexts has proven problematic, largely due to insufficient consideration of fundamental differences between ESL and EFL environments (Fan, 2020; Hu, 2002). To acquire communicative competence, learners must be provided with ample opportunities to utilise the target language for communicative purposes (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Qi & Chen, 2025; Zhao et al., 2023). Regardless from the perspectives of the cognitive or sociocultural strand of study on CLT and second language acquisition (SLA), comprehensible input and output, social interaction and collaboration (Namaziandost et al., 2021) are critical to developing communicative competence. However, big-sized classes, insufficient exposure to the target language, inadequate communication and interaction between instructors and learners, as well as among learners in EFL settings inhibit the development of learners' oral communication skills. Moreover, the Chinese traditional assumptions of education stem from Confucian philosophy (Li, 2011), which conflicts with CLT in several aspects such as reverential learning, reading-centred learning, and the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Besides, the Chinese educational policies and teachers' limited CLT expertise have been systematically overlooked, compromising CLT's effectiveness (Lu & Ares, 2015; Wei, 2012).

With the globalisation and diversification of economic development, English has become an international language (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997; Pan & Block, 2011). People need to use English to communicate with foreigners in and outboard of academic study and daily life. At the same time, the competitiveness of enterprises is facing great challenges. Employers require their employees to have both higher professional and technical levels and English communicative competence (Wei et al., 2018). According to a survey conducted by Velde (2009) among Chinese employers,

over 90% of them considered English communicative skills as important or extremely important in the recruitment of graduates. A more recent survey also revealed that Chinese employers attach great importance to employees' English communicative competence as oral English ability ranks first. However, over half of the employers rate the overall English level of the recently recruited employees as low or very low (Wei et al., 2018). Although before employment, students have learned English for at least nine years, when entering the workplace after graduation, they are still badly in need of improving English communication skills (Du, 2020). Evidently, the gap between the weakness of oral English communicative competence of higher vocational students and the need for communication in English, as well as the high requirement of enterprises, results in an urgent and unsolved problem.

Ignoring this problem will definitely cause negative results on the development of individuals and even the country. Students with weak English communicative competence would have more difficulties in their academic achievement and communicating with foreigners (Wei, 2012). And most importantly, for higher vocational college students, it would be harder to find satisfactory jobs and positions (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Fan et al., 2017; Pandey & Pandey, 2014); thus, the unemployment rate might rise. More enterprises would be short of qualified employees to conduct international business and have to spend more to train their staff. This will possibly drag the economic development of the country. On the basis of the issues discussed, it is necessary to develop an effective and appropriate approach to address the constraints implementing CLT in EFL contextual constraints, with the ultimate goal of enhancing Chinese EFL learners' oral communicative proficiency.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study is to create an online interactive platform to enhance the oral English communicative competence of higher vocational students and to explore its use, as studies of this kind are few in the Chinese context. As explained earlier, Chinese students are used to adopting rote and repetitive drills learning approaches to learn English under the influence of exam-driven education (Hu, 2010). In teacher-centred and big-sized classes, they are generally passive knowledge receivers in English learning (Liao, 2000) and lack autonomous learning ability (Cheng & Wu, 2017). As for oral English, they do not have sufficient opportunities and time to put English into use. In response to those challenges, one way to engage learners more in practising English is by integrating CALL tools to provide an online interactive environment where they could obtain more comprehensible input, produce more output, and have more social engagement and collaboration with peers and the teacher (Larsari, 2011; Fischer & Yang, 2022). Additionally, they can obtain easy accessibility to pertinent learning materials and resources anytime and anywhere according to their own needs (Cheng et al., 2017; Karakaya & Bozkurt, 2022).

After the breakout of COVID-19 in 2019, online and virtual teaching and learning replaced traditional classroom instruction abruptly (Daniel, 2020). It was estimated that ICT-integrated pedagogy would be the trend of educational reform and development in the post-epidemic and endemic periods in China (Feng, 2020; Xu et al., 2020). According to the Guidance on Further Promoting the Vocational Education Development of Informatisation released by the Chinese MOE, ICT is essential for ensuring the quality of vocational education and training, and vocational colleges should utilise it to develop innovative pedagogical techniques (MOE, 2017). Therefore, a study on how different CALL tools can be used effectively in Chinese vocational

college EFL settings conforms to the trend of education today. Interacting with peers, teachers and learning materials can be easily realised by using the internet and participating in online pedagogical activities. By having such opportunity, students will probably be more motivated and engaged and have less language anxiety (Kern, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Shi et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

It is worth noting that the type of CALL tools in online learning activities should not be confined to any stage or trend. The decision of what technological tools to use should rely on the objective of language curriculum and specific context (Du, 2020). By adopting the concept of “Atomised Call” (Gimeno-Sanz, 2016), different stages of CALL tools are integrated into the online interactive platform to enhance oral English communicative competence for Chinese vocational college students. It is crucial that in this online interactive environment, students can have plenty of interaction with peers, teachers and learning materials, share learning experiences and get appropriate scaffolding from others. Moreover, they can become active participants and get more motivated in language learning. However, those positive effects cannot be achieved in traditional language classrooms.

It is also necessary to realise that CALL tools cannot enhance communicative competence by themselves. A sound design and implementation of pedagogical activities are critical to obtaining the goal. English language teaching (ELT) in EFL contexts has much more difficulty and is different from the ways in ESL countries. To create an online interactive platform for improving students’ oral communicative competence, several problems should be solved: What pedagogical approach is effective in the Chinese EFL context? Which content and activities should be chosen? What technologies should be used? How to incorporate them into language instruction

and learning? How to assess different aspects of oral communicative competence? It is only when we overcome the obstacles and constraints of CLT in the Chinese context that students' communicative competence will be enhanced. The present study is a step in this direction. With this in mind, this study puts forward an online interactive platform to promote the oral English communicative competence of vocational college students by utilising a popular communicative CALL tool and integrative CALL one in Chinese EFL teaching and learning settings.

The online interactive platform as designed in this study is scarce in tertiary educational contexts, especially in Chinese vocational colleges. Hence, a detailed case study is required to explore how this platform can be used. To understand how students in China are utilising the online interactive platform to support their language learning, it can be helpful to look into the experiences of both students and teachers. It is hoped that this data will show how an online interactive environment may be used to teach speaking skills. A case study research method is adopted based on interviews, reflections, oral English assignments and online interaction patterns. It will help to understand better teaching and learning experiences in the online interactive platform and provide suggestions for future research in the area of oral English teaching and learning in EFL contexts.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The following are the explicit objectives of this study :

RO1:to investigate whether the online interactive platform designed in this study could enhance different aspects of communicative competence in oral English.

- i. to investigate whether the online interactive platform designed in this study could enhance the accuracy and range of language of communicative competence in oral English.
- ii. to investigate whether the online interactive platform designed in this study could enhance the size and discourse management of communicative competence in oral English.
- iii. to investigate whether the online interactive platform designed in this study could enhance the flexibility and appropriacy of communicative competence in oral English.

RO2: to examine the patterns of interactions in terms of social, teaching and cognitive presences that happened in the online interactive environment.

- i. to examine the patterns of interactions under social presence that happened on the online interactive platform.
- ii. to examine the patterns of interactions under teaching presence that happened on the online interactive platform.
- iii. to examine the patterns of interactions under cognitive presence that happened on the online interactive platform.

RO3: to investigate students' and teacher's experiences and reflections on using the online interactive platform.

- i. to investigate students' experience and reflection on using the online interactive platform.
- ii. to investigate the teacher's experience and reflection on using the online interactive platform.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are as follows:

RQ1: How does the online interactive platform designed in this study enhance different aspects of oral English communicative competence?

- i. How does the online interactive platform designed in this study enhance the accuracy and range of language of communicative competence in oral English?
- ii. How does the online interactive platform designed in this study enhance the size and discourse management of communicative competence in oral English?
- iii. How does the online interactive platform designed in this study enhance the flexibility and appropriacy of communicative competence in oral English?

RQ2: What are the patterns of interactions in terms of social, teaching and cognitive presences that happened on the online interactive platform?

- i. What are the patterns of interactions under social presence that happened on the online interactive platform?
- ii. What are the patterns of interactions under teaching presence that happened on the online interactive platform?
- iii. What are the patterns of interactions under cognitive presence that happened on the online interactive platform?

RQ3: What are the students' and teacher's experiences and reflections on using the online interactive platform?

- i. What are the students' experiences and reflections on using the online interactive platform?

- ii. What are the teacher's experience and reflection on using the online interactive platform?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The reasons why it is significant to conduct this study are described in the following aspects. First, this study operationalises Wei et al.'s (2018) call for context-appropriate CLT adaptations and responds to Teh's (2021) recommendation to situate CLT within online settings by developing an online interactive platform specifically designed for enhancing Chinese vocational college students' oral English proficiency. This provides a case to exemplify how to adopt an eclectic pedagogical approach in an online learning environment based on the EFL contexts and how to integrate different technological tools effectively to meet the needs of learners and enhance students' oral communicative competence. As a result, this study advances knowledge in the field of oral English education in Chinese EFL classes.

This study may serve as a springboard for instructors in EFL countries to consider their pedagogical approach to ELT. Teaching English in EFL contexts is fundamentally different from teaching in ESL ones (Storch & Sato, 2020; Wei et al., 2018). Therefore, the researcher expects that this study can provide an example for teachers in China to adopt an eclectic approach to ELT based on their specific program. Since teachers may have similar problems in teaching oral English in other EFL countries, this study can also have implications for other countries to some extent.

This study may also propel teachers to consider ways of utilising ICT in teaching. Many vocational college teachers' ability to deeply integrate ICT into vocational education is not enough (Jiang et al., 2020). The way of utilising ICT in education mainly is "one-way transmission" (p.92), such as using PowerPoint to teach, obtain

or transmit teaching resources through the internet (Shen, 2015). However, the way of “two-way interaction” (p.92) only accounts for a few proportion, such as using ICT to promote students’ collaborative learning (Shen, 2015). It is hoped that this research will provide teachers with an experience of how to integrate different CALL tools to increase comprehensible input and output and promote social interaction and collaboration in ELT. Thus, teachers’ readiness to use ICT to support ELT can rise as a result of their increased understanding of its benefits.

Although there are a few studies on designing online learning or teaching environments to enhance oral English proficiency, this study is of great importance as an eclectic CLT approach and different stages of CALL tools are integrated by the researcher to design an online interactive environment to improve students’ oral English communicative competence. Therefore, this study uncovers the potential of the online interactive platform as designed in this study to enhance the English communicative competence of vocational college students. Because this study is conducted in a Chinese setting, the findings of the study will augment the body of knowledge of designing and using online learning or teaching environments for enhancing oral communicative competence in EFL countries. It is also expected to provide suggestions to those researchers who are interested in designing online learning and teaching or further improving their online course design in the communicative English education field.

The results of this study can be utilised by organisations focused on professional development and the state departments of education to organise training sessions or conduct specialized conferences that address topics relating to the use of ICT in education. Additionally, by using the online interactive platform, it is hoped that the interactions among students, between students and teachers, and between students

and learning materials will be enhanced and thus language acquisition will be facilitated.

Finally, the findings of this research may also be used to teach students of other higher vocational colleges in EFL contexts. By improving oral English communicative competence, students will have a better academic and social life, enjoy more job opportunities, and become more competitive in workplaces.

1.8 Operational Definitions

The following sections clarify the operational definitions used in this study.

1.8.1 Autonomous Learning Sector

Autonomous learning is an instructional strategy that empowers students to manage their own learning (Holec, 1979). Originally, it meant that students should make all decisions pertaining to their own learning (Holec, 1979) including learning goals, learning resources, learning process and assessment. In the present study, it does not refer to students' total management of their learning due to their limited ability to take charge of their own learning. Instead, it means students have a great degree of autonomy on managing their learning process of the materials provided by the teacher. Those learning materials include pedagogical instructions, task requirements, and model answers. The autonomous learning sector means the area where students conduct this autonomous learning on the learning materials on the Cloud Classroom SPOC platform. When students have questions regarding the materials while using the platform to learn, they can send messages to their teacher on the platform.

1.8.2 Discussion Forum

In online learning environments, a discussion forum refers to an asynchronous electronic communication platform where members participate in threaded discussions that are structured and topic-centered (Marra et al., 2004; Montero et al., 2007). The function of the discussion forum of the Cloud Classroom is used in this study for asynchronous interactions among students, between students and teachers, and between students and learning materials. The students' first answers to each oral assignment are posted on the discussion forum, and then students are encouraged to give comments and suggestions, and further discussion can happen as well. The students and the teacher interact with one another asynchronously in text, oral or video modes. After the interactions in the discussion forum, the students produce final answers to the oral assignments based on the feedback and suggestions from the teacher and other students.

1.8.3 Pair Interaction Sector

The pair interaction sector refers to the WeChat groups where pairs can interact with each other when preparing and completing the pair work in the oral assignments. One student with high English proficiency, one with intermediate English level and the teacher form a chat group on WeChat. Students can prepare, discuss and practice their pair work by synchronous communication on WeChat. The synchronous communication may be in text, audio and video modes which students can choose according to their preferences.

1.8.4 Online Interactive Platform

The online area within the Cloud Classroom SPOC platform and WeChat is referred to as the online narrative writing platform. The autonomous learning sector and discussion forum of the Cloud Classroom SPOC platform and the pair interaction sector on WeChat are integrated as the online interactive platform in this study.

1.8.5 Eclectic Approach

The eclectic approach is an instructional method which integrates the CLT with the traditional language teaching method (Hu, 2005; Liao, 2000; Rao, 1996) to suit Chinese EFL contexts for developing learners' language communicative competence (Gao, 2018; Huang, 2010). In this study, it refers to the combination of the CLT method and grammar-translation method.

1.8.6 Oral English Communicative Competence

The definition of oral English communicative competence adopts the definition of oral expression ability in China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), which is "the ability by which a speaker can effectively perform the task of oral communication and thus achieve communicative goals by appropriately applying linguistic knowledge and communicative strategies based on his/her analysis of situation, participators, intentions of expression, communicative channels, and other contextual factors"(Ministry of Education & National Language Commission, 2018, p.56).

1.8.7 Chinese Higher Vocational College

The essential component of higher vocational education in China is public higher vocational education (Xiong, 2011). The public higher vocation colleges in China come in a variety of forms, ranging such as independent vocational and technical colleges, adult colleges, university-run vocational and technical colleges, independent four-year colleges and regular junior colleges (Xiong, 2011). In this study, the Chinese higher vocational college refers to the selected public independent vocational and technical college in Chengdu, China. Instead of directly leading to an advanced research certification like a degree, higher vocational education programs concentrate on practical occupational specific abilities for workforce readiness.

1.8.8 Online Interactions

The online interactions in this study refer to the student-learning material, student-teacher and student-student interactions happened on the autonomous learning sector, discussion forum and pair interaction sector of the online interactive platform.

1.8.9 Experience

Experience in this study refers to the knowledge and skills gained by students and the teacher through their engagement on the online interactive platform.

1.8.10 Reflections

In this study, reflections relate to the students' and the teacher's written, personal interpretations made after the experience.

1.9 Organisation of the Study

The overall organisation of this study is presented in this section. Chapter One covers the overview, background of the study, problem statement, rationale of the study, purpose and objectives of the study, significance of the study and operational definitions of terms. Chapter Two provides the related literature review and the theories employed in this study. In addition, the theoretical framework and conceptual framework of this study are explained. Chapter Three covers the methodology, which comprises the research design, research participants, source of data, research procedures, and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. Results from the analysis are presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five summarises the discussion of the findings, offers suggestions for future research, and sums up the research.

1.10 Theoretical Framework

The theories underpinning the present study are two learning theories and a model. They are the interactionist SLA theory (Chapelle, 2005), the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison et al., 1999). The interaction SLA theory and sociocultural theory consider interaction as an essential part of effective language learning from different perspectives. From the cognitive perspective in the interactionist SLA theory, language is acquired through interaction in which negotiation of meaning, obtaining comprehensible input, noticing and producing modified output takes place. From the sociocultural perspective in sociocultural theory, language acquisition is considered to be achieved through getting scaffolding to reach ZPD, co-constructing knowledge and internalisation. Therefore, the online learning environment on the online interactive platform for enhancing

learners' oral English communicative competence is designed based on the interaction theory and the sociocultural theory.

To further understand how online interactions support cognitive and sociocultural English language acquisition, the CoI model provides an analytical framework. It examines how the platform's interactive features apply language learning principles by systematically investigating online interaction patterns. These patterns reveal how online interactions establish and maintain social, teaching and cognitive presence, which shape an online learning environment that promotes deep learning and high quality interaction. The theoretical framework supporting the current study is depicted in Figure 1.1.

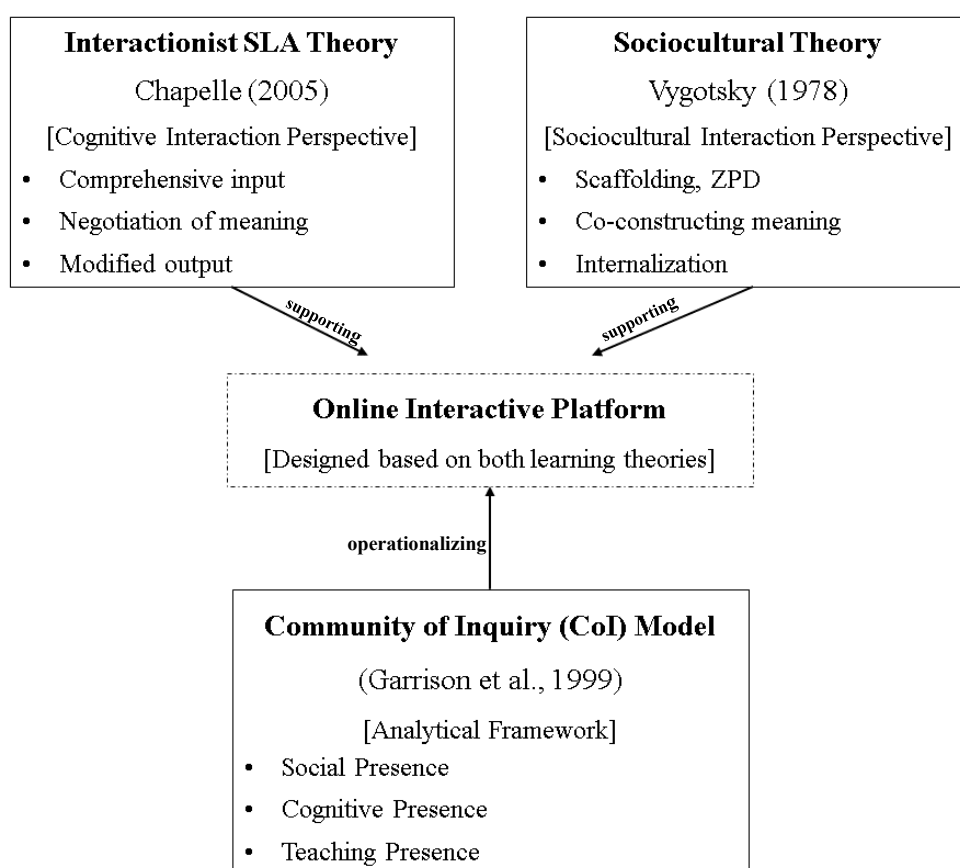


Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework