

Improving Students' Oral Skills Through A Cooperative Learning Approach to Teaching Chinese
College English

by

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Abstract

Cooperative learning is a student-centered instructional approach that has the potential to encourage more interactions among students and maximize the improvement of each student's learning process. This project examines the effect of cooperative learning on non-English major students' oral skills improvement in Chinese universities. By reviewing the empirical studies conducted by Chinese college English teachers, this project examines the effect of cooperative learning from three aspects, including students' oral test scores, oral production and the quality of spoken English. Based on the findings from the literature review, this project further discusses the constraints and possibilities of the implementation of cooperative learning in the light of certain Chinese sociocultural factors; as well this project provides recommendations to college English teachers and academic administrators for implementing a cooperative learning approach when teaching of English oral skills.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, college English teaching, oral skills, Chinese university

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to review of literature on the effects of the cooperative learning approach on Chinese university non-English major students' oral English classroom learning, with a special focus on students' oral test score improvement, oral production and quality of spoken English. The introduction's organization is as follow: (a) motivation of study; (b) research background; (c) research questions; (d) research path and (e) definition of terms.

Motivation of Study

Motivation from my second language teaching experience. My interest in cooperative learning ultimately stems from my first experiences of teaching Mandarin in China. As an instructor of students who were learning Mandarin as a second language, I regularly sought to maximize their opportunities to engage in the use of the target language in order to develop their oral skills. From these early teaching experiences, I quickly came to recognize the validity of the principle that, "in order to achieve a higher level of language proficiency, foreign language learners need to get involved in oral communication" (Lin, 2009, p. 4). Although the relative benefit of oral communication does not preclude alternative approaches to improving students' proficiency, such as writing practices whose formal demands may yield a unique opportunity for practice and development, my experience as a teacher has primarily shown me the potential gains of regularly using spoken English as a means of raising the level of students' language skills. I found that many students came to my class with a low Mandarin foundation and that they often refused to speak in class because of anxiety and shyness. I wondered if there was an approach that could be used to encourage my students to talk with each other within limited class time that would help develop their oral Mandarin competence.

After moving to Canada and enrolling in a Master of Education at the University of Victoria, my curiosity about methods of engaging students' oral language skills continued unabated. For this reason, during a course on Educational Theory into Practice, I developed a deep interest in the cooperative learning approach. After learning the fundamentals of this method, I had the opportunity to return to China last year and, during the summer, was able to use some cooperative learning activities, such as group investigation, jigsaw and role-play in my class. I was excited to notice that this approach greatly enhanced the quantity and quality of students' oral Mandarin skills when these students spoke in class. Some of my students even told me that they were always eager to speak in class after my cooperative learning instruction. Equally encouraging was that after two months instruction, four out of eleven of my students said they have received higher score in Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK: a Mandarin test).

Motivation from my college English learning experience. My Mandarin teaching experience further motivated me to think about the problem that most of my friends and I experienced in our college English studies. The majority of us had entered university with poor English-speaking skills and after two years' college English learning many of us were still not competent in oral communication. We hoped to improve our oral English proficiency in college English classes but we rarely had an opportunity to really communicate in class, which was disappointing. The oral English practice we often experienced in class usually consisted of presenting and reading a text aloud, activities the teacher used to check if we understood the language points on which he or she had lectured. To conserve class time, teachers often asked students to participate in these activities in groups, which, because teachers tended to ask that students with a high oral competence deliver the readings or presentation, meant that the rest of the students merely listened without being asked to speak.

When I reflected on this pedagogy, I wondered if a cooperative learning approach, with its emphasis on the active involvement of all students, could solve the problem of speaking participation as students could have more opportunities to speak in small groups. This question of whether cooperative learning would be an effective method in teaching English as a second language to Chinese college students motivated my research on this subject. As I began to consider the application of cooperative learning in this particular classroom environment, I also came to other questions that, I felt, demanded further research. For instance, as Chinese students are mostly exam-driven (Liu, 2009; Jiao, 2014; Zhou, 2006), would they be willing to spend time in cooperative learning activities instead of learning language points from the teacher and taking notes? Moreover, although enough opportunities are provided in cooperative learning for students to practice speaking English, does the quality of the spoken English in an ESL context limit the grammatical or lexical proficiency of the students who are, according to the principles of cooperative learning, often learning from each other? This last question requires a point of clarification: although cooperative learning ensures that students have more opportunity to practice speaking with others, the experience of doing so is not the same as, and therefore does not ensure, that these students learn from others. Thus, my concern about the effectiveness of cooperative learning in the Chinese university ESL classroom was twofold, specifically when considering the superior English competence of the teacher compared to the English levels of students: first, would students necessarily learn more by speaking more, and, secondly, would students' quality of learning be impeded by the relatively low levels of English of their peer-to-peer interlocutors? In addition, would the large classes of the Chinese colleges hinder the teacher's ability to effectively supervise the students? These questions made me doubt that a cooperative learning approach could be successfully implemented in Chinese college English

classrooms even though I saw a lot of promising aspects of cooperative learning for solving several problems presented by a more traditional teaching method.

Both my second language teaching and learning experience impelled me to explore the answers behind the question, “Is cooperative learning effective in improving non-English students’ oral English skills in Chinese universities?”

Research Background

Relevance of cooperative learning to education studies, particularly in its application to Chinese ESL college classrooms. Here, I clarify the reasons that I have chosen cooperative learning, not collaborative learning or communities of practice, even if cooperative learning seems a bit “old” in this moment. It is important to acknowledge that the long history of cooperative learning may raise questions about the present project’s endorsement of such a method when more contemporary models have been developed. Cooperative learning arose in the 1970s in the USA and gradually developed into a kind of learning strategy for classroom teaching in the mid 1980s, after which cooperative learning eventually came to be widely applied in the classroom teaching in more than 50 countries (Liu, 2009). However, despite its extensive application, as well as the considerable research on this method in Western countries, research on cooperative learning in China has been a much later development, and so my own interest is part of an ongoing evaluation of this method’s efficacy in China, especially in the country’s ESL college classrooms. Moreover, although much of the recent findings and reports on cooperative learning in the context of learning ESL in the Chinese college classroom attest to the method’s effectiveness, I am interested in whether cooperative learning has merit as an effective method for teaching oral skills in this learning environment, especially when there is still considerable resistance in China to adopting teaching methods that do not follow a teacher-centered model.

In China, group activities began to be conducted in class teaching at the beginning of the 1990s (Nan, 2014). The concept of cooperative learning was first introduced to China by the scholar Wang Tan in 2002 and, in 2004, by scholar Tao Weihong, who carefully explained cooperative learning principles in Chinese college English teaching. In the years following their introduction of the method, cooperative learning has been increasingly used in Chinese college English teaching. Since 2004, many Chinese college English teachers have adopted cooperative learning in the teaching of college English courses; according to these ESL teachers' personal reports through data analysis and interviews, compared with reports on the effectiveness of traditional teacher-lectured class, students who were in cooperative learning classes were more engaged in class discussions and peer reviews, received better scores and have had more opportunities to speak English (e.g. Li, 2007; Mu, 2007; Wang, 2013).

Why I focus on cooperative learning. I have chosen to focus on the study of Chinese college students. In the introduction of my thesis, I note some particularities concerning the background of learning to speak English in the Chinese college ESL learning context. According to the literature, after years of a direct teacher-centered approach, especially when speaking is not a component of the Chinese College English test (CET), some students, particularly low-achievers, are afraid to speak English or show no willingness to do so. I believe that the foundation of the improvement of oral test scores, oral production as well as the quality of spoken English is providing students with an increased opportunity to practice.

One important point of cooperative learning in ESL education is that learners at different levels communicate and cooperate with each other in the process of completing the task; learners conduct information exchanges and achieve common progress through joint efforts in the cooperative learning mode.

Cooperative learning facilitates students' individual development by providing time to practice spoken English in the group through several basic activities and forms of social exchange, including asking or offering help to other students, as well as fulfilling specific roles that are assigned to different members within the group. Based on the elements of "positive interdependence" and "individual accountability," the success of the group depends on each student's fulfillment of a special role, an individual responsibility that is ensured by disallowing others to take over their peers' responsibilities, even when doing so would help others finish their tasks. In this way, even if some low-achievers or more reticent students may not be willing to speak in the group, in order to achieve the success of the group and accomplish their individual tasks, they are encouraged to participate orally by asking for help from other group members. Even if some high-achievers may want to take the responsibility of others in order to help their peers accomplish their tasks, they have to provide assistance by giving guidance and encouragement instead of doing the tasks on others' behalf.

In light of this distributed structure of social participation, I believe that the cooperative learning approach may be a means for students to practice their oral English, whether they are high achievers and low achievers.

Why I choose not to focus on collaborative learning or communities of practice.

Compared with collaborative learning and communities of practice, I think cooperative learning is especially suited to promoting the development of Chinese university students' oral skills.

Although both cooperative learning and collaborative learning requires that students work in groups and deal with a designed task by interacting with each other, cooperative learning balances each learner's opportunity for language output through interactions. Cooperative learning is a structured and planned approach compared with collaborative learning, because

each student in cooperative learning has a defined role to play and students' activities are highly structured by the teacher (Matthews, Cooper, Davidson & Hawkes, 1995). Teachers offer guidance and assistance if necessary by observing each group's performance during students' cooperative learning activities; at the end of cooperative learning, both the teacher and students provide evaluations of the performance. In collaborative learning, however, students organize the activities by themselves and may not be required to finish their group tasks by the end of class; instead, students may have more time to work on their tasks in the future (Matthews, Cooper, Davidson & Hawkes, 1995). Moreover, there is no rule that ensures equal opportunities of participation of group members in collaborative learning, such that it is very likely that students of a relatively high-level English proficiency would take the responsibility of other group members and dominate activities. Even if students in collaborative learning groups can accomplish a designed task through group work, some group members, especially low-achievers and those who are very shy speakers, may not have the opportunity to practice speaking, which may not help with the improvement of oral English skills.

In addition, teachers' degree of involvement in students' activities are different in cooperative learning and collaborative learning (Matthews, Cooper, Davidson & Hawkes, 1995). In cooperative learning, teachers observe students' performance and give timely assistance to students' language use and their cooperative skills if necessary, creating a more direct opportunity for students to learn from teachers' instructions and the chance to reflect on what they have done well or not; this feature of the cooperative learning approach is intended to foster students' appreciation of how to conduct activities in the future; I also believe that teachers' timely instruction in cooperative learning makes it easier for students who have been taught under traditional teaching approach for years to grow accustomed to this new approach because

teachers in cooperative learning also guide students' learning. This high level of the teacher's involvement is akin to the teacher-directed nature of the traditional teaching approach, and may therefore offer a comparatively easier transition for Chinese students who are accustomed to the traditional method of teacher-centered instruction than would the relatively more independent approach of collaborative learning. In collaborative learning, teachers do not actively participate in students' activities, as they believe that students have the capability to solve the problems by themselves. Teachers in collaborative learning also maintain that students have the cooperative skills that may help with their group studies. In light of these features of collaborative learning that are premised on the students' independent learning, I contend that after years of learning under teacher-centered approach, Chinese students may not be prepared to switch entirely to resorting to their peers when dealing with learning problems, without the direct intervention of their teachers.

Although cooperative learning and communities of practice may share several similarities when group members are working together, I believe that communities of practice may not be suitable for Chinese non-English major university students in improving their oral English skills. Communities of practice require that group members be practitioners and that the group usually has a shared interest or domain (Wenger & Wenger, 2015), which requires that group members be experts in the task that the group is going to discuss. I think communities of practice can serve as a higher level of cooperative learning, as it demands that group members possess specialized knowledge. I suggest that when students can speak English fluently and are willing to communicate in English, communities of practice may be adopted when students are able to discuss some topic of their shared interest within groups.

Although teachers may sometimes divide students of the same interest into a cooperative learning group when discussing a topic in order to encourage everyone to say something in English, proponents of cooperative learning recognize that students employing this method may be working at different levels of oral English proficiency and that most of them are at or under an intermediate level. However, the likely discrepancy in levels of competency is not inconsistent with the aims of cooperative learning, which is to encourage students to speak more by giving more time and opportunities, such that the emphasis is not so much on the quality of exchange as the quantity, or increased level of participation.

As most Chinese non-English major university students are not good at spoken English, according to empirical studies, a majority of Chinese university students are at an intermediate or below intermediate English speaking level (e.g. Li, 2007; Luo, 2012; Ren, 2013; Zhou, 2006). Some students may lack a strong motivation to learn oral English and may show a lower willingness to speak English; such lower-level speakers may make high levels of insight and participation difficult for all participants during group communication. In this situation of imbalanced levels of competence, it is very likely that communities of practice would create a vicious circle when some less capable speakers of English find it hard to speak, they would not gain confidence in oral English learning.

The need for research on the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a teaching method is ongoing, especially as this method is increasingly used in different teaching contexts that should be evaluated as unique learning environments with distinctive objectives and challenges. Nowadays, cooperative learning has been implemented in several school contexts all around the world (Nan, 2014; Ning, 2010; Pattanpichet, 2011) and is increasingly attracting attention in the field of second language education (Ning, 2010; Wang & Zhang, 2011). Within Chinese

educational studies, research on cooperative learning began in the early 1990s; since that time, some elementary and middle school instructors have tried to incorporate cooperative learning into their classroom teaching (Nan, 2014). According to these instructors' personal reports, which combine data analysis and interviews, students in traditional teacher-lectured classes, when compared with students in cooperative learning classes, were more engaged in class discussions and peer review and received better scores while participating in everyday communication (Li, 2007; Mu, 2007; Wang, 2013).

Research on the impact of implementing cooperative learning in the Chinese ESL college classroom is also important for determining whether the results of this method are more (or less) consistent with the country's updated goals of ESL education. Since the establishment of the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) in 2004, the objective of college English teaching has been "to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that they can communicate effectively in future studies and careers as well as social interactions, thereby meeting the needs of China's social development and international exchanges" (CECR, para. 5); since then, several Chinese college English teachers have begun to reflect on problems in the traditional teacher-centered approach and have subsequently turned their attention to the cooperative learning approach (Han, 2006; Liu, 2009; Ren, 2013; Yin, 2009).

Several English teachers have noted that the traditional teaching approach does not help with students' oral English skills improvement because this form of instruction places little emphasis on using English in real moments of social exchange. Under a more traditional teaching approach in China, English teachers tend to lecture about language points, asking students to memorize vocabulary, grammatical rules, and to do several English and Chinese

translations (Wang, 2007); this approach is easy to conduct as well as useful for controlling students in large-size classes taught within limited class time (Xuan, 2015). However, under a traditional teaching approach, students hardly have opportunities to use what they've learned to communicate with the teacher and their peers; most students may not have the slightest inkling of how to use proper expressions in certain communicative situations (Han, 2006). Of course, whether the situation calls for writing or speaking, the unique applicability of expressions in particular social contexts reflects a potential gap between language use within and beyond the classrooms. The purpose, however, of highlighting the limited opportunity to practice a range of expressions that are often cued by social contexts that arise outside the classroom is not to suggest that this problem is unique to speaking. Rather, the intention is to indicate that the narrow range of likely social exchanges with a teacher suggests why the traditional teaching method does not enable students to improve oral competence in a way that is suited to socially diverse communication.

Finally, despite the theoretical viability of improving students' ESL acquisition through the implementation of cooperative learning in the college classroom, further research on the subject is essential for determining how to overcome learning impediments that are particular to the Chinese undergraduate classroom. For example, in light of the generally limited competency of Chinese college students' spoken English (Han, 2006; Huang, 2012; Nie, 2010), several teachers have claimed that cooperative learning could be an effective method in solving the problem of students who lack opportunities to communicate (e.g. Gao, 2011; Han, 2006; Huang, 2012; Ma, 2006; Nie, 2010).

Although much of the literature on cooperative learning indicates that by distributing the opportunity to practice oral communication, cooperative learning seems to promise a much

broader range of success in facilitating students' acquisition of spoken English, my own research on the method's effectiveness also considers the potential limitations of cooperative learning within the college ESL classroom, as well as what may be the root cause of these limitations. Analyzing these teaching experiments, we may notice that not every student benefits from cooperative learning approach in improving oral skills. There are several reasons behind the particular cases and the possible explanations will be analyzed and discussed in the literature review that follows. In particular, one important question that deserves our attention is the following: Since cooperative learning originated from Western countries, could this method be effectively implemented in Chinese college English class, since China has very different cultural and educational systems compared to Western countries? I would discuss this question in depth in the implication part of my project, based on the results I reviewed from the empirical studies and make a connection to Chinese sociocultural background.

Research Questions

The general research question of this project is: "Is cooperative learning approach effective in improving non-English students' oral English skills in Chinese universities?" There are three sub-questions that guided my reviewing of empirical studies under the general question:

1. Does cooperative learning improve students' oral test scores?
2. When using cooperative learning, do students speak English more often than when learning under the traditional approach for practising oral English?
3. Does cooperative learning help improve the development of students' quality of spoken English?

Research Path

The literature on which the present project is based focuses on the application of cooperative learning, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research. In reviewing the literature, I used several online search engines and the UVic library website, including UVic library, Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). As I only focussed on oral English instruction in China, I used the keywords as “cooperative learning,” “non-English major,” “oral skills,” “speaking,” and “Chinese university” to search for pertinent literature. I received 52 published articles based on all the keywords I used. After skimming through all the literature, I grouped the studies into three aspects (oral test score, oral production, quality of spoken English) based on how the studies conducted experiments in different Chinese universities.

By carefully reading these empirical studies under each aspect, I found that most of the articles have been conducted to explore the effect of cooperative learning on students' oral skills tend to separate these three aspects (oral tests scores, oral production and the quality of spoken English) from one another. As I consider all these aspects important for determining the effectiveness of cooperative learning on students' oral English practice, I cross-analyzed these aspects in an effort to identify correlations between them. In the implication part of this project, based on my findings in the literature review, I discuss the constraints and possibilities of implementing cooperative learning in Chinese college English class within a Chinese sociocultural background. I then provide suggestions for adopting cooperative learning practice for Chinese college English teachers as well as school academic administrators.

In terms of the process by which I selected the studies that constituted my literature review, I restricted my review to empirical studies that focus on cooperative learning practices in Chinese university settings for non-English major students. My reasons for such a relatively

narrow focus is to increase the relevance of the review to the culturally and educationally specific context of the Chinese ESL college classroom. I also limited myself to articles published after 2000, which may better reflect current the situation of Chinese cooperative learning practice. The authors of the articles are mostly teacher-researchers. In order to explore if the cooperative learning approach is more effective in helping with the improvement of students' oral English skills, they conducted the cooperative learning approach while teaching their own English classes and compared the results of cooperative learning with classes taught with the traditional teaching approach by another lecturer. As the empirical studies were conducted in classes of different oral English levels in different regions in China (e.g. developed areas and undeveloped, some regions placed greater emphasis on oral English learning), I sought to review a diverse range of studies that reflected that potential variety of results that may be affected by regional environmental differences within China.

After a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of cooperative learning in Chinese college English class, based on reviewing the studies focusing on the effect of cooperative learning on students' oral test scores, English oral production and quality of spoken English, this project will then present discussions and suggestions for implementing cooperative learning in the cultural context of China.

Definition of Terms

Cooperative learning. In ESL education cooperative learning, collaborative learning and communities of practice are three methods that use small group learning and collective efforts, which overturns the traditional teaching methods that values individual achievement. When two or more students are learning together in a group, teachers may feel confused about which specific method they are using. The confusion about the differences among cooperative learning,

collaborative learning and communities of practice may lead to improper application in second language learning and teaching practices. Before providing a definition of cooperative learning, I would like to differentiate cooperative learning, collaborative learning and communities of practice.

Cooperative learning is a teaching technique that brings students of different levels into small groups to work together towards a common goal (Slavin, 1995). Although students of different learning levels work on an assigned task together, each of them has an equal responsibility for the group's work (Strickland, Morrow & Pelovitz, 1991). Cooperative learning groups delegate subtasks for each and student and each student has his/her role in the group work. Similar to cooperative learning, communities of practice are also a group of people who are working towards the same task and fulfilling each other's roles by interacting with each other (Wenger & Wenger, 2015). Understanding from the characteristic of "the domain" of communities of practice, I believe that communities of practice requires higher levels of knowledge than the cooperative learning approach: A community of practice requires that there should be a shared interest or domain among the people who are working in the same group; people within a community of practice group are practitioners (Wenger & Wenger, 2015). In both cooperative learning groups and communities of practice members are encouraged to ask for help and offer help within the group. In the above two groups, every member has equivalent responsibility and accountable for the group task. In both cooperative learning and collaborative learning, groups members work on a common task and strive as a community as they depend on each other; in cooperative learning groups, students' activities are structured by the teacher and each student has a certain role to accomplish and equal responsibility within the group; however in collaborative learning groups, students organize the activities by themselves as the teacher

ensures that students have the capability in both knowledge and cooperative skills to work together (Matthews, Cooper, Davidson & Hawkes, 1995). It is very likely that in collaborative learning groups, the strongest member or someone who finished his or her task faster may take the responsibility to finish the task for the laggards.

This project focuses on cooperative learning in the ESL/EAL speaking learning field, adopting the definition according to which cooperative learning in ESL is the “systematic and carefully planned use of group-based procedures in teaching as an alternative to teacher-fronted teaching” (Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 196).

College English. College English is a compulsory course in Chinese universities for all non-English major students, which typically spans from one to two years. There are usually over 50 students in college English class (Liu, 2009). According to the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) issued by the Federal government of China (CECR, 2004), teaching of listening and speaking has been highlighted. The purpose of the Chinese College English course is “to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that they can communicate effectively in future studies and careers as well as social interactions, thereby meeting the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges” (CERA, para. 5, 2004). The importance of listening and speaking is also emphasized in the college English course design: “in designing college English course, requirements of competence in listening and speaking should be fully considered” (CERA, para. 19).

Traditional teaching method. In this study, the “traditional teaching method” refers to a teacher-centered teaching. This method dominates China’s English language teaching. Under this approach, a teacher primarily focuses on vocabulary, terms and sentence structures, as well as

grammatical rules, delivering material through lectures rather than the facilitation of communication among students (Bin, 2009; Liang, 2002).

Oral skills. Most papers use the term “communicative competence” to describe students’ oral and written skills in language learning. In this study, “oral skills” means the skills required to use spoken English effectively and appropriately in social situations. This project focuses on students’ oral competency mainly on three aspects: students’ oral test scores, oral production and quality of spoken English.

The Effect of Cooperative Learning on Aspects of ESL/EAL College Students' Oral Skills

Introduction

Most of the articles considered in this review test the effectiveness of cooperative learning for improving oral skills by comparing students' oral pre-test and post-test scores (Duan, 2010; Han, 2006; Li, 2007; Li, 2015; Luo, 2012; Liang, 2002; Mu, 2007; Qiu, 2014; Sun, 2009; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2013; Xi, 2013; Yin, 2009; Zhou, 2006). The change of students' oral test scores enables comparative, quantitative measurement. Besides making a comparison of oral test scores, some articles focus on the impact of cooperative learning on student's level of oral English production in the class (Gu, 2012; Jian, 2011; Liang, 2002; Nie, 2010; Ning, 2011; Yin, 2009; Yuan, 2003). Students' oral English production has mostly been judged through teachers' class observation, students' answers of questionnaires after receiving cooperative learning instruction and interviews. Only a few articles focus on the effect of cooperative learning on the quality of spoken English, namely using of practical expressions (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Gao, 2011; Li, 2007; Li, 2015; Luo, 2012; Wang, 2013) and pronunciation competence (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Lin, 2009). Analyzing the quality of English use may show whether students are speaking native, fluent and accurate English after cooperative learning; furthermore, an analysis of students' spoken English may also present grounds for projecting the applicability of what students practice in cooperative learning groups to real-world communication.

Of the studies that examine cooperative learning's effects in the Chinese college English classroom, one feature is that these studies tend to separate these three aspects (oral tests scores, opportunities to speak English and the quality of spoken English) of cooperative learning from

one another. As I consider all these factors important for determining the effectiveness of cooperative learning on students' oral English practice, I cross-analyzed them in an effort to identify correlations between these factors. It should be noted here that most of the empirical studies I focused on in my literature review are first-research studies by master's degree students in China. As these Chinese master's theses are supervised by the students' university committee, the studies are reliable and fairly done. In addition, I tend to focus on these master's theses mainly because these studies consist of experiments conducted in the student-researchers' own English classes. Most of the theses' authors have, as part of their undergraduate preparation, majored in teaching English as a second language, while some of the students have been working as ESL teachers for years. Moreover, as part of their qualification for the master's program, all students are required to have an internship experience in teaching English in Chinese universities to non-English major students for at least one year. The teacher-researchers' ESL teaching experience provided my study with first-hand teaching experience that is both reliable and significant. However, based on what I've read, in the experiments that compared students' oral test scores before and after cooperative learning, most of the empirical studies didn't use the independent samples *t* test properly because of the researchers' general lack of expertise in statistics; moreover, none of these empirical studies have been subject to the type of peer review that exists in academic journal publication.

Based on the empirical studies I reviewed, this project has set up three criteria to judge the effectiveness of cooperative learning on non-English major students' oral skills in Chinese universities: (a) the effect of cooperative learning on students' oral test scores; (b) oral English production in the class; and (c) the quality of students' spoken English after receiving

cooperative learning instruction for one semester. These three criteria also constitute the three dimensions of the review that follows below.

Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students' Oral Test Scores

Introduction. There are two reasons that support my study of research on the impact of cooperative learning on students' English oral test scores. The first is that a consideration of oral test scores aligns my research with one of the primary concerns of Chinese college students, which is their academic performance. Although educators may have a variety of motivations to investigate cooperative learning's efficacy as a teaching method, students in China's grade-obsessed academic culture are likely to be most concerned with the contribution that cooperative learning can make towards improving their test scores. The second reason for examining cooperative learning's effect on test scores is that the tests that are used to evaluate students' oral performance are themselves based on criteria of assessment that make these tests a helpful and meaningful form of measurement of cooperative learning's impact. In other words, the tests themselves are a valid form of measurement that facilitates comparative research on different teaching methods.

This section of the review is guided by the research question: Does cooperative learning improve students' oral test scores? Based on the published research, researchers usually conducted their experiments designed to address this question by dividing students into an experimental class (exposed to cooperative learning approach) and a control class (exposed to a traditional teacher-centered approach); each group was given the same oral pre-test and a post-test at the beginning and at the end of the term (Duan, 2010; Han, 2006; Li, 2007; Li, 2015; Luo, 2012; Liang, 2002; Mu, 2007; Qiu, 2014; Sun, 2009; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2013; Xi, 2013; Yin, 2009; Zhou, 2006).

Most experiments adopt the oral tests of the Public English Test System Three (PETS Three) and refer to the criteria of evaluation and scoring in PETS to mark students, because PETS Three is regarded as equivalent to the oral English level of non-English major students after a year of English learning (Xi, 2013; Han, 2006; Li, 2007); as Xi, (2013) notes, “PETS is the national English proficiency test system designed by the Chinese National Education Examinations Authority which has established the English test system with five different levels of proficiency to meet the requirements of different standards” (p. 16). There are also studies that have adopted the oral tests of College English Test Band Four (CET Four) as their oral pre-test and post-test; while some researchers rely on a particular school’s original tests designed to measure spoken English (Qiu, 2014; Sun, 2009; Wang, 2009). In the following two subsections, I make comparisons of (a) the oral pre-test and post-test scores of students in classes that adopted a cooperative learning approach and (b) the oral test scores between students in experimental classes (cooperative learning approach) and control class (traditional approach). To answer my research question, I conducted my review of this literature in two parts; firstly, I asked, “Are there any differences between students’ oral pre-test scores and post-test scores in the cooperative learning classes?” Secondly, I asked, “Are there any differences on the oral post-test scores between students’ in the cooperative learning classes and non-cooperative learning classes?”

Comparison of the oral pre-test and post-test scores of students in classes that adopted a cooperative learning approach. By comparing the oral pre-test and post-test mean scores within the experimental class, all studies found that the average score of the oral test improved significantly after completing a cooperative learning class. Although there was some variation in the tests employed by these studies to evaluate students’ oral performance, reported

score summaries in the research demonstrate that students' scores invariably improved in the post-test. However, despite the general trend of improved test scores after a period of cooperative learning instruction, students' individual post-test scores also varied according to the test, and in some cases did not show any improvement. These studies are summarized below. In the following three subsections, I conclude from the empirical studies as (a) general improvement of oral test scores after cooperative learning; (b) inconsistent improvements within cooperative learning class; and (c) inconsistent progress under different speaking categories.

General improvement of oral test scores after cooperative learning. In her study of 51 students majoring in Tourism Management at Qiqihar Forestry Technical School, Xi (2013) adopted a paired samples *t* test to compare students' pre-test and post-test scores.¹ Xi found that students' oral test scores improved greatly after cooperative learning on average, with the class scoring a mean of 2.94 on the pre-test and 3.63 following one semester of ESL using the cooperative learning method ($t(50) = 6.034$, $\text{sig} = 0.000$). As the sig value Xi reported is 0.000, which means that there is highly significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. Since this sig value is much smaller than the sig value one usually gets (in the 0.05 range), the author should probably double check to see if the measurements and the recorded data in the experiment are correct. Even still, we similar studies revealed similar results. By comparing the mean score of 60 students in the experimental class at Sui Hua College, Sun (2009) found similar results to Xi's (2013), as Sun's students' oral scores improved significantly after a term of cooperative learning approach, with students achieving mean scores on their pre-test and post-test of, respectively, 16.0500 and 18.0167. Unlike Xi (2013), who designed the oral tests based on the criteria of PETS, Sun (2009) designed the oral tests by herself and the class's previous teacher based on the criteria of the College English Test Band Four (CET Four) spoken English

test. Qiu (2014) and Wang's (2009) experiments also found similar results. Both Qiu's (2014) comparison of 28 freshmen's oral scores before and after cooperative learning at Henan Zhoukou Vocational and Technical College and Wang's (2009) experiment on 30 students majoring in Computer Science in the Academy of Armed Forces Engineering (AAFE) noted score improvements after a semester of cooperative learning. Unlike Xi (2013) and Sun's (2009) testing instruments, both Qiu (2014) and Wang's (2009) experiments are part of the comprehensive tests of language proficiency instead of independent oral tests.

Inconsistent improvements within cooperative learning class. Despite an overall trend towards improved oral English scores on post-test evaluations following a period of cooperative learning instruction, the above studies show that students' improvements are not consistent. For example, only a few students made outstanding achievements. There is also a small number of students who even did worse on oral tests after cooperative learning, which is not as encouraging as the mean score of the post-tests suggest. For instance, in Xi's (2013) report chart of 51 students, the oral test scores of 22 students stay the same on both pre-test and post-test. Only 26 students made some progress in their post-test. Among the 26 students, 19 students made slight progress as they received one point higher than on their pre-tests; seven students received over two points higher than the pre-tests, which is considered more obvious progress according to Xi. However, it should be noted that there is one student who received an even lower score on the post-test. Similarly, among 60 students in Sun's (2009) experiment, the scores of six students remained unchanged in both oral tests and forty students only made improvements less than five. In contrast, six of Sun's students received much higher marks (more than five points) and eight students even received lower marks (less than five points) after a period of cooperative instruction in English. Both Xi and Sun's tests showed a significant improvement in overall oral

test scores after cooperative learning for the entire class despite the fact that students' improvement was inconsistent.

Inconsistent progress under different speaking categories. Besides the inconsistent improvement of scores within the class, the above studies did not provide any information of the comparison of students' score improvement according to each particular skill or competence that the test evaluates, both prior to and following the students' duration of cooperative learning. According to the requirement of PETS, students' performance should be scored using four categories, namely, vocabulary and grammar, the usage of discourse, pronunciation and intonation, communication and interaction. Han (2006) explains how the tests work: "each category has ten points, which is divided into two parts. So, each sub-category has five points. Three points means the medium level. Four to five points can be defined as good. One to two points refers to the "low level" (p. 53). By providing clear report charts of each student's achievement, Han (2006) and Li (2007) pointed out that each student's progress varies according to each category of the tests based on the criteria of PETS. Because these two experiments chose the same criteria in scoring students while reaching different conclusions under each category, the significance of their results remains inconclusive.

Conflicting test results suggest that we must consider what these experiments found in common, rather than electing to choose one experiment's findings over another. According to this standard of seeking crossover results, these experiments offer some encouraging results about the value of the cooperative learning approach to teaching oral English. In both experiments, with the exception of one student, no student regressed after cooperative learning under each category. According to the data in Han's (2006) experiment, students did best under the category of "communication and interaction" and "the usage of discourse." For instance,

under the category of “communication and interaction” among 32 students, except for five students who maintained their performance in parts of “logicality” and “consistency,” the rest of the students all made progress of around three points after cooperative learning. Li (2007) shares Han’s (2006) finding on students’ progress under the same categories. Compared with Han (2006), Li’s (2007) research produced a more exciting finding, as 24 participants in her study all made some progress after cooperative learning under these two categories (“the usage of discourse” and “communication and interaction”).

Table 1

24 students’ average scores before and after cooperative learning in Li’s (2007) experiment

Category	Sub-category	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean
The Usage of the Discourse	Logicality	1.57	3.00
	Consistency	1.57	3.17
Communication and Interaction	Introduction	1.83	3.35
	Process	1.65	3.22

See from the above table, we may notice that in Li’s (2007) experiment, students’ average score under these two categories increased greatly after cooperative learning (under, “The usage of the discourse” students’ mean scores are respectively 1.57 and 3 in “logicality” part, as well as 1.57 and 3.17 in the “consistency” part; under, “communication and Interaction” students’ mean score are respectively 1.83 and 3.35 in the “introduction” part, as well as 1.65 and 3.22 in the “process” part). Individual students in Li’s (2007) experiment also made outstanding progress (16 out of 24 students received more two points or more under, “The usage of discourse” and 18 students received two points or more under, “communication and interaction”). Under the categories of “vocabulary and grammar” and “pronunciation and

intonation,” the data in Li’s (2007) experiment showed that all students made slight progress after cooperative learning if not as significantly under the other two categories (“the usage of discourse” and “communication and interaction”). Even more discouraging was the data in Han’s (2006) experiment. Under the category of “vocabulary and grammar,” 12 out of 32 students maintained their performance after cooperative learning; even worse, nearly half of the students made no progress after cooperative learning. I was surprised by Han’s finding that half of the students did not improve in vocabulary, as students should have used a variety of vocabulary in group communication and students should also learned some new vocabulary from each other through interaction. However, I think the major explanation for this phenomenon could be that the goal of students’ group work in cooperative learning was not to improve vocabulary but to use the vocabulary they already knew.

Both Li (2007) and Han’s (2006) experiments showed students’ inconsistent improvement under each category: some students progressed rapidly, but a few of them only made little progress or maintained their performance. Li (2007) and Han’s (2006) studies suggest that a cooperative learning approach is effective with improving students’ interactive communication and discourse management skills, perhaps because students in cooperative learning class may get opportunities to practice how to convey information and express their ideas as well as give proper response by communicating with classmates and the teacher. On the contrary, students performed worse in grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation; the improvement of these elements depends largely on the long-term accumulation and one term’s cooperative learning practice may not be enough for students to make noteworthy progress.

Comparison of the oral test scores between students in experimental classes (cooperative learning approach) and control classes (traditional approach). Students in both

experimental classes (taught with the cooperative learning approach) and control classes (taught with traditional approach, which consists mainly of a teacher lecturing) took the same oral post-test after studying for one term. Most studies comparing classes reached the conclusion that cooperative learning is more effective on students' average oral test score improvement than the traditional approach, a finding that is based on the direct comparison of post-test scores between the experiment class and control class, when there is no significant difference in pre-test scores between the two classes (Luo, 2012; Mu, 2007; Wang, 2009; Yin, 2009; Zhou, 2006). As a component of their statistical analysis, researchers used an interdependent samples *t* test to help to determine whether the two classes have any differences with regard the oral pre-test and post-test (Luo, 2012; Mu, 2007; Wang, 2009; Yin, 2009; Zhou, 2006).² In the three subsections that follow, including (a) cooperative learning classes' superior post-test oral performance; (b) inconsistent progress among individual students; and (c) varying levels of progress in different oral aspects, I examine the oral test scores between students in experimental classes and control classes.

Cooperative learning classes' superior post-test oral performance. By comparing students' progress in oral tests in an experimental class and a control class major in computer science at Academy of Armored Forces Engineering (AAFE), Wang (2009) found that the achievement of 30 students in the experimental class exceeded 30 students in the control class, as the below table shows.

Table 2

Comparison of classes' average scores in oral pre-test and post-test in Wang's (2009) experiment

Test	Class	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-test	Control	12.57	0.021	58	0.983

	Experimental	12.63			
Post-test	Control	13.57	3.532	58	0.00082
	Experimental	16.20			

The mean scores of the experimental class and control class were 16.20 and 13.57 respectively in the post-test, $p = 0.00082$. The p value is extremely small in Wang's (2009) experiment, indicating that if the experiment was conducted properly, the differences between the two classes are highly significant, and the use of the cooperative learning approach in the experimental class may attribute to students' improvement in their oral English score. Moreover, in their answers to the question, "Did cooperative learning help with your oral test score improvement?" students in the experimental class further supported Wang's (2009) finding for oral test scores. Over 70% (15% said "strongly agree" and 55.3% said "agree") of the 60 students had the impression that cooperative learning helped with their oral test score improvement.

Yin (2009) also found that the experiment class did much better than the control class by comparing the mean oral post-test score of 44 students in the experiment class to 44 in the control class at Shandong University of Technology (SDUT), as the below table shows.

Table 3

Comparison of classes' average scores in oral pre-test and post-test in Yin's (2009) experiment

Test	Class	Mean	t	df	p
Pre-test	Control	9.14	0.479	86	0.6332
	Experimental	9.00			
Post-test	Control	9.82	4.673	86	0.000011
	Experimental	11.27			

At the end of the term, the mean score of the experimental class was 11.27 points, and that of the control class was 9.82 points. With $t(86) = 4.673$ and $p = 0.000011$, indicating a significant difference between these two classes. Given that the p value is extremely small in Yin's (2009) experiment, if her experiment was conducted properly, then there is great difference between the two classes, showing that cooperative learning has the potential for helping with the students' oral test score improvement. As there was no great difference between these two classes' pre-tests (9.00 points for the experimental class and 9.14 points for the control class; With $t(86) = 0.479$ and $p = 0.6332$, Yin (2009) was able to directly compare the post-test mean score. Yin (2009) concluded that students' improvements after cooperative learning was the result of students' having more opportunities to practice speaking in cooperative learning environment. Similarly, Mu's (2007) study on 60 freshmen at Zhejiang Normal University, Li's (2015) study on 82 students at Bowen College of Management, Guilin University of Technology and Zhou's (2006) study on 68 students at Wuhan University of Technology all found that students in the experimental class received higher post-test scores on average than those in the control class. Moreover, these three studies share Yin's (2009) explanation that the reason for higher scores in the experimental class is most likely due to students' increased opportunity to practice speaking English, since in cooperative learning the students are actively involved in typical forms of social communication that constitute the everyday engagements of recreational (chatting with someone at the gym), professional (greeting a colleague or customer at work) or consumerist (ordering food at a restaurant) routine. While Wang (2009) and Yin's (2009) studies have different class sizes (the latter is 50% larger compared with the former), the experimental class in both studies have around 25% increase in the mean scores compared with pre-test scores. Both studies exhibit the same pattern that control and experimental classes show no significant

difference in pre-test, but significant difference in post-test. Mu (2007), Li (2015), Zhou (2009)'s studies also exhibit the same pattern.

Inconsistent progress among individual students. The data of all the above experiments proved that students in experimental classes received higher oral scores on average than that of the control class, which may indicate that cooperative learning is more effective in improving students' oral skills than the traditional teaching approach in general; however, none of these studies discussed the progress of individual students in each class. I suspect that there may be some students in the control class who received higher marks than those in the experimental class, a comparatively superior performance that may be the result of the traditional class's structure, whereby the teacher offers students a greater amount of direct instruction, which, may be more beneficial for students who excel at learning from rote. Careful observation of the score report of the control class shows that some studies point out that students in the control class have also made progress in scores after one term of English practice under the traditional teaching approach. Xi (2013) and Luo's (2012) studies showed that some students in the control class even made more obvious progress in scores than students in the experimental class. Moreover, Duan (2010), Liang (2002) and Wang's (2013) studies pointed out that students made varied progress under different categories of the oral tests.

Based on the reported data in Xi's (2013) experiment, we may notice that there is a degree of difference between the oral English score of the control class between the oral pre-test and post-test. The students who did not experience the cooperative learning approach made some improvement on average, and the score of some students even dropped. Twenty-two students out of 49 students in the control class made progress in the post-test, which does not seem that discouraging when compared with the data in the report chart of the experimental class, which is

26 out of 51. However, students' progress is not as outstanding as those in the experimental class. Only two students in the control class achieved two points higher than their pre-test and the rest of the twenty students only achieved one point higher. Except for four students who were slightly lower in scores (only one point lower), the remaining 20 students just maintained their performance in the pre-test.

Table 4

Classes' average scores for pre-test and post-test in Luo's (2012) experiment

Test	Number of Subjects	Class	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-test	53	Control	4.301	2.685	0.008
		Experimental	5.170		
Post-test	56	Control	6.226	-10.895	0.0001
		Experimental	8.571		

Similar with Xi (2013), in conducting his experiment at Clinical College of Tianjin Medical University, Luo (2012) found that although the improvement of mean score of 53 students in the control class were not as obvious as that of 56 students in the experimental class (the mean score of the control class for pre-test and post-test were respectively 4.301 and 6.226; those of the experimental class were respectively 5.170 and 8.571); when analyzing the individual progress in the control class, we find that 42 out of 53 students were in the gap between six points and eight points in the post-test, which indicated "their potential to achieve the basic requirement in *College English Curriculum Requirements* in the freshmen year" (Luo, 2012, p. 52). Although students in the experimental class made progress in the post-test in general, the results in Luo's (2012) study showed that there were 22 out of 56 students who

nearly maintained their performance of the pre-test and hadn't exceeded over seven and a half points in the post-test, which was considered "unusual" because based on Luo's (2012) teaching experience, all students in the experimental class should score eight points in oral post-test.

Varying levels of progress in different oral aspects. Duan (2010), Li (2007), Liang (2002) and Wang (2013) all further proved that students in the experimental class and control class made varied progress in different sections of the oral tests, although their analysis were based on different judging criteria of English speaking.

Table 5

Classes' average scores post-test in Duan's (2010) experiment

Category	Sub-Category	Class	Post-test Mean
The Usage of the Discourse	Consistency	Control	2.21
		Experimental	2.78
Communication and Interaction	Process	Control	2.11
		Experimental	3.12

Note. As this study didn't include *t* values and *p* values for each category, the values are not reported in this table.

In Duan's (2010) experiment involving 35 students in the experimental class and 35 students in the control class major in International Trade at Hubei University of Science and Technology, students' average score by the four categories based on PETS varies. Duan (2010) found that students in the experimental class did much better in four categories than students in the control class, especially in the categories of, "the usage of the discourse" and "communication and interaction." The post-test mean score of the control class in "consistency" was 2.21 points and in experimental class it was 2.78; moreover, the mean score in "process" of "communication and interaction" are respectively 2.11 and 3.12. Similar to Duan (2010), Li

(2007) also found that the advancement in the aspects of “the usage of discourse” and “the communication and interaction” are more obvious than the categories of “vocabulary and grammar” and “pronunciation and intonation” based on her experiments on 160 students at Kunming University of Sciences and Technology (KUST). In Li's (2007) experiment, students' average points of post-test under the categories of “vocabulary and grammar” and “pronunciation and intonation” were only improved at one point approximately; however, under the categories of “the usage of discourse” and “communication and interaction”, students' average points were improved at one and a half points or more.

Different to Duan (2010) and Li (2007), Liang (2002) compared the oral test scores based on five items of grading criteria, which are: appropriateness, vocabulary, grammar, intelligibility and fluency. In the pre-test, the two classes only had obvious differences in grammar; the mean score of the experimental class was 13.66 and control class was 12.00. In the post-test, however, these two classes made significant improvement in five items of grading criteria except for fluency (using independent samples *t* test, there are significant differences in the four items, Liang only reported the first two decimal places of *p* values and all the *p* values are smaller than .01). Compared with students in the experimental class that made significant progresses in all of the five items in the post-test, the control class only made significant progress in terms of grammar and fluency.

By comparing the post-test scores of 144 students at Qingdao Agricultural University, under the criteria of script, pronunciation and performance, Wang (2013) found that although students in the experimental class received higher scores under the items of script and pronunciation, the two classes received very similar scores in performance, which is quite unexpected. Students' performance here was measured by the production of a script to be

performed in class. It is not surprising that students in the experimental class would have more opportunities to discuss how they would present their scripted conversation in the exam and have more time to practice based on the script they have created, since they have time under the cooperative learning approach to discuss more deeply of their conversation they should be expected to give a better performance based on what they prepared. Based on Wang's (2013) observation of students' performance in the oral test, she noted that, "students in CC [control class] seem very nervous and their performance are [display a] lack of cooperation" (p.32), thus these students did not earn a high score in performance. I think the only reason that the two classes had similar scores on performance is that the experimental class had a disorderly play. Since it's quite difficult for students to improve their pronunciation greatly only in one semester even if they are offered more opportunities to speak, it would be more reasonable to conclude that the experimental class and the control class have similar scores on pronunciation.

Conclusion. Most studies have reached two conclusions after comparisons: (a) students in the experimental class made more remarkable improvement in oral post-test scores than those in the control class on average; and (b) by and large, experimental class students received higher oral test scores after cooperative learning. However, when carefully observing the report chart for individuals and analyzing students' score achievements under different categories, we may find that not all students achieved equally in oral test scores after cooperative learning. Moreover, the oral scores indicated that students in the cooperative learning class perform better under the category of "discourse management" and "interactive communication," students seemed to not perform well under the category of "vocabulary and grammar" and "pronunciation and intonation." The reasons behind students' unbalanced oral test scores could be: first, students only practiced oral English under cooperative learning approach for one term and most students

were not familiar with cooperative learning approach before and this amount of time may not be enough for students to make great improvements in every aspect of speaking; second, the difficulty of the test may result in the instability of students' scores: experiments adopt different criteria in designing their oral tests; some experiments use the same questionnaires in both pre-tests and post-tests while some may increase the difficulty of the post- tests—although students with superior oral skills would probably perform better on post-tests of a higher level of difficulty, on average, tests designed with the same level of pre-test and post-test difficulty would likely yield higher post-test results than experiments whose post-tests are more challenging than their pre-tests. Third, although every empirical study provided students' background information (e.g. university and major), none of the studies talked about the relationship of students' background and their oral test scores. It is very likely that some students who have low oral proficiency before cooperative learning would hardly improve their scores greatly after only one term's study. Similarly, it would also be difficult to observe the improvement in scores for someone who could get a nearly full score before cooperative learning. Another factor that could limit the efficacy of cooperative learning would be students' basic dislike for this new approach to learning, a possibility that is given more consideration later on. It is noteworthy that because of the teacher researchers' general unfamiliarity with statistics, most of the empirical studies did not use independent samples *t* test properly in comparing students' oral pre-test and post-test scores. Moreover, it is hard to tell whether students' improvement after cooperative learning is the result of the effectiveness of the cooperative learning approach. None of the empirical studies consider other influential factors that may have contributed to students' score improvement; rather, these studies simply attributed students' oral post-test score improvement to the application of cooperative learning in classes. As discussed

above, some students expressed their dislike of cooperative learning but received higher scores after cooperative learning. It is very likely that some students' score improvement could be attributed to their strong work ethic or their learning under other approaches (e.g. traditional teaching approach) after class. In addition, most teacher researchers only adopted cooperative learning in their classes for one term; one term would be comparatively short for students to become familiar and accustomed to this new approach. It is possible that because of students' general unfamiliarity with cooperative learning, they may conduct their group activities in other ways rather than what cooperative learning requires. Moreover, as mentioned, it is difficult to measure the score improvement of the high achievers who were already capable of receiving full marks before cooperative learning. To summarize, besides the effectiveness of cooperative learning, all the above influential factors could also account for students' oral test score improvement and should be considered when comparing students' oral pre-test and post-test scores.

Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students' Oral Production

Introduction. Beyond establishing that, when compared to traditional teaching methods, cooperative learning is, on average, a more effective teaching method for improving students' spoken English, I examine in this section why cooperative learning yields superior results. Knowing what causes students to learn more effectively is essential for any comprehensive understanding of effective teaching methods. Based on the findings from the last section, many researchers have attributed students' improvement in oral test scores after cooperative learning to the increased opportunities that this teaching method provides for practicing English speaking. According to Swain (1993)'s Output Hypothesis, which states that "output or production may contribute to language acquisition" (Swain, cited in Lin, 2009, p. 24), oral English production

plays an indispensable role in effective oral English skills development. In this section, oral production refers to the quantity of students' spoken English.

To determine the effect of cooperative learning on the quantity of students' oral language production, this section of the review intends to consider the research question, "When using cooperative learning, do students speak English more often than when learning under the traditional approach for practising oral skills?" Through direct class observation and the interviewing of students, several researchers have found that after a term of cooperative learning instruction, students used more of the spoken foreign language on average (Jian, 2011; Mu, 2007; Nie, 2010; Yin, 2009; Yuan, 2003; Gu, 2012). In addition, by comparing students' answers to the same questionnaire about their speaking learning experience before and after cooperative learning, some studies noted that most students in the cooperative learning classroom seized opportunities to practice speaking in class after completing cooperative learning because of their experience in the cooperative learning classroom, which includes being assigned different roles within different groups. This experience seems to have encouraged these students to try practicing English beyond the classroom. Moreover, several studies on the experience of learning under the cooperative learning method have noted that students enjoy the relaxing and enjoyable English learning environment cooperative learning provides (Yuan, 2003; Gu, 2012) and the reduction of teachers' lecturing time (Li, 2013; Xuan, 2015).

Despite these advantages of the cooperative learning method, some studies have produced findings that indicate that cooperative learning is not effective in increasing oral language production for all students (Ma, 2006; Ren, 2003; Jiao, 2014; Zhang, 2010).

Cooperative learning seems to bring unequal opportunities for high achievers and low achievers (Zhang, 2010). Constraints such as shyness, anxiety and low motivation in English speaking may

contribute to why some students do not seize opportunities to practice speaking English (Ma, 2006; Ren, 2003; Jiao, 2014). In the three subsections that follow, I examine (a) general enhancement of students' oral English production after cooperative learning; (b) reasons for the enhancement of students' oral production with cooperative learning groups; and (c) unequal distribution of speaking opportunities among students.

General enhancement of students' oral English production after cooperative learning. Studies often have disappointing findings about students' experience of speaking practice in traditional classes (Jian, 2011; Nie, 2010; Yin, 2009). Among 68 students in Nie's (2010) experiment at Chengdu University of Technology (CDUT), only three students said they often volunteered to answer questions in class and 39 students claimed that they were not willing to answer any questions unless the teacher singled them out to do so. When the teacher raised a question, 26 students said they even hoped not to be called by the teacher. Similarly, in Yin's (2009) experiment studying 44 freshmen at Shandong University of technology (SDUT), only 19 students were found to have the initiative required to seize opportunities to answer questions in class. Moreover, when being asked about their participation in the teacher-student communication and student-student communication in class, only nine students said that they often communicated with their teachers while a mere seven students sometimes communicated with peers. Jian's (2011) survey on 61 freshmen at Shi Hezi University prior to taking a cooperative learning class found that more than half of the students were unwilling to take part in class activities; among them, ten students seldom interacted or expressed their opinions with others.

When asked about the reasons for students limited or passive participation in speaking practice, all of the three studies attribute students' low participation in speaking to three factors:

a lack of time in class devoted to social participation, students' anxiety, and low motivation in speaking. For instance, 44 out of 61 students in Jian's (2011) study suggests that they felt nervous and were afraid that they could not speak well when they had to answer questions in class; moreover, 53 students said they were not very interested in speaking English because, according to them, their purpose for learning English was merely to pass the exams. The same circumstances were also noted in Yin (2009) and Nie's (2010) studies, as the teachers of either group of students engaged in a traditional teaching approach where most students sat silently listening to the teacher and rarely initiated interactions in English with the teacher or other classmates.

In contrast, after cooperative learning, all of the above studies found that on average, when students gained more opportunities to speak English in class they also displaying a higher level of initiative to do so (Jian, 2011; Mu, 2007; Nie, 2010; Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), after using cooperative learning in teaching, 16 of 44 students felt that they would communicate with teachers in English and 26 students felt that they would communicate with peers. Like Yin (2009), and based on the interview question, "In which learning classroom do you communicate more with your classmates, traditional or cooperative learning one?" (Jian, 2011, p. 61), Jian's (2011) study found that 80% of students report that they communicated with their classmates in English more than in classrooms prior to their cooperative learning class. After interviewing students in her study, Nie (2010) also reported that students were more active and that their length of speaking was longer than their speech output prior to cooperative learning because they were encouraged but not forced to speak. Mu (2007) further pointed out that students in classes using cooperative learning are provided with more opportunities to speak English. In order for students to have equal opportunities to speak in the group, Mu (2007) asked

the students to discuss the questions together and then to give a presentation based on what they discussed. Each student was required to participate in the presentation by speaking out at least two sentences and answering questions from the students in other groups. Mu (2007) asserted that students thus have more opportunities to practice speaking than in a traditional approach because everyone has something to do in each step and no one can stand aside. One student in Mu's (2007) interview expressed, "When you [the teacher] gave a topic, we would discuss within our group. Everyone participated and cooperated" (p.36).

That Nie (2010), Yin (2009) and Jian (2011) all report an increase in students' oral participation within the cooperative learning classroom warrants some consideration of the differences between these researchers' findings. For one, Nie's (2010) observation that students responded better to being encouraged rather than compelled to speak—when compulsory expectation is the condition for talking in the teacher-centered classroom—suggests that there is more motivation to practice English orally when this motivation is ultimately the student's own choice. Yin's (2009) observation that cooperative learning students reported feeling more willing to speak with their peers than with teachers raises questions about relative levels of desire or anxiety around communicating orally even when the choice is the student's own. For, despite an overall increase to both kinds of interaction (student-to-teacher and student-to-student) in the cooperative learning classroom when contrasted with their respective measures in teacher-centered classroom, Yin's (2009) finding suggests that cooperative learning's greatest improvement to students' oral output is on a peer-to-peer level. Mu's (2006) finding, though he offers little to account for the disparity between students' peer-to-peer output versus student-to-teacher output within the cooperative learning classroom, certainly indicate why the cooperative

learning classes' overall oral output surpasses that of the teacher-centered classroom, as only the cooperative learning class employs activities that have a highly student-driven structure.

Yin (2009), Jian (2011) and Nie (2010) and Mu (2007)'s class observations correspond to the data collected from questionnaires and interviews during their research, as they observed that students expressed their ideas freely and communicated actively with both their teacher and their peers during cooperative learning.

Reasons for the enhancement of students' oral production within cooperative learning groups. Most studies that have found that cooperative learning enhances students' oral English production and have also investigated the reasons behind this phenomenon, attributing students' progress to cooperative learning's practice of assigning roles to each member within groups (Deng, 2014; Gu, 2012; Liang, 2014; Luo, 2012; Yuan, 2003) and the reduction of teachers' lecturing time (Li, 2013; Xuan, 2015). These dimensions are discussed in the following two subsections.

Assigning roles to each member within groups. In order to encourage every student in the cooperative learning group to speak English as much as possible, teachers often assigned different roles to each member (Cai, 2008; Deng, 2014; Gao, 2011; Gu, 2012; Liang, 2014; Luo, 2012; Yuan, 2003). Studies have shown that it is important for each member to have a specific role within the group and that students have to fulfill their duties (Cai, 2008; Deng, 2014; Gao, 2011; Gu, 2012; Liang, 2014; Luo, 2012; Yuan, 2003). Moreover, students' roles changed frequently so that all members have opportunities to practice new roles under different communicative settings (Cai, 2008; Gu, 2012; Yuan, 2003). According to the key elements of "positive interdependence" and "individual accountability" of cooperative learning, students in cooperative learning groups not only needed to be well prepared for his or her own tasks, but

also to help each other understand what they need to do in order to make the group task successful; everyone in the group had to support each other and give valuable suggestions and feedback to each other. In this way, students' opportunities to speak English were enhanced through interactions with group members.

In the division of groups, Cai (2008) and Gao (2011) often had one or two hardworking students in each group to set good examples for others. Moreover, besides considering students' language proficiency, Cai (2008) and Gao (2011) mixed students into a single group in terms of personality, gender and family backgrounds. Mixing these students together seems to help students extend the merits of speaking English as they try to skilfully interact with different people (Cai, 2008). Based on the roles of recorder, reporter, monitor, observer and facilitator, Cai (2008) and Gao (2011) both asked students to choose by their own first role and then did some adjustments to balance students' English oral proficiency and the role they chose. Like Cai (2008) and Gao (2011), Yuan (2003) also divided students into groups by considering their academic abilities, personality and learning style. Each group of Yuan's (2003) cooperative learning class was a mix of high achievers, low achievers with average-ability students. Students within a group alternately played the role of tutor and tutee (Yuan, 2003). From Yuan's (2003) observation, high achievers gained a lot from playing both the role of tutor and tutee; in the meantime, low achievers also profited from access to and interaction with the high achievers. Moreover, the mixing of students of different characteristics may stimulate more interactions within the group (Yuan, 2003). For instance, students from different places with different family and cultural backgrounds may have various viewpoints on a single topic; students may be attracted when hearing novel insights and more questions and answers may be generated from their discussion. Within Yuan's (2003) class, 44 out of 84 students thought that cooperative

learning was a suitable and effective method that provided more opportunities for them to practice English and interact with others: During one-term's cooperative learning, 57 of the students of this class expressed that they were offered more chances to talk in class despite the large number of students. One student, Wu, in Yuan's (2003) study expresses that, "Cooperative learning makes English lesson more fun. I can speak more English rather listen only" (Yuan, 2003, p. 55).

A follow up study of Gu's (2012) direct observation at Jinzhou Normal College revealed that most students in the cooperative learning class warmed up and joined the discussion after being assigned roles, which was rare before the 15 weeks' experiment with the use of cooperative learning approaches. After assigning roles as recorder, reporter, monitor, observer and facilitator to students, Gu (2012) announced the responsibilities within cooperative learning groups to students, as the students were not familiar with cooperative learning. According to Gu (2012), students could speak more in groups by "providing ideas and suggestions" (p. 26); students were also asked to, "carefully listen to what other members say and seeks helpful ideas and insights" and "request clarification when needed" (p. 26). Gu (2012) observed that when students talked with each other in English, they could actively offer productive information, suggestions and error correction. Both Yuan (2003) and Gu (2012) agreed that being assigned different roles as well as the relaxing and enjoyable learning environment cooperative learning helped with students' oral English production.

More studies further provided concrete teaching examples of assigning roles to facilitate students' spoken English (Deng, 2014; Liang, 2008; Wang, 2009). In their experiments, both Deng (2014) and Liang (2008) adopted the jigsaw method to help students understand the holistic nature of comprehensive English. For instance, Deng (2014), in her class at Chongqing

College of Arts and Science, divided 60 students into ten groups and assigned each student one teaching part of the text. Students who learned the same part of the text would come together to form the “expert group” to study the material together. Then they went back to their original cooperative learning group to teach other members what they had learned. By observing students' behaviour in their original cooperative learning group, Deng (2014) noticed that some students used narration, elaboration and peer tutoring when having a discussion with group members. Liang (2014) reached the same conclusion as Deng (2014) by observing students' performance in another oral reading text that is named *Britain and Ireland*.

By using role-play in the post-reading stage, Deng (2014) divided the whole class into four groups of 15 and asked each group to act out a play based on the text, *The Silver Screen*, which talked about the story about the famous director Steven Spielberg. Each group was required to give a performance in front of the class while the teacher and the student audience evaluated the performance and rewarded the best and better groups with small gifts and applause. Students were assigned different roles in groups; each group had a director, two actors, “Steven Spielberg” (the famous director) and eleven reporters. Students in each group would not only act out the play but also evaluated others' performance by giving comments. During the students' performance, Deng (2014) found that although some students could actively act out the play by using their imagination, others merely recited or read some paragraphs, which made the performance dull and time-consuming. Moreover, some students were too shy to speak loudly in front of the class. Although Deng (2014) seemed to blame some students' low participation in speaking on their low language proficiency and shyness, I noticed one underlying drawback from her experiment: with 11 reporters in the group, the repetitive of roles assigned to students may

have inspired resistance to participating in activities because some students may think his or her role is boring and unimportant.

In contrast, Liang (2008) seemed to avoid the problem of repeating roles when dividing groups. Although Liang (2008) also taught a large class, she divided the whole class into ten groups of four, the group size of which is much smaller than Deng's (2014). To give a performance based on the text *The Necklace* (adapted from the famous short novel written by Guy de Maupassant), each group had a director and three roles, Mathilde, Pierre and Jenna. In this situation, every role seemed to be of equal importance in the role-playing activity. Liang (2008) also noticed that although some students would recite or read instead of acting, she observed that everyone was trying their best to complete their acting based on peer assessment.

In reflecting on the above findings about role-play, the most meaningful insight for teachers is probably the limited success of Deng's (2014) jigsaw assignments. Deng (2014) is not the only researcher to use role-play with students of low oral proficiency, as Yuan (2003) and Cai (2008) also relied on students of varying levels of proficiency. However, Deng (2014) is the only researcher whose students showcased extremely low morale and poor projection while performing roles; neither Cai (2008), Gao (2011), Gu (2012), Liang (2014), Luo (2012) nor Yuan (2003) experienced the same poor enactment of roles. Deng's (2014) uniquely disappointing results with role-play suggests that participants in role-playing need to feel that their contribution is not redundant. As further support for the need to ensure that students are excited and stimulated by their roles' variety, researchers such as Gao (2011), who had students switch roles and observed a high level of oral activity and enthusiasm in students, suggest that a sense of novelty and variety is likely crucial for students' optimal response to the activity.

Reduction of teachers' lecturing time. In Li (2013) and Xuan's (2015) studies, they pointed out that the reduction of teachers' instruction time could be a reason for the enhancement of students' oral English production. When teachers don't need to spend most of the time teaching, they could have more time to observe students and develop deeper understanding of students' learning status in class, which may help with their future teaching. From Li's (2013) observations of English classes in Kunming University of Science and Technology (KUST), most teachers tended to explain the passage or some language points for more than 30 minutes in class. Since most university classes in China are 50 minutes long, such a prolonged commitment to speaking about a topic leaves only 20 minutes for students' interaction and discussion. The time for students to speak English is really limited under traditional, teacher-dominated approaches to language instruction. In cooperative learning class, however, teachers only need to take minutes at most for instructions of activities, after which students would have more than 40 minutes to communicate with each other among groups; teachers could offer help by moving around in the classroom. During Xuan's (2015) interview of seven participant teachers at Wenzhou College, a teacher named Max mentioned, "We don't have enough chance to practice English after class. The only way to speak English is in the class, so giving them a chance to talk and figure things out is great. Seeing how they apply the stuff, you know, seeing if they actually learned it or not" (Xuan, 2015, p. 43). Whereas Li's (2013) observations present the basic discrepancy between teacher-centered classes' distribution of time for listening to the teacher and time for talking, Xuan's (2015) provide first-person testimony that corroborates Li's (2013) concerns, namely the teacher-centered classes preclude sufficient time for students to practice speaking. Thus both Li (2013) and Xuan's (2015) findings suggest that through the cooperative learning class structure, which prioritizes the allotment of time for students' own spoken English,

students will have more time to develop their oral proficiency by practicing spoken English. However, claims equate the reduction of teachers' workload with students' increased oral production require further research to determine how students use their time independent of the teacher's direct engagement or supervision. For instance, there may be cases where some students won't make good use of the time allocated for practicing speaking or will just refuse to speak.

Unequal distribution of speaking opportunities among students. The above studies indicate that cooperative learning facilitates several students to talk simultaneously in small groups, which seems to solve the problem of students' limited talking time in large classes under traditional method. Some studies, however, found that students' opportunities to speak were not distributed equally. Because of students' different oral English proficiency, high achievers and low achievers may have unequal opportunities in cooperative learning situation (Jiao, 2014; Ma, 2006; Ren, 2013; Yuan, 2002; Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2010). In most cooperative learning groups, since high achievers are better at speaking English they may have more opportunities to express themselves. Besides, partly due to some teachers' partial treatment, high achievers may be favoured and given more opportunities to speak on behalf of the group.

Based on the observation on one hundred and five first-year non-English major students in three classes in Changchun Normal University, Ren (2013) calculated the time distribution for students' making speeches in class. Ren (2013) randomly listened to the course in three classes for a month and she found that the teachers adopted cooperative learning for 12 times out of 15 times she attended the course. Ren (2013) noticed that the leader of the group made speeches twice, some students who have good command of English individually spoke four times, and those have poor English speaking skills had no opportunities to make a speech. Jiao (2014)

agrees with Ren (2013)'s finding on students' unbalanced opportunities to practice speaking in class. By asking students, "How often do you express an opinion in cooperative learning activities?" (Jiao, 2014, p. 23), Jiao found that nearly half of the students (21 out of 44) said that they only express their opinions in class "sometimes." The numbers of students that said "frequently" and "hardly" are respectively thirteen and ten. In both Ren (2013) and Jiao (2014)'s studies of cooperative learning all groups had a team leader who was recommended by group members because of his or her high English proficiency; when answering teacher's questions or being asked to give a speech among group, the researcher noticed that students were very likely to rely on the team leader to speak on behalf of the group.

Different to Ren (2013) and Jiao (2014), Zhang (2010)'s study only focused on one English class, which consisted of 35 high-achievers and 35 low-achievers at Yangzhou Institute of Education. The criteria for the division of high and low achievers is based on students' score of the entrance examination, those scored over 85% are regarded as high-achievers (Zhang, 2010). From some low achievers' response in the interview, Zhang (2010) seemed to have found a good explanation for their low oral production in class. For example, responses such as, "I am not so good at speaking English as others, so in group work, it is often the case that group members with better English proficiency speak a lot and I for the most of the time only listen to them" and "when the teacher asks a question, I need more time to think and organize the language. So the other students got the answer before me [would get the opportunities] and I often lost opportunities to speak in class" (p. 33) indicate that low achievers often found it difficult to speak in class because they often spent a lot of time catching up with others, although some expressed that they like cooperative learning and enjoy the English learning environment cooperative learning approach provided. Sometimes high achievers became annoyed by the

terrible oral proficiency of low achievers and they think that working with the low achievers is a waste of time. For example, to help low achievers understand the tasks the group were working with, high achievers sometime even need to use Chinese to make explanations, which took a lot of time. For example, one high achiever student in Ma's (2006) experiment at Jiangsu College of Information Technology commented, "I don't feel we communicate more in English, but in Chinese. When I share my opinions with classmates in English, they cannot understand me, so I have to explain it in Chinese several times" (Ma, 2006, p. 44).

Despite the concerns that Ma's (2006) research raises about low achievers' poor level of participation in the ESL classroom, these findings are not corroborated by Li (2007) and Yuan (2003). Based on Li's (2007) observation of students majoring in Material Science and Engineering (MSE), in which class 90 of 101 students were intermediate and slower students based on their oral pre-test scores, students were very active in expressing themselves in cooperative learning activities. Based on the questionnaire of students' impressions of cooperative learning while speaking, 77 students indicated that they had more opportunities to speak in cooperative learning groups because they were more eager to learn in an open and democratic atmosphere, which cooperative learning can provide. Yuan (2003) indicated that it's not because of the English proficiency that prevents some students to speak in class, some students may not willing to speak in cooperative learning groups even if the atmosphere is relaxing and the peers are easy-going. For example, in Yuan's (2003) interview, one student named Wang Xiaolei expressed that, "I am shy and reserved and often feel awkward when working with others" (Yuan, 2003, p. 56). We could see that it was not because Wang has low English proficiency that made him reluctant in speaking; the major reason for Wang's hesitation in speaking is his shyness, which would prevent his oral English production.

Unlike the above studies, Wang (2009) observed that limitation in vocabulary and difficulties in expression sometimes hindered group discussion from continuing. For students who cannot speak English adequately, they cannot help speaking Chinese, especially when they meet quite difficult questions and want to explain something to their peers clearly. Although students are exposed under cooperative learning approach that is said to help increase opportunities to speak, those who may lack appropriate language skills to communicate may not obtain enough opportunities to speak in class. Moreover, for those students who elect to speak their native language rather than practicing English, the benefits of cooperative learning would be negated for the individual student and, to a lesser extent, for the entire group whose engagement with English is thereby diminished.

To summarize, the studies of Ren (2013), Jiao (2014), Zhang (2010), Ma (2006), Yuan (2003) and Wang (2009) all indicate that students in a cooperative learning setting will participate unequally in the class's peer-to-peer or peer-to-teacher oral communication. Ren (2013), Jiao (2014), Zhang (2010), Ma (2006) and Wang (2009) attribute this imbalanced oral participation to the students' differing levels of proficiency, whereby students of a lower proficiency tend to listen (rather than speaking themselves) to those with superior speaking skills. The premise that proficiency predicts the degree of students' participation was based on the random observation of classrooms (Jiao, 2014; Ren, 2013) and students' personal reports (Zhang, 2010). In contrast to this basic finding that proficiency determines participation, Yuan (2003), who concurs that cooperative learning classroom yields an inconsistent level of student oral participation, attributed this discrepancy to individual social disposition rather than different levels of proficiency. Only Li's (2007) research, which was based on a combination of

observation and questionnaires, found that a majority of students (90 out of 101), both low and intermediate actively participated in oral communication during class time.

Conclusion. Despite the dominant finding that cooperative learning classrooms do not ensure an equal distribution of oral participation, most studies nonetheless found that cooperative learning helps with the enhancement of students' oral English production and stimulate their initiatives to communicate in English on average. Students from the same grade and major may have some common characteristics such as knowledge level, experience and thought which may help generate more speaking among them. Assigning different roles to students and the reduction of teacher's lecturing time could help with students' oral production enhancement. Conversely, a few studies hold a cautionary attitude by stating that cooperative learning may have different effect on students of different oral proficiency level. Moreover, shyness, anxiety and low motivation in English speaking may prevent students' participation in speaking activities.

Effect of Cooperative Learning on Students' Quality of Spoken English

Introduction: Based on the review findings of the previous sections, although cooperative learning is effective in providing most students with more opportunities to speak English than the traditional approach, we may be sceptical that the quantity of language output may not equal to the quality of language use. It is very likely that students who speak with a high volume of English output did not use accurate expressions and pronunciation in speaking. Additionally, in the review part of the effect of cooperative learning on students' oral test scores, although each empirical study provided criteria for scoring such as PET Three and CET Four, the overwhelming majority of the studies have not talked about students' score for each element, which makes it difficult for us to examine if students were making progress for each element of speaking through cooperative learning.

The research question for this section is, “Does cooperative learning help improve the development of students’ quality of English use?” By judging the effect of cooperative learning on students’ quality of spoken language, studies mainly focus on if students could use the vocabulary, grammar points and sentence structures they’ve learned into classroom speaking practice (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Gao, 2011; Li, 2007; Li, 2015; Luo, 2012; Wang, 2013); there were very few studies talked about students’ pronunciation competence (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Lin, 2009). Teacher-researchers adopted classroom cooperative learning activities, such as group discussion, role-play and debate, to help students deepen their comprehension of the useful expressions they have learned in class towards helping them practice English in an authentic language environment. Also, most teacher researchers examined the effect of cooperative learning on students’ use of practical expressions through observing students’ performance in cooperative learning activities as group discussion, role-play and debate. However, there were some findings indicated that most students could only produce a limited range of sentences because of their low lexical and grammatical resources; moreover, there was uneven spoken English quality within cooperative learning classes with only high achievers producing a better quality of spoken English. I summarized research studies that reviewed aspects as students’ communicative competence, based on which I will make an analysis of the quality of students’ spoken English. In the following two subsections, I examine (a) the effect of cooperative learning on students’ use of practical expressions; and (b) the effect of cooperative learning on students’ pronunciation.

Examining the effect of cooperative learning on students’ use of practical expressions through three activities. To promote students’ communication and interaction skills, teachers mostly adopt cooperative learning activities as group discussion, role-play and

debate to help students practice some expressions learned in class when using this method after students each generated some ideas by individual learning (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Li, 2015; Li, 2007; Li, 2015; Luo, 2012; Tan, 2006; Wang, 2013). Different to the activities that have been conducted in other group works, these three cooperative learning activities, namely group discussion, role-play and debate are highly structured; the section that follows each activity is arranged in terms of easiest to implement (discussion) to most difficult (debates) in terms of the demands on the use of spoken English. These three activities adopted the learning together approach of cooperative learning, which aims to unite several different groups of individuals to form a community of practice that works to improve the academic ability of the group (Kagan, 1994). In terms of second language acquisition, a learning together approach creates a space for teachers and students to join their typically separate communities in order to learn more about their roles in supporting their English language learning (Ning, 2010). The activities that follow are highly structured characteristics in cooperative learning activities because: (a) teachers design these activities for students after fully considering students' oral English proficiency and other related elements and divide students into proper groups; (b) during students' cooperative learning activities, teachers would observe and assist students' learning process and (c) at the end of the activities, teachers would most likely give some evaluation of the students' performance as well as encourage each group to provide evaluation for students' performance on both spoken English learning and cooperative skills. As most teacher researchers examine students' use of practical expressions through observing students' performance in these three activities, I discuss these three methods, including group discussion, role-play and debate in the three subsections that follow, in order to examine the effect of cooperative learning on students' use of practical expressions.

Group discussion. Group discussion could be used to discuss vocabulary, grammar points and so on, which is easy to for the teacher to organize. Within a group discussion activity, each student exchanges individual findings and prepares for the questions raised by others; after the discussion, each group is required to plan a report and then present the group product to the whole class (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Li, 2015; Li, 2007; Tan, 2006).

Some teachers used group discussion in their comprehensive English courses in helping students practice some useful expressions. Han (2006) noticed that students could use some sentences learned in class to ask or answer questions, such as, “Excuse me, what’s the meaning of...?”, “Can you explain the word for me?”, “How can I get the method of overcoming shyness?”, “Well, in my opinion...”, “Don’t worry, I can help you” (p. 47). Obviously, using these sentences helped students to start the communication easily. After circles of communication, students became used to talking in English and found it was not as difficult as they had expected to talk to others. Huang (2011) asked students to talk about, “how to do something” by using the conjunctions they just learned in the text. Huang (2011) noticed that students could apply the words such as, “first of all,” “to start with,” “after that” in answering each other’s questions. For example, one student’s answer was, “Yes, first make sure your computer is connected to the Internet and then...” as a response to the question, “Could you tell me how to use the library?” (p. 19). Moreover, Huang (2011) also asked students to retell the story of a text in the textbook by using the expressions and sentence structures they just learned. From students’ feedback it is clear that they found it much easier to comprehend and apply the English they have just learned into practical use when having conversations with peers in groups (Huang, 2011). In Li’s (2007) experiment, she observed that most students could make full use of the structures and expressions they just learned since “active students set good examples for

those who are poor at finishing learning tasks. Quick students explain the knowledge and help slow students to correct their mistakes” (p. 54); at the same time, some low-achievers in the group received some fresh ideas and gained proper and correct expressions from the example of high-achievers.

Taken together, Han (2006), Huang (2011) and Li (2007)'s findings suggest that through the learning together method, students of different oral proficiency levels are able to transfer basic phrases and syntax from classroom exercises to authentic social exchanges. Although the use of such standard phrases of conversation marks only the initial phase of socializing with English speech, these researchers' observations indicate that exposing students to usable fragments of everyday speech is an effective way to put their knowledge of oral English into practice outside an educational setting. Despite these encouraging findings, however, Li (2015) and Tan (2006) observed that the group discussion in their classes didn't always result in an effective progress of students' fluency. Based on students' answers to the questionnaires in Li's (2015) experiment, only 24 of 82 students were able to use the expressions and sentence structures they had learned to express their opinions well in group discussion; for the rest of the students, Li (2015) observed that they still depended on Chinese and used Chinese frequently during discussions. When students spoke Chinese instead of English, it was very likely that some students would tend to talk about something irrelevant to the group task, which added much noise and chaos to the group discussion (Li, 2015). During a conversation talking about movies Tan (2006) observed that speaker one tried to initiate the discussion by asking a question, “How about this family tale?” (p. 28) and speaker two gave a response but she failed to extend or elaborate on her opinion; instead, she just responded, “I agree” (p. 28). Speaker one didn't ask speaker two to give her reasons or extend speaker two's contribution, she just gave a hasty

response as, “I agree” (p. 28). It seemed that the group wanted to finish the task as soon as possible. Tan (2006) noticed that students just picked out some names of movies without giving or asking any reason and agreed with each other without questioning; there was very little evidence of consultation or elaboration. Unlike the above studies, Tan (2006) didn't ask students to do preparation work before class. I think the reason behind the phenomenon Tan (2006) observed could be that students found the topic they discussed a bit difficult for them because their oral English proficiency was generally at an intermediate level; moreover, as a teacher, Tan didn't elaborate important points or give students timely assistance during discussions, which could make students feel overwhelmed about what to say.

Role-play. Role-play is an adapted jigsaw learning technique in cooperative learning. The jigsaw learning technique divides the class into groups and breaks tasks into pieces into groups, such that groups complete different parts of the process of learning (Slavin, 1995). Role-play is a pretty vivid method to make students show their understanding of a specific topic and their accumulation related vocabulary and useful expressions. Role-play also can help students establish team spirit and individual responsibility, which are the essential elements of cooperative learning (Gao, 2011). Because of the limitation of class time, most teachers asked students to do some preparation work of the role-play before class in order to perform in the next class (Gao, 2011; Li, 2007; Luo, 2012; Wang, 2013). Also, role-play could be used as homework to help students consolidate the language points they have learned in class (Li, 2007).

In Gao's (2011) study, eight groups of students were required to prepare a role-play to show their understanding of “friendship” before class, they could freely choose the situations that they would like to present. From both class observation and recordings, Gao (2011) found that eight groups chose different situations and designed diverse plots, such as visiting friends in the

hospital, helping friends to catch up on studies and congratulating friends on their progress on English speaking. Students' utilized several expressions to offer congratulations and sympathy. Similar to Gao (2011), students in Li (2007) and Wang (2013)'s classes used their own experiences to create different situations by replacing some underlined parts of the dialogues with their own words. Both researchers found that in the role-play activities students could create a situation to show a certain meaning, such as gratitude or love, or a situation, such as job seeking; moreover, students in heterogenous ability groups can facilitate the organization of groups that are capable of narrating and role-playing; they can do better in acting different characters. Luo (2012) found that students could use the vocabularies and grammatical patterns they had learned in class during the role-play, such that students demonstrated a communicative competence that reflected the sentence patterns of textbooks, which was in turn used to share personal information. However, Luo also pointed out that students encountered some difficulties during role play; for example, they sometimes didn't know when to say or how to continue others' talk, sometimes they were at a loss what to say besides some expressions provided. In some groups Luo noticed short turns among students, students sometimes only mechanically delivered their own words as prepared and didn't give any supportive utterance to one another. Although students prepared the role beforehand, they still found difficulty in reacting to others' words.

The results of Gao (2011), Li (2007), Wang (2013) and Luo's (2012) research indicate that role-play is an important tool for students to exercise creative choice in selecting from the expressions, syntactical structures and vocabulary that have become available to them through ESL instruction. These resources, in combination with the students' familiarity and interest in different social contexts and forms of relationships, make role-play a challenging but rewarding

teaching method. The above studies show that different aspects of students' capacity for team-work were successfully engaged through role-play, including the coordination of social scenarios (Li, 2007; Wang, 2013), and the dialogues that depend on each role-player's understanding of the social relationship that their spoken words are intended to simulate (Gao, 2011). Luo's (2012) identification of the verbal obstacles to a fluid exchange does not discount the potential benefit of role-play so much as illuminate the need for preparation going into role-play, as well as the ongoing possibility that students will discover social scenarios or conversational moments that require new resources (vocabulary, expressions, sentence structures).

Debate. Debate in cooperative learning class requires students to engage each other with various language functions, such as asking for clarification, offering refutation, summarizing ideas and paraphrasing others' points, which could help improve students' oral skills compared with merely learning linguistic patterns from the teacher. However, debate is more difficult for students than the activities of group discussion and role-play because debating requires the advanced capability of giving timely and proper reactions. Those whose oral proficiency is below an intermediate level may hardly have an opportunity to debate with others mainly because of their low oral English proficiency.

In Wang's (2013) study, within a cooperative learning group, students of intermediate and low oral proficiency level only participated in the preparation level for a debate among a heterogeneous group. The low-level students were responsible to find some information related to the topic, the middle-level students collected the useful information and the high-level students classified the information. Only one student in each group was selected to do the debate, which was usually the one of the highest oral proficiency level. Li (2015) further pointed out that debate is not appropriate for students' practising of some basic skills such as mastering

vocabulary, grammatical rules, words and expressions, as students seemed to separate with each other even in the preparation period. Based on students' responses, Li (2015) understood that compared with group discussion, students in debate activity assisted each other less and thus may not progress together. However, both Wang (2013) and Li (2015) agreed that for those who participated in the debate, their English fluency and effectiveness in communication enhanced greatly as cooperative learning enable them to produce more sentences and, in terms of variety of spoken syntax and vocabulary, therefore more opinions when speaking English. Both Li (2015) and Wang's (2013) findings indicate that debate should be used with students whose verbal proficiency and independence in speaking English are strong. The potential for weaker speakers to feel left behind (Li, 2015) or the isolation of stronger speakers who exclusively take an oral component of the debate (Wang, 2013), both illustrate the limits of this activity for developing the oral competency of low or intermediate ESL students.

Effect of cooperative learning on students' pronunciation. By analysing students' oral test scores after cooperative learning, we understood that students did not perform well under the speaking category of "Pronunciation and Intonation." Teacher researchers tended to agree that cooperative learning has a limitation for the improvement of pronunciation through class observation and students' responses (Han, 2006; Huang, 2011; Lin, 2009; Qiu, 2014).

Although cooperative learning can provide chances and atmosphere for students to practice, most of the students paid no attention to their pronunciation and intonation while talking to each other (Han, 2006). When asking if students would help each other to correct their pronunciation mistakes, over 80% of the students expressed that they were willing to give some assistance (Han, 2006); however, as the majority of students didn't perform well in pronunciation (understood from their oral test scores), they had a very limited capacity to

accurately correct one another's pronunciation? Moreover, as students are divided into several cooperative-learning groups, the teacher can not supervise every group at the same time and pay attention to everyone's mistakes (Huang, 2011; Qiu, 2014); thus it is possible that students among the group may imitate each other's wrong pronunciation. Some students in Qiu's (2014) study even expressed that they would prefer traditional teaching approach to cooperative learning approach because they wanted teachers to model the correct pronunciation every time when they made some mistakes; they believe that teachers' timely corrections would help them strengthen their memory for their mistakes that needed to be modified.

Han (2006), Huang (2011) and Qiu's (2014) findings seemed to allude to the problem of neglecting the teacher's role in conducting cooperative learning in several Chinese universities as they both suggested that teacher should pointed out students' pronunciation mistakes directly when they hear such mistakes being made. However, Xu (2012) disagreed with the idea of correcting pronunciation mistake timely by stating that it may do harm to students' oral fluency. When the teacher suddenly points out students' mistakes when they were expressing their ideas, students may feel interrupted and lose confidence in speaking. Xu (2012) suggested that teachers should make a note of students' pronunciation mistakes and give them feedback after class.

Lin (2009) further discussed the issue of "fluency and accuracy" in students' speaking. Lin referred to Nunan's (2003) proposal of principles for designing speaking tasks by stating that in developing fluency, teacher should not interrupt students in the middle of their speaking, even though it aims to correct their speaking mistakes. I tend to agree that teachers should take notes of students' pronunciation mistakes when they heard; moreover, based on students' oral test scores, teacher could ask a group member whose pronunciation is the best among the group to take the work of making notes for the groups' pronunciation as well. However, as Burnaby and

Yilin (1989) pointed out, many Chinese college English teachers themselves lack communication competence and thus they may not have the ability to give the correct pronunciation, which further prevents students from experiencing effective English learning and which subsequently may prevent the successful implementation of cooperative learning in the teaching of pronunciation.

The most significant similarity between the findings of Han (2006), Huang (2011), Lin (2009) and Qiu (2014) is that cooperative learning is not an effective method for directly improving students' pronunciation. However, whereas Han (2006), Huang (2011) and Qiu's (2014) findings paint a picture of the cooperative learning students' inability to improve each other's pronunciation, or even unawareness of flawed pronunciation, Lin's (2009) cites Nunan's (2003) principle that teachers should not interrupt students' speech to correct pronunciation since allowing students to practice speaking without addressing their pronunciation is conducive to overall oral development. Like Xu's (2012) advocacy for feedback after students have spoken (instead of immediate correction), indicate that cooperative learning takes a considered position on pronunciation. Rather than avoiding the issue of pronunciation, cooperative learning, as Xu (2012) suggests, prioritizes students' fluency above pronunciation, which requires that students be free to speak without interruption to immediately correct mispronunciation.

Summary of cooperative learning on students' communicative competence.

Compared with learning under traditional approach, in which the environment for English output is not as authentic and adequate as that in cooperative learning class, students in traditional classes lack opportunities for real-life communication under teacher centered whole-class instruction, they often practice particular grammatical or lexical points based on the text (Gao, 2011; Huang, 2011; Ning, 2011; Tan, 2006). Research has also noted that students in cooperative

learning activities would use various language functions as asking for repetition or clarification, making paraphrases for difficult points or offering further explanations to group members to help them comprehend and encourage each other to continue speaking. Moreover, through communicating more with peers, students in cooperative learning classes may have a deeper understanding of the real purpose of English learning, recognizing that “English is a communication tool instead of studying it as purely linguistic knowledge” (Ning, 2011, p. 156). However, compared with the traditional approach, cooperative learning seems not to be an ideal approach in the teaching of pronunciation as most students admitted that they may pay less attention to their pronunciation or have the intention to correct each other’s pronunciation in cooperative learning groups; also, when considering the issue of “accuracy and fluency,” most teachers are conflicted about giving timely correction for students’ improper pronunciation.

As the college English teachers for non-English major students are Chinese in the majority of universities, it is difficult for the teachers to master native and correct pronunciation, which may directly influence students’ low pronunciation competence and thus subsequent low scores in pronunciation. One more issue that requires attention is that several students in cooperative learning groups tended to speak Chinese when finding something difficult to express or as a way to avoid embarrassment. Although some teachers allowed students to speak a small amount of Chinese to help communicate, it seemed that some students became reliant on using Chinese and used it together with English, which may impede their English proficiency.

Lastly, within the research literature itself there is a gap that must be addressed. According to the empirical studies within this literature review, researchers only examined the effect of cooperative learning on the quality of general communicative competence and “pronunciation”; however, grammar, and the usage of discourse are also important aspects of

speaking. Although several researchers have mentioned that pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, coherence and fluency are all important elements to evaluate students' speaking ability, they didn't discuss further students' performance under other aspects. Teacher researchers should therefore also pay attention to students' usage of grammar and discourse when evaluating their cooperative learning activities.

Concluding Discussion

This study mainly reviewed the empirical studies published within 10 years which helps to testify if cooperative learning is effective in the improvement of students' oral English skills in three aspects: (a) students' oral test scores; (b) students' oral English production; and (c) the quality of students' spoken English. The results of the reviewed empirical studies could be summarized as follow: (a) students in cooperative learning classes scored higher than those in traditional instructional classes on average; however, students of different oral English proficiency in cooperative learning classes made inconsistent improvements and students also made inconsistent improvements under different speaking categories; (b) the cooperative learning approach provides more opportunities for students to practice oral English; however, students' oral production may be influenced by their different oral English proficiencies and personal characteristics; and (c) cooperative learning activities such as group discussion, role-play and debate helped with students' spoken English fluency and strengthened their use of various expressions; however, students' pronunciation did not effectively improve through cooperative learning and students' performance on grammar and the use of discourse under cooperative learning were neglected by researchers.

First, by making a comparison of students' oral test scores in two classes, most studies proved that students in cooperative learning classes scored higher on average than students in

traditional instructional classes because the former category of students have more time to practice oral English and deal with the problems they had in a cooperative learning environment. However, within cooperative learning classes, students of different oral English proficiencies made inconsistent improvements. Moreover, they made inconsistent progress under different speaking categories (i.e. students performed better under the categories of “Discourse Management” and “Interactive Communication” and performed worse under “Vocabulary and Grammar” and “Pronunciation and Intonation”).

Second, studies showed that cooperative learning provides a relaxing and safe environment that facilitates students' interactions, in which students have more opportunities to practice spoken English. Based on class observation, students' answers to the questionnaire and the interviews, by making a comparison with traditional teaching methods, most studies seem to indicate that students of different spoken English proficiency levels all received more opportunities to practice spoken English by interacting with each other and all students made some progress at their own pace. In cooperative learning activities, students' oral English production was enhanced because teachers' lecturing time was reduced and each of the students was assigned a role to play. However, some studies found that within cooperative learning groups there were unequal distribution of speaking opportunities among students mainly because of students' different oral English proficiency levels and their personality differences.

Third, most studies pointed out that compared with learning under a traditional approach, students in cooperative learning environment could practice oral English in authentic life communication circumstances, which facilitated their use of various language functions. Cooperative learning activities such as group discussion, role-play and debate helped with students' spoken English fluency and strengthen their use of various expressions through

interacting with each other, receiving and offering help within the group. However, there were studies pointed out that students' pronunciation did not effectively improve through cooperative learning. Researchers also seem to have neglected to examine students' performance on grammar and the use of discourse in cooperative learning activities, which are also important aspects of English speaking.

By analysing the above findings, we may conclude that the underlying problems as students and teachers' unfamiliarity with cooperative learning approach, students' different spoken English proficiency levels and characteristics as well as some constraints of Chinese oral English teaching environment made cooperative learning not that effective in benefit for all students in all circumstances. Thus, this review reveals that cooperative learning might not be a perfect substitute for traditional teaching method in spoken English instruction under Chinese university settings if these problems could not be solved properly. To provide insights into the issue of using cooperative learning approach to improve Chinese university non-English major students' oral skills, it is necessary for us to find solutions to the underlying problems of implementing cooperative learning approach in a Chinese sociocultural context.

Constraints and Possibilities Identified with Cooperative Learning and Oral English Instruction in Chinese Universities

Introduction

It is known from the literature that although the cooperative learning approach does not yield optimal results in helping with the improvement of oral English skills for every student, a majority of students and teachers have shown an interest and preference for this method; moreover, many of these proponents of the method have expressed a willingness to use

cooperative learning to future oral English learning and teaching. Despite the method's popularity, when compared with traditional teacher-centered instructional approach, which has been adopted for years, cooperative learning is a relatively new instructional approach that was imported from Western countries to Chinese educational settings. In my review of the literature, I was surprised to find that none of the research noted the socio-cultural factors of teaching in a Chinese learning environment; researchers who sought to determine the method's effectiveness in college classrooms in Beijing, Guangzhou or Shanghai had invariably imported and evaluated the method without consideration of how cooperative learning in Western contexts might need to be adapted to Chinese learning environments (i.e. the college ESL classroom). There are potential differences between Chinese and Western sociocultural contexts that could yield distinctive learning environments, including such factors as the instructional tendencies of teachers to the expectations of students.

To provide a clear picture of the effective implementation of the cooperative learning approach to ESL instruction in Chinese universities for non-English major students, I discuss the constraints and possibilities of applying the method within this particular context. In light of the potential constraints in implementing cooperative learning in Chinese university settings, I propose some suggestions to facilitate the enhancement of non-English major students' oral skills. My suggestions have been generated from the findings of the literature review and my personal second language teaching and learning experience in dealing with the underlying problems of using cooperative learning in Chinese college English oral classes.

There are different educational conditions for universities in different regions in China, such that some universities in developed areas may have modern educational technologies support and better teaching resources which facilitate their cooperative learning practices,

whereas in more rural or less developed regions the opposite is true, such that a lack of teaching and technological resources may impede this method's practice. Another condition that affects the adoption of cooperative learning is the range of learning habits that students from different majors bring to the classroom, habits and educational backgrounds that can influence their oral English learning; for instance, from my personal observation, some medical students may take the method of learning by rote as they are accustomed to memorizing medical terminology as part of their daily study; in contrast, some students who major in art and music may use more creativity and imagination in English learning similar to the way they are learning their specialized courses. My suggestions may not fit all non-English major classes in all Chinese universities. I hope that my suggestions could provide Chinese English teachers some inspiration and motivate them to further think of their cooperative learning practice in spoken English class.

In the following sections, I provide some pedagogical implications for both teachers and school academic administrators. The teacher's pedagogical implications seek to address the discrepancy between what students have experienced for a long duration (the traditional teaching approach) and what they just have more recently received (the cooperative learning approach). In this regard, I provide the following suggestions: (a) the blending of the traditional teaching approach and the cooperative learning approach and (b) giving some guidance to students on how to play roles in cooperative learning activities. In light of students' different oral English proficiency and characteristics within cooperative learning groups, I provide such suggestions as (a) designing and planning of appropriate tasks and (b) grouping students after a full consideration of influential elements. For the pedagogical implications for school academic administrators, in light of teachers' unfamiliarity with the cooperative learning approach, I suggest that school academic administrators provide educational seminars on cooperative

learning and experience-sharing sessions; considering the large class size Chinese classrooms for cooperative learning practice, I provide suggestions such as (a) Chinese teachers and native English teachers co-teach English speaking and (b) to create an online cooperative learning environment and make use of modern technology devices.

Pedagogical Implications for Teachers

Research reports that constraints on students' adoption of the cooperative learning approach, including these students' resistance to an approach that clashes with the customary traditional teaching approach, as well students' different levels of oral English proficiency levels, produce difficulty in implementing cooperative learning towards the improvement of oral English. In the following section, I provide some suggestions for teachers to address these potential impediments.

Consider the discrepancy between what students experienced for a long time (traditional teaching approach) and what they just received (cooperative learning approach). Chinese university students have been accustomed to the traditional teaching approach for years. Influenced by Confucian heritage culture, which emphasized the authority of teachers, Chinese students are taught to be submissive, quiet and modest in class (Lv, 2014). These students are used to learning passively from teachers and want teachers to present academic materials to them directly, i.e., to lecture (Tan, 2006). Instead of expressing opinions in class and questioning or even challenging what teachers say, the majority of Chinese students take notes on lectures obediently (Thanh, 2014). Under this circumstance, Chinese students may show more preference for traditional learning than cooperative learning because they are not familiar with investigating and acquiring information by themselves or from their peers—activities that are fundamental to cooperative learning—and are therefore indisposed to learning

English by the cooperative learning method. Besides the distinctive culture of Chinese education, which may be a constraint on implementing the cooperative learning approach, there is also the potential impediment of students' discouraging experiences of cooperative learning. As reported in the literature, not all students prefer cooperative learning in oral English learning. Some students found that group work required too much time and generated too much noise, such that they learned very little within the group; under this circumstance, they preferred to merely listen to the teacher lecturing and be learn according to this authoritative model that does not involve active participation (Han, 2015; Ning, 2010; Tan, 2006).

In order for students to take advantage of the cooperative learning approach in improving their oral English skills and not feel reluctant experiencing this new approach, I suggest that teachers make a smart blend of the cooperative learning approach and traditional teaching approach, as well as provide some guidance to students on how to play roles in cooperative learning activities before they try this approach.

Blending of traditional teaching approach and cooperative learning approach. I suggest teachers to combine the traditional teaching approach with the cooperative learning approach when teaching oral English because both methods have proven to yield benefits for some parts of oral English teaching. For example, cooperative learning encourages more oral English production among students by providing a relaxing communication environment, which further facilitates students' oral production (Liang, 2002). However, compared with the traditional teaching approach, the cooperative learning approach seems not that effective in helping with the improvement of some aspects of students' quality of spoken English, such as pronunciation and the use of proper grammar and language points (Lin, 2009; Xu, 2012). One limitation of a peer-dependent model of correction is that students in cooperative learning groups

have generally limited oral English proficiency and often feel reluctant to point out others' mistakes directly. Consequently, teachers are advised to provide direct instruction on some important language points and to make explanations of some grammatical rules and issues, without which many students, especially low achievers, may have no idea of what to say and make little progress during cooperative learning activities. I suggest that the traditional teaching approach be used before cooperative learning activities in clarifying some important technical and grammatical points that students may encounter during their activities; the cooperative learning approach may be used later in helping students consolidate what they have learned through interactions.

The following is an example of how teachers can combine the cooperative learning and traditional learning methods in teaching oral English. After learning a text about the story of Edward Joseph Snowden, who is a fairly familiar character in China and beyond, a teacher might ask students to discuss if they believe Snowden is a hero or a traitor. As the majority of students in the group are categorized as "intermediate" or "slow" based on their oral pre-test scores, one suggestion the teacher might consider is to present some key words and sentence structures generated from the text and to lead the students in a review of these language points. Later, the teacher could ask some students to give examples of their impressions of Snowden by using the language points they just reviewed. Based on what the students say, the teacher may supplement students' information on Snowden with topics that serve to clarify or revisit aspects of his story about which students have an understanding (i.e. why he left NASA, his relationship with the US or Russia) by using the forms of video or story telling to present their information.

The above procedures of traditional teaching may give students some inspiration for possible topics during discussion. Following the more traditional portion of the lesson, teachers

may start cooperative learning activities for discussion. During the discussion, I suggest that teachers act as a guide-on-the-side and participant; as a guide-on-the-side, teachers may give some tips to students by walking around; for example, he or she could encourage students to explore personal responses to what they have learned (during and prior to class) to Snowden, such as thinking about how to respond to the question, “if I were in Snowden’s situation, would I choose to act against my government, or against my country’s people? Why?” Sometimes when some students lose fluency in expressing their opinions in discussion, the teacher could assist students by giving some cue words to encourage them to continue speaking, which is more effective for students’ oral fluency development rather than offering the complete answer under traditional teaching approach (Wang, 2009).

As a participant in cooperative learning activities, the teacher is “on the same side as the students, serving not to dam up their natural expressiveness, but rather to channel it in positive directions” (Kagan, 1994, p. 35). When the teacher is no longer regarded as the dominator of class teaching and the authority of knowledge, students may feel more relaxed and comfortable in expressing their ideas (Xi, 2013). Under this circumstance, the teacher-as-participant should offer timely praise and affirmation to students to encourage more English conversations in class. Additionally, the teacher could model how to appeal for help, ask for repetition, offer requests and give suggestions to help students work better in cooperative learning groups and thereby improve their oral communication skills. It is worth noting that because the teacher is likely the best speaker in the class, modeling is a role that he or she is uniquely capable of fulfilling, such that the teacher’s involvement is essential for the active demonstration of spoken English.

There is one important point to which I would like to draw teachers’ attention when they are acting as participants during students’ cooperative learning activities. Based on Lin (2009)’s

prioritization of students' initiative, although students in cooperative learning groups may produce certain types of mistakes such as improper vocabulary use, incorrect pronunciation and syntactical errors of sentence construction, as well as receiving some incorrect feedback from their group members, the teacher-as-participant should not always attempt to correct students' mistakes immediately. Instead, in the interests of encouraging students' own initiative, allowing some mistakes to pass uncorrected improves the likelihood that a student who begun to speak will continue speaking, or feel that they are doing well enough to persist in the effort. As a participant, it is advisable for teachers to observe and record what kind of language mistakes their students typically produce; moreover, rather than correcting their mistakes directly, teachers who have identified a mistake in a student's speech may repeat a student's entire sentence back to the student, using intonation to highlight the error. As a learning process, this method of highlighting a student's mistake is different from a direct correction because the conversational structure of the exchange is preserved, as a teacher's interjection takes the form of a complete sentence. Moreover, instead of being told the correction, the student's own initiative is again promoted through this process, as students are still responsible for identifying their own error. For example, if, as is typical of ESL learners, a student, in describing what she did the preceding day, remarks, "Yesterday, I did went to the mall", the teacher could intonate the mistake: "Yesterday, I *did* went to the mall." Here, the intonation cues the student to alter this part of their sentence.

It should be noted that a teacher's direct instruction is necessary at the end of the class after cooperative learning activities and at the beginning of the next class to review important language points students applied during discussion; the teacher's direct instruction is equally necessary while reviewing students' mistakes, such as mispronunciation and improper grammar.

During class, the teacher is advised to take notes of oral communication mistakes that may need correction; these mistakes could be summarized at the end of the class. Delaying a teacher's correction will likely save students from embarrassment. Based on my second language teaching and learning experience, the reviewing session at the end of the class and at the beginning of the following class is beneficial for students to develop a deeper understanding of important points of technical proficiency in spoken English.

Give some guidance to students on how to play roles in cooperative learning activities.

From my perspective, except for some students' shyness or low oral English proficiency, one important reason for their limited oral production in cooperative learning activities could be their lack of clarity about the roles students are expected to play. Some students hold the impression that they are not important in cooperative learning groups, as they haven't recognized that cooperative learning requires "each group member to feel responsible for participating and learning" (Jacobs, 1998, p. 180). Because cooperative learning is new to most Chinese students, it is vital for the teacher to give some training on how to play different roles in cooperative learning activities.

In order to help students to understand how to role-play teachers may need to first model how to play these roles and offer some tips. Take the role of a monitor for example: "The monitor moderates discussions, reinforces the members' contribution and keeps everyone talking" (Lin, 2009, p. 139). For example, in a group of three students, with the teacher guiding them through the process, one student could play the moderator while the other students engage in a discussion that the moderator oversees by asking questions, affirming and encouraging students' answers, and asking if each student would like to respond to each other. In this instance, the rest of the class could watch in preparation to discuss how the student-as-moderator

performed his or her role. The teacher should guide the group members to make the tasks go smoothly and explain how to make summaries of the positive and negative aspects of the group work. For instance, a teacher could model the act of offering a fellow student encouragement by making remarks such as, "You have done a great job, keep going", "I strongly agree with what you said", or "Does anyone have a different idea on...?" to encourage more talking among the group.

It is very necessary for teachers to emphasize every student's general role as an active participant and helper during cooperative learning. Teachers should announce some basic rules to students, such as (a) each student has an equal opportunity to participate in cooperative learning tasks; (b) the group is somewhere everyone should offer assistance and be brave to ask for help; and (c) each student needs to listen carefully to others' ideas with respect even if you may disagree. To help students become increasingly active, teachers should encourage each student to set up a goal for improving their oral English skills by cooperative learning. Students should be encouraged to set up practical goals based on their different oral English proficiency levels and their aim in oral English learning. For example, some high achievers may plan to take TOEFL or IELTS in the near future and want to get a satisfying score on oral tests. For these students, teachers may help them set up goals based on the requirement of the TOEFL or IELTS oral tests. For some low achievers who may feel reluctant to speak English in class, goals such as bravely opening their mouth and communicating with native speakers with some simple expressions could be practical for them. Also, goals could be pertinent to students' majors. For example, students majoring in International Trade may deal with international business, fluently spoken English works as a useful tool in their communications. Even for students who might think oral English is not relevant to their majors, they could be encouraged to learn oral English

in order to make friends with international students, communicating with others while travelling abroad and so on. Teachers may also ask each member to discuss what he or she has gained from the group after cooperative learning activities in order to check if he or she has fulfilled the general roles as active participants.

Teachers are also advised to encourage high achievers in the group to give assistance to low achievers. It is important for teachers to make clear that the presence of helpers in cooperative learning group is not intended to accomplish others' tasks instead of them because everyone has a role to play. For example, when a group of four students are required to create a conversation based on a text, one student may be responsible for summarizing the characteristics of the main characters, the second student responsible for analysing the main points of the first half of the text and the third student responsible for analysing the main points of the second half of the text, while the last student is responsible for writing down what everyone said during their work to form the conversation draft. Suppose the second student has a problem in understanding the first half of the text, others could help him or her by giving explanations or providing methods, but they should not analyse the text for him/her. Students' role of "helper" in cooperative learning also means that when someone in the group demonstrates negative attitude other members should encourage him or her to move forward (Li, 2013).

Consider students' different oral English proficiency and characteristics within cooperative learning groups. One potential constraint of effective cooperative learning instruction is the diverse educational backgrounds of students. As there are usually students of different oral English proficiency levels within a cooperative learning group, designing and planning of cooperative learning tasks should take students' language levels and their interests into consideration. As indicated by the empirical studies of the literature review, college English

teachers tend to design their cooperative learning tasks based on the content of textbooks; currently in China, there are mainly three versions of textbooks for all universities: *College English*, *21 Century College English* and *New Horizon College English* (Luo, 2012). However, there are different types and levels of universities in China, such as comprehensive universities and specialized universities on technology, as well as Arts and Languages schools that focus on language instruction; among them, there are top universities and higher vocational colleges. Students in different universities have different majors, oral English proficiency levels and preferences; obviously the same textbooks are not appropriate for all of them. In addition, I have noticed that many themes of the textbooks may not be appropriate for oral English practice. For instance, some topics are not culturally current, and all cultural references tend to be from the West, such as “Charlie Chaplin” in the book *New Horizon College English Four*; some topics seem difficult for starting a discussion, such as “Five Famous Symbols of American Culture” and “Nazi Concentration Camps” in the book *New Horizon College English Two*. Teachers have to carefully think about how to group students within a cooperative learning group to maximize their oral production and facilitate the enhancement of their spoken English, as well as consider how to design and plan tasks to meet with students' demands. Here I provide two suggestions: (a) designing and planning of appropriate cooperative tasks and (b) grouping students after full consideration of influential elements.

Designing and planning of appropriate tasks. Teachers should prepare the learning materials and design the cooperative learning tasks based on the group level, which may “enable students to process not only the literal meaning of the text but also its inferential meaning within the designated time in class so that they can use it as a source to discuss the content” (Lin, 2009, p. 144). The principles of “language and cognition” proposed by Skehan and Foster (2001) in

task design indicate the need to address specific aspects of language when preparing to address students' varying levels of oral proficiency: "The linguistic demands of the task such as vocabulary, grammatical structures and tenses should be suitable for learners' current level" (Lin, 2009, p. 144); moreover, "the cognitive complexity of the task's content" (Lin, 2009, p. 144) should be taken into consideration.

The following is an example of how to tailor lessons to levels of oral proficiency that I have adopted from my Mandarin teaching class, a class whose students were not only Chinese, but came from a range of international backgrounds. After studying a text about Sichuan cuisine in China, from which we learned some sentences and appropriate expressions for asking others' preferences of cuisine and tastes, as well as some typical remarks for commenting on cuisine, I asked my students in each cooperative learning group to come up with a three-minute short conversation that could occur in a restaurant. As the students on this occasion had just learned several sentences that would be appropriate for this context, I observed that most of them were able to incorporate these phrases into their conversation after a short period of preparation. Amazingly, some students were quite good at drawing inferences from the example of Sichuan cooking and, once free to discuss the cuisines in their own countries, were able to adapt the popular phrases to discuss their unique culinary experiences.

The above case is an example to which teachers could refer when designing timely in-class simple tasks, which I suggest using in some independent colleges or higher vocational colleges in which students' oral English proficiency is under an intermediate level. Tasks, such as talking about cuisines are authentic and close to students' lives, which would easily attract students' interests. For students whose oral English proficiency is generally at or above the

intermediate level based on their oral pre-test scores, teachers may design some advanced tasks for them and give them some planning time after class.

I remembered a terrific example of designing of a group investigation task from my college English class. The general oral English proficiency of the students in my class was above intermediate. After learning a text about the cause of global warming, our English teacher divided us into some groups and asked us to discuss the issue of how to deal with global warming. We were required to come up with the ideas of possible actions to solve the problem by communicating among the groups. The study issue was then divided into different subtopics of solutions such as voicing public concern about global warming in mass media, powering homes and the workplace with renewable energy, eating meat-free meals and driving a fuel-efficient vehicle. Then the teacher regrouped us based on our interests in the subtopics and encouraged each group to explore more deeply the subtopics of solutions and present a seminar after a week. In the seminar, each student was considered an expert on his or her particular solution and each provided two to three detailed explanations based on the solution. For example, my group, which was responsible for the solution of voicing concern about global warming, argued that in order to make our voice heard, we should resort to the use of mass media which, in terms of audience numbers, had the greatest potential for reaching people. We did our research at the school library, searched the web and interviewed several communication and media experts in the school. Everyone in the group worked together on arranging, analyzing and integrating the information we gathered and on designing how to present the seminar together. During each group's seminar presentation, our teacher asked other group members to raise questions and make comments on the topic. For example, other group members raised doubts about some statistics that the group reported or asked for further explanation about the

effectiveness of a proposed solution. After all the groups had finished their seminar presentations, we moved on to the cooperative learning requirement of group processing, which requires group members to gather together to reflect on which parts of the assignment should be kept and which need modifying for next time; students within a given group should also be encouraged to give some comments and suggestions on each other's performance in the group such as the extent each prepared for presentation. This wonderful group investigation task provided several benefits to us besides enabling us to use oral skills in the process of preparation and seminar presentation, such as developing our critical thinking and problem-solving competence.

As Kayi (2006) asserts, the goal of teaching speaking today should be the improvement of students' communicative skills, and helping students to express what is in their minds and to learn how to orally react to different social and cultural communicative situations properly; in choosing the speaking topics for students, based on students' language proficiency, teachers should connect what students have learned in class with some hot issues in current society that are meaningful for them; examples of topics that are potentially more current for students include job applications, the management of money matters and health and fitness. Topics like these could generate more practical communication skills among students, because they bear a close relationship with students' daily lives.

Grouping students after a full consideration of influential elements. From the empirical studies, we understand that some students in cooperative learning groups tend to do most of the talking while some show no willingness to participate in oral tasks. This phenomenon of unequal participation requires that we think about the problem of grouping students to address this potential impediment to a distributed development or students' oral proficiency. Several studies

point out that while implementing cooperative learning, teachers should be especially careful as to which students could be grouped together; elements such as English proficiency, personality, preference and personal backgrounds should all be taken into consideration (e.g. Han, 2006; Ma, 2006; Nie, 2010; Wang, 2009).

In dealing with the imbalance of students' participation that results from their disparate English proficiency, namely that some high achievers tend to dominate the group talking and some low achievers seldom talk and just listen, I suggest that teachers regroup the cooperative learning teams regularly, let us say, after two or three weeks. Teacher may encourage each student in one group to change roles with each other if possible, which may familiarize them with different roles within a cooperative learning group and thereby learn empathy for the different perspectives and objectives within the spectrum of roles. If some low achievers are not able to accomplish particular the roles such as "reporter," to fulfill the group task, these students who have a lower level of English proficiency should receive some assistance from other group members who may model or give guidance on how to summarize the group performance. When being grouped with different peers, students may pick the roles according to their preference. In a different group, students may apply what they have gained from the former group into new group practices, which will enable them to enhance their oral communication skills.

It is very likely that some students may not speak in cooperative learning groups not because of their low oral English proficiency, but because they feel that the group topic is boring. In this case, teachers should group the students of the same interest together according to the topics of the task. For example, if the main theme of the task is "talking about your plan during summer vacation," teachers may group those who prefer "travelling" into a group and encourage them to discuss where they would like to go and give reasons for their choices. The practice of

grouping students based on students' interests may also be applied to organizing students based on other commonalities, such as the students' hometown. From my teaching experience, especially for who are very shy or have low oral proficiency, these students will be more likely to talk with someone with whom they share some similar background. I suggest that teachers adopt the method of grouping students based on their interests and personal backgrounds at the beginning of cooperative learning practice, especially for introverted students and low achievers.

Admittedly, the issue of grouping students is far more complex for teachers when considering the diversity of students' individual backgrounds. Elements such as students' age, personal characteristics and English proficiency can be observed within the class; however, some less conspicuous elements which also influence the grouping of students may require lots of time and effort to discover, including students' family and ethnic backgrounds. Culturally, this consideration of ethnic alignment is particular to China's entrenched practice of respecting minorities by keeping them separate (grouping them according to their ethnicity within the class, or, for that matter, in restaurants). With the Han ethnicity as China's dominant ethnic group, all other fifty-five ethnic groups (Man, Mongolian, Zhung, etc.) constitute minorities. Based on these respective groups' unique Mandarin dialects, combining them is often linguistically infeasible. However, beyond this practical consideration, students might refuse to participate with others from a different ethnic group, which, according to prevailing attitudes in China, risks opening the minority to exploitation or ethnically motivated opposition. With regards to the stated intention of respecting minorities, keeping students of different ethnicities separated ensures that their vulnerability to exploitation by other ethnicities has been acknowledged and prevented. Although such an approach conflicts with the principles of a multicultural or

nationally unified cohesion of students, the Chinese perception is that minorities vulnerable to exploitation by other minorities can only be mitigated through separation.

Influenced by collectivist Confucian heritage culture, Chinese students grow up identifying as a “we” instead of an “I” in several circumstances in group work (Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005). This tendency towards collectivist identity seems to indicate that Chinese students would perform well in group work and that their cultural tendency towards collective identify should help them adapt quickly to the collectivist nature of cooperative learning; however, the Chinese Confucian heritage also indicates that some students may not work well in groups because they “pay special attention to the importance of personal relationships and consider affection between co-workers as a crucial factor that determines the success of a group” (Thanh, 2014, p. 127). Reflecting back on what I have experienced in my college English class, it seemed true that most of the students prefer being grouped with their friends rather than those they were not familiar with. When my friend and I discussed this issue, we both agreed that when joining in a group full of strangers, we often feel reluctant to express our own ideas when the ideas are opposite with others, which made us embarrassed and feel alien in others’ eyes.

There is one more noteworthy constraint on grouping students of a Chinese cultural background that needs teachers’ attention: most empirical studies seem to have reached to a similar conclusion about the willingness of students in cooperative learning activities to show positive attitudes in helping each other during both group and individual tasks; yet, when it came to oral tests, students are showing an unwillingness to support the grade sharing of the cooperative learning approach (Thanh, 2004). Influenced by the exam-driven conception generated from traditional teaching method for years, students value their scores very much; they

see the test score as a personal achievement and see it as unfair and unacceptable when receiving a small score with their co-workers.

The above constraints all indicate that the job of grouping students could be challenging for teachers. A teacher him/herself cannot be reasonably expected to investigate all the complicated characteristics and backgrounds of students that may influence the grouping issue. In light of this considerable challenge to effective grouping, I will also provide some suggestions for academic administrators, whom, I believe, can provide strong support for teachers in implementing cooperative learning in oral English instruction.

Implications for School Academic Administrators

Realizing the potential benefit of cooperative learning to students naturally requires that this method be implemented within the classroom, a requirement that highlights the importance of school administrators in incentivizing the adoption of cooperative learning. Indeed, relying on teachers alone to modify their instructional practices may not be adequate to the task of adopting a new method. As school academic administrators supervise academic affairs such as the promotion and evaluation of teachers, and play an important role in encouraging teachers to try new teaching approaches in classroom teaching, administrators can also support the implementation of cooperative learning in their universities. In dealing with the problems of teachers' unfamiliarity with the cooperative learning approach and the challenge of implementing this method in large classes, I provide three suggestions for school academic administrators to support teachers in their efforts to initiate cooperative learning in Chinese college English course: (a) to provide educational seminars on cooperative learning and experience-sharing sessions; (b) Chinese teachers and native English teachers co-teach English

speaking; and (c) to create an online cooperative learning environment and make use of modern technology devices.

Consider teacher's unfamiliarity with the cooperative learning approach. Many unsuccessful attempts at implementing cooperative learning have resulted from teachers' misunderstanding and improper use of this method (Xuan, 2015). Although many Chinese English teachers have recognized the benefits of cooperative learning for both students and themselves, most of them have neither received cooperative learning training nor have adequate understanding of this method. For instance, in Xuan (2015)'s individual interview with seven English teachers in a public college in Wenzhou, China, although five participants had more than 10 years of English teaching experience and had heard of the cooperative learning approach by participating in academic conferences, six out of seven participants misunderstood cooperative learning as traditional group work and admitted that that they only used group activities in class rather than cooperative learning; only one teacher was quite familiar with the cooperative learning approach and found this approach effective for English instruction. Moreover, although some participants claimed to have gained some understanding of cooperative learning or received some training in this approach, during the interview these teachers often used the term "group study" when referring to cooperative learning (Xuan, 2015). I believe that the phenomenon of teachers' unfamiliarity with cooperative learning is a typical example of the Chinese college English teaching field. To address this problem, I suggest that academic administrators provide some pre-training seminars about cooperative learning as well as experience-sharing sessions for university English teachers.

To provide educational seminars on cooperative learning and experience-sharing sessions. I suggest that universities invite some experienced teachers or experts on cooperative

learning to host seminars to model cooperative learning for teachers, to enable teachers to experience first-hand the participatory nature of this method, and, when possible, to share their experiences of using cooperative learning in their classrooms. Both lectures and seminars could enable teachers to develop some ideas about how to conduct cooperative learning in college English systematically. Moreover, when teachers hear about some successful experiences of cooperative learning instruction in their own teaching domain, they may realize the method's effectiveness and feel encouraged to give it a try in their own teaching.

Although teachers could learn the elements and methods of cooperative learning by themselves through reading books or searching the Internet, there are many issues related to the method's practical adoption that are difficult to explore without cooperative learning instruction. For example, as mentioned, designing proper cooperative learning tasks and grouping students are challenging for one teacher to deal with. To solve this significant problem, teachers who are new to the method must learn from more experienced teachers.

I still remember the cooperative learning seminar I participated in two years ago when I was teaching oral Mandarin in a university program. I had twenty-three students in my class and I found problems in grouping them only according to their oral proficiency level. Although I understood the importance of the teacher's role in cooperative learning groups, I found it difficult to observe every student's performance because of the large class size. The seminar's expert, Ms. Y, who had twenty years of experience in cooperative learning, provided me with a solution: Ms. Y suggested that appointing a team leader for each group is necessary for large classrooms. The team leaders may be the members with the highest oral Mandarin proficiency level among the group. The level of proficiency can be determined by a pre-test of oral skills. In the likely event that the leader is the group's strongest speaker, this individual can then not only

help the teacher explain the task to the group members and organize group discussion, but also help record the problems of the cooperative learning group process and give feedback to the teacher. Thanks to Ms. Y's sharing of her experience, I applied her suggestion to my later teaching and found it very effective.

I also recommend that academic administrators support college English teachers who have an interest in cooperative learning by creating teams to promote the implementation of cooperative learning in classroom teaching. Admittedly, some universities in the remote areas of China do not have easy access to the seminars and training sessions from outside universities, because they have problems, such as a lack of relevant expertise and financial support. Under such circumstances, academic administrators may organize teachers who are willing to conduct cooperative learning to work together in planning lessons and designing activities, as well as sharing experiences and providing solutions to each other's problems. The support among English teachers would definitely expand the sources of information and learning, making the experience more productive, and thereby provide an effective means to help teachers better meet the challenge of the implementation of cooperative learning.

Consider Chinese large class size for cooperative learning practice. Beyond English teachers' inadequate familiarity with cooperative learning, the large class size for Chinese universities may also cause difficulty in implementing cooperative learning in oral English teaching. By definition, cooperative learning is beneficial as a form of small group learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1998); however, there are usually over 50 students in a Chinese college English class; thus teachers will likely encounter many uncontrollable problems in organizing cooperative learning activities in large classroom settings (Wang & Zhang, 2011; Xuan, 2015). Moreover, in examining the particular challenges of the Chinese college classroom, it becomes

clear that several unique circumstances of this learning environment may sometimes require that the teacher be more involved in the class than is typically the case in a cooperative learning class. For instance, a large class size makes it quite difficult for every student to communicate and receive equal attention from the teacher, which, in turn, may require a longer period of initiation and modeling for students to adapt the student-driven design of a cooperative learning class. For most Chinese college students, they have still at a very preliminary stage of receiving cooperative learning in English learning; students may need a period to get accustomed to cooperative learning as a new method, a process of initiation during the teacher's attention may prove crucial. Moreover, it has been found in many empirical studies that before conducting cooperative learning, the traditional teaching approach is useful in clarifying some language points (Xuan, 2015); also, the teacher's guidance and assistance is also important for students whose oral English proficiency is at or below the intermediate level. Particularly for some low achievers who are very shy, teachers play an important role in engaging those students who, even within cooperative learning class, tend not to not seize opportunities to practice oral English.

Moreover, many college English teachers are quite young in age, and have not accumulated years of experience in teaching or have not been provided enough teaching education and are regarded as somewhat "inexperienced" in instruction. For instance, they may not be experienced in handling uncontrollable students' forms of misbehaviour or distraction. The challenges of implementation also apply to experienced teachers who have developed methods of maintaining control of students in the class, as they may be too accustomed to their own teaching style to try cooperative learning as a new method.

Additionally, as Chinese college English teachers are not native English speakers, they themselves may not be able to pronounce English words correctly every time and are sometimes

not able to express themselves in native English, which, through imitation, could lead students to reproduce their teacher's errors. Although the news, YouTube and other forms of media all provide plenty of examples of English as spoken, the physical presence of a teacher in the class may present certain advantages in modeling; as after years of growing accustomed to the traditional teaching approach, most Chinese college students will initially be more receptive to the teacher for modeling. However, as there is only one teacher who is considered a "model" for students, the teacher's mistakes may influence a large class of students. To address the above problems, in the following subsections I suggest that academic administrators invite native English teachers to co-teach college oral English courses with Chinese English teachers; if this suggestion is difficult to implement in some universities, I suggest that at least school academic administrators help to create online cooperative learning environment in universities and introduce some modern technology devices into oral English classrooms.

Chinese teachers and native English teachers co-teach English speaking. Considering the generally low oral proficiency of Chinese non-English major students in most universities, one Chinese English teacher who lacks the communication competence (Wang, 2013) may lack the proficiency to fully facilitate students' development of spoken English. Consequently, I suggest that some universities in developed regions hire native English teachers to co-teach with Chinese English teachers. Chinese English teachers and native English teachers could complement each other in co-teaching oral English. As Chinese teachers have a better understanding of students' oral English levels, their learning habits and characteristics, when designing cooperative learning activities and choosing speaking materials, they could take this information into consideration in order to make the tasks pertinent to students' learning circumstances. During cooperative learning activities, as native English teachers understand

better how to express in a native way, especially for pronunciation and the expression of slang, they can do modeling while working as a guide-on-the-side and participant during students' cooperative learning activities. It is worth noting that native English teachers can better assist Chinese English teachers in evaluating students' performance in speaking. Native English teachers may have a better understanding of how to mark students under each element of speaking criteria. Evaluation of whether students have completed their tasks and how well they have done the group work not only serves to provide detailed feedback for students for further improvements, but also benefits the teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching approach and check whether they have completed the teaching goal, thereby making targeted adjustments in the future.

From my English learning experience, the problem of students' overuse of Chinese during oral English practising was somewhat improved when students communicated with someone who could not speak Chinese with them. When students are communicating with the native English teacher, instead of speaking Chinese, they are "forced" to always come up with English words to help them convey meanings, a requirement that facilitates their self-determined use of English. In the classroom, Native English can help to create an authentic English communication environment for students, which Chinese English teachers cannot do.

To create an online cooperative learning environment and make use of modern technology devices. For universities that are not able to hire native English teachers in college English, cooperative learning in online teaching and learning environments is a practical solution in dealing with the constraint of large class sizes. As Nam (2014) notes, "online learning environments enable learners to implement their cooperative learning activities effectively by using innovative multimedia that have a user-friendly interface" (p. 237). Qin, Johnson and

Johnson (1995) have shown optimism about cooperative learning in online environments because online devices not only promote students' interaction, but also help teachers to observe students' performance in the online forum. In current society, students often use computers, smartphones, iPads and other electronic devices to communicate with each other. Using these modern media not only benefits students' peer-to-peer communication, but also enables them to reach out to someone far away, potentially in countries where English is a first language. Because of the large class size, limited class time and the issue of lacking a teacher who is capable of answering all the questions students raise and of ensuring productive group dynamics within the class, an online cooperative learning environment for English learning in Chinese university college English class is worth of trying to facilitate the improvement of students' oral skills.

When it comes to grouping students in the cooperative learning process, although most research has noted that the ideal group size is five to six (e.g. Ghaith, 2002; Zuheer, 2008; Celik, Aytin & Bayram, 2012), Jacobs and Seow (2015) contend that "two members is the best size for groups, because in twosomes, students may have more opportunities to be active and less likely to be left out of the groups of two" (Jacobs & Seow, 2015, p. 30). I tend to agree with the Jacobs and Seow's principle of grouping, and believe their ideas of "two members in the group" could be well applied to the online cooperative learning environment. The online environment overcomes the limitation of space. For instance, one university student in China could be paired with a Canadian student and they could practice English speaking through Skype, Google hangout or a smartphone voice chat. Compared with practising speaking with peers in the classroom, having a native speaker to communicate benefits the student more for learning the standard pronunciation and correct grammar. By using Skype, the Chinese student may observe

the facial expressions and gestures that the Canadian student uses in communication, which makes his or her language learning close to life. If this Chinese student is paired with a Canadian student who is majoring in language education, that's mutually beneficial because the Chinese student could learn English pronunciation and grammar from the Canadian student, and the Canadian student could reflect on transferring this example of coaching Chinese language partners in to face-to-face language teaching, as well as learning Mandarin from the Chinese student. This is what the element of positive interdependence requires in cooperative learning.

Even for a group of four or five students to use Skype or Google hangout, technical devices such as an online discussion board would help them clarify their equal roles in participation. After each student finishes speaking, he or she can use colour coding to mark his or her contribution, which avoids a situation in which few students dominate the whole discussion. One consideration of which school academic administrators must be mindful is that proper instruction of online devices is needed for both teachers and students before they use those devices in classroom cooperative learning teaching and learning.

Concluding Remarks

Through analysing the findings of this study, it can be seen that cooperative learning has potential to help with the improvement of students' oral test scores, oral English production, and the use of vocabulary and expressions. Although most empirical studies generally yield positive results for the implementation of the cooperative learning approach in Chinese non-English major college English courses, some evidence shows that the cooperative learning approach is not effective for every student with every element of oral English. Because of students' different oral English proficiency levels, characteristics, preferences, learning habits and personal backgrounds, the effectiveness of cooperative learning has different impacts on them. It is also worth noting that when connecting with Chinese of certain sociocultural backgrounds, we may find some underlying constraints such as students' entrenched expectation of the traditional teaching approach, which induces resistance to the cooperative learning approach; likewise, students' ethnic background may present impediments to the effective division of groups; teachers' unfamiliarity with the cooperative learning approach and the large class size of Chinese college English class may also influence the implementation of cooperative learning in Chinese educational settings. As for the constraints of implementing the cooperative learning approach in helping with the improvement of students' oral skills, based on the empirical studies I have read and my own second language teaching and learning experience, I provide suggestions for English teachers and university academic administrators in order to give them some inspiration in their further cooperative learning practices. However, as there are different educational conditions for universities in different regions in China, my suggestions may not fit all non-English major classes in all Chinese universities.

There are three limitations of the present study that I would like to point out here. One is that most of the Chinese master's theses have made inadequate use of independent samples *t* tests to compare students' oral pre-tests and post-tests, a shortcoming that is potentially the result of the graduate students' limited familiarity with appropriate statistical procedures; because of these statistical issues, these master's theses are potentially weak in methodology and might not pass peer review if submitted for journal publication. By comparing the pre-test and post-test scores, I suggest that future researchers conduct research after they truly understand the statistical test and its effective application. I also suggest that researchers fully consider the influential elements that may affect the accuracy of the experiment results.

Another general limitation of the research on which this study is based is the lack of research on the phonetic components of oral skills, such as pronunciation and intonation. Although several studies have generally pointed out that cooperative learning approaches are effective in improving students' oral skills in information exchange in communication by providing more opportunities and an environment for practice, these studies tended not to focus on the improvement of phonetic components of oral skills (pronunciation and intonation), which are also important components of oral skills. In the cooperative learning process, most students may ignore their pronunciation and intonation while communicating, as these qualities of their spoken English are considered secondary to the content-driven concern of conveying the speaker's meaning or intention. Chinese college students come from different areas of China and their English speaking may be influenced by the pronunciation and intonation of their dialects; this variety of local phonetics presents a difficulty for peer correction and assistance in English pronunciation and intonation in the process of cooperative learning discussions. Based on this challenge of dialectic difference, I recommend that future researchers observe and conduct the

experiments on the impact of cooperative learning on the improvement of students' pronunciation and intonation in the online environment, as I propose in the implication part. With the assistance of several modern technology devices, such as Skype, Google hangout and mobile voice chats, Chinese students should be able to communicate with overseas native language speakers.

Thirdly, the findings and suggestions of this study are mainly generated from the previous literature and my personal teaching and learning experience, which leads to the limitation of the study's scope. The examples I provide in this study mainly come from my teaching and learning experience in a certain university in Tianjin, China, and the students I focus on are mainly non-English major students major in Chinese language studies. I recognize that both the university and students I focus on could not be representative of the cases of other Chinese universities. As one of the four municipalities in China, Tianjin has lots of communication and exchange opportunities with English-speaking countries and under this atmosphere, University English teaching and learning in Tianjin is emphasized by the local government as well as university academic administrators and teachers. In China, the gaps of students' oral English competence among universities in different districts are considerable. Moreover, non-English major students may be divided into several different majors, some of which, such as language studies in other countries, may share some traits with English learning and thereby promote English learning; by contrast, some majors in science and technology may be way too dissimilar from English learning such that students in these majors require time to adapt to the English learning environment. To solve this problem, I highly recommend that future researchers include more participants of various majors from universities in different areas and of different levels of language competence. A Chinese version of Skype or QQ video chat

may help research on regional influences. When providing suggestions for university academic administrators and English teachers, a greater variety of samples would make the research results more comprehensive and effective. To conduct the experiment more effectively, I suggest that future researchers combine a quantitative research method with a qualitative research method; namely, to use surveys, interviews, class observation and data analysis together to make the experiment results more comprehensive and persuasive. Moreover, a follow-up study is needed to testify the feasibility and veracity of the original results of the cooperative learning experiment.

I hope that this project can serve as a reference for college English teachers who are interested in the cooperative learning approach. Nevertheless, due to its limitations, more research needs to be done on the effectiveness of cooperative learning. The following questions are some suggested research topics for further studies: How can cooperative learning techniques be used in an integrated way to increase more classroom dynamics? Since Chinese students reportedly dislike cooperative learning during oral English tests because others' performance may negatively impact their partners' scores, how should teachers design cooperative learning tasks for oral tests? Finally, with the advent of online communities and real-time oral communication over the Internet, how can online interfaces be most effectively adapted to fulfil the criteria of cooperative learning? The promise of cooperative learning is the improved outcome of students' efforts to improve their English oral proficiency in the college ESL classroom. In the pursuit of increasingly effective methods for language instruction, cooperative learning has the potential to improve acquisition while also creating a learning experience that, for many students, is a socially rich exchange that more closely mirrors the experience of real everyday interactions than traditional teaching approaches.

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Footnotes

¹ The paired sample t test (also called the dependent sample t -test) is a statistical measure used to test the mean difference between two sets of observations. In a paired sample t -test, each subject is measured twice (usually before and after treatment), resulting in pairs of observations.

² The independent samples t test is a statistical test that compares the means of two independent populations to determine whether there is statistical significance between the associated population means.