THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR ACADEMIC ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract: Academic English is characterized by the integration of English knowledge and subject content, which can promote the cultivation of students' professional academic ability in specialized subjects with the help of English. This study aims to construct a theoretical framework and implementation approach of a professional learning community for academic English teachers across departments and disciplines to build a platform for teachers to communicate, cooperate and learn from each other, so that teachers can learn to conduct innovative teaching and produce research results with integrated thinking, improve teachers' comprehensive ability, and finally achieve the dual goals of teachers' professional development and improvement of teaching quality.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers, the key of teaching reform, are the practitioners of teaching idea and teaching method innovation. Outline of the National Medium - and Long-term Program for Education Reform and Development (2010—2020) stressed the importance of improving the teachers' qualification, especially the importance of improving their professional level and teaching ability, which all paid attention to the professional development of teachers. However, the "inadequate capability" of foreign language teachers is a serious problem. Therefore, many scholars are committed to the study on the development of teacher’s professional competence, among which the establishment of professional learning community (hereinafter referred to as PLC) is widely regarded as an important and effective means to promote teacher’s professional development. In January 2018, the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Team Construction in the New Era, which clearly required to strengthen the construction of learning communities such as teaching and research offices of colleges and departments, and establish the mentoring mechanism. In March 2021, Prof. He Lianzhen and Prof. Wen Qiufang both delivered keynote reports on the topic of teacher professionalism and teacher development community at the 5th High-level Forum on Reform and Development of Foreign Language Education in Universities of China. Therefore, it is necessary to take the advantage of the construction of teachers' professional learning community to improve English teachers' competence in teaching, research, self-learning and management.

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Most of the teachers' PLC research abroad focuses on primary and secondary school teachers, such as the positive effect of PLC on teachers' practice or knowledge acquirement and on students' performance;\(^2\) the confusion and challenge brought by cooperative learning to teachers.\(^3\) Some studies focus on non-English teachers in colleges and universities, and it is found that teachers' participation in the PLC is crucial for their professional growth through a case study of two newly recruited science teachers.\(^4\) However, empirical studies on second/foreign language teachers in colleges and universities are rare.

Domestic teacher PLC researches are mainly empirical studies on the positive impact of PLC on teacher professional development;\(^5,6\) studies on the practice and effect of PLC construction for teachers in single discipline;\(^7,8\) expounding the concept and principle of teacher PLC construction in China from the theoretical level\(^9,10\).

In the literature, there are few studies on PLC construction across departments and disciplines in universities for a specific course. The search results on CNKI with the keyword "Inter-departmental/Inter-disciplinary (Foreign Language) Teacher Community" show that the only relevant literature is *Theoretical and Practical Exploration on the Construction of Professional Learning Community for Inter-departmental Multi-lingual Teachers* written by Wen Qiufang and Zhang Hong in 2019. However, this study only discusses the theoretical construction and practical exploration of multi-lingual and inter-departmental teacher PLC construction in foreign language disciplines. In order to enrich and expand the research of PLC, this study chooses academic English, which combines foreign language knowledge and professional knowledge of various disciplines, as the research carrier, and expounds the theoretical framework and implementation approach of inter-disciplinary PLC construction across departments.

### 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PLC FOR ACADEMIC ENGLISH TEACHERS

Professional learning community (PLC) refers to an intellectual community, established in the process of teacher professional development, that has the same goal and participates in the planning, implementation and reflection of professional development. Its theoretical basis is mainly the Activity Theory proposed and perfected by Vygotsky et al. and Dewey's view that human learning has social characteristics.\(^11\) Activity Theory believes that the interaction between people and society needs to be completed with the help of "intermediary tools". The seven elements in the system, namely subject, object, intermediary tools, rules, community, division of labor and results, are closely linked and interact with each other over and over again. The completion of activities means that the subject gets development in cognition, consciousness, personality, quality and other aspects.\(^12\) Teacher PLC is an intermediary tool to internalize teachers' advanced psychological cognition. Teacher (i.e. "subject") starts from observing community regulations (i.e., "rules"), actively interacts with peers under the arrangement of organizers (i.e., "division of labor"), shows his value (i.e., "object") through various forms of learning (i.e., "intermediary tools"), and finally obtains theoretical knowledge, promotes practical progress, improve ability and stimulates reflection (i.e., "results").\(^13\)

It is based on the the core idea and the practice of interaction, exchanges and cooperation in the process of community building that teachers can harvest the innovation and integration of knowledge, ideas and practices in the process of exchange and communication with their peers, internalize and
improve the understanding of knowledge, and constantly promote the creation, reserve and enhancement of knowledge system in new teaching practice, so as to maximize learning and development with the guidance and help of people who are more capable.[14]

The theoretical framework of PLC for academic English teachers is based on the above mentioned theoretical basis and characteristics of PLC. As an important course in college English curriculum system, Academic English mainly cultivates students' academic English communication ability. It is demand-based, content-based, competence-centered, project-driven, student-centered and application-oriented teaching.[15] Academic English, a combination of English knowledge and disciplinary knowledge, promotes the development of students' academic ability and accomplishment in professional disciplines with the help of English knowledge. Therefore, the construction of academic English PLC belongs to the interdisciplinary teacher PLC across departments, breaking the barrier of lack of communication between teachers of different departments and different disciplines, building a platform to communicate, cooperate and learn from each other for teachers' development, and creating a sound environment for development. At the same time, it helps members understand other research fields better, learn to produce innovative research results with integrated thinking, and improve their ability to solve complex social problems,[16] so that the quality of education and teaching can be enhanced and the students will be benefited.

Learning from the 7 elements of activity theory and the experience of the team led by Professor Wen Qiufang in constructing the theoretical framework of multi-language PLC and cross-school PLC,[9] the theoretical framework of PLC for academic English teachers mainly includes four elements: members, goals, intermediary tools and mechanisms. Meanwhile, in view of its cross-departmental and interdisciplinary characteristics, the specific content and embodiment of the theoretical framework have been changed. (as shown in figure 1)

![Theoretical Framework of PLC for Academic English Teachers](image_url)
Theoretical framework of PLC for academic English teachers is a complex adaptive activity system with dynamic, continuous and interactive characteristics. Each element is connected with the two-way arrow, indicating that PLC is a whole with four elements interrelated and promoted.

Members are the main body of PLC construction, located in the center of the frame. They interact with goals, intermediary tools and mechanism through subjectivity and initiative. Academic English, taking English as the carrier, involves the academic content of various majors, so leaders or organizers in academic English PLC should have leadership qualities, namely organizational ability, discipline professional competence, etc., as well as the ability of interdisciplinary communication and interdepartmental execution in order to coordinate and organize members from different departments better to participate in community activities and carry out effective interaction. Therefore, the leading members need to be 2-3 teachers from different disciplines as the organizers, facilitators and instructors of PLC. While the members, the main body of the community, are inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary teachers, that is, teachers of English majors and those from different disciplines involved in the academic content of the course. This well conforms to the standard that members of the PLC have great diversity, because diversity is the resource condition for the community to produce new values, achievements and understandings. In addition to disciplinary differences, differences among members can be reflected in aspects such as professional level, cognitive ability, teaching experience, life experience and personality characteristics. It is these differences that make the possibility of mutual attraction and the necessity of mutual learning within the community. Besides, members have strong initiative to participate in PLC activities and actively engage in emotional and cognitive interaction.

The goal, as the direction to determine the construction of the community and the yardstick to test the effectiveness of community construction, is located at the top. A community cycle is generally 2 to 3 years, therefore, the goals of academic English PLC can be divided into long-term goals, namely the improvement of teachers' self-development ability and interdisciplinary (English plus other professional disciplines) research and teaching ability, the promotion of discipline development, such as the abilities of interdisciplinary reflection, teaching, research and cooperation, etc.; and short-term goals or measurable goals, that is, to refine the abstract goals into recent explicit goals, for example, Interdisciplinary members work together to complete specific academic English tasks and projects in each unit, apply for projects and write papers based on team objectives, etc. Goals can be divided into integrated or innovative ones also, which refer to how teachers from different majors in the community achieve outstanding and innovative teaching and research achievements in interdisciplinary fields while promoting the improvement of students' academic and English abilities through the content of different subjects involved in each unit by the means of discipline integration and knowledge mastery. To sum up, Different explicit goals can be set up in different stages of PLC construction, so that members can clearly understand the activities they should participate and the tasks they should complete in different stages, so as to ultimately achieve long-term implicit goals. And the goal of integration and innovation refers to the innovative interdisciplinary results produced by integrated thinking, interdisciplinary communication and cooperation among members.

Intermediary tool is the carrier to achieve the goal and the means of operation of the learning community. There are "objects" and "people" in the intermediary tools. Intermediary tools of object include abstract and concrete ones, while the intermediary tools of "people" are divided into “the other”
and “self”\[18\] For academic English PLC, abstract intermediary tools refer to the research problems, issues or focuses raised by interdisciplinary teachers in academic English research and teaching activities. The specific intermediary tools are POA (Production-oriented Approach) cloud platform of professional learning community as well as visible scientific research and teaching materials shared in this carrier, breaking through the limitation of time and space in the process of interaction and participation of inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary PLC members. The intermediary tools of "people" refer to interdisciplinary PLC members of various professional fields involved in academic English courses. They are the human resources of cooperation, interaction and communication as well as the participants, promoters and beneficiaries of the development of PLC.

Mechanism, the driving force that uses the carrier to accomplish the goal, belongs to the operation driving force of the community. First of all, the community rules is a system of restriction, supervision and management to ensure the normal conduct of PLC activities. Only by abiding by the rules can each member create a better cultural atmosphere of equality and cooperation. Secondly, according to the teaching or scientific research tasks and their own professional disciplines, members shoulder their own duties, actively participate in the activities of PLC, and establish the interactive mechanism to promote the interaction of PLC members from the levels of emotion and cognition, \[19\] so as to cooperate more harmoniously and then make progress from the integration of disciplinary knowledge and teaching practice. At the same time, interactive norms are formed, which involve how the participation and interaction is carried out among members, and how the various relationships constructed in the process of interaction are maintained well in the unwritten norms. Finally, the evaluation and supervision mechanism will be established. The evaluation mechanism is the evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of PLC activities, and the assessment of whether the activity objectives are completed, which is indispensable for the effectiveness and improvement of PLC; Supervision is the implementation mechanism of community regulations, which can manage the sequence of activities of team members better.

3 PLC CONSTRUCTION APPROACH FOR ACADEMIC ENGLISH TEACHERS

3.1 Creating the culture of cooperation among interdisciplinary teachers based on ecological orientation

Scholars who hold the views of teacher professional development with ecological orientation generally believe that creating a cooperative atmosphere in the teacher team is an effective strategy to promote teacher professional development. Hargreaves, the representative of ecological orientation, divides teacher culture into four sub-cultures, namely individual culture, faction culture, artificial cooperation culture and natural cooperation culture. Among them, the teacher culture of natural cooperation is the cooperation intention internalized by the members of the teacher group, which has the most significant impact on the professional development of teachers.[20] Therefore, at the beginning of the establishment of academic English PLC, teachers should be encouraged to have a sense of spontaneous professional development and willingness to actively participate in interaction and cooperation, and teachers should be given an open, equal and democratic interactive environment and the supportive measures. Only in this way can the members of PLC consciously work hard, actively participate in the
professional learning community, have a stronger motivation to participate in innovative practice, mutually exchange and learn, so that their own sustainable development can be achieved, the teaching improvement can be made and students can be benefited.

The PLC for academic English teachers, taking the academic course team as the core, includes English teachers and teachers of disciplines involved in the academic English course. In terms of form, the PLC of academic English teachers embodies the interdisciplinary form of team organization, which is different from the previous discipline group, teaching and research office and other groups that take single subject as the project. Therefore, it is necessary to create the culture of interdisciplinary cooperation among teachers based on ecological orientation from multiple aspects.

First of all, according to the majors involved in academic English course, community members are recruited in the College of Foreign Studies and relevant professional departments on the premise of voluntarily exchanging, communicating and sharing learning resources in the learning process and jointly completing tasks based on common interests, which is in line with the “natural cooperation culture” mentioned above, so as to achieve the best effect of PLC operation. In addition, academic English related research groups and teaching competition teams are prepared within the community, providing a platform with strong teaching and academic atmosphere for members to expand their research fields and to cooperate across disciplines. Thirdly, teachers should be encouraged and guided to break through departmental barriers and management limitations, broaden teaching and research fields and enhance professional development by supportive management and policies. For example, team members are reasonably arranged for regular classroom observation and after-class discussion across disciplines, so that they can have a further understanding of the crossover and integration of interdisciplinary knowledge and put forward challenging questions thereafter. Then, the leading members of the PLC coordinate the class time of the members to ensure that the cooperative members who are in charge of relevant parts can have the available time to work together in lesson preparation and teaching, and encourage teachers to try new teaching strategies and generate new research ideas. Additionally, cross-department data sharing and online teaching platform for team members are implemented to provide a supportive environment for communication and cooperation among community members. Finally, create an equal and democratic cultural atmosphere in academic English PLC. Although the course is offered by the Department of Foreign Studies, each member can take turns to contribute their professional knowledge and expertise in different positions and roles due to different majors, disciplines and specialties. According to the key and difficult points of unit content, each member can take turns to serve as the team leader of lesson preparation. It’s essential to construct the "collegiality" of the learning group, that is, a state in which members of PLC consult, govern and cooperate with each other. In a community, a group cannot be controlled by a single thought or decision. Instead, "collaborative" reflection and dialogue among community members are advocated. The interactive norms of mutual trust and mutual assistance in the community enable cooperative teachers to communicate, discuss and share with each other in an equal and democratic atmosphere, so that teachers can freely conduct interdisciplinary exploration, questioning and innovation in the community.

3.2 Constructing academic English PLC based on disciplinary integration
As academic English is an interdisciplinary course that combines English knowledge with academic content, which mainly trains students to apply English knowledge to acquire disciplinary knowledge and improves students' academic English communication ability, the construction of academic English PLC must take the path of disciplinary integration. Based on the above theoretical framework and viewpoints, two ways to create academic English PLC are proposed: interdisciplinary project cooperative PLC and online & offline hybrid PLC. The details are shown below.

![Fig. 2: Implementation Approach for Academic English PLC](Image)

### 3.2.1 Interdisciplinary project cooperative PLC

Interdisciplinary teachers’ PLC emphasizes the reorganization of knowledge of different disciplines by university teachers, which requires teachers to continuously better their cognition and understanding of knowledge of different disciplines, exchange views with each other, undertake reflection, give play to the advantages of different disciplines and finally realize the specialization of university teachers.[22] Therefore, interdisciplinary project cooperation is the main form of PLC construction for academic English teachers.

Firstly, build a team based on the members' expertise and shared vision. Academic English PLC members' recruitment is aimed at English teachers as well as teachers of related majors who take the initiative to pursue the study of interdisciplinary teaching and learning, because they all hope that in addition to deepen mastering to their professional knowledge, they can improve the cognition and understanding of different disciplines of knowledge, so as to optimize their own teaching and broaden their research. At the same time, teachers who specialize in the academic disciplines covered by academic English courses, like geological science, mechanical engineering, tourism, management etc., will join to help the English teachers in the team to understand the terminology and knowledge better with their expertise from professional perspective. In this way, professional subject knowledge in English texts can be better taught, and English can be used more efficiently as a tool for students to
acquire disciplinary knowledge and serve their majors. In return, the communication and interaction between teachers of other disciplines and English teachers also broaden their access to professional knowledge and enhance their ability to exchange professional knowledge with English in the international field. In short, only when members with common vision and expertise join in, can academic English PLC achieve more significant results, and the so-called "superficial" community will not appear, that is, although there are forms and frequencies of cooperation between teachers, there is no essence of cooperation.\[23\]

Secondly, set the goals of academic English PLC based on the purpose of solving practical problems in the teaching process, improving the teaching and research ability of individuals and group, and assisting to realize the development plan of school. The long-term goals of academic English PLC determined by the interdisciplinary characteristics are to build a team of high-quality teaching and research teachers for comprehensive universities, to qualify members to accomplish the school's policy of "foreign language serve and support majors", and to form a faculty team with broad academic vision and high quality teaching and research capabilities that can serve the development and curriculum quality of the university. The setting of short-term goals should consider firstly the basic needs of PLC members, such as publication of papers, promotion of professional titles, etc.\[24\]

Specifically, the short-term goals of academic English PLC are that teachers coming from different majors can design interdisciplinary teaching according to the contents of different professional fields involved in each unit through the integration of disciplines and knowledge mastery, and apply for projects and write papers based on the team goals. Each member, for example, should write at least one paper to meet the publication requirements every year, and apply for a university-level or above project within 3 years. Furthermore, the PLC project activities are divided into the themes of science & engineering and humanities & liberal arts according to the professional categories covered by academic English. Thereafter, set up teaching and research teams in accordance with these themes and apply the expertise and resources of participants to determine the teaching and research activity plans.

Finally, establish the project-oriented "learning community" platform by breaking the disciplinary barriers. Under the classification of science & technology theme and humanities & liberal arts theme mentioned above, the second-level cooperation groups within academic English PLC are set up, namely academic English (science & technology) groups and academic English (humanities & liberal arts) groups. The specific steps of implementation are as follows. The two cooperative groups shall jointly participate in the teaching and research activities of the whole learning community, and complete the overall tasks and objectives of PLC, such as regularly attending academic English PLC lectures and teaching seminars, participating in the discussion and formulation of activity plans, and completing the tasks of papers and projects as required. At the same time, the second-level cooperation groups will further discuss, exchange and prepare lessons together according to the teaching content of the part they are responsible for, and design the teaching plan, cooperate in teaching and research as well as determine the direction and theme of papers and projects. When conducting interdisciplinary project cooperation, the roles of "objects" and "people" in the intermediary of construction should be given full play to. Moreover, on basis of the teaching problems, research topics or focus raised by academic English PLC in scientific research and teaching activities, community members conduct interdisciplinary theoretical interaction through POA Cloud platform of professional learning community and regular teaching and research activities offline, give full play to their specialties and
complement each other in cooperative teaching, and finally achieve professional coordination through the division of labor, cooperation and interaction of members, so as to improve the teaching and research ability of PLC members and promote the teaching effect.

3.2.2 Online & Offline Hybrid PLC

POA (Production-oriented Approach) proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang is a foreign language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics. This method mainly targets middle and advanced foreign language learners, while academic English courses are advanced English courses after completion of basic college English courses. Academic Englis, therefore, is in line with the application scope of POA. The "learning-centered theory" in POA advocates that teaching must realize teaching objectives and facilitate effective learning; The theory of "to learn and use as one " in POA advocated the language teaching activities are closely combined with application, that is, input learning is closely combined with output application, and the two are organically linked. So students no longer only learn texts, instead, they use the text as a means to learn how to complete output tasks in English.[25] These core points mentioned above are consistent with training objectives of academic English for students, so it is feasible to adopt POA theory to guide the teaching reform in academic English courses. Besides, given the discipline integration of academic English PLC, which refers to the teaching team in academic English PLC is composed of members from different departments and different majors, it is not possible for them to regularly conduct teaching and research discussions face to face due to a certain degree of time and space constraints, so academic English PLC adopts POA cloud platform to carry out activities of community or cooperative groups online.

English teachers who are familiar with the POA teaching process should first introduce and share the POA teaching theory and its teaching implementation in academic English course, so as to ensure that each member understands the general direction of the course teaching methods and process, and then conduct teaching design and discussion on this basis. Subsequently, English teachers will communicate the main idea of the English texts and the disciplinary content involved with the teachers from relevant disciplines through the information technology network platform, such as QQ group, nail group, rain classroom, school education platform, network cloud disk, etc., jointly extract the academic key points in and beyond the texts, and finally design the unit output tasks that can combine professional knowledge and English ability. In terms of the selection of input materials serving output tasks, information on disciplinary knowledge are carefully selected and uploaded by disciplinary teachers, while English knowledge materials serving disciplinary content are selected and uploaded by English teachers. Then the English teachers mainly design and arrange the organizational form of teaching activities. Finally, English teachers and disciplinary teachers jointly evaluate the output tasks from the use of English language use and the presentation of disciplinary content respectively. In the whole process, the communication and cooperation of teachers in the community are characterized by the integration of disciplines. English teachers can learn from disciplinary teachers how to conduct academic English teaching from the perspective of professional disciplines rather than just of English knowledge. While disciplinary teachers also learn how to use English to facilitate them become more international in their professional fields in addition to assisting academic English teaching. Moreover, the communication in community cloud platform takes advantage of the fragmented time after work to break the limitation of time and space, which is conducive to more effective cross-department
interaction and communication among teachers. It also provides a more free and broad platform for the sharing of teaching and research resources, which strongly promotes the professional development of teachers.

In addition to the online cooperation and mutual assistance mode, the PLC can organize regular offline exchanging and learning activities for teachers from various departments, such as observation of English public class, class evaluation of teachers from various disciplines, seminars of English plus disciplines in academic English course, project discussion of cooperative groups, etc. Experience sharing of teaching and scientific research achievements will also be held regularly, and experienced experts will be invited to give lectures. In the course evaluation, we should give full play to the expertise of teachers of all majors and optimize the teaching of academic English from the perspective of discipline integration and the assistance of English; During seminars and project discussions, members conduct scientific research attempts by taking the establishment of academic English PLC as an opportunity, teachers' interdisciplinary cooperation of scientific research as the basis, the learning themes initiated by the community organizers or the common concerns of the majority of members as the direction, and the coordinated development of English and other disciplines as the goal. To sum up, offline activities complement and deepen online communication. Regular face-to-face communication across disciplines and departments can help members improve their understanding of the other teaching and research fields and learn to produce innovative teaching and research result with integrated thinking.

In brief, the creation and connection of online and offline learning space requires the active participation of PLC members, the necessary technical support provided by departments, such as communication tools, cooperative teaching tools, collaborative tools and physical site space for activities, etc. Besides, PLC should carry out activities that members can involve to enhance the cohesion of community members. Online & offline hybrid PLC provides members with a broader platform for cross-departments and inter-disciplinary interaction, and promotes the professional development of teachers better.

4 SUMMARY

This paper expounds the theoretical framework of academic English PLC and the construction of the relevant path, and the research is still being explored. General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward new requirements for teachers at the 2018 National Education Conference: teachers shoulder the responsibility of imparting knowledge, spreading ideas, passing on truth, shaping souls, moulding lives and creating new generation. Therefore, teachers should become lifelong learners through various channels. The academic English PLC characterized by discipline integration emphasizes teachers’ reorganization of different disciplinary knowledge, which requires teachers to deepen their cognition and understanding of interdisciplinary knowledge, exchange and learn from each other, give play to the advantages of different disciplines, and finally serve education better.

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