

## Study on Professional Development Mode of Business English Teachers --- from the Perspective of Action Learning in a Professional Learning Community

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**Keywords:** Business english teachers, Action learning, Professional learning community, Professional development mode, Strategies

**Abstract:** The development of undergraduate business English major requires a high-quality group of multi-disciplinary business English teachers. Based on the literature analysis of research on language teachers' professional development approaches, and Action Learning within professional learning communities, this paper discusses what Action Learning means to business English teachers, and how we can integrate reflection, cooperation and guidance from a variety of sources by following an iterative process of identifying problems, reflecting, planning and taking actions so as to promote professional development of business English teachers.

### 1. Introduction

With the growth of knowledge and development of society, expectations on quality of teachers are becoming higher and higher, and meanwhile teachers' qualities and capabilities are believed to be essential to successful teaching reforms as well as effective teaching and learning, according to the guideline of "Only good teachers can provide good education" stipulated in Outline of National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020). With further implementation of economic globalization strategies such as "One Belt, One Road", demands on talents who are equipped with both a high level of English language proficiency and adequate business-related knowledge as well as cross-cultural communication skills are increasing year on year.<sup>[1]</sup>

Since its accreditation in 2012, business English is developing on a fast track with 393 universities and colleges having set up business English major in China up to early 2019 according to data released from Ministry of Education. However, the quality of business English teachers in China are far from being satisfactory. On the one hand, their teaching abilities cannot fully meet the requirements of interdisciplinary programs as they lack a deep understanding of orientation and cultivation objectives of business English major, and they do not have a clear understanding of the nature and orientation of business English curriculum.<sup>[2]</sup> On the other hand, their research scope and abilities are limited as only a small number of them participate in research projects with international or local enterprises. What's more, a lack of long-term team-building mechanism hinders the sustainable development of business English teachers. That is why it is time to promote professional development of business English teachers, so as to facilitate successful teaching reforms and ensure the quality of business English graduates.<sup>[3]</sup>

The theory of Action Learning was developed by Reg Revans who applied it to support organisational and business development, problem solving and improvement. Similarly, the focus of teacher learning and development have been shifting from theory to practice with emphasis on experiences, participation, cooperation and reflection; thus, it is justifiable to apply Action Learning theory to explore the process and facilitate progress of teachers' professional development. Based on literature analysis, the current article intends to answer the following two questions: 1. What is Action Learning for business English teachers; 2. How can we implement Action Learning to promote professional development of business English teachers.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 An Overview of Research on Language Teachers' Professional Development Approaches**

The research on teachers' professional development has mainly experienced the iteration of “instrumental” approach which emphasizes an external knowledge system and a mechanism that promote teachers' growth, to “practice-reflection” approach which highlights self reflection and improvement, and then to an “ecological” approach which combines internal and external cultivation and interaction between self and the environment. In the third stage, a number of language researchers and teachers have been dedicated to exploring routes of teachers' professional development based on self-reflection, community cooperation and guidance from experts, two examples are cited as follows. Sun Qinmei & Zhen Xinmin<sup>[4]</sup> conducted a case study to illustrate how a college English teacher achieved professional development via integrating personal learning with learning in teacher-student communities, imagined communities, school-based teacher learning communities, cross-institutional teacher learning communities, and global learning communities. Wang Jianna<sup>[5]</sup> constructed a framework of integrating reflection and cooperation to enhance English teachers' abilities of teaching, researching, reflecting and cooperating based on a quantitative research. Bao Wen<sup>[6]</sup> put forward Business English teachers' development mechanisms highlighting autonomous teaching and research, cooperation of teachers, cooperation between teachers and society.

In a general sense, teachers' professional development is a long learning process with characteristics of autonomous learning, practice, and reflection, as well as the aim to constantly improve their teaching philosophy and practice with cooperation.

### **2.2 Action Learning**

Action Learning is a cooperative and experiential learning approach dedicated to solving real problems in the process, which is suitable for teachers as they are learning with more specific purposes and plans.

#### **2.2.1 Origin and Development of the Theory**

Reg Revans developed the theory of Action Learning to support organisational and business development by solving problems and making further improvements. He also created a formula of “ $L=P+Q+R$ ” to describe how action learning is achieved. In this formula, L is learning, P is programming meaning traditional instruction of knowledge, Q is question to create insight into how people see, hear and feel, and R is reflection. Later on, followers expanded the theory and put forward a new formula of “ $AL=P+Q+R+I$ ”, with the added “I” meaning implementation. Thus, action learning, an integrative learning, combines knowledge learning, experience sharing, creative solutions to problems and taking actions. Through such recycling process, both individuals and teams can achieve growth; and with the increasing popularity of Action Learning, its application spreads from learning strategies in corporations to those in the educational field.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### **2.2.2 Components of and Ground Rules That Empower Action Learning**

There are six components in an action learning programme, including a problem (project, challenge, opportunity, etc.), an action learning group or team, a process that emphasizes insightful questioning and reflective listening, taking actions on the problem, a commitment to learning, and an action learning coach. Firstly, the problem must be significant, so the resolution of this problem has to be of great importance to the organization. Secondly, members of a group are expected to bring various perspectives and fresh viewpoints to the task of resolving significant organizational problems. Thirdly, action learning succeeds because the process focuses on the right questions that build group cohesiveness, generate innovative and systems thinking and enhance learning results. Fourthly, action learning requires that the action learning group be able to take action on the problem. Fifthly, a commitment to learning, especially long-term learning is essential to the success of action learning. Sixthly, a learning coach is needed to help group members reflect on how they listen and how they may have reframed the problem.<sup>[7]</sup>

As the power of action learning is built on two core behaviours: reflective inquiry and continuous learning, it is essential to follow two ground rules. The first rule requires group members to learn to ask and prepare questions, and the second rule not only empowers the coach to intervene, but also requires the coach to be able to discern what is important and focus the group on these issues.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **2.2.3 Professional Learning Community for Teacher Education**

Originally, community is a term in sociology, meaning a group of people with the same goals or living in the same area, and it was introduced into the field of education in the 1980s. Boyer <sup>[8]</sup> pointed out that a learning community is an organization which consists of teachers, students, administration staff and others who share clear striving goals and common learning visions. Professional learning community is an operational mode of application of learning-oriented organization theory in the educational field. Hord <sup>[9]</sup> believes that teachers and school administrators should strive to pursue and share learning while teaching. He also designed five dimensions for building professional learning communities: school leaders who provide policy support to shared learning, common values and visions, collaborative learning through reflective dialogues and inquiry, supporting environment with both favourable material and spiritual conditions such as beliefs in education and life-long learning, and shared individual practice.

The link between action learning and teachers' professional development is that both emphasize reflection, practice, cooperation and dynamism.

## **3. An Integrative Professional Development Mode for Business English Teachers**

Drawing inspiration and enlightenment from the theory of action learning and professional learning community for teacher education, in light of “ecological” language teachers' professional development research approach, the author attempts to construct an integrative professional development mode for business English teachers based on their current development situation.

Business English teacher's action learning is a process of continuous reflection and learning in a professional learning community that aims to solve practical teaching problems and improve the quality of teaching with the help from other teachers or researchers, experts, business practitioners and students to enhance teachers' professional development.

There are two circles in this mode: the outer circle is an iterative cycle of identifying problems, reflecting, planning and taking actions; the inner circle is a general learning community which includes three smaller learning communities, namely, teacher-teacher learning communities, teacher-business practitioner learning communities, and teacher-student learning communities. What is special about such learning communities is that experts may not necessarily be designated based on their titles or certificates, but on their capabilities and experience in solving a particular problem in a given task. Furthermore, the outer circle that goes around the inner circle indicates that all the learning communities should follow the iterative cycle with special emphasis on reflection and practice.

### **3.1 Teacher-Teacher Learning Communities**

Dialogues and cooperation between business English teachers usually take place in terms of participating in course construction programmes, observing classroom teaching, and conducting collaborative research.

#### **3.1.1 Participation in Course Construction Programmes**

According to the requirements of the National Standard, the core courses of business English are divided into four sections: English knowledge and skills, business knowledge and skills, cross-cultural communication and humanistic quality. Each section is equipped with a relatively fixed teaching team. In addition to the meetings held by the department of business English or the teaching and research teams, the teaching team of the course group should also carry out teaching and research activities on a regular basis, including discussion on teaching objectives, teaching contents, teaching methods and assessment strategies in the syllabus, the formulation of teaching

reform plans, the selection and polishing of excellent courses, the construction of network courses and micro-lectures, and the guidance of students to participate in a variety of business English contests. Different course teams often have opportunities for communication and cooperation, for example, teachers from language and business course teams form a team to guide students to participate in the English business practice competition.

### **3.1.2 Observation of Classroom Teaching**

The two parties involved in classroom observation should be in the position of an equal dialogue, so that both sides can speak freely, enhance emotional exchange and promote common development. Both sides determine the goal of each observation, that is, by observing daily teaching practice, analyzing and reflecting on their teaching methods, specific implementation processes and students' learning responses and effects. Observation teachers should take questions and thinking into the classroom, do a good job of classroom observation and record in the process of observation, actively think about the advantages and disadvantages of the teachers, and reflect on how to arrange the same teaching content, how to design teaching activities, how to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in participation, and how to deal with similar teaching emergencies. Classroom observation is not only real-time observation, but also video observation, such as learning from award-winning teaching videos in SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Competition.

### **3.1.3 Conduction of Collaborative Research**

Business English teachers should integrate discipline resources according to their own interests and specialties, as well as the characteristics of business English discipline, establish and participate in all kinds of business English teaching and research teams. In addition to setting up curriculum teams within departments, it is recommended that team members should try ways of cross-department and cross-university cooperation. We can learn from the practice of “Team Building of Interactive Development of English Teachers of Universities in Beijing” designed and coached by Professor Wen Qiufang. The design of such projects is described as follows. Teachers from business English departments and economics and management schools should cooperate with each other, and school A should cooperate with school B and school C in Business English cross-school cooperation programmes under the guidance of relevant experts. To ensure success of such programmes, coordinators should be carefully selected to be in charge of communicating with team members to determine the theme, content, form and final results of collaborative research. Members within collaborative research teams focus on a certain type of teaching and research issues, carry out a series of action research by learning from each other to expand the vision and capabilities of teaching and research. When the right time comes, we should pool the wisdom and strength of the team to apply for all kinds of teaching reform and scientific research projects at all levels, and further implement cooperative reflective teaching and research practice activities based on the projects, so as to form a virtuous circle of mutual benefit between teaching and research. What is more, for teachers who actively participate in such activities, they not only can improve their professional abilities, but also get a full sense of professional achievement and belonging.

## **3.2 Teacher-Business Practitioner Learning Communities**

Based on the multi-disciplinary characteristics of business English major, it is necessary to actively explore an efficient mode of in-depth cooperation between colleges and enterprises to improve the professional abilities of business English teachers. One way is to carry out the college-enterprise cooperation mode of combining teachers' temporary training in enterprises with “order class” projects. An order training agreement is signed according to needs of the enterprise and thus business English teachers and the experts sent by enterprises should jointly work out the talent training programs. The enterprise selects industry experts to teach some professional courses, while business English teachers of the college attend such business professional courses in batches according to their own professional abilities and development needs. At the same time, they take students from “order class” to the enterprises for practical training. In the end, enterprise practice work logs, practice summaries of temporary training, professional construction research reports and

other materials serve as the assessment basis of temporary training. The second way is to jointly revise the talent training plan. Taking the formulation of the talent training plan for business English major in our university as an example, the team of business English teachers conducted in-depth enterprise research to collect information for revising the talent training plan, and invited industry and enterprise experts and senior employees to participate in the discussion on revising the plan for business English major in our university, so as to comprehensively understand the professional quality, ability and knowledge requirements of talents needed by enterprises in the region. Guided by the needs of enterprise talents, we can adjust the training objectives, restructure the curriculum, build a team of curriculum teachers, and establish college-enterprise practice training programmes. The third way is to jointly develop teaching resources and apply for horizontal research and practice projects. As case study is one of the commonly used teaching methods in business English teaching, we can cooperate to explore, polish and analyze local cases with Chinese characteristics to better serve learning purposes and development of local economy.

### **3.3 Teacher-Student Learning Communities**

There are generally two ways for cooperation between business English teachers and students. On the one hand, they cooperate to enhance teaching abilities and learning outcomes. For example, questionnaires and interviews can be employed to establish a dialogue and cooperation mechanism between teachers and students, so that they could gain a deeper understanding of the actual learning situation of students, such as learning motivation, strategies, habits, effects, etc., and especially teachers could gain access to students' understanding and views on the teaching objectives, contents, activities and evaluation system of the course, which helps teachers timely adjust teaching arrangements according to the specific situation of students. On the other hand, they cooperate to prepare students for scientific research. Students could be selected voluntarily to take part in research projects guided by teachers. The latter provide necessary theoretical and guidance to the former, and the former help the latter with field research and data gathering, for instance, conducting questionnaire surveys to find out enterprises' needs for talents.

## **4. Strategies of Optimizing the Development Mode**

### **4.1 Carrying out Systematic and Multi-Level Reflection**

Business English teachers can reflect from five dimensions: reflection in classroom teaching, student learning, teacher-student interaction, teacher development and educational environment<sup>[10]</sup>.

They also reflect in the following three levels: from the basic level of technical reflection and practical action reflection to the high-level critical reflection.<sup>[11]</sup> They apply multiple reflection tools, such as introspective reflection including writing teaching reflection logs, growth autobiography; collaborative reflection including students' feedback, peer discussion and experts' advice; inquiry reflection including case study and action research. The process of reflection is systematized as it creates a four-step spiral development mode of finding problems, describing problems, analyzing problems and taking actions, so as to help teachers cultivate the habit of reflection and promote teaching accordingly. Therefore, an experienced reflective business English teacher should not only record what happened inside and outside the classroom, but also be able to use ESP (English for Special Purposes) and other foreign language education and teaching theories to analyze the causes of the events according to the requirements of school education and teaching culture and policies, the changes of business environment and policies at home and abroad, so as to take corresponding measures to solve the problems, test the newly formed theories, and improve self-confidence and teamwork. By carrying out systematic and multi-level reflection based on ongoing practice, business English teachers are expected to gain in-depth and sustainable development.

### **4.2 Giving Full Play to the Professional Leading Function of Experts**

The development of business English major needs not only the education, teaching and research

experts in the field of ESP, but also business practitioners and experts in enterprises and industries both of whom can give guidance and advice on the direction and ways of teachers' professional development. On the one hand, the experts with rich practical experience and cutting-edge theoretical knowledge in ESP field help to build reflection modes, develop reflection tools, evaluate effects of reflection, and cultivate expert teacher leaders within the team, so that learning communities can always maintain the internal driving force of professional development. On the other hand, the practical experience of industry experts is a valuable resource for the professional development of business English teachers, which helps the school teachers to overcome the problem of lacking practical experience.

### **4.3 Constructing Cooperation Based on Key Issues**

Every business English teacher has his own professional development problems. In order to narrow the differences and maximize the efficiency of the teacher cooperation model, professional learning communities should be mediated by the key problems in teaching and research. Key problems refer to the common problems recognized by members within a learning community regardless of teaching situations, especially the puzzles and problems that teachers encounter in the actual teaching process. Based on the principle of voluntariness, equality and mutual benefit, a cooperative learning community is established. By communicating openly through multi-level and multi-form reflection, teachers select and establish teaching or research problems that team members are generally concerned about and urgently need to solve within a certain period of time, formulate the specific cooperation objectives within that period, clarify the system and arrangements that team members

consciously abide by, and finally, promote the application of cooperation results. Let's take mentoring students to participate in the National Business English Practice Competition as an example. Adhering to the concept of promoting teaching by competition, business English teachers should form corresponding teaching and competition guidance cooperation teams, such as combining the language requirements of the competition with the teaching objectives of comprehensive English language courses. At the same time, professional teachers from the school of economics and management and enterprise staff with rich practical experience should be invited to join the team to provide guidance from management, marketing, accounting and other relevant theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This will not only benefit students, but also help business English teachers to improve their business knowledge and ability with the help of the multidisciplinary learning community.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper attempts to construct a business English teachers' professional development mode with one outer circle of identifying problems, reflecting, planning and taking actions, and the other inner circle covering three professional learning communities in order to help business English teachers improve teaching and research as well as business practice abilities, and thus promote professional development. As a theory needs to be further tested and improved by practice, follow-up empirical research, such as action research, case study and questionnaire interviews should be carried out to record the continuous process of teachers' professional development with quantitative and qualitative data.

## **6. Acknowledgment**

“Research and Practice on the Training Mode of Speaking and Writing Skills of Application-oriented Undergraduate Business English Majors Based on 'Output-driven and input-enabled' Hypothesis”, a general teaching reform project supported by Chongqing University of Education, JD2017042.

General scientific research project: “Action Research on Core Competences and Professional Development Path of Business English Teachers in the Context of One Belt, One Road Initiative ---

Taking Chongqing Universities as an Example” supported by Chongqing Education Science 13th Five-Year plan 2018, 2018-gx-333.

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