



Contradictions as catalysts: An autoethnography of a TESOL teacher's professional learning at an English language centre in China

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study investigates a TESOL teacher's professional learning (PL) in a group setting, such as workshops, in Chinese English Language Centres (ELCs) from a sociocultural perspective. Drawing on a self-interview, entries from a twelve-month reflective diary, and institutional documents, including PL training documents and training notifications, the analysis highlights the tensions between PL activities—often fragmented, repetitive, and oriented toward test preparation—and the teacher's broader professional aspiration. These tensions became productive sites of PL through the teacher's ongoing efforts to navigate them, such as individual adaptation, reflective practice, and informal peer collaboration, shaped by personal, social, and technological factors. Specifically, contradictions related to institutional commercial goals, standardised teaching tools, and overwhelming workload not only constrained but also stimulated growth in the teacher's learning. The findings suggest that teacher learning in marketised ELCs emerges through the negotiation of competing educational and commercial priorities across time. At the same time, the adaptive responses that supported learning also helped manage and absorb systemic tensions, contributing to the reproduction of existing organisational arrangements. The study contributes to understanding group-based PL in for-profit ELCs, a largely underexplored setting, and highlights the need for more collaborative, context-sensitive, and sustainable frameworks that involve both teachers and institutions in supporting teachers' PL, which is

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essential for responding to the unique contradictions and competing demands shaping teachers' PL in commercialised ELC contexts.

Keywords: Activity theory; autoethnography; English language centre; genetic method; mediation; professional learning; sociocultural perspective; TESOL teacher.

Introduction

In recent years, as seen in many countries such as Vietnam and South Korea (Koseki & Nguyen, 2025; Restall et al., 2023), TESOL in China has shifted from an exam-oriented approach to one emphasising practical communication skills, driven by policy changes and the increasing need for English proficiency in contexts such as study abroad, business, and travel (Yan, 2023). However, many TESOL teachers still rely on traditional methods that prioritise grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence, resulting in what some term dumb English (Yassin et al., 2024). Moreover, learner expectations for native-like pronunciation and fluent spoken English, influenced by the native speaker fallacy (Samuell, 2023), further intensify this mismatch, as teachers are increasingly expected to support communicative language use while many remain shaped by exam-oriented teaching traditions.

English Language centres (ELCs), a crucial component of the TESOL field in China, are not exempt from the above issues. Beyond these issues, they are also confronted with other challenges, due to their commercial nature. Within a neoliberal framework, ELCs have commodified English language as a tool for linguistic entrepreneurship and competitiveness (Yan, 2023). In essence, English language education at ELCs is marketed as a product for learners to consume, positioning English proficiency as a form of capital that can enhance individuals' educational, social, and economic opportunities (Yan, 2023). Consequently, individuals increasingly regard English as a critical tool to access a broader world and as a gateway to success (Iskra, 2023). Hence, they are willing to pay higher tuition fees and expect more effective English instruction than in traditional school settings to develop communication skills for various purposes (Robinette, 2020). Because of this, teaching has become a more demanding job at ELCs. These demands make sustained and meaningful PL particularly important.

However, under such marketised contexts where educational activities are influenced by commercial imperatives, ELCs may prioritise student enrolment, customer satisfaction, and institutional competitiveness over long-term investment in teaching quality and teacher development (Robinette, 2020). Consequently, PL is often reduced to short-term, outcome-oriented training. Such training is typically organised around immediate institutional needs rather than a coherent developmental trajectory for teachers, resulting in PL that lacks coherence and continuity (Robinette, 2020). ELCs in China would benefit from relevant theoretical and empirical insights to address these inherent challenges.

Yet, despite the need for such insights, a review of the broader TESOL teacher learning literature (Section 2) reveals important research gaps. Firstly, many studies (e.g., Tajik et al., 2019; Wu & Liu, 2024) have conceptualised teacher PL as a set of activities rather than a situated, mediated, relational process shaped by personal histories and cultural contexts, which is essential for capturing the socially and historically contingent nature of teacher learning (Johnson, 2009). Secondly, there remains limited understanding of how TESOL teachers in ELCs experience and make sense of PL, as most studies (e.g., Andrei et al., 2015; Nielsen et al., 2020) have focused on university or public-school contexts. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of the first author, a TESOL teacher in a Chinese ELC, through a sociocultural lens and autoethnography, with particular attention to how PL is socially mediated and shaped by contradictions within marketised contexts. This study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What contradictions does the teacher (Author1) experience in PL at an ELC in China?

RQ2: How does the teacher navigate these contradictions and develop professionally?

RQ3: What factors influence this process of navigating the contradictions?

The significance of this study is threefold. For researchers, it provides an empirical narrative account of PL in the under-examined context of Chinese ELCs, advancing theoretical discussions by conceptualising PL as a situated, relational, and evolving process. For ELC leaders, the findings offer insights to reconsider PL structures that better support teachers. For teachers, this study highlights how teacher agency, reflection, and mediational resources can transform PL into meaningful development, encouraging teachers to view themselves as active agents in their learning.

Professional learning in TESOL

This paper positions teacher PL as a complex, dynamic process. In this study, PL is understood as teachers' ongoing learning through engagement with professional practices and contexts. While the early scholarship predominantly framed teacher PL as a series of discrete, observable activities, such as workshops and trainings with efficacy often measured through participation rates or satisfaction surveys (Tajik et al., 2019; Wu & Liu, 2024), this outcome-oriented view of PL has been increasingly contested in the literature. A growing body of work now understands PL as an ongoing process embedded in professional practice, influencing teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and classroom practices (e.g., Tajik et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023). This shift represents a move from viewing teachers as passive recipients to acknowledging them as active agents and negotiators of meaning within their professional communities (Wang et al., 2023).

This process turn has materialised in various PL implementation models, each exposing a critical gap between idealistic frameworks and complex realities. Collaborative, group-based models (e.g., PL communities), for instance, are widely advocated for fostering strategy-sharing and collective problem-solving (Johnson, 2009). Yet, critiques consistently highlight that such models often presuppose an ideal dialogic space, overlooking how institutional hierarchies, time pressures, and unequal workloads structurally constrain genuine engagement and risk silencing alternative voices (Zhou et al., 2025). Thus, the mediational tools and social relations through which knowledge is co-constructed remains insufficiently examined. In contrast, self-directed individual modes (e.g., action research), while promoting teacher autonomy, are frequently critiqued for their potential isolation and detachment from shared practice, which may limit the transformative impact of personal reflection (Smith, 2017). A hybrid model has potential to integrate both group and individual approaches into a more holistic framework. For instance, studies show it can combine video-based individual learning with group evaluation (Howard & Scott, 2017), or pair workshops with sustained self-reflective practice (Smith, 2017). However, the implementation of a hybrid model appears challenging in practice due to the significant demands it places on coordination, time, and institutional culture, explaining its relatively limited prevalence (Smith, 2017).

While the literature affirms PL's potential to enhance teacher knowledge, classroom practice, and self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2023), there is an increasing recognition of the non-linear and heavily mediated nature of this change. For example, study-abroad experiences can broaden teachers' awareness of research-informed teaching (Wu & Liu, 2024). However, the acquisition of new knowledge is not a straightforward transfer but a complex process of negotiation and reinterpretation within teachers' existing belief systems and local constraints (Vosniadou, 2019). Changes in classroom practices, such as improved classroom management and interactional awareness, are also common PL outcomes, although they often depend on the availability of resources and institutional support (Tajik et al., 2019; Vosniadou, 2019). Moreover, PL participation has been linked to increased self-efficacy; in China, for example, taking the Teaching Knowledge Test is associated with such gains, though the effects are uneven (Wang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the mechanisms behind this correlation are still not well understood.

A contemporary sociocultural perspective views teachers' PL as originated in teachers' participation in sociocultural practices and contexts, highlighting the role of interacting personal and contextual factors in PL engagement (Johnson et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2019). Personal factors, such as teachers' needs, prior knowledge, and motivation are crucial (Vosniadou, 2019), while contextual factors, including programme quality, institutional leadership, and national policies, also significantly influence PL engagement (Edge et al., 2015; Main et al., 2020). Furthermore, the interplay between these factors is particularly important (e.g., Tajik et al., 2019). For instance, conflicts between personal motivation and institutional expectations can either foster reflection or hinder engagement (Dang, 2013; Nguyen & Ngo, 2025). Such conflicts may become particularly salient in marketised settings where educational and commercial priorities coexist.

However, despite the growing recognition of the complex nature of teacher learning, several gaps remain in the literature. First, limited studies have applied a sociocultural perspective to offer a holistic, systemic analysis that fully integrates both personal and contextual factors, as evidenced by recent reviews showing that research tends to examine these factors in isolation (Zhou et al., 2025). Second, much of the current research overlooks the experiences of teachers in for-profit institutions, where PL may be influenced by different institutional constraints (Robinette, 2020). Third, the use of autoethnography as a methodological tool to explore teachers' lived experiences remains underexplored, limiting a deeper understanding of how personal and contextual factors interact in PL.

Conceptual underpinnings

Against the backdrop of PL in TESOL and to address the gaps above, this study employs a sociocultural framework integrating three interrelated concepts, including mediation, genetic method (GM), and third-generation activity theory (AT), to examine Author1's PL in group settings at an ELC in China. These concepts have been widely applied in second language teacher education (Cross, 2010; Dang, 2013; Johnson, 2009; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Ngo, 2025), suggesting their relevance for exploring teacher PL in group contexts at ELCs. The ELC context, influenced by institutional and client-driven demands, offers a unique site for applying these constructs.

Mediation, central to Vygotsky's theory (1978), refers to the shaping of cognition through the use of artefacts—both physical (e.g., tools, technologies) and psychological (e.g., language, concepts). Mediation emphasises that learning and development is socially and culturally mediated, where psychological tools help learners process external information and reorganise internal cognitive functions (Johnson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1981). In this study, mediation helps understand how ELC teachers internalise professional knowledge via tools such as pedagogical discussions, digital platforms, and how they externalise this knowledge through classroom strategies and reflection.

Vygotsky's GM (1978) complements mediation by addressing the temporal dynamics of teacher learning across microgenetic (moment-to-moment), ontogenetic (lifespan), and cultural-historic (sociocultural context) domains. GM allows the study to explore how Author1's PL evolves in a group setting, shaped by both personal and institutional histories. This perspective adds developmental depth, illustrating how teacher PL is layered, cumulative, and context-sensitive.

Third-generation AT (Engeström, 2001) builds on Vygotsky's mediation principles by adopting a systemic approach to understanding human activity within sociocultural and historical contexts. Drawing particularly on Engeström's (1999, 2001, 2008) elaboration of the third-generation model, this study conceptualises teachers' PL as a form of collective activity situated within broader institutional and cultural contexts. This model introduces the interaction

of at least two activity systems with a shared object (Figure. 1), making it ideal for analysing the joint PL systems of teachers and the ELC. As illustrated in Figure 1, the two interacting systems represent Author1's PL activity and the ELC's institutional PL system, which intersect around partially shared but potentially conflicting objects (e.g., supporting student learning vs. maintaining the centre's commercial reputation). Each system includes components, including subject, object, tools, community, rules, division of labour (Engeström, 2001), which together shape how PL activities are organised and mediated in this study. This analysis examines how teacher PL and the ELC's PL systems intersect at a microgenetic level (i.e., moment-to-moment interactions within specific PL activities), while also considering ontogenetic (i.e., Author1's PL trajectory over time) and cultural-historic dimensions (i.e., broader institutional and sociocultural contexts shaping PL practices). A central focus in this analysis is systemic contradictions within or between activity system components that disrupt routine functioning (Engeström, 2008). These contradictions are not mere problems but potential sources of innovation and development when surfaced and negotiated (Engeström, 2008). In this study, tensions are used analytically to capture the observable manifestations of these contradictions in everyday PL activities.

In summary, the integration of mediation, GM, and AT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Author1's PL at an ELC. Mediation highlights the role of cultural tools, GM captures developmental trajectories, and AT situates these developmental processes within broader institutional and historical contexts. Together, they present a multi-dimensional view of PL as a process mediated by cultural tools, evolving over time, and shaped by interactions between individual, PL activities, and institutional structures.

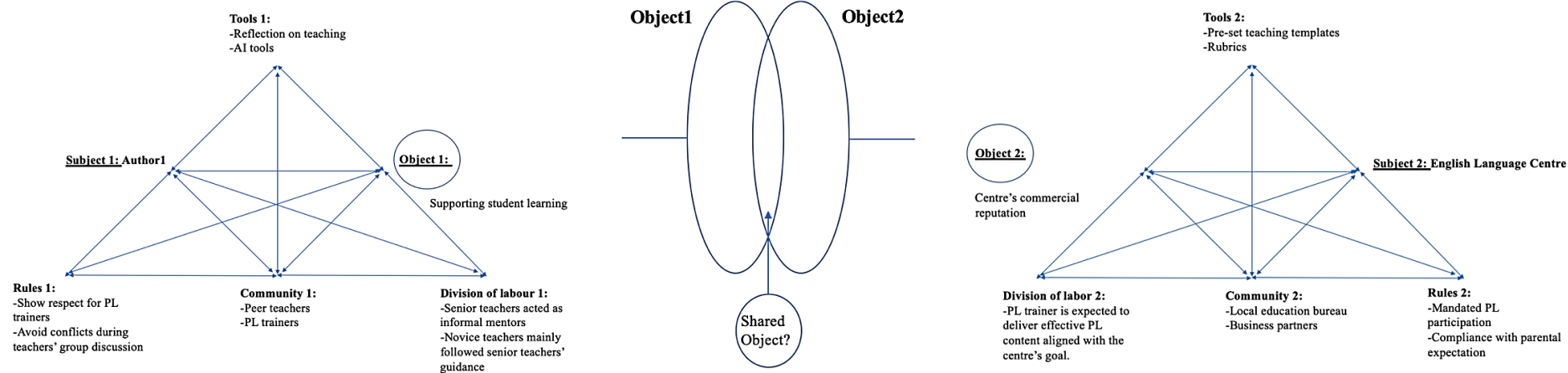


Figure 1. An example of joint activity system for PL at an ELC in China (adapted from Engeström, 2001).

Methodology

Study design and context

This study adopts autoethnography as its methodological approach to explore a teacher's PL experiences in group settings at an ELC in China. This methodological approach integrates autobiography (focusing on personal PL) and ethnography (exploring the culture of PL practices within the institution) (Adams et al., 2017), providing a rich site to analyse how personal and cultural factors co-construct teacher learning. Therefore, it aligns with the study's sociocultural orientation. The writing process serves as both data and a tool for cognitive reorganisation and meaning-making (Johnson, 2009), highlighting the evolving reflections of the researcher.

Due to the autoethnographic nature of the study, different pronouns are intentionally used. In the Findings section, I use "I/my" to emphasise lived experience and reflexive meaning-making. In Finding subheadings, "the teacher" signals thematic interpretation, not personal narration. In other sections, "Author1" (or "the teacher") is used to maintain a formal academic tone.

Author1 has taught at an ELC in China for over 15 years. The ELC is a large, privately owned institution that operates within a highly commercialised market. Its primary learners include school-aged students preparing for high-stakes English exams and adults seeking career advancement. The centre's operations are influenced by business goals, such as maintaining enrolment rates and meeting parental expectations. Teachers face a rigid schedule, often with back-to-back lessons, and are expected to meet performance indicators such as student retention and satisfaction ratings. PL at the centre reflects this commercial logic, with sessions often focusing on exam preparation strategies. These sessions are mandatory but brief, aiming to standardise teaching methods.

Data collection and analysis

The study employed three primary sources of data: a self-interview, Author 1's reflective diary (from July 2024 to June 2025), and PL documents. The self-interview, guided by a set of semi-structured questions pre-designed by Author1 and reviewed by Author2, was designed to facilitate Author1's self-reflection on his PL experiences. Following Vygotsky's (1978) GM, it explored Author1's personal and professional PL experiences, and influencing factors, with a focus on the internalisation (i.e., how professional knowledge is taken up) and externalisation (i.e., how it is enacted in practice) of mediating artefacts (e.g., pedagogical discussions, digital platforms such as AI tools) (Vygotsky, 1978). The 90-minute interview was audio-recorded and transcribed using Tencent Meeting. Additionally, Author1 maintained a 12-month reflective diary, documenting his emotions through reflective entries about his feelings and responses to specific PL activities, and anticipated pedagogical applications (e.g., notes on how new ideas might be applied in teaching). While the reflective diary initially emerged as part of

Author1's ongoing professional reflection, it later became an important source for analysis in this study. The self-interview was subsequently conducted to facilitate retrospective meaning-making across these experiences. These two methods address RQ1 by uncovering individual experiences in a PL group setting, RQ2 by exploring how Author1 developed through internalising new understandings, and RQ3 by identifying factors influencing his PL. To complement the interview and diary, PL documents were also collected, including eight PL training documents and four training notifications from Author1's ELC related to PL activities he attended (e.g., workshops). These documents were selected because they outlined institutional expectations regarding teacher participation in PL and training objectives while also reflecting organisational priorities such as student outcomes, customer satisfaction, and institutional performance. As such, they provided important contextual information for understanding the institutional conditions shaping Author1's PL experiences and the contradictions identified in the analysis.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), informed by third-generation AT (Engeström, 2001) to explore how the components of the PL activity systems interact and shape Author1's PL experiences. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts and reflective materials to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial coding was then generated inductively by Author1 using NVivo as an organisational tool to manage and retrieve coded excerpts, with iterative critical feedback from Author2. Examples of initial codes included "frustration with test-driven PL", "pressure from parents", and "marketing-oriented training" (Figure. 2). The preliminary themes were further refined through iterative discussion between Author1 and Author2, during which themes were reviewed, compared across the dataset, and defined in relation to the RQs. Subsequently, the research team conducted a reanalysis through the conceptual lens of AT, using the joint activity system comprising Author1's PL and the ELC's PL activity systems as the primary unit of analysis. Contradictions within the activity systems were identified and analysed as key to understanding how Author1's learning unfolds through negotiation and adaptation. During this process, Author2 and Author3 both contributed to applying the conceptual framework and engaging in in-depth discussion and validation of the findings. Final themes, supported by illustrative excerpts, were presented in the Findings.

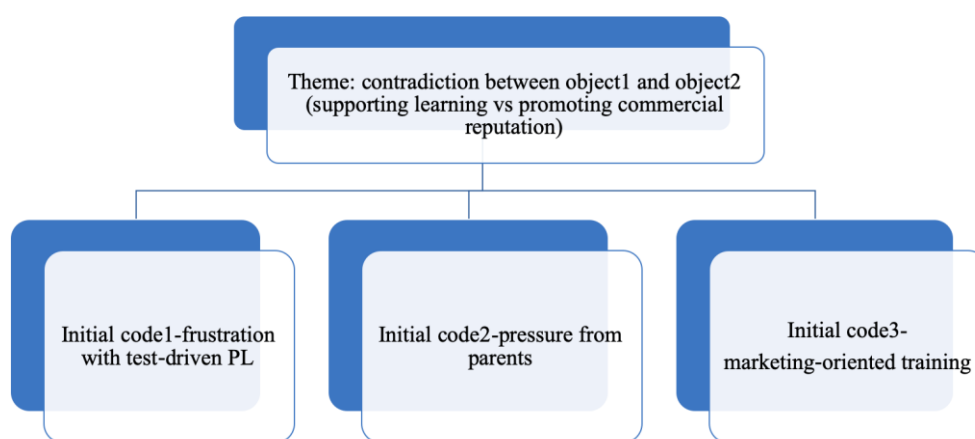


Figure 2. Example of coding process.

Findings

In this section, a joint activity system was constructed and analysed, which identified three contradictions between the teacher's and the centre's PL activity systems. Each group of subsections illustrates: (1) the tensions experienced within the PL activity systems (RQ1), (2) how the teacher navigated these contradictions in ways that supported PL (RQ2), and (3) the influential factors shaping this navigation process (RQ3). Table 1 provides an overview of the findings, which are presented and discussed in the following subsections.

Table 1. An overview of the findings.

Theme	Manifested tension	Teacher's navigation	Influential factors
Contradiction 1: Object 1 vs Object 2	Supporting learning vs supporting promoting commercial reputation	Transforming frustration into inquiry	Peer dialogues; Emotional exchanges
Contradiction 2: Object 1 vs Tools 2	Supporting learning vs standardising teaching tools	Filtering and reconstructing the centre's input; Engaging in self-directed, reflective experimentation	Prior experiences; Self-initiated mediation
Contradiction 3: Division of labour 1 vs Object 2	Managing overwhelming workload vs promoting commercial reputation	Developing micro-strategies; Engaging in peer-mediated collaboration	Digital tools; Collaborative practices

Contradiction 1

The tension between supporting learning (object 1) and promoting commercial reputation (object 2).

My professional object was to enhance students' authentic language competence. In contrast, the centre's object focused on rapid test score improvement to sustain commercial reputation. This contradiction became evident in frequent but fragmented PL activities, such as workshops, teaching meetings (*jiaoyan hui* 教研会), and training sessions. These PL events overemphasise practical techniques over pedagogical inquiry. For example, PL sessions focused on improving high-stakes test scores (e.g., IELTS). A typical session might be advertised as: "How to Help Students Achieve a One-Band Increase in Two Weeks (Trainer: Ms. Y, Time: Friday 3:00-4:00pm). Attendance compulsory" (PL notification document, 17 May 2025). As such, most of these sessions left me burdened with adapting generic strategies to fit students' needs. On another occasion, when I raised a question about supporting low-vocabulary students, the trainer responded vaguely: "Try breaking down the question types" (reflective diary, 4 January 2025). But that wasn't the issue. I needed help building learner confidence and stamina, not more tricks.

Moreover, the gap widened with misleveled students placed in advanced classes due to parental pressure.

Parents often insisted that their children join IELTS classes regardless of their actual proficiency level because they viewed these classes as pathways to future opportunities. If the parents request an IELTS class, we put the student there. We can't afford to lose a client (self-interview, 31 July 2025).

As a result, I once taught an IELTS class with students ranging from CEFR A2 to B2, all expected to reach band 6.5 within two months.

While planning today's lesson, I became increasingly aware of the large proficiency gap among students in the same IELTS class. Some students were ready for advanced tasks, whereas others struggled with basic comprehension. I found myself asking: "How can I design tasks that challenge advanced learners while still supporting those who rely on translating every question word?" (reflective diary, 11 February 2025).

I raised this issue in a weekly meeting, hoping to spark a discussion on differentiated instruction. Instead, the coordinator moved on to the next agenda item: "Reminder to submit weekly mock test data" (12 August 2024). That crystallised that group PL in the ELC setting lacked responsiveness, reducing complex classroom challenges to data-driven deliverables. This disconnect narrows the technical focus of test-driven PL and reinforces reliance on prescribed techniques.

Another striking feature was how frequently group PL blurred teacher development with institutional marketing. We were often asked to attend sessions on delivering demo lessons, instructed to explain our pedagogy to reassure parents.

Much of today's meeting focused on how teachers should communicate with parents about the centre's approach rather than on classroom practice itself. We were reminded not to forget to mention the 'one-to-three-step feedback loop' when talking to parents. It shows that we care. The emphasis appeared to be on reassurance rather than pedagogy (reflective diary, 14 July 2024).

I appreciated the centre's efforts to build trust with parents, but these meetings, while labelled "PL," primarily focused on polishing the centre's image. As I wrote in my diary:

Today's session was about selling confidence, not building language competence. The discussion seemed more concerned with institutional image than teacher development. While I understood the importance of maintaining parents' trust, I questioned whether this could genuinely be considered PL. (reflective diary, 28 March 2025).

This conflation illustrates the commodification of teacher development in market-driven systems. In such contexts, PL focuses more on maintaining institutional credibility and meeting parental demands than on teacher growth. The teacher becomes both a learner and a brand ambassador, which can create significant emotional and ethical strain.

Teacher's navigation: Transforming frustration into inquiry.

In navigating the contradiction between my object and institutional object, I transformed frustration into inquiry, internalising the productive aspects of the centre's emphasis on structure and efficiency while externalising them through meaningful learning. For example, during a session that repeatedly stressed "speed and accuracy" in writing, I questioned whether speed necessarily represented learning progress. In my reflective diary (12 August 2024), I wrote:

Throughout the session, there was a strong emphasis on helping students write more quickly under test conditions. I found myself questioning whether speed alone represented meaningful learning progress. Instead of asking students to finish under time pressure, I guided them to monitor their pacing—speed as awareness, not performance. I wanted students to develop greater control over their learning rather than simply complete tasks faster.

This maintained the institutional focus on improvement while reframing it through a developmental perspective that encouraged learner autonomy, allowing me to reconcile the centre's measurable targets with my commitment to authentic language learning.

Similarly, during a weekly discussion on “error correction consistency,” where teachers were encouraged to standardise feedback. While I understood the institutional need for uniformity, I also recognised that PL is most effective when it connects with teachers’ lived classroom realities. In my diary, I reflected:

The discussion focused on ensuring consistency in teacher feedback across classes. While I understood the rationale behind standardisation, I was concerned that it might overlook individual learner needs. Consistency should mean fairness, not sameness. I therefore encouraged students to identify recurring errors and establish personal learning goals that reflected their own development. (reflective diary, 3 December 2024).

This approach turned institutional directives into reflective moments, illustrating how internalising organisational expectations could coexist with externalising practices that honour learner diversity.

Over time, this recursive reinterpretation enabled professional growth, mediating external requirements and internal values toward conscious transformation. This illustrates how contradictions have potential to become productive sites of PL (Engeström, 2001), as the centre’s prescriptive focus unintentionally stimulated a deeper exploration of effective teaching within constraint.

Influential factors: The role of peer dialogues and emotional exchanges in the teacher’s navigation process.

Amid ongoing contradiction between institutional and personal objects, my PL was shaped more by social and emotional processes than formal sessions. Informal peer interactions, such as hallway chats and WeChat exchanges, proved most generative. These spaces created trust and reciprocity that formal meetings lacked. I recall a conversation with a colleague distressed after a student broke down over a poor mock test result. “She told me: maybe change the way you give feedback—make it about effort, not score. That really helped me last term” (self-interview, 31 July 2025). Such dialogues shaped my understanding of teaching as relational work, highlighting that meaningful PL must attend to teachers’ lived experiences rather than technical prescriptions. These interactions made PL a co-constructed process rooted in collegial empathy and shared problem solving.

Emotions formed another key mediational layer. The anxiety and self-doubt generated in high-stakes settings were transformed into professional resources through collective reflection. After a staff meeting where colleagues shared experiences of being criticised by parents, I noted: “Hearing others talk about their strategies—keeping evidence, shifting the conversation toward learning progress—made me realise that emotion can guide reflection” (reflective diary, 4 January 2025). Through these emotionally charged discussions, teachers developed a shared

understanding of how emotions shape professional growth (Smith, 2017). Therefore, I developed communicative strategies that balanced care and professionalism.

Across these mediational layers, learning occurred through transformation not compliance. These exchanges shaped my movement from frustration to agency, allowing me to selectively internalise the institutional discourse and externalise it through context-sensitive practice, thereby reconstructing PL as a socially and emotionally situated process.

Contradiction 2

The tension between supporting learning (object 1) and standardising teaching tools (tools 2).

This contradiction became particularly salient when the centre's tools in PL diverged from my pedagogical goals. Tensions arose from the centre's standardisation of teaching tools, such as overreliance on templates, repetitive outdated teaching materials, and institutional neglect of AI-related tools. For instance, we were encouraged to teach students to recycle phrases such as "It is widely acknowledged that..." for IELTS Writing (training document, 10 July 2024). While these strategies produced short-term outcomes, they clashed with my broader goal of fostering students' independent voice. As I reflected, "This gives me techniques to help students appear more successful on the surface, but it doesn't help me understand how to teach writing in a deeper, more meaningful way" (reflective diary, 6 September 2024).

The same tension extended to teaching materials. Weekly teaching meetings often repeated identical content, such as "How to Teach IELTS Listening Matching Questions" (training document, 20 July 2024). I attended three such sessions within three months, each focusing on surface-level tactics like guessing from keywords, but none addressing how listening skills might be scaffolded over time. These cycles gave a sense of stagnation rather than progression. As I noted:

After attending another PL session, I found myself reflecting on how little connection there was between different activities across the year. Topics were often revisited, but rarely developed in greater depth or linked to previous discussions. There's no cumulative progression in our PL. It's like looping on the same playlist. The sessions felt repetitive rather than part of a coherent learning journey (self-interview, 31 July 2025).

Such repetitiveness was characterised by a recurring focus on institutional requirements and prescribed practices. Discussions rarely extended beyond these recurring topics. This pattern suggests an institutional orientation toward compliance rather than growth.

A more recent tension arose with the emergence of AI. As students increasingly used ChatGPT to generate or revise their writing, I felt unprepared. None of the PL sessions addressed AI integration. When I raised the issue, the coordinator replied, "That's not officially part of our

syllabus yet, and it is currently under consideration for future curriculum development” (meeting note, 12 November 2024). This absence reflects a misalignment between emerging classroom realities and existing institutional provisions for PL, creating uncertainty for teachers attempting to respond to new pedagogical challenges.

Teacher’s navigation: Reconstructing the centre’s input and engaging in reflective experiment.

In response to the above tension, I filtered PL materials through my accumulated practice, discarding repetitive aspects and externalising revised versions more responsive to students’ realities. I restructured tasks for authentic interaction and connected assessment with learners’ lived experiences. This transformed PL from passive participation into an active process of professional reinvention.

This transformation often began with moments of dissonance. After attending a workshop on “Using Band Descriptors to Guide Writing Instruction” (meeting note, 16 November 2024), I found the rubric too vague for students’ meaningful revision.

As I reviewed students’ writing, I noticed that many could recall their band scores but still struggled to understand what they needed to improve. They know they’re getting ‘Band 5 for Coherence’, but they don’t know what that means in terms of sentences. I had to create my own checklist with examples in Chinese and English. This helped students connect assessment terminology with concrete language choices and gave them a clearer sense of how to revise their work (reflective diary, 3 December 2024).

This marked a small turning point. Real learning began after the workshop, when I translated abstract centre’s tools into context-specific resources. I spent the next few days developing a hybrid rubric combining IELTS descriptors with student-friendly comments and color-coded revision advice.

Professional growth also emerged through critical engagement with repetitive strategies. Many group PL sessions focused narrowly on test-prep efficiency, such as “3 Fast Ways to Improve Listening Matching Accuracy” (training document, 16 November 2024). Gradually, I began to feel uneasy applying them mechanically, as I found every student used nearly identical topic sentences for one writing task. I wrote: “They followed the template flawlessly, but the ideas felt hollow. It made me question: is this what good writing really is?” (reflective diary, 6 January 2025) This question prompted me to re-evaluate the templates, encouraging student voice while retaining structure. I looked up instructional papers on academic genre and taught students how to personalise a template with flexible language choices. When one student said, “Now I feel like it’s my own idea, not just a copy” (self-interview, 31 July 2025), I knew I had grown.

The PL session offered an initial tool, but my development occurred when I questioned it, researched further, and redesigned tasks to align with both my pedagogical goals and students’

needs. This highlights the implication of combining group PL with individual reflection and autonomous follow-up, allowing teachers to adapt new ideas to their own classroom contexts.

In response to the centre's failure to address AI, I began experimenting with AI tools, guided by a self-directed PL orientation (Smith, 2017): generating sample answers, analysing patterns, and integrating AI purposefully into my teaching. For instance, I used ChatGPT to create flawed model texts for critique tasks, or asked students to improve AI-generated paragraphs collaboratively. This integration transformed my role from content deliverer to critical mediator.

I noticed that students were far more willing to discuss errors when they appeared in AI-generated text rather than in their own writing. The task seemed to reduce anxiety and encourage participation. The students loved 'fixing the robot's mistakes.' It gave them confidence and made abstract feedback tangible. Several students who rarely volunteered answers became active contributors during the discussion (reflective diary, 15 October 2024).

I even created a mini-PL presentation for my colleagues called "From Templates to Prompts: Using AI to Teach Writing with Integrity" (self-interview, 31 July 2025), a personal initiative sparked by a lack of formal support. This initiative highlighted how PL could extend beyond institutional provision and emerge through teachers' own efforts to address classroom challenges.

A consistent pattern throughout these experiences was the role of reflective practice in bridging institutional offerings and personal goals. After each PL activity, I noted: 1) What was useful; 2) What didn't apply; and 3) What I could adapt. This routine revealed my increasing modification of materials and creation of alternatives. "I've written the word 'adapt' in my notes at least 15 times this term. That tells me I've moved beyond being a consumer—I've started becoming a designer" (reflective diary, 3 July 2024). These reflections also exposed gaps in my practice, such as rushing through complex tasks. I set small goals after each reflection: try a new technique weekly, collect two student samples, and ask for peer feedback. This active and structured approach to reflection suggests that my PL was shaped not only by experience itself, but also by deliberate efforts to interpret experience and act upon it. Therefore, reflection became a professional tool for tracing growth and guiding informed practices.

At times, it was through contrast and critique from self-reflection that deeper insights emerged. For example, in a meeting on "Student Motivation Tactics" (self-interview, 31 July 2025), we were encouraged to give frequent praise. However, I noticed some students felt overwhelmed. "Too much praise starts to feel fake to them. What students really want is clarity and space to grow on their own terms" (reflective diary, 21 March 2025). This led me to revise my use of feedback, not just when, but how. I started offering choices: written vs. verbal, self vs. teacher-generated. This responsiveness marked a leap in viewing students not as test-takers to manage, but as learners to co-design with.

Influential factor: The role of prior experiences and self-initiated mediation in the teacher's navigation process.

I realise that participation alone does not guarantee growth. As a teacher with over 15 years of classroom experience, my prior knowledge and accumulated practice often shaped how I engaged with PL sessions. I approached some workshops with both curiosity and scepticism, aware that meaningful learning comes from grappling with authentic classroom dilemmas, not from ready-made materials. When my prior expertise was overlooked, I tended to disengage from group discussions, attending sessions but internally questioning relevance. “I know it’s important to stay updated. But sometimes, I can’t help but think: is this worth my time?” (reflective diary, 20 September 2024). As my sense of relevance diminished, participation became increasingly passive rather than inquiry-driven. This feeling resurfaced repeatedly: “We’re constantly told to use praise and goal-setting strategies, but what I really need now is deeper, more meaningful professional conversations, not recycled slogans” (reflective diary, 18 August 2024). These experiences suggest that engagement in PL was closely tied to whether it connected with teachers’ existing knowledge, professional concerns, and developmental needs. When such connections were absent, participation risked becoming a routine obligation rather than a meaningful opportunity for growth.

Yet, I noticed that younger colleagues, especially those in their first few years of teaching, were more enthusiastic, sharing classroom stories eagerly, and engaging with PL trainers. I realised that PL is shaped not only by content, but by the teacher’s perceived need for growth. For veterans like me, without emotional or cognitive challenge, PL can feel like going through the motions.

Also, self-initiated mediation played a crucial role when institutional structures fell silent. In areas with no clear guidance, such as the pedagogical use of AI tools, I turned to independent exploration. “We’re living in an AI era, yet there’s still no structured PL on AI for teachers. So I’ve started to build my own” (reflective diary, 21 June 2025). Attending webinars, designing critique tasks, and trialling new approaches allowed me to externalise curiosity and internalise new knowledge. Therefore, PL depended less on formal provision and more on my own efforts to explore, experiment, and respond to emerging classroom needs.

Contradiction 3

The tension between managing overwhelming workload (division of labour 1) and promoting commercial reputation (object 2).

Even when open to learning, the sheer intensity of my teaching schedule made deep engagement difficult. During peak teaching periods, I taught up to eight classes a day, prepared for multiple exams, and responded to parents late into the evening. This overwhelming workload was further intensified by the need to constantly adapt exam-focused PL tools to

meet classroom needs, adding an invisible layer of cognitive labour. Under such an overwhelming workload, PL sessions often felt like an added obligation. “After teaching seven hours straight and endless tailoring my teaching materials, I’m expected to attend a ‘motivational pedagogy’ workshop. I can barely keep my eyes open” (reflective diary, 27 June 2025). In this sense, excessive workloads can hinder teachers’ PL participation, not only by limiting the time available for learning but also by reducing the cognitive and emotional resources needed for meaningful engagement in PL (Papastamatis & Panitsides, 2014). As such, efforts to support PL should consider teachers’ working conditions for deeper engagement.

Teacher’s navigation: Developing micro-strategies and engaging in peer-mediated collaboration.

Despite the institutional schedule, I developed micro-strategies to reclaim professional agency within time constraints. In a self-interview (31 July 2025), I reflected:

I realised I couldn’t change the timetable, but I could redesign how I used my 10-minute gaps between classes. I started keeping a ‘reflection log’ on my phone—three quick notes about what worked, what didn’t, and what to try next. It became my own kind of PL, invisible to management but meaningful to me.

This practice positioned PL within everyday teaching activities, as growth emerged through small, self-directed micro-cycles rather than formal PL sessions. Over time, these mini-reflections evolved into deliberate exploration. For instance, I recorded in my reflective diary (23 August 2024):

After last week’s workshop on ‘student engagement,’ I redesigned my feedback approach. Instead of written comments only, I used short audio notes on WeChat. Students responded faster, and even the quiet ones replied in English. I was encouraged by their increased participation and realised that more personalised feedback can create a more supportive and engaging learning environment.

Although the workshop itself felt superficial, it triggered an idea that I adapted to my own context. The value of the experience emerged through the active process of translating a general recommendation into a practice that addressed the needs of my own learners.

Yet, navigating this contradiction was emotionally taxing. I often felt complicit in sustaining the system that overworked us. In a self-interview excerpt (31 July 2025), I noted: “When I stay up late to prepare better lessons, I’m aligning with the centre’s ‘quality’ rhetoric. But deep down I’m doing it for my students, not for the centre’s marketing slogans. Maybe that’s how I justify it.” These moments highlight my struggle to sustain professional agency within institutional labour demands. My effort to maintain lesson quality despite exhaustion was more about reclaiming meaning than internalising the centre’s object. Through this process, I sought

to align institutional expectations with my commitment to students, creating a sense of purpose that made these demands more professionally meaningful.

Eventually, I also began forming informal alliances with colleagues to redistribute workload cognitively. We rotated summarising PL sessions, each sharing a digest on WeChat. As I recorded: “Instead of everyone attending, one teacher joins the meeting and shares key takeaways. It’s not ideal, but it saves hours and leads to more honest, critical discussions afterwards” (reflective diary, 20 May 2025). Such peer-mediated collaboration compensates for rigid institutional arrangements. Through these micro-negotiations, the contradiction between my division of labour and the centre’s object was re-mediated, transforming frustration into creative autonomy.

Influential factor: The role of digital tools and collaborative practices in the teacher’s navigation.

My PL was influenced by digital and social tools that extended my agency. In my self-interview (31 July 2025), I described how “WeChat, voice memos, and even AI-assisted note-taking became my thinking partners, helping capture transient insights.” Such technological tools enabled me to externalise spontaneous reflections and later re-internalise them as structured pedagogical reasoning. As such, teachers’ PL is increasingly shaped by the interplay between digital mediation and self-regulation.

Socially, my learning was also shaped through collegial collaboration. Informal exchanges with colleagues on WeChat often became spaces for sense-making and joint problem-solving. For instance, we shared digests including lesson plans, audio feedback samples, and reflections on students’ engagement. These peer dialogues redistributed cognitive workload and fostered relational agency, as colleagues worked collectively to address shared pedagogical challenges and pursue common professional goals.

Over time, these mediational processes allowed a dialogic movement between internalisation and externalisation (Vygotsky, 1978), where private reflection intertwined with collective practice. My cognitive tools (i.e., reflection log) and social resources (i.e., peer digest) formed a hybrid ecology of learning that bridged personal intention and systemic constraint. Thus, my PL became a historically mediated reconfiguration of how I acted, thought, and collaborated within the ELC activity system.

Discussion and conclusion

This autoethnographic study explored a TESOL teacher’s PL within a Chinese ELC, focusing on how he experienced contradictions in group-based PL (RQ1), how it contributed to his

professional growth (RQ2), and what factors influenced these processes (RQ3). The findings revealed that while formal institutional PL opportunities were frequent, they were often fragmented, repetitive, and narrowly test-driven, leaving little space for deeper pedagogical inquiry. Despite these shortcomings, professional growth emerged through individual reinterpretation, reflective practice, informal peer collaboration, and the creative adaptation of new tools such as AI. This process was further shaped by mediational factors such as peer dialogue, emotional exchanges and prior teaching experiences. These experiences suggest that contradictions within the activity system may function not only as constraints but also as catalysts for PL (Engeström, 2001).

This study reframes teacher PL in a marketised ELC as a sociocultural process of negotiating contradictions generated by the coexistence of pedagogical and commercial priorities. Previous research has shown that contextual conditions influence teacher PL (Main et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Extending this line of inquiry, the findings suggest that, in marketised ELCs, these contextual conditions often manifested as contradictions embedded within everyday professional practice. For example, intensive workloads, repetitive IELTS-oriented workshops, standardised teaching templates, and performance-driven accountability systems prioritised efficiency and marketable outcomes while constraining opportunities for deeper pedagogical engagement. Rather than functioning simply as barriers to PL, these contradictions became productive sites of learning through teachers' ongoing processes of internalisation and externalisation (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, drawing on mediational resources such as prior teaching experiences and digital tools, Author1 interpreted, negotiated, and responded to these contradictions, transforming them into new pedagogical understandings and practices. Consistent with sociocultural perspectives that conceptualise contradictions as drivers of development (Engeström, 2001), the present study provides empirical evidence by illustrating how contradictions become developmental resources through teachers' active efforts to internalise, reinterpret, and externalise competing institutional demands.

Vygotsky's (1978) GM provides further insight into how the transformation of these contradictions into productive sites of PL was shaped by interconnected cultural-historic, ontogenetic, and microgenetic processes operating across time. At the cultural-historic level, the broader marketisation of English language education in China created conditions in which pedagogical value became increasingly commodified and PL became closely tied to organisational competitiveness and customer expectations. This complicates existing PL literature that often assumes alignment between institutional PL agendas and teachers' professional aspirations (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wells, 2014). At the ontogenetic level, Author1's more than 15 years of professional experience and commitment to authentic language learning shaped how these institutional expectations were interpreted and evaluated. While this commitment initially enabled proactive engagement with institutional demands, it also led to the internalisation of systemic tensions, requiring additional cognitive and emotional labour to compensate for limitations within institutional PL structures (Roversi, 2021; Werler, 2016). For example, rather than simply complying with repetitive IELTS-focused workshops, formulaic writing templates, and standardised feedback practices, Author1 continually evaluated these initiatives against his pedagogical values and students' learning needs. In doing

so, he attempted to reconcile competing expectations while maintaining a commitment to meaningful learning. At the microgenetic level, these broader cultural-historic conditions and ontogenetically developed commitments became visible in Author1's moment-to-moment efforts to reconcile competing institutional demands. Through differentiated learning activities, revised feedback approaches, and AI-supported pedagogical practices, he continually adapted institutional requirements to better align with students' learning needs. These adaptations align with sociocultural understandings of PL as an ongoing process that emerges through teachers' engagement with everyday pedagogical practice despite the limited opportunities provided by formal PL structures (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Tran & Nguyen, 2026; Zhou et al., 2025).

However, while these responses enabled professional growth and improved pedagogical practice, they simultaneously compensated for shortcomings within formal PL structures. As a result, the practices that supported learning may also have contributed to the ongoing reproduction of existing organisational arrangements by addressing their symptoms rather than their underlying causes. This complicates assumptions that PL necessarily leads to institutional improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Howard & Scott, 2017). Instead, teacher learning in marketised ELCs may function both as a source of professional growth and as a mechanism through which systemic tensions are continually managed and absorbed.

The implications of this study extend to both research and practice. For research, this study shows how autoethnography, informed by sociocultural perspectives (Engeström, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978), makes visible teacher learning in underexplored, commercialised TESOL contexts as a situated and mediated process. It thus contributes methodological and conceptual clarity to calls for more context-attentive and relational understandings of teacher learning. Practically, for practitioners and managers working in similar for-profit ELC contexts, the findings point to the value of designing more collaborative, context-sensitive, and sustainable PL frameworks that value teacher agency and situate learning within real classroom dilemmas (Phantharakphong & Liyanage, 2022). For teachers' personal PL, the study contributes a clear development direction for teachers by illuminating how a teacher can reclaim ownership of learning by transforming imposed PL into meaningful practices (Smith, 2017).

Nevertheless, this study is limited by its autoethnographic design centred on a single participant's narrative. While this approach enabled deep, situated insights and did not aim to generalise the findings, future research could extend to multiple ELC contexts and participants to examine whether similar tensions, adaptive strategies, and transformative outcomes are shared across settings, as well as whether different tensions emerge in varied sociocultural contexts.

AI use declaration

The authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., ChatGPT) solely for language editing and improving clarity of expression. The AI tools were not used to generate ideas, analyse data, or contribute to the intellectual content of the manuscript. All content has been reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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