Effects of energy loss on interaction dynamics of energetic electrons with plasmas

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(Received 5 May 2009; published 12 October 2009)

An analytic model is developed for energetic electrons interacting with plasmas. This model rigorously treats the effects of energy loss upon Coulomb interactions and reveals several important features, including the coupling of scattering and energy loss—which previous calculations had erroneously treated as independent in cases where an electron lost a significant amount (or all) of its energy. The unique transparency and generality of these calculations allows for straightforward applications when quantitatively evaluating the energy deposition of energetic electrons in various plasmas, including those in inertial confinement fusion.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.80.047402 PACS number: 52.40.Mj, 52.50.Gj, 52.20.Fs

The interaction of energetic electrons with plasmas is a fundamental problem with important implications for both basic physics and practical applications [1–6]. This interaction involves electron energy loss and scattering which leads to electron energy deposition and trajectory bending in plasmas. In the context of a single electron interacting with plasmas, such scatterings alter electron distributions, resulting in modifications of the energy deposition structure [7–9].

In addressing electron interactions with plasmas, the convention is that while they scatter off the plasma ions, energetic electrons lose their kinetic energy to the plasma electrons. The two physics processes (i.e., energy loss and scattering) have been treated independently and combined in a simple way. For example, the mean square of the total deflection angle can be calculated simply by averaging over the solid angle

\[
\langle \theta^2 \rangle = \frac{N_c \int \theta^2 \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} d\Omega}{\int \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} d\Omega},
\]

where \(N_c\) is the number of the collisions (which is a function of the electron energy loss and can be independently evaluated) [10]. The treatment of the scattering is exclusively manifested by the integral \(\int \theta^2 (d\sigma/d\Omega) d\Omega\). It has been demonstrated that this approach is justified and is accurate for energetic electrons interacting with “thin” targets (e.g., thin solid foils) [11] since an electron suffers only a relatively small number of collisions and the energy loss of each individual collision is very small compared to its total kinetic energy (due to the nature of small angle dominant Coulomb interactions.) Because of this, the energy dependence in the scattering cross sections can be essentially overlooked.

However, such a thin approximation is unjustified and inaccurate when it is applied in the case where an electron loses a significant amount or all of its energy (e.g., during plasma heating) and suffers a very large number (over \(\sim 10^6\)) collisions, or when an electron interacts with hydrogenic plasmas (\(Z=1\), for which the \(e-e\) scattering could be comparable with the \(e-i\) scattering). This is explained in Fig. 1 where \(e-i\) (Rutherford) and \(e-e\) (Møller) scattering cross sections are plotted as a function of the energy loss \(\Delta E = (E_f - E_i)/E_i\) for 1 MeV electrons in hydrogenic plasmas.

When \(\Delta E\) changes from beginning to the end (0 → 100% of the energy loss), these cross sections increase about 3 orders of magnitudes, indicating that the effects of energy loss on scattering cannot be ignored in these cases, and that a rigorous approach to the coupling of the energy loss to scattering is necessary. In this Brief Report, we demonstrate the importance of the effects of energy loss upon scatterings in the interaction regime described above using fundamental principles [7–9]. This model naturally links scattering and energy loss, and reveals several of the resulting new and important effects.

In our approach [7–9], an integrodifferential diffusion equation is solved to rigorously determine the angular and spatial distributions of the scattered electrons:

\[
\frac{\partial f}{\partial s} + v \cdot \nabla f = n_i \int \left[ f(x,v',s) - f(x,v,s) \right] \sigma(|v - v'|) dv',
\]

where \(f(x,v,s)\) is the electron distribution function; \(n_i\) the number density of fully ionized, uniform time invariant background plasma ions of charge \(Z\); \(x\) the position where scattering occurs; \(s\) is the arc length traveled by the electron; \(\sigma = \sigma_e + Z \sigma_{ei}\) the total scattering cross section with \(\sigma_e\) the Rutherford \(e-i\) cross section [12], and \(\sigma_{ei}\) the Møller \(e-e\) scattering cross section. When \(\Delta E\) changes from beginning to the end (0 → 100% of the energy loss), these cross sections increase about 3 orders of magnitudes, indicating that the effects of energy loss on scattering cannot be ignored in these cases, and that a rigorous approach to the coupling of the energy loss to scattering is necessary. In this Brief Report, we demonstrate the importance of the effects of energy loss upon scatterings in the interaction regime described above using fundamental principles [7–9]. This model naturally links scattering and energy loss, and reveals several of the resulting new and important effects.

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FIG. 1. The normalized Rutherford cross section (e-i scattering) and Møller cross section (e-e scattering) are plotted as a function of the fraction of the energy loss for 1 MeV electrons. Both cross sections show the significant increase in scattering as an electron loses its energy. For vertical axis, \(r_0=e^2/m_e c^2\) is the classical electron radius.
cross section \cite{13}. The equation is solved with cylindrical coordinates with the assumption that the scattering is azimuthally symmetric. Specifically, the angular distribution is \cite{7–9}

\[
f(\theta,E) = \frac{1}{4\pi} \sum_{\ell=0}^{\infty} (2\ell + 1) P_{\ell}(\cos \theta) \times \exp \left(-\int_{E_0}^{E} \kappa_{\ell} (E') \left(\frac{dE'}{ds}\right)^{-1} dE'\right),
\]

(3)

where \( P_{\ell}(\cos \theta) \) is the Legendre polynomial. In this solution, the energy loss is manifested by the plasma stopping power \cite{14,15}

\[
dE = \frac{2\pi r_0^2 m_{e}\gamma^2 n_{Z}}{\beta^2} \left[ \ln \left( \frac{\lambda_D\gamma - 1}{\sqrt{2}\lambda_C} \right)^2 + 1 + \frac{1}{8} \left( \frac{\gamma - 1}{\gamma} \right)^2 \right] - \left( \frac{2\gamma - 1}{\gamma^2} \right) \ln 2 + \ln \left[ \frac{1.123\beta}{2\sqrt{2}\lambda_{D}^2 m_{e}\gamma^2} \right]^2,
\]

(4)

where \( \beta = v/c \) and \( \gamma = (1 - \beta^2)^{-1/2} \), \( r_0 = e^2/m_{e}\gamma^2 \) is the classical electron radius, \( \lambda_C = h/m_{e}c \) is electron Compton wavelength, and \( \lambda_D = (kT/4\pi n_{e})^{1/2} \) is Debye length. Note that Eq. (4) is valid when \( \beta > \alpha = (1/137) \), however, its classical counterpart would be accurate enough when \( \beta < \alpha \) for which the plasma Debye length is shorter than the electron deBroglie length, such as in the case of low-energy electron preheating inertial confinement fusion (ICF) targets. The effects of scattering are characterized by the “macro” transport cross sections

\[
\kappa_{\ell}(E) = n_{i} \int \left( \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} \right) \left[ 1 - P_{\ell}(\cos \theta) \right] d\Omega,
\]

(5)

where the Legendre polynomial converges rapidly for the large angles. The dominant terms are \( \ell = 1 \)

\[
\kappa_{1}(E) = 4\pi n_{i} \left( \frac{r_0}{\gamma \beta^2} \right)^2 Z^2 \left[ 2\ln \Lambda^{ei} + \frac{4(\gamma + 1)^2}{(2\gamma + 1)^2} \right],
\]

(6)

which is related to the slowing down cross section and characterizes the loss of directed velocity (momentum) in the scattering \cite{4}; and \( \ell = 2 \)

\[
\kappa_{2}(E) = 12\pi n_{i} \left( \frac{r_0}{\gamma \beta^2} \right)^2 Z^2 \left[ \left( \ln \Lambda^{ei} \right) - \frac{1}{2} \right] + \frac{4(\gamma + 1)^2}{(2\gamma + 1)^2} \left[ 2\ln \Lambda^{ei} - \frac{1}{2} \right],
\]

(7)

which is related to the deflection cross section and represents the mean-square increment in the transverse electron velocity during the scattering process \cite{4}. It should be noted that such simple analytic versions of transport coefficients [Eqs. (6) and (7)] are only valid for \( \gamma < \sim 10 \) \cite{7–9}, because to have a small angle-interaction dominant Rutherford-like Møller cross section, several approximations have been made (e.g., the effects of large-angle scattering, as well as higher-order terms in the expansions have been neglected). Equation (8) gives the ratio of such a simplified Møller cross section \cite{7–9} to Rutherford cross section

\[
\Re(\gamma) = Z \left( \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} \right)_{ei} \left( \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} \right)_{ei} \approx \frac{4(\gamma + 1)^2 - 1}{(2\gamma + 1)^2} \left[ \frac{1}{Z} \right]^2.
\]

(8)

This ratio is plotted in Fig. 2 for hydrogenic plasmas (\( Z = 1 \)), \( (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \) is slightly larger (\( \sim 20\% \)) than \( (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \) for \( \gamma < 7 \) (consistent with Fig. 1), while significantly smaller for \( \gamma > 10 \). Figure 2 also shows that for a nonrelativistic case (\( \gamma = 1 \)), one has \( (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \approx (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \approx (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \approx (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \approx (d\sigma/d\Omega)_{ei} \) \cite{12}. This clearly indicates that directly applying a nonrelativistic result to the cases of relativistic electron-plasmas interactions, such as fast-ignition ICF \cite{16}, results in inaccuracy.

Mutual couplings between energy loss and scatterings are explicitly reflected by the following integrand from Eq. (3),

\[
\int_{E_0}^{E} \kappa_{\ell}(E') \left( \frac{dE'}{ds} \right)^{-1} dE' = \kappa_{\ell}(E) S(E) \approx \kappa_{\ell}(E) \tau.
\]

(10)

where \( \tau \) is the thickness of the plasma and when it is thin, we find that \( \tau = S(E) = \int_{E_0}^{E} (dE'/ds) dE' = \int_{E_0}^{E} (dE'/ds) dE' \). The linkage of energy loss to scattering is implied by the relationship between the distance that an electron transverses and energy loss, since the father an electron transverses, the more energy it loses and the more scatterings it suffers. The approximation in Eq. (10) makes sense when \( \Delta E \) is very small such that \( d\sigma/d\Omega \) in Eq. (5) can be treated as independent of the energy. As a consequence, the calculation with a scattering parameter \( \kappa_{\ell} \) being factored out of the integration in Eq. (10) is thus justified, and indicates that scattering and energy loss have been treated separately. However, this approximation, as discussed above and shown in Fig. 1, is unjustified in the.
cases of total or even significant energy losses of energetic electrons in the plasmas which this paper is focused on.

To further illustrate the effects of energy loss on scattering, we calculate the mean-square deflection angle \( \langle \theta^2 \rangle \) from Eq. (9). For the sake of simplicity, the Fokker-Planck approximation is used [by expanding the Legendre polynomial to the power of \( \ell^2 \) and keeping only the first two terms] and the Thomas-Fermi screening length, i.e., \( P(\cos \theta) = 1 - 0.25 \ell(\ell + 1)\theta^2 \). Using Eq. (3) and conducting the integration, the first-order approximation in terms of the contributions from terms of electrons in the plasmas which this paper is focused on.

The \( \langle \theta^2 \rangle \) is now ready to be evaluated based on the dominant contributions from \( \ell = 1 \) and \( \ell = 2 \):

\[
\langle \theta^2 \rangle \approx \sqrt{\langle \theta^2 \rangle_{\ell=1}^2 + \langle \theta^2 \rangle_{\ell=2}^2}.
\]

The effective cancellation of the Coulomb logarithms [7] in the numerator and denominator of Eq. (16) significantly reduces the sensitivity of the selection of plasma screening models. The physics behind such a cancellation can be understood as the deflection occurring simultaneously during the slowing down and scattering-off of the energetic electrons in the encountering plasma mediums. This is illustrated
in Fig. 4, where the normalized transport cross sections \( \kappa_s(E) (4 \pi n_e)^{-1} (r_0^2 / \gamma \beta^2)^{-2} \) are plotted as a function of the energy loss [Fig. 4(a)], and differences exist for different models. As shown in Fig. 4(b) where \( \kappa_s(E) (dE/ ds)^{-1} \) is plotted as a function of energy loss, negligible differences make the effects of different screening models insignificant.

In summary, we have used an analytical model to rigorously examine the effects of energy loss upon the Coulomb interactions, which results in revealing of several new and important findings never before realized, including the coupling of scattering and energy loss. The unique transparency and generality of these calculations allows for straightforward applications in the cases of partial to even total energy loss of energetic electrons: for example, the quantitative evaluation of the energy deposition of energetic electrons in various plasmas, including those of inertial confinement fusion.

This work was supported in part by U.S. Department of Energy Contract (Grants No. DE-FG52-07NA28059 and No. DE-FG52-06N826203), LLE (Grant No. 414090-G), the Fusion Science Center at University of Rochester (Grant No. 412761-G).

[14] For the energy loss obtained in Refs. [7–9] we have used the classical version of the maximum impact parameter for ad hoc cutoff, which may have resulted in slightly overestimated linear energy loss. In the Brief Report, we have corrected this inaccuracy (see Eq. (4)) by including quantum effects.