

Enhancing Collaborative Teaching in Academic English Writing: A Three-Semester Action Research Study

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Abstract: This study explores collaborative teaching in academic English writing classes over three semesters. The findings underscore the critical importance of giving due consideration to various factors, including the delineation of teaching goals, a comprehensive analysis of students' needs, the assessment of teaching feasibility and the establishment of an effective cooperation mechanism. Notably, the study suggests that an in-depth collaborative approach is pivotal for achieving optimal learning outcomes. Moreover, the research highlights the significance of mobility and flexibility in the collaborative teaching process. The ability to adapt and respond to evolving classroom dynamics is identified as a key element in fostering a conducive learning environment. This study contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of collaborative teaching, emphasizing its potential to enhance the overall learning experience in academic English writing classes. This study not only highlights the importance of collaborative teaching but also provides practical recommendations for educators aiming to enhance academic English writing instruction.

Keywords: Action Research; Academic English Writing; Subject Teachers; Foreign Language Teachers; Collaborative Teaching

1. Introduction

As China aims to build top-tier universities and disciplines, college students increasingly need to engage in international academic communications. English teaching should align with students' professional needs and improve their communicative competence in their respective fields. (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Izquierdo, 2016). However, many universities lack systematic training in scientific journal paper writing. Additionally, the research and teaching of academic English writing for non-English majors have yet to garner widespread attention (Cui & Gardiner, 2025).

While many scholars have engaged in theoretical speculation and empirical exploration surrounding academic English teaching in recent years (Chang, 2017; Boa et al., 2018), the majority of these studies introduce novel teaching methods without seamlessly integrating them into the broader context of academic knowledge. Notably absent is a focus on teaching research that effectively combines academic English essay writing with discipline-specific knowledge. To foster high-level talents proficient in both professional and language competence, a promising strategy involves close cooperation between foreign language teachers and subject instructors. This collaborative approach allows for mutual learning through cooperative teaching, enabling each educator to leverage their strengths in promoting effective instruction.

Collaborative teaching, proposed by William M. Alexander in the 1960s, involves two or more teachers sharing responsibility for teaching activities. Despite its growing popularity in foreign language education, research on cooperative teaching remains limited (Lee, 2016). Existing international research tends to focus on introducing cooperative teaching practices, with fewer studies undertaking multiple rounds of action research. While cooperative teaching has shown positive results in academic background courses abroad, particularly among graduate students (Khabiri & Marashi, 2015; Haghighi et al., 2019), there is a dearth of similar research in China. Only a few cases, rooted in collaborative efforts between Chinese and foreign teachers, address improving foreign language

proficiency. Studies exploring the feasibility of cooperation between foreign language teachers and subject instructors, along with proposed preliminary practice plans, are also limited and notably lack empirical research.

This study contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of collaborative teaching, emphasizing its potential to enhance the overall learning experience in academic English writing classes. This study not only highlights the importance of collaborative teaching but also provides practical recommendations for educators aiming to enhance academic English writing instruction.

2. Literature Review

The classification of foreign cooperative teaching models is predominantly articulated through various perspectives (refer to Table 1). Shannon & Meath-Lang (1992) classify collaborative teaching models into associate, team leader, master/novice, and coordinated team types. Barren (1992) describes the roles of subject teachers in ESP teaching, from informant to colleague. He categorizes the roles of specialized subject teachers based on the evolution of their input in teaching: informant, consultant, collaborator, and colleague.

Table 1: Different types of collaborative teaching

Shannon & Meath-Lang	1992	Associate type; Team leader type; Master teacher/novice teacher type; Coordinated team type
Barren	1992	The role of subject teachers: informant; consultant; collaborator; colleague
Dudley-Evans& St John	1998	cooperation; collaboration; team-teaching

Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) classify teacher cooperation into three levels: cooperation, collaboration and team-teaching. Within this framework, cooperation represents a more superficial engagement, confined to informal information exchange without a formalized and systematic cooperation mechanism. Collaboration, on the other hand, constitutes a more structured consultation and cooperation involving two or more teachers. Team teaching, the deepest level of collaboration, encompasses a teaching mode where multiple teachers form a cohesive teaching team. Together, they deliver instruction, manage classroom affairs collectively, and engage in teaching activities, fostering mutual assistance and support among colleagues.

Chinese scholar Wang Shaofei (2005) classified cooperative teaching modes as follows: typical mode, supportive mode, parallel mode and guest mode (see Table 2).

Table 2: Detailed collaborative teaching roles by Wang Shaofei (2005)

Typical mode	The teaching team members jointly design and determine the teaching content and teaching process, interact in the same class teaching process, and discuss the same topic from different professional perspectives, so as to better deepen and enrich the teaching theme.
Supportive mode	The teaching team members jointly design the teaching content and teaching process, but take turns to present the teaching materials suitable for their personal expertise, but the teachers must appear in the same class at the same time, but the teacher who presents the teaching materials is in a dominant position for the time being, and the teacher who does not undertake the task of presenting the teaching materials is in a relatively subordinate position for the time being.
Parallel mode	Teaching team members jointly design and determine the content and teaching process, but teach two groups of the same class separately. But the classes are not divided, the teachers are only responsible for the different groups and give feedback accordingly.
Guests mode	One of the faculty members is solely responsible for content design and grade assessment as a moderator, but regularly invites specialists to participate in presentations as guest collaborators. Usually, the content presented by the guest is an integral part of the overall lesson plan.

The aforementioned classification underscores the diverse collaboration possibilities among teachers from different subject backgrounds, with varying modes of cooperation. Collaborative teaching relationships can be characterized by equality or a dynamic division of labor with dominant and subordinate roles. In instances where a cooperative teacher assumes a dominant-subordinate relationship, the teaching mode evolves based on the participation and input levels of the subordinate teacher.

To delve deeper into these dynamics, this paper examines the cooperative teaching modes of subject teachers and language teachers within the context of the “Legal English Literature Retrieval and Thesis Writing” course. By comparing the different cooperative teaching modes employed in various semesters, the author aims to shed light on the evolving nature of collaboration and provide valuable insights and recommendations for similar courses. This exploration will contribute to the enhancement of cooperative teaching practices, ultimately enriching the academic English thesis writing experience for students.

3. Research design

3.1 Research question

RQ1 Is the improved teaching mode effective in participants’ academic writing?

RQ2 What are the participants’ attitudes towards the collaborative teaching model?

3.2 Participates

At a renowned university in China, there are thirty-five undergraduate students majoring in law. This study focuses on an eighteen-week structured academic English course designed for senior law school students.

3.3 Data collection

The study used qualitative methods, analyzing students’ reflection logs and conducting in-depth interviews. Students’ final grades, based on teachers’ assessments of their written texts, served as a benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of the cooperative teaching model.

3.4 Research Procedures

This study delves into the dynamics of collaborative teaching within an academic English writing class over the course of three semesters. This study is based on the subsequent round of research and analysis, combined with innovative improvements.

3.4.1 The first round of teaching practice

In the 2017 offering of the Legal English Literature Retrieval and Thesis Writing course, the first author implemented a teaching approach where both the foreign language teacher and the subject teacher conducted simultaneous classes in the same room. The language teacher focused on academic literacy and language skills for 30 minutes, while the subject teacher delved into professional concepts and theories for 50 minutes. The roles of both teachers were considered equal, each assuming dominance during their respective time slots.

After a semester, an assessment revealed that the teaching content from the two aspects failed to cohesively integrate within the same classroom. The teaching environment exhibited a clear separation between professional subject teaching and language instruction. Drawing on Dudley-Evans & St John’s (1998) perspective, the collaboration between language and subject teachers was superficial, lacking true collaborative teaching.

Classroom observations and student interviews reflected concerns from students who felt that the subject teacher’s content overlapped with their other professional courses, lacking targeted guidance for writing. Students perceived a lack of understanding of legal professional knowledge by the language teacher, with explanations being overly detailed and fragmented. Feedback indicated that the curriculum failed to seamlessly integrate subject and language teachings, resulting in students feeling as if “two teachers of two courses were together, each saying his own.” The feedback also highlighted a perceived lack of systematic strength, hindering students’ ability to apply their learning.

Teacher feedback echoed these sentiments, with language teachers expressing a heavy preparation burden and considerable pressure. Subject teachers felt that language teachers occupied valuable class time, limiting their ability to delve deeply into certain knowledge points.

In light of these challenges, the second cooperative teaching model has not gained unanimous praise from both students and teachers. Recognizing the complexity and dynamism of teaching, the authors

acknowledge the need for continuous adjustments to teaching approaches. Cooperative teaching, they argue, is a dynamic process requiring constant reconfiguration to align with evolving teaching programs and student learning needs (Bauwen&Hourcade, 1997). Consequently, the authors propose adjustments to the teaching plan and undertake further research to refine the collaborative teaching model.

3.4.2 The second round of teaching practice

During the preliminary investigation, teachers identified a lack of systematic and balanced cooperation between language teachers and professional teachers. Consequently, in the subsequent round of curriculum development, the author made adjustments to the cooperative form, aiming to enhance the overall teaching mode. To ensure the cohesiveness and consistency of teaching content, language teachers took on the role of the primary content designers, functioning as hosts. Professional subject teachers were then regularly invited to participate in teaching as guest collaborators, with their content seamlessly integrated into the overall course plan---a model referred to as the “guest model”.

The teaching practice adhered to the macroscopic design of language teachers, reducing redundant delivery of professional knowledge by professional subject teachers. The focus shifted towards language teachers providing guidance to students, supplemented by targeted individual guidance from “guest teachers”. The curriculum design emphasized cultivating students’ writing and subject research abilities through three modules: critical thinking, academic accomplishment, and writing practice. Critical thinking and academic accomplishment modules primarily involved language teacher instruction, while the writing practice module was co-directed by the language teacher and a “guest teacher”. This cooperative approach aimed to create a more comprehensive and cohesive course content, offering students well-rounded academic writing training.

However, the adoption of a sequential guidance approach, where language teachers provide guidance first followed by professional teachers, introduced new challenges. On one hand, teachers needed time to acquaint themselves with the diverse and specialized topics each student pursued, making lesson preparation time-consuming. On the other hand, students exhibited more trust in the subject knowledge of professional teachers, expressing reservations about language teachers providing subject-related advice. This led to higher communication costs, instances where language teachers and students struggled to address specific problems, and the emergence of negative emotions among some students. In-depth interviews with students also revealed suggestions for adjusting the guidance sequence:

“I hope to receive advice from law teachers during the specific content writing and revision stages of the paper.”

“In the early stages of paper preparation, it would be beneficial to have law school professors review and provide guidance, ensuring a more targeted approach to paper writing.”

3.4.3 The third round of teaching practice

In the subsequent teaching sessions, the author continued to enhance the depth of cooperation and meticulously designed the collaborative details, aiming to further improve the interaction between cooperative teachers in the teaching process. The objective was to engage in in-depth discussions on the same topic from different professional perspectives, gradually progressing towards an evolving “typical model”.

In the current round of teaching practice, the three modules from the previous curriculum were retained. Specifically, concerning cooperation, subject teachers relevant to the students’ selected topics were individually invited for in-depth guidance. This ensured the significance and value of the chosen topics, emphasizing the professionalism and cutting-edge nature of the research. Subsequently, language teachers were invited to provide further guidance and teaching. Drawing on the comprehensive feedback from both subject professional teachers and language teachers, students developed a writing outline that evolved into the final written paper. Additionally, the course incorporated a defense committee comprising subject and language teachers, simulating a mock defense of students’ papers. Evaluation criteria encompassed language, content, and overall performance, with subject teachers assessing content and language teachers focusing on language proficiency and presentation skills. This comprehensive approach allowed students to experience a complete process—from academic training to thesis writing and defense.

In the current round, the cooperation between subject professional teachers and language teachers was synchronized, focusing on the same theme simultaneously and expanding the range of activities.

This approach enhanced the systematic and focused nature of guidance. Moreover, the collaboration arrangement was more aligned with students' cognitive processes and learning patterns, demonstrating greater operational effectiveness. The results were evident in students' improved acceptance and enhanced learning experience, as highlighted in the in-depth interviews:

“Language teachers provide guidance on language, logic, and structure, while professional teachers assess the topic's content and research significance from a legal perspective. The combination of both perspectives offers comprehensive guidance, making this model highly effective and, in my opinion, perfect.”

4. Results

4.1 Is the improved teaching mode effective in participants' academic writing?

In the second and third rounds, students' final papers were graded by language and subject teachers to calculate final scores. The scores from both rounds were processed by SPSS, and a paired sample T-test analysis was conducted to compare the scores of students' final papers, as illustrated in Table 3. The results showed a significant difference between the second and third rounds ($t=-2.448$, $p=0.022$). Upon specific comparison, the mean value of the second round (83.30) was significantly lower than that of the third round (86.33), and all paired data displayed a consistent trend. In other words, the average score of the third round of papers was significantly higher than that of the second round. Importantly, while the teachers remained constant, the improvement in student performance is evident in the data, as reflected in the increased mean and reduced standard deviation.

Table 3: Paired T-test analysis results of the Final term grades ($n=35$)

	item	M	SD	MD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pair 1	Second round	83.30	5.99	-3.03	-2.448	0.022*
	Third round	86.33	3.58			

* $p<0.05$

4.2 What are the participants' attitude and appraisal?

Based on the results of the first round of interviews, 25% of the students explicitly expressed their desire for earlier intervention and guidance from professional subject teachers. Additionally, approximately half of the students disclosed a lack of confidence in their papers, particularly in areas such as topic selection and content. Some students advocated for continued guidance from professional subject teachers even after the defense, underscoring their eagerness for ongoing support in refining their theses.

In the third round of interviews, the majority of students reported considerable assistance in the “topic selection stage” from professional subject teachers, leading to increased confidence in their research and writing endeavors, ultimately improving writing progress and efficiency. However, during the revision stage, some students experienced decreased satisfaction due to a perceived lack of detailed and accurate guidance from professional subject teachers. In response, students offered suggestions, such as recommending that language teachers acquire more in-depth knowledge of professional subjects or seeking guidance from other professional teachers. Students also acknowledged the challenge of teachers being too busy to provide timely feedback.

Furthermore, around 20% of the students highlighted noticeable interdisciplinary barriers, emphasizing insufficient participation from professional subject teachers. They expressed a desire for more specific and involved guidance from these teachers, indicating a need for increased collaboration between language and subject instructors.

In a nutshell, the above information can be concluded into the following perspectives:

Students express a desire for guidance from professional subject teachers starting before they commence writing and continuing until the completion of the defense and thesis revision.

Students perceive variations in the guidance levels provided by professional subject teachers across different majors and wish for more detailed guidance.

The effectiveness of professional teachers' guidance is evident when it is detailed and patient, leading to increased willingness, confidence, efficiency, and effectiveness in academic writing.

Conversely, generalized guidance from professional subject teachers can lead to strong dependence among students, resulting in difficulties in progress, negative emotions, and potential abandonment of the task. While some students may seek alternative assistance, the outcomes are not guaranteed.

5. Discussion

The third round of teaching practice demonstrated significant improvements over previous iterations due to a more refined and synchronized collaboration between language and subject teachers. Unlike the first round, where separate teaching blocks created a disjointed learning experience, or the second round, where the “guest model” still maintained a sequential approach, the third round fostered true co-teaching. Here, both teachers engaged simultaneously with the same topic, offering complementary perspectives in real time. For example, during thesis drafting, subject teachers ensured the academic rigor of the content while language teachers immediately addressed structural and linguistic issues. This synchronous input prevented the confusion students previously felt when receiving disconnected feedback at different stages.

The study offers valuable insights for future cooperative teaching practices. A systematic cooperation mechanism is essential for effective collaborative teaching (Defianty&Wilson, 2024), going beyond simply combining language and content classes. This mechanism should effectively separate and integrate the organic relationship between language and content, leading to the expected teaching outcomes. The choice of a cooperative teaching model should align with the specific teaching context. Deeper cooperation is more likely to yield better teaching results. Cunningham (1960) emphasizes the need for comprehensive cooperation, covering pre-teaching planning, in-class collaboration, and post-teaching follow-up. This approach fosters a transformation in the relationship between teachers, evolving from mere “information providers” to collaborative “colleagues”. Designing a cooperative teaching model requires considering factors from top-level design to classroom interactions. Teaching objectives, students’ learning situations, and operability should be thoroughly assessed to ensure the effectiveness of the cooperative approach.

Applying these lessons can enhance the effectiveness and dynamism of future cooperative teaching practices.

6. Limitations

While the focus of this study is on the teaching practice of a specific course, it’s essential to acknowledge the potential limitation in terms of generalizability to other contexts. However, the strength of this study lies in its implementation of multiple rounds of diachronic action research. This approach provides a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the teaching dynamics over time. The in-depth analysis and iterative nature of diachronic action research offer a thorough understanding of the actual teaching process, enhancing the practical relevance and guiding significance of the study.

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