Practicing What We Preach: Teacher Reflection Groups on Cooperative Learning

Thomas S. C. Farrell
Brock University, Canada
<tfarrell@brocku.ca>

George M Jacobs
James Cook University, Singapore
<george.jacobs@gmail.com>

Abstract

This article discusses the use of teacher reflection groups to aid teachers in their efforts to facilitate cooperative learning among their students. It is argued that these teacher reflection groups function best when they are organized with reference to eight cooperative learning principles. Furthermore, it is suggested that these reflective groups enable teachers to learn about cooperative learning and to consider how cooperative learning fits with their beliefs about education and society. Additionally, the article argues that when teachers experience successful peer interaction with their fellow teachers guided by the literature on teacher reflection and the literature on cooperative learning, they will be more likely to want their own students to experience the advantages of well-organized interaction with the students' own peers, their fellow students.

Key words: teacher reflection, teacher reflection groups, teacher beliefs, cooperative learning principles, peer interaction

Introduction

Cooperative learning (CL) involves students working with their peers to learn and to enjoy learning. The literature on the implementation of cooperative learning and, indeed, of any changes in education (Fullan, 2009), suggests that teachers need skilful perseverance in order for cooperative learning to become a regular and significant part of how students learn. In particular, with cooperative learning, teachers must understand the workings of effective groups and how to influence those workings, and they must gain the will to persevere in their attempts to guide students toward successful peer interaction.

For teachers to facilitate success interaction among students, peer interaction among teachers themselves can be useful. Research (e.g., Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grisson,

2015) suggests that when teachers engage in quality collaboration, their students benefit. This article proposes that teachers, by experiencing cooperative learning in groups with their own peers, i.e., their fellow teachers, can better understand the principles behind effective groups and can fortify themselves with belief in the efficacy of cooperation. Teacher reflection groups provide one venue for teachers to cooperate with their peers. Furthermore, reflective practice is an invaluable tool teachers need to employ as both a process via which their teacher groups function and a product of their groups' work on cooperative learning implementation.

This article begins with an overview of reflective practice, including reflection done by groups of professionals. Then, the purpose and logistics of teacher reflection groups are described. Next, eight cooperative learning principles are explained. This explanation includes both general descriptions of the principles, as well as ideas for how the principles apply to groups of teachers who come together to reflect on their implementation of cooperative learning.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has become a popular concept and practice within the field of education (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Schon, 1983), including Second Language (L2) education, in the past 20 or so years. Although popular, the concept does not have a common definition, and it is up to whoever is practicing it to define reflective practice in their own way. This flexibility is both good and bad. It is good because it allows teachers to consider what reflective practice is for them rather than blindly following someone else's definition without fully understanding what it means. The negative side is that reflective practice can become anything, such as teachers thinking about teaching while alone on a bus/subway, and either becoming depressed with what they think did not work or elated with what they think may have worked; both scenarios, however, could be incorrect because what we teachers think may have happened in our class may not have in fact happened. Therefore, teachers must be careful about how they define reflection if they want to get the full benefits of what is actually a complex concept. The following section will first define reflective practice, and, then using this definition, show how teachers can use the concept so that they and their students can benefit from it.

Defining Reflective Practice

Most, if not all human beings reflect in some manner, be it a passing thought or days, weeks, or years in serious contemplation or deep reflection. Contemplative practice and reflective practice are somewhat different and can be undertaken separately, but one can also be a precursor and even a lead-in for the other. Whereas both promote self-awareness, when contemplating, there is no distinction between the thinkers and the subjects they are thinking about (an object) because thinkers and subjects are one. However, when engaging in reflection, there is distinction, because there is a subject thinking consciously about something (an object). Thus, reflection generally means conscious thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it (Farrell, 2015).

Within the field of education, many different terms have been used to refer to reflection and reflective practice. These include many of the following key words (our italics) to define its focus; it is seen as a *process* of *recognizing*, *examining*, *deliberating over* the

impact and *implications* of one's *beliefs*, *experiences*, *attitudes*, *knowledge* and *values* on *classroom practices*. Within the field of L2 education, reflective practice has emerged as an approach where teachers actively collect data about their teaching beliefs and practices and then reflect on the data in order to direct future teaching decisions (Farrell, 2007, 2013, 2015). This evidence-based approach to reflection encourages teachers to avoid making instructional decisions based on impulse or routine; rather, teachers are now encouraged to use the data they have obtained so that they can make more informed decisions about their practice.

So far, we have talked about reflection in a technical manner in that we have focused on examining classroom events and teaching routines. However, classroom lessons do not occur in a vacuum (although it may seem so because the door is usually closed), and there is nothing neutral about our practices. Therefore, reflective practice should also include a close critical examination of the cultural, social, and political settings where our teaching takes place (Farrell, 2015). Now, if we take all we have outlined so far about reflective practice, we can see a pattern emerging: reflection must include the contemplative reflections of the inner being of the teacher and focus not only on the classroom but also on activities outside the classroom in general society that impact teaching practices.

We would also like to point out that there is a duality to reflection that must be considered: yes, it is a cognitive act, but effective reflection must also be accompanied by a set of attitudes. According to Dewey (1933), the three most important of these attitudes are being: open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted. Firstly, teachers must be open-minded with an active desire to listen to more than one side of an issue and then to admit they could be wrong. As a result, teachers must be willing to change a belief or practice. Secondly, teachers must exercise responsibility by carefully considering the consequences of their actions because all teachers' actions impact their students, the community, and the society at large. Thirdly, teachers must be wholehearted in their approach to reflective practice to continually review their beliefs and actions and seek every opportunity to continue to learn and develop themselves as human beings and teachers.

Reflective Practice: A Cooperative-Social Activity

So far, we have suggested that reflective practice is an evidence-based, cognitive act that is accompanied by a set of attitudes. We would now like to point out that reflective practice can be a cooperative activity best completed through interaction with others. We see this cooperation among L2 teachers occurring most fruitfully in teacher reflection groups (Farrell, 2014). As Farrell (2014) pointed out, a teacher reflection group is a place for language teachers to come together to talk about their work in a supportive and evaluation-free environment.

When forming such groups, teachers must consider many issues, such as the type of group they want, the different roles of each participant, and modes of reflection, among others. For example, when considering the type of group that L2 teachers would want to reflect in, the overall philosophical approach to the group should be considered and discussed. Farrell (2007) outlined three main types of teacher reflection groups, which

can be formed not only within a single school but may also span several schools or school districts as well as other organizations. Additionally, virtual groups can be formed among teachers located far apart geographically.

Farrell (2014) also noted that when forming the group, it is important that each participant feels passionate about the group and that group members feel connected to each other so that they are comfortable sharing their ideas. Thus, one of the main issues L2 teacher groups must deal with early on in their existence is the allotment of rotating roles, such as facilitator, note taker, implementer of ideas/strategies, and time/topic monitor, and these roles may well differ in different groups. Then, once the group has discussed and agreed on the allocation of roles, they should consider what opportunities will be provided for reflection. Besides the actual group discussions that can be used as a mode of reflection, groups can also engage in regular journal writing (Francis, 1995), as well as classroom peer observations if the focus is on teaching strategies and techniques. For discussions, each group will have to discuss and agree on the number of meetings they can commit to during the period of their reflection as well as when they will all write in their teacher journal and if and when they will observe each other teach.

Finally, Farrell (2014) suggested that after an L2 teacher reflection group concludes its period of reflection, it is important that all group participants evaluate the influences of the group on their personal and professional growth so that they can have some closure. Participants can reflect on whether they achieved their individual and group goals, their individual and group accomplishments, and factors that can be considered if they or others want to set up other teacher development groups. In summary, we define reflective practice for L2 teachers as:

> *A cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom. (Farrell, 2015, p. 123)*

Cooperative Learning Principles

This article has discussed reflective practice among L2 teachers and has recommended teacher reflection groups as one venue for such practice. The next section of the article discusses how these groups can be informed by principles from the cooperative learning literature, principles which may also be applicable with groups of L2 students. Many sets of principles have been proposed to guide the use of cooperative learning. For example, Johnson and Johnson (2007) propose five principles. This article will use the list of eight cooperative learning principles in Jacobs and Kimura (2013), which are consistent with the writings of Johnson and Johnson and other cooperative learning scholars. Each of the eight principles is explained below with particular reference to groups of teachers.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Heterogeneous grouping involves formation of cooperative learning groups whose members differ in various ways. The many variables on which members of ESL teacher reflection groups might differ include background knowledge about CL, length and types of teaching experience, style of teaching, social class, teacher development experiences,

first language, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sex, views toward CL, and personality. Many CL experts advocate heterogeneous groups, because when people learn in groups that are heterogeneous, they are more likely to engage in interaction, as the heterogeneity of the members creates information gaps which can be bridged by interaction. These gaps could encompass knowledge, such as knowledge about cooperative learning, as well as perspectives, including those of various cultures toward cooperation. The interactions needed to bridge these gaps can benefit both those receiving information as well as those supplying the information (Webb, et al., 2009).

Teaching Collaborative Skills

The CL principle of teaching collaborative skills suggests that time be devoted to group members learning about and reflecting on their use of collaborative skills. Many lists of collaborative skills exist (e.g., Underwood & Underwood, 1999), and these skills overlap with the language functions highlighted in some ESL syllabi. Among the many skills important for reflection in CL groups are comparing understandings, requesting assistance, providing suggestions and feedback, responding productively to suggestions and feedback, requesting reasons, giving reasons, disagreeing politely, praising and thanking others in a specific manner, and paying attention to group functioning. In groups of teachers, when members use collaborative skills, their groups are likely to function better (Soller, 2001), leading to deeper reflection, more learning, and more enjoyment of learning.

Group Autonomy

Too often, group members depend too much on outside authorities, overlooking their own and their peers' abilities. In the case of groups of ESL teachers engaged in reflective practice related to CL, outside authorities might include university professors, officers of government education organizations, school administrators, and reference works on reflection among professionals, even when these works are based on the experiences of teachers in very different contexts. The CL principle of group autonomy encourages group members to look first to their groupmates when they need help or want feedback. Additionally, the principle of group autonomy encourages ESL teachers to become lifelong learners and to take on some of the roles formerly seen to be the exclusive domain of their mentors, such as the roles of providing assistance and feedback. Performing these mentor roles in their reflective teacher groups provides teachers with learning opportunities and promotes peer interactions.

Maximum Peer Interactions

The CL principle, Maximum Peer Interactions, concerns both the quantity and quality of interactions among group members. The quantity of peer interactions increases when teachers reflect in groups, in addition to reflecting alone. Additionally, small groups of two to four members increase the quantity of peer interactions. Furthermore, small groups of ESL teachers reflecting on CL can engage in even more peer interactions by interacting with similar groups before, during, and after their group activities begin. The quality of peer interactions increases when group members use higher order thinking skills (Chiang, et al., 2013). Often, the most important aspect of peer interactions consists of the thinking which can be provoked (Webb, et al., 2009).

Equal Opportunity to Participate

At times, one or more group members may attempt to dominate their groups, making it difficult for other members to interact with group mates and with the task. The CL principle of Equal Opportunity to Participate addresses such situations. When participation is made difficult for any members of teacher groups who are reflecting on CL, the entire group loses out on the insights and industry of the discouraged members. Everyone's voice needs to be heard when ESL teachers come together to reflect, even the voices of teachers new to teaching, to ESL, to CL, and/or to reflection. Inclusiveness helps groups reach better understandings and better communicate those understandings. Additionally, two key rationales for group reflection lie in: (1) welcoming more teachers to communities of reflective practice; and (2) encouraging more teachers to experiment with different ways of helping students to learn and to enjoy learning.

Individual Accountability

Equal Opportunity to Participate attempts to offer all group members chances to play important roles in their groups. At the same time, the CL principle of Individual Accountability attempts to put pressure on members to use those opportunities in order to do their fair share in the groups. In this way, Individual Accountability functions as the flip side of Equal Opportunity to Participate. Group members should utilize the provided opportunities to contribute what they can to their groups. If instead of participating, some members of teacher reflection groups act as freeloaders, group morale may suffer, and teachers may lose faith in the use of groups for reflection on CL or for any other purposes, including for the use of CL by their ESL students. One means of encouraging all group members to do their fair share (which does not necessarily mean an equal share) is to assign roles (perhaps these roles can rotate) in the reflective groups. Possible roles for reflective groups, in addition to the roles mentioned earlier in this article, include recorder, refreshment supplier, videographer (who videotapes other teachers' students when they use CL), and questioner.

Positive Interdependence

Positive Interdependence is the CL principle which most directly seeks to motivate helping behaviors among group members. This principle can be best understood as all group members believing that their own individual outcomes are positively correlated with the outcomes of the others in their teacher reflection groups. In other words, positive interdependence means that groups adopt the spirit embodied in the Three Musketeers' slogan, "All for one; one for all." On one hand, the principle of individual accountability puts pressure on group members to contribute to the group, while, on the other hand, positive interdependence provides support to group members who might be having difficulties. Positive Interdependence may also increase motivation in groups reflecting on CL because members are using CL and reflecting on that use not just for their own benefit and for the benefit of their ESL students, but also for the benefit of fellow group members and those members' students.

Ways to promote Positive Interdependence include:

1. having clear, agreed upon group goals, such as that each member will have facilitated at least seven CL activities by the end of the term,
2. developing a group name, such as the "Cooperative Cats" or other means of building a group identity,
3. spending time on social bonding, for example, occasionally meeting at a coffee shop, instead of always meeting at school,
4. deciding on a group celebration when one or more goal is reached, such as if everyone facilitates the agreed upon number of group activities, they will all collaborate to consume a pint of chocolate flavour coconut ice cream, and
5. building a feeling of coming together to overcome an outside enemy, for example, the outside enemy could be low IELTS scores or lack of student engagement in class.

Cooperation as a Value

An eighth CL principle is Cooperation as a Value. This principle seeks to spread Positive Interdependence beyond small groups of teachers to the entire educational institution, the entire city, the nation, and the world. For instance, teachers can seek to enhance education beyond their own classes by discussing how to engage students and colleagues in aiding refugees or in adopting diets that might reduce humans' production of greenhouse gases. The hope is that the teachers will feel that their group is part of a larger effort to improve education in order to overcome social problems and meet the challenges society faces in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article began with background on the why and how of reflection, in particular, reflection by teachers meeting in groups. Next, the article looked at eight principles for the implementation of cooperative learning and discussed the application of these principles in teacher groups who are reflecting on their use of cooperative learning for the acquisition of ESL. Such cooperative groups for teacher reflection can play a vital role, because before implementing any teaching methodology, including cooperative learning, teachers should walk a mile in the shoes of their students by experiencing that methodology themselves. For example, ESL teachers who might want to have an English-only policy in their classes should spend some time studying another language in classrooms in which only the target language is used. In this way, when teachers ask their students to learn via a particular methodology, it becomes a case of the teachers asking their students to, "Please do as I recommend and as I do myself;" in this way, the teachers are practicing what they preach.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, when teachers experience successful cooperative learning for themselves (and groups guided by the eight principles discussed above are more likely to be successful groups), their belief in the power of peer learning grows. That belief can increase the likelihood that teachers will want their students to enjoy the same benefits of collaboration. Last, but not least, belief in the power of cooperation will encourage teachers to skilfully persevere when inevitable obstacles arise as their students struggle to learn for themselves the skills and attitudes necessary to experiencing successful cooperative learning.

About the Authors

Thomas S.C. Farrell is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. Professor Farrell's professional interests include Reflective Practice, and Language Teacher Education & Development. Professor Farrell has published widely in academic journals and has presented at major conferences worldwide on these topics. A selection of his work can be found on his webpage: www.reflectiveinquiry.ca

George M Jacobs teaches tertiary students, as well as a wide variety of teachers, in Singapore. He enjoys the difficult but doable and often delightful dance of cooperation with his colleagues, and together, they have produced many publications of cooperative learning and other topics.

References

Chiang, V. C. L., Leung, S. S. K., Chui, C. Y. Y., Leung, A. Y. M., & Mak, Y. W. (2013). Building life-long learning capacity in undergraduate nursing freshmen within an integrative and small group learning context. *Nurse Education Today, 33*(10), 1184-1191. doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2012.05.009

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. London, UK: Continuum Press.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2013). *Reflective writing for language teachers*. London, UK: Equinox.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2014). *Reflective practice in ESL teacher development groups: From practices to principles*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Francis, D. (1995). The reflective journal: A window to preservice teachers' knowledge. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 11*, 229-241.

Fullan, M. (Ed.). (2009). *The challenge of change (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 11*, 33-49.

Jacobs, G. M., & Kimura, H. (2013). *Cooperative learning and teaching*. In the series, *English language teacher development*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. P. (2013). *Joining together: Group theory and group skills (11th ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (2007). *Nuts & bolts of cooperative learning (2nd ed.)*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S. O., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. A. (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(3), 475-514. doi: 10.3102/0002831215585562

Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professional think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Soller, A. (2001). Supporting social interaction in an intelligent collaborative learning system. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education, 12*, 40-62.

Underwood, J., & Underwood, G. (1999). Task effects on co-operative and collaborative learning with computers. In K. Littleton & P. Light (Eds.), *Learning with computers: Analysing productive interaction* (pp. 10-23). Florence, KY: Psychology Press.

Webb, N. M., Franke, M. L., De, T., Chan, A. G., Freund, D., Shein, P., & Melkonian, D. K. (2009). 'Explain to your partner': Teachers' instructional practices and students' dialogue in small groups. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(1), 49-70.