
Jacobs, M. G., Lie, A. & Tama, S. M. (2022)
Cooperative learning through a cooperative lens.
Bristol CT: Equinox Publishing.

Fortunately, in the discourse of cooperative learning, new handbooks continue to appear. Such as the book titled Cooperative Learning through a Reflective Lens published by Equinox Publishing. Over the past half-century, numerous cooperative models have been characterized in the discourse of cooperative learning. Among these models are the Jigsaw Classroom (Aronson, 2021; Aronson et al., 1978), Learning Together (Johnson et al., 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 2021a), Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 2021), Structural Approach (Kagan, 1990, 2021), Small Group Discovery (Davidson, 1985, 2021), as well as Complex Instruction (Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Lotan & Holthuis, 2021), or the Paradigmatic Approach (Arató, 2013, 2014a, 2023). One of the authors George Jacobs is also familiar to those well-versed in the CL discourse. Together with co-authors Anita Lie and Siti Minah Tamah, they specifically created their handbook with a focus on language teaching or social studies. The book, as indicated in its title, ties the aspect of reflexivity to the concept of cooperative learning. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity for educators to comprehensively understand the theoretical background, practical principles, and specific applications of cooperative learning, including the importance of peer reflections in learning. On the other hand, it also connects the necessity of collegial reflection to the implementation of cooperative practices. Moreover, they have included Reflective Breaks at the end of each chapter for the reader, which contain specific prompts and questions to facilitate reader’s reflection. It aligns well with the spirit of the Reflective Practice in Language Education series in which it was published.

The book consists of seven interwoven chapters that can guide readers along the path of implementation. In my interpretation, these seven chapters can be divided into three distinct parts. The first four chapters introduce the reader to the discourse of cooperative learning, starting from the theoretical foundations, moving through the cooperative principles, practical strategies, and exploring alternative assessment practices within cooperative learning. The next section of the book focuses on reflective practice, as promised by the title. In the fifth chapter, two models are used to connect reflective approaches with cooperative learning. While the sixth chapter provides guidance for creating a reflective practice centered on teacher collaboration to facilitate the implementation of cooperative learn-
ing. The final part, the concluding seventh chapter, offers a synthesis of the book’s content with the help of five lesson plans that bolster practical implementation.

In the introduction (Hurray for Cooperation!), attention is drawn to the societal necessity of cooperation, guiding the reader towards cooperative learning, the central concept of the book. Similarly, in the first chapter (Background on Cooperative Learning), the authors start from the broader context of cooperation, shedding light on the recurring idea of learning based on cooperation from ancient times to the present day. From another perspective, they direct the reader’s attention to the significance of cooperation in society by highlighting the phenomenon of neighborhood cooperation (such as gotong royong, kampung, etc.) present in various cultures. The authors present the theories that define the cooperative discourse, starting from Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, Humanistic Psychology, behaviorism, Social Interdependence Theory, constructivism, and Critical Pedagogy. Considering the book’s target audience, they position the cooperative discourse in the context of Second Language Education, incorporating three hypotheses related to cooperative learning: Input, Interaction, and Output Hypotheses. The authors also delve into approaches that validate the significance of learner diversity and the need for individualization, as well as theoretical foundations that emphasize learner autonomy. The chapter discusses the distinction between cooperative and collaborative discourses, and further delves into the research background of the discourse.

In the second chapter (Eight Principles of Cooperative Learning), the authors list the principles of cooperative learning. One representative of the principle-based approach is Kagan (1990, 1992, 2009, 2021), who talks about four basic principles of cooperative learning. Arató (2013, 2014, 2023), on the other hand, discusses eight paradigmatic basic principles. While Jacobs and colleagues provide more flexibility in shaping the list of principles, Kagan and, surpassing him, Arató attach significant importance to certain principles. According to their view, it is precisely through these principles that cooperative learning can be distinguished from any other group learning activity. Arató (2013, 2017, 2023) explicitly claims that by using the basic principles of cooperative learning, it can be determined to what extent any learning process establishes a guarantee for each individual student’s effective, successful, and equitable cooperation to enhance their individual learning outcomes.

Most of the principles mentioned in the book coincide with those found in the literature. Positive interdependence, individual accountability, parallel promotive peer interaction—all of these are present in the cooperative learning discourse (Arató, 2014, 2023; Johnson & Johnson, 2009, 2021b; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1992, 2021; Slavin, 1983; Slavin & Madden, 2021). Both in Kagan’s and Arató’s work, ensuring equal participation is also emphasized, with Arató focusing on equal access as a facet of this principle. This aligns well with Jacobs and colleagues’ other principle of Heterogeneous Grouping. Arató discusses heterogeneity as a guarantee of equal access. It is essential to ensure the heterogeneity that reflects the diversity of the class for every student because it provides access to personal resources stemming from diversity. Group processing also appears as a distinct component in Johnson’s work and can be well correlated with the principle of Group Autonomy in the book. Arató links elements of group autonomy, group development and team building to his principle of Critical Friendly, Reflective, and Supportive Transparency. Both Johnsons, Kagan, and Arató include the conscious development of interpersonal and small group skills; the authors of the book have highlighted this as the Teaching Cooperative Skills principle. The Cooperation as a Value principle resonates well with Arató’s approach, which promotes the principle of open and flexible structures. Its essence lies in viewing cooperation, the collaboration among students, as a core value that overrides the teacher’s possible plans or ideas, placing the successful individual development of each student at the center of collaboration.
The authors highlight the principles that are important for readers who are getting acquainted with cooperative learning, and which also play a defining role in the discourse. Another strength of the chapter lies in the fact that they provide concrete examples to their principles. They bring forth examples of cooperative roles, cooperative skills, and positive interdependence based on Johnson’s work. They also provide simple techniques (e.g., Talking chips), or more complex structures (e.g., Jigsaw structure). Drawing on Kuhn (1970), Arató (2014) emphasizes that the Jigsaw Classroom, developed by Aronson and colleagues (1978, 2021), emerges as a paradigmatic exemplar for the defining authors of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, 2021; Sharan & Sharan, 2021; Kagan, 1992; Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Lotan & Hulthois, 2021). Similarly, Jacobs and colleagues showcase the Jigsaw structure to illustrate how all their eight principles can manifest within a single cooperative structure.

Like Johnson and Holubec’s popular book (2007), which has seen multiple editions under the same title, in the Nuts and Bolts of Cooperative Learning chapter, the authors share ideas and practical tips for the implementation of cooperative learning. During the discussion of classroom arrangements, they analyze various possible spatial layouts including standard rows, circles, horseshoes, small groups, and student-centered seating. They emphasize the importance of simplicity, routine behavioral patterns, and promoting target language usage. They then delve into several practical tools for fostering group identity. After exploring name-based group identity, they emphasize the significance of cooperative games for strengthening team spirit. Towards the end of the chapter, they briefly highlight the new roles of observing, discussing, and modeling as facilitative and scaffolding elements within the teacher’s competencies that support cooperative learning.

In the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to assessment. The authors derive forms of assessment used in cooperative learning from the differentiation between summative and formative assessment. The trichotomous line of thinking, which categorizes diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment, emerged from the formative evaluation concept introduced by Scriven (1967), later referred to as formative assessment following Bloom’s (1969) proposal. Black and Wiliam’s departure from the “black box” of assessment and the emphasis on formative assessment, along with the efforts of the Assessment Reform Group (2002, 2006), received substantial attention in the international discourse.

The concept of formative assessment has evolved over the years, necessitating the clarification and refinement of its use and interpretation, which has been a central task in this discourse (see, for example, Bennett, 2011). The authors use the terms in the classic sense, discussing the two expressions dichotomously, which often leads to misunderstandings. For instance, when a teacher tries to evaluate from non-verbal facial expressions how well the explanation their students could follow, it falls under the dimension of assessment of learning since it attempts to assess comprehension through observing behavior. According to the authors, this is a spontaneous form of formative assessment. They cite this phenomenon as an example of spontaneous formative assessment, even though in this case, it evaluates learning performance, comprehension, rather than the form of learning. In this scenario, spontaneous formative assessment could involve momentarily pausing and asking the Recorders in the small groups to check whether everyone is taking notes on important learning points in their notebooks. While one feedback pertains to the form of learning, the other assesses comprehension or academic performance.

The literature has identified the concept of summative assessment used in the classic sense with the concept of assessment of learning (Crooks, 2004). Yet, it has become clear that a summative judgment can also be relevant within the dimension of formative assessment. For example: “Let’s gather the five note-taking methods that worked well for you in following the lectures.” This is a summative, or aggregating assessment that relates to the form of learning, hence a summative formative assessment.
Within the cooperative discourse, Arató (Arató, 2017, 2018) points out that classroom assessment needs to occur across four dimensions based on fundamental questions about learning: What are we learning? How are we learning? Why are we learning? For whom are we learning? These questions outline four dimensions in learning and consequently in assessment: performance assessment, formative assessment, metacognitive assessment, and structural assessment uncovered by the cooperative paradigm. Each of these can serve diagnostic, process-following, intervention, or summative assessment functions.

Therefore, the authors, within the interpretive framework of the classic division, provide vivid examples, important attitudinal approaches, and practical instances. They summarize practical ideas supporting the implementation of cooperative learning through eight questions. They address the frequency and actors of assessment, norm-based, criterion-oriented, and ipsative approaches, various grading forms, grade-free assessment, criterion-oriented assessment of cooperative skills, joint creation of assessment rubrics, and different forms of rewards. This reveals a sufficiently broad horizon for educators interested in practice, including those coming from a traditional assessment culture.

Regarding rewards, there are two major schools of thought within the cooperative learning discourse. One is associated with Slavin, who increasingly interpreted the possible place of rewards in a broader sense of individual accountability (Slavin, 1983, 2021). Arató (Arató, 2013, 2014), Arató & Varga, (2005, 2006), referencing humanistic psychology and specifically Rogers’ disciples (Gordon, 1989, Rosenberg, 2003), excludes the reward-punishment paradigm from cooperative practice. Arató also points out that Kagan came to a similar realization, and he revised the chapter on group assessment accordingly in the version of his handbook co-authored with his son (Kagan, 1992, Kagan & Kagan, 2009). Despite the criticism, the listed reward practices can contribute to strengthening group spirit and understanding the significance of individual efforts and responsibility, as demonstrated by Slavin’s decades of research.

The first four chapters beautifully outline the journey from theoretical foundations through principles, practical techniques, and even to the diverse, complex alternative assessment methods in cooperative learning. This can be seen as the first part of the book. In the following chapter, within the book’s second part, they bring out the reflective lenses and contemplate the realm of cooperative learning from a reflective perspective. This approach not only aligns with the interactive and constructivist traditions of the cooperative discourse but also emphasizes the significance of reflection in cooperative practice. Moreover, it fits seamlessly into the reflection-centered approach of the book series.

The next chapter (Cooperative Learning and Reflective Practice) primarily present the possibilities of reflective learning and teaching within cooperative learning through two models. Drawing on Palmer’s (1998) model and connecting it with the cooperative principles mentioned in the second chapter, they illustrate the reflective practice related to students, language learning as a subject, and teachers. Concerning students, they draw attention to eight crucial factors. Among these, they emphasize the significance of learner autonomy, the social nature of learning, neurodiversity, developing critical thinking, and alternative assessments in shaping reflective learner practices. Regarding the subject, they highlight that language teaching provides an excellent ground for curricular integration and reinforce the teacher’s role as a model, partner, and co-learner in language-cultural knowledge acquisition, or language learning. Palmer’s third pillar, concerning teachers, again underscores the teacher’s reflective role in planning and facilitating, creating a responsive, non-threatening, non-violent environment for all of their learners.

In the second part of the chapter, based on Farrell (2019), they detail six reflective principles within the context of cooperative learning practices. They demonstrate how one can analyze their own practice using holistic, evidence-based, and dialogue-based approaches.
They also show how educators can reflect on the principles underlying their pedagogical practices and maintain a critical attitude toward both their teaching practices and professional life-situations. These six principles are linked to the basic principles of cooperative learning in a detailed and highly useful table. This table essentially becomes the focus of the book. It becomes clear how practicing educators can connect reflective principles essential for language teaching with the foundational principles that shape cooperative learning. Through the table, readers can delve into the connections, as the authors provide examples of synergistic and reflective questions for each area.

In the following chapter (Teachers Cooperatively Reflecting on Their Students’ Use of Cooperative Learning), the authors introduce another level of reflection. They highlight the importance of collaboration-based reflection among teachers during the practical implementation of cooperative learning. Through parables and stories, they illustrate the significance of openness to knowledge and cooperation. Then, drawing from Farrell and Jacobs (2016), they showcase the benefits of collaboration among teachers. The unique value of this chapter lies in how they interpret the eight foundational principles within the context of collaboration among teachers. They vividly demonstrate how the cooperative paradigm can be applied among educators. This approach particularly aligns with ideas from the cooperative discourse, such as Johnson’s Cooperative School (1994) concepts or Arató and colleagues’ models for the school and system-wide application of the cooperative paradigm (Arató & Vargha, 2005, 2012, Arató, 2013, 2014). As readers progress through the chapters, aligned with the cooperative principles, they can potentially collaborate with their colleagues to design a support system based on cooperative structures, such as introducing cooperative learning into each of their practices.

The last chapter (Put It All Together: Cooperative Learning and Teacher Reflection in Language Lessons) serves as a summary of the entire book, encompassing both cooperative and reflective practices. The authors structure the subsequent sub-chapters around five excellent and inherently exciting methodological approaches. Extensive reading, debate, reading non-fiction, learning grammar, and project-based lessons are all discussed by the authors following the same logic. After introducing each approach, a Lesson plan is presented, followed by a Commentary section that assists in implementation. This is further enhanced by a Variation segment. Similar to the rest of the book, each of the five sub-chapters presenting these lessons concludes with Reflection Break questions and instructions to encourage reader reflection. This chapter encapsulates the essence of the book’s content, guiding readers through a process of summarizing what has been discussed. Additionally, the authors provide ammunition for encouraging reflection, creativity, and reader engagement.

The preface and its reflecting counterpart in the afterword (Hurray for Cooperative Learning through a Reflective Lens) aptly symbolize the authors’ enthusiasm that permeates the entire book. The Reflective Breaks, presented in each subsection throughout the book, continually introduce new contexts for interpreting the content, expanding the context toward social diversity and collaboration. This effectively illuminates how the application of the cooperative paradigm within the classroom or among teachers for practice improvement extends beyond the school walls, potentially impacting societal interactions and collaborations.

Overall, this handbook presents a valuable resource that intricately weaves into the discourse of cooperative learning. With its reader-friendly typography, references, index, and authors sections, clear structure, and a well-crafted logical progression that spans from theoretical underpinnings to complex implementation, the book is an asset not only for English educators but also for other teachers curious about cooperative learning practice. Moreover, it holds relevance for researchers delving into the practical aspects of cooperative learning. Its seamless blend of theory and practice makes it a compelling guide that bridges the gap between educational theory and classroom application.
References


