

Leadership and Languages: Preparing Leaders at All Levels

BY SHERI SPAINE LONG

Leadership definitions are everywhere. Almost daily there are new or repurposed categories of leaders and leadership styles. There are culturally intelligent leaders, millennial leaders, transformational leaders, and the list goes on. As lifelong learners of languages and cultures, language teachers know that leaders can look and behave differently across cultures. Language educators possess a unique perspective on leadership because of our insider knowledge of multiple cultures.

The integration of leadership development and language learning poses a variety of questions: How do we add leadership to our curriculum and professional culture in a meaningful manner? How do we put into practice the concept to *Lead with Languages*? What is a transnational leader? How does a global citizen lead? There is a need to clarify our role as language educators and its relationship to leadership. Those of us in language education are particularly concerned with leadership as it relates to teacher effectiveness with our students and also in society at large.

Let's start by defining the concept of a leader. In its most basic definition, a leader has a vision of what needs to be done and influences others to do it. Leadership is a behavior that implies intentionality, interpretive skills, self-awareness, appropriateness, and the ability to communicate. By integrating leadership development and languages, we can better advocate for our students to become good global citizens. Language educators generally share the belief that civility and mutual responsibility are essential behaviors both locally and globally. With this in mind, we know that effective leaders are also good followers. Therefore, a focus on leadership and on leadership development is appropriate for each and every language student and educator—not

just a select few. In a word, leadership is being *democratized* and is no longer an elite pursuit.

Embracing “leadership and responsibility” as identified in ACTFL’s 21st Century Skills Map for World Languages (tinyurl.com/actflskillsmap) both in the classroom and beyond is essential for language educators. There is growing pressure for schools to produce career-ready students and for teachers to educate and advocate for multilingualism in an increasingly connected world. Leadership roles for language teachers are wide-ranging. We are classroom teacher-leaders, school and community leaders, and often we are also the leaders in the profession. Leadership skills are highly transferable to a variety of contexts.

Leadership development is a growing component of language education, as individual educators are experimenting with leadership in the language classroom and experiential learning. Former Spanish teacher Cristin Bless from Castle View High School, Castle Rock, CO, developed a “Spanish for Leadership” course for her advanced students. Mary Risner, Associate Director of Outreach and Business Programs at the Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida and founder of NOBLE (Network of Business Language Educators), co-published with a team of classroom educators a Languages for Specific Purposes e-book, *Connecting World Language Curriculum to Global Workplace Skills (K–12)*, that is available to download for free (nble.org/ebook). It includes a chapter of classroom-tested leadership modules for Spanish. There are several foundational studies published in SCOLT’s online journal *Dimension* about language learning and leadership development. However, there is a need for further research, more practical models, and additional classroom resources to help guide educators that seek to incorporate leadership into their repertoire. In 2011, Lieutenant Colonel LeAnn Derby, Assistant Professor of French at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and I initiated a research study that concluded: *Knowing multiple cultures helps produce good leaders.*



LEFT: Japanese educators at the LILL Summer Institute (l-r), Iya Nemastil (Marysville High School, OH), Yasuo Uotate (University of Florida), and Tim Cornell (The Harvey School, NY). RIGHT: LILL participants from the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages region.

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TOP: LILL participants Lisa Berkson (Saguaro High School, Tempe, AZ), Todd Bowen (Niles Township High Schools, Skokie, IL), and Rebecca Berber-McNeill (Arizona State University). ВОТТОМ: Jay Ketner (Maine Department of Education) creates his action plan during the LILL institute.

This result is likely to come as no surprise to language educators. A number of ACTFL-sponsored and/or affiliated initiatives have paved the way for the leadership mindset—the ACTFL 21st Century Skills Map for World Languages (2011) that includes leadership and responsibility, ACTFL’s *Lead with Languages* advocacy campaign conceptualized in 2013 (and scheduled for official launch in 2016), and most recently the 2015 Leadership Initiative for Language Learning (LILL) institute that took place this summer at The Ohio State University (OSU). Ten organizations collaborated in the design and facilitation of the LILL Summer Institute: the five regional language organizations, NNELL, NADSFL, NCSFL, TELL, and ACTFL. Generous support for the event was provided by the OSU Department of Teaching and Learning; the College of Education and Human Ecology; East Asian Studies Center; and the Center for Languages, Literatures and Cultures.

Over 100 language educators, teacher-leaders, and national experts from across the United States, representing all levels of instruction and administration gathered in Columbus, OH, for 3 days in late July 2015. Presentations on core practices were led by Eileen Glisan, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and sessions on leadership were led by Greta Lundgaard, Plano Independent School District (TX), and Pete Swanson, Georgia State University.

At this first-ever leadership initiative, the participants pledged to listen, learn, discuss, share, and incubate ideas. While at the institute, each participant created an action plan for strengthening language instruction detailing steps to implement in their own classroom, within their department or institution, or through their state, regional, or national language teaching organization. According to the LILL goals, the initiative “seeks to empower individuals to become agents for change, foster a growth mindset focused on effective teaching and learning, and purposefully nurture leadership skills, all in the service of learners.” This meeting of minds is to begin an ongoing dialogue among professionals about leadership in language education. The LILL project is founded on the notion that every educator is a leader every day and should strive to be highly effective. For language educators, effectiveness is demonstrated by evidence of learners’ growth in proficiency, including their growth in language literacy.

There were several groups of LILL participants. State, regional, and national organizations named 30 emerging leaders, and an additional 70 self-motivated educators participated independently to improve their effectiveness as language teachers and develop their leadership skills. The leadership conversation was focused around how to lead all language educators to use effective language teaching practices in their instruction. Research around effective practices provided a strong rationale for examining and refocusing classroom instruction and assessment.

During the institute, participants created public service announcements (PSAs) to summarize their understanding of effective standards-based practices. The participants worked in breakout groups to plan, dramatize, and produce their own PSAs.

Institute participants repeatedly referenced the importance of examining one’s practices in their recorded feedback detailing their experience at LILL. They outlined plans to take core practices back to their institutions, departments, colleagues, and classrooms:

- ▶ French teacher Richard Emch from North Royalton High School in North Royalton, OH, expressed that he will work “to prioritize and implement core practices” in his school, as well as follow up and spread effective practices by acting as an “agent of change” in his state and regional professional associations.
- ▶ District Director of World Languages and ELL Justin K. Fisk at Adlai E. Stevenson High School District 125, Lincolnshire, IL, spoke of his plan “to forge more connections between our content area and others.”
- ▶ Dorie Perugini, Spanish teacher at Naubuc Elementary School, Glastonbury, CT, observed that “the first step in this process is for teachers to realize that they are leaders and encourage them to get involved in a professional organization at any level to hone leadership skills.”

Institute participants explored the notion of leading by example, following, sharing, creating, reflecting, and they pledged to influence others to espouse what they learned at LILL. At the close of the event, LILL participants were asked to reflect on questions such as: Are language educators uniquely poised to be leaders?

“Teachers are communicators,” said Beth Slocum, who teaches French and Spanish at Genesee Community College, Batavia, NY. Spanish teacher Pamela Reynolds at Siloam Springs High School, AR, noted that “language educators are uniquely poised to lead because in studying other cultures we are accustomed to acknowledging and appreciating other cultural perspectives.” Her observation concurs with a recent research study conducted at the U.S. Air Force Academy that points out the crucial role of language learning in a student’s overall education. Our ability to understand and express ourselves appropriately across cultures is unique to the language discipline. Our students will not get such experience elsewhere in the curriculum. This means that languages and cultures intertwined with leadership are all the more essential to pass on to our students.

Another LILL participant, Yasuo Uotate, senior lecturer of Japanese at the University of Florida, expressed a desire to include more leadership activities in his classes. There are discipline-specific as well as generic approaches to developing leadership. Generic methods include assigning additional team and group work, incorporating the role of class, group, or team leader into the classroom routine, and organizing more presentations to offer learners more leadership opportunities.

Spanish teacher Lori Polin-Silva from Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, IL, already includes leadership activities in her classes “through cooperative learning activities where students take turns being leaders.” These types of tasks engage students in target language communication and leadership activities simultaneously; often these activities contain cross-cultural perspectives and problems to solve. Such activities are likely to promote critical thinking.

Reynolds shared an additional example where students use the target language, cultural knowledge, and leadership skills to refocus a speaker when off topic. Her students “learn target language gambits in which they affirm one another, summarize, ask clarifying questions, and respectfully refocus the conversation.” She noted that, “Knowing how to redirect a conversation is an important leadership skill.”

Clearly, there are both simple and complex ways to incorporate leadership development into the learning environment. For example, it is straightforward and powerful to make a point of praising student leadership. Be explicit and intentional about valuing appropriate behavior and make students accountable to one another. First and foremost, lead by example. Be a mentor. Consider building mentorship pairings among your students of varying levels to enhance language learning to make it peer driven.

Leadership development and language learning possess a parallel relationship, according to Jean W. LeLoup, Professor of Spanish at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and co-founder of the FLTEACH listserv. Both language learning and leadership development present considerable occasions for risk taking because one must observe, reflect,

analyze and decide how to proceed in a given situation. Interestingly in leadership and language learning, there is often not just one right answer, but rather there are multiple ways to move forward in order to be successful. This is an important point for our students to know as they seek to improve their language and/or leadership skills.

Leadership opportunities are everywhere for both language students and instructors. Students appreciate the focus on leadership when it is associated with and explained as a needed skill for successful future employment, continued education, or for lifelong learning. In my classroom experience, I find that students are fascinated with leaders and how they frequently appear and act uniquely across cultures. At the U.S. Air Force Academy, I partnered with James P. Rasmussen, Associate Professor of German, to co-organize a student discussion and debate between upper-level Spanish and German students, so that they could share observations about leaders and leadership across their target languages and cultures. In the context of experiential learning, I also required that students of Japanese at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte keep a leadership diary when they participated in a short-term study abroad trip last summer to Japan. They were instructed to jot down their observations about how Japanese leaders and leadership appeared to be the same or different than in the United States. Their observations about Japanese respect for leaders were fascinating! Cultural activities to foster awareness of diverse practices are already employed by most language educators. Often the same activities can simply be modified to focus more intentionally on the concept of leadership in order to encourage the development of language literacy and leadership at the same time.

As the pedagogy of leadership and language learning evolves and is mainstreamed into the language discipline, consider how you can equip your students for future success. According to a recent survey published in *Economist Intelligence Unit* in August 2015, business leaders were asked to identify the most critical skills for their employees. Leadership skills garnered 18% of the responses and foreign language skills received 15% of the replies. Problem-solving skills were named in 50% of the vote.

Language educators know that cross-cultural understanding through language learning is key to helping solve problems in the increasingly global workplace. This is why what language educators do matters more than ever before because the welfare and success of our students is at stake. Keep this in mind as our profession is poised to promote effective language learning and leadership development to serve different constituencies—local and global citizens, civic and community groups, our professional organizations, institutions, departments, colleagues, and, most importantly our own students. We need to ask ourselves how to best lead and focus language learning that will ultimately benefit us all—teach to lead! Lastly, as ACTFL so aptly puts it: *Lead with Languages**!

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*Look for ACTFL’s new advocacy campaign—*Lead with Languages*—to be officially launched next year with the release of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) national study on language education. Learn more about the AAAS study on p. 56 of this issue.