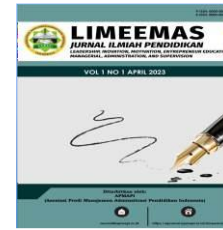


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LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This study investigates how language learning contributes to leadership transformation among students in higher education. In an increasingly global and multilingual environment, leadership is no longer defined solely by technical competence or formal authority, but also by the ability to communicate effectively, influence others, and manage social interactions. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study explores how participation in language learning activities shapes students' communication practices, leadership behaviors, and social roles within group settings. The participants were 50 students from three diploma programs who had completed courses in Indonesian and English. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and documentation of speaking tasks and group discussions. The findings show that language learning enhances leadership communication through increased verbal initiative, more precise message delivery, improved persuasive ability, greater involvement in group decision-making, and higher communication confidence. The study also identifies learning strategies that foster leadership capacity, including group discussions, oral presentations, role-play activities, collaborative projects, and reflective writing. However, several barriers were identified that limit leadership transformation, including fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, cultural inhibition, and unequal participation in groups. Overall, the study concludes that language learning provides a powerful social and communicative space for developing leadership, although its impact depends on both individual and contextual factors.

Keywords: Language learning; leadership development; communication; higher education; qualitative study

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana pembelajaran bahasa berkontribusi pada transformasi kepemimpinan di kalangan siswa di pendidikan tinggi. Dalam lingkungan yang semakin global dan multibahasa, kepemimpinan tidak lagi ditentukan semata-mata oleh kompetensi teknis atau otoritas formal, tetapi juga oleh kemampuan untuk berkomunikasi secara efektif, mempengaruhi orang lain, dan mengelola interaksi sosial. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana partisipasi dalam kegiatan pembelajaran bahasa membentuk praktik komunikasi, perilaku kepemimpinan, dan peran sosial siswa dalam pengaturan kelompok. Peserta adalah 50 mahasiswa dari tiga program diploma yang telah menyelesaikan mata kuliah dalam bahasa Indonesia dan Bahasa Inggris. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, jurnal reflektif, dan dokumentasi tugas berbicara dan diskusi kelompok. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran bahasa meningkatkan komunikasi kepemimpinan melalui peningkatan inisiatif verbal, penyampaian pesan yang lebih jelas, peningkatan kemampuan persuasif, keterlibatan yang lebih besar dalam pengambilan keputusan kelompok, dan kepercayaan diri komunikasi yang lebih tinggi. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi strategi pembelajaran yang menumbuhkan kapasitas

kepemimpinan, termasuk diskusi kelompok, presentasi lisan, kegiatan bermain peran, proyek kolaboratif, dan penulisan reflektif. Namun, beberapa hambatan diidentifikasi yang membatasi transformasi kepemimpinan, termasuk takut membuat kesalahan, kosakata yang terbatas, kepercayaan diri yang rendah, hambatan budaya, dan partisipasi yang tidak setara dalam kelompok. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajaran bahasa menyediakan ruang sosial dan komunikatif yang kuat untuk mengembangkan kepemimpinan, meskipun dampaknya tergantung pada faktor individu dan kontekstual.

Kata kunci: *Pembelajaran bahasa; pengembangan kepemimpinan; komunikasi; pendidikan tinggi; Studi kualitatif*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and increasingly intensive cross-border work mobility, modern leadership cannot be separated from the ability to communicate across languages and cultures. A leader is not only required to have vision and technical competence, but must also be able to express ideas, influence others, build trust, and resolve conflicts through effective communication interactions. Language serves as the primary medium in this process: through language, visions are formulated, decisions are negotiated, and professional relationships are built. Therefore, language skills are no longer just linguistic skills, but rather the main infrastructure of leadership practice itself.

However, reality shows that many individuals with high intellectual and technical capacity fail to maximize their leadership potential due to limitations in cross-lingual and cross-cultural communication. In a global work environment, misspelling words, inability to explain ideas clearly, or a lack of cultural sensitivity can hinder collaboration, lower credibility, and even trigger conflict. This is where language learning becomes crucial, as it not only teaches structure and vocabulary but also shapes a person's way of thinking, social sensitivity, and confidence in interacting with others. (Harpiansi, Anggra Prima, 2025). Thus, examining the relationship between language learning and leadership transformation becomes very urgent to understand how future leaders can be prepared more holistically.

In practice, many organizations and educational institutions continue to treat language training and leadership development as two distinct paths. Purwanto et al. (2025) Language training is often directed at academic or functional abilities alone, while leadership training focuses more on management theory, decision-making, and organizational strategy. (Purwanto, Umar, et al., 2025). In fact, in the real world, leadership is carried out through daily communication: leading meetings, negotiating solutions, building networks, and motivating teams. (Indriani et al., 2025). When these two domains are not integrated, individuals may possess strong leadership theories but struggle to execute them effectively in communication.

Most research on leadership still emphasizes psychological, organizational, or managerial aspects, while research on language learning tends to focus on improving linguistic competence. (Vivin Afini, Fitri Nurdianingsih, Ridayani, 2025). Relatively few studies explicitly examine how the language learning process can influence a person's approach to leadership roles, persuasive communication, and social influence in a given context. (Purwanto, Yuliasri, et al., 2025). As a result, there is a space for study that has not been explored much: language as a mechanism for leadership transformation, not just as a technical communication tool.

Based on these backgrounds and gaps, this study aims to examine how language learning contributes to changes in the way individuals communicate as leaders, how specific learning strategies can encourage the emergence of leadership behaviors, and what challenges learners encounter during this process. Specifically, this study aims to answer three key questions: how language learning affects leadership communication practices, what learning strategies are most effective in developing leadership capacity, and what barriers hinder this transformation.

The novelty of this research lies in its position that bridges two relatively separate fields: language learning and leadership studies. Instead of viewing language as a supporting skill, this research positions it as a key arena in which leadership is formed and practiced. Using a descriptive approach to learners' experiences, interactions, and behavioral changes, this study presents a new perspective on how leadership can develop organically through the process of learning and using language.

It is hoped that this research will serve as a valuable reference for educators, trainers, and designers of human resource development programs in integrating language learning with leadership development in the future. The findings of this study are expected not only to enrich the academic literature but also to provide a practical basis for designing training programs that are more relevant to the demands of the global workforce. Thus, this article is expected to contribute to efforts to create a generation of leaders who are not only technically competent but also communicatively and socially strong.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design that aims to provide an in-depth description of how the language learning process contributes to changes in the way participants think, behave, and communicate within the context of leadership. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture subjective experiences, perceptions, and the dynamics of social interaction that arise during the language learning process, which cannot be reduced to numbers or statistical variables alone. (Dahnial Dahnial et al., 2025). Through observations, interviews, and reflections with participants, this study aims to understand how individuals interpret their role in communication, how they initiate change, influence others, and build confidence as part of the leadership transformation that naturally occurs in Language learning activities. (Harapan et al., 2024).

The participants in this study are 50 students from Prasetiya Mandiri Polytechnic PSDKU Palembang, specifically those in Semester 1 and Semester 3, who have taken Indonesian and English courses as part of their curriculum. The students were selected from three study programs: D3 Commercial Administration, D3 Accounting, and D3 Business Travel and Tourism, to represent diverse academic backgrounds and professional orientations. The selection of these participants is based on the consideration that they already have formal experience in language learning relevant to analyzing the development of communication and leadership roles in early academic and professional contexts.

Data collection in this study was conducted through four primary sources: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, student reflection journals, and documentation of speaking assignments and group discussions. Classroom observations

are used to directly capture how students interact, communicate, take initiative, and position themselves in language learning activities. The researcher recorded communication patterns, courage to speak, how to express opinions, and leadership dynamics that emerged in group activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected students representing the three study programs to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions regarding changes in confidence, communication methods, and social roles they experienced during the language learning process. Reflection journals are used as a means for students to record their personal experiences, challenges, and progress. At the same time, documentation of speaking assignments and group discussions serves as authentic evidence of communication and leadership practices occurring in the classroom.

The implementation of data collection is carried out through several systematic stages. First, the researcher conducted initial observations on language learning activities to map communication patterns and the role of students in groups. Second, students are asked to fill out a reflection journal periodically during the learning process, especially after participating in speaking activities or group discussions. Third, the researcher collected and archived speaking assignment documents, such as presentations, dialogues, and discussion results, as qualitative analysis materials. Fourth, based on the results of observations and journals, the researcher selected 10 students with varying levels of participation and communication activity to be interviewed in depth. Interviews were conducted to clarify observational findings and deepen the understanding of how language learning affects their confidence, leadership style, and social engagement.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, namely by identifying, grouping, and interpreting patterns of meaning that emerged from observations, interviews, reflection journals, and assignment documentation. The focus of the analysis was directed at three main aspects, namely changes in communication styles, the role of students in the group, and indications of initiative, influence, and confidence. Data from various sources were compared and triangulated to ensure the consistency of findings, so that the resulting picture truly reflects how language learning contributes to the transformation of student behavior and leadership tendencies within the learning context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study are organized around three central dimensions that explain how language learning contributes to leadership development. First, the results describe how participation in language learning activities reshapes students' leadership communication practices. Second, the study identifies specific learning strategies that most effectively foster leadership capacity. Third, it reveals the key barriers that limit or slow down leadership transformation through language learning. Together, these three dimensions provide a comprehensive picture of both the enabling and constraining factors in the process of leadership development through language learning.

A. Language Learning Influences Leadership Communication

Language learning actually encourages students to show higher verbal initiative in classroom interactions. Before participating in a series of language learning activities,

many students tend to be passive and wait for others to speak first. However, after engaging in discussions, presentations, and speaking assignments, they become more courageous in expressing their opinions and engaging in open conversations.

"I used to be afraid that if I wanted to speak first, now I feel more courageous because I am used to discussing in class." (MM_ADM 1)

This statement suggests that language learning not only improves speaking skills but also lowers psychological barriers to taking on an active role, a crucial hallmark of effective leadership communication.

Additionally, students experience increased clarity in conveying their messages. Classroom observation reveals that the instructions, ideas, and opinions expressed by students become more structured and easier to understand for group members.

"Now I can explain my intentions to my friends better, not just one or two words, but it can be broken." (RS_AKT 3)

This suggests that language proficiency enables students to convey ideas more effectively, making them more capable of leading discussions or directing groups.

Significant changes are also seen in students' persuasive abilities. In various group assignments, students begin to use language to persuade, propose solutions, and synthesize different opinions.

"If there is a difference of opinion, I can now explain why my idea is more suitable, so friends want to come along." (WR_UPW 1)

The ability to use language to influence others is at the heart of leadership communication, and these findings suggest that language learning provides students with a more powerful tool to perform these functions.

In terms of participation in decision-making, students no longer only follow directions but also begin to actively contribute to determining the direction of group work. Observations indicate that they are more likely to propose alternatives, question choices, and facilitate groups reaching an agreement. Language learning also has a substantial impact on increasing communication confidence. Many college students report that they become calmer and less nervous when speaking in front of others.

"Even though there is still something wrong, I am not too scared anymore; the important thing is to be able to convey it." (MB_AKT 3)

This statement shows that confidence depends not only on the accuracy of language, but also on the ability to stay speaking and engaged, which is crucial for a leader in real-life situations. Overall, these findings suggest that language learning not only enhances linguistic skills but also influences student leadership communication patterns. Through increased initiative, clarity of message, ability to influence, involvement in decision-making, and confidence, students begin to practice leadership roles more readily in their social interactions. In other words, language is the primary means through which leadership is learned, tested, and developed in the context of learning.

B. Learning Strategies that Foster Leadership Capacity

The study's results show that group discussions and debates are among the most effective strategies for developing student leadership capacity. Through this activity, students learn to organize the flow of conversations, express their opinions openly, and respond to the views of others. Classroom observation reveals that students who

initially were passive began to take on the role of discussion leaders or mediators when differences of opinion arose.

"When I was in the studio, I felt like I had to talk to the audience so I was able to get the audience to act." (MB_AKT 3)

This suggests that discussions not only develop language skills but also cultivate a sense of responsibility for the group process.

Oral presentation strategies also play a crucial role in establishing authority in communication. When students are asked to present their ideas or work, they learn to organize their messages, speak convincingly, and effectively face their audiences. Many college students report that this experience makes them more confident in speaking in front of others. Presentations serve as real exercises for communication-based leadership. Additionally, role-play and simulation offer a safe environment for students to practice leadership in real-world scenarios. In specific scenarios, students should assume the roles of coordinator, discussion leader, or decision-maker.

"When I was playing a role, I felt like I was really the one in charge, so I had to be brave enough to speak up." (DF_UPP 3)

This activity helps students develop the courage and communication flexibility that is essential in leadership practice.

Collaborative projects have also proven effective in fostering leadership, as they require coordination, role sharing, and shared decision-making. In this activity, students not only work individually, but must manage group dynamics. Observations suggest that some students are starting to take the initiative in organizing tasks and ensuring that all members are included. This strengthens their ability to lead through communication and cooperation. Meanwhile, reflective journals help students recognize the changes they are experiencing in their communication and their role in a group. Through reflective writing, students can reassess their experiences, identify successes and difficulties, and understand how language learning affects their leadership behavior.

Table 1. Learning Strategies and Leadership Effects

Learning Strategy	Language Learning Function	Leadership Capacity Developed	Interpretative Meaning
Group discussion & debate	Practice speaking and responding	Initiative, influence, role-taking	Students learn to lead group communication flows
Oral presentations	Organize and communicate ideas	Communication authority, confidence	Language becomes a tool to lead the audience
Role-play & simulations	Situational communication practices	Decision making, courage	Leadership is trained in a realistic context
Collaborative projects	Group interaction and coordination	Team management, responsibility	Language as a means of managing collective work
Reflective writing	Self-evaluation through language	Self-awareness, role regulation	Students understand and improve their leadership style

Table 1 illustrates that each language learning strategy serves not only as a means of developing linguistic skills but also as a mechanism for fostering leadership. Group discussions and debates train students to manage the flow of communication and influence the direction of the conversation, thus fostering social initiative and influence. Oral presentations build communication authority and confidence, while role-playing and simulation allow students to practice decision-making and leadership in situations that resemble real-world contexts. In all these activities, language evolves from a mere means of communication to the primary instrument for guiding interactions and establishing social legitimacy.

Meanwhile, collaborative projects and reflective journals reinforce a deeper dimension of leadership. Collaborative projects require coordination, negotiation, and shared responsibility, all of which are facilitated through effective communication, making language a crucial tool for managing teams. Reflective journals, on the other hand, help students develop self-awareness of their communication styles and roles in groups, allowing for continuous evaluation and improvement. Overall, this table confirms that language learning creates an ecosystem of practice and reflection that systematically fosters student leadership capacity.

C. Barriers that Limit Leadership Transformation

One of the most fundamental barriers to leadership transformation through language learning is the fear of making mistakes. Many college students still view language mistakes as embarrassing or as a risk to their self-image, so they tend to avoid speaking actively. This attitude limits their opportunities to take initiative, lead discussions, or communicate ideas openly. As a result, the true potential for leadership development through effective communication practices is hindered by linguistic anxiety.

Additionally, limited vocabulary and the inability to express ideas effectively are also significant barriers. While college students may have good ideas and solutions, they often struggle to put them into clear and convincing language. These limitations reduce their effectiveness in directing, explaining plans, or influencing members of other groups. In the context of leadership, the ability to precisely structure and convey messages is crucial, so linguistic barriers directly limit the leadership roles they can run.

Low self-confidence is also a significant factor. Some students still feel doubtful and unsure of themselves, even though their language skills have improved. This doubt makes them reluctant to stand out or take on greater responsibility in the group. Leadership, which relies heavily on the courage to perform and take on roles, becomes difficult to develop when individuals are still uncertain about their own abilities.

In addition to individual factors, social and structural barriers within the group also limit leadership transformation. Certain cultural and social norms make some students reluctant to appear too dominant or vocal, as they worry that they will be perceived as disrespectful or disrupt group harmony. On the other hand, uneven participation in groups also creates inequality, where some students dominate the discussion while others remain passive. This condition limits the opportunity for all members to practice leadership and utilize language as a tool of influence, thereby hindering the even distribution of leadership transformation.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that language learning plays a significant role in transforming student leadership communication practices along three main dimensions: changes in communication methods, the effectiveness of learning strategies, and the presence of structural and psychological barriers. Students become more courageous to take the initiative to speak, are better able to convey ideas clearly and persuasively, and are more active in group decision-making. Learning strategies, including discussions, presentations, simulations, collaborative projects, and reflection, have been proven to create a social space that fosters leadership to emerge and thrive. However, this transformation remains limited by factors such as language anxiety, expression limitations, social norms, and inequality of participation in groups.

These findings align with various studies that emphasize the role of communication in leadership, which suggests that leadership is exercised primarily through verbal and symbolic interactions, rather than just through formal positions. (Marsinah et al., 2024; Stuart & Stuart, 2024; Yuliana et al., 2024). Previous studies on language learning have also demonstrated that speaking and collaborative activities can enhance students' confidence and social participation. (Hidayad et al., 2024; K et al., 2025; Marsinah Marsinah et al., 2024; R.A Rodia Fitri Indriani et al., 2024). However, most previous research still separates language studies and leadership studies, focusing on improving linguistic competence or leadership development separately. (Aisyah et al., 2024; Rosyidin & Purwanto, 2024). This research transcends this separation by demonstrating that the language learning process itself serves as the primary space for practice and leadership development.

Conceptually, the results of this study suggest that language functions as a social medium in which power, influence, and leadership roles are negotiated and exercised. When students learn to use language to convey ideas, organize interactions, and influence others, they are simultaneously practicing leadership. (Irawan et al., 2024). The transformation that occurs is not only in the level of speaking skills, but in the way the individual positions themselves in social and group relationships. (Nasar et al., 2024). Thus, language learning can be understood as a process of leadership capacity building that takes place implicitly but continuously.

The primary implication of this research is the need to view language learning as an integral part of leadership development, rather than merely as technical communication training. Education and training programs should be designed to provide space for meaningful interactions, open discussions, collaborative work, and reflection, as these activities allow students to practice leadership roles through the use of language. (Budiyanto et al., 2024; Novia et al., 2024). By integrating communication and leadership goals, educational institutions can be more effective in preparing graduates who can play an active and influential role in the social and professional environment.

Although the findings of this study demonstrate the significant potential of language learning in shaping leadership, there are still challenges to its implementation. Differences in cultural backgrounds, language proficiency levels, and group dynamics can influence the extent to which individuals are willing to take on leadership roles. In addition, certain social norms can hinder active participation, especially in contexts where humility and harmony are valued more highly than the courage to take action (Fitria Marisya et al., 2025; Nasar et al., 2023). These challenges suggest that the

relationship between language and leadership is not universal, but highly contextual.

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between language learning and leadership in broader contexts, including across cultures, institutions, and educational levels. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to observe how communication and leadership skills develop over time. (Auliana et al., 2022; Scott, et al., 2025; Nasar et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2022). In addition, technology integration, such as digital-based language learning or online interaction, opens up new opportunities to examine how leadership is mediated by language in a virtual environment. By expanding this scope, the study of language and leadership can develop into an increasingly relevant and impactful field of research.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that language learning has a significant role in transforming communication practices and student leadership capacity. Through a variety of language-based activities, students not only improve their speaking skills but also develop initiative, confidence, influencing skills, and involvement in group decision-making. The main strength of this research lies in its qualitative descriptive approach, which enables the capture of students' experiences, interactions, and social dynamics in depth, thereby providing a rich picture of how leadership develops through the daily communication process in language learning.

However, this research also has some limitations. Data were collected from institutional contexts and a limited number of participants, so the findings could not be generalized to all educational or cultural contexts. In addition, this study places greater emphasis on the perception and observation of behavior, rather than the quantitative measurement of leadership levels or changes in language skills, resulting in interpretive findings. These limitations present opportunities for further research to test and expand the findings using more diverse designs and a broader scope.

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