

# ACTION RESEARCH: DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN GROUP WORK

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## ABSTRACT

*In language classes, motivation tends to ebb and flow depending on the "learner's vision of oneself as an effective L2 speaker, the social pressure coming from the learner's environment and positive learning experiences" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010, p. 86). A focus on leadership skills development can be helpful both in and beyond the classroom. The development of leadership skills in group work contributes to higher self-esteem, self-confidence, and motivation (Sussman, 2015). This paper is an overview of an action research project that began as a teaching diary in 2016 and culminated in collecting learner data in the 2020 school year. Students in two English classes in a medium-sized Japanese university participated in group work activities, taking turns as leaders, and completed a survey to help them reflect on their experiences. The author will share the qualitative results in a subsequent paper, but the background, methods, and preliminary observations are presented here.*

## BACKGROUND

The Action Research project described in this paper was inspired by my previous experience with action research in a previous workplace. After teaching in a secondary school for more than a decade, I struggled at my first university teaching job. I felt dissatisfied with my classes, but I could not ascertain the root causes. A colleague who felt similarly agreed to undertake a two-year action research project since we taught the same groups of students. For the first year, 2016, we maintained a shared teaching diary (Mayse & Yoshida, 2017) in which we each wrote one entry per week. Through qualitative analysis, two major themes emerged: Lack of learner accountability and lack of teacher/student communication. In our second year, we undertook the action part of the cycle in which we made changes. We agreed to include 10 minutes of talk time in groups with designated leaders at the beginning of classes with our new freshmen and sophomore students. Our teaching diary, observations, and questionnaires indicated general improvement with class atmosphere and learner motivation. Students showed more interest in getting to know each other and more positivity about communicating with us, their teachers.

The following year, I transferred to a different university; however, I believed that lack of learner accountability and reticence pertaining to teacher/student communication were common issues

in Japanese tertiary classrooms. I decided to continue the action research cycle with my new students. This time, I included a learner reflection section in the students' learning diaries as part of their homework requirement. In my first year at this university, I focused on just the leader role, which was the only role I specified for group discussions and group work. By making a leader schedule, I determined that each student would have four or five opportunities to act in the leader role each semester. I requested those students write reflections about their leadership experiences each week. I hoped to read about the groups' experiences reported by the group leaders, and I felt this was the most efficient way and would save time. Since I had 40 students across two classes but only ten leaders, I planned to read ten entries each week and monitor their group dynamics. However, to my surprise, the leaders tended to focus on their struggles and successes as leaders. It soon became apparent that examining their developing leadership skills could take my action research into a new direction.

In my second and third years at this university, I made minor changes to improve the logistical management of group leaders and their learning diaries. However, over these two years, I did not collect data. Finally, just before my fourth year, I joined the Coordinated Action Research Project, a project managed by James Owens (Principal Lecturer for Research in the English Language Institute) and Professor Anne Burns of the University of New South Wales, Sydney, and the Academic Advisory Board. To join this project, I had to reframe my action research and create research questions. With Professor Burns' help, I modified my research design and planned to collect data that would allow me to answer the newly-formed research questions below:

1. What aspects do learners focus on when reflecting on their own experiences as leaders in group work?
2. What kinds of improvements do learners notice in themselves as a leader for a semester?
3. Does the teacher's input, in terms of class instruction and individualized feedback, seem to contribute to the learners' leadership experiences?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several topics emerged and seemed significant throughout this project. This section will examine relevant literature in the following topics: action research, group work, self-reflection, and the relationship between teacher feedback and learner motivation.

### **Action Research**

Action research is an approach that involves a teacher researching their context by identifying an issue and then making a slight change that could improve the situation (Burns, 2009).

Teachers may wish to examine their teaching practice, their own learners' development, their interventions with the curriculum, and their teaching beliefs and practices (Fischer, 2001, as cited in Burns, 2009). The teacher determines a systematic approach and collects information that may help answer the research questions concerning the issue. These data collection methods are typically used in qualitative research, such as questionnaires, interviews, and teaching diaries. Burns (2009) points out that "action research can be contrasted with other types of research which may aim to hypothesize, describe, explain, interpret, theorize, and generalize - but not to make immediate changes in specific teaching practices within the research context" (p. 115). Although there are several action research models, one model that I feel is most useful is Kemmis' and McTaggart's (1986) model that describes the following stages of a self-reflective action research cycle: Planning, action, observation, and reflection. This cycle may last for a short or long period and may be repeated as often as necessary.

### **Group Work**

Richards and Lockhart (1994) state that group work activities have several advantages, such as increasing student participation, increasing opportunities for learners to practice and use the target language, promoting collaboration, and allowing learners to take a more active role in their learning. Nunan and Lamb (1996) suggest assigning leaders to each group and asking leaders to report back to the class to elicit more whole-class discussion.

### **Self-Reflection**

As with any type of journaling, Richards & Farrell (2005) recommend that people write about an event within the same day. Therefore, students who summarize and reflect on their group work experiences in their learning journals days or weeks after the class may have forgotten important details.

### **Teacher Feedback / Motivation**

Stevens and Cooper (2016) describe the importance of providing feedback to motivate students as they write learning journals because the presence of an audience (or a reader) and individualized feedback may encourage them to continue. Regarding feedback, teachers may be familiar with the sandwich method of both positive and negative feedback (Daniels, 2009) and its criticisms for being too focused on the presence of negative feedback (Von Bergen, Bressler, & Campbell, 2014). However, Kato and Mynard (2015) introduced the concept of "reflective dialogue," in which advisors and teachers are encouraged to open a pathway for students to feel heard and consider their actions and beliefs as they progress.

## METHOD

In the previous section, I covered some important areas of the literature. Here, I will introduce the participants, the interventions for this action research cycle, and some examples from the data. The focus of this paper is not on the analysis itself but instead to introduce some examples of data and how it will be analyzed for a subsequent paper on this topic.

### Participants

The participants were members of my Media English classes, one of the core required courses. They were second-year students majoring in English at a medium-sized university in Japan. In 2020, I taught two Media English classes of 20 students in each class. Due to the pandemic, all classes took place online, using a combination of Zoom and Google Classroom. The classes met on average twice a week. In each class meeting, the lesson began with a topic of discussion. As in the past two years, the students were divided into groups of three or four students, and I created a schedule for each unit. Each unit lasted about four weeks so that every student took the leader role five to seven times throughout the spring semester. The small group discussions were nicknamed Coffee Talk, referencing old television episodes of *Saturday Night Live*, an American sketch comedy show (*Coffee Talk*, 2013). In all my classes, Coffee Talk occurred at the beginning of class. However, the leaders maintained their leadership role throughout the entire class period for any follow-up group work. They were called on frequently to report on or summarize their group discussions to the whole class. At the beginning of the school year, I described this research project to the students and asked them if they were willing to complete a bilingual consent form via Google Forms. They were reassured that not offering consent would in no way affect their grades in the class. Any data used in the discussion section of this paper will hide students' identities by referring to them as numbers and gender-neutral pronouns.

### Intervention

In this cycle, I made the following changes:

1. Ask leaders to fill out a Google Forms survey at the end of class, which would take the place of their learning journal.
2. Emphasize that Google Forms survey responses would not be included in their grades for the class.
3. Check the Google Forms results each week and provide feedback to the group leaders individually via email.
4. Incorporate advice based on group leaders' survey responses and my emailed responses in the following classes via a slide and a short explanation in the following class.

## Data Collection

As mentioned above, the focus of this paper is not on the analysis and data itself. Instead, I will introduce the tools for data collection.

Data collection tools included the Google Forms survey for group leaders, the email responses I sent to each survey respondent, and the slides I created and used for the following lesson. Just like the original learner reflections in their diaries, the survey consisted of three questions:

1. How did you feel during the group work/discussion time today? (Not good  $\leftrightarrow$  Great)
2. Please summarize your discussion/group activities in today's class.
3. How might you improve your discussion/group work the next time you are the leader of your group?

In Google Forms, the survey data is transferred to a spreadsheet, and after reading each line of data, I wrote a response in a new column and extracted a "theme" in another new column. Then I copied and pasted my responses into individual emails for each group leader and sent them. Finally, I used the extracted themes to create a slide for the following class. The following examples were chosen because they demonstrate participants' responses in length and content.

## Analysis

In this section, I will provide examples of the data raw data collected from three students. A brief analysis will be offered after each example, followed by an explanation of how the data will be analyzed in a subsequent paper.

### **Student #1**

Please summarize your discussion/group activities in today's class:

*I could ask all my group members to say their opinions about each subject we discussed. Some opinions were very funny and unique, so we could enjoy our discussion. We spoke actively in English through the group activity, and it was a very good discussion.*

How might you improve your discussion/group work the next time you are the leader of your group?

*We made a silence a little during group work, so I would like to speak more activity not to do that again next time I am in charge of the leader.*

In response, I sent the following in an email:

*I am glad you had fun and enjoyed discussing the topics together. When silence happens, what can you do to encourage people to start talking again? I once read that using people's names helps them get more confidence, and they may become willing to speak more because it seems like you really care about their ideas.*

Quick Analysis: This student reported that their experience was generally positive, and identified one area to work on: Silence. In response, I praised the student and then advised them about managing silence by asking a question to encourage deeper thinking and suggesting a possible solution. This exchange holds two possible angles for analysis: The student's struggle with managing silence and the teacher's approach in her response.

### **Student #2**

Please summarize your discussion/group activities in today's class:

*I think my time management was terrible. And it's hard for me to do both hear my teammates' idea and take a note.*

How might you improve your discussion/group work the next time you are the leader of your group?

*I will itemize next time, make our discussion more smooth.*

In response, I sent the following in an email:

*Time management is hard, especially when we have a lot of tasks in the lesson. Listening on Zoom while taking notes can be slow-going. You may have to ask them to repeat their points or help you summarize the main ideas so you can take notes on them. I agree that learning how to take notes quickly will be a challenge, but it is great that you noticed this weakness and want to work on it.*

Quick Analysis: This student reported that their experience was generally negative, and identified two areas to work on: Time management and simultaneous listening/notetaking. In response, I acknowledged the challenge of managing time and notetaking while listening. Then I advised the student by suggesting a possible solution, praising them for noticing weaknesses and considering ways to improve it. This exchange holds two possible angles for analysis: The student's struggles with time management and listening/notetaking and the teacher's approach in her response.

### **Student #3**

Please summarize your discussion/group activities in today's class:

*We had three group work/discussions today. Firstly we talked about our studies in three English classes. Most of our opinions were the same, and we had a time, so I asked an extra question which class is hard for you. Secondly, we shared about questions to Amanda's presentation. At last, we watched a video and discussed if the TV show which is about LGBTQ goes on air, is it helpful to increase awareness? Looking overall, we could have smooth conversations and share opinions equally.*

How might you improve your discussion/group work the next time you are the leader of your group?

*In the discussion, I could not ask if they were ready to share, so I should have asked to make it smooth.*

In response, I sent the following in an email:

*Okay, it sounds like you wanted them to share their ideas, but they were not quite ready yet. Maybe they needed a little more thinking time. It is a useful observation for you, as a leader, to notice that they need some more thinking time before you start the discussion. The topics were particularly challenging in this class.*

Quick Analysis: This student reported that their experience was generally positive and identified one area to work on: encouraging participation. In response, I was not certain what was meant by "ready to share" because, in the summary, this student had praised themselves for how well the group did to "*smooth conversations and share opinions equally.*" It is possible that the student did not know what to write here and felt it necessary to write at least one improvement point. I acknowledged the challenge of encouraging participation, especially when presented with a time limit, a common issue in my classes. I advised the student by suggesting a possible solution and emphasized the need for the leader to allow for thinking time in the case of challenging discussion topics. In this case, I did not offer praise because the student did write a particularly negative self-reflection.

### **Emerging Themes**

After looking at the students' responses, I looked for one or two emerging themes and used those themes to create a slide for the following class. In this case, the emerging themes were managing silence, turn-taking, and giving space and time to think. The first of these themes is a common issue in group work, but the third is a suggested strategy that leaders can use to manage complex tasks when met with silence or reticence. At the beginning of the next class, I showed the slide on leader skills and briefly explained the skills and some possible strategies that new leaders could employ.

## **PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

In the previous section, I listed four changes I made to this iteration of the action research project. Here, I will briefly explain how the new changes seemed to affect the atmosphere and students' progress with some excerpts from the data. Then I will explain how the data answers each of the research questions thus far.

**1 Ask leaders to fill out a Google Forms survey at the end of class, which would take the place of their learning journal.**

At the end of each class, I thanked the group leaders by acknowledging their hard work and then asked them to stay after class for a few minutes. Once all the students had left the class, I reminded the leaders to fill out the survey as soon as possible and showed them where to find the survey on Google Classroom. Most students filled out the survey within a day or two after the lesson. Their prompt responses were an improvement over previous iterations when students sometimes waited several weeks. The summaries and reflections in this iteration seemed more detailed than in the past.

**2 Emphasize that Google Forms survey responses would not be included in their grades for the class.**

In addition, the fact that the survey was not attached to their assessment meant that the students could be more honest in their responses. Many students regularly responded to the survey, indicating student buy-in. On their end, they were receiving prompt, individualized feedback, and most of the feedback was reframed as advice to the whole class, specifically to future leaders. These aspects of the class were incorporated to help them develop their leadership skills and not "assess" or "judge" them, which seemed to allow for higher quality and honest reflections.

In Table 1 (below), Student #4 mentions having difficulties keeping up with the conversation since the role involves listening carefully, commenting, and keeping the conversation going. Student #5 admits that notetaking deterred them from participating actively in the discussion. Meanwhile, Student #6 refers to the challenge of managing turn-taking and equal speaking time amongst the members. These responses seem to reflect their authentic challenges with the leadership role and the task demands. It was clear that they took time to think about the questions and the difficulties that their role as leaders presented on that day.

*Table 1. This excerpt from the data shows some participants' responses that display notions of honesty.*

Student #4	Student #5	Student #6
<u>To be honest</u> , when we discussed about the brand I <u>could not catch up</u> the conversation and it took <u>some difficulties to continue</u> discuss. So I have to improve my listening skills and come	I <u>couldn't speak a lot</u> because I thought I had to write down about discussion. It was <u>not good</u> so I want not only to listen others opinion but to speak a lot my own opinion, too.	This time, <u>the time was not enough to speak</u> every members <u>because of one person speak long</u> . I'll try to management time to all member can speak the next time.



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up with some comments, not only listening and asking.

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### **3 Check the Google Form results each week and provide feedback to the group leaders individually via email.**

The day before each lesson, I checked the Google Form results (in their Google Sheets format) and wrote responses to each student who had acted as a leader in the previous lesson. Admittedly, this task was time-consuming because there were ten leaders across the two groups, and my responses varied from 50-150 words. I then copied and pasted each response into email messages and sent them to the students. I did not require or expect responses, but several students referred to the individual feedback in future surveys when they acted as leaders again. In Table 2 (below), the student took on my feedback from Week #6, specifically about using members' names during discussions. First, they suggest that using names will help make the discussion smoother on Zoom to avoid talking over each other. Later, they realize that using names will also help when their members become silent. Additionally, due to the app's limitations, they struggled with using body language and reading others' body language on Zoom. For instance, it is difficult for them to know if someone is willing to speak, and they struggle with finding the courage to call on people to speak. To keep the conversation going, they consider the various struggles that all leaders face.

*Table 2. This excerpt from the data shows one participant who referenced the feedback they received previously.*

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Week #	Student #7's Reflections	Teacher's Response
3	We should add one more sentence when someone told the answer.	It is great that you attempted to facilitate discussion even if silence happened sometimes. Topics were a bit difficult. How can you make sure there is less silence and more talking? How can you encourage people to share their ideas even if their ideas are not perfect or amazing?
6	Sometimes some people speak at the same time. Therefore I want to call their name so that the conversation is smooth.	Yes, that is true. It is not so hard to manage turn-taking in real life because it is OK for people to talk over each other. But on Zoom, if one person is talking and a 2nd person tries to speak, NO ONE can hear anything. That is something we all have to get used to, so calling out their names and

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taking turns carefully is a great idea.

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10 It's good way to call someone's name directly to avoid silent. I didn't see a face because we opened the document on their iPad, and I couldn't know who knows the answer from the facial expression. I thought I was sorry to assign someone who don't know the answer but I need more courage to call their names.

It sounds like everyone is participating and you could lead the group well. Yes, calling their names is an important way to keep the conversation going and get the task done in time. But, if you call on someone and they are not sure of the answer, don't be afraid to say, "It's okay. We'll come back to you. Please keep thinking about it." I mean, of course they won't always know the answers. You are doing very well, so please just keep practicing.

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13 I want to use a body language and speak with eye contact. In addition, I will make a smile more while talking because I felt everyone didn't want to say their opinions if the atmosphere was dark in a breakout rooms. Thus I will care about my facial expression to make a active conversation.

It is great that your discussion went smoothly, but it sounds like you are worried about making a good, comfortable atmosphere. I think we need to start encouraging members to become more interactive and to not just rely on their leader for that day. It should not be just the leader asking all the questions and making all the comments...it should be a more natural discussion with everyone participating, commenting, asking questions, etc. Let's try to focus more on that in the fall semester. Facial expressions are quite important, even more so on Zoom because we cannot use our gestures as much. I recommend working on this...though you always smile and look so joyful! How can anyone feel dark when they look at you?

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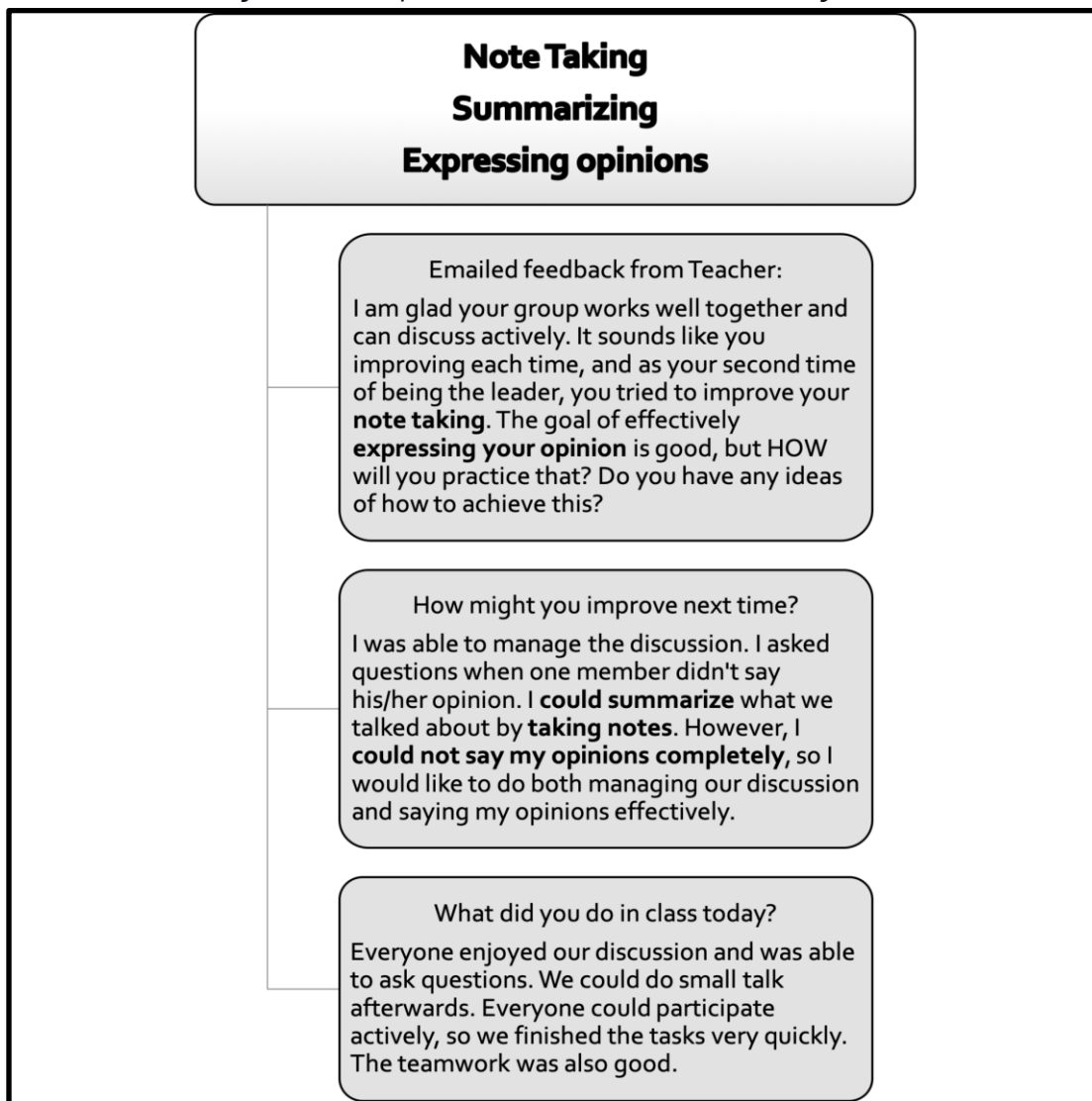
**4 Incorporate advice based on group leaders' survey responses and my emailed responses in the following classes via a slide and a short explanation in the following class.**

After reading their responses and composing and sending them my responses, I extracted some emerging themes that I could use as more general "advice" for a slide in the next lesson. Using a slide was a good way to introduce the new leaders and encourage them to pay attention to particular issues or try new strategies. It seemed that framing this as if it came from the former leaders and was for their benefit helped make them aware of the importance of being a good leader and developing such skills. In Figure 1 (below), I would use the opportunity to praise

students for improving their notetaking and summarizing techniques. Then I would focus more on how they, as leaders, can participate more actively in the discussion.

It should be noted that although my emailed responses often included questions to push students to reflect more deeply, it was rare to receive direct replies from them. However, one particular student did respond to my email with the following: "Thank you for your advice. I would like to study useful vocabularies and phrases by using vocabulary list on the Media Reflection Journal so that I will be able to say my opinions clearly and shortly." In the future, I would like to keep track of such responses from students and attempt to continue the dialogue with them. This kind of individual attention may be beneficial for them.

Figure 1. This diagram shows the flow from a student's response (from bottom) to teacher feedback to whole-class feedback (top), which would be used in a slide for the next lesson.



## CONCLUSION

In the previous section, I discussed some preliminary observations. As I proceed with this project and prepare a comprehensive analysis of the data, I would like to explore some issues that have emerged regarding my own teacher development and future iterations of this action research project.

### Teacher Development

Collecting data and staying abreast of any leadership challenges allowed me to give feedback individually and to the whole group. Moreover, challenges and strategies that we focused on emerged organically. In other words, the emerging issues and strategies came from the students themselves and not from a textbook or an authoritative figure (me) slightly outside of their circle. In my feedback, I attempted to provide them with an adapted version of the sandwich-style of feedback (Daniels, 2009); however, my version started with praise, then gave suggestions or advice, followed by questions for further reflection, and ended with encouragement. I plan to learn more about the "Learner Advisor" language, such as Kato's and Mynard's Reflective Dialogue (2015) to encourage learners and help them self-reflect without giving direct advice or suggestions.

### Future Iterations

In a future iteration, I plan to make more changes, including the following:

1. Allow students to be the group leader for the entire week of lessons. Students would be leaders for two lessons in a row, allowing them to self-reflect on their leadership and make immediate improvements by trying out strategies sooner rather than waiting several weeks before their next turn. This would also lessen the teacher's workload of having to prepare individual responses for each leader.
2. Request students to make a short speech at the beginning of the next class to explain their challenges and attempted strategies and perhaps offer advice to other students. I hope that this would result in even more vested interest on their parts, and rather than me coming up with emerging themes based on the data, I can allow them to find and speak about these themes themselves.

Leadership skills are essential and may be helpful in students' future careers. Therefore, it may be helpful to incorporate leadership skill development into language classes since many teachers use task-based learning and project-based learning approaches. Additionally, simple group discussions can benefit from the incorporation of leadership reflection and training. Although teachers may not have the wherewithal to respond to each student's reflections about

their leadership experiences, incorporating some training will allow them to develop this vital skill that does not come naturally to everyone.

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