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Language Learning as Leadership Training?

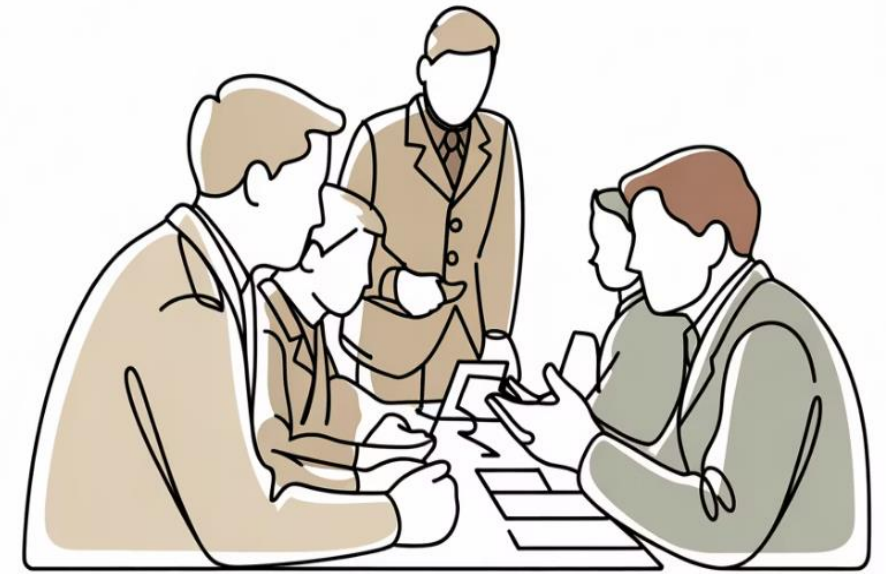
Rethinking Adult Language Education through the
Lens of Soft Skills

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An Unexpected Discovery

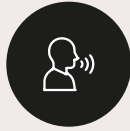
After years of teaching adult learners in military education contexts, we noticed something remarkable: our students weren't just learning Russian or English. They were developing communication skills, strengthening teamwork capabilities, building self-confidence, and refining self-management abilities.

In essence, they were growing as people and as leaders – not merely as language users. This observation sparked a critical question that forms the foundation of our research today.



Can language learning be viewed as a form of leadership training?

The Invisible Skills Crisis



Communication

Essential for navigating complex professional environments and building trust across cultural boundaries



Collaboration

Critical for coordinating diverse teams and achieving shared objectives in dynamic situations



Adaptability

Necessary for responding effectively to rapidly changing circumstances and unexpected challenges



Empathy

Foundational for understanding different perspectives and building inclusive environments

These competences are systematically addressed in teacher training, higher education, and leadership development programs. Yet in foreign language instruction, they're often treated as secondary – something that "happens anyway" rather than being deliberately cultivated and assessed.

A Missed Opportunity

For adult learners especially, the invisibility of soft skills in language education represents a significant missed opportunity. Many return to the classroom after years of professional experience, already possessing teamwork and communication skills in their native language.

The challenge – and the profound potential – lies in transferring and reshaping those existing competences through another language and cultural framework. Teachers know these skills exist. Learners feel them developing. Yet they remain largely invisible, rarely made explicit or deliberately integrated into course design.



The Gap: While educators recognize soft skills informally, language curricula typically lack systematic frameworks for identifying, nurturing, and measuring their development.



The Language Classroom as Leadership Laboratory



Group Discussions

Build teamwork through shared problem-solving, active listening, and negotiating meaning across linguistic and cultural differences



Classroom Debates

Train argumentation skills, perspective-taking, and empathy while developing the ability to advocate persuasively in another language



Role-Plays & Projects

Require negotiation, leadership, and strategic thinking as learners coordinate efforts and navigate complex scenarios



Making Mistakes

Builds resilience, emotional regulation, and self-confidence through the daily experience of vulnerability and recovery

Foreign language learning naturally creates situations where soft skills are practiced and refined. For teachers, the separation between "teaching grammar" and "developing soft skills" is artificial – these processes happen simultaneously and are, for learners, inseparable experiences.

What Learners Actually Say

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"I've become more confident"

Adult learners rarely discuss vocabulary acquisition or grammatical accuracy when reflecting on their progress

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"I'm not afraid to speak anymore"

Instead, they describe transformations in self-perception and capability that extend far beyond linguistic competence

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"I can handle uncertainty"

These reflections reveal that language learning shapes personal agency and develops resilience in the face of ambiguity

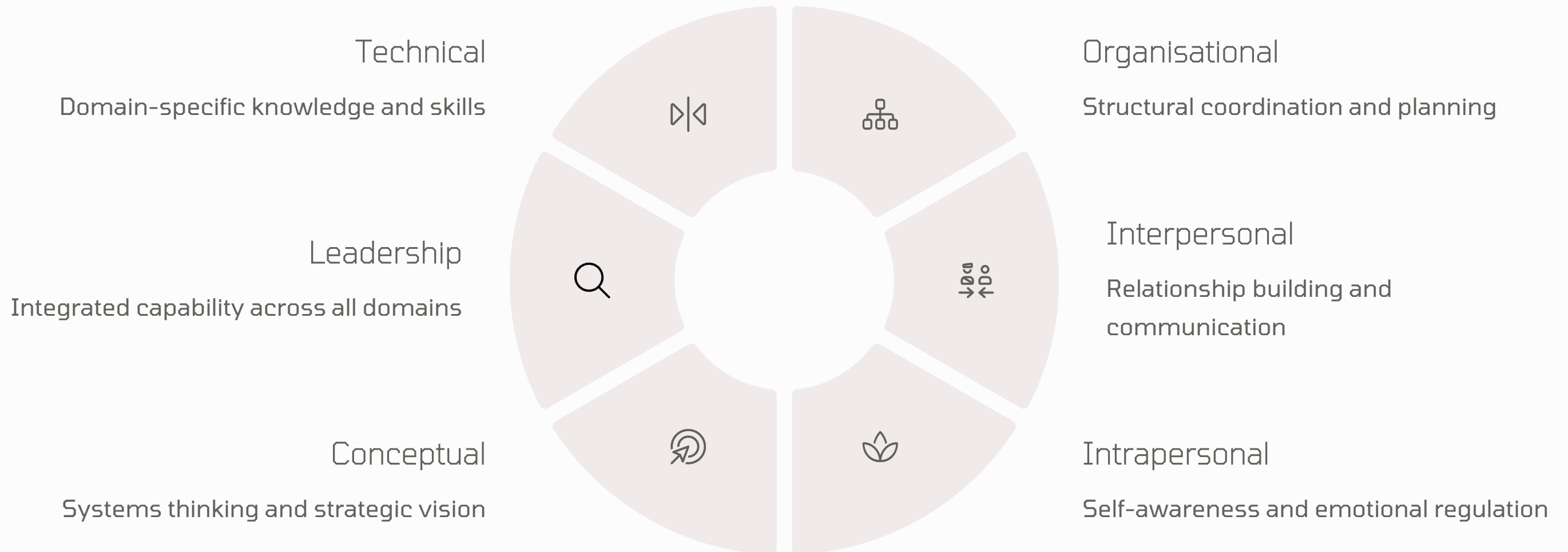
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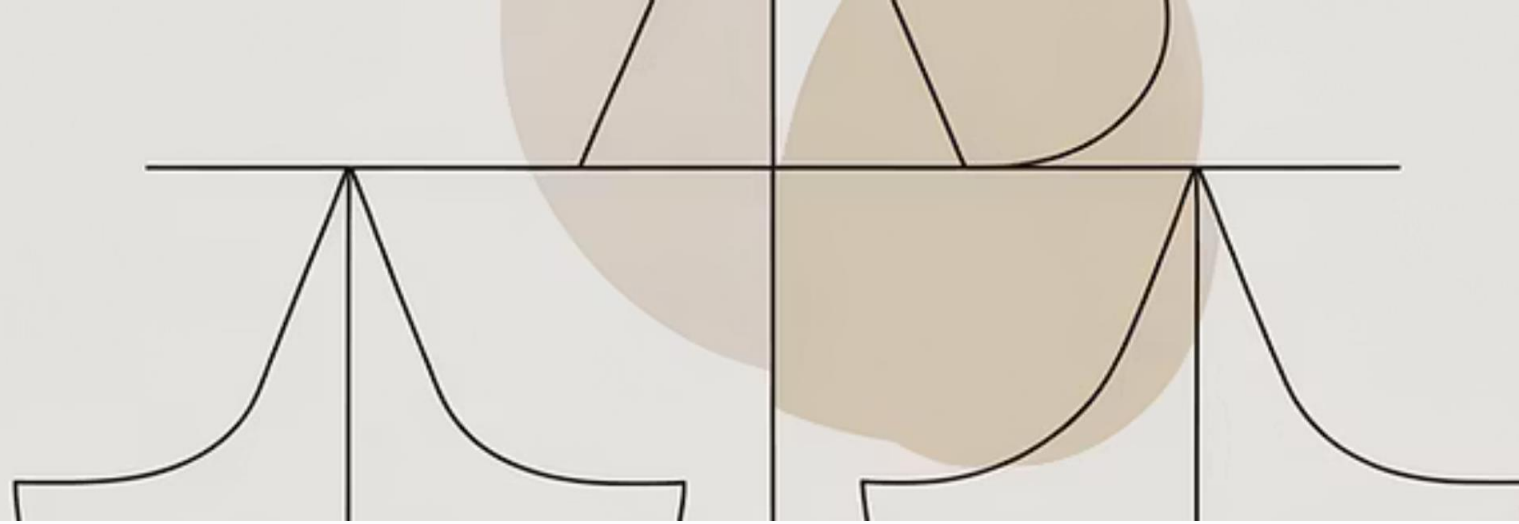


These comments reveal a profound truth: language learning shapes not only linguistic competence but personal agency and professional capability. This observation led us to our central research question: If language learning develops the same human competences that leadership training aims for, could we design a way to observe and even measure that development?

The Military Leader Competency Model

To explore this question systematically, we turned to leadership development research. At the Estonian Military Academy, the Military Leader Competency Model created by Ülle Säälik and colleagues (2020) defines leadership as a multidimensional and ongoing process, identifying six interrelated competences:





Leadership as Balanced Growth

The model defines effective leadership not as command or authority, but as a balanced interplay between task execution, human relationships, and adaptability to change. Crucially, it demonstrates that leadership grows through reflection, self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and ethical conduct – all refined through practical experience.

Continuous Process

Leadership development must be ongoing. While formal education matters, the most profound growth happens through real practice, guided reflection, and mentoring.

Striking Parallel

In language learning too, progress comes through practice, interaction, feedback, and reflection. The classroom becomes a micro-laboratory of leadership.

Reflection: The Engine of Growth

Both leadership development and language acquisition depend fundamentally on reflection. Without reflection, experience remains unprocessed – a collection of moments rather than integrated learning.

In the classroom, learners typically focus on measurable goals: grammar rules, vocabulary lists, examination scores. But beneath those surface objectives, another kind of learning happens – often unnoticed and unacknowledged.

When students say "I dared to speak" or "I wasn't afraid to make mistakes," they are describing the development of confidence, self-management, and emotional resilience. These are leadership qualities too.



Can we design a tool that helps both teachers and learners become more aware of these processes?
Something that makes the invisible visible?

Designing the Instrument

This question led to the creation of our pilot questionnaire – an instrument to observe the development of soft skills in adult language learners. The tool is detailed enough to capture nuanced feedback, yet simple enough for regular classroom use.

01	02
Four Core Domains	Clarity & Accessibility
Communication, teamwork, self-confidence, and self-management – grouped into scaled and open-ended items	Simple, positive wording free from academic jargon, ensuring all learners can engage meaningfully
03	04
Balanced Approach	Progressive Structure
Mix of quantitative scales and qualitative questions capturing both measurable change and personal narrative	Moving from concrete classroom experiences to deeper reflection on personal growth and transformation
05	06
Open Reflection	Demographic Context
Final open-ended section inviting learners to identify other competences they feel they developed	Short section allowing later comparison across courses, age groups, and learning contexts

Two Modes of Application

Dynamic Tool

Administered at multiple points during a course to observe development over time, capturing the evolution of competences as they emerge through sustained practice and reflection

Static Tool

Used at the end of a course to capture retrospective reflections, allowing learners to articulate their overall growth journey with the perspective that completion provides

For Teachers

- Provides data on classroom dynamics
- Reveals what tasks motivate students
- Identifies what causes stress
- Shows what fosters confidence
- Informs pedagogical adjustments

For Learners

- Creates structured reflection opportunity
- Makes invisible growth visible
- Validates non-linguistic development
- Particularly valued by adult learners
- Enhances metacognitive awareness

A Pedagogical Shift

Introducing such an instrument represents more than data collection – it signals a fundamental pedagogical shift from focusing solely on linguistic achievement to recognizing whole-person development.



What We Know

Traditional focus on vocabulary, grammar, and linguistic accuracy



Who We Are

Transformative focus on self-perception, capability, and agency



What We Can Do

Functional focus on capacity to act effectively in complex situations

This approach aligns with the principles of transformative learning: that real education changes not only what we know, but how we see ourselves and our capacity to act in the world. It acknowledges that every learning experience has the potential to fundamentally reshape identity and capability.



Strategic Implications for Military and Professional Education

In professional and military education contexts, this research carries particular significance. Language courses are sometimes perceived as secondary – useful but not central to leadership formation.

Yet our findings suggest the opposite. Language learning provides a uniquely safe space for practicing essential leadership behaviors: active listening, cooperation under pressure, adaptability to uncertainty, and decision-making with incomplete information.

Resilience Building

The daily experience of mistakes and recovery in language learning builds the psychological resilience necessary for effective leadership in high-stakes environments

Empathy Development

Navigating cultural and linguistic differences cultivates the empathy and perspective-taking essential for ethical and inclusive leadership



Recommendation: Language education should not be reduced within professional programs – it should be expanded and recognized as a strategic arena for leadership development.

Future Research Directions

This project began with a simple observation: in the language classroom, adults do not only learn to speak – they learn to lead themselves and others. The pilot questionnaire is only a first step, opening pathways toward more systematic exploration.



Curricular Integration

How can reflection be more deliberately integrated into language curricula as a core component rather than an afterthought?



Longitudinal Studies

What is the long-term impact of soft skills developed in language learning on professional performance and career trajectories?



Teacher Development

Can language teachers be trained to systematically identify and nurture soft skills as part of defined learning outcomes?



Cross-Cultural Validation

How do these findings translate across different educational systems, cultural contexts, and language combinations?



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An Act of Communication is an Act of Leadership

If every act of communication in a new language is also an act of leadership – of listening deeply, guiding meaning-making, and negotiating understanding across difference – how might we design language education to recognize and strengthen that potential more consciously?

Language learning is not preparation for leadership. It is leadership practice itself.

By making visible the soft skills that emerge through language learning, we honor the full complexity of what our adult learners accomplish. We validate their growth not just as language users, but as confident, capable leaders ready to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

Thank you for your attention!

