



Language Learning as Leadership Training? Rethinking Adult Language Education through the Lens of Soft Skills

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Abstract

Soft skills such as communication, collaboration, self-confidence, and self-management are widely recognised as essential competences in contemporary education [7]. Yet within foreign language instruction, these transversal skills often remain implicit –they are recognized and valued, but not always directly addressed . For many adult learners, however, the language classroom is more than a linguistic environment; it is a space where personal growth unfolds alongside language skills. This paper introduces an early-stage initiative within a broader research project¹ that seeks to integrate soft skills development more purposefully into foreign language education. Drawing on current literature, feedback from adult learners, and practical classroom experience, it presents the rationale and design of a purpose-built questionnaire that helps educators observe how soft skills emerge and evolve through language learning. The instrument combines scaled and open-ended items and focuses on four core areas repeatedly cited in both theory and learner reflections: communication, teamwork, self-confidence, and self-management. The aim is twofold: firstly, to provide a practical diagnostic tool for use in adult language classrooms; and secondly, to lay the groundwork for more systematic, research-informed inquiry into the role of soft skills in language pedagogy. Ultimately, this approach supports a shift in perspective – one that views the language classroom not only as a site of language acquisition, but also as a meaningful context for developing 21st-century competences through intentional, learner-centered strategies.

Keywords: *Soft skills, language education, adult learners, language teaching strategies, communication*

1. Overview. Soft Skills and Language Learning: a Shared Pedagogical Space

In the field of education, the importance of integrating soft skills development into curricula has long been recognized and actively promoted – from early schooling to higher education [11] and in-service training [2]. Among language educators, this awareness is perhaps especially acute: those who teach foreign languages have a deeper understanding of how essential these transversal competences are, and they continuously seek methods to nurture and support them.

At the same time, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between language instruction itself and the cultivation of soft skills, as the two are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. For teachers, distinguishing between linguistic and personal development can at times seem artificial; for adult learners, this distinction is even less perceptible. In practice, communication tasks, collaborative projects, and moments of reflection simultaneously strengthen linguistic ability and foster self-confidence, teamwork, and adaptability – demonstrating that language learning and soft skills development are, in essence, part of the same educational process.

While soft skills have been discussed extensively in educational and professional development contexts [6], relatively little research has examined their deliberate integration into adult language education. This study addresses that gap by exploring how soft skills can be recognised and systematically fostered within language classrooms.

The analysis of adult learners feedback at the EMA revealed [4] that the outcomes of language education extend far beyond the acquisition of linguistic competence. For many adult learners, the process of learning a foreign language fosters the same interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that underpin effective leadership: attentive listening, adaptability, empathy, initiative, and the ability to manage uncertainty. These findings suggest that soft skills are not accidental by-products of language learning but integral dimensions

¹ This article is one of the initial publications in the series of the project “The Development of Military Leader Competences in Language Teaching and Learning.”



of it – skills that emerge naturally when communication, reflection, and collaboration are embedded in pedagogical practice.

Recognizing this transforms the way we view the language classroom: it becomes not merely a site for mastering grammar and vocabulary, but a dynamic environment for practising leadership behaviours in a low-risk, socially meaningful setting. This insight laid the foundation for the present stage of research, which seeks to make such processes visible and measurable through the design of a dedicated diagnostic instrument. By tracing how soft skills evolve through language learning, we can begin to understand how foreign language education contributes to the broader formation of competent, reflective, and resilient professionals – in other words, how language learning can function as leadership training. To better understand how soft skills can be defined and observed, it is helpful to turn to fields where such competences have already been systematically conceptualised – notably, in the study of leadership.

2. Leadership Competency Framework and its Broader Implications

The *Military Leader Competency Model* [10] conceptualises leadership as a multidimensional and continuously evolving process built upon six interrelated competencies: technical, organisational, interpersonal, intrapersonal, conceptual, and leadership competence. It defines effective leadership not as the exercise of command or authority, but as a balanced interplay between task execution, human relationships, and adaptability to change. At the core of this framework lies the understanding that leadership develops through reflection, self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and ethical conduct – all of which are refined through experiential learning. Equally significant is the growing recognition of social and intrapersonal competencies within military leadership. Skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness are shown to have a direct impact on leadership effectiveness, influencing not only decision-making but also the capacity to motivate and support others.

The model emphasises that leader development must be a continuous process: while formal education is necessary, the most profound growth occurs through practical experience, guided reflection, and mentoring. This conceptualisation has implications that extend beyond the strictly military sphere. It demonstrates that the qualities of an effective leader are not innate but learnable, transferable, and measurable [9]. Leadership development, therefore, depends on environments that foster self-management, social interaction, problem-solving, and reflective thinking – precisely the same processes that underpin successful language learning.

In this sense, the military competency model provides an intellectual foundation for viewing the language classroom as a micro-laboratory of leadership. Both settings cultivate comparable soft skills² – communication, teamwork, confidence, and self-management – within structured yet human-centred interaction. Building on this premise, the present article extends the logic of the military leadership framework into the domain of language education, proposing that foreign language learning can function as an authentic training ground for leadership behaviours and 21st-century competences [11].

² For instance, Chamorro-Premuzic et al. found that the most important soft skills in higher education are self-management, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and creativity. [1]



3. Reflection as a Mechanism of Growth

In the course of learning, we often fail to recognise the silent yet significant development of certain abilities and skills. This is natural: a student's main focus during language study is typically directed toward concrete language-specific outcomes, for example, expanding vocabulary, mastering grammatical structures, achieving measurable progress as demonstrated by level tests. Yet it would be mistaken to overlook another, less visible dimension of learning. During feedback sessions, it is often language learners themselves who remark, "I have become more confident," "I am no longer afraid to speak," or "It no longer frightens me when I don't understand something." In retrospect, students tend to recall not the number of words memorised, but rather the moments of overcoming, i.e. the experience of breaking through a language barrier, of daring to communicate despite uncertainty.

The instrument we designed to trace the development of soft skills in foreign language learners therefore serves a dual purpose. For educators and curriculum designers, it offers concrete and dynamic data on how essential competences evolve over time. For students, it provides a valuable framework for self-analysis and reflection on their own learning process.

It is reasonable to expect that, when this questionnaire is implemented regularly – for instance, every six contact hours, which approximately corresponds to one thematic unit of study – adult learners will become more conscious of their progress and more precise in setting their personal learning goals. At the same time, teachers benefit from a systematic perspective on their practice through the prism of learner reflection. Such feedback enables them to discern which activities students enjoy, which cause stress, where learners demonstrate strength, and where further support may be needed. Nevertheless, the questionnaire can also be used to survey students who have already completed a language course. In this way, a single instrument can be employed to examine both past experiences (in a static mode—focusing solely on outcomes) and the present situation (in a dynamic mode).

4. Introducing the Instrument

As the next step in exploring the development of soft skills in foreign language classrooms, a pilot questionnaire was designed [12] for future use with both former and current students. The instrument is relatively detailed yet not overly complex, allowing for structured feedback without overwhelming respondents.

The underlying premise of the project that soft skills can be systematically developed in language classrooms also informed the design of the questionnaire. The primary aim of creating this broadly applicable tool is to make soft skills more visible and deliberate within the learning process.

Equally important is the overall orientation of the project itself: it shifts the lens to the adult classroom, where the dynamics differ significantly from those of school-age learners. Here, soft skills are not formed from scratch but are reshaped, transferred, and consciously reflected upon.

The following key considerations guided the design of the instrument:

- Clarity and accessibility: a positive approach and simple wording to ensure that learners are not discouraged by technical jargon.
- Balance: two or three closed questions and one open-ended item in each skill area to provide both measurable data and authentic learner voices.
- Progressive structure: questions from concrete experiences (e.g. class conversations, group work) toward reflection on personal growth (moments of confidence, self-management strategies).
- A final open-ended question: to allow learners to identify and describe skills they personally value, which may extend beyond the four predefined domains.

In addition, a short Demographics / Context section was included at the beginning of the questionnaire. Although this information may not appear immediately relevant at this stage, it was retained for potential use in later phases of the project – for example, when comparing different course formats, age groups, or instructor perspectives.



Questionnaire: Development of Soft Skills in Language Learning

This questionnaire is intended to help educators and learners reflect on how language learning contributes to the development of essential soft skills³. It can be used at the end of a course to gather structured feedback and better understand the learner's experience beyond purely linguistic progress. The questions focus on four key soft skills: communication, teamwork, self-confidence, and self-management.

Please respond honestly. Your feedback is anonymous and will be used to improve future courses.

I. Communication Skill

1. I feel I have improved my ability to express myself clearly and understandably during this course/session/lesson.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

2. The conversations in class helped me feel more comfortable handling communication situations in the new language.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

3. In what kind of situations did you feel you learned the most through communication?

II. Teamwork

4. I felt I was able to collaborate effectively in pair and/or group work.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

5. Group work⁴ helped me better understand the content and encouraged me to participate more actively.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

6. What were the strengths and possible challenges of learning in cooperation with others?

³ We use the term “soft skills” instead of “leadership skills,” as our aim is to establish a natural connection between the two.

⁴ Educators can make the link explicit by referring to connections with professional life: “Notice how you solved this task together – these are the strategies you use in professional teamwork.”



III. Self-confidence

7. During this course/session/lesson, I felt I became more confident⁵ in communicating in the new language.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

8. I feel I can make language mistakes without fear and learn from them.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

9. Describe a moment when you felt your self-confidence grew.

IV. Self-management

10. I was able to study regularly outside the classroom.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

11. I feel I can plan and monitor my learning more effectively.

Scale: 1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly agree

12. What supported you the most in self-directed learning?

V. Final Question

13. Besides language proficiency, what personal or interpersonal skills do you feel you have developed the most during this course/session/lesson?

5. Conclusion

The reflection undertaken in this study reveals that language learning and leadership training are not parallel but profoundly interconnected processes. Both rely on interaction, self-reflection, and the ability to act with awareness in complex, uncertain contexts. In both domains, growth occurs not through isolated instruction but through experience, reflection, and deliberate practice.

⁵ Confidence means risk-taking in professional or intercultural contexts, e.g. handling a difficult phone call, negotiating, or giving a presentation in another language (meta-level connection).



The military leadership framework with its emphasis on interpersonal, intrapersonal, and conceptual competences, offers a valuable lens through which to understand this connection. It demonstrates that communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability – qualities essential to effective leadership – are also continuously exercised in the foreign language classroom. In this sense, language learning becomes a form of leadership training: a micro-environment where learners practise initiative, empathy, cooperation, and self-management within authentic social interaction.

The pilot questionnaire presented here represents an initial attempt to make these processes visible. By systematically documenting how learners perceive their own development, it provides educators with tangible data and learners with a structure for meaningful reflection. More broadly, it invites both teachers and institutions to reconsider what counts as progress in language education; i.e. the focus is not only on accuracy and fluency, but also on the formation of communicative confidence, resilience, and responsibility.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that foreign language learning should not be viewed as a peripheral or purely linguistic activity within professional and military education. In contrast, it is a strategic arena for cultivating leadership competences – a setting in which the human, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of learning converge.



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