

Language Learning and Leadership: Empowering Students

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This article presents and analyzes two pedagogical experiences that incorporate leadership development in the world language classroom. In the context on the one hand, of low enrollment in language classes, and the increase of Spanish heritage speakers on the other, one way that language instructors attract learners is by incorporating skills transferrable to the real world and the job market. Leadership is one such valuable skill for all students. It fosters civility, mutual understanding, intercultural communication, and good global citizenship. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) map for foreign language education names “leadership and responsibility” as critical skills for the future. Drawing from this ACTFL document, this article proposes an interdisciplinary approach to teaching language and leadership practices that will help language learners stay engaged with the community and with their peers while learning and teaching Spanish.

Keywords: leadership, responsibility, community service, global citizenship.

Aprendizaje de idiomas y liderazgo: empoderamiento de los estudiantes

Este artículo presenta y analiza dos experiencias pedagógicas que incorporan el desarrollo de liderazgo en la clase de lenguas. En un contexto de baja matrícula en las clases de idiomas, y del aumento de los hablantes de herencia de español, una forma en que los educadores de idiomas pueden atraer a los estudiantes es mediante la incorporación de habilidades transferibles al mundo real y al mercado laboral. El liderazgo es una habilidad útil para que todos los estudiantes fomenten la civilidad, la comprensión mutua, la comunicación intercultural y la buena ciudadanía global. En este contexto, el artículo sigue la guía de habilidades del Consejo Americano de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (ACTFL siglas en inglés) para la educación en lenguas extranjeras, que nombran como habilidades críticas para el futuro al “liderazgo y la responsabilidad.” Basándose en este documento, este artículo comparte un enfoque interdisciplinario de la enseñanza de las lenguas y las prácticas de liderazgo que ayudarán a los estudiantes de idiomas a mantenerse comprometidos con la comunidad y con sus compañeros mientras aprenden y enseñan español.

palabras clave: liderazgo, responsabilidad, servicio a la comunidad, educación cívica global.



Recibido: 14/07/2020 | Aceptado: 10/12/2020

PEART, S.M., IBARRA, R., SALAZAR, H.Y. (2020). Language Learning and Leadership: Empowering Students. *Lenguaje y textos*, 52, 9-21. <https://doi.org/10.4995/lyt.2020.13972>

Introduction

Low enrollment in world languages in the U. S. (see analysis of the 2016 Modern Language Association report by Looney & Lusin, 2018) has prompted universities and language educators to work on innovative curricula to increase student enrollment in their classes. Most of these innovations are in keeping with the guidance on how to promote language studies in the U.S. offered by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and Modern Language Association (MLA). In 2007, the MLA Executive Council established an Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages with the objective of proposing a number of changes focusing on (1) transforming academic programs, and (2) making translingual and transcultural competence the center of language teaching. The MLA's 2007 report called for "a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses" (p.3). This proposed transformation of academic programs advocated for more interdisciplinary work with the intent to broaden learners' linguistic and cultural skills as well as regional expertise, facilitating university-level language instruction not only for language majors, but for others who did not wish to specialize on one particular language but wanted to be able to navigate between cultures while exploring a particular theme. This approach also supported the idea of promoting minors, as well as double majors, particularly by pairing language expertise with other disciplines such as business or medicine. In this current article, the authors follow that model to now pair language with leadership.

The MLA report called for a greater collaboration among colleagues of all disciplines, and in line with this curricular renewal envisioned by the MLA, language professionals in the field, continue to champion interdisciplinary approaches across language courses (Lafford, Abbot & Lear, 2014).

The last two decades have also seen a push to include in the world language curricula not only knowledge about culture, but also the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in intercultural dialogue at local, national and international levels (Byran & Zarate, 1996; Byram, 1997; Majhanovich, Kreso & Fox, 2009) particularly during the current times of rapid change and political turmoil. Despite common needs, people with different points of view find it harder to communicate with each other and find common ground. Intercultural dialogue fosters mutual understanding, helping learners appreciate that people have different beliefs, values and behaviors. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign in the United States, several candidates marshalled tremendous support from constituents by calling for stricter enforcement of immigration laws and protection of the nation's borders. Furthermore, the 2018 FBI report shows a clear rise of hate crime, particularly against Latinos and Jewish people in the U. S. (Hassan, 2019). Moreover, in Europe, in response to many terrorist attacks in recent years, the Council of Europe (2018) has created the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. The main focus of this document is the education in competences that support a democratic culture. In the context of today's complex world and the widespread need for a citizenry capable of thinking critically

and communicating effectively, language educators are in a unique position to introduce contemporary and relevant topics in their curricula and to foster learners who think critically and are able to communicate with those of different opinions, different languages and cultural background.

Drawing from calls for curricular change, and from the realities of a changing world, this article describes the context of language education in the U. S., and then, discusses and analyzes concrete approaches that intentionally incorporate leadership themes. These are intended to modify and expand traditional curricular content in world language courses in order to foster collaboration and problem-solving by having learners apply their second language (L2) in real-world situations. Both the approach based on curricular modification and that which involves expansion were developed in two distinct universities in the United States with focus on undergraduate programs. Finally, in the conclusions, the authors discuss (1) lessons learned (2) limitations of the pedagogical experiences and (3) future directions.

Foreign Languages in the United States: What are the challenges of the 21st Century?

ACTFL is the leading organization in the United States devoted “to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction” (ACTFL, 2018). Since its establishment in 1967, this organization has been leading the field of language education through the development of national standards and proficiency guidelines. In 1996, ACTFL, in collaboration with other language associations in the country, started a movement

to change the philosophy of language teaching in the United States. That movement culminated in the publication of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (National Standards, 1996). In that document, experts argued that all K-12 students would develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language. In the years immediately following, these standards had relatively little impact on higher education in spite of widespread dissemination (McAlpine, 2000; McAlpine & Dhonau, 2007). Between 1996 and 1999, the standards were distributed at national, regional, and local foreign language conferences, and by 1999, ACTFL re-issued the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (National Standards, 1999), now encompassing additional languages: Italian, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese (Arabic was later added in 2006). Ten years after the introduction of these standards, ACTFL and other language organizations’ main objective was to underscore the importance for language professionals to focus on student outcomes in the foreign language classroom. This meant a more functional and pragmatic approach for teaching foreign languages. The main goals underpinning this shift toward L2 learners were: (a) to use the target language in real life situations, (b) understand multicultural and global issues, (c) connect with other disciplines, (d) acquire new knowledge, and (e) participate in multilingual communities. As these goals were implemented in the classroom, learners became more actively engaged, fostering a rich environment of language learning, which in turn, resulted in the fact that students were more engaged and motivated to learn a

foreign language (Bustamante, Hurlbut & Moeller, 2012; Hall, 1995; Kern, 2006; Shrum & Glisan, 2009).

In 2012, ACTFL revised some of its guidelines to anchor them to the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, NSFLEP, 2014) to underscore how important it is for learners to become competent multilinguals, and focus on what language learners could do with language in authentic situations. This new culture-rich approach intentionally highlights the interplay between language and culture in order to develop intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, both the MLA and ACTFL highlight in their documents the importance of learning an L2 that is not divorced from its culture, as an L2 is never learned in a vacuum, rather in a particular situational context. It is in this spirit, and to engage language in context, that the authors embarked on a project to enhance and expand traditional curricular content in world language courses so as to include leadership studies.

Foreign language educators of Spanish have seen an increasing call for such curricular changes. Brown and Thompson (2018) analyze the history and evolution of Spanish language education at the university level and show how the diverse demographics of the United States and the growing presence of heritage learners of Spanish in postsecondary education are calling for a change in the curricula. They argue that Spanish programs, in particular, are feeling the tension between traditional approaches of teaching Latin American and Spanish Literature and, increasingly, those who favor a focus on cultural studies.

Alonso (2007) goes even further to point out that Spanish sections and departments “are responsible for teaching and producing scholarship about an increasing national cultural reality rather than a foreign one” (p.225). Furthermore, Irwin and Szurmuk (2009) argue strongly for the elevation of U.S. Latino studies, Mexican studies, and Latin American Studies within the Spanish curriculum at the expense of Peninsular Studies. Their main argument rests in the fact that most Spanish speakers in the U.S. come from Mexican and Mexican American roots, not from Spain. Most heritage speakers who are attracted to pursue a Spanish minor or major do so because (1) they see the utility of Spanish in their professional lives and (2) they want to explore and enrich their understanding of a heritage language and culture. The study of culture in the language classroom guides these students to a greater self-awareness and an understanding of the Latino community around them and their role in it. This is particularly true for heritage language learners, whether they are first or second generation immigrants; they want to understand how they became part of this country, how their own story of migration fits with those of other communities, and how they can better communicate deeply and meaningfully with the Spanish-speaking community around them. Higher education institutions offering Spanish language courses in the U.S., however, have not shown as much of a willingness to develop innovative curricula to respond to this population’s situation as heritage speakers.

The authors of this article propose that one strategy to address the needs of heritage language learners (HLLs) would be to develop learning modules that help

students perceive their linguistic ability as an asset instead of a problem. This is the approach the authors take in the development of the two pedagogical interventions they present and discuss in this article. Prior to their presentation, however, the authors will examine some of the current trends in foreign language enrollments in the United States, as they lend special relevancy to these new methodologies.

Foreign language Enrollments: What are the current trends?

The number of Spanish speakers in the United States grew exponentially in the final decades of the twentieth century. The MLA survey data indicates that by 1970, Spanish enrollments surpassed all the other foreign languages. From 1985 to 2009, the gap between Spanish and all the other foreign languages taught in the U.S. became so wide, that by 1995, the total enrollment for Spanish was higher than for all the other foreign languages combined. Similarly, from 1979 to 2014, the number of Advanced Placement exams administered by College Board to high school students in Spanish language and Spanish Literature increased from 4,378 to 152,962 (Brown & Thompson, 2018). This is approximately a 3,494% increase, which reveals the strong impact that demographic change in the U. S. has had in the education landscape. Interestingly, the 2009 Report produced by the MLA for the Teagle Foundation revealed a decrease in the number of enrollments in foreign-language classes, which some concluded was an anomaly. The MLA survey of 2013 as cited by Brown & Thompson (2018) confirmed that this is a trend not seen in the U.S. since at least 1968: the decline affects not only Spanish but all foreign languages.

The 2016 MLA report on language enrollments in higher education shows that language enrollments have continued to decrease. The report states that between fall 2013 and fall 2016, enrollments in foreign languages (other than English) fell by 9.2% in colleges and universities in the United States, “suffering the second-largest decline in the history of the census” (p.2). Also, worth noting from the report is that the number of students in advanced courses (for example, literature, and culture) is significantly lower than those students registered in introductory courses. Moreover, the report indicates that for every five enrollments in lower-level courses, there is only one enrollment in advanced courses (2016 MLA report, p.5). That lack of progression from introductory to advanced courses means that most students who are initially interested in learning a foreign language will achieve only a limited proficiency in that language.

The MLA report from 2015 also revealed that students nowadays tend to choose foreign languages, literature, and linguistics as a second major. Furthermore, the MLA report from the Humanities Departmental Survey of 2012-13 shows that more minors in foreign language were completed than majors, suggesting that students are electing to pair their language studies with other disciplines, such as business or medicine. This trend has coincided with a period during which migration to the U.S. from Spanish-speaking countries increased, and when a greater number of native or heritage language learners had access to higher education. Latinos, are now the largest minority in the United States, making Spanish the most commonly spoken language at home alongside with English. In

the next section, the authors discuss leadership education in the context of higher education.

Leadership in Higher Education

In the 21st century, higher education faces a number of challenges that require innovative approaches to leadership. The growth of international partnerships, the need for new business models, new technologies, and changing demographics are some of the powerful forces that are shaping this century. In the midst of change, Higher education is pressured to deliver graduates who can apply their acquired skills in the real world by becoming leaders in their field. It is not surprising that, in the last decade, majors, minors and doctorates that focus on leadership have proliferated. Business education has been focused on leadership for many years, claiming to thus prepare students for the real world (Badaracco, 2006; Derby, LeLoup, Rasmussen, & de Souza, 2017).

Language education is no exception to this trend, which first manifested itself in the area of languages for specific purposes, particularly in teaching languages for business. However, the broad impact of leadership beyond limited curricular offerings was recognized when ACTFL published the *21st Century Skills Map P-21* (2011). In this document, the organization underscores the importance of leadership and responsibility as useful skills for all citizens to foster civility, mutual understanding, respect, intercultural communication, and good global citizenship. Furthermore, in 2013, ACTFL released the video titled *Lead with Languages* highlighting the importance of learning languages and cultures as a key element in becoming a strong and successful

leader. Since then, language instructors at a variety of educational levels have been experimenting with ways to incorporate leadership and language education. This work has been facilitated by a noteworthy series of articles published by Long and her colleagues at the Air Force Academy (Long, LeLoup, Derby & Reyes, 2014; Uribe, LeLoup, Long & Doyle, 2015; Long & Rasmussen, 2017). Their work sets forth: (1) definitions of leadership, (2) concrete applications in the language classroom, and (3) a clear framework by which language educators can link leadership development and language curriculum. The authors of this article build on their work, with the objective of creating powerful opportunities to enable learners to (1) become confident and perceive themselves as leaders, and (2) understand how language and cultural learning can readily contribute to their development as decisive leaders.

In the next section, the authors describe two concrete educational experiences that intentionally incorporate leadership into the language curriculum, reaching out to the community and fostering critical reflection among language learners.

Developing Leadership Inside of the Language Classroom and Beyond

In this section, the authors present and discuss two educational experiences developed at the United States Naval Academy (USNA) in Annapolis, Maryland, and at Campbell University, located at Buies Creek, North Carolina. Both institutions embrace leadership in their mission statements and as their motto. USNA's mission, for example, is to prepare leaders for service in the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps. The

school educates about 4,500 students in twenty-five majors, and immediately upon graduation, midshipmen become commissioned officers in the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, or special operation communities. In the long term, USNA graduates have served as outstanding leaders as U.S. presidents, congressional representatives, astronauts, and distinguished military commanders, and in many other notable roles in the history of the United States. Although USNA is identified as an engineering school, midshipmen can major and minor in Arabic and Chinese, and additionally, pursue minors in French, German, Japanese, Russian or Spanish. Midshipmen have demanding academic course loads; the average is eighteen credit hours per semester for exactly eight semesters; by law this is a four-year program. This makes for a very tight schedule, and because of time and budgetary constraints, not all midshipmen can participate in study abroad programs. Given these institutional limits, how can language educators maximize the time they spend teaching languages and developing leadership experiences, and at the same time, foster respect, civility, and mutual understanding? In response to this need, one of the authors of this article re-designed an existing USNA program so as to intentionally link leadership development and language learning, while simultaneously exposing students to role models who embody a wide range of leadership styles.

Leading with Languages at USNA: Midshipmen Group Study Program (MGSP)

The MGSP was created initially to provide midshipmen out of the classroom support with their STEM course assignments.

Throughout the years, this program was formalized, and added a study group focused on world languages. One of the authors of this article is the coordinator of the MGSP for the languages and cultures department. In that capacity she has re-designed this program to (1) intentionally incorporate leadership development in the teaching of languages and cultures and (2) create a language learning community that fosters multiple styles of leadership, particularly among female students which make up 1/4 of USNA's total student body. (According to USNA's 2023 Class portrait, female students make 26.25% of the total student body.) Additionally, the redesigned MGSP pedagogical experience intends to engage and empower heritage speakers of Spanish.

In the next section, the authors present a detail description of the Midshipmen Group Study Program.

Nuts and Bolts of the Midshipmen Group Study Program

Students apply to become the MGSP leader for a particular language among the seven that are offered. Minors and majors are particularly encouraged to apply by completing an on-line form which includes academic information and requires a professor's recommendation. The student who is selected will lead a one-hour study session per week, and at the end of the semester he or she will earn one credit hour. Each leader will work with a faculty-sponsor who will provide guidance on how to better design the weekly study session.

This general structure creates the opportunity for faculty members to mentor midshipmen on how to teach languages, create lesson plans, work with others, and become strong role models. In addition, the

MGSP is a great opportunity for the student leaders to use the target language in a real-world context, improvise, and react, even in cases when they are unable to anticipate and prepare for their peers' questions. As MGSP leaders, students have to develop effective communicative strategies and engage their audience. The main idea behind the redesign of the MGSP is to empower students so they can become peer-mentors of other students who are learning languages. Peer mentoring has proven effective in promoting students' success (Collier, 2017), particularly by helping to support the increasingly diverse 21st Century student population. Peers can provide useful scaffolding, valuable and honest feedback and suggestions for improvement in the process of language learning (Everhard, 2015).

Particularly useful tools for the leaders are the guided critical reflective assignments they complete. Significant research in the field of language instruction has examined how the linguistic and intercultural goals of language courses can be advanced through critical reflection (Crane, Fingerhuth & Hünlich, 2017; Crane, 2018; Crane & Sosulski, 2020; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Kramsch, 2011; Johnson 2015). Directed reflective assignments fulfill several key functions. They focus the MGSP leaders on thinking about their role and on ways to provide feedback to their peers, and they also support their quest to advance their own language learning process, and to become more actively engaged with their immediate community. Students who attend each MGSP session are more motivated to keep pursuing language at upper levels because they find a community that supports them.

MGSP leadership has been particularly effective for minority students (female

students and heritage speakers of Spanish). This leadership experience helps them to recognize their strengths, and lets them become role models for other students. It has been particularly empowering for heritage speakers, because they find agency in their own voices. During their high school years, some have struggled socially and emotionally with their identity as they felt they needed to apologize for their bilingual and bicultural identity. Becoming MGSP leaders validates their language and cultural experience, projecting them as role models for others, reaffirming their identity. "Identity" is a broad term, and in this paper, the authors understand this concept as a construct that reflects the beliefs, personalities, appearance, or qualities that can make a person self-identify or a group identify collectively. These qualities can be cast in positive and negative ways, making the process of identity construction a complex one (Clifford & Reisinger, 2019). Therefore, it is important to present strong positive role models to minoritized students, so they can build a positive identity that empowers them.

A diverse cadre of MGSP leaders with a wide range of backgrounds encompasses different leaders as role models with a variety of leadership styles. This program has been an amazingly successful experience, according to the number of participants. The languages and cultures MGSP tutored approximately 1,140 language students in 2017, and 1,030 in 2018. The changes to the student leadership that were made to this existing program fostered a growth mindset and brought students' voices to the forefront. This pedagogical experience can easily be replicated at any institution, and at different levels, with just a few adjustments.

In the next sections, the authors describe another pedagogical experience that supports advanced students in their quest to become more proficient in the target language and use Spanish in real life situations.

Language Learners as Teachers: Spanish Clinic

Leadership development is very much present at Campbell University. On the school's website its prominent motto reads: "Lead with us. Lead with purpose." At Campbell, as in many other universities in the United States, leadership development has become an increasingly important for the administration and academic programs (Badaracco, 2006; Derby, et al., 2017). This is what motivated Spanish majors and minors to participate in the Spanish Clinic under the auspices of two professors, one from Campbell University and the other from Wake Technological Community College.

Campbell University is located in the heart of Harnett County, North Carolina; it is a small private institution with approximately 7,121 graduate and undergraduate students. The Foreign Languages Department offers French, German, Latin, Portuguese and Spanish. Students can minor in these languages, but only major in Spanish. Students in the Spanish program are mainly double majors or minors who are specializing in homeland security, pre-med, biology, history, and international business.

Study abroad is available to Spanish learners, but some are not able to travel due to the price of the program, a tight curriculum, or other personal issues such as family or work. The question for educators then becomes, "how can this program provide

opportunities for students to 'function in new and unfamiliar situations' and 'use their second language to access, discuss, and create content across all disciplines?'" (ACTFL, 2013).

In response to this challenge, two of the authors created a Spanish Clinic, where students majoring or minoring in Spanish teach Spanish to children from six to ten years old, with this project counting as part of their course work and final grade. Students registered in Spanish Composition and Conversation II, and in Survey of Spanish-American Literature II, participated in this pedagogical experience.

The instructor in charge of the project sent a mass email through the office of the Provost to all faculty and staff of the university to invite their children between the ages of six and ten to participate in the Spanish Clinic, which was scheduled to run three Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Interested faculty and staff filled a short Google form providing name, age, contact information, and any pertinent information about their child, e.g. food allergies. Once this information was gathered, the leading instructors divided the children into two classes based on age; one group was comprised of children aged six to seven, and the other with children eight to ten years old.

The instructors met with the Spanish students who would be conducting the Spanish Clinic for a general orientation. Students were responsible to participate in at least two Saturdays, and to design two different lesson plans for those days. During orientation, students and instructors were able to brainstorm ideas for lesson plans, modeled activities and tasks that are successful with young learners, and shared best practices for second language

teaching. Students understood that they were responsible for the Spanish Clinic. Although instructors would be present to observe and help during this project, the actual teaching and direction of the classes were their responsibility. Students turned in lesson plans at least a week in advance of their assigned Saturday. They then received feedback and suggestions for improvement in time for them to prepare for their assigned Saturday. In this manner students were able to develop a sense of ownership, because this was “their” Saturday, and “their young learners,” and they had to prepare and deliver language lessons with a real-life audience. In their post-Clinic reflections, students noted that in order to engage the children, sometimes they had to improvise, speak without relying on textbooks or dictionaries, and negotiate meaning with their interlocutors. Furthermore, the fact that sometimes children did not like a particular activity, and they were very vocal about it, pushed students to react quickly in order to keep their audience engaged. One particular student noted that, although translation was valuable in preparing for the Spanish Clinic, it was not enough. He reflected that he often had to come up with things to say in Spanish on the spot, which meant stepping out of his comfort zone and think spontaneously, which is how real conversations are carried on in everyday life.

Both students and children participants had positive experiences. Spanish language students had a sense of accomplishment, and they were able to step into an unfamiliar role while using Spanish to teach others. They assumed a leadership role, and modeled how to teach and learn languages to young learners. By engaging in meaningful work with children, students

came to realize what they could actually do with their second language. In addition, their new public roles confirmed that their language skills were an asset beyond the classroom walls.

Conclusions

The powerful educational experiences described above can provide students with a level of motivation and personal investment that is often difficult to achieve within the classroom itself. Both student-led learning projects enhance the participants’ confidence to serve others in a more professional capacity. MGSP Spanish heritage speakers were able to reaffirm their identities, gaining confidence using Spanish beyond the classroom. Students who taught children were able to identify or confirm an interest in a career in education, or other fields that involve working with children. Overall, participants grew and even embraced their newfound roles of teachers and mentors. Furthermore, in both pedagogical experiences, learners were able to use the language in meaningful ways in real-world tasks. Additionally, the authors helped students apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the classroom to a space outside of school. Likewise, the authors supported the network of collaboration among learner-leaders and those with whom they interacted. Both pedagogical experiences fostered collaboration, dialogue, analysis and planning for a successful execution. Students mentored other peers, worked in teams to teach young learners, and in the end, both experiences created a community of learners who come together, support each other, and make lasting contributions which enrich the experience of those around them. They share ideas and

learn from each other, act as role models and motivate others to keep learning, provide opportunities for target language interaction and intercultural communication, and become strong peer mentors.

In the 21st Century one of the main challenges that educators and learners face is to be able to communicate and find common ground with each other despite different backgrounds and ideas. Experiences such as the ones described in this article help students get out of their comfort zone, overcome their own limitations, and reach out to others and at the same time appreciate that other students may have different beliefs and values.

These pedagogical experiences show how leadership roles can be successfully

implemented in the curriculum of world languages in different manners, and across different levels of language ability. There is no need for a new course or an entirely curriculum re-design to incorporate these pedagogical interventions. Their flexibility and adaptability may prove useful for their implementation at different institutions and at a wide range of proficiency levels.

Current evidence from research studies and pedagogical developments linking world languages and leadership is insufficient. While the preliminary experience from these projects is favorable, this area calls for rigorous investigation to determine whether leadership should be integrated as a core value for world language education.

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