Language Teacher Leadership

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Key Points

- discusses the origins and types of language teacher leadership
- reviews the different characteristics of language teacher leaders
- introduces different pathways to language teacher leadership
- identifies future directions for research and practice in language teacher leadership

Abstract

While many teachers have long acted in various leadership capacities, the term "teacher leadership" is now better understood–and increasingly valued– within the context of language teaching. The article summarizes research on teacher leadership in the education literature, with a recognition of its social and cultural constraints, presents key domains of language teacher leadership and points to future directions for fostering language teacher leadership.

Introduction

Broadly, teacher leadership is defined as the involvement of teachers in leadership roles and activities that contribute to school improvement, professional development, and the enhancement of student learning outcomes.

The evolution of teacher leadership reflects the philosophical, social, and cultural drivers of education reform, which began with progressive educators such as John Dewey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing teachers' agency in shaping educational experiences. Throughout the 20th century, the professionalization of teacher identity included efforts to elevate the status of teaching as a profession, provide teachers with more autonomy and decision-making power, and promote collaboration among teachers. As part of 21st-century education reform, initiatives such as school-based management, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership models have emphasized the importance of shared leadership among teachers and administrators (Fullan & Watson, 2000; Spillane et al., 2004; Stoll et al., 2006).

The teacher leadership "movement" particularly coincides with the advent of the distributed leadership model, in which leadership responsibilities are shared among various stakeholders within an organization rather than being centralized in a single individual or administrative body (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This model acknowledges that effective leadership can emerge from different levels and areas within an educational institution, including formal leadership roles such as department heads or team leaders, as well as informal leadership roles that arise from teachers' expertise, influence, and willingness to take initiative. However, this model is distinctly "Western" as the countries that have produced significant research on teacher leadership are also all from the Global north, including the United States (Nguyen et al., 2020), the United Kingdom (Eckert et al., 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), Australia (Chew & Andrews, 2010), Canada (Harris et al., 2017), New Zealand (Harris et al., 2017), the Netherlands, Singapore (Goodwin et al., 2015) and Finland (Niemi & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). In other contexts that embrace more authoritarian, centralized, or hierarchical systems of leadership, teacher leadership may tend to be more self-initiated, less formalized, less researched, or even discouraged. Just as language teacher identity development can be situated within global and contextual contexts (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Fairley, 2020; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010), language teacher leader development necessitates a nuanced examination of the complex interplay between cultural contexts, international norms, and their influence on the formation of leadership identities (Rojas et al., 2023). Utilizing diverse data collection instruments can illuminate the dynamic interplay of factors influencing how language teacher identity is constructed (Li, 2023).

Both internal and external factors drive the development of teacher leadership. External forces include, for example, formal teacher leadership job ladders, school directors leading reform efforts, system-wide curricular and standards reform, and/or community demands for school improvement. Internal drivers of teacher leadership include emphasizing its essential role in fostering effective language instruction, promoting linguistic equity, shaping the trajectory of language education, a passion for pedagogical innovation, a commitment to advocating for equitable learning opportunities, a dedication to personal and professional growth, a desire to support novices or colleagues, and/or engagement with continuing education (Shah, 2017). All these may compel educators to embrace leadership roles.

Characteristics and Activities of Teacher Leaders in Language Education

While sharing much of the same features, teacher leaders in the language education context possess several distinct characteristics that set them apart from general teacher leaders. These characteristics are reflective of the purposes, expertise, and profiles of language educators, as organized in Table 1 below.

Adding to the above, the professional education and preparation of language teachers tends to include (1) highly active teaching methods, (2) attention to classroom language discourse, and a (3) need for creativity in the absence of materials or curricula, all of which also lends to the skills language teachers draw on when becoming teacher leaders. There is a wide variety of educational contexts for language teachers, from being the solo language teacher in a building to working in large teams, and hence a wide variety of teacher leadership activities for them to engage in. These generally fall into nine categories:

1. *Professional Development.* Language teacher leadership plays a crucial role in facilitating professional development within language education communities. Teachers who take on leadership roles often engage in mentoring, coaching, and organizing workshops (Baecher, 2012; Smeets & Ponte, 2009).
2. *Curriculum Development.* Language teacher leaders contribute significantly to curriculum development by providing insights into effective instructional practices, advocating for the integration of new methodologies, and collaborating with colleagues to align curriculum with standards and learner needs (Chu et al., 2022; Lai & Cheung, 2015; Lopez, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2020).
3. *Advocacy.* Language teacher leaders advocate for the needs of language learners and educators at various levels, including within schools, districts, and professional organizations. They promote policies that support language education, lobby for resources, and raise awareness about language-related issues (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Table 1   Distinct characteristics of language teacher leaders.

Language proficiency and expertise	Language teacher leaders possess specialized knowledge and expertise in language acquisition, linguistics, and language teaching methodologies. Their understanding of language learning processes and proficiency in the target language enables them to provide unique insights and guidance to colleagues and contribute to the development of effective language instruction (Shah, 2017).
Cultural and linguistic diversity	Language teacher leaders often work with diverse student populations and speakers of multiple languages. As a result, they are particularly attuned to issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, and they play a crucial role in advocating for the needs of language learners and promoting inclusive teaching practices that respect students' linguistic backgrounds and identities (Pennington & Richards, 2016).
Integration of technology	In an increasingly digital and interconnected world, language teacher leaders are at the forefront of integrating technology into language instruction. They explore innovative digital tools, online resources, and multimedia materials to enhance language learning experiences and engage students in meaningful language practice across diverse contexts (Chun, 2019).
Global perspectives and cross-cultural competence	Language teacher leaders often foster global perspectives and cross-cultural competence among their students by incorporating authentic materials, cultural activities, and opportunities for intercultural communication into their teaching. They promote intercultural understanding, empathy, and appreciation for diverse linguistic and cultural traditions (Whitehead & Greenier, 2019).
Advocacy for language education	Language teacher leaders advocate for the importance of language education and the value of multilingualism in an increasingly interconnected world. They champion policies and initiatives that support language learning opportunities for all students, raise awareness about the benefits of bilingualism and language proficiency, and work to address disparities in access to language instruction (McGee et al., 2015).
Collaboration with language communities	Language teacher leaders often collaborate with local language communities, heritage language organizations, and cultural institutions to enrich language learning experiences and provide opportunities for students to engage with native speakers and authentic language use outside the classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Richards, 2015; Zonoubi et al., 2017).

4. *Innovation.* Language teacher leaders are often at the forefront of innovation in language education. They experiment with new technologies, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods, and share their findings with colleagues to foster continuous improvement in teaching and learning (Harris et al., 2017).
5. *Community Building.* Language teacher leaders build strong professional communities by fostering collaboration, facilitating communication among colleagues, and organizing networking events. They create supportive environments where educators can share ideas, resources, and best practices both in their institutions and globally through professional association involvement and social media groups (Nguyen et al., 2020).
6. *Research and Scholarship.* Language teacher leaders contribute to the advancement of language education through research and scholarship. They conduct studies on effective teaching practices, publish articles in academic journals, and present at conferences to disseminate knowledge and promote evidence-based instruction (Reid et al., 2022; Smeets & Ponte, 2009).
7. *Equity and Inclusion.* Language teacher leaders promote equity and inclusion by advocating for culturally responsive pedagogy, addressing disparities in access to language education, and creating inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and supported in their language learning journey (Lopez, 2014; Niemi & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015).
8. *Policy Influence.* Language teacher leaders influence policy decisions by providing expertise and insights on language education to policymakers and administrators. They participate in policy discussions, serve on committees, and advocate for policies that support high-quality language instruction and equitable access to language learning opportunities (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).
9. *Assessment and Evaluation.* Language teacher leaders play a crucial role in assessment and evaluation practices by developing and implementing reliable assessment tools, analyzing data to inform instruction, and advocating for fair and equitable assessment practices that align with language learning goals and standards (Lai & Cheung, 2015).

Pathways to Language Teacher Leadership

The factors that affect whether language teachers take on leadership roles have only recently started to be investigated. This is surprising as there is a long history of research into the drivers and impediments to leadership in the general education literature (Levenson, 2014). In part this is due to the lack of attention given to the development of leadership skills in pre- and in-service language teacher education, which typically do not address "the knowledge, awareness, interpersonal and social skills needed to succeed in leadership responsibilities and decision making" (Richards, 2023, p. vi). In fact, in a qualitative analysis of ten detailed cases of leaders in TESOL, Curtis (2022) found that feeling ill-prepared for leadership roles was a dominant theme among the experiences of the case contributors. This was echoed in a study by Powers and Bailey (2023), who surveyed 223 teacher leaders of world languages in the United States to identify their leadership journeys, or "the sequence, timing, and setting of experiences and influences that culminate in teaching professionals acquiring leadership responsibilities and (usually) gaining awareness of their potential to carry out those roles."

In their study, Powers and Bailey (2023) identified six characteristics of leadership pathways: (1) the timing and sequence of experiences; (2) any catalysts that caused individuals to first act on their leadership potential; (3) the context in which the work took place; (4) any external influences the leaders received; (5) the leaders' motivations regarding their current responsibilities and/or future roles; and (6) the individuals' overall perception of their pathways.

These six characteristics imply several implications for the profession. For example, awareness of leadership was less likely to develop during university if it had not already developed earlier in teachers' lives. This means that professional programs can probably do more to incorporate leadership awareness building and future employers cannot assume that new teachers are clear on their potential on arrival into a new organization. Another finding was that only a minority of respondents (35%) had had access to leadership training of any type, and that informal resources such as role-models and mentoring were much more prevalent. This has implications for the types of support that organizations can offer and the ways in which teachers may be motivated to engage in leadership.

Emerging research can guide leadership development. A recent scoping review on language teacher leadership (Reinders, 2024) revealed eight factors affecting the development of leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Shah, 2017; Walsh & Mann, 2019):

(a) a supportive culture, which means a minimally hierarchical environment that fosters collaboration, trust and mutual respect (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Stephenson, 2012);
(b) opportunities for staff to switch roles across the organization;
(c) willingness of middle and senior leaders to delegate authority to teachers (Shah, 2017; Walsh & Mann, 2019);
(d) the provision of high-quality professional development for teachers and leaders (Shah, 2017; Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012; Walsh & Mann, 2019);
(e) extensive coordination and knowledge exchange among teachers;
(f) a high level of engagement in schoolwork at all levels;
(g) fostering a safe environment for risk-taking and creativity to occur, and
(h) recognition and reward for teachers' leadership activities (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Clearly, the emergence of teacher leadership does not occur in isolation and must be seen in the dynamic context of the wider organization. Schools and their current leaders bear a significant part of the responsibility for fostering teacher leadership.

In addition to external factors, teachers' interest in and readiness for leadership also play a determining role. Reinders (2023) introduced the concept of "*Willingness to Lead*," which foregrounds teachers' personal beliefs, goals and aspirations in relation to leadership. Prior experiences, misconceptions on the nature of teacher leadership (such as equating leadership exclusively with managerial and administrative duties), the belief that teachers cannot have a significant impact beyond their own classroom, or that leadership necessitates assuming a highly public role, can all have a negative impact (Reinders, 2023). A further impediment was identified by Greenier and Whitehead, who found little awareness among the 56 teachers in South Korea of their own leadership, something echoed by Baecher (2012) regarding teacher leaders in New York: "While 22 of the 24 teachers surveyed for this paper participated in many activities considered teacher leadership, less than one-half of them recognized these activities as such" (2012, p. 326). This is a common phenomenon, with many teachers showing low levels of confidence in their leadership abilities. Clearly, there is room for constructively challenging teachers' beliefs.

The framework of *Willingness to Lead* attempts to offer a systematic approach to facilitate this. It draws on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020), which explains why people do or do not engage behaviors over which they have control. TPB consists of behavior belief (the subjective probability that the behavior will produce a given outcome or experience), attitude toward the behavior (the degree to which performance of the behavior is positively or negatively valued); normative beliefs (he perceived pressure to engage in a certain behavior); subjective norms (the perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in a behavior); control beliefs (the perceived presence of factors that may facilitate or impede performance of a behavior), and; perceived behavioral control (people's perceptions of their ability to perform a given behavior). Across the domains of personal, organizational and professional leadership, possible levers for language teacher leadership development emerge and can also serve as a basis for a more systematic approach to research on the topic.

Additional Future Directions

In addition to the factors identified throughout this article, two emergent areas of interest when fostering language teacher leadership are the rise of artificial intelligence and leadership development focused on social justice.

Language teachers of today and tomorrow will require a strong understanding of how digital tools, especially generative artificial intelligence (AI), influence language acquisition's cognitive, social, affective, and neural dimensions (Li & Yu-Ju, 2022). Effective language teacher leadership will in turn require not only familiarity and experience with deploying digital tools for language teaching themselves, in order to guide colleagues, but also an ability to identify potential technology pitfalls to ensure responsible implementation. While AI promises personalized and immersive learning experiences for students, it also necessitates language teacher leaders to navigate new ethical and technical terrains (Huang et al., 2023) including issues related to data privacy and bias. Language teacher leaders may be confronted with leading challenging decision-making conversations with colleagues to leverage the benefits of AI, and ultimately enhance students' learning experiences and the quality of language education (Ghamrawi et al., 2023). AI may also be tapped for its ability to make routine leadership tasks easier and more readily accomplished, thus freeing time for teacher leaders to engage in more humanistic and personnel development activities.

The growing diversity of language learners across the global stage demands a shift toward sustainable and equitable practices. Language teacher leaders may have the potential to champion social justice within their work, addressing challenges faced by language learners globally, such as access to qualified teachers, limited resources, or discrimination based on language (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Lopez, 2014). Language teacher leaders may be able to leverage their positions to advocate for resources, programs, and policies that support students with diverse linguistic backgrounds, especially those from marginalized communities (Bradley-Levine, 2018). Contextual understanding is important for language teacher leaders working toward social justice, including being aware of broader systemic issues such as economic, environmental, health, and social factors that influence students' experiences and working to shift mindsets and reinforce values that promote social justice (Pham, 2022) and linguistic justice (Romaine, 2019, pp. 40−61). Further research is needed to explore how language teacher leaders can effectively raise awareness of systemic issues, challenge existing paradigms, and embody their commitment to social justice through discourse and action. Within language teacher leadership lies tremendous potential for sustainable and equitable language development for learners, teachers, and for themselves.

Conclusion

Language teacher leadership has an increasingly rich history. The impact of teacher's agency on not only their own confidence and job satisfaction but also learners' wellbeing and academic performance is significant. As we have shown in this entry, there are many different approaches individual teachers can take to assume leadership roles, beyond their formal roles. This opens up opportunities for all teachers to better support their communities and make a difference to their learners and colleagues.

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