

IMPROVING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES DURING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

Gabriela MIHĂILĂ-LICĂ

**“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
mihailag2001@yahoo.com**

Abstract: Numerous specialists agree with the fact that learning at least one other foreign language brings a multitude of advantages both to the individual who makes the effort to learn it, but also to the society he or she is part of. At the “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, cadets learn about leadership not only from the specialized courses like Fundamentals of Leadership or Military Leadership [1], but they can find opportunities to improve their leading skills and qualities during the foreign language classes. The article focuses on some of the most important qualities of a leader and offers suggestions on how these could be developed during the English, French or German classes. We believe that the foreign language courses will help students develop much needed leadership traits like adaptability, flexibility, open mindedness, the capacities of being good team players, good listeners and good communicators. These are qualities without which they will have a very hard time functioning not only in an international environment but also in a national one. As teachers we have to understand that it is more than vocabulary and grammar that we help our students learn, we also help them to learn about life, about being leaders of others.

Keywords: leadership, qualities, foreign languages

1. Introduction

Nowadays specialists have introduced the concept of “global leader”, i.e. “a leader comfortable working with different nationalities, communication styles and motivations” [2]. The learning of foreign languages is a key criterion that would enable one to become such a global leader. Emma Buckby in *6 Ways a Foreign Language Enhances Your Global Leadership Skills* enumerates six ways in which learning a foreign language can help one become a better leader. She is of the opinion that such an experience expands the way people communicate and the way they are perceived by their audience; gives the speaker a broader world perspective. It is also helps the learner understand more about the context, about the way people say

things; another problem encountered by monolinguals is the fact that they generally use references from their own language and culture and thus the number of people that can understand them greatly diminishes and so does the effectiveness of their speech; those who speak more languages understand the context better and they are capable of understanding things that to others may appear ambiguous and that otherwise may lead to misunderstandings; by learning a new language, one also learns about a new culture and in this manner they become more empathic and more tolerant [3].

The countries that fail to take measures regarding the improvement of the level of knowledge of foreign languages of their citizens will find themselves in a predicament. In their paper entitled

America's Foreign Language Deficit, David Skorton and Glenn Altschuler discuss the serious problem the United States is confronted with, the one represented by the too few Americans who can speak a language other than English as compared to Europeans. The statistics presented by the two authors are dire: "Only 18% of Americans report speaking a language other than English, while in Europe it 53% speak more than one language, and even more do elsewhere"[4]. "As we globalize and work across more countries, more significant than knowing a second or third language, there is a rising need for people skilled in understanding context that stems from how people speak or interact. This goes beyond issues of inclusiveness and having a culturally diverse workforce. It is much more an issue of leadership in being about to comprehend and hold different perspectives readily and why people may think in different ways. Per Chris Heuer of Alynd, <<it's about choosing the right words for creating understanding and alignment>>".[5]

2. "Soft" leadership skills

We take as a starting point the definitions of leadership given by Mohandas K. Gandhi according to which "leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people" [6] and that of Peter Drucker who is of the opinion that "The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say <<I>>. And that's not because they have trained themselves not to say <<I>>. They don't think <<I>>. They think <<we>>; they think <<team>>. They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don't sidestep it, but <<we>> gets the credit. This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done" [7]. From these two definitions we notice that the leaders of today and, very probably the leaders of tomorrow, (will) have to display not only the "classical qualities" mentioned by all the specialized books in the field, but we can also detect a growing insistence

upon a good mastery of soft skills, which are subjective and difficult to quantify, skills that could be acquired or bettered during foreign language classes.

3. The mission of the "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy

The presentation of the "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy of Sibiu clearly states its mission. The Academy "is a public higher military education institution integrated within the national education system, with university autonomy guaranteed by law and with legal personality, able to organize and develop accredited bachelor and master programs and build up commissioned leaders for the Romanian Land Forces as well as for other beneficiaries from the national defence, public order and national security system"[8].

At the "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, the professors who teach foreign languages also try to develop leadership character and leadership skills in their students.

4. Improving leadership qualities during the foreign language classes

The leadership qualities the foreign language professors can develop most successfully in the ones they teach are best summarized by C.Perry Yeatman and Stacie Nevadomski Berdan in their work entitled *Get ahead by going abroad: A woman's guide to career success*. This book aims at teaching women how to succeed in obtaining an international position and on how to secure it. In the authors' view, good leaders must know more than one language, they must be adaptable, flexible, open minded, they have to prove to be good team players, they need to listen and to communicate clearly [9].

In the paragraphs that follow we will take each of these traits and show some activities the teachers of foreign languages could use in order to improve these traits in their students.

Adaptability represents the “individuals' capacity to constructively regulate psycho-behavioral functions in response to new, changing, and/or uncertain circumstances, conditions and situations”[10]. Specialists found that “young people who are more adaptable were more likely to participate in class, enjoy school, be more satisfied with life, have higher self-esteem, and have a more concrete sense of meaning and purpose in life”[11]. One of the things that help a person become more adaptable is the capacity of seeing things from a different perspective. One exercise that we use in order to encourage students to analyze a situation from various points of view is the one that is done in pairs and in which one is a small unit commander. Some of his men are complaining about noise in the barracks. There are soldiers who are play music very loud and sometimes there are even “stereo wars”. The commander has to speak with one of the “culprits”, (the other student in the pair) and to find a solution to the problem. After the solution is found, the two partners change roles [12].

“Flexibility is what enables individuals to generate new ways to solve a problem, adapt to changes in routines, and adjust to the unexpected”[13]. Many teachers nowadays are engaged into collaborative partnerships with their students. Teachers have to really listen to the students and to offer them choices. There are instances when cadets can choose from a list of military topics the one they want to write an essay on or to deliver a presentation on. Flexibility is also fostered by the fact that teachers permanently emphasize the things that the students do well, by the fact that they take into considerations the changes the cadets suggest in the case of certain activities, by encouraging their sense of humor.

“Intellectual humility and a willingness to hear a broad range of opinions are teachable behaviors that are increasingly important in our interconnected, global world. Of course, being open-minded is not an end in itself; but the means of consciously finding what

you stand for in a vast range of standpoints”[14].

In order to help students become more open-minded, we have introduced in our courses issues related to diversity and cross-cultural awareness. One example in this respect is the Military English course where there are lectures on *Women in the Military* or on *Professional Development*, the latter presenting ways in which one can become an officer in other armies, more precisely in the American and the British armies.

Without teamwork, very few foreign language classes would be successful. Our cadets are adults and they cooperate with the professor and with each other more than students from other universities, yet they still need practice. This is done by means of a variety of teamwork tasks, such as pair-work tasks, an example of these being the creation of dialogues on various military topics or group activities, like preparing project works. One such project work could be the creation of a poster that presents the Army ranks in the Romanian and in the US armies.

By asking the students to do exercises in which they are asked to listen to a recording and afterwards to fill in the gaps of a text with the missing information, we also facilitate their transformation into listeners who are more attentive not only to the recorded speech but also to one another. Such an example of listening activity would be the one requiring students to “Listen to the audio clip and fill in the blanks with the missing words”, an exercise that is taken in *Standby. Military Vocabulary Practice* [15].

In order to see how well they can convey their messages and to better themselves as far as their communication skills are regarded, the cadets are taught about briefings and afterwards they have to brief their colleagues on various military topics. One of the topics received by the students I taught last year was the modernization of the military equipment and the requirements of one of the briefings they had to produce were the following “The

maintenance division you work for got less money for the equipment that needed, so a careful decision on how to spend it is necessary. Give a briefing on two possible ways of spending money, describing their advantages and disadvantages. Recommend one and justify your choice:

a) buy some modern equipment b) upgrade the old equipment c) other” [16].

The constructive feedback the cadets receive from their peers after delivering their briefings represents “one of the most valuable contributions” made to their learning [17].

5. Conclusion

We know that *Verba docent exempla trahunt* and that cadets follow the model of those who teach them to a greater or lesser extent. This is why it is extremely important for the teacher to display and to try to improve the qualities he/she tries to develop in his/her students. Even if the

leadership qualities our paper focuses on are not mentioned in the syllabus, we have to keep in mind that as teachers we are not only sources of knowledge regarding the subject matter we are specialized in but also sources of experience and in this quality we should deliver lessons on foreign languages as well as lessons on life.

There are very few people who are born with all the necessary leading qualities. For the great majority it is extremely hard, but with courage and perseverance leading can be learned. “Leading people is not easy. It is complex. It can be frustrating. It is time-consuming. It’s about emotions and expectations.

Leading people is about mobilizing and optimizing the talent and skills of yourself and others in order to achieve results. And it is about the willingness to hold up the mirror and be very self-aware about your strengths and limitations – and maintaining the capacity to grow and develop”[18].

References

- [1] Ghidul studentului, Seria 2018-2021, Domeniul de studii „Științe Militare, Informații și Ordine Publică“, Programul de Studii/Specializarea „Leadership Militar“, Editura Academiei Forțelor Terestre „Nicolae Bălcescu“, Sibiu, pp.8-10, 2018.
- [2] <https://www.communicaid.com/business-language-courses/blog/6-ways-foreign-language-global-leadership-skills/> 10.02.2020.
- [3] <https://www.communicaid.com/business-language-courses/blog/6-ways-foreign-language-global-leadership-skills/> 10.02.2020.
- [4] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/collegeprose/2012/08/27/americas-foreign-language-deficit/#5dd240ba4ddc>; 17.01.2020.
- [5] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rawnshah/2014/12/03/leadership-skills-multiplies-with-language-skills/#6c6293828f49> ; 17.01.2020.
- [6] https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/1991/18/18_chapter%203.pdf, 04.02.2020.
- [7] Idem.
- [8] <https://www.armyacademy.ro/engleza/presentation.php>, 11.02.2020.
- [9] Yeatman, C. P., & Berdan, S., *Get ahead by going abroad: A woman’s guide to career success*. New York: William Morrow, 2007.
- [10] Martin, A.J., Nejad, H., Colmar, S., Liem, G.D. (2012). *Adaptability: Conceptual and empirical perspectives on responses to change, novelty and uncertainty*. “Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling”, v22 n1, 58-81 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ971493>, 11.02.2020,
- [11] <http://theconversation.com/coping-with-change-teaching-adaptability-will-help-kids-grow-19726>, 12.02.2020,
- [12] This exercise has been taken and adapted from Mellor-Clark, Simon, *Campaign. English for the military*, Oxford, Macmillan Publishers Ltd., vol. III, p. 53, 2006.

- [13] <http://archive.brookespublishing.com/articles/ed-article-0911.htm>, 12.02.2020
- [14] Kefalas, Malvina, *Teaching open-mindedness engages students with different interests*, <https://blog.100mentors.com/how-teaching-open-mindedness-engages-students-with-different-interests/> 12.02.2020.
- [15] Boștină-Bratu, Simona, *Standby. Military Vocabulary Practice*, Editura Academiei Forțelor Terestre “Nicolae Bălcescu”, Sibiu, p. 77, 2016.
- [16] Idem, p. 41.
- [17] <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Giving-and-Receiving-Feedback.pdf>, 12.02.2020.
- [18] <https://www.advantageperformance.com/leading-people/> 14.02.2020