JOURNAL FOR THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

IAPLL

Research Article

A One-Semester Study of Emergent Leadership and Small Group Interaction in the Language Classroom

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(Received 30 June 2025; accepted 11 September 2025)

ABSTRACT

Group dynamics are widely believed to be a key factor in the success of a group, and studies have investigated how student leaders can influence group performance (Hiromori, 2023; Leeming, 2024; Mitsugi et al., 2024). This study takes a mixed-methods approach to investigate emergent leadership in small groups, focusing on one group of four students who worked in the same fixed group for a fourteen-week semester. To understand factors that may contribute to perceptions of leadership by peers, students completed a battery of questionnaires related to personality, efficacy, and a test of English proficiency. At three points during the semester, students rated the other group members for leadership. The group was recorded weekly, and discussions were analyzed to determine the behavioral and cognitive engagement of the four members over the course of the semester. At the end of the semester students were interviewed regarding their group and student leadership. A leader emerged in the group and perceptions of leadership seemed to be influenced by proficiency and feelings of efficacy. The leader did not dominate the interactions, but was notable for the quality of contributions made. Results also suggested that the roles students adopted and the way that they engaged with tasks within groups were established early on in the semester and remained relatively stable. Interviews with students showed that students viewed the leader as being a positive and important role in small groups.

Keywords: group dynamics, emergent leadership, engagement, interaction

INTRODUCTION

Most language learning in the classroom occurs in small groups, and yet despite this, researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) have been relatively slow in conducting research that focuses on how the dynamics of a given group may influence the interaction and subsequent learning that takes place (Philp et al., 2013). Although group dynamics itself has a rich history in general psychology going back over one-hundred years (Forsyth, 2000), it is only recently that there has been increased interest in this area within the field of SLA. Group dynamics encompasses a wide range of topics including group formation, group cohesion, and cooperative learning, many of which have direct relevance for language teachers (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrman, & Dörnyei, 1998).

The focus of this paper is leadership, which also has a long history of research in general psychology (see Forsyth, 2018, for a comprehensive review of the research). Leaders are considered to have perhaps the most important role within a group (Northouse, 2009), dictating the group norms and ultimately influencing the performance of group members (Durham et al., 1997). Although there has been a recent focus on leadership within groups in SLA (Hiromori, 2023; Leeming, 2019, 2021, 2024; Mitsugi et al., 2024), there is still a lack of qualitative research taking a longitudinal approach to examine how leadership may develop over time, and how that is reflected in language use and task engagement. This study attempts to address this gap by examining a single group working together in the language classroom for a semester. Quantitative and qualitative data are used to identify who emerges as leader in the group, factors that may influence who adopts this role, and also the interactions that occur during group discussions conducted over the course of the semester. The goal is to help teachers understand the emergence of leaders in their own classrooms, and their potential impact on small groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Groupwork in Language Learning

Since the introduction of communicative language teaching small group work has become an established feature of most language classrooms (Brown & Lee, 2015). Research has established the importance of interaction (Long, 1996), and also providing students with the opportunity to produce language (Swain, 2005). Task-based language teaching has become a widespread approach to teaching, with a strong focus on small group work as students work together to collaboratively complete language tasks (Ellis et al., 2020; Willis & Willis, 2007). Despite the centrality of small group work to most classrooms, and calls from prominent researchers for a focus on group dynamics (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998), researchers have been seemingly reluctant to conduct research in this area, although this special issue shows that group dynamics is finally becoming an established field of research within SLA.

Group Dynamics and Language Learning

There have been a number of studies that have sought to understand how group dynamics could be important to language learning. Cohesive groups are thought to perform more effectively, and this was one of the first areas that researchers in SLA considered (Chang, 2010; Noels et al., 1994). More recently, Poupore (2016, 2018) developed a measure to look at the positive and negative aspects of group dynamics when students are working on tasks. He found that the task itself was an important factor in determining the way in which a group worked together, with familiar and achievable tasks leading to positive group work dynamics. Poupore (2018) concluded by arguing that understanding group dynamics was key to the effective use of tasks in the language classroom.

Leadership in Small Groups

Leadership is one of the most actively studied areas within the field of group dynamics (Forsyth, 2000, 2018). Leaders are considered to be an important element in determining how well a group will work together, and often the success or failure of the group is attributed to the leader. Generally, two kinds of leadership are considered by researchers. Official or assigned leaders are given their role, have the power to give rewards and punishment to other group members, and the rest of the members are aware of that person's status as leader. Emergent leadership (Northouse, 2009) is when there is no official leader, but one member of the group takes on the role of leader, and despite having no explicit power over the group, is widely acknowledged by other group members to be the leader. Although they may not have an official role, they exert influence by controlling the norms of the group.

In terms of the impact of emergent leaders, research has shown that groups with emergent leaders are more likely to perform at a higher level, and generally emergent leadership has been shown to be a positive influence on the group (Forsyth, 2018). Leaders tend to facilitate smooth communication in groups, and help group members feel closer to other members. They also positively influence the efficacy beliefs of other group members, helping the group to work more effectively (Pescosolido, 2001, 2003).

In many educational contexts, official roles are not assigned when students engage in small group work, and therefore the roles that students adopt become important. Understanding these roles can help teachers effectively use tasks in the language classroom. With their clear importance in small group work, emergent leaders are the focus of the present paper.

Predicting Emergent Leadership

Researchers have long been interested in understanding why some people emerge as leaders and others do not (Forsyth, 2018). Personality has been considered to be one of the most important factors, and researchers have used the big-five model of

personality to try to understand how personality may predict emergent leadership (Gow et al., 2005). In a meta-analysis, Judge et al. (2002) found that all five dimensions correlated with leadership, although extraversion showed the strongest relationship (r = .31). Following this was conscientiousness (r = .28), neuroticism (r = .24), and openness to experience (r =.24). Agreeableness showed only a weak correlation with leadership (r = .08). Task related proficiency has also been investigated as a potential predictor of emergent leadership. De Souza and Klein (1995) found that the more proficiency individuals had, the more likely they were to take on a leadership role within the group. Self-efficacy has also been shown to be an important variable in the emergence of leaders within groups, with high feelings of efficacy predicting leadership (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011).

Leadership in the Language Classroom

Research in language teaching has considered the role of emergent leadership in the way that groups work together. Leeming (2019, 2024) was interested in the impact of emergent leadership on the interaction that occurred in groups. He conducted research with first-year Japanese university students majoring in science and taking compulsory English classes. Students were placed into random groups that were fixed for a semester, and then the teacher let students self-select into groups for the second semester. Questionnaires were given to measure perceptions of leadership, and engagement in tasks was measured through observation. Results showed that the leader had a big impact on the way that the group interacted, and also that the leader's role was not fixed, changing depending on the context of the group. Leadership predicted behavioral engagement in the discussion tasks. The roles adopted by students were generally stable but did change with group membership, and this changed the way that they interacted with the group, and their engagement with language learning tasks.

In a follow-up study in the same context, Leeming (2021) was interested in the factors that might predict leadership within groups, and also the teacher's ability to

identify emergent leaders in their own classroom. He measured the individual difference (ID) variables self-efficacy (SE), extraversion, and English proficiency and used them to predict leadership ratings. He also selected students who he thought were the emergent leaders in each group based on his own observation of classes, and compared his perceptions of leadership with those of the students. Results suggested that the importance of different ID variables was dependent on the stage of group development, with proficiency and extraversion being important in the earlier stages. After the group had worked together for approximately 10 weeks, proficiency became the only significant predictor of emergent leadership. Self-efficacy had no relationship with ratings of leadership. In terms of observation, results showed that the teacher had an approximately 50% success rate in identifying the leader in each group. Leeming (2021) argued that there were many different kinds of leader, and therefore it was challenging for teachers to identify leaders who may not be particularly extraverted, but may have a large influence on the group.

While Leeming's (2019, 2021, 2024) studies were observational, Hiromori (2024) was interested in how teachers can positively influence the way that students interact, and conducted a study to investigate the impact of assigned versus emergent leadership in both face-to-face and online groups. Hiromori (2024) conducted research with university students in Japan taking English classes both face-to-face and online. He assigned students as leaders to some groups, and left other groups without a leader. Group members were not aware of who the leader was, or indeed, if a leader had been assigned to their group. Hiromori (2024) used Poupore's (2016, 2018) observation instrument to measure the group dynamics of each group. He found that groups where a leader had been assigned tended to have a more positive group work dynamic, and were generally better at the task. This was particularly important in online groups. He concluded that it was beneficial to assign students to the role of leader, as this facilitated a positive group dynamic that helped the group.

In a follow-up study again conducted with university students in Japan, Mitsugi et al. (2024) considered both emergent and assigned leaders in small groups in the

language classroom. He and his colleagues assigned leaders to some groups, but let leaders emerge in others. Groups were observed and the dynamics of each group analyzed. The researchers then compared the groups for the group work dynamic, motivation, and also linguistic performance. Although there were no statistically significant differences between groups for motivation and linguistic performance, they found that groups with assigned leaders were more active from the outset, and maintained a higher level of motivation during the task. They concluded that assigning leaders was beneficial for the group, and that teachers should assign roles before groups begin to work on tasks.

The Current Study

Despite the importance of these studies in showing the impact of emergent and assigned leadership on the group, we still have a limited understanding of how groups, leadership, and interaction may develop over time, and also the variables that may be involved in influencing who becomes the emergent leader in a given group. Longitudinal observational studies allow researchers to assess how change may occur, providing greater insights into the development of leadership, and how it may be reflected in, and influence the engagement that students have with the conversation tasks that comprise a language course. The current study set out to provide a comprehensive description of a single group, measuring leadership, ID variables that are hypothesized to predict emergent leadership, and also recording and analyzing the weekly interactions that occurred in the group over a single semester. Finally, interviews were conducted to gain insights into students' views on leadership in the language classroom. The aim of this research was to discover who emerged as the leader in the group, possible ID variables that may account for students' perceptions of leadership, and also how leadership influenced the students' engagement in discussions over the course of a single semester.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Data for the current study were collected in a Japanese tertiary educational context with first-year science majors taking compulsory English classes. The participants were enrolled in three 90-minute classes each week, focusing on writing, reading, and oral communication. There were fourteen classes in a single semester. Courses were streamed according to major within the department, so there was a wide range of proficiencies in each class. The data for this paper was collected in the oral communication class. Students were randomly assigned to fixed groups of three or four people for the duration of the semester. A task-based approach was taken, with the focus being on students starting to produce language (Willis & Willis, 2007). Students in Japan often have experience practicing receptive skills which are tested in university entrance exams, but have little or no experience with productive English, and therefore typically lack confidence to speak and interact. The course aimed to develop basic conversation skills, with a focus on short discussions and asking questions to drive the conversation. Students were informed of the research, assured that participation was voluntary, and asked for their consent. All students agreed for their data to be used.

A single group was randomly selected to be recorded on a weekly basis. Beginning from the third week, this group was video recorded, and an IC recorder was placed on their desk. The group was selected based on their position in the classroom and no other criteria were used to decide who would be observed. The four students worked together at a hexagonal table close to the teacher's desk. This meant that a video camera could be placed on the teacher's desk at a reasonable distance from the group, in order to limit the impact of recording on students' behavior. Due to the distance between the camera and the students, an IC recorder was placed directly on the students' table in order to capture the audio. The group was comprised of four students, who were all first years in the department. There were three males (Keisuke, Takeshi,

and Yuichiro) and one female (Michi). To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used. The students did not know each other before the study began.

Data Collection

This was a mixed method study and students were given a number of questionnaires during the course of the semester. All questionnaires were administered online to ensure that there was no missing data. If a student was absent, they completed the questionnaire in the next class. Table 1 shows the data collection for the semester. It should be noted that the quantitative measures used in the study were validated for a previous cohort in the same context using Winsteps software (Linacre, 2021) based on Rasch analysis (Bond et al., 2021). Results of these analyses are not presented here due to space limitations. As this study focuses on a single group, raw scores from the questionnaires are used to compare group members and statistical analyses are not conducted.

Table 1. *Data Collection Timetable*

Week	Measures
1	IPIP Personality Test, Background information
2	SE (1), Vocabulary Size Test
5	GLI (1), CE (1), SE (2)
10	GLI (2), CE (2), SE (3)
13	GLI (3), CE (3), SE (4)
14	End of semester Speaking test
Post study	Interviews with group members (4 students)

Note. IPIP – international personality item pool, SE – self-efficacy, GLI – general leadership impression, CE – collective-efficacy

General Leadership Impression

The General Leadership Impression (GLI) scale was developed by Cronshaw and Lord (1987) and then adapted by Leeming (2019) to measure impressions of leadership for group members. There are 10 items that are designed to measure the amount of leadership that an individual member of the group has displayed (see Leeming, 2021, for the items). An example item is *This person made sure the group was working effectively*. Each student in a group rates the other members on a four-point Likert scale, giving each student an overall rating for leadership from the other members of the group. In order to corroborate the results, a categorical question was added asking students to name the leader of the group. Students were able to self-nominate, and also select the option that there was no leader in the group. Students completed the Japanese language version of the GLI three times during the course of the semester. The methodology employed in the current study was based on Leeming (2019) including (as much as possible) the timing of the administration of the different surveys. Therefore, the GLI was not administered until the fifth week in order to give the group time to develop.

Personality Questionnaire

At the start of the study, students completed the Japanese version of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP), which has been used previously in Japanese contexts (Apple & Neff, 2012). The IPIP was originally developed by Goldberg (1999) and is designed to measure the Big Five Model of personality (Gow et al., 2005), with questions relating to each of the five constructs of extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and agreeableness. It was used and validated with a previous cohort in the same context as the current study (Leeming, 2019). Students completed 50 items (10 for each construct) by responding to statements on a four-point Likert scale. An example item for extraversion is *feel comfortable around people.* Participants completed the Japanese version of the questionnaire.

English Proficiency

English proficiency data was not available for the students in the current study, and therefore the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation & Beglar, 2007) was used as a proxy variable. Students were given 10 minutes to answer the first eight levels of the test. Research has shown that Japanese university students typically know about four thousand words (McLean et al., 2014), and therefore it was decided that eight thousand would cover the wide range of proficiency in the class. Students were told to leave the answer blank if they did not know, and to answer as many questions as possible in the time limit. Scores were then calculated for each student. Vocabulary knowledge has been shown to predict English speaking proficiency (Uchihara & Clenton, 2023), and therefore the score was used to represent English proficiency for these students.

Efficacy Measures

Efficacy beliefs were measured on several occasions during the study (see Table 1 for the administration schedule for questionnaires in the study). Self-efficacy was measured using a questionnaire that had been developed by Pintrich, and de Groot (1990) and adapted for use in this context (Leeming, 2021). There were eight items that asked students to respond using a six-point Likert scale to statements regarding their ability to perform tasks that comprised the course. An example item asked students to endorse the statement *I can speak English fluently when taking part in a group discussion*. Students also completed a questionnaire to measure their perceptions of the efficacy of their group (collective-efficacy). These questions largely mirrored the items for self-efficacy, but rather than asking students to rate themselves, they were required to rate the ability of the group. An example item was *Our group can take part in fluent discussion in English.* This questionnaire had also been used with a previous cohort in the same context (Leeming & Harris, 2025). Japanese versions of the questionnaires were given to students.

Weekly Group Discussions

Students took part in a number of discussions over the 14-week course. Some of these were in pairs, while some discussions required students to talk to members of other groups. Discussion that involved the four members of the group interacting together were analyzed for this study. Discussions were selected from each week, and were transcribed using AI (see Table 2 for a list of the discussion topics). The transcriptions were then verified by the author by watching the video while listening to the recording. Due to the fact that data was gathered in a classroom with lots of background noise, and the students' faces could not always be seen as they moved and turned away from the camera, it was not always possible to assign utterances to a speaker, and in this case they were left unassigned and not considered in the analyses. There were also some parts of the conversation that could not be clearly transcribed, and these were also left blank and not analyzed. Although this is a limitation in the data, it is also a strength as the recordings were taken during regular classes, and therefore represent the natural classroom discourse that occurred in this context.

The conversations were examined for several features. First, behavioral engagement was measured by counting the number of turns taken, and the overall number of words produced. For the number of words, repetitions were not included, and Japanese was also not counted. For example, if a student said, "I think I think I think that it is good," this was counted as six words. Cognitive engagement was measured by counting the number of follow-up questions (FUQ) (see Lambert et al., 2017 for more on measuring engagement). FUQs represent cognitive engagement, as students are required to actively listen and respond to the interlocutor. A question was considered to be a FUQ if it encouraged the original speaker to expand on their answer and provide more information. Questions that were repeated were only counted once (the same person repeated their question several times), and questions in Japanese were not counted. Also questions regarding language were considered to be language related episodes rather than FUQ. Repetition of another person's question was also not counted.

In addition to these measures of engagement, the conversations were qualitatively analyzed to look for patterns in the interaction. It became clear that there were some qualitative differences in behavior between participants. First, the length of utterances was different. Some students took short turns, while others gave more developed and lengthy responses. Another feature that emerged were instances of correction or support. Leaders tend to offer help and guidance to other group members, and I was therefore interested in the degree to which group members offered each other linguistic support during the interactions. I therefore went through the transcripts and coded instances where students offered help to others. An example from the data is shown below (week 3 conversation):

Keisuke: Osaka don't like.

Yuichiro: Why?

Keisuke: Many people. To Kankyo bad. Kankyo bad.

Yuichiro: Atmosphere. Surrounding

Keisuke: Yeah yeah yeah.

Yuichiro asks Keisuke why he does not like Osaka, and he is unable to answer so uses codeswitching and provides the reason in Japanese. Yuichiro then immediately provides the English translation for Keisuke. Instances of this nature were coded in the data.

Table 2. *Group Discussion Topics*

	Topic(s)
Week 3	What do you want to do when you graduate from university?
	What country would you like to visit?
Week 4	What is the most expensive thing you ever bought
Week 5	What do you like to do in your free time?
Week 6	What did you do last weekend?
	What are the qualities of an ideal partner?
Week 8	What did you do last weekend?
	Do you like your family?
	What are your plans for summer?
Week 9	What did you do last weekend?
	Picture task-describe the pictures and find the correct order.
Week 11	What did you do last weekend?
Week 14	What is the best age to get married? (Final test)

Interviews

At the end of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all four students about their experiences in the group. Interviews were conducted in Japanese then transcribed using AI and verified by the author. The questions focused on emergent leadership, and in particular who they considered to be the leader in the group, why they were considered to be the leader, how the leader had influenced the group, and the importance of leadership in small groups in the language classroom. Following transcription, each interview was read several times and thematic analysis was employed in order to understand the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I first present the results of the GLI that was administered three times during the semester. This gives a clear indication of how the group perceived the other members of the group in terms of leadership, and shows how perceptions changed over the course of the semester. Following this, I present the ID variables that were measured for each member of the group in order to give a clear view of the composition of the group. Students completed an English proficiency test (vocabulary), and also questionnaires designed to measure personality and also feelings of self- and collective-efficacy. These ID variables are potentially helpful in explaining who emerged as leader, and also their influence on the group. Next, I present the data regarding individual engagement in discussion tasks. Finally, interview data are presented to show the students views on group work and leadership within groups.

Leadership Over Time

The results of the GLI as shown in Table 3 were conclusive in suggesting that Yuichiro was the emergent leader in this group. Students assessed each member of the group for leadership, and Yuichiro was constantly rated as displaying the most leadership behavior, followed by Michi. Both of the other members displayed little leadership over

the course of the semester, with Keisuke scoring the lowest in the group. Students also were asked to make a categorical decision on who the leader was in the group, with the option of self-selection included, and also the choice of no leader in the group. Yuichiro and Michi consistently selected “no leader”, while the other two members voted for Yuichiro on all three occasions. It should be noted that students in this context rarely voted for themselves as leader, even when subsequent interviews confirmed that they had considered themselves to be the leader in the group (Leeming, 2021). Interestingly, despite being administered at different times, the scores for the GLI were consistent over the course of the semester, suggesting that leaders emerge, and are relatively stable when the group members remain the same (Leeming, 2024). This goes against claims from researchers such as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) who suggest that leadership can be fleeting and can change depending on the specific task that is being undertaken. The results here suggest that leadership patterns are established early in the life of the group (by the fifth week), and may remain relatively constant for the duration of the group.

Table 3. *Results for the Three Administrations of the GLI*

	GLI 1 Score	GLI 1 Votes	GLI 2 Score	GLI 2 Votes	GLI 3 Score	GLI 3 Votes
Keisuke	54	0	62	0	54	0
Yuichiro	**91**	**2**	**88**	**2**	**88**	**2**
Takeshi	70	0	69	0	73	0
Michi	85	0	83	0	82	0

Note. Yuichiro and Michi always voted for no leader.

The results also suggest that leadership may be best considered on a scale rather than as a dichotomous variable. Previous studies have discussed “the leader” of the group and their influence on other members (Leeming, 2019; Hiromori, 2024), but the results here suggest that students display leadership, and groups can have several students who are perceived in very similar ways by other group members. Although

Yuichiro consistently scored highest on the GLI, Michi was only between five and six points behind him in the ratings. Therefore, it seems that both learners took on some of the leadership in the group. It may be helpful for future studies in SLA to consider leadership in a more nuanced way. Rather than simply asking who is the leader of a group, it may be more informative to consider levels of leadership displayed and how these influence students' engagement with tasks.

Individual Difference Variables and Emergent Leadership

Much of the research investigating emergent leadership in general psychology has focused on the ID variables that can be used to predict leadership (Forsyth, 2018). In the language classroom there have also been attempts to construct regression models to predict who will emerge in a leadership role (Leeming, 2021). The present study considered several ID variables that could theoretically be related to emergent leadership. The aim was not to conduct statistical analyses, but to present the results for the ID variables for the group members in order to attempt to understand how they may have contributed to perceptions of leadership from other members of the group.

Table 4 shows the self- and collective-efficacy beliefs for the four members of the group. Put simply, self-efficacy relates to learner beliefs in their own ability to successfully complete the tasks that comprise the course of study. Collective-efficacy beliefs indicate the degree to which students believe that their group will be able to accomplish the tasks (Bandura, 1997). The results suggest that self- and collective-efficacy were important in deciding who would be perceived as the leader. Yuichiro was confident in his own ability from the outset, and these feeling increased as the semester progressed. Other members of the group showed comparatively low levels of SE. Results from the CE questionnaires suggest that Yuichiro also believed in the group and was confident that they would be successful. This kind of confidence is very important for leadership, and again the other members may well have perceived this and been influenced by Yuichiro. Generally, scores for CE were higher than for SE

and increased over the semester. Keisuke was notable on this point. Despite having very low feelings of self-efficacy, he was confident that the other members of the group were high in ability and that as a group they would be successful. More research is needed on the role of collective-efficacy in language learning (see Leeming & Harris, 2025, for an example study), but according to Bandura (1997) it is an important variable that will predict the likelihood of students engaging in tasks and expending efforts when facing challenges in their group.

Table 4. *Efficacy Beliefs During the Semester*

	SE1	SE2	SE3	SE4	CE1	CE2	CE3
Keisuke	13	14	10	11	29	28	**35**
Yuichiro	**24**	**23**	**27**	**27**	**27**	**33**	33
Takeshi	8	8	8	9	13	15	16
Michi	15	13	14	16	21	26	32

Note. SE1 – first administration of the self-efficacy questionnaire, CE1 – first administration of the collective-efficacy questionnaire.

Table 5 shows the English proficiency of the group members (as measured by the vocabulary test), and also their scores on the IPIP test of personality. Task-related proficiency has been shown to be a predictor of emergent leadership in general psychology, and this relationship was also shown in the language classroom (Leeming, 2021). Personality has also been associated with emergent leadership, with extraversion often related to emergent leadership. In the language classroom this relationship has been shown to be more complex (Leeming, 2021), with extraversion initially significant but then losing significance.

Table 5. *English proficiency and the big five model of personality*

	English proficiency	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness to experience
Keisuke	13	22	**26**	22	**26**	19
Yuichiro	**37**	24	21	**24**	25	**24**
Takeshi	31	**25**	25	22	22	23
Michi	27	23	19	21	17	19

Table 5 shows that proficiency in English seems to have a positive influence on perceptions of leadership. Yuichiro is considerably more proficient than his peers, and this, combined with his efficacy beliefs, may have helped to establish him in his role as emergent leader. Regarding personality, the picture is far more complex. Yuichiro is not the most extraverted member of the group, but does show the most conscientiousness and openness to experience (although only slight differences with other group members). It is possible that it is a combination of personality variables that contribute to perceptions of who is the leader. Teachers may assume that the extraverted members of the class will take on roles of leadership, but this does not seem to be supported by this data.

Overall, ID variables suggest that feelings of efficacy both for oneself and the group, and task-related proficiency may be important factors in predicting who will be perceived as the leader within a given group. These were the areas where Yuichiro showed a marked difference to the other members of the group. This seems logical, as people are far more likely to follow someone who seems to believe in both their own competence regarding the task at hand, and also the ability of the group.

Engagement in Group Discussions

Students took part in discussions as a regular part of the course (see Table 2 for topics of discussions analyzed in this study). Those discussions were transcribed in an attempt to discover the patterns of interaction within the group, and also potentially

how these interactions changed over the course of the semester. Behavioral engagement was measured by number of turns and overall contribution to the conversation (number of words). Cognitive engagement was measured by FUQ as described in the methods section.

Table 6. *Behavioral engagement in conversations*

	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 8	Week 9	Week 11	Week 14
Keisuke								
Turns taken	23	7	13	27	17	17	12	10
No. Words	80	29	51	96	108	84	54	49
Yuichiro								
Turns taken	20	10	9	28	16	30	12	13
No. Words	**123**	**72**	64	**227**	**176**	**213**	**88**	**175**
Takeshi								
Turns taken	18	11	11	18	25	42	20	9
No. Words	90	60	**73**	70	144	173	77	97
Michi								
Turns taken	11	17	16	29	15	36	14	10
No. Words	25	40	32	77	104	107	62	66

Note. Underline represents highest number for turns taken in that discussion, Bold represents highest number of words produced in that discussion.

Table 7. *Cognitive Engagement in tasks (FUQ)*

	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 8	Week 9	Week 11	Week 14
Keisuke	1	1	2	8	1	1	1	3
Yuichiro	5	2	2	6	7	5	3	6
Takeshi	6	4	5	7	9	6	9	3
Michi	2	6	3	6	2	2	0	3

Results regarding behavioral engagement in discussion (number of turns, number of words produced) are mixed. The number of turns taken by students varied week by week, and may have reflected the topic of the conversation. Despite Yuichiro's status as leader, he generally took quite a low number of turns in the conversations, suggesting that his engagement was lower. More revealing however, is the number of words produced and the mean length of turn. Yuichiro consistently produced far longer utterances than the other members of his group. Although he may not have always contributed as frequently as other members, when he spoke, he gave lengthy and developed responses.

The data clearly shows that the quality of responses were higher and more developed for Yuichiro, and this may have influenced the perceptions of other students. For example, one of the conversation prompts in the fourth week was "what is the most expensive thing you ever bought?" Response from the four students were as follows (in the order they occurred in the conversation):

Takashi: I I bought glove.

Yuichi: The most expensive thing is personal computer I ever bought. I bought it in last spring vacation. Last spring vacation. So, it is very expensive. When I think the I never bought such thing. It's very...It's very expensive. It's expensive for me. Anything question?

Tsukimi: I bought DVD. Musical. Musical DVD.

Kyosuke: I bought...basket shoes. I...shoes.

Takashi, Tsukimi, and Kyosuke gave short responses to the prompt, and there was no attempt to expand on their answers. Yuichiro not only gave a well-developed answer, but then to conclude his response he invited follow-up questions from the other members of the group. This shows an awareness of what was required to help the conversation flow, and may help to explain his status as leader in the group. The quality of his responses was generally higher than that of his peers.

The data suggests that students may be more swayed by the content and quality of responses than frequency of participation when considering leadership. This matches research in general psychology which showed that although quantity was

important, students were more likely to vote for someone as leader based on the quality of their contributions than the quantity (Jones & Kelley, 2007).

In order to provide an additional measure of engagement in the discussions, FUQ were used to represent cognitive engagement in the task, and again the results were mixed (see Table 7). It seemed that FUQ depended on the topic and the week, with a high degree of variability among the participants. These findings are in contrast to the results of Leeming (2024), who showed that FUQ were highly dependent on leadership status within the group. Leeming (2019) considered strong, moderate, and weak leaders and showed that with groups with moderate to weak leadership, there tended to be more silence in conversations, and the leaders in these groups worked less to drive the conversation. This matches the interaction patterns observed in the current study, and suggests that Yuichiro was a moderate to weak leader for this group (as supported by the similar values on the GLI for Yuichiro and Michi).

Qualitative analysis of the conversation revealed that the students seemed to adopt a fixed pattern of interaction, that has been clearly identified in the Japanese language classroom (Campbell-Larsen, 2019). Put simply, students consider conversation to be a series of short speeches. The first student answers the question prompt, then directs the question to the second student who answers, before directing the question to the third student and so on. This pattern was very clear in the group. For example, Student A asked Student B the prompt question (*what is the most expensive thing you have ever bought?*). Student B responded to the question, and then asked Student C, who responded before passing the question to Student D. This kind of turn-taking leads to minimal interaction and feels more like a collection of speeches than an interactive conversation. Perhaps due to the relatively weak leadership displayed by Yuichiro, these patterns were adopted early in the life of the group and tended to persist throughout the semester.

It is worth noting that Yuichiro was dominant in the conversation test that was conducted in Week 14. Students were given 10 minutes as a group and were expected to have a discussion. This formed a considerable part of their grade for the course

(25%), and therefore students were under pressure to perform. They were provided with a rubric, and told that they would be assessed in part based on their ability to drive the conversation and use FUQ. In this situation, Yuichiro stepped up as leader, and helped the group. He asked twice as many questions as the other students, and was able to drive the conversation. These findings are similar to those in Leeming (2019, 2024), who also used data that was gathered during a conversation test to analyze emergent leaders and their relation to task engagement. It may be that in week-by-week interactions, students are less interested in showing their leadership and are happy to let the group work together. However, when they know that they are being assessed, leaders step up and take control to ensure the success of not only themselves, but also the other members of the group.

Another feature of leadership is giving guidance and help to the other members of the group (Forsyth, 2018). While transcribing the data I noticed that there were several instances where students tried to help others with their language, which could be considered to be leadership behavior. In order to investigate this, the conversation data were analyzed post-hoc for evidence of corrections of others, or providing the correct English when another student has used Japanese. The data are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. *Number of corrections by each student*

	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 8	Week 9	Week 11
Keisuke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yuichiro	3	2	0	2	1	1	2
Takeshi	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Michi	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

The results show the influence that Yuichiro had on the group. He regularly provided English translations for Japanese, helping the other members of the group to communicate their ideas in English. For example, in Week 4, Takeshi uses the

expression *shozoku*, and Yuichiro is able to provide the correct English term, *to belong to*.

Students at this level often struggle to engage in conversation without relying to some degree on their shared L1, and L1 can be used to enable the smooth flow of conversation (Leeming, 2011). The general rule for this course was that students were expected to complete the conversation tasks in English, and although this was not strictly enforced, students were regularly reminded of it. Yuichiro was clearly sensitive to the use of the L1, and there were a number of occasions where he was able to explain things to the others, or provide English translations that facilitated the use of English by the other students. This kind of support may have helped in making the other members consider Yuichiro to be the leader. Again, rather than the quantity of contribution, it is the quality of contribution that seems to have been important here in influencing perceptions of leadership.

Interviews

After the final class in the semester, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the four members of the group. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to see who the students considered to be the leader of the group, possible reasons for these perceptions, and their general views regarding emergent leadership in small groups in the language classroom.

The results of the interviews generally supported the findings of the GLI. Both Yuichiro and Michi did not consider there to have been a leader in the group. They both discussed the fact that the group had not really needed a leader. They felt that the collaborative atmosphere meant that there was no need for leadership. This is reflected in the reasonably balanced level of engagement displayed during the semester (see Table 6), where no single student really dominated the interaction.

Yuichiro did acknowledge that other members of the group may have perceived him to be the leader. He felt that his own insufficiencies as a leader meant that he was

unable to properly lead the group, and he mentioned a number of mistakes that he had made. Yuichiro was quite sensitive to these errors and repeatedly mentioned his own lack of ability or proficiency, feeling that he had failed to be an effective leader for the group.

Interview Excerpt (translated from Japanese)

Interviewer: *So, being a leader means standing out?*

Yuichiro: *Yes, in a good or bad way. I want to stand out in a good way. Maybe others misunderstood and thought I was the leader. Basically, I kind of looked like the leader.*

Interviewer: *Looking at evaluations or scores, you had the highest numbers—why do you think that is?*

Yuichiro: *Maybe in the beginning of the class, when we had to choose the meaning of a word in English, I often said, "I think it's this one." So, my opinion kind of led the group.*

Interviewer: *But you don't see yourself as the leader?*

Yuichiro: *I'd prefer not to.*

Interviewer: *Would you like to be a leader?*

Yuichiro: *If I were perfect, yes. But since I make mistakes, I don't want those to come out.*

This interview excerpt shows that although Yuichiro understood that he may have been perceived as the leader, he was reluctant to assume the role. This may explain why he did not seek to dominate interactions, and instead attempted more to help others in the group. Keisuke was adamant that Yuichiro had been the leader, and claimed that he felt that he could rely on him from the outset. Takeshi, however, despite voting for him was less convinced, claiming that leadership depended on the topic, and sometimes Michi would take the leadership role. He did acknowledge that Yuichiro had been the clear leader during the final test. Michi acknowledged Yuichiro's leadership role, but claimed that he was not a strong leader. She stated that "*usually Yuichiro would take the lead, but it felt like everyone was working together. So, it wasn't one person leading strongly*."

Overall, it seems that based on the interview data the group were aware of Yuichiro and his role as emergent leader, but perhaps due to his lack of confidence and reluctance, the group did not consider him to be a strong leader. Although it is tempting to consider leadership/non-leadership as a dichotomy, clearly there are many different kinds of leaders in groups, and no doubt these differences will have an impact on the way that the group interacts (Leeming, 2019, 2024). In this case, Yuichiro did not dominate the conversation, but gave long responses to questions, and also provided more in the way of assistance to the other members. Research in general psychology acknowledges many different kinds of leader including transactional leaders who focus on the task, and transformational who focus more on the relationships in the group (Forsyth, 2018). Future research in SLA needs to consider how different kinds of leader and leadership styles may influence groups in different ways.

Are Leaders Important for Small Groups in the Language Classroom?

The general view among the students was that leaders are important for small groups. Takeshi felt that groups need a leader, and that the lack of strong leadership was one of the issues with his own group that had led to problems in conversation. Keisuke also felt that a leader is needed to drive the conversation, and an integral part of the group. Yuichiro and Michi had a more nuanced view of leadership, claiming that the need for a leader is dependent on the task and the group context. They believed that in their group for this course, there was little need for a leader, and that the group had been able to form a collaborative working relationship which meant that they had succeeded in the tasks provided.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although research has investigated emergent leadership and shown its impact on student engagement, this was the first study to take an in depth longitudinal mixed-

methods approach to analyzing emergent leadership in a single group over the course of a semester. According to the results of the GLI, the group had the same leader for the duration of the semester, and leadership seemed to come from Yuichiro's feelings of efficacy, both personal and regarding the group, as well as his English proficiency. Interestingly, Yuichiro did not feel that he had done a good job, and there was little in the week-by-week data for both behavioral and cognitive engagement to suggest that the leader had any kind of strong impact or domination within the group. However, data suggested that it may be the quality rather than the quantity of contributions that influence perceptions of leadership. Yuichiro gave lengthy and detailed responses to questions, and also provided help to the other students when they struggled to find the appropriate language. It seems that these contributions were valued by the other members and this may be why Yuichiro was considered to be the leader of the group.

The interaction patterns in the group were fairly stable, suggesting that once a group forms and these patterns are established, they may not change significantly when students are interacting in the group. This supports previous findings regarding interaction patterns within groups (Leeming, 2024), and means that groups are important in influencing the learning experiences of our students. Much of the research discussing interaction, engagement and tasks assumes that the benefits are the same for all students, but this study along with others (see papers in Sato and Ballinger, 2016), suggest that the environment can have a big impact on how students learn in groups.

There are several pedagogical implications from the current study. First, in order to provide students with opportunities to interact in various ways within groups, it is important to mix group membership on a regular basis. In the current study, even though there was some variation in the way that this group interacted, the patterns of interaction were reasonably stable over the course of the semester. The data also suggests that it may be beneficial to assign leadership roles in groups as suggested by Hiromori (2024) and Mitsugi et al. (2024). Yuichiro was a reluctant leader in this group, and that meant that he did not really take charge of the conversation. Takeshi

lamented this lack of leadership, and Yuichiro himself seemed somewhat disappointed by his own ability to lead the group. By assigning roles, we can give students confidence and make their roles within the group clear, facilitating smooth interaction.

The results also suggest that it may be beneficial to train students in the role of leader. Yuichiro seemed to adopt a leadership role, but he was unsure in how he should behave, and felt pressure to complete all the tasks perfectly. Researchers involved in cooperative learning argue that students should be assigned roles, but also that roles should be clearly explained to the group so that all the members know what kind of behavior is expected (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; McCafferty et al., 2006). Perhaps by giving clear definitions of what is expected, Yuichiro would have felt more comfortable in his role as leader, and therefore behaved with more confidence, and as a result, more effectively.

This study is not without limitations. First, the researcher was also the teacher for the class, and as such will have influenced students' responses to the questionnaires that were given. Second, the observation of the group, although designed to be as unintrusive as possible, will have undoubtedly influenced the interaction between the members of the group. Students were aware of the recording, and also the camera, and although it became a regular part of the class it will have had an impact on behavior. A strength and limitation of the study was the classroom setting. This allowed the researcher to observe natural interactions, improving the ecological validity, but did provide challenges with transcription of data and subsequent analyses of engagement. In a noisy classroom where students move around and face different directions, it is hard to accurately assign speech to an individual. Finally, the GLI was not administered until the fifth week, meaning that initial perceptions of leadership in the group were not measured. Having an earlier measurement would have allowed a clearer picture of how leadership roles emerged in the initial stages of group development.

Despite the limitations outlined above, it is hoped that the current study increases our understanding of the emergence and impact of leaders in small groups in the

language classroom, and factors that may influence perceptions of leadership among peers. A deeper understanding of leadership within small groups will help teachers when designing tasks, and also when assigning students to groups. On a final note, at present, the research on emergent leadership in the language classroom is heavily focused on Japanese contexts, and it is hoped that studies can be conducted around the world to determine how emergent leadership may impact language learning in a variety of contexts.

Author Contributions

PL participated in the design of the study and completed the m collection. PL worked on data analysis, and was involved in the writing of the manuscript. PL drafted the manuscript and participated in the interpretation of the results. PL read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the university where the data were gathered, and followed appropriate protocol for that institution. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment and data collection in the study.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the preparation of this work the author used Turboscribe in order to transcribe the task conversations. The tool/service was used only to generate initial transcriptions. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed, verified the accuracy, originality, and appropriateness of any GenAI-assisted outputs, and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Funding

No funding or financial support of any kind was received by the author.

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