

From Instruction to Perception: University Students' Views on Essential Leadership Qualities

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Abstract—Leadership has become an essential skill in higher education, particularly in a global context that requires communication, adaptability, and collaboration. Understanding how students perceive leadership after instruction is important, as these perceptions influence how they interpret and apply leadership concepts. This study aimed to examine university students' views on essential leadership qualities following structured instruction and to explore how these views relate to major leadership theories. A qualitative approach was used with 52 Thai undergraduate EFL students. After a leadership lesson, students participated in group discussions to identify key leadership qualities and select admired leaders. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, combining deductive coding based on Implicit Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory with inductive coding to identify emerging patterns. The findings showed that Vision was the most frequently selected leadership quality (76.92%), followed by Knowledge, Initiative, and Communication Skills. Students emphasized clear direction, trust, and the ability to motivate others. Differences were observed between year levels, with Year 3 students focusing more on knowledge and integrity, while Year 2 students emphasized motivation and decisiveness. Students also selected leaders mainly from political and business contexts. Overall, the results indicate strong alignment with Transformational Leadership Theory and partial alignment with Trait Theory, while also supporting culturally shaped leadership prototypes in EFL contexts.

Keywords—Leadership Qualities, Student Perspectives, Implicit Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership, Trait Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Leadership Education in the Twenty-First Century

Developing effective leaders has become one of the central goals of higher education in the twenty-first century. In a context shaped by rapid technological change, increasing cultural diversity, and growing global interdependence, leadership is no longer viewed as a rare or exceptional ability. Instead, it is widely considered a core graduate attribute required across many professional fields [1], [2]. As a result, universities around the world have invested in leadership development through formal programs, experiential learning activities, and classroom-based instruction. These initiatives

aim to build not only knowledge but also interpersonal skills and leadership-related attitudes [3], [4].

Such efforts are based on the assumption that structured educational experiences can shape how students understand leadership. This includes how they define effective leadership, which qualities they consider important, and which leaders they see as worth admiring [5]. Research provides support for this assumption. Lee and Chan [1], for example, found that students' leadership perceptions are influenced by both individual factors—such as prior beliefs, identity, and self-efficacy—and contextual factors, including teaching approaches and institutional environments. This highlights that leadership learning is not simply the transfer of knowledge, but an active process in which students interpret new ideas through their existing perspectives.

In a similar way, Ueda and Kezar [2] identified experiential learning, peer interaction, and reflective activities as key approaches that contribute to positive outcomes in leadership education. These approaches not only improve students' knowledge and skills but also influence how they understand the purpose and nature of leadership. In other words, instructional design plays an important role in shaping students' leadership perceptions.

However, important questions remain. Many studies focus on measurable outcomes such as confidence or knowledge gain, but fewer examine how instruction influences students' deeper thinking about leadership. This includes how students prioritize leadership qualities, how they evaluate leaders, and how they explain their choices [6], [7]. Furthermore, Generation Z students may engage with leadership instruction in selective ways. As Weng [5] suggests, their perspectives are shaped by digital media, social movements, and global culture. As a result, they may adopt ideas that align with their existing views while rejecting those that do not. For this reason, understanding how students construct leadership perceptions after instruction is an important area for further research.

B. Instruction, Perception, and the Thai EFL Context

Although research on leadership education has expanded significantly, limited attention has been given to how instruction shapes students' immediate perceptions in non-Western EFL contexts. Most existing studies have been conducted in Western settings, where leadership is often

associated with individual achievement, performance, and transactional effectiveness [1], [3].

However, leadership perception is not culturally neutral. As Amini et al. [8] argue, it is shaped by specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In environments where values such as hierarchy, collective responsibility, or spiritual influence are emphasized, students may develop different ideas about what makes an effective leader. Therefore, findings from Western contexts may not fully apply to other cultural settings.

Thailand provides a valuable context for exploring this issue. Thai leadership traditions reflect a combination of Buddhist ethics, hierarchical social structures, and influences from modern education and economic development [4]. At the same time, Thai university students—especially those from Generation Z—are increasingly exposed to global leadership models through social media and popular culture [5], [9]. As a result, students are likely to engage with multiple and sometimes competing leadership frameworks.

Within this context, a structured instructional session can serve as a useful point of analysis. By presenting a specific set of leadership qualities, instruction provides a clear framework. Students' responses—such as how they rank qualities or select admired leaders—then reveal how they interpret, adapt, or negotiate this framework in relation to their existing beliefs.

The EFL context adds another important dimension. In this study, students were required to explain their reasoning and discuss leadership concepts in English. This requirement may have made their thinking more explicit and structured, as they needed to articulate ideas carefully. Therefore, examining leadership perception in a Thai EFL setting offers insights into how cultural context shapes students' engagement with leadership instruction.

C. Review of Related Research

Previous research has shown that students' leadership perceptions are strongly influenced by prior experiences. Rizzo et al. [6], for example, found that students rely on leadership ideas formed before entering university, including those developed through school, family, and media exposure. These pre-existing views often guide how students evaluate new leadership examples. In their study, students consistently valued qualities such as self-confidence, care for others, and charisma.

Wilson et al. [7] extended this work by identifying five dimensions of leadership prototypes. While some dimensions reflect traditional traits, others—such as collaboration and adaptability—indicate a shift toward more collective and flexible models of leadership. This suggests that students' leadership perceptions are evolving over time.

Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) offers a further lens by highlighting how individuals evaluate leaders against internally held prototypes shaped by cultural exposure and prior experience [10], [11]. This perspective is discussed in detail in the Theoretical Frameworks section below.

Transformational Leadership Theory has been widely discussed in leadership education because it emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and influence followers beyond personal interests [12], [13]. The theory highlights several important leadership dimensions, including

inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Studies have shown that students often associate effective leadership with transformational qualities such as vision, communication skills, ethical influence, and the ability to motivate others [7], [16]. These qualities are particularly relevant in educational settings, where leadership is frequently viewed as a relational and value-driven process.

Trait Theory offers a different perspective by emphasizing stable personal characteristics associated with effective leadership. Early leadership research identified traits such as intelligence, confidence, integrity, and responsibility as important predictors of leadership effectiveness [14]. Although later scholars argued that leadership cannot be explained by traits alone, Trait Theory continues to influence how leadership is understood and evaluated [10]. Research suggests that students frequently associate leadership with personal credibility, competence, and moral character [6]. Therefore, Trait Theory remains useful for explaining why qualities such as knowledge and integrity are often perceived as essential leadership characteristics.

Research focusing on Generation Z supports this trend. Booth [16] found that students prefer transformational leadership, particularly qualities such as communication, ethical behavior, and the ability to inspire others. Weng [5] further emphasized that students respond more positively to learning experiences that connect with their real-life contexts and social experiences.

In the Thai context, Phonsupa et al. [4] identified several key dimensions of socially responsible leadership, including collaboration, commitment, and shared purpose. Their findings show that classroom instruction and structured activities can support the development of these qualities. Similarly, Krapookthong [9] found that both cultural background and international exposure influence how students understand leadership.

D. Theoretical Frameworks

This study is guided by three theoretical frameworks: Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT), Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory. Among these, ILT is particularly important because it explains how students interpret and evaluate leadership qualities after instruction, drawing on previously formed leadership prototypes shaped by cultural and social experience.

Transformational Leadership Theory focuses on how leaders inspire followers through shared goals, communication, and motivational influence [12], [13]. In this study, the framework helps explain why students strongly valued qualities such as vision, communication, and motivation.

Trait Theory supports the analysis of qualities such as knowledge and integrity, which students often associated with leadership credibility and competence.

E. Research Gap

Overall, the literature suggests that leadership perception is shaped through the interaction of personal beliefs, cultural influences, and educational experiences. Students do not evaluate leadership qualities in isolation; instead, they interpret leadership through existing prototypes, social

expectations, and instructional experiences. The literature also indicates that students often combine transformational and trait-based understandings of leadership when identifying effective leaders. However, limited research has examined how these perspectives emerge immediately after structured classroom instruction, particularly in non-Western EFL contexts.

Despite this growing body of work, a clear gap remains: there is limited research examining how leadership perceptions form immediately after structured instruction in a non-Western EFL context, using data that are both context-specific and multi-framework in scope.

F. Research Objectives and Questions

This study investigates the leadership perceptions of 52 Thai university students, organized into 13 groups, following a three-hour English-language instructional session on leadership.

The objectives are:

- To identify the leadership qualities students consider most important and examine their reasoning
- To explore how students' choices of admired leaders reflect their leadership beliefs
- To analyze how these perceptions relate to Implicit Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory

The research addresses the following questions:

- **RQ1:** Which leadership qualities do students identify as most important, and what reasons do they provide?
- **RQ2:** Which leaders do students admire, and how do these choices reflect their leadership prototypes?
- **RQ3:** To what extent do students' responses align with the three theoretical frameworks?

The study uses qualitative and quantitative content analysis of group discussion data. It aims to provide a clearer understanding of how leadership instruction shapes student perception in a Thai EFL university context.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore university students' perceptions of essential leadership qualities following structured instruction. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to examine how students interpret, prioritize, and explain leadership concepts based on their own perspectives. The focus was placed on students' reasoning, group discussion, and meaning-making rather than numerical measurement.

The study followed a post-instruction exploratory design. Students' perceptions were examined after they had been introduced to key leadership concepts based on three theoretical frameworks: Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT), Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory of

Leadership. These frameworks guided both the instructional process and the structure of the data collection.

B. Participants and Sampling

The participants were 52 undergraduate students enrolled during the 2025 academic year. All participants were English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and were in their second or third year of study (28 second-year students and 24 third-year students), with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years. Purposive sampling was employed, as the study required participants who had received specific instruction on leadership concepts in an English-medium classroom. This ensured that all participants had relevant learning experience aligned with the research objectives.

The students were organized into 13 small groups, including 7 groups of second-year students and 6 groups of third-year students. Each group consisted of approximately four members. Group discussion was used as the primary unit of analysis to capture shared perspectives and collaborative reasoning.

C. Instruments

The primary instrument was a structured worksheet used as a guideline to support group discussion and written responses. The worksheet was designed to ensure that students remained within the scope of the three theoretical frameworks (Implicit Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory) and did not move beyond the intended research focus. The worksheet included guided questions organized into three main areas: (1) selection and ranking of leadership qualities, (2) explanation and justification of these choices, and (3) identification and analysis of an admired leader.

Students were asked to select four leadership qualities from a predefined list of ten qualities and explain their choices with clear reasons. They were also required to identify a real and well-known leader and connect that leader's characteristics to the selected qualities. The worksheet functioned as both a discussion guide and a data collection tool, allowing for consistent responses across groups while still encouraging critical thinking and group interaction.

D. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two phases.

In the first phase, students participated in a three-hour instructional session on leadership. During this session, key concepts and ten leadership qualities were introduced based on Implicit Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Trait Theory of Leadership. This phase provided a shared conceptual foundation for all participants.

In the second phase, conducted one week later, students worked in small groups to complete the worksheet. Each group engaged in a two-hour discussion, during which members exchanged ideas, negotiated their choices, and developed shared responses. The worksheet was used throughout the discussion to guide students' thinking and ensure alignment with the theoretical frameworks.

After completing the discussion, each group submitted the completed worksheet together with a written report that provided detailed explanations and justifications. These outputs were later used for class presentations. Both the

worksheet responses and written reports were collected as the primary data for analysis.

E. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, combining both deductive and inductive approaches. The unit of analysis was each group's response, including both worksheet answers and written explanations. In the first stage, deductive coding was applied using a framework based on the three theories:

- Implicit Leadership Theory (leader prototypes and leader selection),
- Transformational Leadership Theory (vision, motivation, and influence), and
- Trait Theory (personal characteristics such as integrity and knowledge).

In the second stage, inductive coding was used to identify additional patterns emerging from the data, such as differences between year levels, types of reasoning, and leader selection patterns. The analysis focused on identifying frequently selected leadership qualities, examining how students justified their choices, and exploring how these responses aligned with the theoretical frameworks. This approach allowed for both structured interpretation and flexibility in capturing students' perspectives.

III. RESULTS

A. RQ1: Essential Leadership Qualities and Reasons for Selection

This research question examined which leadership qualities students identified as most essential after instruction, and how they justified their choices. Content analysis of 13 group discussions showed that students selected a total of 13 leadership qualities. Ten qualities were introduced during the lesson, while three additional qualities—Patience, Reasonableness, and Problem-Solving Skills—were proposed by students.

Overall, **Vision** was the most frequently selected quality (n = 10, 76.92%), followed by **Knowledge, Initiative, and Communication Skills** (n = 6, 46.15% each), and **Integrity, Motivation Skills, and Decisiveness** (n = 5, 38.46%). Other qualities appeared only once, indicating a lower level of importance in students' perceptions. To present both overall patterns and year-level differences, Table 1 combines frequency data with group comparisons.

TABLE I. LEADERSHIP QUALITIES BY FREQUENCY AND YEAR-LEVEL COMPARISON (N = 13)

LEADERSHIP QUALITY	TOTAL (N)	%	YEAR 3 (N=6)	YEAR 2 (N=7)
Vision	10	76.92%	4	6
Knowledge	6	46.15%	5	1
Initiative	6	46.15%	3	3
Communication Skills	6	46.15%	2	4
Integrity	5	38.46%	3	2
Motivation Skills	5	38.46%	1	4
Decisiveness	5	38.46%	1	4
Others	1	7.69%	—	—

The results show that both groups strongly valued Vision. However, Year 3 students placed more emphasis on **Knowledge and Integrity**, while Year 2 students focused more on **Motivation Skills, Communication Skills, and Decisiveness**. Students' explanations mainly reflected two key themes: (1) **trust and credibility**, especially related to Integrity, and (2) **direction and future planning**, associated with Vision.

B. RQ2: Admired Leader Choices and Leadership Prototypes

This research question explored which leaders students admired and how these choices reflect their leadership perceptions. All 13 groups selected one real and well-known leader and justified their choice based on leadership qualities. The selected leaders included both Thai and international figures.

Frequently mentioned examples were **Pita Limjaroenrat** and **Barack Obama** (each selected by two groups), as well as **Khomsan Saly (Flash Express)**, who was chosen by both year levels. Other examples included **Chadchart Sittipunt**, the **Buddha**, and **Kim Namjoon (BTS)**. These selections reflect a mix of political, business, religious, and pop-culture influences. To present both distribution and interpretation patterns, Table 2 integrates leader categories with common reasoning.

TABLE II. ADMIRER LEADERS AND ASSOCIATED LEADERSHIP INTERPRETATIONS

CATEGORY	GROUPS (N)	%	EXAMPLE LEADERS	TYPICAL INTERPRETATION
Political	7	53.85%	- Pita Limjaroenrat, - Barack Obama, - Chadchart Sittipunt	Vision, leadership influence, public impact
Business	4	30.77%	- Khomsan Saly (Flash Express)	Initiative, success, problem-solving
Religious	1	7.69%	- The Buddha	Moral values, integrity
Pop-culture	1	7.69%	- Kim Namjoon (BTS)	Inspiration, communication

Students consistently linked their selected qualities to real examples. For instance, **Vision** was associated with leaders who set clear goals and direction, while **Integrity** was linked to honesty and trust. Leaders such as Pita Limjaroenrat and Barack Obama were often described as having strong vision and communication skills, while Khomsan Saly was associated with initiative and business success. This pattern shows that students applied leadership concepts in a structured and meaningful way.

C. RQ3: Alignment with Theoretical Frameworks

The third research question examined how students' responses aligned with leadership theories. To summarize this

alignment, Table 3 presents the relationship between selected qualities and the three theoretical frameworks.

TABLE III. ALIGNMENT OF LEADERSHIP QUALITIES WITH THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

THEORY	RELATED QUALITIES
Implicit Leadership Theory	Vision, leader selection patterns
Transformational Leadership	Vision, Communication, Motivation, Integrity
Trait Theory	Integrity, Self-Confidence, Knowledge

The results show strong alignment with Transformational Leadership Theory, particularly in the emphasis on Vision and communication-related qualities. Partial alignment with Trait Theory is also observed, while Implicit Leadership Theory helps explain students' shared leadership prototypes and their choice of leaders.

IV. DISCUSSION

The most notable finding of this study is the strong dominance of Vision as the most frequently selected leadership quality (76.92%). This pattern appeared across both year levels and across different types of admired leaders. This result aligns clearly with Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT) [10], [11], as it suggests that students share a common leadership prototype centered on forward thinking and direction-setting. In other words, students tend to associate effective leadership with the ability to define and communicate a clear future direction. This finding is also consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory [12], [13], where Vision is closely linked to *inspirational motivation*. Students' emphasis on Vision suggests that they value leaders who can guide and inspire others toward shared goals. This supports previous findings by Wilson et al. [7], who identified future-oriented thinking as part of students' leadership prototypes, and by Booth [16], who found that Generation Z tends to prefer transformational leadership qualities. The present study extends these findings to a Thai EFL context, suggesting that the importance of Vision may be shared across different cultural settings.

A second important finding is the difference between Year 2 and Year 3 students. Year 3 groups showed a stronger preference for Knowledge and Integrity, while Year 2 groups focused more on Motivation Skills and Decisiveness. This difference may reflect students' academic development. As students gain more experience in higher education, they may place greater value on deeper, more stable qualities such as knowledge and ethical behavior. This interpretation is supported by Trait Theory [13], [14], which highlights the importance of stable personal characteristics in leadership. It is also consistent with Rizzo et al. [6], who found that students often evaluate leaders based on relational and ethical qualities. The results of this study suggest that leadership perceptions may become more focused on character and credibility as students progress through university. This developmental trend could be explored further in future research.

The findings related to admired leaders also support the role of cultural context in shaping leadership perceptions. The high number of political leaders (53.85%), especially Thai

figures such as Pita Limjaroenrat and Chadchart Sittipunt, suggests that students draw on familiar and socially relevant examples when thinking about leadership. This reflects the idea in ILT that leadership prototypes are shaped by cultural and social environments [9]. This result is consistent with Amini et al. [8], who argue that leadership perception is socially constructed, and with Krapookthong [9], who found that cultural context influences how Thai students understand leadership. At the same time, the selection of global figures such as Barack Obama and business leaders like Khomsan indicates that students are also influenced by international and media-based sources. This supports Weng [5] view that Generation Z develops leadership ideas through both local and global influences.

Another important finding is that students did not rely only on fixed personal traits when defining leadership. While qualities such as Integrity and Self-Confidence reflect Trait Theory, many frequently selected qualities—such as Communication Skills, Initiative, Motivation Skills, and Decisiveness—are better understood as learnable skills. This suggests that students hold a hybrid view of leadership, combining both personal characteristics and developable competencies. This finding aligns with Crawford et al. [3], who argue that leadership development involves both personal and contextual factors. It also reflects the role of instruction in shaping students' understanding. By presenting both trait-based and skill-based qualities together, the instructional session may have encouraged students to view leadership as both something a person *is* and something a person *can develop*. This supports Ueda and Kezar [2] argument that instructional design plays a key role in shaping leadership learning.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be noted. First, the study involved a relatively small sample (13 groups) from a single university, which limits generalizability. Second, the instructional session was relatively short (three hours), and data were collected shortly after it, so the results may reflect short-term perceptions rather than long-term understanding. Third, the use of group discussion means that the data represent shared group views rather than individual perspectives.

Future research could address these limitations by including multiple institutions, using longer instructional interventions, and collecting both group and individual data. Longitudinal studies would also help examine how leadership perceptions change over time [7]. Overall, this study provides useful evidence on how leadership instruction shapes students' perceptions in a Thai EFL context. It shows that students develop structured and theory-related views of leadership, and that these views are influenced by both cultural context and instructional design.

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