

Research Article

Leading Students in the Classroom: Similarities and Differences Between English and Music Teachers

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Abstract

Effective classroom leadership plays a key role in supporting student learning across all subjects, though its practice varies according to each discipline's unique demands. This article explores how English and music teachers lead their classrooms, identifying both commonalities and distinctions. Based on a narrative review of research on classroom management, teacher leadership, and subject-specific teaching methods, the analysis reveals that while both groups use similar foundational strategies—such as setting clear expectations, building relationships, maintaining consistent routines, and designing engaging lessons—they differ in significant ways. These differences include the main focus of student engagement, reliance on nonverbal and auditory signals, patterns of student interaction and grouping, methods of feedback, and overall classroom structure. The findings offer insights for teacher training, instructional coaching, and broader educational leadership practices.

Keywords: classroom management, teacher leadership, classroom leadership, English Language Teaching (ELT), music education.

Introduction

Classroom leadership involves how teachers organize, guide, and maintain student activities to promote learning and development. Studies on classroom management and teacher leadership highlight that effective educators establish consistent routines, foster positive relationships, and keep students actively involved (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). At the same

time, the specific demands of each subject influence how leadership is applied in real classroom settings (Bauman-Field, 2024).

English Language Teaching (ELT) and music education are two distinct fields, each centered on different kinds of activities: language-focused skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Arleo, 2000), versus performance-oriented practices like singing, playing instruments, and working in musical groups (Arleo, 2000; Pitychoutis, Spathopoulou & Scurtu, 2026). This article reviews existing research to explore (a) the common leadership strategies used by English and music teachers, and (b) the important differences in their approaches that stem from the unique characteristics of their subjects.

Methodology

This article uses a narrative review approach to examine and integrate existing research on classroom leadership and management in English language teaching (ELT/ESL/EFL) and music education. It seeks to explore similarities and differences in how English and music teachers guide students, focusing on aspects such as classroom expectations and routines, building relationships, discipline strategies, lesson planning, subject-specific instructional formats, cueing techniques, student participation, feedback practices, and overall classroom organization.

As a narrative review, it does not present a systematic meta-analysis or aim to cover every relevant study comprehensively. Some of the sources cited are practice-based rather than research-driven, which enhances practical applicability but may affect broader generalization. The emphasis is on identifying overarching trends rather than findings tied to specific contexts, such as particular regions, school systems, or age ranges. Further research could benefit from systematic review methodologies and more direct empirical comparisons between English and music classroom settings.

Literature Review

Classroom Management and Teacher Leadership: Broad Perspectives

Classroom management generally refers to the strategies teachers use to structure students, physical space, time, and materials in ways that support learning with as few interruptions as possible. In the context of English language teaching, it specifically involves how teachers organize and guide learners' actions, conduct, and interactions during lessons (Richards, 1990). Strong classroom management in ELT is often viewed as both an “art and a science,”

demanding awareness of psychological, linguistic, and instructional factors (Khansir & Mirzae, 2024).

Similarly, in music education, effective classroom management plays a critical role in delivering curriculum content successfully. Music teachers are expected not only to be proficient in their subject matter but also to implement structured approaches to behavior management that support both instructional goals and their own teaching practices (Moore, Batey & Royse, 2023). Studies suggest that for management strategies to be effective, attention should first be given to curriculum design and teacher behavior, rather than jumping straight to targeted interventions (States, Detrich & Keyworth, 2017).

Wider academic literature highlights that successful classroom management goes beyond enforcing rules. It involves fostering a productive learning environment through consistent expectations, established routines, positive relationships, and instruction that actively engages students (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Bauman-Field, 2024).

Classroom Management in English Language Teaching

Research reviews on classroom management within foreign language education point to three central aspects: (1) unique features of language instruction that influence classroom dynamics, such as reliance on the target language and communicative tasks, (2) recurring challenges encountered by language teachers in managing learning environments, and (3) practical approaches to minimize disruptions and support effective learning. These analyses stress the need for further investigation into how classroom management interacts with elements like target language use and instructional methods (Macías, 2018).

In the context of English language teaching specifically, studies emphasize that successful instruction is closely tied to a teacher's capacity to organize the classroom, encourage student motivation, and foster learners' confidence in using English (TEFL Institute, 2025). Managing ELT classrooms involves navigating psychological, learner-related, and linguistic challenges, suggesting that effective strategies must address not only behavior but also emotional and cognitive aspects of learning (Khansir & Mirzae, 2024; Piyal & Hasan, 2025).

Empirical and review-based research in EFL settings identifies three key components of strong classroom management: seating layout, student engagement, and participation patterns. Productive seating arrangements include U-shaped setups, small groups, and traditional rows. Engagement is understood as a multifaceted concept, encompassing cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, academic, intellectual, physiological, affective, and relational dimensions.

Participation involves diverse types of classroom discourse, such as teacher-led talk, collaborative dialogue, exploratory discussion, argumentative exchanges, and learner-initiated conversation (Wahyuni, Akib & Sujariati, 2023).

Broader reviews of EFL classroom management strategies analyze their impact on student involvement and academic achievement, drawing on thematic synthesis of numerous peer-reviewed studies to pinpoint practices that boost engagement and performance (Piyal & Hasan, 2025). Collectively, this body of work highlights the critical role of classroom management in shaping learning outcomes in language education.

Classroom Management and Leadership in Music Education

In the field of music education, classroom management consistently emerges as a major concern for both aspiring and current teachers, playing a critical role in effective instruction (Potter Gee, 2023). Research identifies six foundational strategies, such as planning and delivering high-quality lessons, setting clear behavioral expectations, and implementing reliable daily routines (Caldarella, Williams, Jolstead & Wills, 2017). However, while general studies on classroom management are abundant, there is still limited research specifically focused on music classrooms, indicating a need for more targeted investigations (Langstaff, 2023).

Contemporary discussions among music educators stress the importance of fostering strong connections with students and their families, adapting to individual student needs, and applying culturally responsive practices to support both behavior and participation (Lind & McKoy, 2016). There is also growing attention to trauma-informed approaches, which acknowledge that students affected by trauma may exhibit difficult behaviors and benefit from structured, supportive environments (Bauman-Field, 2024).

Research on music teachers' leadership abilities highlights several essential qualities: inspiring student involvement in musical activities, communicating effectively with peers and parents, resolving issues during rehearsals or classes, and handling pressure or unexpected challenges (Malakauskienė & Navickienė, 2015). These competencies portray music educators not merely as instructors but as influential figures who shape the social and emotional dynamics of their groups.

Additionally, studies on performance-oriented music settings examine new teaching models—such as flipped classrooms and blended learning—and how these affect classroom management and student engagement, underscoring the close relationship between

instructional design and behavioral outcomes (Weiger, 2021). Systematic analyses of K–12 music teaching methods further confirm that certain pedagogical strategies significantly boost student involvement, reinforcing the idea that teaching decisions directly influence classroom management success (Jamaludin & Xing, 2025).

Connections to Psychology, Social-emotional Learning (SEL), and Teacher Well-being

Recent research exploring the overlap between music therapy, psychology, and classroom management highlights themes that resonate in both music and language education: intrinsic and extrinsic student motivation, teacher-student dynamics, social-emotional development, psychological safety, student and teacher well-being, and educator identity and burnout (Ewell, 2025). While this body of work primarily examines music therapy applications in general education settings, it emphasizes that classroom management is closely tied to emotional security, motivation, and long-term teaching sustainability—factors just as critical in English language classrooms (Register, 2001).

Frameworks rooted in trauma-informed practices and SEL are gaining attention across both music and English language teaching scholarship, indicating that successful classroom leadership involves supporting students' emotional and interpersonal growth alongside academic or artistic outcomes (Bauman-Field, 2024).

Limitations in Current Research

Although classroom management has been widely studied within each field independently, there is little comparative analysis investigating how English and music educators lead their classrooms in similar or distinct ways. Most existing reviews concentrate on a single subject area—either language or music—and do not systematically compare instructional leadership across disciplines (Macías, 2018; Langstaff, 2023). Furthermore, scholars in music education point to a need for more empirical research on management strategies tailored to music classrooms, while those in language education stress the importance of further studies connecting management techniques to language acquisition and pedagogical methods (Koops, 2018).

This article contributes to filling that gap by integrating findings from both fields to identify common principles of classroom leadership as well as subject-specific distinctions, offering a conceptual foundation for future comparative and evidence-based studies.

Shared Foundations of Classroom Leadership

Clear Expectations and Consistent Routines

Establishing clear expectations, rules, and procedures early in the year supports effective classroom leadership in both English language teaching and music education. In ELT, research suggests that outlining classroom norms and aligning them with language learning goals from the outset enhances student understanding and engagement (Granata, 2023; Koops, 2018). Likewise, music educators are encouraged to define expectations from the first day, including protocols for entering and leaving class, managing instruments, and shifting between activities (Henry's Music World, 2025).

Well-established routines help minimize confusion and reduce cognitive load, allowing students to focus more fully on learning (Sweller, 1988). Teachers in both fields who clearly communicate what behaviors are expected and unacceptable, model appropriate conduct, reinforce positive actions, and address disruptions promptly tend to maintain more structured and productive learning environments (Woolfolk, 2020).

Building Relationships and Fostering Psychological Safety

Positive, trusting relationships between teachers and students are central to successful classroom management in both disciplines. In English language teaching, developing strong connections with students, as well as with parents and fellow educators, contributes to a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere (Joshi, 2025). Similarly, music education emphasizes connecting with students and their families, recognizing individual differences, and applying culturally responsive practices to support diverse learners (Lind & McKoy, 2016).

A student-centered approach that emphasizes emotional safety, mutual respect, and trust is key to maintaining discipline in music settings (Music & Arts, 2026), just as creating a space where learners feel valued, respected, and secure is considered fundamental in ELT classroom management (Van den Branden, 2022).

Consistency, Fairness, and Encouragement

Effective classroom leadership in both areas involves fair, predictable responses to behavior and the intentional use of positive reinforcement. In ELT, acknowledging effort and progress through constructive feedback and celebrating achievements helps motivate learners (Pishkar, 2022). Practical resources for ESL instructors suggest using praise, reward systems, or immediate recognition to boost participation and attentiveness (The Teacher Treasury, 2025).

Music educators are advised to keep guidelines straightforward, correct misbehavior discreetly, avoid confrontations, and apply consequences consistently (Responsive Classroom,

2015). Similarly, in ESL contexts, promptly recognizing appropriate behavior is seen as an effective way to build motivation and mutual respect (TEFL Institute, 2026).

Purposeful and Well-structured Instruction

Classroom leadership becomes more manageable when lessons are thoughtfully designed, materials are prepared, and transitions are smooth. In ELT, engaging students through interactive tasks, diverse resources, and thorough planning is recommended to sustain attention and interest (Arianie, 2017). Music education literature echoes this, stressing the importance of preparation, structured lesson flow, and reducing idle time to limit distractions and maintain focus (Music Teacher Resources, 2026).

Successful classroom leadership in both English language teaching and music education is built on common foundational practices. Establishing clear expectations, consistent rules, and predictable routines helps minimize uncertainty, enhance focus, and encourage constructive student behavior. Fostering positive relationships between teachers and students, ensuring psychological safety, promoting mutual respect, and incorporating culturally responsive approaches contribute to inclusive and supportive learning settings. Maintaining consistency, fairness, and encouragement—along with providing meaningful feedback and handling consequences with discretion—helps build student motivation and trust. Additionally, thoughtful lesson planning, dynamic activities, well-prepared resources, and seamless transitions reduce interruptions, maintain engagement, and improve overall classroom management in both disciplines.

Subject-Specific Variations in Classroom Leadership

Although foundational aspects of classroom leadership are shared across disciplines, the approaches used by English and music teachers differ in significant ways due to the nature of their subjects.

Nature of Student Engagement

English instruction centers on language-based activities such as reading, writing, discussion, grammar, and spoken expression. Teachers in this field typically guide students by fostering conversation, breaking down complex texts, and supporting the stages of drafting and revising (Joshi, 2025).

In contrast, music instruction revolves around sound production and performance—singing, playing instruments, rehearsing in ensembles, and active listening. Music teachers often lead like conductors, using cues for timing, shaping musical expression, and coordinating multiple

performers simultaneously (Koops, 2018). These classrooms tend to follow a “play first, talk minimally” approach, where verbal input is concise and embedded within continuous musical practice (Nottelmann Music Company, 2017).

Role of Nonverbal and Auditory Communication

Music educators make extensive use of gestures, eye contact, baton movements, and live demonstrations—such as modeling a musical phrase or clapping a rhythm—to guide students in real time. Many also employ established hand signals to manage behavior or correct technique without interrupting the flow of sound (Leisner, 2012).

While English teachers also use nonverbal strategies—like positioning, facial expressions, or visual aids—spoken language remains the primary vehicle for instruction. Verbal questioning, explanations, and dialogue management are central, with nonverbal cues serving a supplementary role rather than replacing speech (Sutiyatno, 2018).

Patterns of Student Interaction and Grouping

Music classes frequently involve large-group performance, sectional rehearsals, and structured part assignments (e.g., vocal sections or instrumental roles). Leadership here requires balancing different musical lines, ensuring accurate tuning and timing, and synchronizing group efforts (Bullock, 2024; Jackson & Burgess, 2016).

English classes, by comparison, typically shift between full-class discussions, collaborative small groups, peer work, and independent writing. The teacher’s role involves managing speaking turns, observing group interactions, and adapting tasks to meet varied reading and writing needs (Everhard & Murphy, 2015).

Feedback and Evaluation Practices

In music education, feedback is often immediate and performance-driven—comments like “adjust your breath support” or “follow the cutoff” are delivered during ongoing activity. Teachers shape the music in real time, using rehearsal strategies to refine ensemble precision and expression (Band Directors Talk Shop, 2026).

In English, feedback tends to be text-focused and cyclical, involving written comments on drafts, one-on-one conferences, and assessments based on rubrics. Teachers support students through multiple revisions, helping them understand and apply standards for effective writing and analysis (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

Learning Environment and Resources

The layout of a music classroom is shaped by instruments, music stands, sheet music, and acoustics. Effective leadership includes organizing instrument distribution, arranging seating for both behavioral and sonic balance, and establishing routines for handling equipment (Henry's Music World, 2025; Beth's Music Classroom, 2025).

English classrooms are designed around access to texts, writing tools, notebooks, and digital devices. Teachers manage the flow of reading materials and technology, arrange spaces for discussions or independent work, and ensure students can readily engage with literacy resources (Express Publishing, 2026).

While English and music teachers follow similar foundational leadership principles, the unique demands of each subject lead to different teaching approaches. In English classes, the focus lies on reading, writing, discussion, and verbal exchange, requiring instructors to guide conversations, support collaborative work, and foster individual progress in literacy. Music instruction, by contrast, centers on performance, rehearsal, group coordination, and attentive listening, with teachers frequently using gestures, modeling, and sound-based signals to instruct. Feedback in music tends to be instant and tied directly to performance, while in English it is typically written and aimed at long-term skill growth. Additionally, differences in classroom setup, materials, student grouping, and daily routines align closely with the distinct activities central to each discipline.

Leadership Styles in English and Music Classrooms

Research in music education indicates that instructors often employ varying leadership approaches—authoritarian, democratic or participative, and laissez-faire—shaped by factors such as context, student age, and school environment (MRA Music Place, 2022). While English teachers also display a range of leadership styles, how these are applied tends to differ (Benjamin & Arulsamy, 2024).

In a music classroom, an authoritarian teacher may closely regulate aspects like timing, performance entries, and seating arrangements. In contrast, an English teacher with the same style might strictly manage discussion themes, turn-taking during conversations, and prescribed writing structures. A democratic music instructor might involve students in shaping performance standards and group expectations, whereas a democratic English teacher might collaborate with students to establish guidelines for class discussions and peer review processes (Quest, 2025). When a laissez-faire approach is used, music classes may experience disorganized rehearsals and weak group coordination, while English classes may see

meandering discussions and inconsistent progress in writing skills (Oakwood International, 2026).

Analyses of leadership among music educators emphasize several core competencies linked to effectiveness: the ability to motivate students toward musical engagement, strong communication and teamwork with fellow staff and parents, skill in resolving issues that arise during musical activities, and the capacity to manage high-pressure situations (Talalienė & Šečkuvienė, 2015).

Music and English educators may adopt authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire approaches to leadership, adjusting their style based on factors such as student age, context, and school setting. These methods influence classroom dynamics in distinct ways—impacting discipline, student engagement, and group coordination. Music teachers often focus on synchronizing performances and organizing ensembles, whereas English teachers typically oversee classroom discussions and written assignments. Successful leadership in music education additionally demands strong motivational skills, clear communication, teamwork, conflict management, and the capacity to handle stress during both teaching and live performances.

Implications for Teacher Education and Coaching

These findings offer a two-tiered framework that can guide teacher educators, instructional coaches, and school leaders:

1. Cross-disciplinary leadership practices:

- Setting consistent expectations and classroom routines
- Fostering positive relationships and a climate of psychological safety
- Enforcing fair discipline and using positive reinforcement effectively
- Planning meaningful, well-structured lessons that maximize instructional time.

2. Subject-specific teaching strategies:

- In English: guiding discussions, scaffolding texts, conducting writing conferences, providing feedback on student drafts, and organizing collaborative pair or group activities
- In music: conducting ensembles, balancing sound dynamics, offering immediate performance feedback, managing instruments and materials, and using nonverbal and auditory cues effectively.

Professional development and coaching can maintain a consistent foundation of core leadership principles while tailoring specific teaching techniques to the nature of each subject—whether centered on language-based tasks or performance-based activities—and its

primary modes of communication, such as verbal instruction versus auditory or gestural signals.

Conclusion

While English and music teachers both rely on core classroom leadership strategies—such as establishing clear expectations, building relationships, maintaining routines, and delivering engaging instruction—their subject matter influences how these strategies are applied. Differences emerge in areas like student engagement, instructional cues, participation formats, feedback methods, and classroom setup. Acknowledging both shared practices and subject-specific variations can help shape more effective teacher training, coaching models, and leadership development efforts that honor disciplinary contexts while enhancing general teaching effectiveness.

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