

REVIEW

Leadership in English Language Teaching and Learning: A Systematic Review of the Past Decade

Yuqian Chen¹ , Siqi Wang^{1*} , Xiaofeng Hu² , Shadanguli Maowulan² , Yutong Jiang¹ 

¹ Faculty of Education, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi 43650, Malaysia

² Graduate School of Business, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi 43650, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Leadership in English language teaching and learning is often discussed but seldom synthesized as a distinct focus; the evidence remains fragmented and indirect. This systematic review integrates empirical studies published from 2014 to 2024, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Searches in Web of Science and Scopus, screening, and independent expert checks yielded 26 studies for thematic analysis addressing three questions: (1) the types of leadership investigated and conceptualized; (2) the characteristics, processes, and impacts of teacher- and student-initiated leadership; and (3) the methodological, theoretical, and contextual forces shaping the field. Findings show that leadership is treated as a practice rather than a position, spanning principal and department leadership; distributed leadership that centers on English for speakers of other languages; teacher leadership (pedagogical and relational); supervisory leadership; interactional leadership enacted in classroom discourse; shared or collective leadership in project-based and professional-learning settings; and student or peer leadership. Teacher leadership blends a relational stance with deliberate task and method design, often shifting toward facilitation in technology-mediated courses and linking to participation, perceived learning, achievement, and equity. Student leadership is emergent, role-fluid, and task-bound, predicting participation and dividing functions across offline idea generation and online evidence synthesis and revision. Qualitative case studies, interviews, and conversation analysis predominate, complemented by survey-based modeling and emerging longitudinal and ethnographic designs; transformational, instructional, distributed, communities-of-practice, concept-based, and shared-leadership perspectives frame the inquiry. Implications include strengthening

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Siqi Wang, Faculty of Education, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi 43650, Malaysia; Email: p125686@siswa.ukm.edu.my

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department-level coordination and whole-school provision for multilingual learners, preparing teachers for both relational work and design/facilitation (especially online), and structuring student leadership via interdependent tasks, rotating roles, and explicit discourse norms.

Highlights

- Leadership in English language teaching is understood as practice rather than position, spanning teacher, student, supervisory, and shared forms.
- Teacher leadership blends relational support with pedagogical design, while student leadership is role-fluid, task-bound, and strongly predicts participation.
- Research has expanded methodologically and theoretically, with increasing attention to distributed, interactional, and context-sensitive leadership in English language teaching.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching; Foreign Language Learning; Leadership; Systematic Review

1. Introduction

Leadership is commonly defined as the process of influencing, guiding, and supporting others toward achieving shared objectives, typically by setting a vision, making strategic decisions, and cultivating productive relationships^[1,2]. In education, this extends beyond formal authority to include the collaborative mobilization of teachers, learners, and other stakeholders to improve both pedagogy and institutional performance^[3,4]. Leadership can be enacted formally by school administrators or informally by teacher-leaders and students themselves. In the field of English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL), leadership functions at multiple levels—from shaping policy and curriculum design at the institutional level^[5] to influencing classroom culture^[6], teaching methods^[7], and learner outcomes at the micro level^[8]. This multilayered nature of leadership makes it a critical yet complex construct in language education research.

Over the past decades, leadership has been linked to improved teacher professional development^[9], innovation in curriculum and assessment^[10], and enhanced student engagement^[11] in ELTL contexts. Models such as transformational leadership emphasize vision and inspiration; distributed leadership highlights shared responsibility across organizational members; and teacher leadership recognizes the agency of teachers to initiate and sustain pedagogical change^[12,13]. These models have been applied to promote reflective practice, inclusive pedagogy, and the integration of new technologies and methodologies in diverse linguistic and cultural settings^[14,15]. Yet, despite this theoretical richness, leader-

ship in ELTL is often examined indirectly—nested within broader studies on school improvement, teacher training, or policy implementation^[16]—rather than being explored as a distinct focus in its own right.

Existing systematic reviews of educational leadership have predominantly targeted general education or specific national contexts^[17–19]. As a result, the distinctive sociolinguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dynamics of leadership in ELTL remain underrepresented in the synthesized literature. Moreover, the past decade has witnessed new complexities. Global policy shifts toward multilingual education^[20], the rapid adoption of digital technologies^[21], and the transformation of learning environments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic^[22] have expanded the boundaries of leadership. Increasingly, leadership in ELTL is no longer confined to hierarchical structures but emerges through distributed and participatory forms, with teachers and even students initiating and sustaining leadership activities within their classrooms. However, research in this area is fragmented and often employs varied definitions, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches, making it difficult to identify coherent trends or derive actionable insights.

These developments make a systematic review both timely and necessary. A comprehensive synthesis can clarify how leadership is conceptualized and operationalized in ELTL, identify which forms and processes are most frequently studied, and reveal underexplored domains, particularly regarding leadership initiated from within classroom contexts. Such a review can also capture how leadership practices and research approaches have evolved over the last

decade in response to sociopolitical changes, technological innovations, and shifting pedagogical paradigms. Accordingly, this review is guided by the following questions: (1) What types of leadership have been investigated in ELTL, and how are they conceptualized in the literature? (2) What are the characteristics, processes, and impacts of leadership initiated by teachers and students within ELTL contexts? (3) What methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and contextual factors have shaped research on leadership in ELTL over the past decade?

By systematically mapping and synthesizing the literature from the past decade, this review will contribute to both scholarship and practice in ELTL. For researchers, it will consolidate scattered evidence into a coherent knowledge base, enabling clearer conceptual definitions and stronger theoretical framing for future studies. For practitioners, it will highlight leadership practices—whether formally assigned or informally initiated—that have been linked to positive outcomes in teaching and learning. For policymakers and institutional leaders, the review will offer insights into the leadership capacities and structures most conducive to supporting language education in diverse, rapidly changing contexts. In doing so, it will address the pressing need for a comprehensive, context-sensitive understanding of leadership in ELTL, helping to bridge the gap between leadership theory and the realities of language teaching and learning worldwide.

2. Literature Review

Leadership has been one of the most widely examined constructs in the social sciences, with definitions and conceptualizations emerging from management, psychology, sociology, and political science. At its core, leadership involves influencing, guiding, and supporting others toward the achievement of shared objectives, often by setting a vision, making strategic decisions, and fostering productive relationships^[23]. Early theorists tended to focus on the inherent qualities of leaders, with trait theories emphasizing characteristics such as charisma, intelligence, and decisiveness as predictors of leadership effectiveness^[24]. Subsequent research in the mid-twentieth century shifted attention from fixed traits to observable behaviors, distinguishing between task-oriented approaches, which emphasized structure and goal comple-

tion, and relationship-oriented approaches, which prioritized interpersonal support and collaboration^[25,26]. Later contingency and situational theories moved beyond one-size-fits-all prescriptions, arguing that effective leadership depends on the alignment between a leader's style and contextual factors such as task structure, organizational climate, and the nature of leader-member relations^[27,28].

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, transformational leadership emerged as a prominent model, highlighting the capacity of leaders to inspire, intellectually stimulate, and provide individualized support to followers in pursuit of shared vision^[29]. In parallel, transactional leadership underscored the importance of establishing clear goals, monitoring performance, and administering rewards or sanctions to ensure compliance^[30]. More recently, distributed and collective leadership perspectives have challenged the notion of leadership as the domain of a single individual, framing it instead as a social and relational process embedded in the interactions among multiple actors across an organization^[23].

In the educational arena, these leadership models have been adapted to address the complex interplay of pedagogy, policy, and community engagement. Instructional leadership, for instance, has become an influential framework, positioning the improvement of teaching and learning as the leader's core responsibility and focusing on curriculum development, teacher professional growth, and assessment practices^[1,12,18]. Transformational leadership in education emphasizes the role of vision, shared commitment, and innovation, particularly in fostering a positive organizational culture that motivates teachers and students alike^[3,13,17]. Distributed leadership has also gained significant traction in educational research, offering a collaborative approach in which leadership tasks are shared among administrators, teachers, and, in some cases, students, thereby broadening ownership of school improvement^[4,19]. Closely related is teacher leadership, which recognizes the agency of teachers to lead beyond their classrooms—whether through mentoring, curriculum design, or professional learning communities—contributing to institutional development without necessarily holding formal administrative titles^[31]. These models have sparked debates about whether leadership in education should primarily serve managerial efficiency or prioritize pedagogical vision, with some cautioning that bureaucratic or compliance-oriented approaches risk stifling innovation and adaptability^[3]. Fur-

thermore, it is increasingly recognized that leadership in education is highly context-dependent, influenced by cultural norms, policy environments, and the expectations of local communities^[32], which can vary substantially across regions and educational levels.

Although the body of research explicitly addressing leadership in ELTL remains limited^[7], studies in related educational contexts provide valuable insights. In multicultural and multilingual settings, leadership often entails the dual challenge of promoting academic achievement while affirming linguistic and cultural diversity^[20]. Scholars have argued that effective leaders in such environments demonstrate cultural responsiveness, integrating inclusive pedagogies that respect and leverage linguistic pluralism while navigating policy demands and resource constraints^[5,6]. Leadership in curriculum innovation represents another adjacent domain with relevance to language education; here, leaders must balance the introduction of new methodologies with the professional readiness of teachers and the trust of the wider community. Evidence from subject-specific reforms indicates that distributed leadership can be particularly effective in fostering collaboration, encouraging experimentation, and ensuring sustained implementation of innovations^[18,31,33]. Likewise, research on teacher leadership highlights how teachers, acting as mentors, curriculum designers, and peer coaches, can drive pedagogical change from within and create professional cultures of mutual learning and improvement^[4,13,19]. These findings resonate with the potential of teacher-led and participatory leadership in language education, where initiatives often emerge organically in response to learner needs, evolving pedagogical approaches, and shifting institutional priorities.

Taken together, the broader literature underscores that leadership is a dynamic and contextually embedded process, informed by a wide range of theoretical perspectives and enacted through diverse practices^[1,4]. While the conceptual foundations and empirical evidence from general education research offer a rich starting point, the unique sociocultural, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions of ELTL necessitate tailored understandings of leadership. The examination of adjacent domains not only illuminates the types of leadership approaches that may be transferable to ELTL but also highlights the gaps that a systematic review of the past decade can address, particularly in relation to how leadership is defined, distributed, and initiated within language education contexts.

3. Methodology

This review was underpinned by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework^[34], which has been widely applied in systematic reviews within foreign language education. As shown in **Figure 1**, the review followed three main stages: identification, screening, and inclusion. In the identification stage, searches were conducted in two databases—Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. These databases were chosen because they index high-quality, peer-reviewed research across education, linguistics, and social sciences, ensuring comprehensive coverage of both language-specific and broader educational leadership studies^[35]. Their complementary indexing strengths improved the likelihood of capturing relevant empirical work.

The search strategy combined two clusters of terms: leadership terms such as leadership and leader; and ELTL terms such as English language teaching, English language learning, English as a foreign language (EFL), and English as a second language (ESL). Boolean operators were used to combine these clusters, and the search was limited to studies published between January 2014 and December 2024. For both WoS and Scopus, the search strings were applied to article titles, abstracts, and keywords. An example search string was: (leadership OR leader*) AND (“English language teaching” OR “English language learning” OR EFL OR ESL OR “English as a foreign language” OR “English as a second language”). The initial searches yielded 410 records from WoS and 279 records from Scopus from the past decade. After removing duplicates ($n = 213$), the remaining records were screened based on their titles, abstracts, keywords, and publication type to determine their relevance to the review objectives. During this stage, 42 were removed for being non-empirical or conceptual papers (e.g., theoretical articles, commentaries) and 187 were excluded for not focusing on leadership in ELTL or closely related contexts.

Despite attempts to obtain all full texts, 26 records were inaccessible and excluded. The remaining 221 records were assessed against the following inclusion criteria: (1) they reported original empirical research; (2) they focused explicitly on leadership in English language teaching and/or learning or in directly relevant settings; (3) they were grey literature; and (3) they were published in the English language. Studies published in languages other than English were excluded to

ensure accessibility for an international academic audience and consistency in interpreting pedagogical terminology and research reporting conventions. Following this assessment, 35 records were excluded for not presenting empirical evi-

dence, 96 were excluded for not being substantively related to leadership in ELTL, 42 were excluded for being grey literature such as conference papers, and 22 were excluded for not being published in English.

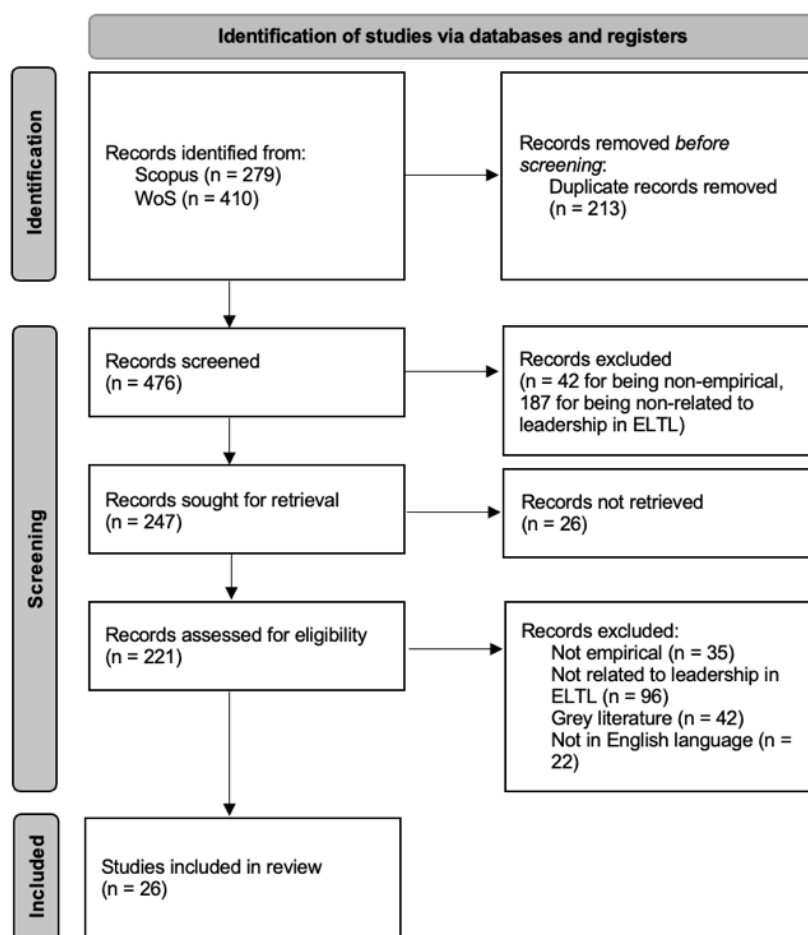


Figure 1. Identification and Selection of Studies.

The final set of 26 records underwent an additional review by two independent experts in ELTL research and educational leadership to ensure methodological rigor and alignment with the review questions. The experts assessed whether each study sufficiently addressed the review objectives and whether the evidence presented was credible based on its research design, results, and conclusions. All remaining studies were deemed academically sound and included in the synthesis. The selected records were organized using EndNote for reference management and Microsoft Excel for data extraction. Extracted data included bibliographic details, study location, educational level, leadership focus, methodology, theoretical framework(s), and key findings.

The included studies were then analyzed thematically in alignment with the review questions. The summary of the reviewed studies is illustrated in **Appendix A**, following the matrix suggested in the literature^[36].

4. Findings

4.1. Types and Conceptualization of Leadership in ELTL

Across the included studies, leadership in ELTL is initiated by different agents, such as principals, department leaders, teachers, supervisors, and students, and is concep-

tualized less as a static position than as practices that shape instruction, participation, equity, and outcomes. At the institutional level, leadership in ELTL is initiated by principals and subject-department leaders to create enabling conditions for teachers and learners. Transformational principal leadership is framed as motivational and supportive behavior that is empirically linked to students' reported success and well-being^[37]. Subject-department "middle" leadership is treated as a meso-level engine that channels system reform into teachers' pedagogy and perceived learning through professional development, reform receptivity, and coordinated routines; department leadership explains substantial between-school differences in perceived student learning^[38]. Case analyses of English for Speakers of Other Languages—focused leadership depict leadership initiated across roles—principals, coordinators, and classroom teachers—to center the needs of English language learners through whole-school planning and targeted professional learning, while also revealing how system logics can still marginalize English for Speakers of Other Languages by asking learners to "fit" pre-existing practices^[39,40].

Most commonly, leadership in ELTL is initiated by teachers and conceptualized in two entwined ways: as pedagogical decision-making with measurable effects and as a relational, identity-laden practice enacted in classrooms. Quantitative modeling of "pedagogical leadership" treats the teacher's orchestration of methods as a leadership act that directly lifts achievement, with stronger gains when instruction is diversified and methodologically rich^[41]. From learners' vantage point, teacher leadership is not command-and-control but a constellation of qualities—passion, rapport, clear purpose, and balanced flexibility—that animate learning beyond routine management^[42]. In technology-mediated courses, leadership identity is fluid: as teachers initiate telecollaborative designs, they move toward facilitation, trust-building, and power-sharing, while students assume greater responsibility for their own learning^[43]. Teachers' leadership self-efficacy—nurtured through experience and prior administrative exposure—underpins how they initiate leaderful climates in classroom management and discipline^[44]. Supervisory leadership directed at teachers also appears as a distinct type in English language teaching and learning: supervisors' coaching strategies and expectations, which can vary by gendered patterns of practice, are linked

to improvements in English writing instruction^[45].

A complementary thread conceptualizes leadership in ELTL as interactional work initiated moment by moment in classroom discourse. Conversation-analytic evidence shows teachers opening or closing opportunities for learners—especially in linguistically diverse, early-years settings—so leadership is something speakers do in interaction rather than a role they hold^[46]. Preferences for how such classroom leadership should be enacted are culturally inflected: in a Confucian setting, students preferred democratic classroom leadership, suggesting that effective leadership is context-sensitive and blended rather than universal^[47].

Finally, students also initiate leadership in English language learning in ways the literature frames as emergent, role-fluid, and tightly coupled to task demands and modalities. In classroom group work, emergent peer leadership predicts participation more strongly than language proficiency or personality, although very strong leaders can suppress peers' cognitive engagement; leadership itself reconfigures as group membership changes^[48,49]. In blended collaborative argumentative writing, student leadership functions distribute across modalities: face-to-face episodes drive claim generation and development, while online work clarifies claims, locates evidence and reasoning, synthesizes sub-arguments, and steers revision—together revealing leadership as complementary across settings^[50]. In self-access learning centers, leadership by student leaders is treated as developmental and concept-mediated, with concept-based pedagogy helping leaders internalize and apply disciplinary ideas; reflective self-regulation then supports guidance that boosts motivation, intercultural communication, and belonging^[51,52]. Collective designs also distribute leadership across participants and artifacts: shared leadership in project-based English learning is sustained by interdependent tasks and intrinsic motivation, while participatory lesson study grows teachers' leadership through collaborative inquiry even as it surfaces practical constraints in non-native English-speaking contexts^[53,54]. Program-level syntheses distill actionable levers—clear goals, empowering innovators, and targeted professional development—while warning that weak information flows and low program status can blunt impact^[55]. Taken together, these studies show that leadership in ELTL is initiated at system, department, classroom, and learner levels and is best understood as situated practice that is culturally

conditioned, developmentally scaffolded, and functionally tied to participation, learning, equity, and well-being.

4.2. Characteristics, Processes, and Impacts of Leadership in ETL

Across the included studies, leadership initiated by teachers is marked by a dual character: it is both pedagogical orchestration and relational, identity-inflected practice. From learners' accounts, teacher leadership is characterized by passion, rapport, clear purpose, and balanced flexibility—qualities that move beyond managerial control toward motivating, values-driven guidance^[42]. Teachers' confidence in their own leadership—shaped by experience and prior administrative roles—conditions how they initiate and sustain leaderly classroom climates, especially around discipline and participation^[44]. Process-wise, leadership is enacted through concrete instructional choices and stances. Quantitative modeling treats “pedagogical leadership” as the teacher's deliberate coordination of varied methods; this orchestration shows a positive direct effect on student achievement and appears strongest when instruction is diversified and methodologically rich^[41]. In technology-mediated courses, leadership identity proves fluid: as teachers design telecollaborative work, they shift toward facilitation, trust-building, and power-sharing, with students correspondingly taking greater responsibility for their learning^[43]. Conversation-analytic evidence further locates leadership in the micro-processes of classroom talk, where moment-to-moment moves open or close opportunities for learners—especially in linguistically diverse, early-years settings—making leadership something speakers do in interaction rather than merely a role they hold^[46]. The impacts of these teacher-initiated processes include improved achievement^[41], greater student self-direction and engagement in telecollaboration^[43], and locally expanded opportunities for participation through responsive talk^[46]. Where teachers undertake structured, collaborative inquiry—such as participatory lesson study—leadership grows alongside professional agency, though practical constraints in non-native English-speaking contexts remain^[54]. Programmatic experiences designed explicitly for teacher leaders also strengthen identity and skills, indicating that leadership development is itself a learnable, formative process^[56].

Leadership initiated by students is consistently emer-

gent, role-fluid, and task-bound, and its processes depend on interactional dynamics and learning design. In classroom group work, peer leadership that arises from interaction predicts participation more strongly than language proficiency or personality, yet very dominant leaders can suppress peers' cognitive engagement; leadership itself reconfigures as group membership changes across a semester^[48,49]. In blended collaborative argumentative writing, leadership functions are distributed across modalities: face-to-face sessions tend to generate and elaborate claims and sub-arguments, while online sessions clarify claims, locate evidence and reasoning, synthesize sub-arguments, and steer revision. These offline and online processes intersect and complement one another, revealing leadership as a flexible resource that the group redeploys as the writing task evolves^[50]. In self-access learning centers, student leadership is developmental and concept-mediated: concept-based pedagogy helps student leaders internalize and apply disciplinary ideas in practice, and reflective self-regulation enables responsive guidance of peers, with reported gains in motivation, intercultural communication, and belonging^[51,52]. Beyond formal classes, online communities of practice show leadership growing with participation and collaborative contribution, indicating that influence is earned through visible, helpful action rather than assigned status^[57]. The impacts of these student-initiated processes include higher participation, stronger ownership of learning, richer argumentative development across modalities, and community-level outcomes such as cohesion and mutual support; a consistent caution is that unbalanced peer authority can dampen others' deeper engagement^[48–50].

Cross-cutting the teacher and student strands are boundary conditions and design levers that shape how leadership takes hold and what it does. Cultural expectations calibrate preferred classroom leadership styles, with learners in a Confucian context favoring democratic enactments—suggesting that effective leadership is context-sensitive and blended rather than universal^[47]. Task structure matters: shared leadership flourishes when tasks are interdependent and intrinsically meaningful, whereas very low complexity can weaken shared leadership even as it increases perceived relevance and reduces cognitive load^[53]. Where schools and programs intentionally create spaces and routines for leadership—lesson study for teachers, structured projects and communities for students—leadership processes become

more visible, coachable, and consequential for participation, learning quality, and well-being^[54,56,57]. In sum, within English language teaching and learning, leadership initiated by teachers and students is best understood as a set of situated characteristics and adaptive processes—relational, interactional, and design-responsive—that reliably shape engagement, knowledge construction, and achievement, while remaining sensitive to culture and context.

4.3. Methodological Approaches, Theoretical Frameworks, and Contextual Factors

Over the past decade, research on leadership in English language teaching and learning has been methodologically eclectic but dominated by qualitative and cross-sectional designs. A large share of studies use qualitative case study and interview-based approaches to capture how leadership is enacted in situ—by teachers in classrooms, supervisors in programs, and students in peer groups—often triangulating interviews with classroom observations, documents, and reflective artifacts^[39,40,54,56]. Conversation analysis and other fine-grained discourse methods locate leadership in moment-to-moment classroom talk, showing how teachers open or close opportunities for learner participation in linguistically diverse settings^[46]. When researchers seek explanatory claims about participation and achievement, they turn to correlational and multivariate models: classroom observation paired with survey measures and regression to estimate the influence of emergent student leadership on engagement^[48], repeated-measures classroom studies to track leadership stability as groups are reconfigured^[49], and large-scale teacher or student surveys analyzed with multilevel and structural equation modeling to link leadership with perceived learning and well-being^[37,41]. Mixed-methods surveys combine standardized scales with open-ended responses to profile teacher leadership self-efficacy and practice^[44] and to map drivers and barriers of professional engagement among English language teaching professionals^[58]. Emerging modalities also shape method: ethnographic and longitudinal case studies examine leadership across offline–online settings in self-access learning centers and blended writing tasks, combining fieldnotes, digital traces, drafts, and interviews to follow leadership functions as they shift by context and medium^[50,51].

Conceptually, the field has moved from leadership-

as-position to leadership-as-practice. At institutional levels, transformational leadership frames principal behaviors that motivate and support students and teachers, while middle or department leadership is theorized as a meso-level mechanism channeling system reform into classroom pedagogy^[37,38]. In programs serving English for Speakers of Other Languages, leadership is treated as distributed across roles—principals, coordinators, classroom teachers—tasked with centering multilingual learners through whole-school planning and targeted professional learning^[39,40]. Within classrooms, teacher leadership is conceptualized along two entwined strands: as pedagogical decision-making that orchestrates methods and directly shapes achievement^[41], and as a relational, identity-laden practice characterized by passion, rapport, clear purpose, and balanced flexibility from learners’ perspectives^[42]. Conversation-analytic work treats leadership as interactional work accomplished in talk^[46], while technology-mediated studies conceptualize teacher leadership identity as fluid, shifting toward facilitation, trust-building, and power-sharing in telecollaborative designs^[43]. Student leadership is framed as emergent and role-fluid: in task interaction, it outpredicts language proficiency and personality for participation and reconfigures as group membership changes; in blended argumentative writing, leadership functions distribute across modalities, with offline work driving claim generation and online work guiding evidence, synthesis, and revision^[48–50]. Additional lenses include communities of practice and concept-based learning to explain how student leaders internalize disciplinary concepts and guide peers in self-access settings^[51,52], shared leadership to theorize collective agency in project-based courses^[53], and supervisory leadership to capture how coaching practices shape writing instruction^[45]. Practice-oriented syntheses distill program-level levers—goal setting, empowering innovators, targeted professional development—while cautioning that low program status and weak information networks can blunt effects^[55].

Context consistently conditions how leadership is studied and what it does. Culturally, preferences for classroom leadership styles vary, with learners in a Confucian context favoring democratic enactments—an important boundary condition for interpreting findings and for designing leadership interventions^[47]. System reforms and accountability pressures provide the backdrop for department leadership

and teacher change, especially in large-scale, territory-wide initiatives^[38]. Institutional status and service models matter: where English for Speakers of Other Languages is marginalized or expected to “fit” existing routines, leadership efforts aimed at equity face structural headwinds^[39]. Modality and task design are pivotal contextual levers: telecollaboration and blended learning redistribute leadership functions between face-to-face and online spaces^[43,50], project interdependence and intrinsic motivation scaffold shared leadership^[53], and group reconfiguration alters the stability and effects of student leadership^[49]. Level and setting diversify the evidence base—from early-years Indigenous classrooms to primary schools, secondary departments, higher education classes, self-access centers, and online communities—revealing leadership as situated practice that is contingent on learner population, program mission, and local resources^[46,57,59,60]. Finally, capacity-building structures such as lesson study and discipline-specific leadership programs create the conditions under which leadership identities and skills are most visible, coachable, and consequential^[54,56].

In sum, the past decade’s scholarship relies heavily on qualitative, discourse-analytic, and survey-based methods, supplements them with multilevel and structural equation modeling when testing outcomes, and increasingly follows leadership across offline–online ecologies. Theoretical work prioritizes distributed, interactional, shared, and developmental views of leadership initiated by teachers and students, while contextual analyses highlight culture, reform environment, modality, task design, and institutional status as the key conditions that shape both how leadership is researched and how it impacts participation, learning, equity, and well-being.

5. Discussion

The evidence assembled in this review points to leadership in English language teaching and learning as a situated, multilevel practice rather than a static role, enacted by principals and department leaders, by teachers and supervisors, and by students within peer groups. What binds these strands is not a single model but a family resemblance: leadership is accomplished through relational work (for example, cultivating purpose, rapport, and trust), through pedagogical

orchestration (the deliberate design and sequencing of tasks and methods), and through interactional moves in classroom discourse that open or close space for learning. At the institutional end, studies of transformational principal leadership and subject-department leadership demonstrate that leadership matters when it is translated into routines and capacities that teachers can feel and use^[53,61,62]. Principal behaviors associated with vision, support, and intellectual stimulation are connected to students’ reported success and well-being, suggesting downstream effects on the learning climate^[37]. Department-level leadership appears especially consequential: it channels system reforms into teachers’ day-to-day pedagogy, predicts participation in professional learning, and explains variance in perceived learning across schools^[38,46,55]. Work in English for Speakers of Other Languages shows both the promise and the fragility of this institutional layer. When leadership is genuinely distributed across principals, coordinators, and teachers—through whole-school planning and targeted professional learning—multilingual learners are centered; when schools expect students to “fit” pre-existing routines, leadership for equity is blunted^[39,40].

Most of the action, however, sits with teachers. Quantitative modeling frames “pedagogical leadership” as the teacher’s coordination of methods toward learning goals, with evidence of positive, direct effects on achievement, particularly when instruction is diversified and methodologically rich^[41]. Yet, learners’ accounts remind us that effectiveness is not only technical. Students describe teacher leadership as passion, rapport, clear purpose, and balanced flexibility—qualities that mobilize engagement and stretch beyond managerial control^[42]. These two views are not in tension but complementary: the relational stance seems to underwrite the technical orchestration. Technology-mediated cases make the dynamic character of teacher leadership explicit. As instructors design telecollaborative tasks, they shift toward facilitation, trust-building, and power-sharing; students then assume more responsibility for their learning, and the teacher’s leadership identity evolves in tandem^[43,56]. Belief systems matter here: teachers’ leadership self-efficacy—shaped by experience and prior administrative roles—appears to condition how confidently they enact leaderly classroom climates in matters like discipline and participation^[44]. Supervisors’ coaching adds a further layer of teacher-facing leadership; qualitative work in writing instruction indicates that super-

visory expectations and techniques—even where gendered patterns surface—can steer instructional improvement when they are concrete and developmental^[45].

A distinctive contribution of the past decade is the tighter focus on leadership as interactional work inside classrooms. Conversation-analytic studies in linguistically diverse, early-years settings show teachers leading in the grain of talk—by shaping sequences that invite students’ knowledge displays and by avoiding patterns that prematurely foreclose participation^[46]. This turns leadership from a background condition into something observable and coachable: a repertoire of moves that teachers (and students) can learn. Cultural context modulates these enactments. In a Confucian setting, for instance, learners reported a preference for democratic classroom leadership; in practical terms, this cautions against universal prescriptions and supports blended approaches tuned to local norms^[47].

The review also foregrounds students as initiators of leadership in English language learning. In group work, emergent peer leadership—not language proficiency or personality—best predicts participation, though very dominant leaders can suppress peers’ cognitive engagement; moreover, leadership stability shifts as groups are reconfigured over time^[48,49]. Blended argumentative writing clarifies how leadership functions are distributed across modalities: face-to-face work typically generates and elaborates claims, while online phases clarify claims, surface evidence and reasoning, synthesize sub-arguments, and drive revision. These modes intersect and complement each other, revealing leadership as a flexible resource that groups redeploy as tasks evolve^[50]. In self-access learning centers, concept-based pedagogy helps student leaders internalize and apply disciplinary ideas^[63], while reflective self-regulation equips them to guide peers, strengthening motivation, intercultural communication, and belonging^[51,52]. Communities of practice extend this logic beyond class sessions, showing leadership as influence earned through participation and useful contribution rather than assigned status^[57]. Across these sites, the message is consistent: student leadership is not an add-on but a learning mechanism—productive when structured and shared, counterproductive when unbalanced.

Methodologically, the field’s reliance on qualitative case studies, interviews, and conversation analysis has yielded rich accounts of how leadership actually happens,

while surveys with multilevel and structural equation models have connected leadership to outcomes such as perceived learning, achievement, and well-being^[37,38,41]. Longitudinal and blended-ecology designs are beginning to show how leadership identities and functions shift across time and media^[43,50]. Still, the evidence base remains uneven. Many outcome measures are perceptual; causal claims are rare; and details about samples or demographics are sometimes thin, limiting transferability across regions and levels. These constraints do not undermine the central patterns, but they bound their generality and point to priorities for the next wave of research.

Two cross-cutting implications follow for practice and policy. First, department leadership looks like a high-leverage point: when departments align goals, routines, and professional learning, teachers change practice and students report stronger learning. Investments should therefore prioritize sustained, discipline-specific professional development, coordination of assessment and curriculum, and structures that socialize new practices rather than one-off workshops. Second, leadership is design-sensitive. In classrooms, interdependent tasks, rotating roles, and explicit discourse norms can distribute student leadership and protect against dominance effects; online, role scripts that name who synthesizes, who finds evidence, and who revises help make leadership visible and shared. For schools serving multilingual learners, leadership for equity means redesigning services and routines around learners’ needs—not attempting to retrofit learners to existing systems—an orientation already visible in successful English for Speakers of Other Languages cases^[39,40].

Looking forward, the most promising advances will come from studies that follow who leads, how, and with what evidence of impact across phases of learning, and from designs that deliberately test levers—task interdependence, rotating facilitation, concept-based scaffolding, lesson study—under varied cultural and policy conditions. In short, leadership in English language teaching and learning is best understood as adaptive work at the intersection of relationships, design, and discourse. When those elements are intentionally aligned—by principals and departments, by teachers and supervisors, and by students themselves—participation deepens, knowledge construction improves, and the system moves closer to equitable outcomes for multilingual learners.

6. Conclusions

Across the past decade, research portrays leadership in ELTL as practice rather than position, spanning principal and department leadership, distributed leadership, teacher leadership (both pedagogical and relational), supervisory leadership, interactional leadership enacted in classroom talk, shared/collective leadership in project-based and professional-learning contexts, and student/peer leadership. Teacher-initiated leadership is characterized by purpose, rapport, balanced flexibility, and deliberate orchestration of tasks and methods—often shifting toward facilitation and power-sharing in technology-mediated courses—and operates through moment-to-moment discourse moves, structured professional learning, and coaching, yielding gains in participation, perceived learning, achievement, self-direction, and equity when schools redesign routines around multilingual learners. Student-initiated leadership is emergent, role-fluid, and task-bound: it predicts participation beyond proficiency, divides productively across offline (idea generation/elaboration) and online (evidence, synthesis, revision) phases, and grows in self-access centers and communities of practice, while unchecked dominance can dampen peers' deeper engagement. Methodologically, qualitative case study, interviews, and conversation analysis predominate, complemented by surveys with multilevel and structural equation models, mixed-methods designs, and growing longitudinal/ethnographic work; theoretically, transformational, instructional, distributed, communities-of-practice, concept-based, and shared-leadership perspectives frame the field. Culture, reform pressures, the institutional status of ELTL, modality, task interdependence and complexity, group reconfiguration, and setting consistently shape how leadership is enacted and what it achieves.

These patterns carry actionable implications for stakeholders. Institutional leaders should invest in department-level structures that coordinate curriculum, assessment, and sustained, discipline-specific professional learning, and should resource whole-school approaches that center ELTL through coordinated services and targeted teacher learning. Teacher educators and supervisors should cultivate leadership as both relationship and design—coaching teachers to plan interdependent tasks, rotate roles, and make equitable discourse norms explicit, especially in hybrid and online

settings. Classroom teachers can structure student leadership so it is shared rather than dominated by scripting rotating responsibilities (for example, evidence-finder, synthesizer, reviser) and by assessing both participation and depth of reasoning. Designers of self-access centers and communities of practice can use concept-based and reflective pedagogies to help student leaders internalize disciplinary ideas and guide peers. Researchers and assessment offices in schools should complement perception measures with behavioral indicators (for example, turn-taking, evidence citation), product quality (for example, revision gains), and academic records to capture impacts more reliably.

This review has several limitations. The search was confined to two databases (WoS and Scopus), to English-language, peer-reviewed publications, and to studies available in full text; gray literature and non-English studies were excluded, and some potentially relevant full texts were unobtainable, introducing coverage and language bias. Screening and coding relied on what primary reports disclosed, so incomplete reporting may have affected data extraction and interpretation. The included evidence is geographically uneven and methodologically heterogeneous, limiting generalizability and—together with inconsistent measures—precluding meta-analysis or formal effect estimation. Finally, although we used expert review, we did not apply a standardized risk-of-bias tool across studies, so the strength of the synthesized claims should be interpreted with caution.

Author Contributions

Y.C. led the conceptualization, systematic search, and drafting of the manuscript. S.W. coordinated the review process, managed correspondence, and contributed substantially to data extraction, synthesis, and manuscript revision. X.H. provided methodological oversight, guided the analytic framework, and critically revised the manuscript. S.M. supported data analysis, coding reliability checks, and refinement of the discussion. Y.J. assisted with screening, reference management, and proofreading the final manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the cor-

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of Studies.

Source	Indexing	Research Purposes/Objectives	Research Methods	Key Findings
[37]	Scopus & WoS	To test a model linking principals' transformational leadership behaviors (TLB) to students' success and psychological well-being (PWB).	Design: Cross-sectional SEM. Participants: Secondary students (context as per study). Data: Three self-report scales on principal TLB, PWB, and success; SEM estimation.	TLB accounted for ~62% of the variance in reported success and ~57% in PWB, indicating sizeable, positive associations.
[38]	Scopus & WoS	To model how middle leadership and related contextual factors affect teachers' pedagogical change and perceived student learning under a territory-wide reform.	Design: Quantitative, multilevel/SEM analysis. Participants: English teachers nested in multiple secondary schools. Data: Large-scale teacher surveys; SEM and multilevel modeling.	Subject-department middle leadership had strong direct/indirect effects on teachers' practices, PD participation, reform receptivity, and perceived student learning; department leadership explained >60% of between-school variance in perceived learning.
[39]	Scopus & WoS	To identify how school leadership supports teaching and learning for English language learners (ELLs) in changing, multilingual primary classrooms.	Design: Qualitative case study across primary schools. Participants: School leaders, coordinators, and teachers (numbers not stated in abstract). Data: Interviews, classroom/meeting observations, and document review.	Leadership that centers ELLs—e.g., whole-school planning, targeted professional learning, and coordination around ESOL—improves support; persistent barriers include marginalizing and expecting ELLs to 'fit' existing practices.
[40]	Scopus & WoS	To document how a district and its high school distribute and sustain leadership to promote equity for ELLs.	Design: Qualitative single-district case study. Participants: District/school leaders, specialists, and teachers (numbers not stated). Data: Interviews, observations, and documents.	Distributed leadership practices (e.g., coordinated supports for teachers, targeted services for ELLs) underpinned inclusive opportunities for ELLs and their teachers.
[41]	Scopus	To test whether teachers' pedagogical leadership directly improves student achievement and whether English teaching methods mediate this effect.	Design: Cross-sectional SEM. Participants: Secondary students in Taian, China (n=968). Data: Questionnaire measures of pedagogical leadership, methods, and achievement; SmartPLS SEM.	Pedagogical leadership had a positive direct effect on achievement, with additional gains when coupled with diversified, effective English teaching methods.
[42]	Scopus & WoS	To characterize language teacher leadership from learners' perspectives.	Design: Qualitative interview study. Participants: 20 South Korean university students. Data: Semi-structured interviews.	Students framed teacher leadership around passion, rapport, purpose, and balance/flexibility; views extended beyond classroom routines and differed from traditional, top-down leadership conceptions.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Source	Indexing	Research Purposes/Objectives	Research Methods	Key Findings
[43]	Scopus	To trace how teacher leadership identity evolves during the integration of telecollaborative projects in university EFL courses over two years.	Design: Longitudinal qualitative case study. Participants: University EFL instructor(s) and classes. Data: Interviews and reflective diaries.	Telecollaboration fostered collaboration, trust, and power-sharing; students showed stronger self-direction and engagement as teacher leadership shifted toward facilitation.
[44]	Scopus	To assess EFL teachers' leadership self-efficacy and how they enact leadership in classroom management and discipline.	Design: Explanatory mixed-methods survey. Participants: Turkish EFL instructors in higher education. Data: Leadership self-efficacy scale + demographics; two open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.	Teachers reported high leadership self-efficacy, shaped by experience and prior administrative roles; narratives described reflective practices to sustain a leaderful classroom climate.
[45]	Scopus	To examine supervisory roles that enhance EFL writing instruction and factors influencing supervisor involvement.	Design: Qualitative exploratory study. Participants: Male and female supervisors of EFL writing. Data: Semi-structured interviews (and related field evidence as reported).	Supervisors applied varied techniques; gendered differences appeared (e.g., stricter planning expectations among female supervisors); supervision quality shaped teaching improvement.
[46]	Scopus	To examine how teachers lead learning and elicit students' knowledge in linguistically diverse, early-years Indigenous classrooms.	Design: Conversation analysis of classroom talk. Participants: Early-years teachers and Indigenous students. Data: Video/audio classroom observations.	Effective leadership was visible in responsive, moment-to-moment decisions that opened space for students to demonstrate knowledge; certain interactional patterns constrained this.
[47]	Scopus & WoS	To test whether Confucian cultural values shape learners' preferences for classroom leadership style.	Design: Cross-sectional survey. Participants: 57 South-Korean EFL learners. Data: Vannsimpeo Leadership Survey + Confucian values questionnaire; statistical analysis.	Democratic leadership was most preferred; cultural values influenced preferences, supporting blended, context-sensitive leadership approaches.
[48]	Scopus & WoS	To test whether emergent student leadership predicts participation and engagement during group conversation tasks.	Design: Classroom observational study with correlational analysis. Participants: EFL students (tertiary; number not stated in abstract). Data: Video observations at midterm and final; survey measures (proficiency, extraversion, leadership); regression analyses.	Emergent leadership—not proficiency or extraversion—best predicted participation; strong leadership sometimes coincided with lower cognitive engagement for peers.
[49]	Scopus & WoS	To examine how changing group membership affects leadership stability and task engagement in language-learning groupwork.	Design: Repeated-measures classroom study. Participants: EFL learners in intact classes. Data: Leadership ratings collected three times/semester; interaction analysis of tasks.	Leadership stability shifted with group reconfiguration; patterns of interaction showed leadership shape how students engaged with tasks.
[50]	Scopus & WoS	To examine how EFL learners enact peer-leadership behaviors in blended collaborative argumentative writing, and what leadership functions are performed offline vs. online.	Design: Qualitative case study. Participants: 5 EFL learners. Data: Audio/video of group discussions (offline & online), drafts/written products, and semi-structured interviews; qualitative coding/analysis of leadership behaviors across contexts.	Offline leadership mainly generated and developed claims and elaborated sub-arguments; online leadership clarified claims, identified evidence/reasoning, synthesized sub-arguments, and guided revision. Leadership type, agent, and argumentative focus fluctuated across contexts; the two modes intersected and complemented each other, revealing the fluid nature of peer leadership in blended designs.
[51]	Scopus & WoS	To analyze how everyday and scientific concepts shape student leadership development in a self-access learning center (SALC).	Design: 18-month ethnographic case study. Participants: 3 student leaders and 1 faculty member. Data: Fieldnotes, interviews, and artefacts; inductive then theory-informed coding.	Concept-based pedagogy helped leaders internalize and apply scientific concepts through dialogic practice, suggesting value for SALC advising.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Source	Indexing	Research Purposes/Objectives	Research Methods	Key Findings
[52]	Scopus & WoS	To explore how a student leader guided a French learning community and influenced members' motivation and belonging.	Design: Qualitative single-case study. Participants: 1 student leader; community members. Data: Leader reflections and interviews/fieldnotes (as reported).	Regular self-reflection enabled responsive decision-making and guidance; leadership supported members' motivation, intercultural communication, and sense of belonging.
[53]	Scopus & WoS	To theorize how shared leadership emerges and can be fostered within project-based English learning.	Design: Conceptual/classroom-based analysis. Participants: Students in project-based English courses (not specified). Data: Analysis of project work and classroom practices.	Shared leadership is facilitated by interdependent tasks and intrinsic motivation; low-complexity tasks may weaken shared leadership yet enhance relevance and reduce cognitive load.
[54]	Scopus & WoS	To evaluate how PLS shapes English teachers' professional growth and leadership.	Design: Qualitative interpretive case study. Participants: 4 ELTs and their senior teacher. Data: 8 lesson-study cases and 16 meetings (field notes, artefacts, reflections).	PLS boosted self-efficacy and confidence and supported self-directed PD; participants also raised critical concerns about implementing PLS in NNES contexts.
[55]	Scopus & WoS	To distill effective TESOL leadership practices and identify systemic obstacles.	Design: Practice-oriented synthesis (details not specified). Participants: Not applicable. Data: Review of practitioner experiences and program documentation.	Goal-setting, empowering pioneers, targeted TESOL PD, and program facilitation were highlighted; barriers included limited information-sharing and low program status.
[56]	Scopus & WoS	To understand how world-language teacher leaders experience LILL and how it shapes their leadership identity and skills.	Design: Qualitative case study. Participants: 11 LILL participants. Data: Interviews and reflective accounts; thematic analysis.	Participants viewed LILL as transformational for identity, mindset, and leadership skill development; authors call for more discipline-specific WL leadership scholarship.
[57]	Scopus & WoS	To explore links between social networking, collaborative language learning, and leadership development in a university community of practice.	Design: Qualitative content/interaction analysis. Participants: University students in an online community. Data: Facebook posts/interactions within a course community of practice.	Participation patterns showed how social networks supported collaborative learning and enabled informal leadership to emerge.
[58]	Scopus	To identify drivers and barriers of professional engagement and motivation among ELT practitioners.	Design: Explanatory mixed-methods survey. Participants: ELT professionals. Data: Questionnaire on engagement/motivation with open-ended responses for qualitative analysis.	Overall engagement was positive, with strong meaning derived from teaching; the study mapped factors that sustain or hinder engagement.
[59]	Scopus & WoS	To explore how primary EFL teachers enact leadership when reforming pedagogy.	Design: Qualitative interview study. Participants: 6 primary EFL teachers. Data: In-depth interviews.	Teachers led change by tailoring textbooks, orchestrating supportive environments, and diversifying practices to fit learners' needs.
[60]	WoS	To embed and evaluate leadership-skills development within university English courses.	Design: Course-embedded project with pre/post evaluation. Participants: First- and second-year university students. Data: Baseline and end-of-course assessments of leadership-related competences.	Students improved interpersonal and communication skills and reported valuing leadership development alongside English learning.
[63]	WoS	To present classroom designs that integrate leadership development into L2 Spanish instruction and argue for an interdisciplinary model.	Design: Descriptive pedagogical cases. Participants: University Spanish learners. Data: Course tasks and reflective artefacts.	An interdisciplinary, community-engaged approach can maintain engagement and develop leadership practices alongside language learning.
[62]	Scopus	To describe leadership and technology practices for teaching Turkish as an L2 to immigrants using Web 2.0 tools.	Design: Descriptive chapter (non-empirical). Participants: None. Data: Secondary statistics and literature review.	Provides an overview of learner demographics and tools; no empirical outcomes reported.

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