Why did the Spanish Armada fail?

In 1588, Philip II of Spain sent an Armada to conquer England. It was the greatest fleet of ships ever assembled and yet it was defeated by the much smaller English navy. I will argue that the most important reason the Armada failed was because the English had better leadership. There are also other reasons, however, such as tactics and weaponry, which I will also look at in this essay.

The most important reason the Spanish Armada failed was because the English had better leadership than the Spanish. This is shown by the fact the English had experienced leaders in Sir Francis Drake and Lord Howard. In contrast, Duke of Medina Sidonia, the Spanish leader, was chosen because of his social status and not his skill. This meant that the English had a clear advantage because their enemy did not really know what he was doing. Moreover, when Medina Sidonia had a chance to attack the trapped English fleet at Plymouth Harbour, he instead sailed past. As a result, he missed an opportunity to easily defeat the English fleet. Furthermore, Sir Francis Drake proved how good a leader he was when he sailed the English fleet close to the Spanish fleet during the Battle of Graveline. As a consequence of this daring attack the Armada was badly damaged and effectively defeated. Therefore, the most important reason the Spanish Armada was defeated was because the English had better leadership than the Spanish.

Another important reason for the Spanish defeat was that the English had better tactics than the Spanish. However, not all the Spanish tactics were bad. The armada, for example, sailed in a crescent formation which made it very difficult for the English to attack it. However, the English tactics eventually proved superior. They used fire ships to break up the armada's strong crescent formation. This scattered the Spanish fleet and as a consequence the English were able to more successfully attack the Spanish ships. Clearly, the English tactics were superior to the Spanish which helps explain why the Armada failed. However, without good leadership, you cannot have good tactics, therefore it must be argued that leadership is more important than tactics as a reason for Spanish defeat.

The final reason why the English were able to defeat the Spanish was because they were better at using their weapons. Even though the Spanish had 130 ships and the English only had 55, the English still emerged victorious. This is partly because the English ships were smaller and therefore more agile, able to evade Spanish ships easily. Furthermore, the English were much better at using their cannons, which they could fire frequently. By comparison, the Spanish cannons could only be fired about once an hour. This led to the English having a significant advantage in battles, because they could inflict more damage on their enemy. Thus better use of weaponry was also key in the defeat of the Armada. However, again, it must be said that leadership is more important because the Duke of Medina Sidonia had not trained his men as well as Drake and Howard had, which explains why they were not able to use their weaponry as effectively.

To conclude, as I have shown leadership was clearly the most important reason why the Spanish Armada failed, although other factors were important. Some, such as historian William Bailey, have argued that it was the agility of the English ships that allowed the English to win. I disagree, however, because had the English leadership been poor, the fact that their ships were more agile would not have been enough of an advantage to secure them victory. Furthermore, the Spanish had some very effective tactics, such as the crescent formation. These could only be overcome by the excellent leadership of Sir Francis Drake and Lord Howard. Therefore it must be argued that superior leadership was the most important reason the English were able to defeat the Spanish Armada.