The magic of rapport in language teaching: A review of rapport-building strategies from in-person to virtual classrooms

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One of the indispensable elements of education in general, and language teaching in particular, is building good rapport in the classroom. A classroom with strong rapport promotes a learning environment through friendly relationships, trust, respect, and mental engagement between the teacher and students, as well as among students. Senior (2006) stated that the rapport teachers develop in their classes seems to them as significant as the pedagogy itself. Harmer (2015) identifies the ability to build rapport as one of the essential qualities of good teachers. He states: "In classes with good rapport, anything is possible because the students believe their teacher is a good teacher" (p. 114). He refers to this as the magic of rapport. The interactions between teachers and their students significantly influence both the classroom environment and learning outcomes (Wang, 2023).

Numerous studies have identified effective techniques for building rapport in in-person language classrooms, where physical proximity and immediate interactions foster connection. While methods for establishing rapport in physical classrooms have been thoroughly explored, the recent transition to online language classes raises questions about whether these strategies can be effectively replicated in a virtual setting or if the dynamics of rapport-building differ in online teaching. In this paper, I will first outline the theories that underpin the importance of rapport; then, I will draw on recent and seminal literature on rapport in language teaching to define rapport and review strategies for building and maintaining rapport—including their challenges and adaptability in virtual classrooms, and finally, I will discuss the findings of the literature review in relation to my own experience as an English language teaching professional.

1. Theoretical underpinnings

The concept of rapport in the language classroom aligns with several theories and concepts of second language acquisition. Vygotsky's (1978) concept, known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning. The ZPD suggests that learners can achieve more with appropriate support from teachers or peers. In other words, learning occurs within a social context rather than in isolation; it happens through scaffolding instruction by teachers and other knowledgeable individuals' contributions to the learner's growth (Zhang, 2023). Building rapport in the

language classroom enhances mutual support and trust between students and the teacher by engaging learners in collaborative tasks and encouraging them to maximize their learning potential within the ZPD.

The role of rapport in language classroom rooms also aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which claims that language learners can take in more input if their affective filter is lowered. Krashen argued that the affective filter is a psychological barrier preventing language learners from fully understanding available comprehensible input. He examined how affective factors act as a filter, reducing the amount of language input learners can grasp. These factors include emotions like anxiety, lack of motivation, and self-confidence. A positive and encouraging learning environment through good rapport can help reduce this affective filter and maximize learning potential.

Moreover, motivational theories in L2 education align closely with the concept of rapport. According to Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), the pace and success of language acquisition are significantly influenced by L2 motivation, which initiates learning and sustains efforts throughout. Without sufficient motivation, even the most capable learners may not achieve long-term goals, as effective teaching alone cannot guarantee success. One of the ten commandments of L2 motivation outlined by Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) is to cultivate a positive relationship with learners, emphasizing the importance of rapport in the classroom. This principle is widely acknowledged among teachers: A substantial portion of students' learning efforts is driven by the motivation to please their teacher. Establishing a positive connection between teachers and students (rapport) greatly enhances their motivation, making learning a more rewarding experience.

2. Defining rapport

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), rapport means "a good understanding of someone and an ability to communicate well with them." In the context of language teaching, rapport retains the same fundamental meaning; however, a language teacher must go above and beyond this definition to cultivate and maintain genuine rapport in the classroom. Although the significance of rapport in language teaching is widely acknowledged, its definition remains complex and elusive. Scrivener (2011) noted that defining rapport is neither simple nor straightforward; it is instead "notoriously difficult to define or quantify" (p. 15). While a commonly accepted definition of rapport involves being friendly toward learners, it is essential to view it from a broader perspective.

Most definitions found in the literature are related to two common aspects of rapport: relationships within the classroom and teachers' qualities to achieve that. Scrivener (2011) describes rapport as the "quality of relationships within the classroom" (p. 401). Harmer (2015) also defines rapport as a positive relationship between learners and their teachers, as well as among the learners themselves. Likewise, Brown and Lee

(2015) state that "rapport is the relationship or connection you establish with your students, a relationship built on trust and respect that leads to students' feeling capable, competent, and creative" (p. 306). According to Scrivener (2011), rapport refers to how students feel in the presence of their teacher, the relationships learners have with the teacher, the connections learners share with each other, and whether teachers' roles encourage students to excel or make them feel shut down. In other words, depending on the quality of the report in a classroom, people may be defensive and anxious, or they may feel empowered to be honest and take risks. From the perspective of psychology, rapport contains both emotional and behavioral aspects, including mutual attentiveness, positivity, and coordination (Hamilton, 2021).

3. Ways to build rapport

As mentioned in the definition section above, good rapport primarily refers to relationships within classrooms that promote a positive learning environment. Ensuring this environment largely depends on the qualities of the teacher. Therefore, building rapport in a language classroom heavily relies on the quality of the teachers' characteristics. Now, the question is: What qualities of a teacher can build rapport, and what contributes to this quality? This section will outline essential strategies that educators can implement based on the literature regarding rapport building in language classrooms.

3.1 Teachers' rapport building attributes

Although building rapport is not an easy task, some teachers establish it the moment they enter the classroom, indicating that these teachers are born, not made (Harmer, 2015). However, research on rapport building recommends multifarious strategies teachers can adopt to build rapport in their classrooms. Senior (2008) emphasizes the importance of the teacher's attitude, proposing that teachers should be with their students rather than against them. It is vital to view our students positively and give them the benefit of the doubt when problems arise. Senior (2008) also advocates rewarding students by adopting a *generous-minded* approach. According to Scrivener (2011), a good starting point for rapport is creating a positive relationship and learning environment in the classroom. He outlined several key traits teachers should have for building good rapport in the classroom, including showing respect, being fair, listening to one another, providing clear and constructive feedback, possessing a good sense of humor, demonstrating patience, inspiring confidence, being authentic, empathetic, and organized, exhibiting enthusiasm, building trust, being non-judgmental, and approachable. Among all these, Scrivener emphasizes the importance of being welcoming, encouraging, and remembering the positive aspects of our students.

3.2 Respect, empathy, and authenticity

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) identified three characteristics of teachers that can promote an effective learning environment: respect, empathy, and authenticity. When a teacher develops these three qualities, the classroom environment strengthens individual relationships and communication. Respect entails the teacher's nonjudgmental and positive attitude. Empathy is the ability to view situations from others' perspectives, and authenticity means being genuine rather than hiding oneself behind job titles, roles, or positions (Scrivener, 2011, p. 17). Rogers and Freiberg (1994) regard authenticity as the most crucial of these attributes. They argue that being oneself, being human, vulnerable, and honest is essential for building rapport rather than simply acting as a teacher. Similarly, Houston (1990) stresses that to be authentic, one must know one's own style and be truthful with oneself, as this forms the basis of authenticity.

3.3 Being an enabler rather than an explainer

Underhill (1994) classified teachers into three categories: i) Explainer, ii) Involver, and iii) Enabler. While an explainer teacher only knows and examines the subject matter, an involver teacher is aware of both the subject matter and teaching methodology. Enabler, on the other hand, goes above and beyond the subject knowledge and methodology and enables the learners towards autonomous learning. Of these three types, enablers are best suited for ensuring good rapport in the classrooms because this type of teacher is not only an expert in both the subject matter and teaching methods but also is sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of students, both individually and collectively. They incorporate this understanding into lesson planning and techniques, fostering strong working relationships and a positive classroom environment. Their personality and attitude actively promote a conducive learning atmosphere (Scrivener, 2011).

3.4 Sustaining rapport through genuine interest

While the above-mentioned techniques can improve communication, authentic rapport extends beyond simple methods. Even though there are practical strategies that one can learn to enhance interactions, sustaining rapport requires teachers to possess or cultivate genuine qualities such as respect, empathy, and authenticity—not merely for professional purposes. In other words, rapport-building traits cannot be faked or mimicked; they must arise from a sincere interest. As Scrivener (2011) noted, "real rapport is something more substantial than a technique that you can mimic. It is not something you do to other people. It is you and your moment-by-moment relationship with other human beings. Similarly, respect or empathy or authenticity are not clothes to put on as you walk into the classroom, not temporary characteristics that you take on for the duration of your lesson" (p. 17).

By the same token, Nguyen (2007) states that rapport is not just formed through sporadic small talk but is seamlessly woven into the lesson's flow; for example, how teachers intentionally build rapport at key moments in a lesson, especially during potentially confrontational situations like getting students' attention, correcting a student, or providing instructions. Therefore, maintaining a strong rapport is challenging. Occasionally, students' misbehavior can threaten this connection, and how we respond in these circumstances will influence whether the rapport we have established lasts (Harmer, 2015).

3.5 Engaging the learners through emotion and tasks

Engaging learners in classroom tasks rather than keeping them passive helps create a friendly environment. Sang and Hiver (2021) outlined several dimensions of student engagement, including i) emotional engagement, ii) behavioral engagement, iii) cognitive engagement, iv) affective engagement, v) social engagement, and vi) task engagement. Among these types, emotional engagement significantly contributes to rapport building in the classroom. It fosters connections and enhances learning (Zhang, 2023). Emotional engagement pertains to the feelings learners experience in response to learning activities and their classroom environment. By nurturing these emotional connections, educators can create a welcoming and supportive space that encourages active participation. In this context, facial expressions can enhance communication, convey emotions, and cultivate an engaging learning atmosphere. Senior (2008) emphasizes that a friendly manner through supportive facial expressions influences students' perceptions of their teachers and the classroom environment. Smiles and nods communicate approval and curiosity, fostering connections and clarifying instructions. These gestures promote emotional involvement and nurture trust and motivation among learners.

Another strategy to engage learners and build rapport involves task design in class. Scrivener (2011) suggested that if rapport is lacking, teachers should prioritize tasks that enhance relationships and interaction over mere language instruction. This approach is vital, as learning quality diminishes without friendly classroom dynamics. Harmer (2015) emphasized that sustaining learner motivation requires activities that promote rapport, where teachers show interest and personalize lessons. Authentic group tasks based on communicative approaches can strengthen rapport. Gamified activities, particularly early in the course, can significantly enhance rapport and teamwork (McLellan, n.d.).

3.6 Knowing the learners personally

Connecting with each student personally can be an effective way to build rapport in the classroom, although having many students in a class often makes it challenging for teachers. A great method for establishing personal connections with students and fostering rapport is to remember all learners' names and address

them accordingly (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011). When students hear their names called by teachers, they feel valued and motivated. Various techniques can assist with name recall. Harmer (2015) suggested specific strategies for remembering students' names, including assigning designated seating arrangements, using name cards on desks, having students wear name badges, noting learners' names along with details about them, reviewing the name roster before each class, and taking a class photo with names tagged on each image.

Another effective way to understand and relate to students personally is by engaging with their lives beyond the classroom. This can involve asking learners questions like: How was your day? What activities did you do over the weekend? (Sharpe, 2019). In this regard, Harmer (2015) highlighted the benefits of one-on-one teaching, noting that individual lessons offer clear advantages over group classes. In one-on-one teaching, both teacher and student can tailor the curriculum to personal needs, aligning it with the student's interests and learning styles. Ultimately, it provides valuable opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration, which are essential aspects of rapport.

Learning about students' cultures and finding common ground could be another way to personally understand and connect with the learners, creating strong rapport. Culture is the foundation of human interaction, shaping community connections and identities. Harmer (2015) noted that emotions and meanings vary across cultures. For example, many British and American people nod for yes and shake their heads for no, but this is often reversed in Greek and Indian cultures. Brown (2000) stated that when learning a second language, one must transcend the boundaries of their first language to embrace a new language, culture, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. In a heterogeneous classroom, it is crucial to find common ground, appreciate cultural differences and shared experiences, and demonstrate empathy and mutual respect.

3.7 Building rapport through feedback

Another way to build rapport in the classroom is by providing multilayered feedback from several sources, such as self, peer, and teacher. Harmer (2015) highlighted that while teacher feedback aims to facilitate language learning via implicit or explicit correction, it can also help build rapport. He also stated that rapport significantly depends on how we respond to our students' words and actions, meaning how we provide feedback and how we correct them. In this context, Brown & Lee (2015) emphasized the importance of providing feedback on each student's progress, seeking students' ideas and feelings, and valuing and respecting what they express. They also highlighted the genuine sense of shared joy that arises when students discover something new or achieve success. Also, engaging in laughter with them, rather than at their expense, is encouraged. Collaborating with them as a cohesive unit, rather than in opposition, is

beneficial. Fostering a welcoming and encouraging environment is essential, alongside recognizing and reflecting on the students' positive attributes (Brown & Lee, 2015). By the same token, Katz (2021) also notes that constructive and supportive feedback is key to fostering trust and community in the online classroom. Among other types of feedback, work-specific feedback, or the reaction to the content of what the students have said or written (as opposed to saying typical *good* or *very good),* can help build better rapport because this kind of feedback makes the learners feel that they have been listened to with interest (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011).

4. Rapport building in online classrooms

In recent years, especially post-COVID-19, online language instruction has significantly expanded due to technological advancements. Online language teaching varies widely across platforms, featuring real-time classes on Google Meet, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams, as well as AI-based applications like Duolingo and YouTube lessons. For this paper, online language classrooms refer mainly to live instruction on platforms like Google Meet or Zoom, where learners and teachers engage in real-time rather than recorded YouTube lessons or AI-based preprogrammed apps.

4.1 Challenges of rapport building in online teaching

Scholars have raised concerns about the effectiveness of online language teaching in various aspects. One key issue in online classrooms is the lack of rapport. There are several obvious reasons for having a weaker rapport in online classrooms compared to in-person classrooms. Fattore (2022) notes that online courses often experience a digital disconnect, leading to student dissatisfaction and feelings of isolation from their peers and the instructor. This makes it challenging to build relationships without the physical proximity experienced in face-to-face interactions. In online classes, learners are physically separated from one another, which complicates the application of Vygotsky's (1987) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept.

4.2. Strategies to maximize rapport in online Classroom

The lack of rapport in online language classes can be minimized in certain ways, specifically by replicating the rapport-building strategies as much as possible. Katz (2021) identified the need to integrate characteristics from the face-to-face classroom into the online environment. These include fostering a more personal experience, enhancing the ability to connect, simplifying the process of asking questions, ensuring timely feedback, and promoting a greater sense of engagement and interaction. Fattore (2022) emphasizes the use of care and authenticity to connect students in online classrooms. This approach bridges the gap of physical proximity and heals the trauma and fatigue resulting from COVID-19. In the same vein, essential teacher

qualities mentioned above, such as being authentic, respectful, and empathetic, can be maintained in online classrooms if the teachers choose to do so.

The practical steps to maximize rapport in online language classes include utilizing state-of-the-art online classroom features. One of these most compelling features is breakout rooms, which are available on both Zoom and Google Meet. Breakout rooms allow learners to interact with each other through pair work or group work, which can be nearly as effective as in a traditional classroom. Many activities based on Communicative or Task-based Language Teaching methods already tested in physical classrooms can be seamlessly applied in online classrooms by utilizing breakout room technology (Katz, 2021). Some research shows that many students tend to feel more comfortable engaging in breakout rooms than in traditional in-person settings, and by extending the time and frequency of pair and small group activities in breakout rooms offers teachers greater opportunities to provide feedback and creates a more personal connection in the learning environment (Katz, 2021).

In addition, it is essential to learn to use certain online tools like microphones and webcams skillfully. Peachey (2020) emphasized that in online teaching, certain practical steps can boost engagement and strengthen rapport. These steps include but are not limited to positioning the webcam at eye level, connecting with students by looking at the camera instead of the screen, and maintaining a comfortable distance from the computer to utilize gestures and body language (e.g., facial expressions) effectively. As educators become more skilled with online tools, new strategies will arise to enhance rapport in these digital learning settings. Another way to enhance online classrooms is by utilizing multimodal communication, such as an interactive whiteboard and Google Docs, where all participants can collaborate on writing.

5. Implications

Rapport building is a crucial aspect of language pedagogy, and this paper presents several practical implications for teaching and teacher training. Language educators can adopt many of the rapport-building qualities discussed above, including being empathetic, respectful, authentic, and enabling teachers rather than merely explainers. Additionally, it is essential for language teachers to implement the rapport-building strategies mentioned previously, such as emotionally engaging learners, utilizing collaborative tasks, providing encouraging feedback, getting to know each student individually, and demonstrating genuine interest in each student's progress. The strategies for maintaining rapport in virtual classrooms, including the skillful use of advanced online tools, ensure that teachers can maintain the same level of rapport while smoothly transitioning from face-to-face to online instruction. This paper also offers implications for syllabus designers and textbook writers, considering the importance of rapport so that the syllabus and course materials provide enough opportunity for teachers to develop rapport-building activities in the

classroom.

6. Reflection

As an ESL teacher, I have always prioritized building rapport in every class to foster a positive learning environment. My rapport-building framework focuses on respect, empathy, and authenticity, along with rapport-orientated tasks like group work or pair work and being an enabling teacher. I also use a blended teaching approach, giving some hybrid classes seamlessly. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I had to transition all my classes to fully online, initially using Google Meet and then Zoom. Establishing rapport was quite challenging at first due to physical disconnection and students' unfamiliarity with online platforms. The absence of face-to-face interaction made it harder to read nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which are critical in connecting students' emotions and responses. It was also challenging to connect with each student personally.

Nevertheless, I remained the same supportive teacher, maintaining the same empathy, respect, and authenticity. Over time, I gradually regained rapport. I also continued using rapport-oriented tasks such as pair and group work, utilizing online tools like breakout rooms on Zoom. This enabled me to recreate collaborative opportunities similar to those in a face-to-face classroom, allowing the learners to connect and engage meaningfully with their peers. This experience reinforced my belief that an authentic, empathetic, and respectful environment is not limited to a face-to-face classroom. It is equally achievable in the online classroom. It relies on teachers' willingness to stick to these qualities. If a teacher is genuinely authentic, empathetic, and respectful, they will exhibit these traits in both online and offline teaching seamlessly.

On the other hand, after arriving in Canada, I began learning French as my third language using a prominent AI-based language teaching app called Duolingo. While Duolingo offered an attractive interface and a gamified language learning experience, one crucial element was almost entirely missing, and that is rapport. Learning through preprogrammed software resulted in poor rapport due to the absence of a live teacher. This led me to conclude that in live online classes on platforms like Zoom or Meet, rapport-building strategies can be effectively replicated by having the same teacher with the same attributes. However, in a software-based, non-human online learning platform like Duolingo, rapport is sadly nonexistent. Essentially, strong rapport in a language classroom consistently calls for a human instructor who possesses the qualities mentioned earlier, regardless of whether the instruction is online or in-person. Therefore, AI-driven online language teaching apps that are preprogrammed and lack human instructors are likely to struggle or even fail due to the lack of rapport.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rapport remains necessary and possible both in online and face-to-face classes. It depends on teachers' willingness and effort to foster those qualities that help build friendly relationships in a classroom, regardless of whether they are in physical or online classrooms. Depending on the teachers' genuine interest in motivating learners and building rapport, an online class may achieve the same rapport as an in-person class. In other words, rapport in language classrooms largely depends on teachers' attributes. However, the findings of this paper are predominantly drawn from the existing literature and from my experiences of teaching and observing classrooms of adult ESL and EFL learners. Hence, these findings may not apply in all contexts. Further studies across different contexts and cultures, survey research on teachers' attitudes toward rapport, and studies on how rapport influences different types of learners could provide more complex aspects of rapport building in language classrooms.

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