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Students' Perceptions of Student-Teacher Rapport in The English Language Classroom

Ahoud Al Hattali
Center for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman
Corresponding Author: ahoudsk@squ.edu.om

Yasmeen Al Tai
Center for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman
Email: altai@squ.edu.om

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Abstract
Student-teacher rapport is cited as crucial to language learning, yet students' perceptions of this phenomenon remain underexplored, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. To address this gap, the present study investigates how students perceive student–teacher rapport and how it influences their classroom experience, motivation, and engagement. A mixed-methods approach was employed to collect data on students' perceptions of student-teacher rapport in the English language classroom. to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Seventy-four students enrolled in both Foundation and Credit courses at Sultan Qaboos University completed a survey examining specific aspects of rapport. Quantitative insights from the survey were complemented by open-ended responses and focus group interviews to gain deeper insights into students' experiences. The results show that students place greater value on certain aspects of rapport, such as mutual respect, trust and recognition, emotional support, and positive non-verbal cues, which directly affect their motivation, confidence, and engagement levels. In contrast, rapport appears to have a more limited influence on students' willingness to share personal information or on their perceived personal growth. These findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive, respectful, and interactive learning environments while maintaining appropriate cultural and professional boundaries. The study contributes to the literature by foregrounding students' perspectives in the Omani EFL context and offers practical implications for improving teaching practices and enhancing learning outcomes.

Keywords: Classroom engagement, confidence, emotional support, learner perceptions, motivation, mutual respect, student-teacher rapport

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Introduction

Rapport, broadly defined as a relationship of mutual understanding, trust, and agreement among people, should ideally be established among all participants in the teaching and learning process from the very beginning of a course (Popovska & Piršl, 2013). Its importance is particularly relevant in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, which, unlike other formal and content-driven scholarly subjects, is characterized by its friendly atmosphere due to its social and interpersonal nature, which is why teachers need to build and maintain good relationships with their students to help bridge language proficiency and cultural awareness gaps (Meng, 2021). Cultivating such rapport between teachers and students in the EFL classroom setting, however, is not without challenges, given that English is not their first language (Santana, 2019).

Although rapport building in educational settings has received increasing attention, existing research has mainly focused on teachers' perspectives. There is a significant gap in the literature regarding students' viewpoints on this aspect and its effect on their learning experiences. To be specific, the affective dimension of language learning from students' perspectives remains underexplored.

Understanding how learners perceive rapport with their teachers is crucial, as emotional engagement and comfort levels can directly influence participation, motivation, and learning success. To address this gap in the literature, the current study explores students' perceptions of student-teacher rapport in the ESL context to offer meaningful insights for improving teaching practices and overall learning outcomes. This research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the quality of the student-teacher rapport influence students' overall classroom experience?
2. What aspects of teacher behavior and communication most significantly impact students' perceptions of rapport in the classroom?

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Frameworks like Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Positive Psychology underpin current understandings of student-teacher rapport in language learning; however, few studies have explicitly connected these theories to students' perceptions of teacher rapport. Meng (2021) posits a clear link between student-teacher relationships and learner motivation, noting that satisfying the three psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and self-governance fosters a sense of responsibility and well-being among students. This connection is further explored through the Rhetorical/Relational Goal Theory, where the author highlights that teachers balance rhetorical practices in delivering their content with relational strategies to build positive rapport with students. Combining these two orientations fosters a supportive learning environment where students feel that their needs are fulfilled, leading to a more sustained motivation to learn (Meng, 2021).

Positive Psychology extends this perspective by encouraging teachers to harness the power of positive emotions in their classrooms rather than focusing on the negative (Zhao & Li, 2021). In fact, research in second language acquisition shows that affective variables such as motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, and autonomy play a critical role in learners' achievement, with empirical evidence from Saudi EFL university contexts demonstrating that these factors

collectively account for a substantial proportion of variance in L2 performance (Alrabai & Moskovsky, 2016).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and the associated concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) add yet another dimension, proposing that learning is inherently social and that learner engagement is driven by interpersonal interactions (Meng, 2021; Zhang, 2023).

Importance of Student-Teacher Rapport

Strong student-teacher rapport consistently emerges in the literature as an indicator of student success and as a driver of motivation and engagement in the language classroom (Santana, 2019; Meng, 2021). Drawing on SDT, Shakki (2022) lays out three interconnected dimensions of student engagement in the L2 classroom: emotional engagement (interest and passion for learning), behavioral engagement (frequency and quality of classroom participation), and cognitive engagement (sustained attention and mental effort).

These dimensions are often enhanced in respectful, caring, and supportive learning environments. A study conducted by Gao, Li, and Liao (2024) found that higher levels of engagement were positively correlated with teacher support, while Burkšaitienė and Šliogerienė (2018) found that students particularly valued their teachers' patience and personal involvement.

Coristine et al. (2022) found that students with greater levels of social-emotional skills share more positive relationships with their teachers. Supportive language learning environments where collaborative tasks are used enhance academic learning, emotional regulation, and social connectedness (Zhang, 2023). In fact, supportive teacher behaviors encourage students to exert more effort, which boosts their overall engagement (Gao, Li, & Liao, 2024). Empirical evidence from Sureepong (2018) further supports this claim, showing that students identified positive teacher rapport as a primary contributor to their learning achievement.

Building Student-Teacher Rapport

Recognizing diverse needs, personal interests, backgrounds, and learning styles of students contributes positively to their motivation and social development (Syahabuddin, Fhonna, & Maghfirah, 2020). Moreover, teachers' language proficiency levels in ELT contexts matter less to students than pedagogical skills, making the ability to establish a positive rapport a desirable quality in English language teachers (Santana, 2019). One effective approach is to build a culturally inclusive classroom environment that promotes equality, respect, care, diversity, and mutual understanding (Porto, 2010). Reinforcement that encourages engagement and feedback plays a role in cultivating shared interests and maintaining a respectful classroom environment (Sybing, 2019).

Non-verbal communication is equally important. Effective teachers recognize the significance of body language, gestures, and eye contact in fostering a positive classroom environment (Duţă, 2015). Despite the rapid increase of digital communication tools, students continue to value direct face-to-face contact with their teachers, and strong communication qualities in both teachers and students contribute to the cognitive and psycho-affective growth (Duţă, 2015). Learner-centered instruction and collaborative learning approaches reinforce this dynamic by sharing classroom control with students, encouraging open communication, and allowing students' involvement in curriculum decisions, all of which are fundamental to learning success (Santana, 2019).

Cultural diversity in ELT settings, however, can complicate rapport-building. Cultures oriented towards individualism tend to emphasise personal goals and recognition, whereas collectivist cultures tie goals more closely to the social group (Hofstede, 1980).

In collectivist societies, social harmony holds particular significance, and non-verbal cues are commonly used to convey positive feelings (Shoaib, 2023). For example, students from Asian contexts may perceive eye contact and tone as indicators of credibility and emotional closeness, underscoring the need for cultural adaptability in diverse classrooms.

A notable barrier to rapport building can be the teacher's lack of awareness. For instance, individual differences in personality, family backgrounds, academic goals, maturity levels, and learning styles require teachers to tailor their approach tos to diverse student needs (Coristine et al., 2022). Failure to do so may lead to relational difficulties. In fact, some teachers believe that caring for students is not within their job description, a viewpoint more prevalent in higher education. They argue that maintaining a certain distance between the teacher and students is necessary to maintain academic seriousness and that excessive support may undermine student independence (Pranjic & Zizanovic, 2021).

Methodology

This study was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University, the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS). The participants are 74 students enrolled in various English language courses offered by the CPS, spanning both the Foundation Program (FP) courses and credit-level English courses (LANC), and representing a range of proficiency levels as well as both males and females. This diverse population provided a broad perspective on student-teacher rapport, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the learning environment within the university's English language programs. Understanding how students perceive different aspects of their student-teacher rapport provides valuable insight into the dynamics of the learning environment and informs potential improvements in teaching practice.

For this study, the researchers adopted a mixed methods approach to investigate students' perceptions of rapport with their English language teachers. A survey of 23 items was conducted in English, employing a Likert scale ranging from one (Strongly Disagree/ Never) to five (Strongly Agree/ Always). To complement the quantitative data, the survey also included an open-ended question to elicit a broader range of responses from participants. Following the survey, the researchers conducted focus group interviews to deepen their understanding of students' learning experiences and to explore further themes emerging from the survey. Together, these methods yielded both quantitative trends and detailed qualitative data. The survey focused on multiple dimensions of rapport, each grounded in one or more theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

- General student-teacher relationship quality (Q1-Q4) in alignment with Rhetorical/Relational Goal Theory and Positive Psychology.
- Classroom environment and learning experience (Q5-Q12) based on Sociocultural Theory and Affective Pedagogy.
- Teacher as a role model and mentor (Q13-Q16) linked to Self-Determination Theory.
- Teacher communication and behavioral impact on rapport (Q17-Q21) framed by immediacy research, namely Yuan (2024).

Content validity was ensured through an expert review by a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) faculty member to ensure that the items appropriately reflected rapport constructs. Students received email invitations to participate voluntarily and anonymously,

and 74 consented to complete the survey. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify overall trends, followed by component analysis to determine underlying dimensions in students' perceptions of their teacher.

Following the survey, focus group interviews were conducted with a sample of 19 male and female students to explore broader experiences of student-teacher rapport. Each session was audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for analysis. Qualitative data from open-ended survey items and focus group interviews were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the two researchers jointly reviewed and discussed a sample of the data in a standardization session, aligning their interpretations and establishing a shared understanding of patterns and themes. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Committee, and all participants provided informed consent; they were assured that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and would not affect their course outcomes.

Results

Quantitative Results

The five-point Likert scale items were used to assess students' perceptions of student-teacher rapport across four main variables:

- General student-teacher relationship quality (Q1-Q4): Average score = 3.37
- Classroom environment and learning experience (Q5-Q12): Average score = 3.71
- Teacher as a role model and mentor (Q13-Q16): Average score = 3.84
- Teacher communication and behavioral impact on rapport (Q17-Q21): Average score = 3.85

The responses to the survey items range from 3.5 to 4.3. The overall mean score across all items is 3.7, suggesting generally positive perceptions of the teacher and the learning environment. Items that received the highest agreement include:

'I respect my teacher' with an average score of 4.3, indicating a high level of respect for the teacher. 'I enjoy interacting with my teacher' and 'My teacher is a role model', both with average scores around 4.2, reflecting strong positive attitudes toward the teacher's interpersonal style and mentoring role. However, items related to personal connection and emotional openness received relatively lower ratings. These include: 'I feel comfortable sharing personal information.' 'I have a close relationship with my teacher,' and 'My teacher helps me grow personally.' Each of these items received below 3.9, indicating a more reserved perception towards aspects of rapport that extend beyond the academic domain.

Overall, the data indicate that students hold their teachers in high regard, particularly in terms of respect, classroom interaction, and professional modeling. Nonetheless, there is slightly less affirmation in areas related to deeper personal rapport and emotional closeness.

Results per Statement

Table 1. *Mean scores of survey items measuring student-teacher rapport*

Item	Code	Mean (4.3)
I enjoy interacting with my teacher.	Q1	3.92
I feel comfortable sharing personal information with my teacher.	Q2	3.20
I have a close relationship with my teacher.	Q3	3.24
I feel there is a "bond" between my teacher and me.	Q4	3.12
My teacher makes the class enjoyable.	Q5	3.99
I look forward to seeing my teacher in class.	Q6	3.57
I feel my teacher encourages me to succeed.	Q7	3.96
My teacher creates a feeling of warmth in our relationship.	Q8	3.32
I feel I have learned more from this teacher than from others.	Q9	3.68
My teacher acknowledges my efforts in the class.	Q10	3.73
My teacher helps me grow academically.	Q11	3.92
My teacher helps me grow personally.	Q12	3.51
My teacher is a role model.	Q13	3.53
I view my teacher as a mentor.	Q14	3.62
I respect my teacher.	Q15	4.35
I would like to take other classes taught by my teacher.	Q16	3.85
My teacher maintains eye contact with me.	Q17	3.64
My teacher's body language is approachable.	Q18	3.96
My teacher encourages questions and comments from students.	Q19	4.31
My teacher shows interest in my well-being.	Q20	3.64
I understand what my teacher expects of me.	Q21	3.68
	Average	3.7

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data gathered from student responses provided rich insights into how learners feel and experience rapport with their teachers. Analyzing the open-ended responses and interviews showed common themes related to the affective and interpersonal aspects of the student-teacher relationship. These themes include emotional support, recognition and trust, respect and professionalism, motivation and academic success, and teaching style. Emotional support emerged as a central theme even in the simplest form. A greeting of 'Hi' or an inquiry about a student's absence was perceived as meaningful evidence of care. One student described her teacher as "the mom of the class," showing how deeply students appreciate warmth and care. "She was so supportive... She has, like, a psychological degree or certificate, which helped me a lot." (Participant's original words.) "She cares, and she is friendly and nice at the same time, like the mom of the class." Second, recognition from teachers contributes significantly to students' sense of value and capability. The way teachers trust and look at students is reflected in how students look at themselves. "When my teacher makes me the leader of something, or gives me... important papers... that's when I think I'm great." These quotes are indicators that small gestures of trust from teachers can help students feel empowered and capable.

Third, students frequently emphasized the importance of being treated with respect and fairness. Many students described their interactions with teachers using words such as 'professional,' 'respectful,' and 'friendly,' underscoring the crucial role that mutual respect plays in fostering a positive and effective classroom environment. For example, students stated, "We must keep it professional, respect each other, and be friendly with each other;" "they're not our friends. We must keep it professional...;" "the relationship must be friendly, but also professional;" "we have limits with the teacher, we need to be respected both ways." Another prominent theme was the teacher's role in students' overall motivation and academic success. Students expressed appreciation for teachers who establish a strong rapport, as it impacts their motivation to do well in the course. Quotes like "If I had a good relationship with my teacher, I will do my best to challenge these difficulties", "If it was positive, I would do my best to succeed and get high grade in that class so they can see me in a good way" and "If the teacher was not that good, I will be lazy to come" suggest that rapport directly impacts motivation. When students feel supported, they're more likely to persist through academic challenges.

Poor student-teacher rapport or low teaching quality can demotivate students and negatively impact their attendance. Students widely appreciated teachers who demonstrated emotional warmth, friendliness, and respect, and they also valued teachers who used engaging teaching methods. Effective rapport, according to some, also meant being engaged in the lesson in a way that builds trust and credibility. "I feel close to the teacher when we have games and engaging activities because he is funny." "I don't like to participate in class when the teacher is boring. Some teachers only lecturing lecturing lecturing." This indicates that teaching style plays a major role in establishing a strong rapport with students.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of English language teachers, focusing mainly on the effects of their relationship on engagement, classroom enjoyment, and motivation. Analysis of the Likert-scale and open-ended survey responses, along with focus group interviews, revealed that students generally hold positive perceptions of their English language teachers, with respect and understanding emerging as the most valued qualities. These elements contribute significantly to creating positive learning environments and enriching classroom experiences.

The majority of survey respondents indicated that a strong rapport with their teachers boosted their motivation, sense of respect, and confidence. Statements such as "I respect my teacher" and "My teacher encourages questions and comments" scored high averages of 4.1 and 4.3, respectively, which indicates a sense of appreciation on the students' part for open communication and mutual respect. Another aspect that appeared to consolidate rapport was non-verbal behaviors, such as eye contact and body language, which scored an average of 4.2. These subtle cues help students feel more connected to and supported by their teachers.

These results show that teachers who demonstrate care and respect toward students through both verbal and non-verbal communication significantly enhance students' overall classroom experience. The results clearly show a direct link between teacher encouragement and students' willingness to participate and improve. One student highlighted this in the open-ended responses, noting that the teacher "motivates me to try harder." This demonstrates that teacher encouragement not only cultivates students' desire to improve but also actively shapes their academic performance and supports personal growth. The results also highlight the importance of individualized attention, with students giving the statement "My teacher encourages questions and comments from

students" a high average score of 4.1. This suggests that when teachers actively invite student input, it fosters a more engaging and participatory learning environment.

These results align with those of Santana (2019) and Meng (2021), whose research highlighted a strong correlation between student-teacher rapport and improved academic performance. Similar to the results of the current study, Syahabuddin, Fhonna, and Maghfirah (2020) concluded that inviting student input and reducing fear of participation are positively correlated with good student-teacher rapport. Yuan (2024) also found a positive correlation between teachers' clear and expressive communication and student engagement and active participation, a finding supported in this study by students' appreciation of their teachers' immediacy behaviors. Furthermore, Xu et. al. (2026) emphasized the vital role of mutual respect, a theme that emerged from both Likert-scale and open-ended responses in the current study, as a core component in the language classroom.

Despite the generally high average scores on the Likert scale for motivation, confidence, and respect, not all students reported a strong rapport with their teachers. For instance, one student stated, "I don't care about my relationship with the teacher," suggesting that not all learners see relational dynamics as central to their learning. Furthermore, statements about sharing personal information and perceived influence on personal development scored lower, potentially due to cultural norms that discourage emotional transparency with authority figures, such as teachers, or due to personal comfort levels. These findings suggest that while many students value emotional and interpersonal connections, others may prefer a more formal relationship with their language teachers.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on both qualitative and quantitative findings, this study concludes that Omani EFL Foundation and Credit Courses' students generally hold positive attitudes toward their relationship with English language teachers, particularly in terms of respect, communication, and encouragement. While the results from the quantitative data revealed higher scores for Likert-scale statements about respect, classroom engagement, and inviting student input and participation, qualitative responses highlighted how aspects of teacher immediacy, such as listening, showing care, and modeling respectful behavior, increase student motivation and support their self-confidence.

Although previous research has established the general importance of positive student-teacher rapport, the current study contributes new insights by exploring these dynamics in the Omani higher education EFL context. Students value reciprocal respect and opportunities to express their voices; however, respect for authority figures, such as teachers, remains important. It is important to note that, for Omani students, teachers' expression of warmth and friendliness is not the only contributor to building positive student-teacher rapport; teachers' professionalism, punctuality, and being prepared for lessons seem to be valued by students as well. Cultural norms in the Omani context, particularly those related to hierarchy and personal boundaries, differ from those in Western educational contexts, which explains this finding.

Based on these findings, several context-specific recommendations for practice can be made. First, teachers need to be aware that professionalism may be as important as affective behaviors. They need to serve as role models by prioritizing punctuality, preparedness, and fairness, and view them as basic building blocks to establishing respectful student-teacher relationships. Second, students reported that when teachers acknowledged their opinions and

welcomed their contributions, it positively influenced their motivation. In light of this, teachers should create opportunities and spaces for students' voices in the language classroom through reflective discussions and collaborative tasks to encourage their contributions, while also respecting cultural norms. Third, teachers' non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice, was revealed to signal to students whether their teacher is approachable. Although classroom size and curriculum constraints may limit teachers at times, they should remain attentive to such cues in order to build strong rapport with their students. Reflective teaching could be helpful in this regard, as teachers can use tools to utilize reflective tools such as surveys to collect meaningful data on classroom interactions and dynamics. Finally, it is important to be aware of cultural boundaries when designing interactive tasks, like group work and discussions. Teachers should design engaging tasks carefully to avoid pressuring students to share personal information beyond their comfort zones. These insights underscore the importance of teacher training programs that incorporate communication skills and promote cultural awareness to meet diverse student needs. Building rapport should not be viewed as a soft skill but as a key pedagogical tool that enhances learning outcomes and fosters supportive language classrooms.

Although this study is based in Oman, the findings are relevant to other EFL contexts where teacher authority and cultural sensitivities overlap with modern pedagogical approaches. In regions with similar sociocultural dynamics, such as other Gulf countries, the emphasis on professional respect, student voice within safe structures, and teacher immediacy can inform practice. This study underscores the importance of contextualized rapport-building, reminding educators and policymakers that relational strategies must align with students' cultural norms and comfort levels.

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About the Authors:

Ahoud Al Hattali is a Senior Language Instructor at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, with over 10 years of teaching experience. She holds a BA degree in Education from Sultan Qaboos University and an MA degree in TESOL from the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her areas of interest include educational technology
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3009-8482

Yasmeen Al Tai is a Senior Language Instructor at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, with 15 years of experience. She holds a Bachelor's degree from Sultan Qaboos University and a Master's in TESOL from the University of Stirling, Scotland. Her areas

of interest include curriculum design and language assessment
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1969-6883

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