

11. Building rapport with learners

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Principles

What is rapport?

- “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” (Brown, 1994, p.202).
- Rapport, or the trust between teachers and students, is “the affective glue binding educational relationships together” (Brookfield, 1990, p.163).

Why is rapport important in language learning?

- Rapport encourages learners to enhance their learning experience by taking risks, challenging themselves, asking questions, and making continuous efforts (Stipek, 2006).
- Rapport is a key element of teaching, as optimal teacher-student rapport and a comfortable classroom environment leads to higher achievement (Nguyen, 2007).

Attachment Theory

- Attachment theory explains how supportive relationship between teachers and students enable students to organize their learning, to feel safe when making mistakes, and to confront challenges (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2010).

Self-Determination Theory

- Self-determination theory explains the significance of motivation and how teacher-student relationships enable learners to enhance their competence (feel capable of academic work), autonomy (ability to make decisions), and relatedness (feel socially connected), which are fundamental psychological needs of the students (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2010).

Research findings on rapport in the classroom

Interactional resources to build rapport (Nguyen, 2007)

- The study found that teachers incorporate multiple interactional resources, which include the following: calling-to-attention sequence, the correction sequence, the summarization sequence, and co-construction of rapport, which create positive social relationships between the teacher and students.
- In the calling-to-attention sequence, the teacher gave clear instructions by giving commands in the question form, used the pronoun ‘we,’ clapped hands to gain attention, used a loud voice, and mentioned the lesson content.
- In the correction sequence, the teacher provided the correct form with a smile, tried to implicitly elicit the students’ self-correction, drew attention to the error, and softened face-threatening acts.
- In the summarization sequence, the teacher summarized the lesson so that the students could recapture the lesson and relate the content to their everyday lives.
- For co-construction of rapport, there were features of students co-constructing rapport in the classroom, which were established through active and reciprocal initiation and maintenance of building rapport.

Relationship between rapport and affective factors

- Positive relationships between students and teachers enabled students to have more positive self-beliefs, greater self-efficacy, and higher motivation (Ma, Du, Hau & Liu, 2018).

Relationship between rapport and academic achievement

- A positive student-teacher relationship in class led to higher academic performance, which was shown in an English performance test (Ma et al., 2018)

Instruments to investigate teacher-student relationships (as summarized in Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2010)

- Student-teacher relationship scale (STRS) is a teacher-report instrument that measures the teacher's perception of conflict, closeness, and dependency with a specific child (Saft & Pianta, 2001).
- Teacher-student relationship inventory (TSRI) investigates teachers' satisfaction with their students, perceptions of their own teaching practice or conflicts with their students (Ang, 2005).
- Classroom assessment scoring system (CLASS) measures the positive and negative classroom atmosphere and the teacher's sensitivity to such atmosphere (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2006).
- Assessment of learner-centered practices (ALCP) identifies the differences between the teacher and the students' perceptions (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Miller, 2006).
- Feelings about school looks into students' perception toward their relationships with teachers and overall feelings toward school (Valeski & Stipek, 2001).
- Loneliness and social dissatisfaction questionnaire for young children investigates students' feelings of loneliness and negative factors of peer relationship (Cassidy & Asher, 1992).
- Teacher treatment inventory looks into students' perception of the teacher's behaviors (Weinstein & Marshall, 1984).

Tips for teachers

1. Things to consider in particular educational contexts (Stipek, 2006)

- When teaching young children, listen to their concerns, respond to their misbehavior in a gentle manner with explanations, show positive emotions (smiles, being playful), and be attentive and fair.
- When teaching adolescents, treat them as individuals, express interest in their personal lives, give opportunities for decision-making and expressing opinions, and be a caring, honest, fair, and trusting teacher.
- When teaching students who you find it particularly difficult to establish rapport with, make special efforts to show a personal interest, interact positively, compliment positive behaviors, listen to their problems and concerns, and work together to address those issues.

2. Importance of teacher credibility and authenticity (Brookfield, 1990)

- Teacher credibility refers to teachers who have knowledge, deep insight, experiences that far exceeds those of the students, becoming a role model who has subject and skill expertise.
- Teacher authenticity refers to teachers whom students perceive as a person with passion, weaknesses, and feelings. Such teachers have congruent words and actions, acknowledge their own errors, and respect learners by listening carefully to them.
- One of the challenges for teachers for building good relationships with students is to keep the balance between credibility and authenticity. Teachers should raise credibility by showing knowledge and expertise while they establish authenticity by believing the importance of education and expecting students' great progress.

3. Do's and Don'ts of establishing rapport (Brookfield, 1990; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2010)

Do's:

- Get to know the students' personalities and interests and cope with their individual characteristics flexibly. It is also important to have knowledge about the students' backgrounds, emotions, strengths and weaknesses, and academic levels. For instance, if a student is shy and never raises his/her hand in class, teachers can check their understanding in a one-on-one conversation. Another example is when a student who loves basketball comes to ask a question, teachers can explain how to solve his/her question relating to basketball.
- Listen carefully to students' voices and check if they have any concerns, anxieties, or concerns. It is important to give students time to express their thoughts without interrupting.

Don'ts:

- Don't give up easily on students or classrooms that are especially difficult to build rapport with.
- Don't assume rapport to be important to only for younger learners, as older learners equally benefit from such positive teacher-student relationships.
- Don't stream students according to their proficiency levels, as it has the possibility of teachers giving special treatment to certain students, which could make some students feel less supported and valued by teachers.
- Don't be impatient or be annoyed by students when they are having trouble comprehending.

4. Classroom practices to build rapport and engage students (Kim, 2017)

Know students' names

- Get familiar with the list of students' names ahead of time.
- Include self-introduction activities and games so that both the teacher and students can remember each other's names.

Know students beyond just their names

- Get to know students' likes, dislikes, interests, and their daily life.

Incorporate team-building exercises

- Word tag is an activity for students to start a conversation with one another. Each student receives a slip of paper with one word (nouns are preferred) and a name of a classmate, who will be his/her partner. The student tries to elicit the word from his/her partner by asking questions.
- Laughter yoga is an activity where the teacher students simply laugh and smile at the beginning of the class to create a positive atmosphere suitable for learning.
- Post-it notes could be used in the classroom in two ways: distributing them randomly with students' names so that students can write compliments to the person written on the post-it or using them to share the opinions anonymously on a serious topic.

Ask open-ended questions

- Incorporating open-ended questions in the classrooms enables the teacher and students to know each other better and to engage in a more meaningful talk. Open-ended questions are questions with multiple possible answers such as "What kinds of books do you like to read?" or "What are some things that bring you the most joy?" Teachers do not have a predetermined answer in mind when asking such questions. It is also the role of teachers to ask follow-up questions to the students' answers to keep the conversation going whenever necessary.

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