Stressing Rapport to Achieve Goals in EFL/ESL Classrooms

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Teaching English at the university level in Japan has been a challenging but rewarding experience. The nature of the subject itself sets it apart from most courses based on a body of content. What separates foreign language education from other academic subjects is the component of socialization in the classroom; that between teacher and student as well as between student and student. The role of the classroom environment and its accompanying affective filter, that theorizes psychological factors at play influence learning positively or negatively *(Krashen, 1982)*, and uniquely characterizes EFL/ESL education. Stressing rapport building through verbal and non-verbal strategies as well as classroom management may be beneficial in creating a better learning environment and better academic outcomes.

1. A Working Definition of Rapport

Rapport originally comes from the French word *rapport* meaning to bring back, according to *Merriam-Webster*. Rapport is now commonly meant to mean a friendly harmonious relationship, similar to the Japanese translation *chowa*. *Merriam-Webster* further notes *rapport* is especially identified with relationships characterized by mutual understanding or empathy that makes communication easy. *Random House* simply defines *rapport* a harmonious or sympathetic connection.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker, J. Palmer argues that connecting with students should be a concern for all teachers and goes so far as to say he considers methodology secondary to connectedness in creating a better learning environment *(Palmer, 1998)*. Two prominent studies measuring teacher-student rapport; *Student-Instructor-Rapport Scale-9 (Lammers, 2012)* and *Professor-Student Rapport Scale (Wilson, Ryan & Pugh, 2010)* while significant and of considerable relevance were intended to access rapport in classes of first language students and instructors. Rapport can be measured to a degree as these surveys indicate but when it is perceived through the eyes of foreign language students what constitutes a definition may not be entirely clear. Its meaning even between first language speakers can vary from person to person, according to the people we seek to engage and the situations we engage them in. We see in daily life how perceptions of rapport between people is often at odds; the employee who is shocked to learn of her dismissal, the husband who is speechless when his wife asks for a divorce or the teacher who is bewildered at his negative student evaluations. How then can the term "rapport" be used effectively as a strategy for ESL teachers when its definition is nebulous, elusive and without consensus? Perhaps a concrete definition of rapport is less important for teaching purposes than the recognition that through conscious modifications of teacher behavior, relationships can be positively or negatively effected.

2. The Case for Striving for Better Rapport

Renowned linguist Stephen Krashen aptly identified in his theory of second language acquisition a unique learning process students go through. Second language acquisition he contends is a subconscious process where students learn naturally, without grammar rules, much in the way children learn their native language *(Krashen, 1982)*. Second language learning advocates by contrast emphasize grammar rules students are consciously

aware of. There are proponents of both teaching philosophies. At the university level in Japan, native speakers of English often tend to take a more communicative approach favored by proponents of second language acquisition theory, while homegrown instructors often favor a more grammatical approach as second language learning supporters promote. What is rare in my experience is an instructor who exclusively uses one teaching method or the other. In reality, most teachers are likely use a combination of communicative and rule based styles. The merits or demerits of any particular teaching methodology are not contemplated here, rather the intention is to show how stressing rapport; presents learning opportunities, helps emphasize teaching goals, makes learning more relevant, strives for inclusion, emphasizes fairness and in general reduces factors that impede language learning.

Can students learn with no emotional connectedness with an instructor? The obvious answer is, of course they can. There are boundless examples of learning through books, videos, online lectures et cetera, where the student has no or minimal emotional investment. When we want to know how to install the latest computer software, lay cement for a patio or how to cook a turkey for ten people, we may turn to *Wikihow, Youtube* or *Cookpad* that can possibly provide the comprehensible information we need quickly and effectively. In such cases, our need is clear, our motivation is high, our attention is focused; what could be described as ideal learning conditions. These factors correlate what many scholars identify as key elements for superior learning in general to take place *(Chugani, 1998), (Pawlak, Magarinos, Melchor, McEwen & Strickland, 2003)*. Miao Yu *(Willingness to Communicate of Foreign Language Learners in a Chinese Setting, 2009)* concluded from her research motivation and attitude toward the learning situation had the most significant power to predict a willingness to communicate. Krashen *(Krashen, 1982)* famously insists that the presence of an affective filter (the presence of negative psychological factors) hinders language learning. Sven A. Christianson *(Christianson, 1992)* concurs, stating, "Cognitive psychology studies provide clinical evidence that stress, boredom,

confusion, low motivation, and anxiety can individually, and more profoundly in combination, interfere with learning." Kathryn R. Wentzel attributes a desire to learn and motivation leading to academic improvement to a positive teacher-student relationship *(Wentzel, 1998)*. To create an environment more conducive to learning, establish immediacy with students described as psychological availability *(Mehrabian, 1968)* help motivate students, lower the anxiety of students, enhance student confidence and in effect lower the affective filter in the classroom that Krashen refers to, building rapport with our students may go a long way in achieving these goals.

3. Building Rapport with Students

One of the most helpful and enduring pieces of teaching wisdom I have received through the years came from an older colleague who told me, "Some days will be good, others not so, but just remember that, it's rarely about you." I took this to mean a paraphrased version of *The Serenity Prayer (Reinhold Niebuhr, 1934)*. Accept the things you cannot change, change the things that should be changed and learn to tell the difference. As many in the teaching profession can attest to, there are an abundance of things beyond ones control or pay grade. Quite often university teachers it seems have little or no control over the classes they are assigned to teach, the hours of their classes, the size of their classes, the abilities of the students and their range of abilities. Some teachers have little control over curriculum or textbooks, in other cases it may be the physical size, location or limitations of the classroom itself. More importantly, there are variety of things pertaining to our students that are out of our control to a lesser or greater extent. They may be working at a late night part-time job or belong to a club or activity that drains their energy and denies them sleep. They may have family or financial troubles that can affect their mood and concentration. They may have a history of personal, social, physical et al. problems we are unaware of. I subscribe to the theory that schools and classrooms

are a microcosm of society and "You play with the hand you're dealt."

Regardless of existential factors how then can teachers help their students succeed in an EFL classroom? The psychological case for building rapport to boost academic performance has considerable support. Wentzel *(Wentzel, 1998)* asserts that better student-teacher relationship stokes motivation in students leading them to improved academic performance. Cavell, Hughes & Jackson *(Cavell, Hughes & Jackson, 1999)* claim students' perception of their relationship with a teacher is likely to improve classroom achievement. Brilliant *(Brilliant, Lavish & Markson, 1995)* in a study of immigrants to the United States concludes when self-confidence and motivation are low, learning English proves more difficult. Yolanda Reinoso Barzallo identifies four affective factors that hinder language learning; inhibition, attitude, level of anxiety, and self-esteem. Eliminating negative psychological factors in the classroom and promoting positive ones then, is one of my main goals as a language teacher. Lowering of the affective filter Krashen describes *(Krashen, 1982)*, broadly interpreted, is the primary reason teachers should consider implementing rapport building strategies in their classrooms.

How teachers present themselves to students, how they behave in class and how they relate to their students is an element of teaching largely (albeit, not completely) within the control of the teacher. Through teachers' verbal and non-verbal actions, students form perceptions Wilson, Ryan and Pugh contend in their surveys measuring teacher-student rapport *(Wilson, Ryan & Pugh, 2010)*. They go on to claim that the student perception of teacher-student rapport is so indicative of academic outcomes that questions to measure it should be included in all teacher/class evaluations. Below is a list of verbal and non-verbal strategies, which teachers may consider in efforts to build and maintain rapport with their EFL/ESL students. The list is not meant to be exhaustive or all-inclusive but rather to bring attention to things we as teachers can consciously do to better connect and hopefully better teach our students. Nor is the list meant to be prescriptive. The personality of an individual teacher will

determine which strategies he or she is comfortable implementing. Penny Ur *(Ur, 1996)* commenting on teacher personality and effectiveness goes so far as to assert that some teachers in spite of efforts in the classroom lack the right personality for a specific classroom to competently teach. Christopher Murray, *(Murray, 2005)* identified the personality traits of liberalism and extroversion as common characteristics of effective EFL teachers according to student surveys. Some personality types may be better suited to teaching physics and some to EFL he claims *(Murray, 2005)*. While not entirely agreeing with their assessments, I would contend after thirty years of teaching EFL at the university level that employing more rapport building strategies can substantially benefit teacher-student connectedness and immediacy. Each of the suggestions below may not be suitable or realistic for any particular teacher. Improving rapport in the classroom will depend on which strategies a teacher is comfortable with and work best for him or her.

Verbal Strategies

* Learning and using students' names.
* Using respectful but casual conversation to strategic ends.
* Asking individuals about themselves, their activities and interests.
* Sharing pertinent information about yourself to strategic ends.
* Explaining what you expect them to do for tasks, tests and reports.
* Asking about understanding collectively and individually.
* Praising comments, questions and effort.
* Disciplining fairly and dispassionately.
* Talking to students before and after class.
* Using humor and bringing up socially convergent topics.

Non-Verbal Strategies

* Coming early, staying late.
* Smiling, making eye contact.

* Moving around the room, moving students around the room.
* Spending time with individuals and groups equitably.
* Sharing the stage and blackboard.
* Writing helpful and motivational comments on papers.
* Pacing the class to student needs.
* Updating students on their course status (attendance and scores).
* Attending school events, festivals and games.
* Maintaining office hours, being accessible.

What effect these strategies have on student performance may differ from student to student, teacher to teacher, and class to class. Modifications to routines and observation will give better insight to their effectiveness. Professor John Fanselow of Columbia University Teachers College contends the way to gauge modifications is through observation *(Fanselow, 1987)*. It seems logical to assume if teachers never modify their behaviors, their results are unlikely to change. The flip side of this is to make extreme modifications or constant ones. In these scenarios confidently ascertaining which modification or to what degree a modification has affected students can be difficult. Much like eliminating a certain food from a diet and then observing the effects, food allergies can be diagnosed more accurately than by say, eliminating nuts, eggs, milk and fish simultaneously. Fanselow proposes making small, isolated changes in the classroom, observing and then analyzing their effects *(Fanselow, 1987)*. What positively affects one class, may not with another. Similarly, how individual students reaction to modifications may not be uniform. In summation, connecting with students and developing rapport with students might be described as a moving target. Within an EFL classroom it would be common to have students from different cultures and backgrounds, students with a range of abilities and obviously students with unique personalities and receptiveness to different teaching styles. Understanding these classroom dynamics better,

understanding how as teachers our behavior affects our students and striving to improve connectedness seems an essential initial step to advancing the concept of building better rapport in the classroom.

As Fanselow would remind us; observation makes the unclear, clearer.

4. Using Rapport Building Strategies to Achieve Classroom Goals

Most experienced teachers can tell you, that in addition to the student-teacher relationship, student-student relationships are another critical dynamic in the classroom. It is quickly apparent within the classroom setting, which students are more social and which are more introverted, who tends to gravitate towards groups and who tends to be more isolated. Which students are attentive and which aren't. The communicative aspect of language classes differentiates them to a great extent from other academic classes. Teachers of EFL/ESL classes, especially larger ones often use group work or pair work in lessons. For the more social, talkative or popular students, this is rarely a problem and they seem to effortlessly take part in such activities. In fact, during such activities social convergence and social divergence may become even more apparent. Left unattended, this situation can become a source of embarrassment or stress to some students. Loneliness in the classroom and in society in general is such a concern that British Prime Minister felt compelled to appoint a "Minister of Loneliness." Some students may prefer to isolate themselves and learn alone. My experience with students at the university level suggests lonely students are not so by choice. No teacher can turn the most introverted student into an extreme socialite or a lonely student into the most popular but by stressing inclusiveness one common negative factor can be removed from the classroom. How teachers deal with the social dynamic in the classroom can raise or

lower the affective filter to learning for some students. Chandra Muller adds to the better learning environment argument contending that students derive additional social capital benefits from a positive classroom setting that can result in positive outcomes in various ways including drop out rates *(Muller, 2001)*. In creating a more positive classroom setting, teachers may consider some modifications.

Inclusiveness Strategies

  * Having a seating chart.
  * Using a lottery for pair work.
  * Using circular seating.
  * Having team activities.
  * Giving equitable opportunities.
  * Using speed dating type activities.
  * Setting students up for success.
  * Using participation as a part of grades.
  * Confessing your weak points.
  * Compensating for individual differences.

Success in creating an inclusive classroom can depend on a variety of factors especially class size and composition of students, which unfortunately may be out of teacher control. Nancy Bailey expands on the benefits of lower class size pointing out how smaller classrooms allow teachers to get to know students better and how students socialize better with peers *(Bailey, 2018)*. Some strategies may work better in certain situations and have different results for different teachers. Through making modifications and observations, conclusions can best be drawn *(Fanselow, 1987)*. What I have found to be essential to the success of these strategies is to make them part of the classroom routine from day one. By making clear to all students that pair work and group work are part of the class, an essential part, and that they will be graded on their participation, by making clear the class is to be viewed as a community where interactions with each person are to be expected and respected and by making clear

the benefits all students receive by making their world of acquaintances a little bigger. The latter point was convincingly argued in the article *Variety Of Casual Acquaintances Affects Success And Health (Erickson, 2003)*. Communicating clear classroom policy initially helps avoid the appearance of micromanaging social interaction in the class while reserving the option of purposefully promoting inclusion of all students in all activities. If the teacher gives up this role inclusion may not occur naturally. Aside from the primary goal of classroom inclusion as a strategy to lower the affective filter, there is evidence a more controlled social environment, including seating charts, leads to better learning for all students *(Hammang, 2012)*.

5. Side Conversations

For students in EFL classes, opportunities to use the language have most likely been limited. Side conversations, before, during and after class give valuable listening and speaking opportunities. As the teacher-student relationship evolves through accumulated interactions more meaningful dialogue can take place.

Interaction #1
    Teacher: Hi, Daisuke.
    Student: (Silent)
    Teacher: Hi.
    Student: Hi.

Interaction #2
    Teacher: Hi, Daisuke.
    Student: Hi.
    Teacher: I see your sports bag. (Points) Do you like sports?
    Student: Yes, I do.
    Teacher: I do too. Are you in a club?
    Student: Hai. (Japanese)
    Teacher: Yeah? What club?
    Student: Baseball.

Teacher: Great.

Interaction #3

Teacher: Hi, Daisuke.
Student: Hi.
Teacher: How are you?
Student: (Silent)
Teacher: Me? I'm fine. How are you?
Student: Fine.
Teacher: How is baseball? Fine?
Student: Fine.
Teacher: What position do you play?
Student: Pitcher.
Teacher: Ahh, Darvish has five pitches. Fastball, slider, curve, change and shoot, right? (Using gestures) How about you?
Student: Straight, curve.
Teacher: Fastball and curve. Great!

In this example, the focus is on giving Daisuke an opportunity to communicate in English with as much support as possible. Using prompts, body language, comprehensible language and minimal pressure. This conversation would ideally take place semi-privately with only students nearby able to listen. Paramount to the interaction is making Daisuke understand the teacher wants him to succeed, not forcing English beyond his abilities. Accepting less than perfect answers in side conversations communicates to students that the teacher values what they have to say. The how part can always be addressed in the formal lesson. At this point, after three interactions, the teacher has a good idea about Daisuke's English level, whether he is reticent to speak, what he has an interest in and an idea on what he needs to work on to improve his spoken English. Note taking on seating charts may help teachers keep track of talking points. While at least a part of most English teachers' lessons are "teacher centered", the focus in side conversations is "student centered." Conversations can be extrapolated or condensed accordingly. Side conversations give the teacher the opportunity to recognize the uniqueness of each student and communicate

to them their uniqueness and current English level is understood and appreciated.

English lessons in EFL/ESL classes usually focus on a particular grammatical structure, vocabulary, or some functional purpose. However, teachers present this material in a lesson, it can be reinforced by using side conversations as a rapport building strategy.

> Teacher: Hi, Daisuke.
> Student: Hi.
> Teacher: Hey. The Giants won last night. Are you a Giants fan?
> Students: No. (Pause) Lotte.
> Teacher: I have been to Tokyo Dome but I haven't been to ZOZO Marine Stadium. Have you been there?
> Student: Yes.
> Teacher: How many times have you been there?
> Student: Two times.
> Teacher: Have you been to Tokyo Dome?
> Student: No.
> Teacher: You really gotta go. It's amazing!

Prior to this conversation, it has been established that Daisuke has limited speaking skills, may be reticent to speak in class and has some interest in baseball. If, for example, the target grammatical structure of the day is using the present perfect tense to express experience the teacher may use examples that are more relevant to a student. By using examples with some relevance to a student, teachers set the student up for success.

6. Rapport Building and Classroom Management

The perception of good rapport with a teacher has been shown to have a strong positive correlation with good academic outcomes *(Wilson, Ryan & Pugh, 2010)*. As educators we celebrate such progress. Establishing a connection through rapport building strategies can provide a path to this ultimate goal. Rapport

building also helps the teachers in various other ways. Classroom management in general and discipline with disruptive, disengaged students specifically can present challenges for teachers at all levels. It has been my experience that with students who fall into this category, they usually behave in counter productive ways as a defense mechanism. Perhaps the rationale is, by showing disinterest, disengaging or disrupting the class they will somehow save face. The earlier the teacher engages in rapport building strategies, the sooner the root of the problem can be diagnosed. Does the student have the textbook? Is the book open to the right page? Can he or she read the material? Does the student know what to do? What vocabulary doesn't he or she understand? Does he or she know how to find the meaning of these words? If the class is way beyond the student's ability, what are the options? Changing sections? Modifying the lesson? Giving special assignments? Are external factors involved? Are clubs, part-time jobs, long commutes et cetera causing problems? The point is that without engagement our efforts to resolve problems are less likely to be successful. The earlier the intervention occurs the quicker some type of resolution can be found. Building rapport with such students early on allows the teacher to establish and communicate parameters of acceptable behavior, lets the student know you are aware of his or her abilities and hopefully tells them their success is important to you. Building rapport doesn't imply relinquishing authority or the negotiation of policy. Instead, building rapport should be viewed in the overall context of classroom management strategies to promote better academic outcomes.

7. Conclusion

For many of us in the teaching profession, our motivation stems from a desire to help. For EFL/ESL teachers in particular, the love of content is generally secondary to the enjoyment we receive from interacting with students as they struggle to improve their English language skills. Much like the parent who teaches a

child to ride a bicycle, the explanation of physical instructions, the imparting of knowledge, is only a part of the process. Creating motivation, giving encouragement, analyzing weaknesses and most importantly picking them up after the inevitable falls are the parts of the process that give joy. Building rapport with students in EFL/ESL classrooms probably comes naturally to most in the profession for others the strategies described here may take some effort. Experimenting with strategies that promote connectedness between teacher and student, and student and student may benefit academic outcomes by eliminating psychology factors in our classroom environments that hinder learning.

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