



## **Establishing and Maintaining Rapport with Learners for Classroom Management: A Qualitative Inquiry into Iranian EFL Teachers' Cognition**

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** The present study sought to explore EFL teachers' cognition of rapport establishment and maintenance, as one of the aspects of classroom management, in the context of Iran's foreign language institutes' face-to-face EFL classes.

**Method:** The study involved 12 Iranian teachers who taught adult learners. The sample size was determined based on reaching saturation, and the participating teachers were selected through purposeful sampling. The main instrument utilized in this qualitative study was a semi-structured one-to-one in-person interview, which aimed to elicit the participants' cognition of rapport development. These individual interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically.

**Results:** The findings revealed that the participants believed in the importance of rapport creation for efficient classroom management. Besides, they recommended strategies for establishing rapport with learners, such as familiarization, verbal immediacy, non-verbal immediacy, attention to learners' emotions, judicious L1 use, playing games, and utilizing social media. Moreover, they held that teachers' personality traits and communication skills could impact their approach to building rapport.

**Conclusion:** Altogether, the participants had a sound cognition of rapport maintenance as one of the aspects of classroom management. The findings of the current study provide implications for teacher educators, teachers, and institutes' supervisors.

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## Introduction

Building rapport with learners is an essential aspect of classroom management (Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2012) and has a significant impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning in EFL classes (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2012). Language teachers play a determining role in their students' learning (Borg & Sanchez, 2020). As such, understanding language teachers' cognitions of rapport can provide valuable insights into how to improve classroom management in order to enhance students' learning experiences. Despite the fact that rapport establishment has been accepted as a crucial aspect of classroom management (Scrivener, 2011; Spratt et al., 2011), there is a dearth of research in this area, particularly in the Iranian EFL context. Besides, little is known about how Iranian EFL teachers perceive rapport as a classroom management element. These are gaps in the literature which need to be addressed, since findings of research in this regard aid in designing and developing more effective teacher education and professional development programs for Iranian EFL teachers, which can ultimately lead to improved teaching and learning. Moreover, results of such inquiry contribute to improvement of classroom management in the EFL context of Iran. Therefore, because of the significance of teachers' cognitions (Borg, 2019; Li, 2020) and due to the importance of rapport development for classroom management (Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2015), to address the gaps in the literature, the present study sought to explore Iranian EFL teachers' cognitions with respect to establishing and maintaining rapport with learners for classroom management in face-to-face EFL classes of foreign language institutes in Iran, by answering the following research question:

What are foreign language institutes' EFL teachers' cognitions of rapport as an aspect of classroom management in face-to-face classes in the EFL context of Iran?

## Literature Review

### Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition, as a psychologically heterogeneous concept (Feryok, 2020), is an inclusive term that refers to "the unobservable dimension of teachers' professional lives" (Borg, 2019). The definition of teacher cognition has been expanded over time. While Borg (2006) believes that teacher cognition, as an umbrella term for a range of mental and psychological constructs, encompasses teachers' thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge, Borg (2012) expounds that he does not intend to exclude emotions from teacher cognition inquiry since teachers' learning and professional practice are shaped by their emotional responses to their experiences. Likewise, Borg (2019) emphasizes that in addition to teachers' thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge, teacher cognition also encompasses teachers' emotions and feelings. Li (2020) goes even further by saying that the focus of teacher cognition research is on various aspects of teachers' professional lives including their beliefs, knowledge, conceptions, emotions, and interactive decisions. However, regardless of the theoretical and conceptual expansion that has happened, understanding teachers' cognition is still a "key to making sense of the process of becoming, being, and developing as a teacher" (Borg & Sanchez, 2020).

## Establishing and Maintaining Rapport for Classroom Management

Classroom management is a practical concept which is commonly used in language teacher education programs, because the skills which are required for managing a class are essential for every language teacher (Buchanan & Timmis, 2019). It is a complex phenomenon, yet it has rarely been investigated in research studies (e.g., Evertson & Weinstein, 2011; Todorova & Ivanova, 2020). It is a component of teachers' professional practice which is fundamental for successful teaching (Rinda & Indrastana, 2020). In fact, successful classroom management "may be the key to the whole success of a course" (Scrivener, 2011, 54).

Establishing and maintaining rapport with learners is one of the elements of classroom management (Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2012). Rapport refers to the successful professional relationship and connection between a teacher and her/his learners (Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2007; 2012; 2015), which is based on respect, support, trust, and friendliness (Brown & Lee, 2015; Scrivener, 2012). When the relationship between a teacher and their learners is satisfactory, they can focus on the lessons without having negative feelings (Harmer, 2012); hence, the quality of this relationship is of great importance (Scrivener, 2011; 2012).

Establishing rapport with learners leads to creating group identity (Harmer, 2015), positive energy (Brown & Lee, 2015), and appropriate atmosphere (Harmer, 2015) in a language class. Besides, it is vital for effective teaching and learning (Harmer, 2015), and increases learners' motivation (Harmer, 2012) and willingness to communicate (Song et al., 2022). In the absence of rapport or when it is not sufficient, learning becomes difficult since learners are preoccupied with feelings and emotions like boredom, nervousness, and mistrust (Harmer, 2012). In fact, being a rapport builder is one of the roles that teachers are expected to play in their classes in order to be successful classroom managers (Spratt et al., 2011).

There are strategies (Brown & Lee, 2015) which are recommended to language teachers for developing and establishing rapport with learners in a language class; e.g., showing interest in each learner as a person, respecting what learners think and say, laughing with learners and not at learners, and working with learners as a team. Similarly, Harmer (2015) presents recommendations for building rapport with learners in an English language class, such as treating learners equally and planning for learners' engagement in all the activities. Along the same lines, there are techniques recommended by Scrivener (2012) for establishing and maintaining rapport with learners in a language class; e.g., treating each learner as an individual, remembering positive characteristics of each learner, empathizing with learners, being yourself rather than 'the teacher', not faking happiness, being culturally sensitive, and avoiding sarcasm.

It should be noted that language teachers' classroom management is affected by their personality (Norouzi & Hassanpour, 2022). Likewise, according to Harmer (2012), what is conducted by teachers in order to develop, establish, and maintain rapport in a language class is influenced by their own personality, yet they should pay attention to learners' personality as well. Harmer (2012) adds that if a teacher wants to create rapport with learners, they need to feel that the teacher respects them. Scrivener (2012) believes that the level of friendship between teacher and her/his learners for establishing and maintaining rapport depends on the context (educational, social, and cultural).

## Method

### Participants

The participants of this qualitative study were twelve Iranian in-service EFL teachers who taught English language to adult learners in face-to-face classes at foreign language institutes in the Iranian EFL context. Out of the twelve participants, five were female and seven were male, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 10 years and an average of 6.7 years. Their ages varied from 24 to 39, with an average age of 28.9. They all had passed a Teacher Training Course (TTC) prior to starting their EFL teaching profession. The sample size was decided based on data saturation, which was the point at which collecting more data did not yield any new themes. The foreign language institutes were selected through convenience sampling, and the participants were chosen through purposeful sampling. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all the participating teachers, who were assigned a number for the purposes of anonymity and identification (T1, T2, T3, T4, etc.). Table 1 displays further information on the participants' demographic characteristics.

**Table 1.** *The Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

|     | Age | Gender | Teaching Experience | University Education (Educational Level) | Field of Study in the University |
|-----|-----|--------|---------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| T1  | 24  | Male   | 5 years             | BA graduate                              | management                       |
| T2  | 33  | Male   | 8 years             | MSc graduate                             | mechanical engineering           |
| T3  | 39  | Female | 10 years            | MA graduate                              | TEFL                             |
| T4  | 30  | Female | 10 years            | BSc graduate                             | computer engineering             |
| T5  | 25  | Female | 5 years             | BSc graduate                             | chemical engineering             |
| T6  | 25  | Male   | 5 years             | BSc graduate                             | civil engineering                |
| T7  | 28  | Male   | 9 years             | BSc graduate                             | electrical engineering           |
| T8  | 30  | Female | 6 years             | MA graduate                              | Management                       |
| T9  | 25  | Male   | 5 years             | BA graduate                              | English literature               |
| T10 | 26  | Male   | 5 years             | BSc graduate                             | civil engineering                |
| T11 | 26  | Male   | 5 years             | BSc graduate                             | computer engineering             |
| T12 | 36  | Female | 7 years             | BA graduate                              | Photography                      |

### Instrument

The data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one face-to-face interviews, which were conducted in English. A total of twelve interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting approximately an hour. A flexible interview guide was developed, which included a set of prepared questions. The guide was reviewed by a professional EFL teacher educator with a PhD in Applied Linguistics and over 20 years of experience educating EFL teachers at the university level. The interview guide was also piloted with three Iranian EFL teachers to identify any potential problems and was revised accordingly. The guide provided a starting point for the interviews, and the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and provide detailed explanations during the interviews. It included the following key questions:

- Do you think developing rapport with learners is necessary for classroom management in an EFL class? Why/why not?

- In your opinion, how can EFL teachers establish and maintain rapport with their learners?
- What factors do you consider with regard to rapport-building in your EFL classes?
- Is creating rapport in your classes easy for you as an EFL teacher? Why/why not?

### Data Collection Procedure

The researchers informed the participants about the purpose and process of the research and obtained their consent. Permission was gained for audio-recording the interview sessions. The first step was to administer the participants a demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to gather information about the participants' demographic information, such as age, gender, teaching experience, and educational background. After that, they participated in the individual interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Two gadgets were used simultaneously for recording the voice during the interview sessions: a Sony voice recorder and a mobile phone. These two audio recording gadgets were utilized simultaneously, to make sure that if technical problems happened for one of the gadgets, another audio file existed that could provide the interview data. The audio files were arranged immediately and precisely. Transcribing each interview session took about eight hours, and the transcripts of the interviews were checked twice in order to make sure that no mistakes were made. The data were not labeled in the participants' real names to protect the information about them. Each transcript included the participant identification number (assigned in advance) and date of recording.

### Data Analysis

The researchers utilized an iterative inductive data-driven process to analyze the data, which involved several steps such as reading, thinking, rereading, rethinking, coding, re-coding, and seeking themes. Dörnyei (2007) also explains this process as a sequence of transcribing, coding, re-coding, searching for themes, and making interpretations. After reading and re-reading the transcribed data and writing down the initial ideas, data coding began. The data were coded, and after a while they were re-coded. Then, the search for themes began by grouping the related codes into initial themes. In fact, the themes were generated after developing, revising, linking, and categorizing the codes. After that, the researchers explored the themes to find the potential connections among them. They searched for parallel, connected, or similar themes, moving from more particular themes to more general themes. By looking for interrelated themes, more patterns were developed. In essence, the primary objective of this process was to identify the patterns that emerged from the data. The process ultimately led to the interpretation of the themes, as described by Creswell (2014).

### Results

Seven main themes emerged from the transcribed interview data. Each of the emerged themes is presented, accompanied, and demonstrated by an instance or a few instances of what the participants stated in the interviews. The interview excerpts which accompany the themes or sub-themes are the most demonstrative instances of each theme or sub-theme, and have been chosen from among all of the representative interview excerpts; that is, they have been selected from among the instances that existed for each theme or sub-theme in all the 12 interviews.

## **Theme Number 1: Importance of Rapport**

The participants emphasized the importance of developing rapport with learners for effective classroom management. They believed that developing a positive professional relationship with learners and being friendly towards them could result in a supportive environment that helped learners feel more comfortable in the classroom, which in turn could lead to more efficient engagement and more desirable learning outcomes. Besides, they held that knowledge of English language and teaching methods should not be considered sufficient for effective classroom management, since gaining learners' trust and making them feel relaxed by creating an upbeat atmosphere in EFL classes should be considered crucial as well.

*T5: I believe it's really important to create a link with my students and be friendly to them, so they don't feel like strangers in my class, because once they're friends with me, they listen to me better, they do the activities better, and everything goes well.*

*T2: Knowing English and learning methods of teaching are not enough. We need to have a positive friendly relationship with students, we need to gain their trust, we need them to feel relaxed.*

## **Theme Number 2: Strategies for Rapport Creation and Development**

### ***Sub-theme 2-1: Familiarization***

The participants believed that teachers should familiarize themselves with learners. They added that teachers should gather information about learners' interests, concerns, and educational needs, so that later on learners' interests, concerns, and needs could be integrated into various lessons to attract their attention and make them engaged in the lessons. They asserted that familiarization could aid in generating an inclusive learning environment. They said that it produced a positive and friendly atmosphere, because learners felt that their teacher paid attention to their interests, and this ultimately led to better teacher-learner relationship and improved classroom management. The participants' perspective was indicative of a learner-centered approach based on needs analysis.

*T10: I ask them questions about their job or about their university. I use this information when it's related to topics of their lessons.*

*T8: I find what they're interested in, by asking questions in class or by asking them to write about what they like.*

*T2: In my opinion, we should have some information about students' personal interests. I focus on it to attract their attention and be friendly.*

*T11: I try to find out about my students' personal interests, and after that I talk to them about those things as icebreaker to make friends with them.*

*T6: I use whatever students say about themselves to show my interest in them, to motivate them.*

They also underscored the significance of the first session of EFL course, where learners should be asked to introduce themselves and share information about their background, interests, and preferences, as this approach could help their teacher to get to know the learners better and understand their needs and concerns. Yet, they added that the familiarization process should be continuous throughout the course, to tailor learning experience to learners' needs and interests.

*T4: You know, the first session is important. When it's the first session of a class with a group of students, I ask them to introduce themselves one by one, um, this can give me some information about them, age, education, job, hobbies, interests, favorites. This really helps me to know about them. Then during the term, I try to find out about them even more.*

### **Sub-theme 2-2: Verbal Immediacy**

The participants believed in the use of humor. They mentioned that telling jokes and making funny comments could engage learners and increase their energy level, which in turn led to better learning outcomes. They viewed humor as a primary tool for building rapport with learners and managing the classroom environment, since by using jokes and other forms of humor, they would be able to generate a more enjoyable and productive learning experience for their learners.

*T2: Sometimes I tell jokes to make them laugh, because when they laugh, they get more energy and they learn better. Jokes and funny comments are interesting for students.*

*T6: I think telling jokes helps me to change the mood of class, especially after difficult activities.*

Nonetheless, they spotlighted the importance of setting boundaries for learners when it came to using humor and telling jokes in the classroom, ensuring that it would remain conducive to learning. They stressed the need to permit humor as long as it would not turn into impoliteness or mocking, and to intervene if learners crossed the line. They believed that this approach could generate a respectful learning environment.

*T10: I let students be funny sometimes, if they're not rude, if they're not mocking others, I let them tell jokes or funny things.*

*T4: Another thing is telling jokes, or sometimes allowing students to tell jokes. BUT we should control it, we should have a border. If they go too far, I stop them. I immediately and directly tell them that they're not allowed to say that thing in our class. I don't let them make fun of their classmates.*

In addition, they believed in the utilization of story-telling. They held that story-telling should be used to illustrate a point, provide context, or simply entertain learners.

*T11: Sometimes, I tell them a very short story about myself that's related to the topic of that day's lesson, you know, to make them engaged and interested.*

*T7: I tell them stories about what I did for example, or I ask them to tell stories when they're tired or bored.*

Besides, they underlined the use of greetings to show learners that they were valued and respected by their teacher.

*T5: Greetings are an important part of each lesson and make my class mood more friendly. I greet students simply by saying hello and how are you? and things like these. I know that it sounds so simple, but it's not useless. It shows my students that I care for them and I respect them. We had a teacher, when I myself was a student. She never greeted students, as if it was **HARD** for her to say a simple hi or hello or what so ever. She gave us a feeling like she was not happy to teach us.*

Further, they foregrounded the use of small talk at the beginning of each session.

*T2: Before starting my lesson, I ask questions like how was your day? or how was your weekend? what did you do? I even sometimes pass nice comments about students' clothes or new haircut.*

*T7: To begin, I say for example what did you do this weekend? where did you go?. I think it's a good way to break the ice before every lesson.*

Additionally, they held that having conversations with learners outside classroom before and after sessions could build a friendly and welcoming environment.

*T9: I talk to students outside class, it may happen before or after class, or our break time. I answer their questions, I listen to their learning problems, I advise them on things. I show them that I'm available, even outside the classroom walls.*

Also, they believed that calling learners by their first names could help them to maintain rapport with their learners.

*T12: Another thing that makes students feel friendly with their teacher is learning students' names and calling them by their names.*

Furthermore, they accentuated that using words such as 'we', 'us', and 'our' for referring to class as a whole could create a sense of belonging and community.

*T8: I talk to them the way they feel friendly with me. I mean as if I'm one of **THEM**. Like when I want them to do an activity, I don't say you're going to do this, I say WE're going to do this.*

### **Sub-theme 2-3: Non-verbal Immediacy**

The participating teachers believed that smiling could aid in generating a positive atmosphere in their classrooms.

*T5: I think smiling is one of the most important things teachers can do to have a positive mood in class. When we smile, we communicate to our students that we're friendly and interested.*



**T11:** *I try to smile as often as possible during lessons, especially when I'm interacting with students. For example, um, when a student asks a question, I try to answer with a friendly smile.*

Moreover, they accented the use of gestures while talking to learners in order to illustrate a concept or attract learners' attention.

**T3:** *Using gestures can be a useful way to build a good relationship with students. It's good for interaction and catching their attention. I also use it for clarification when I teach. If I'm teaching a word like run, I may use gesture of running to help them understand the meaning of this word. Or if I'm teaching grammar of past tense, I use gesture of pointing backwards to help them understand.*

Besides, they believed that maintaining eye-contact and looking at learners while talking to them could provide a sense of connection and engagement.

**T10:** *When a teacher makes eye-contact with a student, it shows attention and interest. It makes communication easier. Students are more engaged when teacher has eye-contact with them.*

Furthermore, they pointed out that having relaxed body language while talking to learners could create a relaxed and comfortable environment in their classes.

**T8:** *I try to have relaxed body language. I think when teacher appears to be relaxed, it lowers students' stress and makes them feel more at ease, which is important for language learning.*

**T1:** *I make conscious effort to have a welcoming body language to show that I'm approachable. I ensure that my posture is relaxed and not intimidating, to make students feel comfortable and relaxed. For example, I'm careful about my arms, because folded arms are not a welcoming sign.*

In addition, they mentioned that moving closer to learners or sitting closer to them could aid in producing a supportive and friendly atmosphere, by generating a sense of integration.

**T9:** *Sometimes, I sit near them, for example when they're working as a group, and I try to act like a group member. I listen to their talking, or I say a sentence if it's suitable. I join their groups one by one, and they really like it. Or in my advanced classes, when one student is giving a presentation, I sit among my students and listen. It gives them the feeling that our teacher is one of us.*

Further, they held that teachers should have a more informal atmosphere in their classes by wearing professional but casual clothes appropriate for foreign language institutes' context in order to look more friendly. They underlined the significance of dressing in a manner that would manifest their respect for teaching/learning environment, while presenting them as being relatable to their learners. They believed that there should be a balance between professionalism and approachability in this respect.

*T12: Wearing clothes which are professional but at the same time casual helps my students feel more comfortable with me. I wear well-fitted clothes that are suitable for class and institute. I actually wear something that's neither too formal nor too informal, because I think if I dress too formally, I'll have a distance between me and my students.*

#### **Sub-theme 2-4: Attention to Learners' Emotions**

The participants emphasized the importance of paying attention to learners' emotions in the classroom. This indicated that they were aware of the emotional needs of their learners and were willing to address them in order to form a supportive and caring environment in the classroom that fostered a positive learning experience.

*T1: When I see one of my students is sad, I ask what's the reason? what's happened to you? to help them, um, feel good in my class; I ask what's the problem? why are you sad? I care for students' feelings and emotional needs. If I see, for example, one of them is not in a good mood, I even say if you have problems, you can talk to me and tell me about your problem if you like.*

#### **Sub-theme 2-5: Judicious L1 Use**

The participants believed that using L1 when necessary (e.g., for clarifying complicated instructions or explaining difficult concepts) could produce a sense of familiarity and comfort.

*T3: I believe using L1 when it's needed can help to have positive and supportive atmosphere. When students are struggling to understand complex instructions or grammar rules, using L1 can help them understand and make them feel more comfortable and less stressed. Let's say I'm teaching a grammar lesson and my students have trouble understanding a grammar rule. If I notice that they're getting frustrated or confused, I may sometimes use L1 to explain the rule. This actually makes students more motivated to continue learning.*

#### **Sub-theme 2-6: Playing Games**

The participating teachers recommended incorporating games into EFL lessons as a useful strategy to build rapport with their learners, since playing games could make learners feel friendly and engaged, and this led to an encouraging atmosphere, which in turn helped learners feel more motivated to learn.

*T12: One of the things I do is to play games with students whenever the purpose of lesson allows it. They're adults, but even adults feel friendly when they're engaged in playing a game. You know, it's exciting and encouraging and gives them good feeling. Students have a lot of fun when we play games.*

#### **Sub-theme 2-7: Utilizing social media**

The participants suggested that using social media to connect with their learners could foster teacher-learner communication and create friendly atmosphere in their classes, because it

helped them establish a more informal and approachable relationship, appreciated by their learners.

*T10: I connect with students, um, on social media. I think it's a friendly thing to do, and they like it I guess.*

### **Theme Number 3: Learners' Psychological Factors**

#### ***Sub-theme 3-1: Rapport Can Increase Learners' Motivation***

The participants emphasized the crucial role of building rapport with learners to enhance their motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. They highlighted that learners' interest in their teacher and positive atmosphere of their class could help learners become more active, participate more, and ultimately learn more.

*T3: Students who don't have motivation don't improve so much. You know, when students are interested in their teacher and the class mood is good, they listen more, they become more active, they talk more, they do homework, they LEARN more. So, it's really important to be nice to our students. I want them to believe in me and trust me, not only as a teacher, but also as a friend.*

#### ***Sub-theme 3-2: Rapport Can Decrease Learners' Classroom Anxiety***

The participating teachers accentuated the role of rapport-building with learners to decrease their classroom anxiety. The participants also asserted that creating a relaxed and positive atmosphere by positioning themselves as a friend to the learners could help in this respect. Besides, they believed that reducing learners' anxiety and stress by developing rapport could lead to mutual acceptance between teacher and learners, ultimately fostering a conducive learning environment.

*T7: I try to reduce students' stress or anxiety by telling them you're here to learn, you're here to make mistakes and it's OK. I ask them to just freely practice and I ask them not to worry about their mistakes. I tell them that I'm your FRIEND, and I'm here to HELP you learn. In the TTC I passed, our trainers said these sentences can make students feel relaxed and trust you. And when they're relaxed, um, it's easier for me to manage the mood and have a positive atmosphere. Actually, when I'm like their friend, it reduces their stress. And then when they're less stressed, they're more likely to be friendly and accept me like their friend. I think these two can both affect each other.*

### **Theme Number 4: Teachers' Personality Traits**

The participants believed that teachers' personality traits played an important role in shaping their rapport-building practices.

*T10: Well, I think telling jokes is a good way to make friends with students, and I heard from other teachers that it works for them, but doing it depends on teacher's personality. MY personality isn't like that, I'm not good at telling jokes in my classes. Actually, I'm not good at telling jokes AT ALL. Nowhere*

*and never. And it's actually because of my own personality; I'm so badly serious.*

**T6:** *Basically, I have this funny personality, and I don't want my classes to be boring. I say things to make students laugh. It's in my personality, when I'm with my friends and when I'm with my family and when I'm in class.*

They added that patience and flexibility were among teachers' personality traits that would contribute to effective teacher-learner relationship and learner motivation.

**T4:** *In my opinion, character of each teacher acts on this. Being patient and flexible really helps for having a nice relationship with students and for having a relaxed and motivating mood in class.*

Also, they mentioned that kindness was another personality trait that could impact teachers' relationship with their learners.

**T12:** *You know, some people are kind and caring. I mean, it's their nature. So, I think as teachers, they're more likely to have a good relationship with students.*

### **Theme Number 5: Teachers' Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

The participants gave prominence to communication skills for teachers in order to become efficient rapport-builders and establish positive teacher-learner relationship. They believed that by working on their communication and interpersonal skills, teachers would be able to communicate with learners more effectively and provide an interactive learning environment.

**T9:** *In my view, communication and interaction are important. There are teachers who have a natural ability to communicate very easily or they practice to be good communicators. They want to learn how to communicate, um, by reading related books or by watching related videos. They work on their communication ability. This can help them so much to communicate with their students.*

Moreover, they underscored the significance of maintaining a human-to-human relationship with learners in order to build a supportive and friendly learning environment.

**T8:** *It's also about communication skills. I think knowledge of English language isn't enough, and becoming a good teacher also depends on how we communicate with students. I try to have a human-human relationship with them, not just a teacher-student relationship.*

**T12:** *I personally interact with them as a human, and I co-communicate in activities that involve group work.*

Further, they accentuated the role of active listening as one of the primary communication skills that teachers should exert.

**T3:** *I think we must practice being good listeners. We must listen well when students say something about themselves, and if needed, we should show*

*reactions. We should show our emotions like happiness or sadness. They should know that we're not robots. They should see that we're humans and we have emotions and we express them.*

Besides, they referred to empathy as another key communication skill that teachers should possess.

*T1: I show empathy when they talk about their personal problems in the class. It happens in the class that in speaking activities or in free discussions they talk about their lives, their kids, their work, everything. It's a good opportunity for me to show them empathy, and they look at me as a friend when I behave like that.*

### **Theme Number 6: Possible Discipline Problems**

The participants were concerned about potential discipline problems that might arise from developing rapport with learners. They acknowledged that being friendly might lead to some learners abusing this friendliness and behaving disrespectfully. Moreover, the participating teachers were in favor of maintaining balance between rapport and discipline.

*T3: Of course, being friendly may cause discipline problems in some classes. Sometimes when teacher is trying to be friendly, some students may take advantage of it in a negative way. I have that experience myself. Some of them don't have that capacity to be friendly with them, and they start behaving in a disrespectful way. We must know our students. The first thing is to find out about our students' character.*

Further, by recognizing that creating rapport with learners might sometimes lead to learners' misbehavior, they suggested a solution for the possible discipline problems. They said that a change in behavior from being friendly and approachable to being strict and serious could be considered a possible solution in order to maintain discipline. However, they mentioned that the solution would not always solve this problem, since sometimes learners complained to supervisor about their teacher's strictness, and the situation became more complicated.

*T8: If I see misbehavior, I completely change my behavior from a friendly teacher to a strict teacher. I've experienced such situation four or five times since I started teaching, and that's how I deal with that. If things go wrong, I try not to be that friendly, I become serious. Sometimes, they got it. But sometimes they went to supervisor and complained about my strictness, to add insult to injury. So, this solution doesn't always work and things may get worse.*

### **Theme Number 7: Cultural Norms**

The participants foregrounded the significance of cultural norms concerning rapport creation and development in EFL classes. They pointed out that learners' gender should be considered a crucial factor in this respect.

*T2: In girls' classes, or in mixed classes, I hesitate when I want to tell specific jokes, and usually I don't do that, because I'm not sure if it's proper or not. I try not to do it as much as I do it in boys' classes. In boys' classes, um, I feel free to tell certain jokes or encourage students to give specific funny comments. But, in girls' classes, I feel as if there are some borders that I should respect, like unwritten rules. I try to be more polite in girls' classes or in mixed classes. I guess it's a cultural matter, and I think my students' gender affects me. I mean, when students' gender is the same as mine, I freely tell those jokes for example.*

## Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study uncovered the participants' attention to rapport development as an important aspect of classroom management. It is in accordance with [Brown and Lee \(2015\)](#) and [Harmer \(2012\)](#). Moreover, the participating teachers believed that teacher-learner relationship hinged on friendliness, respect, support, and trust, which is in agreement with [Brown and Lee \(2015\)](#), [Harmer \(2012\)](#), and [Scrivener \(2012\)](#). Besides, the results of the present study revealed that the participants were heedful of providing positive energy and lively atmosphere in their classes. This finding is in line with [Brown and Lee \(2015\)](#). Furthermore, the participants held that rapport maintenance could increase learners' motivation and decrease their anxiety, as highlighted by [Harmer \(2012\)](#). In addition, they recommended strategies for building rapport which were similar to those suggested by [Brown and Lee \(2015\)](#) and [Scrivener \(2012\)](#). The findings of this study also demonstrated the participating teachers' belief in the impact of teachers' personality traits on their cognition concerning rapport creation for classroom management. Likewise, results of [Norouzi and Hassanpour's \(2022\)](#) study showed the influence of teachers' personality on their classroom management. Further, the participants of the present study accentuated the importance of noticing cultural norms with respect to rapport establishment, which was also stated by [Scrivener \(2012\)](#).

The results of this study indicated that inconsistency between EFL teachers' cognition and their practice of rapport development was possible. An instance of such inconsistency has been shown in an interview excerpt with T10 (Theme Number 4), when this participant explained about his belief in using humor, while not using it himself because of his personality traits. Furthermore, the findings of the present study unveiled that various factors might shape the participants' cognition with regard to building rapport. These factors included pre-service teacher education (Teacher Training Course), language teaching experience, language learning experience, learners' needs, and colleagues' teaching experience. An instance of the influence of pre-service teacher education on teachers' cognition has been manifested in an interview excerpt with T7 (Sub-theme 3-2). This finding reflects [Borg's \(2006\)](#) perspective concerning the effect of pre-service teacher education on shaping teachers' cognition. Besides, instances of the impact of language teaching experience on shaping teachers' cognition have been displayed in the interview excerpts with T3 and T8 (Theme Number 6). In the same vein, [Borg \(2009\)](#) spotlighted the role of language teaching experience in shaping teachers' cognition. Moreover, an instance of the effect of language learning experience on teachers' cognition has been presented in an interview excerpt with T5 (Sub-theme 2-2). As for the impact of learners'

needs on teachers' cognition, instances have been shown in Sub-theme 2-1 and Sub-theme 2-4. Further, an instance of the influence of colleagues' teaching experience has been evinced in an interview excerpt with T10 (Theme Number 4).

### Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore Iranian EFL teachers' cognition vis-à-vis rapport development for classroom management in face-to-face classes of foreign language institutes in Iran. The participants in the context of the study understood the importance of rapport establishment and maintenance with EFL learners, and considered it pivotal for efficiently managing EFL classes. Also, they were aware of the rationale behind such significance (e.g., increasing learners' motivation and decreasing their classroom anxiety). Furthermore, they suggested strategies for building rapport with learners in EFL classes, including familiarization, verbal immediacy, non-verbal immediacy, attention to learners' emotions, judicious L1 use, playing games, and utilizing social media. Moreover, they believed that teachers' personality traits and communication skills could influence their approach to rapport management in EFL classes. In addition, they were cognizant of possible discipline problems that might occur as a result of their efforts for rapport establishment and maintenance. Further, they propounded attention to cultural norms apropos of building rapport with learners. To conclude, it can be said that the participants in the context of the present study had a sound cognition of rapport creation and development for better classroom management in face-to-face EFL classes at foreign language institutes in Iran. Besides, it is noteworthy that the results of the current study demonstrated that various factors, such as pre-service teacher education, language teaching experience, language learning experience, learners' needs, and colleagues' teaching experience might shape the participants' cognition of rapport management in the EFL context of Iran.

The study's findings have implications for language teacher educators, EFL teachers, and supervisors at foreign language institutes in the EFL context of Iran. The results can provide language teacher educators with information about EFL teachers' cognition of rapport creation with regard to efficient classroom management. This information can be utilized to design more effective pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to enhance EFL teachers' cognition of rapport development for classroom management. EFL teachers can also benefit from the study's findings by gaining insights into rapport establishment and maintenance in their EFL classes. It is indispensable for them to strike a balance between creating rapport and keeping discipline in their classes. Additionally, the study's results can help foreign language institutes' supervisors to better understand EFL teachers' cognition of rapport, which can enable them to observe and assess EFL teachers' classroom practices of rapport development in a new and more informed way. It is crucial to heed a cautionary note about the generalizability of the results of the current study. As *Dörnyei (2007)* points out, the findings of this study, along with other qualitative studies, may not be generalizable to other contexts. Nevertheless, *Dörnyei (2007)* believes that the goal of qualitative research is not to attain generalizability. Furthermore, *Borg (2006)* asserts that exploring teacher cognition is inherently context-based.

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