

# Rapport

<Judith Hamilton>

Most teachers would probably say they recognize good rapport when they experience it or are, on occasions, painfully aware of its absence. Scrivener (2011: 15) writes, 'whereas rapport is clearly important, it is also notoriously difficult to define or quantify'. Turning to the field of psychology for insights, rapport is said to consist of both emotions and behaviour, and is made up of mutual attentiveness (intense interest in what each other is doing), positivity (friendliness and caring) and co-ordination (being 'in sync') (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). It includes nonverbal behaviour and is an aspect of interaction rather than of personality. When found in the language classroom, this translates into a palpable, 'level of respect, humour and safety' where students know 'they will be listened to with interest' (Harmer 2015: 114).

Despite being difficult to define, many EFL teachers believe rapport is central to their work. Experienced language teachers, Senior (2006: 266) concludes, tend to be guided in their relationship with their students by 'general humanistic principles', and she goes so far as to write 'it seems that in teachers' minds the rapport that they develop with their classes is as important as the pedagogy itself' (ibid). From the perspective of evaluation of teaching, good rapport can make up for 'any number of infelicities in the actual design and implementation of a lesson' (Thornbury, 2012). Given the emphasis placed on rapport by experienced teachers, it should come as no surprise that it plays an important role in initial teacher training. The 'ability to establish rapport and create and maintain learners' interest' (Trinity College London 2016: 13) is the third objective of the Trinity College, London, Cert TESOL course. The Cambridge CELTA syllabus has 'establishing good rapport with learners and ensuring they are fully involved in learning activities' (Cambridge English 2018: 15) as an objective of the planning and teaching module of the course.

The field of pragmatics offers a further possible pathway to understanding the idea of rapport. For Spencer-Oatey (2005), rapport is a subjective concept, with the emphasis being on the harmony or disharmony within relationships, and it comprises face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals. The first of these, face, is a person's desire for their positive qualities to be recognized and acknowledged. Sociality rights and obligations can be described as behavioural expectations; failure to meet these expectations can cause annoyance. Finally, interactional goals are the outcomes a person hopes to achieve as a result of their interaction. All three factors vary according to the individual, context and culture. This may help us see how rapport can be built up in teaching, but given that rapport is threatened when one or more of these features are mismanaged, it is also easy to see how rapport can be lost in the classroom.

There is also a body of research that has looked at rapport from the perspective of the practitioner. Nguyen (2008) explores how a teacher uses rapport-building strategically at certain points in a lesson, particularly when required to perform potentially face-threatening acts, such as getting students' attention, correcting a student or giving instructions. He demonstrates that rapport is not just developed in isolated bubbles of 'small talk' at certain points in a lesson, but is implicitly blended into the lesson structure. Lee (2015) looks at rapport in writing tutorials at a university in Hong Kong, and demonstrates how rapport-building strategies, such as use of open-ended

questions, can help increase tutee participation in the learning process. Nguyen and Lee emphasise that building and maintaining rapport is a two-way process involving both teacher and student.

A final means to a better understanding of rapport is through reports of practical ideas about how it is built and demonstrated in the learning environment. Taking an interest in students and being even-handed are important and can be realized by, among other things, learning students' names, being friendly and encouraging, being open-minded when things go wrong and responding in positive ways to students, including by means of facial expressions (Harmer, 2015). Being well-prepared and arriving early in order to chat to students, giving genuine praise and winning over class leaders are tactics recommended by Anderson (2017). He adds that for young learners and teenagers, consistency and clear routines are also needed. This advice chimes with that of Khurram (2018) about teaching large classes, who also highlights the sharing of classroom responsibilities between teacher and students.

Maintaining rapport while working online represents an increasingly important challenge for teachers. When it comes to teaching online, Peachey (2020) highlights some practical ways to increase engagement and so help develop rapport: have the webcam at eye level, make eye contact with students by looking at the camera rather than the screen, and sit or stand at a distance from the computer so as to make best use of gesture and body language. As teachers' experience with online tools develops, so too will novel strategies emerge to build rapport in these new learning environments.

827 words sans references

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**Judith Hamilton** has been a Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Wolverhampton for over 20 years and has taught a variety of students on a range of courses in that time. She is currently completing a Doctorate in Education and is exploring the language attitudes of university lecturers.

[J.R.Hamilton@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:J.R.Hamilton@wlv.ac.uk)