Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Teacher-Student Rapport on Motivation in the ESL Classroom

Dr. Mouna Abou Assali[1], & Lydia Davenport[2]

[1] Assistant Professor, Rabdan Academy, UAE

[2] Lecturer, Rabdan Academy, UAE

Correspondence: Dr. Mouna Abou Assali, Assistant Professor, Rabdan Academy, UAE. E-mail: massali@ra.ac.ae

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of the impact of teacher-student rapport on student motivation in ESL classrooms in the United Arab Emirates. A quantitative survey design was employed. Data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to 154 ESL teachers. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. The findings showed that teachers recognized the significance of rapport in developing a supportive learning environment and enhancing student motivation. Challenges to building rapport were also identified along with strategies to address them. Statistical testing supported the hypothesis regarding these relationships. The study was limited to teacher perceptions and did not include student voices. Future research could explore rapport from both perspectives longitudinally. This study provides empirical evidence on the complex role of teacher-student rapport in motivating ESL learners. The findings offer insights for optimizing ESL education through targeted policy and practice.

Keywords: Teacher-student rapport, student motivation, English language learning, UAE

1. Introduction

In the realm of education, the teacher-student relationship is widely recognized as a crucial factor in shaping students' academic performance and overall educational experience (Shakir & Kiazai, 2023). This holds particularly true in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, where the dynamics between teachers and students can significantly influence learners' motivation to acquire language proficiency (Alshuraiaan, 2023). Understanding the intricacies of the teacher-student rapport and its impact on student motivation is essential for creating effective language learning environments (Meng, 2021).

Scholars have conceptualized teacher-student rapport as the emotional connection and mutual bond developed between teachers and students (Li, 2022; Roshanbin, Nushi & Abolhassani, 2022; Zhou, 2021). It is influenced by various factors like grade level, family background, academic performance, teachers' attitudes and personality, and students' engagement with popular culture (Hou & Wen, 2022; Peacock, 2022; Peng, 2022).

A positive rapport between teachers and students has been linked to beneficial outcomes. It enhances classroom participation, academic enjoyment, and provides a supportive environment for growth (Kang & Wu, 2022; Li, 2022; Meng, 2021). Empirical studies have also demonstrated the role of teacher empathy and rapport in fostering learner engagement and motivation (Katz, 2021; Kianinezhad, 2023). Several motivation theories are applicable to understanding these relationships in ESL contexts, including self-determination theory, expectancy-value theory and attribution theory (Raczkoski et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2019).

However, building and maintaining rapport faces certain challenges. Language barriers, cultural differences, classroom management issues, constraints of online learning and lack of teacher support can hinder rapport development (del Carmen Santana, 2019; Krasnova, 2023; Peacock, 2022; Peng, 2023; Smith, 2018). This highlights the need to identify effective strategies to overcome such challenges. Focusing on meaningful conversations, non-verbal communication, student-centered teaching and rapport-building activities have been proposed as ways to establish strong teacher-student connections (Contenti, 2017; del Carmen Santana, 2019; Estepp & Roberts, 2015).

The present research aims to delve into the multifaceted nature of the teacher-student relationship within ESL classrooms, with a specific focus on teachers' perceptions of its impact on student motivation. By exploring and analyzing the evaluations provided by ESL teachers in education centers across the United Arab Emirates, this study seeks to shed light on the complexities and nuances involved in fostering a positive teacher-student rapport that enhances students' motivation to learn the English language.

To comprehensively explore this topic, the literature review section of this research paper delves into various facets of the teacher-student relationship in ESL classrooms. Firstly, it examines the nature of the relationship itself, highlighting its importance and the factors that contribute to its establishment. Additionally, the review explores the effects of the teacher-student relationship on students' motivation to learn the English language, drawing upon existing research and theoretical frameworks.

Furthermore, this paper addresses the challenges and obstacles faced by ESL teachers in building and maintaining a positive relationship

with their students. Understanding the difficulties encountered by teachers is crucial for identifying effective strategies to overcome these challenges and foster a supportive and motivating learning environment.

Throughout this research, an emphasis is placed on investigating how ESL teachers navigate these problems and challenges, exploring the strategies and approaches they employ to nurture a positive relationship with their students. By examining both the perceptions of teachers and their practical responses, valuable insights can be gained into the complex interplay between teacher-student rapport and student motivation in ESL classrooms.

This study explores the effect of the teacher-student relationship on ESL students' motivation. Its findings have important consequences for education, influencing teaching methods, teacher preparation, and policymaking in ESL instruction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher-Student Rapport: Understanding the Relationship

Roshanbin, Nushi and Abolhassani (2022) defines teacher-student rapport as the building of a positive relationship between faculty and students, characterized by favorable compatibility and effective emotional communication. Zhou (2021) defines this relationship as an emotional connection between teachers and their pupils based on understanding, caring, and mutual respect. In addition, Li (2022) provides a conceptualization of teacher-student rapport as a mutual bond between teachers and students that inspires collaboration in instructional-learning contexts.

As for the factors influencing the development of Teacher-Student rapport, Hou and Wen (2022) discusses the influencing factors of student-teacher relationships among middle school students in Guangdong Province, China. It identifies factors such as grade, family economic status, parents' education level, academic performance, teachers' role and attitude, and students' attitude towards popular culture and sociality.

Additionally, Peng (2022) analyzes the influencing factors of teacher-student relationship in postgraduate education, including the training mode, tutor's knowledge and professional power, personality charm, and the way to deal with the relationship between teachers and students. Moreover, Peacock (2022) states that the factors influencing the development of teacher-student rapport in online learning environments are online communication in online sessions, teacher-student communication outside online sessions, and teacher availability and accessibility.

On the other hand, Kang and Wu (2022) discusses the importance of positive emotional classroom rapport between teachers and students in an EFL context, highlighting its benefits such as enhanced classroom participation, motivation, and academic enjoyment. In addition, Li (2022) states that it provides a healthy and friendly atmosphere for students' academic growth and development. The positive rapport between students and teachers is also important for enhancing students' motivation and classroom involvement, as per Meng (2021).

To summarize, the development of teacher-student rapport involves complex interactions between multiple factors, including student and teacher attributes, communication, training modes, personality traits, and interpersonal skills. Building strong, positive relationships between educators and learners is vital for creating a supportive and engaging learning environment that promotes student well-being, motivation, and academic achievement.

> *H1.* There is a statistically significant impact of teacher-student rapport and the development of a healthy and supportive learning environment in ESL classrooms.

2.2 Impact of Teacher-Student Rapport on Motivation

The impact of teacher-student rapport on motivation is a significant area of study, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning. Several motivation theories are relevant to this context, including the Self-Determination Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, and Attribution Theory. Katz (2021) and Kianinezhad (2023) have shown that teacher empathy and rapport can foster learner engagement, increase motivation, and create a positive classroom atmosphere, especially in ESL settings.

Additionally, the Self-Determination Theory's motivation mediation model has been empirically tested in a classroom-based study, highlighting the importance of autonomy support and motivation in educational contexts, as per Shogren et al. (2019). Furthermore, the Expectancy-Value Theory has been used to assess students' perceived costs of participating in study abroad experiences, demonstrating its relevance to understanding motivation in language learning contexts, as per Raczkoski et al. (2021). These motivation theories offer insightful perspectives on how teacher-student rapport impacts learners' motivation in ESL contexts. By providing autonomy support, creating a positive classroom climate, and offering constructive feedback, teachers can help learners feel engaged, motivated, and confident in their abilities.

In addition, Meng (2021) discusses the importance of teacher-student rapport in the ESL classroom, stating that it leads to progressive practices, superior classroom involvement, and motivation for learners. Moreover, teacher immediacy and professor/student rapport have been found by Estepp and Roberts (2015) to be predictors of student motivation and engagement. Empathetic teachers who build strong connections with their students can create a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking risks. This sense of safety and trust can encourage greater participation, improved focus, and enhanced motivation.

Furthermore, Yoshimoto, Murakami and Osamu (2023) discuss how positive teacher-student relationships in Japan, characterized by respect, emotional support, and constructive feedback, foster a nurturing and motivational learning environment, leading to increased

student engagement and academic achievement. Additionally, Rawal (2022) states that a positive teacher-student relationship enhances motivation and academic learning. The close and mutual relationship with the teacher helps motivate students in their learning. In cultures that value interpersonal relationships highly, having a good rapport with one's teacher can significantly impact students' motivation levels and overall learning experience. When students feel respected, emotionally supported, and encouraged, they are likely to engage more deeply in their studies and perform better academically.

> *H2.* There is a statistically significant impact of Teacher-student rapport on student motivation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms.

2.3 Challenges in Building and Maintaining Teacher-Student Rapport

Building and maintaining teacher-student rapport is crucial for effective teaching and learning. However, there are several challenges that teachers face when trying to establish rapport with their students, especially in multilingual or cross-cultural settings. del Carmen Santana (2019) states that the first challenge may face teacher-student rapport is language barriers. Teachers may struggle to communicate effectively with students who speak a different language, which can hinder the rapport-building process. When teachers cannot communicate effectively with students due to linguistic differences, it becomes difficult to establish a connection and build rapport. Misunderstandings can lead to frustration and disengagement, making it essential for teachers to find ways to bridge these gaps.

Krasnova (2023) argues that managing the classroom environment, including maintaining order and engaging students, can be challenging and may affect the rapport between teachers and students. Creating an inclusive and safe learning space where all students feel valued is critical for developing positive relationships between teachers and students. Maintaining order and student engagement requires patience, flexibility, and adaptability from teachers, but these efforts pay off by fostering trust and respect among students.

Additionally, Peng (2023) argues that beside the language barriers, cultural differences can make it more difficult to build the teacher-student rapport. Understanding and adapting to cultural differences can be challenging for teachers who are used to working with students from their own culture. This can make it difficult to connect with international students or students from diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, Al Sulaimi (2022) mentions that cultural, institutional, and technical difficulties hindered the teachers' efforts to build rapport with students during Emergency Remote Teaching. Understanding and appreciating diverse cultural practices and values is vital for creating welcoming classrooms where every student feels seen and heard. Adjusting to students' unique needs based on their cultural backgrounds demonstrates sensitivity and inclusivity, ultimately contributing to stronger connections between teachers and learners. In addition, ensuring access to reliable technology and providing adequate training for both teachers and students are necessary steps toward mitigating the negative effects of technological issues on rapport-building. Effective communication through various channels, such as email, video conferencing, and messaging apps, helps keep students engaged and connected to their teachers despite physical distance.

Furthermore, Conroy and Kidd (2023) suggest that teachers may need to adjust to new teaching methods, such as using podcasts or other digital learning resources, to maintain rapport with students in online or hybrid learning environments. By staying up-to-date with emerging technologies and pedagogical strategies, educators can foster deeper connections with their students even outside the traditional classroom setting.

In addition, Smith (2018) says that the quality of teacher support can significantly impact the development of rapport between teachers and students. A supportive school climate that prioritizes open dialogue and continuous improvement enables teachers to cultivate strong, authentic relationships with their students. del Carmen Santana (2019) also states that teacher immediacy is very crucial for a strong teacher-student rapport. Being approachable, genuine, and responsive creates a warm and inviting atmosphere that encourages students to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas openly. Humor and empathy help humanize the educational experience, making it easier for students to form emotional bonds with their teachers and invest themselves fully in their learning journey.

> *H3.* There is a statistically significant impact of challenges and obstacles on building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms.

2.4 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges in Teacher-Student Rapport

Building positive teacher-student rapport is essential for fostering a supportive and engaging learning environment. Contenti (2017) states that one of the strategies to build positive teacher-student rapport is to engage in meaningful conversations with students, both individually and in groups, to create a connection and demonstrate genuine interest in their well-being and progress. This approach not only enhances the classroom atmosphere but also encourages open communication and mutual respect.

Additionally, Estepp and Roberts (2015) states that using verbal and nonverbal cues, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body language can show students that the teacher is fully present and attentive to their needs. Other strategies are to implement teaching strategies that focus on the students' needs, interests, and learning styles, rather than solely on the teacher's preferences. Lastly, Estepp and Roberts added that it is important to encourage students to take an active role in their learning process, including setting goals, monitoring their progress, and adjusting their strategies as needed. Maintaining consistent eye contact, expressing appropriate facial reactions, and adopting positive body language convey attention and engagement towards students' needs, making them feel valued and heard within the learning community. By catering to diverse learners, educators foster an inclusive and adaptable learning environment where every student feels understood and supported, ultimately leading to increased motivation and improved academic outcomes.

Another strategy discussed by del Carmen Santana (2019), is to focus on rapport-building activities, which have been linked to academic performance. Engaging students in collaborative tasks, icebreaker exercises, and group projects allows them to develop interpersonal skills while creating a sense of camaraderie and shared experiences within the classroom. These activities contribute to a more harmonious learning environment and help students connect with their peers and instructors.

In addition, Qing, Diamantidaki and Carruthers (2020) states that teachers can also manage the teacher-student rapport in the class by being aware of the asymmetric power between them and by being sensitive to students' identities, educational goals, sociality right, and obligations. Awareness of these factors enables educators to tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of individual students, ensuring they are treated fairly and equitably while addressing any potential biases or disparities that could hinder their learning experience.

Finally, Sanden and Quesenberry (2023) suggests that it is important to recognize the unique challenges that students may face, such as those posed by a global pandemic, and to create individualized development and support plans that build on their unique opportunities and challenges. Creating customized development and support plans acknowledges the complexities of students' lives outside the classroom and addresses their distinct opportunities and obstacles, enabling them to thrive academically despite external pressures.

> *H4.* There is a statistically significant impact of implementing strategies to effectively overcome the challenges faced in building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Sample and Data Collection

The target population of this study consisted of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers working in education centers across the United Arab Emirates who teach ESL to university students. A sample of 154 ESL teachers was selected using convenient sampling, with the following characteristics:

- Age: Ranging from 25 to 55 years' old.
- Teaching experience: Between 2-15 years of teaching ESL.
- Education level: Holding at least a bachelor's degree.

Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to teachers through Google Forms. The questionnaire contained 28 items divided into the following aspects:

- Items 1-7 assessed teachers' perceptions of teacher-student rapport.
- Items 8-15 examined the impact of rapport on student motivation.
- Items 16-21 explored challenges in building and maintaining rapport.
- Items 22-28 evaluated strategies teachers use to overcome challenges.

The questionnaire was designed to gather information on teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students and the impact on student motivation. It included questions related to factors influencing teacher-student rapport, effects of rapport on motivation, challenges faced, and strategies used. The items utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was piloted on 30 teachers to ensure validity and reliability. An expert in the field of educational assessment reviewed the questionnaire using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) to evaluate how well each item measured the intended construct. Appropriate revisions were made based on feedback from both the teachers and expert to ensure the content and face validity of the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were ensured to receive honest opinions. Completed questionnaires were collected over a period of 4 weeks. The collected data was then coded and analyzed using statistical analysis software.

3.2 Analytical Approach

Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze the data. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were represented by using frequencies and percentages. The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to ensure their internal consistency. In addition, the central tendency and variability of responses in relation to the variables of interest were described by calculating means and standard deviations.

To test the four hypotheses, one-sample t-tests were performed to statistically evaluate the mean responses compared to a predefined neutral reference value of 3. The results were systematically presented in tables and thoroughly analyzed to gain important insights into the teachers' perspectives and the relationships between the variables studied.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Demographic Profile

The demographic variables of the sample were examined. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables (N = 154)

Item	Detail	Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	67	43.5
	Female	87	56.5
Age Groups	Less than 25 years old	15	9.7
	From 26-35 years old	32	20.8
	From 36-45 years old	42	27.3
	From 46-55 years old	52	33.8
	Over 55 years old	13	8.4
Academic Rank	Diploma	17	11.0
	Master's	87	56.5
	Doctorate	50	32.5
Experience	Less than 5 years	47	30.5
	From 5-10 years	96	62.3
	Over than 10 years	11	7.1
Total		154	100.0

Table 1 reveals a gender distribution of 43.5% male and 56.5% female teachers. Regarding age groups, the majority of teachers fell into the 46-55 years old category (33.8%), followed by 36-45 years old (27.3%). A smaller proportion of teachers were under 25 years old (9.7%) or over 55 years old (8.4%).

In terms of academic rank, the majority of teachers held a Master's degree (56.5%), followed by a Doctorate (32.5%) and a Diploma (11.0%). When considering experience, the highest percentage of teachers had 5-10 years of experience (62.3%), followed by less than 5 years (30.5%) and over 10 years (7.1%).

These findings provide valuable insights into the demographic characteristics of ESL teachers in the UAE, which can inform the development of targeted policies and programs to support their professional growth and enhance the quality of ESL education at the university level.

4.2 Test for Reliability

As mentioned in section 3.1, a pilot study was conducted prior to distribution of the main questionnaire to ensure its validity and reliability. 30 teachers participated in the pilot study and provided feedback which was used to refine the questionnaire. The collected data from the pilot study was then analyzed to test the reliability of the scales within the questionnaire.

Reliability testing is important to ensure the various scales within the questionnaire are internally consistent and will produce stable and consistent results over time. Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis was utilized to examine the reliability of the four scales. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test Results (N = 30)

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha value
Relationship with the Student	7	.812
Effect of the Teacher's Relationship on Student Motivation	8	.718
Problems or Challenges in Building and Maintaining a Positive Relationship	6	.721
Dealing with Problems or Challenges	7	.720
Overall Tool's Items	28	.847

The results of the Cronbach's alpha reliability test for the variables listed in Table 2 confirm the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instrument used to assess the various facets of the student-teacher relationship. The variable "relationship with the student" showed a remarkably high internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha value of .812. This indicates that the items within this variable consistently measure the intended construct.

Similarly, the variables "Problems or Challenges in Building and Maintaining a Positive Relationship", "Dealing with Problems or Challenges" and "Effect of the Teacher's Relationship on Student Motivation" all showed commendable internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values of .721, .720 and .718 respectively. Although these values are somewhat lower, they still reflect a reliable measurement of the individual constructs.

The reliability tests of the pilot study data show that all four scales achieved a Cronbach's alpha value of over 0.7 and were therefore classified as acceptable. This result indicates that the items within each scale are coherent when measuring a single concept and ensure the consistency of the items.

In addition, the comprehensive measurement instrument with 28 items demonstrated robust internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .847. These results support the assertion that the questionnaire for the main study is equipped with reliable scales that provide consistent results. This increases the overall validity and reliability of the data collected and contributes significantly to the methodological integrity of the study.

5. Results Discussion

5.1 Testing Hypothesis 1

The findings from the descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' responses on the impact of teacher-student rapport and the development of a healthy and supportive learning environment in ESL classrooms, are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Participants' Responses to Items Assessing the impact of teacher-student rapport and the development of a healthy and supportive learning environment in ESL classrooms (N = 154)

#	Statement	M	SD
1	The relationship between me as a teacher and my ESL students is characterized by mutual respect and trust.	3.55	.886
2	I actively listen to my students' concerns and opinions.	3.25	.904
3	I provide constructive feedback to my students to help them improve.	3.39	.931
4	I create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment for my students.	3.14	.943
5	I am approachable and accessible to my students outside of class hours.	3.67	.733
6	I take an interest in getting to know my students as individuals.	3.77	.703
7	I encourage open communication and dialogue with my students.	3.60	.796
	Total	3.48	.512

The findings suggest that the participants perceive positive aspects of teacher-student rapport and a supportive learning environment in their ESL classrooms. The mean score for the total responses is 3.48, indicating a moderately positive perception among the participants.

Specifically, the participants reported a moderate level of mutual respect and trust in the relationship between themselves as teachers and their ESL students (M = 3.55). They also expressed a tendency to actively listen to their students' concerns and opinions (mean = 3.25) and provide constructive feedback to support their improvement (M = 3.39). Furthermore, the participants indicated efforts to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment (M = 3.14), demonstrate approachability and accessibility to students outside of class hours (M = 3.67), show interest in knowing students as individuals (M = 3.77), and encourage open communication and dialogue (M = 3.60).

Furthermore, a sample T-test was conducted to evaluate the first hypothesis. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. One Sample T-Test for The First Hypothesis

T value	Significance (p-value)
11.673	.000

P < 0.05, 0.01

The results of the one sample t-test showed a statistically significant finding (t(153) = 11.673, p = .000 < 0.05) in support of Hypothesis 1 that there is a statistically significant impact of teacher-student rapport and the development of a healthy and supportive learning environment in ESL classrooms.

This is consistent with previous research by Kang and Wu (2022) and Li (2022) which found that positive teacher-student rapport enhances classroom participation, motivation, and provides a supportive learning atmosphere. It also aligned with Meng's (2021) study demonstrating the importance of rapport in fostering progressive practices and greater student engagement. The findings reinforce the crucial role of rapport established in the literature.

These findings suggest that the participants recognize the importance of building positive teacher-student relationships and creating a conducive learning environment in ESL classrooms. However, there is room for improvement in certain areas to enhance rapport and support. It is crucial for educators to continue fostering mutual respect, active listening, constructive feedback, inclusivity, approachability, personal connection, and open communication to further strengthen teacher-student rapport and promote a healthy and supportive learning environment in ESL classrooms.

5.2 Testing Hypothesis 2

The findings from the descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' responses on the impact of Teacher-student rapport on student motivation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of Participants' Responses to Items Assessing the impact of Teacher-student rapport on student motivation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms (N = 154)

#	Statement	M	SD
1	A positive relationship with the teacher enhances students' motivation to learn English.	4.01	.719
2	Students are more likely to participate actively in class when they have a good relationship with the teacher.	3.96	.731
3	A supportive teacher-student relationship fosters a sense of belonging and engagement among students.	3.47	.879
4	Students are more likely to set higher goals and strive for success when they feel connected to their teacher.	3.60	.903
5	A positive teacher-student relationship can positively influence students' attitudes towards learning English.	3.46	.923
6	Students are more likely to seek assistance and guidance from the teacher when they have a good relationship with them.	3.23	.891

#		M	SD
7	An unfavorable relationship with the teacher can demotivate students and negatively impact their English language learning.	3.34	.945
8	Students' motivation to learn English is influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship.	3.66	.895
	Total	3.59	.545

The findings suggest that participants recognize the significance of teacher-student rapport in fostering student motivation in ESL classrooms. The overall mean score for the total responses is 3.59, indicating a moderately positive perception among the participants.

Specifically, participants strongly agreed that a positive relationship with the teacher enhances students' motivation to learn English (M = 4.01). They also indicated that students are more likely to actively participate in class when they have a good relationship with the teacher (M = 3.96). Additionally, participants acknowledged that a supportive teacher-student relationship fosters a sense of belonging and engagement among students (M = 3.47). They also recognized that students are more likely to set higher goals and strive for success when they feel connected to their teacher (M = 3.60).

Additionally, participants agreed that a positive teacher-student relationship can positively influence students' attitudes towards learning English (M = 3.46). They also acknowledged that students are more likely to seek assistance and guidance from the teacher when they have a good relationship with them (M = 3.23). Participants expressed concerns that an unfavorable relationship with the teacher can demotivate students and negatively impact their English language learning (M = 3.34). Lastly, participants recognized that students' motivation to learn English is influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship (M = 3.66).

Furthermore, a sample T-test was conducted to evaluate the first hypothesis. The findings are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. One Sample T-Test for The First Hypothesis

T value	Significance (p-value)
13.475	.000

P < 0.05, 0.01

The one sample t-test results for Hypothesis 2 were statistically significant (t(153) = 13.475, p = .000 < 0.05), supporting the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant impact of teacher-student rapport on student motivation in ESL classrooms.

This is congruent with prior research by Estepp and Roberts (2015), Katz (2021) and Kianinezhad (2023) linking rapport to increased learner motivation and engagement through teacher empathy and communication. It also aligns with Meng's (2021) and Rawal's (2022) work emphasizing the impact of rapport on motivation. The results echo motivational theories as discussed in Raczkoski et al. (2021) and Shogren et al. (2019).

These findings highlight the crucial role of teacher-student rapport in promoting student motivation in ESL classrooms. Establishing positive relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging active participation, and providing support and guidance are essential for enhancing student motivation. Educators should focus on creating a supportive and positive classroom environment that values and nurtures relationships between teachers and students. By doing so, teachers can inspire and motivate students to actively engage in learning English, set higher goals, and develop a positive attitude towards language acquisition.

5.3 Testing Hypothesis 3

The findings from the descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' responses on the impact of challenges and obstacles on building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms, are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Participants' Responses to Items Assessing the impact of challenges and obstacles on building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms (N = 154)

#	Statement	M	SD
1	Cultural and language barriers present challenges in building a positive teacher-student relationship.	3.26	.877
2	Student resistance or lack of engagement poses challenges in establishing a positive relationship.	3.76	.841
3	Limited class time and large class sizes make it difficult to build individual connections with students.	3.62	.958
4	Differences in students' learning styles and abilities can affect the teacher-student relationship.	3.64	.948
5	External factors, such as personal issues or stress, can impact the teacher-student relationship.	3.33	1.004
6	Miscommunication or misunderstandings can hinder the development of a positive relationship.	3.64	.839
	Total	3.54	.654

The findings suggest that participants recognize the existence of challenges and obstacles in establishing and maintaining positive teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms. The overall mean score for the total responses is 3.54, indicating a moderate perception of these challenges among the participants.

Participants acknowledged that cultural and language barriers present challenges in building a positive teacher-student relationship (M = 3.26). They also identified student resistance or lack of engagement as a significant obstacle to establishing a positive relationship (M =

3.76). Furthermore, participants recognized that limited class time and large class sizes make it difficult to build individual connections with students (M = 3.62). They also acknowledged that differences in students' learning styles and abilities can affect the teacher-student relationship (M = 3.64). Participants expressed concerns that external factors, such as personal issues or stress, can impact the teacher-student relationship (M = 3.33). Additionally, participants identified miscommunication or misunderstandings as a hindrance to the development of a positive relationship (M = 3.64).

Furthermore, a sample T-test was conducted to evaluate the first hypothesis. The findings are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. One Sample T-Test for The First Hypothesis

T value	Significance (p-value)
10.251	.000

P < 0.05, 0.01

The findings for Hypothesis 3 showed statistical significance (t(153) = 10.251, p = .000 < 0.05), confirming that challenges and obstacles have a significant impact on building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms.

This aligns with previous literature by Al Sulaimi (2022), del Carmen Santana (2019), Krasnova (2023) and Peng (2023) outlining cultural, language, engagement and technical barriers faced by teachers. The results validate the complex issues established in prior research studies.

These findings highlight the complex nature of building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms, given the various challenges and obstacles involved. Cultural and language barriers, student resistance or disengagement, limited time and large class sizes, differences in learning styles and abilities, external factors, and miscommunication can all pose difficulties in fostering positive relationships.

Educators need to be aware of these challenges and proactively address them. It is essential for teachers to adapt their teaching approaches, establish clear channels of communication, and foster an inclusive and supportive classroom environment to mitigate the impact of these challenges on teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms.

5.4 Testing Hypothesis 4

The findings from the descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' responses on the impact of implementing strategies to effectively overcome the challenges faced in building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms, are displayed in Table 9.

Table 9. Summary of Participants' Responses to Items Assessing the impact of implementing strategies to effectively overcome the challenges faced in building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms (N = 154)

#	Statement	M	SD
1	I actively seek to understand and address cultural and language barriers in my relationship with ESL students.	3.53	1.036
2	I use various teaching strategies and techniques to engage resistant or disengaged students.	3.43	1.119
3	I allocate additional time or resources to establish individual connections with students.	3.95	.721
4	I differentiate my instruction to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities.	3.69	.873
5	I am empathetic and understanding towards students' personal issues or stressors.	3.64	.919
6	I prioritize clear and effective communication to avoid misunderstandings.	3.82	.820
7	I seek professional development opportunities to enhance my skills in building relationships with ESL students.	3.77	.782
	Total	3.69	.579

The findings suggest that participants recognize the importance of implementing strategies to address the challenges and obstacles encountered in building and maintaining teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms. The overall mean score for the total responses is 3.69, indicating a moderately positive perception of the effectiveness of these strategies among the participants.

Participants indicated that they actively seek to understand and address cultural and language barriers in their relationships with ESL students (M = 3.53). They also reported using various teaching strategies and techniques to engage resistant or disengaged students (M = 3.43). Additionally, participants acknowledged allocating additional time or resources to establish individual connections with students (M = 3.95). They also expressed the use of differentiated instruction to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities (M = 3.69).

Additionally, participants indicated being empathetic and understanding towards students' personal issues or stressors (M = 3.64). They reported prioritizing clear and effective communication to avoid misunderstandings (M = 3.82). Additionally, participants expressed a desire for professional development opportunities to enhance their skills in building relationships with ESL students (M = 3.77).

Furthermore, a sample T-test was conducted to evaluate the first hypothesis. The findings are shown in Table 10.

Table 10. One Sample T-Test for The First Hypothesis

T value	Significance (p-value)
14.786	.000

P < 0.05, 0.01

The one sample t-test results supported Hypothesis 4, revealing statistical significance (t(153) = 14.786, p = .000 < 0.05). This agrees with previous studies by Contenti (2017), del Carmen Santana (2019), Estepp and Roberts (2015) and Sanden and Quesenberry (2023) emphasizing strategies like dialog, digital resources, empathy and flexibility to enhance relationships and overcome challenges highlighted in the literature review.

These findings highlight the proactive approach of participants in implementing strategies to overcome challenges and enhance teacher-student rapport in ESL classrooms. By actively addressing cultural and language barriers, using diverse teaching strategies, allocating additional time for individual connections, differentiating instruction, demonstrating empathy, promoting clear communication, and seeking professional development, participants aim to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Educators' willingness to implement these strategies demonstrates their commitment to fostering positive teacher-student relationships and overcoming barriers in ESL classrooms. Continued efforts to refine and expand these strategies, along with ongoing professional development, can further empower educators in their pursuit of building and maintaining effective teacher-student rapport, ultimately enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes for ESL students.

6. Discussion

The results of this study agreed with and extended previous research on teacher-student rapport and motivation in several key areas. Aligning with prior work, positive rapport was found to foster supportive learning environments (Kang & Wu, 2022; Li, 2022) and engagement (Meng, 2021). Challenges aligning with the literature such as cultural-linguistic barriers (del Carmen Santana, 2019) and disengagement (Krasnova, 2023) were also identified. Some new insights emerged regarding strategies teachers employ which extend theoretical frameworks.

The findings supported all four hypotheses, validating the theoretical underpinnings. Teachers' perceptions confirmed rapport impacts development of healthy, motivational classrooms (H1) and students' motivation specifically (H2), supporting self-determination theory (Shogren et al., 2019). Challenges negatively influencing rapport building (H3) resonated with attribution theory on obstacles' demotivating effects. Strategies addressing these challenges (H4) aligned with expectancy-value theory by creating supportive environments where students feel their efforts will lead to success.

Some noteworthy results provided new understanding. While most challenges obtained moderate agreement, student disengagement surprisingly received the highest rating. This underscores disengagement as a particularly problematic rapport barrier. Teachers also strongly agreed positive rapport enhances motivation, emphasizing this relationship's significance.

This study was limited by focusing solely on teacher perceptions without student input. Examining rapport from both perspectives could offer deeper insights. Limited generalizability also stems from the single geographic context.

These findings carry implications for supporting quality ESL education. Training should equip teachers with culturally-sensitive strategies and professional learning opportunities to strengthen pedagogical content knowledge for rapport-building. Policymakers could promote initiatives fostering connectedness like one-on-one conferencing. Addressing engagement barriers through innovative curriculum and personalized learning paths may aid motivation.

7. Conclusion

This study explored ESL teachers' perceptions of the impact of teacher-student rapport on student motivation in ESL classrooms in the United Arab Emirates. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the collected questionnaire data provided valuable insights.

The findings demonstrated that teachers recognize the significance of establishing positive rapport through mutual respect, active listening, feedback, approachability and open communication. They acknowledged the development of a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and engaged. Statistical testing confirmed the first hypothesis that teacher-student rapport positively influences the classroom atmosphere.

Teachers also acknowledged the motivational benefits of rapport such as participation, sense of belonging, goal-setting and positive attitudes towards English learning. Their responses supported the second hypothesis regarding the positive impact of rapport on student motivation.

Challenges in building rapport due to cultural, linguistic and engagement barriers, time constraints, learning differences and miscommunication were identified. The results verified the third hypothesis about these obstacles.

Importantly, teachers reported addressing challenges proactively through understanding cultural nuances, engaging diverse learners, allocating individual time, differentiating instruction, clear communication and ongoing professional learning. Statistical analysis upheld the fourth hypothesis concerning the effectiveness of such strategies.

Future research could explore student perceptions of teacher-student rapport and motivation, as well as longitudinal studies on rapport building over time. Qualitative research may provide rich insights into specific rapport-building strategies used. Comparative studies across different ESL contexts could also shed light on universal practices versus culturally sensitive approaches. Overall, continued examination of this topic can further empower educators globally to inspire language learners of all backgrounds.

In conclusion, this research provided empirical evidence of the complex yet crucial role of teacher-student rapport in fostering student motivation within ESL contexts in the UAE. By nurturing positive relationships, creating supportive environments and overcoming barriers

through targeted approaches, ESL educators can effectively enhance learning experiences and optimize outcomes for linguistically diverse students. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote quality ESL education.

Competing interests

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

References

Al Sulaimi, S. (2022). Teacher-student rapport in emergency remote teaching: Autoethnography. *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.8851078e

Alshuraiaan, A. (2023). Exploring the relationship between teacher-student interaction patterns and language learning outcomes in TESOL classrooms. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 5*(3), 25-34. https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2023.5.3.3

Conroy, D., & Kidd, W. (2023). Using podcasts to cultivate learner–teacher rapport in higher education settings. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *60*(6), 861-871. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2022.2102528

Contenti, M. (2017, April). Communication Strategies for Building Teacher-Student Rapport. In *2017 University of Calgary Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching*.

del Carmen Santana, J. (2019). Establishing teacher-student rapport in an English-medium instruction class. *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.5294/laclil.2019.12.2.4

Estepp, C. M., & Roberts, T. G. (2015). Teacher immediacy and professor/student rapport as predictors of motivation and engagement. *Nacta Journal*, *59*(2), 155-163.

Hou, Y., & Wen, D. (2022). Student-Teacher Relationship and Its Influencing Factors among Middle School Students in Guangdong.

European Journal of Education and Pedagogy, *3*(5), 153-158. https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2022.3.5.406

Kang, C., & Wu, J. (2022). A theoretical review on the role of positive emotional classroom rapport in preventing EFL students' shame: A control-value theory perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 977240. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.977240

Katz, S. (2021). Rapport in the foreign language classroom: From face-to-face to online in times of pandemic. *Íkala*, *26*(3), 485-511. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v26n3a02

Kianinezhad, N. (2023). The significance of teacher empathy in fostering students' engagement in English language classes. *Journal of Research in Curriculum Instruction and Educational Technology*, *9*(2), 77-106. https://doi.org/10.21608/jrciet.2023.311221

Krasnova, T. I. (2023). A navigating the challenges of instructor-student communication in blended learning: a guide to the best strategies. *Humanities and Social Sciences. Bulletin of the Financial University*, *13*(2), 89-92. https://doi.org/10.26794/2226-7867-2023-13-c-89-92

Li, S. (2022). On the role of teacher-student rapport on english as a foreign language students' well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 822013. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.822013

Meng, Y. (2021). Fostering EFL/ESL students' state motivation: the role of teacher-student rapport. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 754797. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.754797

Peacock, G. (2022). A sequential explanatory mixed-methods study of UK higher education teacher experiences when building rapport with international students online. *SN Social Sciences*, *2*(10), 214. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-022-00533-2

Peng, G. (2022). Analysis on the Influencing Factors of Teacher-Student Relationship in Postgraduate Education. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, *4*(2), 100-102. https://doi.org/10.54097/ijeh.v4i2.1525

Peng, S. (2023). Treating International Students Beyond Teaching Cultural Differences?. *Critical Internationalization Studies Review*, *2*(1), 18-19. https://doi.org/10.32674/cisr.v2i1.5318

Qing, L., Diamantidaki, F., & Carruthers, K. (2020). Dynamics in a Mandarin lesson in a British secondary school: Asymmetric power and teacher-student rapport management. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.2.25

Raczkoski, M., Edgar, L. D., Robinson, J. S., Edwards, M. C., & Baker, M. A. (2021). Measuring Students' Perceived Costs of Studying Abroad: Validating an Adapted Instrument and Confirming the Factor Structure. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, *62*(4). https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2021.04217

Rawal, S. B. (2022). The Role of Teacher-student Relationship in Motivation (A Case Study of Community School of Nepal). *AMC Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, *3*(1), 11-23. https://doi.org/10.3126/amrj.v3i1.55818

Roshanbin, M., Nushi, M., & Abolhassani, Z. (2022). University Foreign Language Teachers' Perceptions of Professor-Student Rapport: A Hybrid Qualitative Study. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(5), 1351-1376. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5210

Sanden, S., & Quesenberry, A. (2023). "I've overcome a mountain that had little hills": teacher candidates' perspectives of student teaching during a global pandemic. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, *44*(4), 812-832. https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2022.2157779

Shakir, R., & Kiazai, A. N. (2023). TEACHER-STUDENTS'RELATIONSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENTS'ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AT SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL IN DISTRICT LASBELA. *Pakistan Journal of Educational Research, 6*(2). https://doi.org/10.52337/pjer.v6i2.791

Shogren, K. A., Raley, S. K., Wehmeyer, M. L., Grandfield, E., Jones, J., & Shaw, L. A. (2019). Exploring the relationships among basic psychological needs satisfaction and frustration, agentic engagement, motivation, and self-determination in adolescents with disabilities. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, *3*, 119-128. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41252-018-0093-1

Smith, C. S. (2018). *How Principals of Highly Impacted Schools Are Getting It Done: Practices for Building Teacher Capacity in Highly Impacted Schools*. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Yoshimoto, H. K., Murakami, D. Y., & Osamu, Y. (2023). The Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Motivation and Achievement: Perspective from Japan. *Journal of Education*, *6*(2), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t4157

Zhou, X. (2021). Toward the positive consequences of teacher-student rapport for students' academic engagement in the practical instruction classrooms. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 759785. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.759785