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An Investigation into the Impact of EFL Teachers' Rapport on Classroom Interactions and Students' Participation in Class Activities: The Case of Experienced and Novice Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of teachers' rapport on classroom interactions and students' participation in class activities, comparing experienced and novice EFL teachers. Rapport, defined as a positive, harmonious relationship between teacher and students, is often cited as critical for effective communication and a supportive learning environment. Despite the extensive literature emphasizing the importance of rapport in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and classroom dynamics, limited research has explored the role of teaching experience in moderating these effects. The study involved 40 EFL teachers (20 experienced and 20 novice) from Safir Language Academy in Tehran, with data collected through classroom observations. An independent t-test was used to analyze the differences in classroom interaction and student participation between the two groups. The findings indicate no significant difference between experienced and novice teachers in terms of the impact of rapport on classroom interactions and student participation. The study's results challenge previous research, suggesting that the level of teacher rapport, regardless of experience, does not significantly influence classroom dynamics or student engagement. These findings imply that other factors may play a more substantial role in shaping classroom interactions and participation, warranting further investigation into the complexities of teacher-student relationships and their effects on learning outcomes.

Keywords: teachers' rapport, classroom interactions, students' participation, class activities, experienced/novice teachers

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1. Introduction

Language teaching and learning are dynamic processes that extremely rely on effective communication and classroom interaction. According to Anderson and Maclean (2022, pp. 144-145), "successful language learning relies on the quality of teacher-student and student-student interactions." The teacher-student relationship and student-student interactions are important elements of any thriving language class. Meanwhile, Cai (2021) believes that "a positive and supportive relationship between teachers and their students forms a friendly learning atmosphere in which learners get motivated to actively participate in language-related activities" (p. 19). In the same vein, it seems that any teacher greatly desires to have classes with high teacher-student and student-student interactions and they may know that different factors can affect the quality of these interactions and the way they are done. One of these factors is teachers' rapport which can influence the quality of different classroom interactions (Coupland, 2003; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Jorgenson, 1992; McKeachie, 2011; Wasley, 2006). In other words, rapport refers to the positive and harmonious relationship between individuals, characterized by mutual understanding, trust, and respect.

Different scholars have proposed different definitions for rapport based on their viewpoints and on the basis of its significance in educational settings. Some scholars simply define it by saying "It is the relationship between teachers and their students" (Harmer, 2007, p. 26). This is in line with Jorgenson's (1992, p. 151) definition by saying, "Rapport means that there is some affinity or true interpersonal relationship between a teacher and students in his/her class." In a relational-base manner, rapport is made by teachers mainly through communication behaviors that show interpersonal intimacy (e.g., Voelkl, 1995) and emotional support (Titsworth et al., 2010). Other scholars define it as "a relationship that is built on mutual interest, support, and understanding." In their idea, "it is often viewed as an essential element of research assessments" (Horsfall, Eikelenboom, Draisma, & Smit, 2021, p. 1).

Some other scholars, however, take a more positive look at it by defining rapport as "the positive relationship between the teacher and students, which creates a supportive and conducive learning environment" (Voller, 1997, p. 45). In addition, McCroskey and Richmond (1990), have the same idea when they say that rapport refers to "a state of harmony achieved through mutual attentiveness, empathy, and positive regard" (p. 74). For some other scholars, it is defined as an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). Brown (2001), however, defines rapport as "… the relationship or connection you establish with your students, a relationship built on trust and respect that leads to students' feeling capable, competent, and creative" (p. 202).

Similar to Brown (2001), Johnson (2021) defines rapport as "a state of interpersonal connection and positive interaction characterized by mutual empathy, trust, and harmony" (p. 82). According to him, rapport involves nonverbal behaviors, active listening, and the establishment of shared goals. Some scholars deem two main aspects of rapport, namely personal connection and pleasant interaction (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Furthermore, Li (2022) states that "Rapport is that wonderful bond that allows teacher and students to work and learn well together" (p. 2). In her words, "The powerful teacher creates this relationship early in the year and works to maintain it. When good rapport has been established, students and teachers enjoy one another and the class and students feel more motivated to do well" (p. 69).

In the same line, Fleming (2003) defines rapport by giving an example of a specific learning context and says that "A teacher connected with their students makes the learning process far more enjoyable, especially if the process involves the creation, interest, promotion, and motivation of students" (Fleming, 2003, p. 1). Although rapport is an essential characteristic of a teacher, relatively little is known about this key facet of teaching (Frisby & Martin, 2010). More recently, however, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) describe rapport as "the interpersonal bond between teachers and students, characterized by trust, respect, and understanding" (pp. 22-23).

Some other scholars (Garbanski et al., 2016) look at the concept of rapport from another perspective and define it as responsive behavior by the interviewer (fitting a response to the respondent's previous task) and the respondent's engagement (behaviors consistent with motivation to perform the task). The reason for this definition is that they look at the concept in line with the view that coordination is important in interview settings. However, aside from what was mentioned above regarding the definition of rapport, it is necessary to know that rapport has its own components and prerequisites to be established and if the required components are not met, most probably it will not be built and further developed. Besides, instructors cannot create rapport on the basis of their title/rank, and it cannot be ordered to learners (Granitz et al., 2009). This means that one must know the different components of rapport to have a better understanding of how it can be built, and further developed.

As already mentioned, a lot of studies have been carried out to test the effect of teacher rapport on students' interaction and their participation in class activities; however, very few, if any, research studies have been done to see if teachers'

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experience can have a positive effect on the amount of rapport built in classes. Thus, the main purpose of the present research article is to test this issue. The present study was an attempt to shed light on the effect of teachers' rapport on classroom interactions and students' participation in class activities. To this end, the following research question was posed.

RQ1: Compared to novice EFL teachers, does experienced EFL teachers' rapport have any significant effect on classroom interaction and students' participation in class activities?

Based on the above research question, one can pose the following null hypothesis.

H01: Compared to novice EFL teachers, experienced EFL teachers' rapport has no significant effect on classroom interaction and students' participation in class activities.

2. Literature Review

In an educational context, the teacher-student rapport plays a crucial role in creating a good and friendly atmosphere to facilitate effective classroom interactions and enhance students' participation in class activities. However, establishing rapport with students is a complex process that involves various factors, including communication patterns, emotional connection, and a supportive classroom environment. In line with what was said about rapport, Johnson (2020) believes that successful language classes can be built upon rapport since it increases students' participation, confidence, tendency, and willingness to use the second/foreign language. In the meantime, Liao and Wang (2021) propose that the types of interactions between students are also necessary in second/foreign language classes. In their words, learning tasks in which students work together and the interactions carried out between them help language learners develop their linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. In these types of interactions, learners will have the chance to have a role in authentic language use, negotiate meaning, and learn from other learners.

In addition to teacher-student and student-student types of interactions, a plethora of research has recently been carried out on the significance of effective communication and rapport in language teaching. According to Mercer and Williams (2021, p. 6), "teacher-student rapport not only impacts students' affective engagement but also influences their cognitive engagement in language learning." In the same vein, Wei and Chen (2022, pp. 301-302) believe that "positive teacher-student rapport is associated with increased student motivation, participation, and academic achievement in language classes." Similarly, many research studies have found that student-student interactions facilitate language acquisition and intercultural understanding.

Moreover, Ozturk and Yildirim (2013, p. 8), stipulate that "peer interactions provide opportunities for students to practice the target language in authentic contexts, develop their communicative competence, and gain insights into different cultural perspectives." Realizing the importance of rapport, teacher-student interaction, and student-student interaction in successful language classes would be very significant for language educators.

Different scholars have introduced various significant components that help rapport develop in the class and bring about positive teacher-student relationships. For instance, research carried out by Dunn et al. (2017) reveals that 'empathy', 'active listening', and 'affirmation' are vital components of building rapport. In line with Dunn et al. (2017), believes that active listening can be a key element, emphasizing the fact that teachers must attentively engage with students' concerns and opinions. Besides, Jones and Smith (2021) emphasize the significance of 'nonverbal cues' such as having eye contact and using body language to build rapport between teachers and students.

Too, Brown (2020) came to the conclusion that empathy is an essential component. In his idea, teachers have to show understanding and sensitivity to students' feelings and viewpoints. In line with Brown, Mercer, and Dörnyei (2020) propose three key components, namely, 'mutual understanding', 'shared goals', and 'positive affect.' According to them, "teachers who establish mutual understanding, set clear goals, and exhibit positive emotions are more likely to build rapport with their students" (pp. 19-20). Additionally, Voller (1997) believes in the significance of 'communication patterns', and says, "Open and respectful communication between teachers and students is crucial for rapport building" (p. 41). In the meantime, Burke-Smalley (2018) introduces three factors (components) for rapport. In her words, 'personalized connection', 'supportive communication', and 'accessible interaction' are the three components of rapport. She goes on by saying that,

> as to personalized connection, I attempt to make personalized connections with students by providing customized mid-term feedback on each student's course performance, calling students by their preferred first name starting the first week of the term, and being responsive to a student's communication (p. 3).

In the meantime, regarding supportive communication, Burke-Smalley (2018) states that "I try to use supportive communication which includes positive/inviting facial expressions (e.g., smiles, head nods, direct eye contact to

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facilitate interaction), empathetic concern, as well as humble silliness" (pp. 3-4). Last but not least, and concerning accessible interaction, she believes that "I try to be accessible because mindful interaction facilitates relationships." She further continues that "I try to be accessible via email and phone and during scheduled office hours – both physically and mentally -- as well as before and after class breeds interaction" (p. 4).

Besides, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) identify three components of rapport, namely, 'mutual attentiveness', 'positivity', and 'coordination'. According to them, "In any interaction, mutual attentiveness and positivity are important ways of creating a positive personal image, which motivates the other person to continue the interaction. Coordination is described as the feeling that the interaction is balanced or "in sync" (pp. 288-289).

Moreover, Bakic-Miric and Bakic (2008, p. 76) propose seven components that they believe would lead to efficient rapport building. In their idea, these seven components are a) Build the relationship; b) Open the discussion; c) Gather information; d) Understanding of other's requirements; e) Share information; f) Reach agreements on problems and plans; and g) Mindful work.

However, some other scholars believe that in addition to components for rapport, some principles are also needed for rapport to emerge. These principles have been proposed by Buist (2007, pp. 47-48) as I) Developing an attractive personality; II) Becoming genuinely interested in other people; III) Aiming to meet the other person's crucial needs; IV) Becoming an excellent communicator; V) Creating similarity; VI) Understanding and adapting behavioral style; VII) Cultivating trust and trustworthiness.

Recent research studies have revealed that rapport has numerous benefits for the classroom, both for students and teachers. Some of these benefits include increased motivation on the part of students and teachers, a higher amount of feedback, improved student learning, better communication, and, not to be ignored, instructor well-being. In the meantime, a good teacher-student relationship opens up a comfortable space for more learning opportunities, allowing students to increase their participation in the classroom as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which ultimately leads to higher achievement. It is thus more than obvious speculation that good teacher-student rapport enhances language learning. Also, rapport creates a positive learning environment, which enhances student engagement and motivation. This is stated in the words of Johnson (2018), when he says, "positive teacher-student rapport is associated with increased student motivation and active participation in classroom activitie" (p. 224).

In line with Johnson (2018), Wasley (2006) states that students who interact frequently with an instructor earn higher grades, are more satisfied, and are more likely to return to school in subsequent years. This positive classroom environment begins with developing relationships with individual students. In the meantime, for the benefit of teachers out there, Middlebury's Barbara Hofer argues that a classroom of motivated learners will in fact affect [the teacher's] motivation and can make teaching a more satisfying experience for the instructor (McKeachie, 2011). So, for your health, and for the overall student learning, increasing rapport can yield large dividends.

Furthermore, a study by Wei and Chen (2022) found that "students who perceive high levels of rapport with their teachers are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and academic success." Looking at rapport from another perspective, Benson and colleagues found rapport to be associated with positive student perceptions (enjoyment of the subject and the professor) and behaviors (attending, studying, and paying attention) (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). This presents more evidence that rapport with learners can result in higher ratings of instruction. Also, the higher possibility of paying attention in class would most probably lead to better classroom interactions and student participation in class activities. By generating rapport, teachers strengthen the emotional connection students have to a concept, thus promoting and enhancing learning. According to Tiberius et al. (1991), rapport helps establish a context that positively influences learning.

A lot of studies have reported a positive association between teachers' rapport and increased classroom interaction as well as students' participation in class activities. For instance, a study by Li and Zhu (2019) found that "students who perceived a strong rapport with their teachers were more likely to participate actively in classroom discussions and ask questions" (pp. 411-412). In the same vein, Matuzas (2021) believes that "students' participation in class activities increases significantly when they feel a sense of connection and trust with their teachers" (p. 14.).

Another study carried out by Chen (2016) came to the conclusion that teachers with high levels of rapport with their students were more likely to increase students' participation in the classroom. Similarly, a study by MacIntyre et al. (1998) concluded that there was a positive correlation between the quality of teacher-student interaction and students' participation in class activities. Furthermore, another critical factor to motivate students' participation in class activities can be student-student interaction. In another study, Long (1983) stated that student-student interaction provided learners with more opportunities and chances to practice their language skills and participate in real communication.

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Still, other scholars believe that there is a close relationship between rapport and classroom interaction. For example, Pianta et al. (2012) stipulate that teachers who build a positive rapport with their students have more possibility to provide an interactive and engaging classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, Wei and Chen (2022) state that "rapport-building strategies such as active listening and providing feedback that have been employed by teachers positively affect classroom interactions and promote student engagement" (pp. 304-305). Still, other research studies have come to the conclusion that teachers who build high levels of rapport with learners have much higher levels of classroom interaction than teachers with low levels of rapport. In the meantime, Pekrun et al. (2009) have stated that "teachers who proposed warmth, support, and understanding towards their students were more likely to promote increased classroom interaction" (p. 151).

Needless to say, the quality of teacher-student interaction has been identified as a critical factor in promoting increased classroom interaction. In line with this theory, Brophy (1986) found that "teachers who provided clear instructions, asked open-ended questions, and provided feedback were more likely to engage their students in classroom interaction" (p. 1073). Meanwhile, the rapport established between teachers and learners can play a vital role in students' learning and their class achievements. (Jorgenson, 1992). Last but not least, Coupland (2003) believes that establishing rapport can have a positive effect on classroom interaction and also on class atmosphere as it reduces anxiety, increases the amount of students' participation in the class, brings about and motivates social interaction, provides a positive learning environment and promotes learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study has a quasi-experimental design which compares two independent groups (experienced and novice teachers) using observational data to assess the impact of teacher rapport on classroom interactions and student participation.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study included 40 male and female teachers (with no specific proportion) comprising 20 experienced teachers (with at least 5 years of teaching experience) and 20 novice teachers (with a maximum of 1 year of teaching experience). The age range of the teachers was 23 to 47 years old. They were teachers at different levels and teaching at different branches of Safir Language Academy in Tehran. They have gone through the same Teacher Training Course at the beginning of their recruitment.

3.3 Instrument

The instrument used to collect the data required for the present study was "Observation" carried out by the trained observers of the main branch of the Institute (which is regularly done either at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of every semester).

3.4 Data Collection

The results of the observation were written and reported in an "observation form" and discussed in a one-to-one "negotiation session" with the observed teacher(s). The observation form has been designed and prepared on the basis of the the problems found by the coordinators, issues presented through OJT (On the Job Training) session, and TTC packs. There are 10 items in the observation form, with each item bearing 0-10 points (i.e., the weakest performance or quality gets 0, while the best quality or highest performance receives 10), the overall score of the ten items ranges from 0 to 100 points. Three of the ten items deal with "teacher rapport", "student interaction", and "Students' class participation". The observation form has no reliability and validity indices. It was designed by the panel of executive coordinators at the Head Office of Safir Language Academysome 5 years ago and has been used tremendously in all branches of the institute (in Tehran and all other cities around the country) since then. When an observer is suppoed to fill it out for a class, s/he must spend the whole class time which is 90 minutes as it requires complete observation of teacher and students' performance through the class time. "Student interaction" and "Students' class participation" were tsted integratively, not separately.

3.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, an independent samples t-tests was used by SPSS Ver. 27 to test the possible effect of experienced vs novice teachers' rapport' on students' interaction and their participation in class activities. The results would help determine if there are statistically significant differences between the two groups of teachers regarding the effect of their rapport on students' interaction and their participation in class activities.

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4. Findings

Below, the results of the study have been presented in Tables 1 and 2. Concerning Table 1, it can be seen that there is no specific difference between the Mean and Standard Deviation of Experienced vs. Novice Teachers regarding their rapport and the amount of their classroom interaction. Taking a look at Table 1., it can be seen that the Mean of interaction for Experienced and Novice teachers was 8.65 and 8.35, respectively. Besides, the amount of Standard Deviation for the same component was 1.039 and 1.663, respectively. Too, the Mean of rapport for Experienced and Novice teachers was 9.80 and 9.70, and the Standard deviation for the same component was .523 and .656, respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of experinced and novice teachers' rapport, class interaction and student participation

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Interaction	1.00	20	8.6500	1.03999	.23255
	2.00	20	8.3500	1.66307	.37187
Rapport	1.00	20	9.8000	.52315	.11698
	2.00	20	9.7000	.65695	.14690

Regarding Table 2, it can be stated that with a df of 38 and a .05 confidence level, the t-observed was .684. Since the t-critical for this df is 2.021 which is almost three times bigger than t-observed, we can say that the first part (effect of teachers's rapport on classroomm interaction) of the null hypothesis "Experienced EFL teachers' rapport has no significant effect on classroom interaction and students' participation in class activities compared to that of novice EFL teachers." is retained and we can say that there is not a significant difference between experienced and niovice EFL teachers concerning the effect of their rapport on classroom interactions.

Taking a second look at Table 2, one can see that with a df of 38 and a .05 confidence level, the t-observed was .533. Again, since the t-critical for this df is 2.021 which is again three times bigger than t-observed, we can say that the second part (effect of teachers's rapport on students' participation in class activities) of the null hypothesis "Experienced EFL teachers' rapport has no significant effect on classroomm interaction and students' participation in class activities compared to that of novice EFL teachers." is retained and we can say that there is not a significant difference between experienced and niovice EFL teachers concerning the effect of their rapport on students' class participation in class activities. In other words, it can be concluded that there is not enough evidence to support a significant effect of the independent variable (teachers' rapport) on the dependent variables (class interaction and student participation) of experienced teachers. This means that teachers' rapport has no significant effect on class interaction and student participation of teachers with high teaching experience and no matter how much rapport teachers have with students in their class, no enhanced class interaction and student participation is observed either for experienced or for novice teachers.To sum up, one can say that teachers' experience does not play any specific role on the amount of effect that their rapport can have on either classroom interaction or students' participation in class activities.

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Table 2. Independent samples T-test of teachers' rapport, class interaction and student participation for experienced vs. novice teachers

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Interaction	Equal variances assumed	3.612	.065	.684	38	.498	.30000	.43860	-.58790	1.18790
	Equal variances not assumed			.684	31.889	.499	.30000	.43860	-.59352	1.19352
Rapport	Equal variances assumed	1.149	.290	.533	38	.597	.10000	.18778	-.28015	.48015
	Equal variances not assumed			.533	36.186	.598	.10000	.18778	-.28078	.48078

A closer examination of Tables 3 and 4 highlights a discernible difference, albeit modest, between the rapport established by experienced versus novice teachers and the corresponding levels of students' interaction/class participation. Both tables show that 17 out of 20 teachers, regardless of their experience, were able to build strong rapport with their students. However, the tables also reveal a variation in the extent of students' interaction/class participation, with this variation being more pronounced among students taught by novice teachers. Although the difference in student engagement is not dramatically significant, it does suggest that novice teachers may face more challenges in encouraging consistent students' interaction/class participation compared to their more experienced counterparts. This subtle yet important observation underscores the potential influence of teaching experience on the dynamics of students' interaction/class participation, highlighting the need for targeted support and training for novice teachers to enhance their ability to engage students effectively.

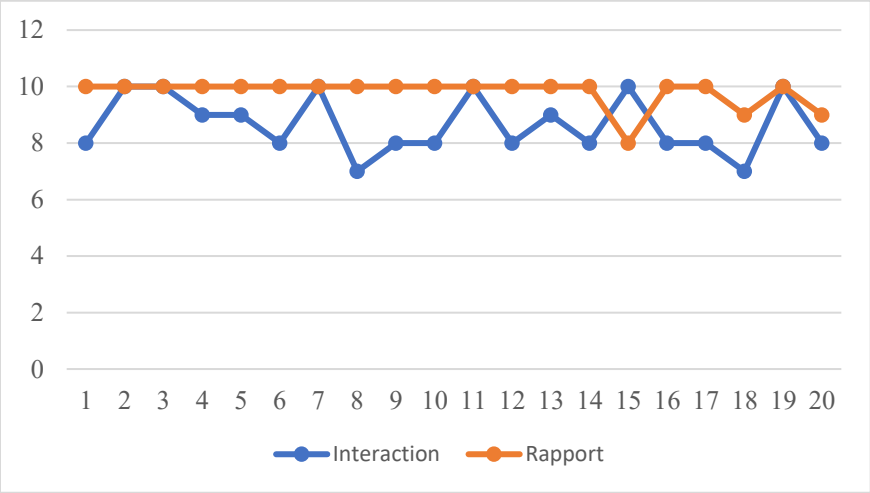


Fig. 1. Experienced teachers' line graph for rapport and students' interaction/class participation

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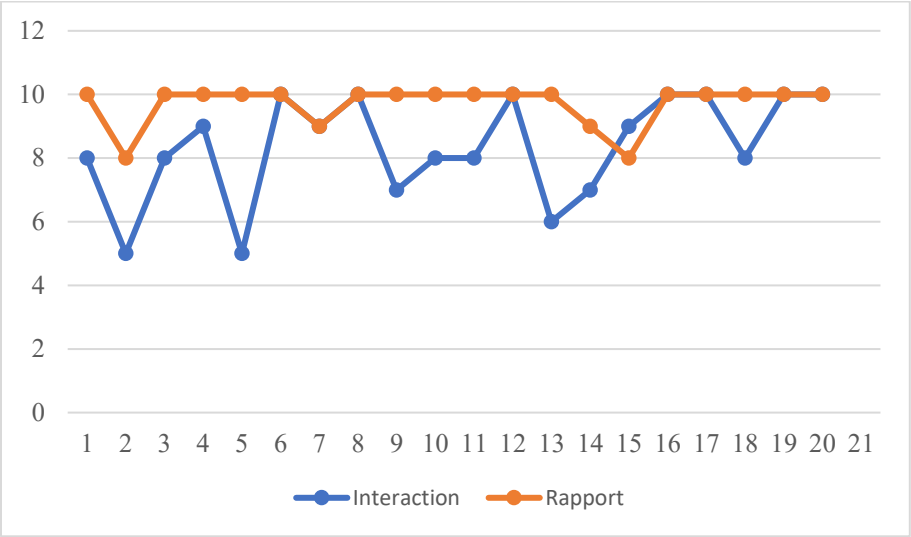


Fig. 2. Novice teachers' line graph for rapport and students' interaction/class participation

5. Discussion

The findings of this study challenge conventional assumptions about the relationship between teachers' rapport and classroom dynamics, particularly in relation to teacher experience. Despite previous studies asserting that rapport plays a critical role in fostering student participation and enhancing classroom interaction, our results suggest that teacher experience—whether novice or experienced—does not significantly alter the impact of rapport on these variables. This outcome stands in contrast to studies like those by Johnson (2018) and Benson, Cohen, and Buskist (2005), which suggest that the ability to build rapport is linked to increased student participation and engagement, particularly when established by more experienced teachers.

One possible explanation for these contrasting results is the evolving nature of classroom environments, where rapport may not be the sole or even primary driver of classroom participation and interaction. As Ozturk and Yildirim (2013) point out, peer interactions and collaborative tasks in modern EFL classrooms often play a more pivotal role than teacher-student rapport in motivating students to engage. In such environments, rapport may complement, rather than lead, classroom interaction. For example, novice teachers, despite their limited experience, may still be able to facilitate effective peer interactions that compensate for any limitations in their ability to build deep rapport with students.

Moreover, the study's reliance on classroom observations as a data collection tool may have inadvertently overlooked the nuanced ways in which rapport influences student behavior. As discussed by Coupland (2003), rapport encompasses not only overt behaviors, such as classroom engagement, but also subtle, often non-verbal, dynamics like reducing anxiety and creating a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning. These dimensions of rapport may not have been fully captured by the observation form used in this study, which lacks reliability and validity indices, potentially skewing the findings.

The results also raise questions about the role of teacher training and institutional culture in shaping classroom dynamics. Given that all teachers in the study underwent the same teacher training course at Safir Language Academy, it is possible that institutional norms and practices heavily influence classroom behavior, potentially mitigating differences in individual teachers' rapport-building skills. The TTC (Teacher Training Course) may have equipped both novice and experienced teachers with similar strategies for classroom management, reducing the variability in their ability to establish rapport. This possibility aligns with studies like those by Li, Ellis, and Zhu (2019), who argue that institutional frameworks can standardize teacher behaviors, sometimes at the expense of personalized teaching practices.

Additionally, the modest differences observed between experienced and novice teachers regarding student participation might point to other factors influencing classroom dynamics. One such factor could be the students' own characteristics, such as their age, cultural background, or previous educational experiences, which were not accounted

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for in this study. Pianta et al. (2012) suggest that student attributes can significantly impact the effectiveness of rapport in fostering classroom interaction. For instance, more mature students might require less teacher-student rapport to engage in classroom activities, relying instead on intrinsic motivation and peer interactions.

Another noteworthy point is the potential impact of class size and the type of activities employed during observations. Research by Brophy (1986) emphasizes that small class sizes allow teachers to interact more frequently and meaningfully with students, potentially enhancing rapport. However, larger class sizes or teacher-centered activities may limit these opportunities, reducing the overall influence of rapport on classroom dynamics. Although class size was not explicitly controlled for in this study, it could be a contributing factor to the non-significant results observed.

Furthermore, the cultural context of the study, conducted in Tehran, Iran, may have influenced the findings. As highlighted by Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), cultural norms around teacher authority and student participation vary widely and can mediate the impact of rapport on classroom interaction. In more hierarchical cultures, students may view teachers as authority figures and may be less likely to rely on rapport as a motivator for participation, instead adhering to cultural expectations of deference and respect. This could explain why even novice teachers, who might struggle to establish strong rapport, were still able to maintain classroom participation.

In conclusion, while this study's findings suggest that teacher experience does not significantly affect the impact of rapport on classroom dynamics, it opens the door for further exploration into the various factors influencing EFL classroom interaction. Future research could explore the impact of other variables such as class size, cultural context, and student characteristics on the rapport-interaction relationship. Additionally, the development of more reliable and valid observational tools could provide a clearer picture of how rapport operates in different teaching contexts.

6. Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the impact of teacher rapport on classroom interactions and student participation between experienced and novice EFL teachers. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, the findings suggest that there is no significant difference between the two groups, indicating that rapport, regardless of teacher experience, does not have a strong influence on classroom dynamics. These results stand in contrast to previous studies that have emphasized the importance of rapport in promoting student engagement and interaction (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005; Johnson, 2018).

One key implication of this finding is that rapport, while important, may not be the sole or even primary factor driving classroom interactions and participation. Instead, other elements such as institutional training, classroom management techniques, and peer dynamics may play a more substantial role in shaping the classroom environment. This highlights the need for educators and researchers to take a more holistic approach when considering the factors that influence classroom behavior, rather than focusing narrowly on teacher-student rapport.

Additionally, the non-significant differences between experienced and novice teachers suggest that teacher experience alone does not necessarily enhance rapport-building skills in a way that directly impacts student participation. This challenges the conventional assumption that experienced teachers are inherently better at fostering classroom interaction through rapport. Instead, it suggests that even novice teachers, provided they receive adequate training and support, can create engaging and participatory classroom environments. This aligns with research by Li, Ellis, and Zhu (2019), who argue that institutional practices and training programs can standardize teacher behaviors, reducing the variability in rapport-building skills across experience levels.

The study also underscores the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when evaluating the role of rapport in the classroom. In more hierarchical cultures like that of Iran, where the study was conducted, teacher authority may play a more significant role in classroom dynamics than rapport. As Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) suggest, cultural norms can mediate the impact of rapport on student participation, with students potentially relying more on formal teacher authority than interpersonal connection.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The use of an observation form without established reliability and validity indices may have limited the accuracy of the data collected, particularly in capturing the more subtle aspects of rapport. Additionally, the study was conducted within a single institution, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a broader range of institutions and teaching contexts, as well as develop more robust tools for measuring rapport and its impact on classroom dynamics.

Furthermore, the study did not account for potential moderating variables such as class size, student characteristics, or the type of activities used during the observed lessons. These factors could significantly influence the relationship between teacher rapport and classroom interaction and should be considered in future studies. For example, Brophy

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(1986) emphasizes that smaller class sizes tend to facilitate more frequent and meaningful teacher-student interactions, which could amplify the effects of rapport on student engagement.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the role of teacher experience in rapport-building, it also raises important questions about the broader factors influencing classroom interaction and participation. The findings suggest that rapport, while beneficial, may not be as critical to classroom dynamics as previously thought, and that teacher experience alone does not necessarily enhance rapport in a way that impacts student engagement. These conclusions invite further research into the complexities of teacher-student relationships, particularly in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. By expanding the scope of future studies and refining the tools used to measure rapport, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how best to foster engaging and participatory classroom environments in EFL settings.

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