

**Teacher Learner Rapport in Online Education:  
Case Study EFL Teachers and Learners of Saida  
University**



**Hadjira Hichour**

Moulay Tahar of Saida University, (Algeria), hadjira.hichour@univ-saida.dz

**Summary:**

Learning a foreign language successfully requires a special and warm relationship between teachers and learners. This teacher-learner relationship is academically known as 'rapport'. The current paper provides insights into the importance of rapport in online education as well as the challenges facing rapport building in an online environment. The study relied on a questionnaire addressed to EFL students and an interview conducted with EFL teachers of Saida University. Findings revealed that rapport is necessary in EFL environment especially if it is an online one. However, this rapport is failed in the English language department of Dr. Moulay Tahar university because of the absence of face to-face communication. The study also indicated that most challenges facing building rapport are related to the asynchronous nature of online education, social absence of both teachers and learners, and electronic problems coined to the software use, in addition to connectivity problems.

**Keywords:** Rapport, Rapport Building, EFL teachers, EFL learners, Online education

**1. INTRODUCTION**

It is a fact that learning a foreign language successfully requires a special and a warm relationship between teachers and learners, based on 'caring and sharing'. Building such learning / teaching environment means taking into account the psychological and the social perspectives of both teachers and learners. With students, as unique individuals coming from different backgrounds and experiences, a positive environment may not occur naturally but requires a careful nurturing from the teacher. In the

\* Corresponding author: **Hadjira Hichour**, e-mail: [hadjira.hichour@univ-saida.dz](mailto:hadjira.hichour@univ-saida.dz)

academic purpose, this relationship between teachers and learners is known as *'rapport'*.

Rapport is a developed positive relationship between teachers and learners within the bounds of professional standards. Bernieri (1998) defined it as harmonious interactions between teachers and students. In this respect, the relationship between instructors and their students is seen as a harmonious relationship that enables effective communication, improved work outcomes and the quick resolution of issues. Rapport is also a reflection of the good time teachers and learners are passing in the classroom, and the basis of a positive work environment and high job satisfaction. It means that they work well together, they enjoy each other's company and they coordinate their efforts to achieve shared goals. The level of rapport between a teacher and their students is a key indicator of a teacher's success in developing a positive classroom dynamic. The importance of developing rapport applies to all students irrespective of age, subject, background, disability, intellect or abilities.

In traditional learning, creating such a comforting rapport is an easy task. The students recognize the opportunity for the shared time with their teacher who is, in fact, a partner in their learning process rather than someone who solely directs it. Teachers in their turns take their time to understand students' styles, psychologies, and abilities. As a result, rapport is established.

However, when it comes to online education things go differently. Stock (2010) noted that in an online context, because of the absence of voice and nonverbal behavioural, rapport might be a difficult task to be created. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the nature of the relationship between EFL teachers and learners of Saida University during the pandemic. Since this latter was one from a number of Algerian universities that suspended traditional classroom and activated e-learning.

## **2. Literature Review:**

### **2.1 Rapport: Academic Perspective.**

Rapport is viewed as a relationship of mutual understanding, trust and agreement between people. It is a sense of communication that forms the basis of meaningful, close and harmonious relationships. In psychology, the APA dictionary of psychology\*y defines rapport as: *"a warm, relaxed relationship of mutual understanding, acceptance, and sympathetic compatibility between or among individuals"* (2002). In this regard, rapport is the relationship that is essentially based on mutual trust and understanding, in which all parties involved have the another's best interests in mind. Rapport building is the process of creating rapport and building trusting relationships between two or more people.

Academically, many definitions are suggested regarding rapport. Bernieri, (1998) defined it as a harmonious interaction between teachers and students. Harmer (2001, p 52) claimed that: "Rapport means, in essence, the relationship that the students have with the teacher, and vice versa." In this regard, the teacher-

learner rapport is the relationship between the teacher and the learner that collects a sense of mutual understanding, a sense of mutual trust and sympathy, and a sense of harmony.

Rapport isn't just a tool for building relationships, though; it's often the foundation of success. In education, the first meeting of an initial teacher-student encounter is likewise important for establishing trust and rapport. Relationships characterized by trust and rapport not only contribute to better academic experiences, but they can also alleviate anxiety and distress and enhance students' involvement in the lecture. Benson et al., (2005 cited in Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008) found that in classes where teachers established rapport students were more likely to attend class, pay attention, and enjoy the subject matter. Thus, rapport nurture the learning process.

At the level of teaching process, Granitz et al. (2009) claimed that "one of the key traits of a master teacher is the ability to foster student rapport" (p. 52). In this sense a successful learning is the result of an effective teaching. Through a warm relationship, teachers find the way by which they improve their teaching and increase their productivity. They will easily share their expectations concerning the learning of content, achievements and social behaviour with their students. This is also attributed to a good learning/ teaching environment in which students find the opportunity to express themselves and express their concerns. This claim is well supported by Frisby and Martin (2010) who found that instructor rapport emerged as a significant predictor of cognitive and affective learning.

It is worth mentioning that rapport building is not the responsibility of teachers only, students in their turns are expected to respect their teacher and their peers so as to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and support in the classroom, an atmosphere where tolerance and a sense of community and common identity are promoted. Thus, the students feel safe in expressing their concerns and asking questions, and teachers feel satisfied of their job and increase their productivity. It is asserted that high-quality relationships between teachers and students enhance classroom learning and motivation by building a safe and supportive classroom context for students to open up and listen to teachers and take intellectual risks (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

## **2.2 Challenges of Rapport Building in Online Environment:**

Teacher-learner relations play a prominent role in the development of competencies from early age till university. Teachers may operate as social agents, and they can affect students' intellectual and socioemotional experiences by creating a classroom setting that stimulates both student motivation and learning. To do so, there is no doubt that building rapport in an online environment is much more challenging than face to face setting.

In the virtual world, it is harder to establish rapport since the participants exist in two different dimensions on their computer screens or mobile devices. they need to work extra hard to make sure they are interacting in a way that allows them

to build genuine, meaningful and warm relationships. In education, the quality of student-instructor rapport is positively linked to student satisfaction with the online learning experience (O'Grady, 2013)

Despite the fact that online education existed before, Covid-19 braced up the spread of this process. Following the lockdown posed by Corona Virus, schools, colleges and universities all over the world suspended face to face education and activated the remote teaching and learning process. In this sense, both teachers and students are not obliged to go to the campus to receive lectures. They just need to stand behind their screens, login in online educational websites with their usernames and passwords, and they will find their courses.

In Algeria, online education is strongly coined with the Covid-19 Virus. The virtual setting of education has not really been applied until the spread of the virus, (Bin Herzallah, 2021). Moodle as an online platform is used in Algerian universities to fulfill the virtual education. However, due to electronic problems facing this tool, most teachers and learners moved to other alternatives to complete the teaching and learning process, namely, Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Tweeter, (Ghounane, 2020).

Accordingly, through this study, the researcher will provide a deep understanding of rapport building in Algerian universities during the period of the Corona Virus. The department of English language and literature of Saida university is taken as a case study. The aim of this paper is to answer the following questions:

- ✓ How do both EFL teachers and Learners of Saida university perceive the importance of rapport in the process of teaching/learning?
- ✓ What are the challenges facing both of them in creating and maintaining rapport in a virtual education?

### **3. Methods:**

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to identify why rapport is important in EFL environment and what challenges might be associated with rapport-building in online education. To achieve these objectives a quantitative and a qualitative method is used.

#### **3. 1 Participants**

Since this paper is to investigate the nature of EFL teacher-learner rapport, 12 teachers and 98 students were recruited from the department of English language and literature at Dr. Moulay Tahar University. All teachers participated in this study are permanent teachers who teach English as a foreign language before and during the pandemic. Thereby, the participated teachers experienced teacher-learner rapport in the traditional physical-based presence classroom, in addition to online learning imposed by Covid-19. Students participated in the study are divided into two groups. In the first group, 45 master students who are enrolled at the department for 4 to 5 years. This group studied in both traditional and online classrooms (pre-and post- Covid-19). In the second group, 53 students from the first, second and the third year. This group joined university during the pandemic,

where learning was shifted to online version. Thus, they only experienced distance relationship with EFL teachers.

### **3. 2 Research Tools:**

In the current study, the instruments used include a questionnaire handed to students and an interview conducted with teachers. The questionnaire consists of two sections: The first section's aim is to collect demographic information about students, namely, their ages, gender, and their level. opinions and feelings towards their teachers. The second section's aim is to know the attitudes of students towards online learning, the feelings they have towards their teachers, and their evaluation of teacher-learner relationship in distance education. On the other hand, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participated teachers. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they allow the researcher "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Within the interview, four questions were asked to the participated teachers:

1. Is building rapport important in online education?
2. What are the challenges related to promoting rapport in e-learning?
3. do you try to build rapport with your students in online environment? In what ways do you build such rapport?
4. do you think that rapport building in physical-based presence classroom is the same as in online education?

### **3. 3 Data Collection and Procedures:**

Due to pandemic, it was difficult for the researcher to catch students since they are studying through wave system (each level is studying 7 weeks, once finished another level is taking place). As a result, an electronic version of the questionnaire was handed to EFL students of Saida University. The questionnaire was addressed to all students of the department of English language and literature, however, only 98 students responded to the questionnaire. The one-hour interview was conducted with the participated teachers during their working days at the level of the department, and the answers were recorded by the use of the researcher's phone. At the end, the results were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

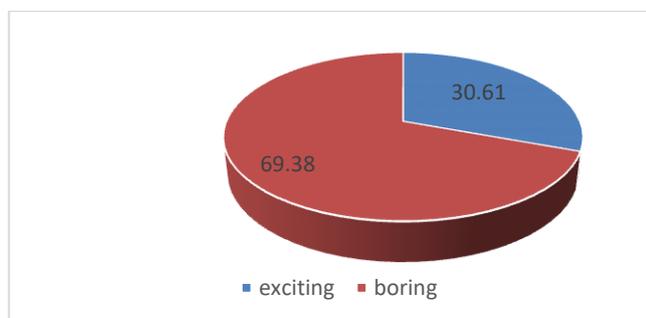
**3. 4 Data Analysis:****3.4.1 Section One : Students' Questionnaire Analysis****Table1 : Students' Demographic Information**

Demographic Information			
Age	18-25	86	87.75%
	More than 25	12	12.24%
Gender	Male	36	36.73
	Female	62	63.26%
Level	First year	12	12.24%
	Second Year	17	17.34%
	Third Year	24	24.48%
	Master (1-2)	45	45.91%
First joining university	Before pandemic	47	47.95%
	During pandemic	51	52.04%
Total		98	100%

The above table shows that the entire number of students who participated in this study is 98. Concerning age, 86 students out of 98 aged between 18-25 years old, on the other hand, only 12 subjects their age is more than 25 years old. Next in importance, the participants are 36 males, and 62 females. The table also show the distribution of the participants over the levels, it is shown that 53 students out of 98 are enrolled in license levels (first-12, second-17, and third-24). However, 45 out of 98 students are enrolled in Master levels (1-2). This means that the subjects are divided into two groups: most of license students joined university during the pandemic, and all master students joined university before pandemic.

**Question One:** How do you feel about learning English language online?

**Figure 1:** Students' Attitudes towards Learning English Online



The above figure reports that 69.38% of the participated students find learning English online is boring. However, only 30.61% find that the process of learning English online is exciting.

**Question Two:** do you care about your relationship with your teachers?

**Table 2:** Students' Interest about Teacher-Learner Relationship

Choices	Responses	
Yes	96	97.95%
No	02	02.04%

Commenting on table 2, it is shown that 97.95% of the participated students care about their relationships with their teachers. On the other hand, only 2 students out of total of 98, with 02.04% responded by No. which means that they do not care about teacher-learner relationship.

**Question Three:** is there any kind of communication between you and your teacher out of the learning context?

**Table 3:** Student-Teacher Communication out of Learning Context

Choices	Responses	
Yes	26	26.53%
No	72	73.46

Answering the third question, table 3 shows that 26.53% of the participated students communicate with their teachers out of the learning context. However, 73.46% claimed that they do not share any kind of communication with their teachers out of the learning context.

**Question Four:** do you think building a good relationship between you and your teachers is essential to motivate your learning process?

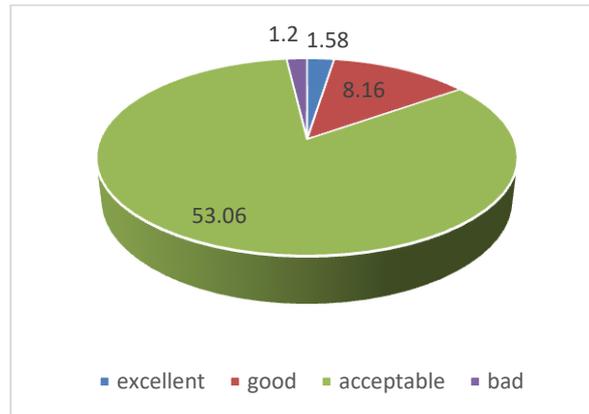
**Table 4 :** Teacher-learner Relationship Contributing to Students Motivation

Choices	Responses	
Yes	98	100%
No	00	00%

Table 4 reports that all the participated students 100%, surprisingly, consider a good teacher-learner relationship is a key for students' motivation.

**Question Five:** how do you qualify your relationship with your teachers?

**Figure 2:** The Quality of Teacher-Learner Rapport in the Department of English Language and Literature of Saida University



The above figure shows that 53.06% of the participated students evaluate their relationship with their teachers as 'acceptable'; 8.16% consider it as 'good'; 1.58% see it as 'excellent'; and 1.2% qualify it as a 'bad relationship'.

**Question 6:** which type of learning is suitable to build a good teacher-learner rapport and why?

**Table 5:** The Suitable Learning Type to Build a Good Teacher-Learner Rapport.

Choices	Responses	
Online learning	20	20.04%
Traditional learning	78	79.59%

Table 5 reports that 79.59% of the participated students consider traditional learning as the suitable environment to build rapport. They added that in the physical-based presence classroom, teachers and learners have face to face interaction, the fact that makes both of them understand each other easily. Moreover, many students reported that in the traditional learning before the pandemic, they spent much time with their teachers than nowadays. As a result, according to them, they built a good relationship with their teachers. However, in online learning imposed by Covid-19, students said that they spend only few weeks with their teachers, a period that is not enough to establish such kind of rapport, especially, that all teachers focus only on the lecture; thereby neglecting the psychological perspective of the learning process.

### **3.4. 2 Section One: Teachers' Interview Analysis**

As mentioned above, the interview consisted of four questions, the analysis of the answers is presented in the following:

#### **1. The Importance of Building Rapport in Online Education**

All the participated teachers reported that rapport building is important in online education. They said that teacher engagement and connection with online students has a positive effect on students' perceptions towards distance education; since it is recently included in Algerian universities. Students used to receive lectures in traditional classroom where they contacted teachers face to face for a long a period than in online learning; as a result, rapport is built automatically.

#### **2. Challenges Related to Promoting Rapport in E-Learning?**

Responding to this question, all teachers agreed that building rapport in online environment is more challenging than in traditional one. most of them claimed that because of the few weeks, teachers are spending with their students and due to the limited time devoted to the lecture, teachers focus more on the academic discussion of the lecture. They added that one of the rapport building hindrances is the frequent absences of the students due to Covid-19; especially when the Ministry of higher education noted that student's absence should not be counted because of the health situation caused by Corona virus. Moreover, teachers also consider internet connectivity as one of the major obstacles that cause the failure rapport building. Others reported that Moodle is also among the hindrances, since both teachers and learners are not qualified to use it. In addition.

#### **3. Teachers' Ways in Building Rapport?**

In trying to build rapport, the ways followed are different from one teacher to another. In this respect, one of the teachers said that she tries to be available all the time through Moodle and email, to ensue accessibility and quick response to students in order to reduce the gap caused by the absence of face to face contact. Another subject reported that she is friending students in social media such as 'Facebook'. According to her, this method will give both teachers and learners more information about each other, namely, their attitudes, mentalities, and personalities. Moreover, one of the subjects reported that "sine face to face teaching-learning process is limited by only few weeks, I am doing my best to make these meetings friendlier".

#### **4. Then Difference between Building Rapport in Physical-Based Presence Classroom and Online Education?**

All teachers claimed that building rapport in traditional classroom is easier than building it in online environment, simply because of the differences of between the amount of time devoted for each type. Also, due to the easiest accessibility and the availability of both teachers and learners. They noted that the non-verbal behavior associated with online teaching results in the failure of building a good teacher-learner rapport.

### 3.5 Discussion

The study highlights a number of issues related to rapport building in online environment. The objective of the study questions was to provide a deep understanding about rapport building during online learning in higher education. To start with, the results revealed that EFL students of Saida university consider learning English online as a boring process. It is assumed that these responses reflect the reality of online education adopted in Algerian universities, which is in fact an offline education (Ghounane, 2020). These attitudes towards online education is a good indicator of rapport building failure, since the teaching-learning process is associated with a non-verbal behavior as claimed by some teachers.

Next in importance, the results revealed that most of the students care about building rapport between them and their teachers. In fact, these wants are shared between both students and teachers as divulged by interviewing teachers also. However, when they were asked about if they communicate teachers out of the learning contexts, only few students responded by yes. Analyzing the results in terms of the variables gathered from demographic information of students, it was found that those students who respond by 'yes' are aged more than 25 years old. As a result, we can assume that age plays a great role in defining teacher-learner rapport. In this respect, age convergence between teachers and learners establish an agreement.

Moreover, through the answers, all students agree that a good rapport motivate them in their studies. These findings are supported by the answers of teachers concerning the importance of rapport building. In this respect, they claimed that teacher engagement and connection with online students has a positive effect on students' achievements. These findings are also supported by koca (2016) who claimed that, 'teachers may operate as social agents, and they can affect students' intellectual and socio-emotional experiences by creating a classroom setting that stimulates both student motivation and learning' (p.7).

The results obtained from teachers' interview concerning the methods they follow to foster their relationship with their students, revealed that most of EFL teachers look for alternatives to maintain rapport, namely, Facebook, Whatsapp, and email. These results are consistent with that of Ghounane (2020) who asserted that social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Youtube, and Instagram have become the refuge of teachers and students during the pandemic, instead of using Moodle.

Furthermore, the results also revealed that the majority of students consider their relationship with their teachers in online environment as 'acceptable'. This answer is well illustrated through teachers' answers over the challenges they face in building rapport in online education. In this respect, they claimed, that due to connectivity problems, the asynchronous meeting lecturing through Moodle, and the frequent absences of students, rapport building is failed. These results agreed with that of Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) who asserted that rapport

building in online environment is the most challenging educational process. As a result, the majority of EFL students at Saida university who joined the department before the pandemic, claimed that the relationship they had with teachers in traditional classroom learning is better than in online environment. They said that they had much time, communication, and interaction with teachers than in online learning. In their turns, teachers also noted that building rapport in traditional classroom is easier than building it in online environment, simply because of the differences of between the amount of time devoted for each type. Also, due to the easiest accessibility and the availability of both teachers and learners.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In this study, we investigated Saida university teachers' and students' perceptions over the importance of rapport building in EFL environment, the nature of rapport established between teachers and learners of the English language department, and the challenges that might be associated with rapport-building in online education. The results indicated most of EFL students and teachers care about building rapport in the virtual educational environment, since it is important in fostering the educational process. However, both of them share a negative attitude towards online education applied in the department, since according to them is associated with a non-verbal behavior. Moreover, many challenges have been reported by teachers and learners, which they see that it is the reason behind the absence of a warm relationship between the participants. These are according to them are, electronic problems facing Moodle, asynchronous meetings, and the social absence of both teachers and learners in the virtual education. These results are a good indicator of rapport building failure and the quality of teacher-learner relationship in the department of English language and literature of Saida University.

The findings presented in this paper are limited to EFL teachers' and students' beliefs towards rapport building in online environment. These findings provided further insights into how important rapport, or some elements of it, might be in online education. The scope of the research questions limited the types of responses.

#### **5 References:**

1. APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2002). *American Psychological Association*. <https://dictionary.apa.org/rapport>.
2. Barnett, P. B. (2001). Rapport and the hospitalist. *American Journal of Medicine*, 111(9), 31-35.
3. Bernieri, F. J. (1988). Coordinated movement and rapport in teacher student interaction. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 12(2), 120-138.
4. Bin Herzallah, M. (2021). E-Learning at the University of Algiers Reality and challenges. *Winter and Spring*, 9(16), 73-91. DOI: 10.21608/JDL0L.2021.168484
5. Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1997). The teacher-child relationship and

- 
- children's early school adjustment. *Journal of School Psychology*, 35(1), 61–79.
6. Frisby, B. N., & Martin, M. M. (2010). Instructor-student and student-student rapport in the classroom. *Communication Education*, 59(2), 146-164. doi:10.1080/03634520903564362
  7. Ghounane, N. (2020). Moodle or social networks: What alternative refuge is appropriate to Algerian EFL students to learn during Covid-19 pandemic. *Arab World English Journal*, 11(3), 21-41. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.2>
  8. Granitz, N. A., Koernig, S. K., & Harich, K. R. (2009). Now it's personal: Antecedents and outcomes of rapport between Business faculty and their students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 52-65. doi: 10.1177/0273475308326408.
  9. Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Malaysia: Longman. 51-67.
  10. Koca, F. (2016). Motivation to Learn and Teacher–Student Relationship. *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, 6(2), 52-61.
  11. Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
  12. Murphy, E., & Rodríguez-Manzanares, M. A. (2008a). Contradictions between the virtual and physical high-school classroom: A third-generation Activity Theory perspective. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(6), 1061-1072. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8535.2007.00776.x
  13. O'Grady, P. (2013). *Positive psychology in the elementary school classroom*. New York, NY: Norton.
  14. Stock, M. (2010). The three R's: Rapport, relationship, and reference. *The Reference Librarian*, 51(1), 45-52. doi:10.1080/02763870903361995