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**THE EFFICACY OF BUILDING AND ENHANCING RAPPORT TO BETTER
MANAGE THE EFL CLASSROOM**

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THE EFFICACY OF BUILDING AND ENHANCING RAPPORT TO BETTER MANAGE THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Managing the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom involves more than just controlling what students do. It includes many other decisions the teachers make to achieve teaching and learning goals. Besides, building rapport can be one of the main aspects teachers are concerned about, once it is considered central to a good classroom atmosphere. Through a qualitative bibliographic study, this article presents a reflection on how positive teacher-student relationships can help the teacher better manage the language classroom, and also verifies what is involved in this process. With this aim in mind, it relates what has been said about human development in psychological theories including social constructivism and the Wallon theory. Also, it discusses the concepts of “zone of proximal development” and “affective filter”, to demonstrate the impacts of building rapport. Moreover, it reflects on the challenges of teaching English in Brazilian public schools, and it further contemplates two possible ways to form good connections between teachers and learners: lowering students’ affective filter and leveraging similarities. Lastly, the available literature regarding the relationship between rapport and English language teaching indicates to some degree that constructing rapport can help the work of managing the EFL classroom.

Keywords: rapport; classroom management; English as a foreign language.

RESUMO

Administrar a sala de aula no ensino de Inglês como língua estrangeira envolve mais que controlar o que os alunos fazem. Inclui muitas outras decisões que os professores tomam para alcançar os objetivos de ensino e aprendizagem. Ademais, uma vez que construir *rapport* pode ser um dos principais aspectos que os professores se preocupam, visto que é um elemento central para tornar a sala de aula em um bom ambiente de aprendizagem. Por meio de um estudo bibliográfico e o método qualitativo de análise, este artigo apresenta uma reflexão sobre como boas relações entre professores e alunos podem ajudar o professor a gerir melhor a sala de aula no ensino de línguas, e também verifica o que está envolvido nesse processo. Considerando esse propósito, o artigo traz o que foi dito sobre o desenvolvimento humano por meio das teorias psicológicas como socioconstrutivismo e a teoria de Wallon. Também discute sobre o conceito de "zona de desenvolvimento proximal" e "filtro afetivo",

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para demonstrar os impactos de construir *rappport*. Além disso, reflete sobre os desafios do ensino de Inglês nas escolas públicas do Brasil e ainda contempla dois possíveis modos de criar boas relações entre professores e aprendizes: diminuir o filtro afetivo dos estudantes e alavancar as similaridades. Por fim, a literatura disponível sobre a relação entre *rappport* e o ensino da língua Inglesa indica até certo ponto que construir boas relações pode auxiliar no trabalho de administrar a sala no ensino de Inglês como língua estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: *rappport*; gestão da sala de aula; ensino de Inglês como língua estrangeira.

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking into consideration that Brazil is among the countries with the greatest number of students per classroom in public education (BBC, 2018), such a fact imposes an extra challenge for teachers to achieve learning and teaching goals. Moreover, teachers often have to deal with anxious and discouraged students. As indicated by Mesquita (2021), today's Brazilian schools are in crisis regarding quality teaching and learning.

Thus, there are a great deal of issues to think about and to handle when managing the EFL classroom. However, when teachers seek to build rapport with students, it can have a great impact on the engagement of learners. Studies show that the relationship between teacher and student can have a tremendous impact to the point of affecting students' attitude toward the school (Roeser; Midgley; Urdan, 1996; Ryan; Stiller; Lynch, 1994).

Furthermore, throughout the history of the development of English teaching, while some methods made use of teaching techniques that hindered rapport-building, some others have taken into account the importance of building a good relationship within the language classroom. A few of those methods include the humanistic approach and the desuggestopedia. In addition, theories such as the social constructivism of Vygotsky (2007); the Wallonian theory (Wallon, 1959; La Taille; Oliveira; Dantas, 1992), and the affective filter concept of Stephen Krashen (1982) also address the relevance of good relationships in the learning process.

Because of that, this research is mainly based on the studies about classroom management and rapport-building done by Harmer (2007), Scrivener (2012), and Gehlbach et al (2016), to analyze how building positive rapport can help teachers better manage the EFL classroom and also to verify what is involved in this procedure. Therefore, analyzing teacher-student relationships (TSRs) is paramount, as addressed by the American writer David Brooks:

For 30 years, I've been covering school reform and we've basically reorganized the bureaucratic boxes -- charters, private schools, vouchers -- but we've had disappointing results year after year. And the fact is, **people learn from people they love**. And if you're not talking about the individual relationship between a teacher and a student, you're not talking about that reality. But that reality is expunged from our policy-making process (Brooks, 2011, 02 '19"- 02' 45", own emphasis).

Bearing that in mind, it can be assumed that the intentional construction of positive rapport can help the teacher better manage the classroom. Therefore, this study seeks to bring

pertinent discussions about the connection between classroom management and building rapport. Also, it raises reflection on how educators can create a meaningful classroom experience for the students.

On the whole, this is a bibliographical study that analyzes qualitatively the connection between classroom management and rapport-building. It is ordered into parts, in which section two presents the theories that were used to base the research, highlighting the impacts of rapport-building according to Vygotsky (2007) and Wallon (Wallon, 1959; La Taille; Oliveira; Dantas, 1992); the importance of building rapport in the EFL classroom; the challenges of doing it and the ways to build rapport within the language classroom; section three consists of the analysis of the literature on the relationship between rapport and classroom management; finally, section four contains the concluding remarks.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The impacts of rapport-building according to the studies of Vygotsky and Wallon

For Vygotsky (2007), the mediation that happens through social interactions is regarded as the basis for superior psychological processes. Such psychological processes include memory, perception, attention, and language, they are developed through the relations individuals build in their lives. He also affirms that what distinguishes humans from primates is their ability to advance in their learning through the intervention of others, once the latter cannot solve problems beyond what they were trained to do. Hence, in the educational context, the teacher plays the role of a mediator for students to proceed in developing their knowledge.

Likewise, Henri Wallon claims that humans are “genetically social” (Wallon, 1959, p. 284) and, as defended by Vygotsky, social mediation is the foundation for development. Applying that to the language learning context which requires students constant interaction with their classmates and teachers, it is possible to assume that the interpositions teachers make to help students develop their communicative competence can advance or hinder their language improvement. Therewith, regarding the relevance of such interactions to human development, Góes and Smolka (1993, p.10 *apud* Rego, 1995, p.62) highlight:

In a process of development with a more revolutionary than an evolutionary character, the subject is considered different from the other, but formed from the relationship with the other: singular, but constituted socially, and, therefore, in an

individual but not homogenous composition. (Góes; Smolka, 1993, p.10 *apud* Rego,1995, p.62, own translation)³

Accordingly, as supported by Wallon and Vygotsky, the relationships built in the language classroom will be vital not only for students' language learning but their overall intellectual growth. However, those interactions must be intentional, to gain students' engagement and to achieve learning goals. That is why educators must ponder on how they are constructing and enhancing rapport in their teaching process, something that will be discussed in the following part.

2.2. The importance of building and enhancing rapport in the EFL classroom

According to Harmer (2007), rapport in the language classroom is related to the relationships developed between teachers and students or vice versa. He addresses that although it is hard to measure whether teachers and students have high or low rapport; however, good rapport can be easily observable since it is reflected by a constructive, pleasant, and respectful environment among the members within the classroom. In this regard, Culpeper and Kan (2020) explain that rapport allows teachers and students not only to have a strong bond but also to work collaboratively. Thus, although it seems the ideal environment for teaching and learning, it requires continuous work from teachers and students.

Bearing that in mind, building rapport can provide a safe and welcoming environment for the participants in the classroom. As defended by the psychologist Vygotsky (2007) in his theory of social constructivism, human relationships are part of language and knowledge development, since learning is a social process. Besides, in his concept of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 2007), he highlights the need for relationships as guidance for a person to overcome possible barriers in their knowledge and reach a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Thus, relationships play a big role in the different areas of life, including the teaching and learning of a foreign language, in which the interactions impact not only students' communicative competence⁴, but also their eagerness to continue learning.

With that in view, the rapport built by the teachers through the way they treat their students and what teachers demonstrate to think of their learners can impact students' intrinsic

³ "Num processo de desenvolvimento que tem caráter mais de revolução que de evolução, o sujeito se faz como ser diferenciado do outro mas formado na relação com o outro: singular, mas constituído socialmente, e, por isso mesmo, numa composição individual mas não homogênea" (Góes; Smolka, 1993 *apud* Rego,1995, p.62)

⁴ "Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation" (Saville-Troike, 2003, p.18).

motivation⁵ to learn English (Harmer, 2007). Then, if it is hard to deal with discouraged students who are unwilling to participate, that can be even worse if the cause of such discouragement is due to teachers' practices.

As suggested by some studies, teenagers who noticed that they were often criticized and disregarded by their teachers were more likely to produce discipline problems (Murdock, 1999). Other research showed that the opposite was also true, once students perceived that their teachers viewed them in a positive light, they paid closer attention to the classes and participated more; also problematic behaviors were less frequent (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wilson, 2013; Xie and Derakhshan, 2021). Therefore, the attitudes whether conscious or unconscious carried out by the English language teacher can lead to either positive or negative relationships.

Still taking into account the study mentioned above, some teachers' behaviors such as showing favoritism, not listening to students, and displaying little or no interest in learners' needs and desires can all affect students' motivation to learn a language. However, as indicated by Harmer (2007), one of the main teacher's roles is to be a prompter, that is someone who inspires and pushes students to participate, for instance, by caring for their learning necessities, instead of discouraging them. Thus, when teachers are aware of how they are constructing relationships within the classroom whether in a good or negative way, such consciousness can be an important step in developing better relationships with students and, consequently, gradually gaining students' engagement.

Moreover, the rapport established within the language classroom can be an impactful aspect on its own (Leary, 2010 apud Gehlbach et al, 2016). First of all, it can work as a stimulus and consequently increase students' intrinsic motivation, which, according to Harmer (2001), can lead to greater success in a language, since it is linked to student's love for the learning process.

In brief, it is important that, from the first and every day, teachers think not only about what to teach but also how to teach in a way that enhances rapport between themselves and their pupils. And that can heighten motivation, as mentioned by Alan Rogers: "...we forget that initial motivation to learn may be weak and die; alternatively it can be increased and directed into new channels" (Rogers, 1996, p.61). Then such efforts will have significant

⁵ "Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better" (HARMER, 2001, p. 98).

impacts in the long run, such as improved students' engagement, attention, and satisfaction in learning (Wentzel, 1997; Cornelius-White, 2007).

2.3. Challenges to build rapport in the EFL classroom

Taking into account the Brazilian reality when it comes to English teaching and learning, some challenges can be identified that not only affect the educational process but also the efforts teachers make to build positive rapport. Among those obstacles are crowded classrooms and overwhelmed teachers, especially in the context of public schools (British Council, 2015). Indeed, such problems can interfere a lot with the attempts of building rapport, however by recognizing and reflecting upon them, teachers can more promptly seek ways to conquer them.

In the first place, overcrowded school rooms can be extremely demanding to build rapport, once teachers will have to deal with further educational needs from students. In a study conducted by the British Council in 2015, in which around 1.269 public school teachers from all five different regions of Brazil were interviewed, it was reported that among the challenges teachers face in the public education system is the fact of extreme amount of students per classroom (British Council, 2015). The average number of students was counted as approximately forty in each classroom, which teachers claimed they were not prepared for (British Council, 2015). However, even if it seems to be an issue that is out of teachers' control, it is still possible to find ways to construct good relationships within crowded classrooms. In this regard, teachers can apply strategies to accomplish that, still seeking not to become more overwhelmed, which is considered another drawback in the public education context.

As mentioned, the study showed that teachers were drained by the many classrooms and the workload they needed to dedicate themselves (British Council, 2015). Around 69% of the teachers had to give classes for more than six different classrooms each week, one of the teachers said that they had to work in nineteen diverse classrooms with around forty-five students each (British Council, 2015). Considering that, it is evident that it is hard for teachers to try to build positive rapport in those situations, once they feel exhausted by their work, something called teacher burnout, a condition that makes them feel consumed and unhappy with their career due to workplace stress (WHO, 2019).

In general, those two are just a few of the difficulties commonly faced by teachers in the public school system. The study showed many others such as a lack of resources, little

recognition of the utility of the English language, lack of time to plan lessons, low wages, and a small amount of class hours to study the language (British Council, 2015). But, despite those obstacles, teachers can do what is within their reach to find ways to build good relationships with their students and some of those ways will be reflected upon in the next section.

2.4. Ways to build rapport in the language classroom

When searching online for ways to create stronger connections with students, teachers can end up feeling lost by the many things they can find. Some of the tips given are to learn students' names, to get to know students' interests, and to praise learners as much as possible. However, this research will discuss only two possible ways that can be impactful when teachers are intentionally endeavoring to build rapport with students; one is by lowering students' affective filter (Krashen, 1982) and the other by leveraging similarities (Gehlbach et al, 2016).

Foremost, besides being professionals, teachers are humans in the first place, namely, they carry prejudice and stereotypes either consciously or unconsciously about their students (Byram; Gribkova; Starkey, 2002). That is why teachers must come into the language classroom willing to help students and with a strong conviction that they can develop their skills. As addressed in the Base Nacional Comum Curricular⁶ about the perspectives toward students (BNCC): “... from the strong conviction of all students' ability to learn and to achieve goals that, at first sight, may seem to be beyond their capacities.” (BNCC, 2018, p. 464)⁷. Having that in mind, once teachers have such certainty, they will more easily search for ways to build rapport with their students and overcome challenges that may appear along the way.

That said, one of the ways to build rapport is by lowering the affective filter, which refers to providing a low-anxiety environment within the language classroom (Krashen, 1982). The affective filter term was first proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977 apud Krashen, 1982), and later reviewed by Krashen (1982) to make reference to the affective variables that can either hinder or fasten students' language acquisition. According to Krashen (1982), there are affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and low anxiety which lead to

⁶ Official document that standardizes content taught in basic education for both public and private schools.

⁷ “da firme convicção na capacidade que todos os estudantes têm de aprender e de alcançar objetivos que, à primeira vista, podem parecer além das suas possibilidades” (BNCC, 2018, p. 464).

success in language learning. With this in mind, one of the roles of teachers is, through their teaching practice, to create a good atmosphere that makes students feel comfortable, yet encouraged to try, take risks, and make mistakes. Thus, students will not have to face embarrassment when they are attempting to learn English, which seems to be common in Brazilian classrooms, as addressed by Burnier (2001):

The culture that Brazilian schools constructed, for any reason, is an anti-value that plagues and dominates our classrooms: the ethics against questions, the mockery of doubts, and the unknown. Asking a question is the cause of anxiety for students, fear of exposing oneself to ridicule, when it should be faced as an ability, a sign of intelligence, questioning capacity, and active quest for information. (Burnier, 2001, p.5, own translation)⁸

Providing a low affective filter atmosphere does not only impact students' participation and learning, it affects their morale, motivation, and self-esteem as defended by Hadfield (1992), but also shows the professionalism of the teachers themselves, as Krashen mentions: "the effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation" (Krashen, 1982, p.32).

Another possible way to build rapport is by leveraging similarities between teachers and students (Gehlbach et al, 2016) which involve getting to know better students' personality and allowing them to get to know their teacher's character. According to some researchers, similarities between people can strengthen their bond (Cialdini, 2009; Montoya; Horton; Kirchner, 2008), as claimed by Myers (2015, p.330): "[I]keness produces liking not only for college students but also for children and the elderly, for people of various occupations, and those in various cultures". So, by sharing and being acquainted with mutual similarities, teachers and students may enhance rapport more naturally.

Additionally, studies have shown that even the most trivial similarities, such as sharing the same musical preferences (Boer et al, 2011; Myers, 2015) can be a booster in strengthening relationships, once they review the correlative values people can have. A study conducted by Gehlbach *et al* (2016), which sought to check whether similarities were able to improve teacher-student rapport, showed that discovering the similarities they shared with students, teachers started to interact more with them, and, the students, on the other hand, better performed on exams, getting higher grades. On this account, by interacting with

⁸“A cultura escolar brasileira construiu, por algum motivo, um antivalor que empestia e domina nossas salas de aula: a ética anti-pergunta, o deboche da dúvida e do desconhecimento. Fazer uma pergunta é motivo de ansiedade para o aluno, de medo de exposição ao ridículo, quando deveria ser encarado como habilidade, como sinal de inteligência, de capacidade de questionamento, de busca ativa pela informação” (BURNIER, 2001, p.5).

students more frequently both in class and outside of it, in a more personal way, teachers and students may leverage the similarities between them.

In general, the two possible ways to build rapport: by lowering students' affective filter and by leveraging similarities are broad strategies that can be easily adapted to the educational context where the teacher and the students are.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BUILDING RAPPORT AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Being aware of the tremendous relevance of relationships in the different realms of life (Vygotsky, 2007; Wallon, 1959), this study has sought to discover the impacts of rapport in language learning, by questioning whether the intentional construction of positive rapport could help the language teacher to better manage the EFL classroom and also what was involved in doing that. The reason for specifically working with the connection between classroom management and rapport building was due to the importance of reflecting upon how educators can create a meaningful classroom experience for students.

In this study, it was assumed, at first, that building rapport can help teachers in managing the EFL classroom. Through the studies of Vygotsky (2007) and Wallon (1959), it was presented that relationships and interactions are vital to human development, leading to superior psychological processes such as language, memory, perception, and attention. Then, it can be said that the bonds built within the language classroom may lead to favorable changes in how students engage in class activities, thus assisting the teacher's work of managing a classroom.

In addition, other studies regarding relationships within education support what has been defended by both Vygotsky and Wallon. Such research has shown that the relationship between teacher and student can be so impactful to the point of affecting students' attitudes toward the school (Roeser; Midgley; Urdan, 1996; Ryan; Stiller; Lynch, 1994). Hence, the rapport built between teachers and students can be a useful asset to make the teaching and learning process more enjoyable to students, once they participate more, and it may ease the work of the teachers to gain students' involvement.

Besides, students' participation within the language classroom is paramount to how the class works. Another study revealed evidence that once students perceived that their

teachers viewed them positively, they were more likely to pay attention and participate (Cornelius-White, 2007). Then, teachers' beliefs about their students, that is how the teacher builds rapport, can affect students' performance in language learning, influencing also the way the teacher manages the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, other studies have presented that teacher-student rapport is involved with greater learner engagement (Wilson, 2013; Xie and Derakhshan, 2021) attention, satisfaction in learning, and less frequent problematic behaviors (Wentzel, 1997; Cornelius-White, 2007). Therefore, once teachers constantly achieve those outcomes, it can be claimed that they have good classroom management skills (Scrivener, 2012).

On the contrary, research also has shown that negative TSRs can lead to unpleasant student reactions. One of those studies revealed that teenagers who noticed that they were often criticized and disregarded by their teachers were more likely to produce discipline problems (Murdock, 1999). Thus, once discipline is a major part of classroom management (Scrivener, 2012), teacher-student relationships can certainly affect how well the teacher can manage the classroom, and, to avoid turmoil, the teacher must encourage all students' participation, instead of allowing only the most engaged ones take part of the class (Scrivener, 2012).

Based on the existing literature on the effects of rapport in the educational realm, it is inferred that the same can be applied to the process of managing the classroom itself, namely, that it can positively influence the flow of a class, hence helping the language teacher better control and delegate the control of what happens within the classroom to students (Scrivener, 2012). Finally, those results bring the following implications to the language teaching and learning process: attentiveness to the ways the teacher builds relationships, endeavoring to make them both intentional and positive, seeking ways to overcome potential challenges, and reflecting upon the impacts of rapport in the overall students' learning.

4. FINAL REMARKS

At the end of this theoretical and reflective discussion about the connection between building rapport and classroom management, it can be pointed out the relevance of positive teacher-student interaction to students' engagement, attention, satisfaction in learning, and feelings of belonging, which are all crucial aspects for managing a classroom well. Then, this research has the following main theoretical and practical contributions to the educational field regarding rapport and classroom management: positive TSRs can be a strong asset teachers

can use to gain control or transfer it to students in the teaching and learning process. Also, teachers can apply the two mentioned strategies to construct good relations with pupils, such as lowering affective filters and leveraging similarities.

On account of positive TSRs, it is agreed to be an effective aid for classroom management. Since humans are social beings and relationships play a significant role in the different spheres of life, the mediations that happen in the language context are paramount to the development of both communicative competence and intellectual growth in the second language learning process. In this fashion, teachers can be the main character for building rapport and they can do it by the way they manage the EFL classroom.

Similarly, the two ways to build rapport analyzed were lowering the affective filter of students and leveraging similarities and they were brought up because they can be adaptively used in different educational contexts. The literature supporting this research showed that those strategies are considered effective in strengthening the bond between teachers and learners. Therefore, each teacher can ponder over them, in their group and how they can be applied.

On the other hand, despite the mentioned contributions, this research has some limitations. Those setbacks include the fact that the theoretical framework was mainly based on research done outside of Brazil, as there are fewer studies regarding the topic in the Brazilian educational context. Other drawbacks are that more recent studies should have been consulted and a case study could be conducted to bring stronger evidence of the relationship between rapport and classroom management.

All in all, this work opens up to other studies, since relations in the EFL change through the years; thus, rapport between teachers and students must be constantly studied and analyzed. Further research may answer questions regarding the limits of building rapport in the EFL classroom, once it is difficult to build rapport with all members of the classroom. Also, case studies may be applied, as done by the studies consulted, to scrutinize the real impacts of intentionally constructing relationships, especially searching how it may facilitate the work of managing a classroom, consequently, smoothing teachers' work.

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