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BUILDING RAPPORT WITH YOUNG EFL LEARNERS AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR ACHIEVEMENT IN AN EFL LEARNING CONTEXT

Abstract

This paper aims to stress the importance of building rapport with young EFL (English as a foreign language) learners and to investigate the connection between student-teacher rapport and students' achievement in an EFL classroom. It also treats some methods and approaches that should be used when teaching young language learners with respect to their needs and characteristics. In addition, this paper describes the importance of motivation for language acquisition and explores some motivational strategies for young language learners.

The paper also aims at inspiring EFL teachers to focus on dimensions of language teaching which are associated with pedagogical aspects of teaching and are focused on creating positive student-teacher relations. The positive classroom atmosphere in which students feel safe and comfortable is considered essential for their success in language learning.

Key words: young EFL learners, teacher-student rapport, motivation, language acquisition, student achievement

Introduction

Young learners[1] are very specific and demand special attention and care from their teachers. Children are very fragile and affected by people who surround them, primarily by their parents, family, teachers and peers. In childhood they start discovering life

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[1] In the context of this paper this term refers to the students aged 5 to 12.

and connections between things they are surrounded with. They do not have critical opinion and can easily be hurt and affected by their teacher's actions, especially by punishments and praises. Young learners need a student-centred approach and warm atmosphere in which their needs would be put before everything else.

Teachers who work with children should adjust their plans and programs to children, always bearing in mind the fact that this specific group of students have short attention span and cannot focus long on a single activity. Therefore, teachers need to vary different games and activities during class to keep their attention focused. These activities should be diverse to accommodate all types of learners and to cater to the needs for all students. However, no matter how interesting and diverse activities are, if a teacher does not show a genuine interest in students, does not create a good working atmosphere with students, they will not be motivated enough, which is why teachers need to be emotionally involved and need to show great care for their students.

There are certain rules and methods for building rapport with students that are applicable to every age of students and every school subject. This paper will treat those, as well as some specific approaches applicable just to EFL learners, specifically younger ones.

The Significance of Rapport for Student's Achievement

The Oxford English Dictionary defines rapport as a close and harmonious relationship in which there is common understanding. Brown (2007, p. 253) 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." Similarly, Paterson (2005, p. 69) explains that the rapport is the bond between a teacher and students that allows them to work and learn well together.

Although emphasised by many as an important aspect of a teaching and learning process, rapport has been fairly disregarded so far. Teachers are constantly being advised how to teach students vocabulary, grammar, receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills, while even more important than this, the genuine care that teachers should show for students and their effort to establish a positive rapport with them,

appears to be neglected. However, as Ramsden (2003) suggests, "the emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship is much more important than the traditional advice on methods and techniques of lecturing would suggest" (p. 74).

Furthermore, Bouras and Keskes (2014) state that the teacher and his/her methods are one of the most important factors for language learning. Similarly, Claridge and Lewis (2005) add that a positive rapport is beneficial for both learners and teachers. They explain that the relationship a teacher has with a learner is fundamental to the success of teaching, and that learning is more successful and enjoyable when there is a good relationship between students and their teacher. (cited in Bouras & Keskes, 2014). Marzano and Marzano (2003) continue by saying that the quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management. Further on, Hamre and Pianta (2006) emphasise that a positive student-teacher rapport is fundamental to the learners' success in school:

> Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains. In contrast, conflict with teachers may place students on a trajectory of school failure in which they are unable to connect to academic and social resources offered within classrooms and schools (p. 57).

Over the past 10 years, research on student–teacher relationships has focused on the ways in which student-teacher relations may affect students' peer relations, parent–child relationships, academic competence, and social and emotional adjustment (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003, cited in Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Marzano (1992) agrees that students need a positive atmosphere and a positive attitude towards learning so they could be successful in it. "This is the first dimension of learning and, without a positive attitude learning is inhibited (p. 34)." Clark (2014) adds that a positive student-teacher rapport can assist in an increase in student endeavours along with improvements in academics and behaviour. In contrast, students who have difficulty forming supportive relationships with teachers are at a greater risk of school failure (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Numerous scholars have emphasised the impact of student-teacher rapport on students' behaviour in the classroom, leading to much better overall academic achievements. For instance, Clark

(2014) asserts that positive relationships with teachers can help those behaviourally at-risk students learn more adaptive behaviour. She argues that research indicates that students who develop rapport with a teacher experience fewer classroom behaviour problems and better academic performance. Much attention should be paid to this issue since a poor school student achievement is a concern for most school systems for behavioural reasons as well as a predictor of further school achievement (Schaps, 2005).

Rapport building starts from the very first lesson. Students make first impressions about their teachers by the way they present themselves to a class and how they initially set the class climate. In this occasion, teachers should be cheerful and enthusiastic, should make eye contact with students and give some personal information, should ask students to introduce themselves, etc. However, building rapport is not one-time event, but rather it is an ongoing process that requires a lot of effort and positive energy.

The younger the children are, the greater their dependence on the teacher is. They first rely on their parents, and then, when they start attending school, they begin depending on their teacher. They seek from him/her guidance, support and love, the same as they do from their parents. The need for positive relationships with teachers does not diminish as children mature. Wentzel (1998) suggests that there is a great need for support in teacher–student relationships especially at the transition periods, such as the transition from elementary to middle school.[2] Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder (2004) argue that, although the nature of teacher-student relationships changes as students mature, the need for the connection between students and teachers remains strong from preschool to the 12th grade[3]. In accordance with this, research has shown that the quality of student-teacher rapport tends to decline after students enter junior high school (Freeman, Anderson, & Jensen, 2007). As children enter adolescence, they become less dependent on adults, and they form more personal and better relationships with their peers. Another aspect which reflects the change in the nature of students-teacher relationships is the teacher's influence on regulating their emotions. For instance, as Hamre & Pianta (2006) explain, young learners rely extensively on teachers to regulate their emotions and behaviour, and facilitate connections with peers.

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[2] In most countries this term refers to the early adolescent ages of 12-15.
[3] In Bosnia, these students are 16-17 years old, and attend high-school.

Over time relationships between teachers and students become less personal, more formal, more competitive and more evaluative (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

It is very important that teachers are aware of children's cognitive development, so that they adjust their methods and techniques to the very specific level of their students' growth. Children are not able to reason as adults, because the human brain is not fully developed until the late adolescence or even early adulthood. Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development suggests that there are four stages of children's cognitive development:

1. The sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years) - infant knows the world through their movements and sensations;
2. The preoperational stage (2-7 years) - children begin to think symbolically and learn to use words and pictures to represent objects. Children at this stage are also egocentric;
3. The concrete operational stage (7-11 years) - children's thinking is logical and organised, but still very concrete;
4. The formal operational stage (11 and up)- the adolescent or young adult begins to think abstractly;

According to Child Development Institute (1999), from 4-7 children's speech becomes more social, less egocentric. A child has an intuitive grasp of logical concepts in some areas. However, there is still a tendency to focus attention on one aspect of an object while ignoring the others. After the year of 7, children are capable for an organised, logical way of thinking. There is the ability to perform multiple classification tasks, order objects in a logical sequence, and comprehend the principle of conservation. Thinking becomes less transductive and less egocentric. A child is capable of concrete problem-solving, so, teachers should bear in mind that young learners are not able to comprehend abstract notion. Their attention span is very short so they need a lot of varying activities that will keep their attention. Teachers have to cater to the needs of students with different personalities and preferences. Activities which they use should be interesting, creative and in the form of games, since they like to learn through games and playing. However, some neo-Piagetians believe that young children are capable of learning much more than we once believed possible. They believe that young children are actually capable of far more advanced learning than Piaget's original theories suggest and

actually benefit from teaching methods that make demands on them (Westwood, 2008).

Whichever theory is followed, children certainly need a teacher who is sensitive to their needs and who employs various methods taking "a full account of their immaturity, their need for a safe and secure learning environment, their desire for activity and hands-on experience, the value of play and exploration, and the importance of social interaction and talk" (Blaustein, 2005, cited in Westwood, 2008, p. 40).

Teacher as a Motivator

Many factors affect young learners' achievement and their language acquisition: their personal traits and intrinsic motivation, parents and family members, previous exposure to English, etc. However, the teacher's influence on young learners is one of the most important factors. Young learners look up to their teacher and are significantly affected by his/her positive reinforcement. Burden (1997) says that "the teacher is the most influential school-related force in student achievement" (cited in Bouras & Keskes, 2014, p. 547).

Similarly, the previous research has identified motivation as a determinant factor in learning a second or a foreign language. Motivation is the driving force that makes one pursue a goal, and it is combined with the energy to work towards that goal. Motivation is seen as a variable that determines the extent of active, personal involvement in L2 learning (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Thus, as Schaps (2005, p. 52) suggests, "students who experience their school as a caring community consistently become more motivated, ambitious, and engaged in their learning". This is further elaborated by Buskist & Seville (2001) who add that "the behaviour of students will rarely be a problem when they are interested and focused on the subject matter" (p.51).

For young language learners, a teacher should be the source of the most important and most frequent language input, since he/she can adjust the speed of speech, tone, he/she can repeat certain parts and use gestures and facial expressions, so that children can more easily understand the meaning of what they are being told. This is confirmed by Moon & Nikolov (2000) who claim that with young children, it is the teacher who becomes the prime source of language input, and the success or failure of the teaching/learning

process will depend on the quality of the input the children are exposed to, and on the ways they are helped to understand and use the language.

In order for young learners to be able to speak English, they must receive good input from their teacher and they should be immersed in a linguistically rich environment. When it comes to listening activities, for example, teachers should choose those that do not demand a verbal response, since children should have the opportunity to absorb the language before they have to say anything (Pinter, 2006). The teacher should always bear in mind that children can never learn to speak English completely accurate, that is with no mistakes. They should focus on students' ability to use every day English, i.e. that language which is needed for everyday communication and English that is necessary for usual simple interaction. This also implies that the focus should be on fluency, rather than accuracy.

Teachers can motivate pupils in different ways: by praising their progress, providing various interesting activities, giving them some competitive tasks, awards, etc. As previously mentioned, children cannot focus long on one activity only; therefore, teachers should provide various shorter tasks that are suitable for different types of learners and that require different cognitive abilities. Lessons should be divided into a series of activities lasting no longer than five or ten minutes. Millington (1995) agrees and says that in order for children to have opportunity to use a wide range of language, teachers must include a variety of tasks based on games, stories, collaborative problem-solving or information-gap activities. These activities have to be interesting and adjusted to their age and in the forms of games, as they learn best by playing. Children also like to be completely involved in the task and to learn by doing. They enjoy drawing, making different objects, singing songs, etc. As they grow older, their concentration span increases, as well as their ability to comprehend abstract notions, thus more complex activities can be incorporated.

Another important motivational strategy is providing positive feedback. Children should be given a lot of praise and positive attention. Negative feedback and correction should be avoided maximally because it usually has a negative effect and can be very demotivating. Ur (1992) suggests that a student's sense of pride and satisfaction can be enhanced by explicit praise or approval, or by its expression in quantitative grades. This is especially the case

with young and inexperienced learners who usually lack self-confidence. Feedback can be implicit and explicit. Students usually react better to implicit correction, as they are being corrected indirectly, and they do not feel that they did something wrong, but rather feel that a teacher is just communicating with them. For example, if a child offers a comment about a picture and says that he/she sees "bird tree", a teacher should say: "Yes. The bird's in the tree. It's sitting on the branch. It's singing." (Cameron, 2001) In this way, a student realises that there are elements other than concrete nouns needed for sentence to be formed. Implicit feedback should especially be used at the beginning phases of teaching, when student-teacher rapport is still being developed. Then, once a teacher gains respect and trust from students, and once the classroom climate is set in a way that students are not afraid to make mistakes, explicit feedback can be used without a great fear that students will find it de-motivating. Thus, a good rapport is maintained when teacher-to-child feedback is supportive and positive. However, one should be careful not to exaggerate and overuse praise because students can lose ability to recognise success on their own, and they could see a lack of approval as doing something wrong when that is not the case.

Teachers are also expected to be enthusiastic about teaching, as it will positively reflect in the classroom climate and students will greatly benefit from it. This implies that teachers' intrinsic motivation has a great impact on pupils' motivation. Children can feel if a teacher is not very enthusiastic about certain activity and their interest for the activity will begin to wane. Thus, a teacher should always keep himself/herself motivated. This is confirmed by Dörnyei (2005) stating that "there is no doubt that teacher motivation is an important factor in understanding the affective basis of instructed SLA, since the teacher's motivation has significant bearings on the students' motivational disposition and, more generally, on their learning achievement." (p.115). Similar to this, Buskirst and Saville (2001) explain that "the teacher's motivation needs to be kept at an optimal level as enthusiasm is contagious" (p.51). In addition to this, teachers need to have positive expectations from their students, because they can feel if the teacher believes in them and their progress, and in that case, they tend to be more motivated.

To sum up, students are more motivated to do well when they enjoy working with their teachers. Since a positive rapport

increases their motivation for learning, it also leads to a greater overall academic achievement, including the success in EFL learning. Teachers are expected to provide positive classroom atmosphere in which students feel loved, cared for and inspired.

Methods for Building Rapport with Students

Building rapport with students is important for all ages, but young learners are even more sensitive and dependent on teachers, which is why teachers need to be even more careful when working with children. Lowman (1995) mentions that teachers who build rapport need to be caring, welcoming, encouraging, positive, democratic, and express a genuine interest in their students. He also argues that rapport is established when teachers convey to students, through various means, that they are interested in and care about them. Over time, this concern translates into a desire to help them learn.

Finocchiaro (1988, cited in Bouras & Keskes, 2014) has identified some traits of superior teachers, some of which are related to personal and affective factors: making learners feel loved, respected and secure, keeping motivation of students at a high level, offering a relaxing atmosphere for learning, etc.

As per Lenkova (2012) there are five main steps for building rapport. The first step is to be curious about the other person, because people respond to those who are genuinely interested in them. Secondly, when putting questions to others, one should be certain to give them time to respond. This shows that you are interested in them and it is a sign of respect. The next step she mentions draws on Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques by suggesting that you can learn a lot about a person through observation. It is well known that non-verbal communication can tell more than verbal communication. Non-verbal communication implies body language, eye contact and voice tone. Lenkova (2012) states that NLP experts advise creating rapport by mimicking these nonverbal cues. For example, if a student is speaking slowly and softly, he or she will feel at ease if a teacher is doing likewise. Her fourth suggestion is to focus intently on students, so that they feel that you regard them as important. The last step in building rapport, per Lenkova (2012) is to demonstrate that you understand student's background and to tell

them about similar experiences or thoughts. This will develop a level of trust which is crucial to building rapport.

Furthermore, Lenkova (2012) states that the most reliable metric to know when a teacher has established a positive rapport with students is the behaviour of his students towards him. If they approach their teachers with questions, comments and personal remarks, smile or laugh during class, seek them after class, ask for advice about something, tell them that they are enjoying class, it means that the teacher has developed rapport with the students. In addition to this, students' achievement should improve and their feedback and response in classroom should be better.

The classroom environment also affects student's motivation and willingness to learn, as they feel more relaxed in a comfortable environment. Teachers of young language learners should invest some time in decorating the classroom and making it interesting and fun, as their lessons should be. English language classroom should have a lot of colours, posters, pictures, toys, flashcards, etc. The physical environment of the classroom sets the stage for active and engaged learning. It conveys a crucial message to students that they will be safe, nurtured, and comfortable there (Espinosa & Magruder, 2015).

An EFL learning context is a very sensitive filed, because learners are acquiring a foreign language, and they are still learning their own, native language. This is especially applicable to young language learners, who are still learning how to write accurately in their mother tongue. Teachers should be very cautious and patient, and should always provide positive affirmation and increase learner's self-confidence. In general, the most important characteristics of teachers who build a positive rapport with students are that they: show care and genuine concern, respect every student, are optimistic and enthusiastic, smile a lot, tell jokes, are helpful, praise students, use open and relaxed body language, provide various different activities for different types of learners.

Previous research and Recommendations for Future Research

There are numerous studies that emphasise the importance of student-teacher rapport in general and studies that investigate teachers' perceptions about this issue. However, there is a need for more studies that examine students' perceptions about rapport, particularly in the case of young language learners.

Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) investigated the teachers' interpretation of their own impact on learners' motivation and carried out a nation-wide study about English teachers' attitudes towards various motivational techniques and the frequency with which they implemented them in their own teaching practice. The participants were 200 Hungarian teachers of English from diverse contexts. The results showed that the participants considered the teachers' own behaviour to be the most important motivational factor. In addition to this, the study showed that it is one of the most underused motivational resources in EFL teaching.

Also, there are numerous studies that have investigated students' motivation and factors that affect motivation, out of which many are connected to a teacher-student rapport. For instance, Bouras and Keskes (2014) investigated secondary school teachers' and pupils' perceptions of the teacher characteristics and its impact on learners' motivation. The participants were selected through random sampling from four secondary schools in Algeria at the end of the academic year 2012-2013. A total number of 200 participants was surveyed, and the same questionnaire was given to 21 secondary school teachers. The questionnaire elicited the opinions of both pupils and teachers to find out which teaching practices both groups believed foster learners' motivation in the foreign language classroom. The results showed that students found some teaching practices related to the teacher's rapport motivating. Also, teachers and students had different views on ranking teacher's characteristics, but both recognised rapport as a crucial factor.

However, there have not been many studies investigating the association between a positive student-teacher rapport and student motivation for EFL learning. In addition to this, the importance of rapport and students' achievement in EFL classrooms, especially those with young language learners, presents an issue not extensively explored so far. However, the university level students have participated in few studies researching this issue. For instance, Sanchez, De Gonzalez and Martinez (2013) conducted a qualitative research that focused on the impact of teacher-student relationships in an EFL context exploring the collective perceptions of a group of university students. They gathered data from semi-structured interviews. The results of this inquiry revealed that university students' sense of well-being, attitudes, and willingness to learn

were improved when teachers demonstrated empathy, interest in student development, and respect.

Taking into account that no study explored the student-teacher rapport in Bosnian EFL classroom, there is a great need for researching the relationship between rapport and variables that affect it, particularly student motivation and language acquisition.

Conclusion

Young language learners are dependent on their teachers, so they have to approach them with great sensibility and caution. Teachers should put a lot of effort in establishing a good rapport with their students, from the very first class and should continue to do so. Every lesson should be carefully planned with respect to children's needs for various short interesting activities and games.

Teacher-to-child feedback should always be supportive and positive, and young learners need to be praised for their progress, whereas negative feedback should be avoided. Teachers should be aware that children learn gradually and slowly, and that they need a lot of support and understanding. New young teachers should be trained to focus on pedagogical aspects of teaching, and not just on teaching productive skills to their learners.

Only in that way, when teachers establish and maintain a good relationship with their students, and create a warm classroom environment, students can be inspired for a lifelong learning in general, including their learning of the English language.

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Stručni rad

IZGRADNJA DOBROG ODNOSA SA UČENICIMA MLAĐEG UZRASTA I UTJECAJ TOG ODNOSA NA NJIHOVO POSTIGNUĆE U KONTEKSTU UČENJA ENGLESKOG KAO STRANOG JEZIKA

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Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada je istaći važnost izgradnje dobrog odnosa sa učenicima mlađeg uzrasta u kontekstu učenja engleskog kao stranog jezika (EFL), te ispitati vezu između tog odnosa i učeničkog postignuća. Rad, također, tretira nastavničke metode i pristupe koji bi se trebali koristiti u radu s mlađim učenicima, a u skladu s njihovim potrebama i karakteristikama. Nadalje, ovaj rad opisuje važnost motivacije za usvajanje engleskog kao stranog jezika, te istražuje neke motivacijske strategije pogodne za mlađe učenike.

Ovim radom se, također, nastoji inspirirati nastavnike engleskog jezika da se fokusiraju na pedagoške dimenzije podučavanja, a kojima se formiraju pozitivni odnosi sa učenicima. Pozitivna razredna klima, u kojoj se učenici osjećaju sigurno i ugodno, nužna je za uspjeh u učenju engleskog jezika.

Ključne riječi: učenici mlađeg uzrasta, EFL (engleski kao strani jezik), odnos učenik-nastavnik, motivacija, usvajanje jezika, postignuće učenika

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بناء علاقة جيدة مع الطلاب الأصغر سنا وتأثير هذه العلاقة على انجازهم في سياق تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

ملخص

الهدف من هذا البحث هو تسليط الضوء على أهمية بناء علاقة جيدة مع الطلاب الأصغر سنا في سياق تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) ، ودراسة الصلة بين هذه العلاقة والتحصيل العلمي للطلبة . ويعالج البحث أيضا أساليب التدريس والنهج الذي ينبغي استخدامه في العمل مع الطلاب الأصغر سنا وفقا لاحتياجاتهم وخصائصهم . وعلاوة على ذلك يصف هذا البحث اهمية الدافع لاعتماد اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، ويدرس بعض الاستراتيجيات التحفيزية المناسبة للطلاب الأصغر سنا.

ويسعى هذه البحث ايضا الى إلهام معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية للتركيز على البعد التربوي للتعليم والذي يبنى به علاقات إيجابية مع الطلاب . المناخ الإيجابي في الفصل والذي يشعر الطلاب فيه بالثقة والراحة ضروري للنجاح في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية .

الكلمات المفتاحية : الطلاب الأصغر سنا ، EFL (اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية) ، العلاقة بين الطالب والمعلم ، التحفيز ، اكتساب اللغة ، تحصيل الطالب