First-class teaching: Building rapport between teachers and students

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This paper was written as a toolbox of resources for new teachers to help create a classroom atmosphere of safety and engagement with the classroom topics. This paper will discuss: the five stages of a group's life; the importance of rapport and how to establish it in the language classroom; how to continue that rapport among the students for the duration of the course; and how to establish patterns of student/teacher behavior that will improve the fluidity of class activities and help participants achieve their class goals. The aim of this paper is to give a series of practical applications to establish classroom rapport that teachers can use in their teaching practice.

本稿は教室内に安心感とトピックに取り組む姿勢を生みだせるようにするためのアイデア箱として新任教師向けに書かれたものである。そのために、本稿は以下を議論する。グループがたどる5段階、　信頼関係の重要性と築き方、学生間の信頼関係を学期を通していかに維持するか、クラスの活動がスムーズに進み、学生が目標を達成できるようになる、学生/教員の行動パターンをいかに確立するか。本稿の目的は、教室内の信頼関係に関して、教師が日頃の授業で利用できる、理論と実践の調和がとれたアプローチを提案することである。

In Louise's classes, the students listen to a delightful story about Dr. Milton Erickson, the psychiatrist, well known for his uncommon and unique methods of treating patients. As a boy, he was very observant. Growing up on a farm, he watched the seasons change, the leaves turning colors in the fall, the crops as they were harvested, the winter snows, the new emergence of flowers in the spring, the animals as they were born, grew up, and died. He was always very curious. One day in the late afternoon, he and his father were out in a field, and his father was trying to get the cows into the barn to be milked that evening. He managed to get all of them in except one stubborn cow who was determined not to move. The father got a rope, tied it around her neck, and started pulling, trying to get her to move.

Little Milton was watching the scene, and after a while he said, "Dad, I think I can get the cow into the barn."

"No, Milton, I don't think so. This is a very big cow, and you're just a little boy."

"Yeah, Dad, I think I can. Dad, if I get the cow into the barn, will you give me a dollar?"

Well, a dollar was a lot of money back in those days. The father thought about it, and, as-

suming Milton would not be able to do it, agreed to the deal and then went into the house to wash up for dinner.

A little while later, Milton came into the kitchen and said, "Dad, the cow's in the barn."

"I don't believe it. You couldn't have done it, and certainly not that fast."

"Yeah, Dad. Go look." So they both went out to the barn, opened the door, and there was the cow.

"Milton, how did you do that?"

From this story, it is easy to see that the startled father was approaching the situation with several assumptions. There is one way to get the cows into the barn. It's the way we've always done it. It works, usually, so why change? If a cow doesn't want to go into the barn, it's obviously just stubborn and has to be put into the barn somehow. Another is that his son, so much smaller and inexperienced than he, would not have the ability to find a solution on his own.

It might be easy for teachers to make similar assumptions about how to approach a new course. While this article is directed towards new teachers to deepen their knowledge of rapport building and goal setting the more seasoned teacher may want to use it as a review of essential principles and techniques in building and continuing classroom rapport which can be compared, contrasted and added to their own first class activities.

Groups and affective issues

Any newly formed group will go through a series of stages as it forms, matures, and ends. Groups tend to go through the following phases: *forming*, in which members may feel anxious about their role in the group, acceptance within the group, and how the group will operate. In the *storming*, phase conflicts sometimes arise. This may be because the groups' security needs have been taken care of and students feel more ready to express their opinions that are different to the opinions of their classmates. *Norming*, usually follows which is the period of time when issues are resolved, as differences have been aired and students accept their place and the place of others in the group. P*erforming* is a very productive part of group life because students are deciding their roles and division of labor as they then work towards the group goal. Finally, *termination*, when a group comes to an end, should be a time when group members have time to acknowledge the work they have done together and congratulate all the people involved (Keyton, 1999, p. 357-364). In this paper we focus on the first stage, *forming*, which includes participants' getting to know one another, committing to a group goal or goals, and developing a sense of inclusion in the group or "sense of belonging" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 79). If these develop well, the result is cohesiveness or "the degree to which members desire to remain in the group" (Keyton, 1999, p. 177).

The importance of fostering cohesiveness in the classroom is related to the learners' affective states. Affective issues in language learning have been shown to influence motivation and success in the language classroom. One such example is that of anxiety, or the unease a learner experiences when required to perform in the foreign language (Arnold, 1999). In order to reduce unhelpful anxiety, an atmosphere of support, respect and acceptance can be promoted through establishing rapport among students and instructor. As Stevick (1980) writes, "Success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4). In the early 1980s, Stevick was one of the first researchers to argue that language learning is not just a cognitive process but also an emotional and attitudinal one. Influenced by such language teaching methodologies as The Silent Way and Suggestopedia, he came to the conclusion that the key

to language learning was the presence of harmony, both inside the individual learner and among the group's participants. We acknowledge that competition and even conflict can have a place in the classroom, for example in the form of *storming,* a group's second stage. Ultimately however, harmony is of great importance, and our goal as educators is to create a group that accepts and works in sync with each other and individuals who can concentrate their intelligence and emotions on the subject at hand.

In her study of four groups of adults learners of English and German, Turula (2006) found that in classrooms in which teachers showed competency, professionalism, care for the students, and acted as role models for attentive and empathic communication, students were more comfortable with taking risks with the new language.

Establishing a classroom environment that is supportive also includes acknowledging students as fellow human beings, an essential part of rapport. One study with nursing students researched the connected student-teacher relationship and found that some students, though not all, reported learning more effectively when the teacher was more willing to be known as a person, promoted a more egalitarian environment, and took a position as "coach, guide, helper and advocate" (Gillespie 2002).

Other studies have found that instructor immediacy, positive behaviors that are encouraging and welcoming, rather than harsh or judgmental, will foster a connected classroom environment. When instructors are perceived as establishing rapport with their students, students report that they participate in class and they report gains in their affective learning, state motivation, and satisfaction (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 150).

Student-student rapport is equally important in improving the chances of positive student affective and cognitive learning and research shows that "supportive peers, in conjunction with a supportive instructor, led to better attendance, more hours studying, school satisfaction, academic engagement, and higher efficacy" (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 149).

Perhaps the most complete book on this subject is *Group Dynamics in the Classroom* by Dornyei and Murphy (2003), which combines psychological and sociological theory with many hands on, personal examples of task-based, rapport building exercises throughout the different phases of a learning group's life. Lesser known studies as well as celebrated research on group dynamics is presented in a concise, lively and applicable format. The authors encourage educators to not only build the individual learner's identity but also the class as a whole unit by continually sharing personal information and quickly establishing accepted rules and agreements. With our own theoretical examples and practical exercises our paper can be seen as a further addition to this book.

Given that there are many benefits for the teacher as well as for the students by creating a learning environment that is based on mutual respect, care, and support, it is incumbent on language teachers to consider how rapport can be cultivated in the classroom.

Rapport

Teaching is about relationships. Positive rapport means having good relationships, and as teachers, one of our important goals is to build a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable and willing to learn. When positive classroom rapport exists, students feel a sense of belonging and are prepared to work and share information together. Group members know something about the other people and hold a definite sense of themselves as a group. Furthermore, when students have rapport with the teacher that means they are "with you". The teacher is accepted in that role and students are prepared to follow the instructor's activities and suggestions.

According to Hadfield (1992), the concrete characteristics of a healthy group are:

- A positive, supportive atmosphere: members have a positive self image which is reinforced by the group, so that they feel secure enough to express their individuality.
- Group members are not cliquey or territorial but interact happily with all members of the group.
- The group is self-reliant and has a sense of responsibility. It is able to overcome problems and difficulties without recourse to the teacher.
- The members of the group trust each other.
- Group members are able to empathize with each other and able to understand each other's view points even if they do not share them.
- The group has a sense of fun.
- Group members have a positive attitude to themselves as learners, to the language and culture being studied and to the learning experience. (Hadfield, 1992, p. 42)

The classroom group is a resource pool. It can provide substantial motivation and be a profound source of behavioral change for the better. When functioning well, groups can serve as an excellent instrument of support and maintenance. Most teachers have experienced occasions when classes simply flow along. The students listen intently, follow instructions, stay task-focused and complete work on time. In these situations teaching feels easy, and at the end of the day the instructor has energy left over and, in fact, may even feel energized by working with students. On the other hand, most of us have taught lessons where there was little rapport in the classroom and students failed to listen, did not ask for help and did not feel motivated to do the work. There can be resistance to learning and this can create communication breakdown and a lack of trust. This is not such a pleasant experience and can quickly drain the teacher's motivation, confidence and energy.

How to build rapport

Good rapport building activities involve:

- students getting to know each other (and their teacher)
- changing partners
- cooperation
- as much humor and fun as possible
- an ongoing process of activities

Good rapport building should NOT be embarrassing.

First of all we assume that any teacher reading this article already works on rapport in some way, particularly during the first class. Our aim is to clarify this topic and add to the range of your activities. Building rapport involves sharing a certain amount of personal information with the group and good rapport building activities involve students getting to know each other. One important point is that the teacher should be actively involved in this process of sharing and listening. Students are curious about their teacher, and they will follow your lessons more willingly if they know something about you as a person.

There are many activities to build rapport. They might include: Partner interviews and then introducing them to the group, sending a short letter around introducing yourself and the course, tiger toss or a guessing game on personal facts. The latter is one of our favorites and it is called Four Truths and One Lie. The following is a description of how to use the activity.

The teacher writes five sentences on the board about her life, e.g.,

Sarah:

1. has an older sister who plays drums.
2. has played tennis for seven years.
3. likes to eat scrambled egg and *miso* on toast for breakfast.
4. has visited five countries in South East Asia.
5. has never climbed Mt. Fuji.

The students write down these sentences and then have a couple of minutes to discuss and choose which one is false. The teacher then gives the answers and embellishes each sentence so that her students learn a bit more about her hobbies, family, likes and dislikes. Of course to deepen rapport, the topics you choose can be adapted to the class you are teaching. For example, if you are teaching P.E. students, you might want to talk more about sports. If you are with language students, you may want to concentrate on culture and travel. Once you have given your answers to the five statements, allow for a couple of minutes for student questions before inviting them to try this activity with their partner. One indication that you have good rapport is when students feel comfortable asking questions in your class. Two important points regarding this activity are that students need to have their curiosity peaked and to feel safe with you and their classmates.

This activity has three purposes:

1. To enable your students to know and feel more comfortable with you as their teacher.
2. To provide a model of the activity because then in pairs they will do the same task.
3. To embed grammar and vocabulary you would like to review or introduce, e.g., in the previous example, the present past tense is being highlighted.

A powerful way to start rapport building is to acknowledge the shared situation of the new group. According to Murphy and Dornyei (2003), all new groups have two essential questions: "Who is here?" and "What are we going to do together?" Explaining that these two questions are the basis for our first class together gives students a cushion of psychological comfort, i.e., it is totally normal to think or be concerned about these topics today. These two questions also provide a basic framework for you in the first class. The first question "Who is here?" is answered by rapport building exercises such as the ones you already do and the activities mentioned above.

Ongoing who

Addressing "Who is here?" in the first class enables students and teacher to become acquainted with one another initially. In subsequent classes, it is normal for the students to develop friendships and cliques. One way to make sure that all students have the greatest opportunity for feeling included on a weekly basis is to have students change partners regularly. Although some teachers may feel more comfortable with a seating chart, they might also experience better class cohesion when students have new partners to experience the day's class with, to share ideas and opinions, or simply share answers with. If a teacher chooses to make assigned seats, rearranging students every so often can result in a greater level of rapport within the class.

If assigned seating is not required, an easy method of random seating is to give each student an index card, ask them to write their name and student number at the top. On the first day, if possible, you might take the students' pictures and glue them to the card as well. Check on your school's information privacy policy if necessary. Then each week, shuffle the cards, and before class, place them on the desks at random. In smaller classes of 16-24, it may be possible to have the students sit on the aisle seats, making it easy to find a partner across the aisle. Later, if

you wish, you can have them move one seat clockwise, resulting in a new partner sitting across the aisle. There are many creative ways to use cards to mix students.

Setting ground rules and goals

In order to let students know what to expect in a course, on the first day, teachers may read the syllabus, write an outline of the course on the board, explicitly state rules of conduct, show the table of contents of the course book, or simply do nothing and begin the first day with Unit 1 of the book.

If you have the students read the syllabus/rules with you (or everyone reads one sentence of a passage), you are also supporting a sense of "We are all in this together," which helps to strengthen the rapport you have with your students. The purpose of presenting the syllabus, however, is not only to explain what will be covered in the course, the percentage given to attendance, homework, participation, exams, etc. A teacher who is concerned about building rapport with her students will also reveal the values she shares with the learners. It's important to acknowledge there are similarities among the goals of all the class participants (see table 1):

Table 1. Needs of stakeholders in a class.

The teacher wants…	The students want…
to pass the students	to pass the course and get credits
to work well with the students	
to have fun in class	
to cover the required material	
to have a meaningful time	
(what's in it for me?)	

It is also useful to honestly address the learners' attitudes and beliefs about language learning. This could be done briefly, or as a more in-depth small group activity, including such questions as:

- What experiences have you had with English in the past?
- What would make a good English course for you?
- How could this course help you in the future?
- What would be three specific things that you would like to achieve during this course?

The instructor can then incorporate students' observations on what would be useful to them into a list of goals or objectives that they will be helping each other to achieve, e.g., being able to start a conversation using natural expressions, looking at my partner, feeling relaxed with a speaking partner, asking follow-up questions, or whatever goals the instructor and learners choose. Later on, this can help the class as a whole to identify successes at intervals throughout the course. From time to time, the teacher can refer the group back to this sheet, and check which items the group has already successfully achieved and which remain.

Participation self-evaluation

Effective teachers create positive rapport and clarify the course goals from the start of the semester. Another important point of first class teaching is that effective teachers establish norms and rules very early on. Teachers sometimes assume that their students share with them the same values and behaviors regarding education. A western teacher for example might assume that students would never sleep in class. That is not necessarily true however as many of us teachers have experienced at one time or other. The reason why establishing norms and rules early in the course is important is because this helps prevent problems from arising in the first place, as opposed to running around putting

fires out at a later stage. Preventing problems saves time and energy and ensures the lessons run smoother and are focused on the course materials and the process of learning them.

In Ben's class, one clear and simple way of explaining and maintaining classroom norms is the Participation Self-Evaluation List, or P.S.E. List (Deacon, 2006). This is a student self-assessment checklist of teacher expectations. The list spells out clearly the behaviors that are expected of students. This preventative approach is usually written by the teacher but offers students the opportunity to add any other points they consider valuable. To draw up a P.S.E. List first of all decide upon your core expectations of student behaviors in the classroom, e.g. Students will arrive on time, students will turn off mobile phones and put them in their bags, students will bring all the necessary equipment, etc. The second step is to put these into a list which is stated in the first person singular, e.g., "I arrived on time", "I turned off my phone and put it in my bag", "I brought all the materials for the class". The reason why the list is stated in the first person singular is to emphasize the responsibility of the individual for their own learning. A second noteworthy point on these statements is that we recommend they be framed in a positive sentence. The subconscious mind only works in positive images. If, for example, I say, "Don't think of a blue chair" it is natural to think of a blue chair, but it is crossed out. We are, however, still imagining a blue chair whether it is crossed out or not. So, with regards to the P.S.E. List, if you say, "Don't forget your homework", students will very likely imagine forgetting their homework with that image crossed out. You are therefore running the risk of more students actually forgetting to bring or do their homework. To work in accordance with the proclivities of the human mind it would be more effective to say, "Remember your homework". Therefore the statement in P.S.E List format would be "I remembered my homework", which is qualitatively different to the negative statement, "I didn't forget my homework" (see Figure 1).

Name:	Student #:						Class:				
Classroom participation (date)											
I arrived on time											
I brought all my class materials											
I spoke only English with my partner											
I completed and brought my homework											
I turned off my phone and put it in my bag											
Total											

Figure 1. Participation self-evaluation list

At the end of every lesson, students spend a few minutes filling in the form and rating themselves on a scale of one (the lowest) to five (the highest). One suggestion is to incorporate this list into your student's final grade in order to leverage the importance of shared norms and behavior. Given the use of the first person singular and the self-assessed nature of the list students become more aware of their responsibility in learning and how their behavior impacts not only their educational outcome but also the class learning as a whole. Ultimately, the purpose of the P.S.E. List lies in encouraging students to take a more independent and interdependent approach to their studies.

Conversational "tools" sheet

Many recent textbooks for English language teaching contain conversational phrases, strategies, hints, etc. to help learners manage conversations and to help them keep conversations

going. A list of such phrases is relatively easy to come up with, and putting them on a chart with narrow columns to the right allows students to check off the phrases they have used each time in each class. This allows students to spend a few moments working alone, thinking about their own progress, and by the end of a few weeks, they are able to see which of the phrases or strategies they use often and which they could be taking better advantage of in their conversations.

The following is a sample of a conversational "tools" sheet (see Figure 2):

	4/7	4/14	4/21	4/28	5/12	5/19	…
GREETINGS							
How are you doing?	| | |	| |					
Terrific/Great/Not so bad/Not so good	| |	| |					
How 'bout you?	| | |						
See ya./Talk to you later./Bye.	| | |	| |					
MEETING AGAIN							
Sorry, what was your name again?		|					
Good to see you again.							
How have you been?		|					
…							

Figure 2. Conversational tools sheet.

Using anchors

Explicitly stating class rules and expectations also helps to keep students on track. In addition, using a technique known as *anchoring* (Dilts, 1999) can assist the teacher in making activities flow more smoothly each week.

Probably the best-known example of anchoring is Ivan Pavlov's experiment with dogs, bells, food, and a great deal of saliva. The main concept is that when we see, hear, or feel a certain stimulus, we have a certain reaction. We may not want our students to salivate too much in class, but it's useful to have them start or stop particular activities without the instructor having to spend time in getting them to do so. One popular method is through the use of music.

Playing carefully selected background music can be useful in a number of ways. First, it sets the tone of the class. If a class is scheduled first period, a bit of up-tempo music in the background will energize sleepy students. If students are working on a vocabulary quiz, quiet classical music may help them to focus. If the group is overly energetic, try playing smooth jazz in the background. If you regularly play music, when you turn it off, you send a signal that it is time to pay attention to the teacher because instructions or other information is coming.

There are other anchors that are just as easy to install in learners, and most teachers already do these without thinking or planning. For example, setting established patterns for activities lets the students know what will be coming next. Most language course books are written this way, e.g., vocabulary, listening dialog, conversation practice, reading, etc.

Teachers can go beyond this by using visual cues, such as hand or facial gestures, or by determining where the teacher will stand for a specific purpose. For example, when we tell stories in class, we stand in a specific place in the room. This "anchors" students into expecting a story whenever we stand in that spot. Another simple case of anchoring is asking students to exchange papers for marking by the teacher's gesturing with arms held up and crossed, as though exchanging something. After a few samples of this, students recognize the gesture and work quickly.

Anchoring is useful in that it cues learners about what activity is coming up next, and it creates more energy or calms the mood in the classroom.

Summary

Establishing good rapport with your students from day one is important for a number of reasons. First, it prepares for the alignment of a semester in which the standards are clear and the goals take into account learners' perspectives. Answering the "Who" and "What" questions at the beginning helps to achieve smooth-running, organized and cohesive groups, yet allows for flexibility. Through clearly stating the ground rules and expectations, learners have an idea of what to expect and therefore can relax and focus on the tasks at hand. This, combined with the use of anchoring, creates good patterns that will help the organization of class and flow of subsequent classes.

Working together with your students, you can achieve the objectives you set together. You can better lead them in the direction they (and you) want to go.

And little Milton Erickson and his father were looking through the open barn door at the stubborn cow that Milton had somehow gotten into the barn.

"How did you do that?" his father asked.

"Gee, Dad, it was easy. I just went around the back of the cow and pulled on her tail, and she moved forward. Then I pulled on it again, and she moved forward, and again, all the way into the barn. Dad, can I have my dollar now?"

Bio data

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