



© 2026 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

1. Mohammad. Afzali Shahri^{ORCID}: Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Qom, Qom, Iran (Email: m-afzali@qom.ac.ir)
2. Mahmood. Salimi^{ORCID}: Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Qom, Qom, Iran

Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 12 December 2025
Revised 24 April 2026
Accepted 28 April 2026
Initial Publish 28 May 2026
Published online 01 September 2026

How to cite this article:

Afzali Shahri, M., & Salimi, M. (2026). The Relationship between Teacher–Student Rapport and Willingness to Communicate among Iraqi EFL Learners: A Mixed-Method Study. *Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences*, 4(5), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.61838/japes.245>

The Relationship between Teacher–Student Rapport and Willingness to Communicate among Iraqi EFL Learners: A Mixed-Method Study

ABSTRACT

Creating positive rapport between teachers and students is now considered to be a significant affective component of foreign language acquisition, particularly in a student-centered environment with an oral language focus, where students' willingness to communicate (WTC) is substantially based on the quality of the relationship between the teacher and students in the classroom. However, little attention has been directed toward the role of rapport in fostering WTC in the context of Iraqi students studying English as a foreign language (EFL), where traditional, teacher-centered methodologies are prevalent. In this mixed methods study, we examined the relationship between rapport and WTC of Iraqi EFL undergraduate students. Quantitative data were obtained with standardized measures of rapport and WTC, while qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to gain insight into how students perceive teachers' classroom behaviors to influence their willingness to speak. The quantitative analysis demonstrated that students generally had a positive rapport with teachers and a moderate WTC, as well as a strong positive relationship between the two constructs. Qualitatively, the findings corroborated the positive relationship between rapport and WTC by clearly indicating that students' communicative confidence and willingness to participate are enhanced through teachers demonstrating supportive, empathetic, and encouraging behaviors, especially those that reduce anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This study emphasizes that the relational and affective dimensions of teaching are crucial to developing WTC in Iraqi EFL classrooms, and proposes directions for future research and pedagogical implications.

Keywords: teacher–student rapport; willingness to communicate; Iraqi EFL learners; teacher–student relationship; foreign language anxiety.

Introduction

The increasing emphasis on communicative competence in second and foreign language education has fundamentally reshaped pedagogical priorities, shifting the focus from structural knowledge of language to meaningful interaction and real-world communication. Within this paradigm, learners' **willingness to communicate (WTC)** has emerged as a pivotal construct that directly influences language use, practice opportunities, and ultimately language acquisition outcomes. Originally conceptualized within first language communication research, WTC was later adapted to second language (L2) contexts as a dynamic, situationally influenced construct reflecting an individual's readiness to initiate discourse in the target language (1,

2). Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes WTC as a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by an interplay of enduring individual differences, situational variables, and socio-contextual factors, all of which converge to determine whether a learner engages in communication at a given moment (3, 4).

A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated that learners with higher WTC are more likely to actively participate in communicative activities, thereby gaining greater exposure to input and opportunities for output, which are essential for language development (2, 3). Conversely, learners with low WTC tend to remain silent, limiting their engagement and hindering their communicative competence. This has led researchers to investigate the underlying determinants of WTC, revealing that it is not solely a function of linguistic proficiency but is deeply influenced by affective variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, and perceived competence, as well as contextual elements within the classroom environment (5, 6). In particular, classroom-related factors, including teacher behavior, interaction patterns, and relational dynamics, have been identified as critical in shaping learners' communicative willingness.

Among these contextual variables, **teacher–student rapport** has gained increasing scholarly attention as a central affective and interpersonal factor in educational settings. Rapport refers to the establishment of a positive, respectful, and trusting relationship between teachers and students, characterized by mutual understanding, emotional support, and genuine care (7, 8). Research in educational psychology and instructional communication consistently demonstrates that strong teacher–student relationships are associated with enhanced student motivation, engagement, academic achievement, and overall satisfaction with the learning experience (9, 10). Within language learning contexts, rapport is particularly significant because communication inherently involves risk-taking, vulnerability, and exposure to potential evaluation, making the emotional climate of the classroom a decisive factor in learners' willingness to speak.

Empirical evidence suggests that when learners perceive their teachers as supportive, approachable, and empathetic, they are more likely to experience reduced anxiety and increased confidence, thereby facilitating their willingness to communicate (11, 12). Teacher immediacy behaviors—such as eye contact, smiling, and open body language—further strengthen rapport by reducing psychological distance and fostering a sense of closeness, which has been shown to positively influence students' communicative engagement (13, 14). Moreover, teachers who create inclusive and non-threatening classroom environments encourage learners to take risks in using the target language, which is essential for developing fluency and communicative competence.

The theoretical foundation linking rapport and WTC can be traced to MacIntyre et al.'s pyramidal model, which situates WTC at the apex of a hierarchy of interacting variables, including situational antecedents such as state anxiety, motivation, and interpersonal relationships (1). Within this framework, teacher–student rapport operates as a key socio-contextual variable that influences learners' situational self-confidence and emotional readiness to communicate. Studies conducted in diverse educational contexts have consistently demonstrated that positive teacher–student interactions contribute to higher levels of WTC by enhancing learners' perceptions of safety, belonging, and support (4, 6, 15). These findings underscore the importance of relational dynamics in language classrooms, where communication is both the means and the goal of instruction.

Recent research has further expanded the understanding of teacher–student interaction by incorporating perspectives from positive psychology, sociocultural theory, and digital learning environments. For instance, studies have shown that teacher–student communication is closely linked to learners' emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, which in turn influence their engagement and communicative behavior (16, 17). In technology-mediated contexts, such as online and blended learning environments, the role of rapport becomes even more critical, as the absence of physical proximity can hinder the development of interpersonal connections unless deliberate efforts are made to foster interaction and emotional engagement

(18, 19). These findings highlight the evolving nature of teacher–student relationships in contemporary education and the need to adapt pedagogical practices to maintain effective communication.

In parallel, recent empirical studies have explored innovative approaches to enhancing teacher–student interaction and its impact on learning outcomes. For example, research on project-based learning and creative teaching strategies indicates that interactive and student-centered pedagogies can significantly improve both academic performance and communicative engagement by promoting collaboration, autonomy, and meaningful interaction (20, 21). Similarly, studies focusing on culturally responsive and creative teaching practices emphasize the importance of aligning instructional methods with learners' sociocultural backgrounds to foster deeper engagement and communication (22, 23). These approaches not only enhance cognitive learning but also contribute to the development of positive teacher–student relationships, thereby indirectly influencing WTC.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses further corroborate the central role of teacher–student interaction in shaping learning outcomes. Valinejad et al. highlight that effective interaction fosters creativity, engagement, and sustained learning by creating an environment conducive to exploration and expression (24). Similarly, Olsson and Granberg demonstrate that interactive teaching strategies support students' reasoning and problem-solving abilities, reinforcing the idea that communication is integral to cognitive development (25). These findings suggest that teacher–student rapport is not merely an affective variable but a fundamental component of effective pedagogy that influences both cognitive and communicative dimensions of learning.

Despite the extensive body of research on WTC and teacher–student rapport, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly in specific cultural and educational contexts. Much of the existing research has been conducted in East Asian, Western, and Iranian settings, leaving other contexts underexplored. Cultural norms, educational traditions, and classroom dynamics can significantly influence both teacher–student relationships and learners' willingness to communicate. For instance, in educational systems characterized by hierarchical relationships and teacher-centered approaches, students may experience higher levels of anxiety and reluctance to speak, even when they recognize the importance of communication for language learning. This underscores the need for context-specific investigations that account for cultural and institutional factors.

Furthermore, while quantitative studies have established correlations between rapport and WTC, there is a growing recognition of the need for mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these constructs. Qualitative insights can reveal the nuanced ways in which learners perceive and experience teacher behaviors, offering valuable information for designing effective pedagogical interventions. Recent studies adopting multimodal and mixed-method approaches have demonstrated the complex interplay between emotional, cognitive, and social factors in shaping WTC, highlighting the importance of examining these constructs from multiple perspectives (18).

Another important consideration is the dynamic nature of WTC, which fluctuates across contexts, tasks, and interactions. This situational variability suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing WTC must address not only stable learner characteristics but also the immediate classroom environment and teacher behaviors. Teacher training programs, therefore, should emphasize the development of interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and communicative teaching strategies to foster positive relationships and supportive learning environments. By doing so, educators can create conditions that encourage learners to engage actively in communication, thereby facilitating language acquisition.

In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining the relationship between teacher–student rapport and willingness to communicate within a specific EFL context. By integrating theoretical insights from communication studies, educational psychology, and second language acquisition, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal dynamics influence learners' communicative behavior. The findings are

expected to have both theoretical and practical implications, informing pedagogical practices and contributing to the development of more effective language teaching approaches.

Ultimately, understanding the role of teacher–student rapport in fostering WTC is essential for creating language learning environments that are not only cognitively stimulating but also emotionally supportive. As language learning is inherently a social process, the quality of interactions between teachers and students plays a **निर्ण**ative role in shaping learners' experiences and outcomes. Therefore, exploring this relationship in diverse contexts remains a critical area of inquiry in the field of applied linguistics and language education.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between teacher–student rapport and willingness to communicate among EFL learners.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods research design by integrating a quantitative approach and a qualitative approach to provide a complete perspective on the relationship between rapport and WTC. The quantitative method was correlational in investigating whether and to what extent the scores on TSRQ and WTCS were correlated. The qualitative method was semi-structured interviews and classroom observation which investigated students subjective experiences and explanations of their WTC or lack of WTC.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 174 undergraduate students from the English Department of the College of Education for Human Sciences, Hilla University College in Iraq, during the 2024-2025 academic year. Of the sample, 102 were females (58.6%) and 72 were males (41.4%), aged from 18 to 24. Participants were from all four academic levels of the English Department program: 45 were 1st-year (freshmen), 47 were 2nd-year (sophomores), 42 were 3rd-year (juniors), and 40 were 4th-year (seniors) students. All participants were native speakers of Arabic, and all had studied English for varying lengths before entering university. Convenience sampling was used, which meant that only those students who were present in class when data was collected were able to participate. Thus, students who volunteered to participate in this study were not selected based on any predetermined criteria outside of their physical presence in the classroom and willingness to participate in the research project.

Instruments

Teacher–Student Relationship Questionnaire (TSRQ): The Teacher–Student Relationship Questionnaire (TSRQ), as employed in the work of Caballero (2010), was used as a measure of rapport between the teacher and student, with slight modifications made to create a culturally/linguistically appropriate/suitable version for use with an Iraqi population. The final modified version consisted of 36 items measured on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree) measuring various aspects of teacher-student rapport such as; teacher support/encouragement, friendliness/approachability, fairness/respect, emotional understanding/emotional support, clarity of explanation/feedback, encouraging participation/risk-taking during class, and classroom management/organization of the class environment. A higher score equated to a higher positive perception of teacher-student rapport. The reliability of the adapted TSRQ used in this study was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha, which indicated acceptable internal consistency of the overall scale ($\alpha > .70$).

Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTCS): McCroskey's (1992) Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTCS) was used to assess students' want to communicate using English. The WTCS uses self-report measures related to the desire of initiating communication across multiple different contexts (e.g. group discussions, time spent with another person) and with different types of people (e.g. friend, stranger). In this study, the items selected were reworded so that they reflected academic as well as classroom-based L2 (second language) communication situations specifically for Iraqi university students. The participants rated their willingness to communicate in a variety of situations on a Likert-type scale. A higher rating indicates that the participant is more willing to communicate with others in English. The reliability analysis demonstrated that the WTC measure had an acceptable level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > .70).

Semi-Structured Interviews: In addition to gathering questionnaire data, semi-structured interviews were completed with a subset of students from various academic levels who voluntarily agreed to participate. The interview protocol included questions regarding students' perspectives on their relationships with their English teacher(s), as well as specific teacher behaviours that impacted their willingness to speak in the classroom. Students were also asked about their experiences of anxiety, embarrassment, or fear of receiving negative feedback about communicating in the English language and requested to identify instances when they felt particularly encouraged or discouraged to communicate in the English language. Interviews were conducted using Arabic so that participants could express their thoughts and ideas more freely and then transcribed into English for analysis.

Classroom Observations: Selected speaking-oriented courses and skills courses were used as a setting for conducting classroom observations to document teacher behaviors (e.g., immediacy, praise, use of humor), as well as patterns of participation by students in each course, in relation to teacher behaviors that had a positive influence on students' willingness or reluctance to communicate. The researcher recorded his observations by use of field notes, providing documentation of the effect of teacher behavior on student communication.

Procedure

Data were collected for this study during several weeks. To prepare for data collection, researcher obtained permission from the department and course instructors before seeking to inform potential participants of the study's purpose and maintain confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during or after completing the questionnaire. The TSRQ and WTCS were administered during regular class time while researcher supervised the data collection process. Participants received instructions on how to complete the questionnaires, and were encouraged to provide honest answers. It took approximately 20–25 minutes for each participant to complete the questionnaires. Once questionnaire data had been initially analysed, arrangements were made for selecting interview participants based on their level of reported rapport and willingness to communicate (WTC) with their instructors. Interview times were scheduled outside of class to accommodate participants' schedules. Classroom observations occurred before and after the survey phase to assist in understanding the data and obtaining a more thorough understanding of the data.

Data Analysis

Data gathered from a questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics within SPSS for the purposes of summarizing both teacher-student rapport (TSR) and the Willingness to communicate (WTC). The normality of the distributions were determined through checking the skewness and kurtosis of the data, as well as performing the Shapiro-Wilk test. The relationship or correlation between TSR and WTC was then examined using Pearson's Correlation at an alpha level of .05. The Qualitative data obtained from the interviews and classroom observations were analyzed thematically using an inductive

approach, and codes and themes were developed to represent the perceptions of learners regarding teacher behaviour and their communication experience. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings further established the validity and trustworthiness of the overall results.

Findings and Results

Before conducting correlation analysis, the normality of the distributions of TSR and WTC scores was examined using skewness, kurtosis, and the Shapiro–Wilk test. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Normality Test Results for TSR and WTC Scores

| TSR Scores | N | Test | Statistic | P-value |
|------------|---|--------------|-----------|---------|
| 174 | | Skewness | 0.101 | |
| | | Kurtosis | 2.231 | |
| | | Shapiro-Wilk | 0.99 | 0.19 |
| WTC Scores | N | Test | Statistic | P-value |
| 174 | | Skewness | -0.41 | |
| | | Kurtosis | 2.87 | |
| | | Shapiro-Wilk | 0.99 | 0.23 |

As shown in Table 1, the skewness and kurtosis for both Teacher-Student Rapport (TSR) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) are in acceptable ranges indicating normal distribution. Additionally, neither TSR or WTC shows any statistical significant departure from normality ($p > .05$) using Shapiro-Wilk Tests (TSR [0.99, $p = 0.19$]; WTC [0.99, $p = 0.23$]). Hence, both TSR and WTC satisfy the assumption of normal distribution, which allows researchers to use parametric statistics (e.g., Pearson's correlation).

Descriptive statistics for teacher–student rapport and willingness to communicate scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for TSR and WTC Scores

| | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Minimum | Maximum | Median |
|------------|-----|-------|--------------------|---------|---------|--------|
| TSR Scores | 174 | 23.48 | 3.85 | 14 | 30 | 23 |
| WTC Scores | 174 | 56.13 | 12.21 | 10 | 100 | 55 |

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of teacher-student rapport (TSR) was 23.48 ($SD = 3.85$) with scores ranging from 14 - 30. The median of 23 suggests a fairly symmetrical distribution around the mean score which indicates that, on average, all participants perceived their relationship with their teachers as positive and most of the students had perceived moderate to high levels of rapport. The mean score for willingness to communicate (WTC) was 56.13 ($SD = 12.21$) with a range of scores from 10 - 100. The median of 55 shows there was moderate WTC on average but that there was considerable variation among students as some students had very low WTC while others had very high WTC.

To address the research question and test the null hypothesis, Pearson's product–moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between teacher–student rapport and willingness to communicate. The correlation matrix is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation Coefficient between Teacher-Student Rapport and Willingness to Communicate

| Variables | | TSR | WTC |
|-----------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| TSR | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .65** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 174 | 174 |
| WTC | Pearson Correlation | .65** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 174 | 174 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As we can see from the results in Table 3, the correlation between TSR and WTC is $r = .65$, $p < .000$ (2-tailed), which is significantly lower than our $p < .05$ level of significance. This relationship between teacher-student rapport (TSR) and willingness to communicate (WTC) is therefore both statistically significant and strong. Thus, we have rejected our null hypothesis (H_0) that there is no statistically significant relationship between TSR and WTC. The results also suggest that students who perceive greater rapport from their teachers will have more willingness to communicate in English.

The qualitative data from student interviews indicated five central themes (students' emotional experiences in relation to talking; students' perception of talking challenges; teachers' actions towards students while talking; students' experiences within a classroom environment; students' perception of culture/ family and cultural expectations related to speaking). The themes, along with their relative frequency and percentage values, are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Thematic Analysis of Participant Responses to Semi-Structured Interview Questions

| Theme | F | % |
|--|----|-----|
| Emotional responses to speaking English | 15 | 75% |
| Challenges in expression | 14 | 70% |
| Teacher's attitude and approach | 16 | 80% |
| Fear of making mistakes | 14 | 70% |
| Formality vs. friendliness in teacher relationship | 18 | 90% |
| Supportiveness and encouragement | 15 | 75% |
| Confidence and risk-taking | 16 | 80% |
| Creating a supportive atmosphere | 16 | 80% |
| Patience and wait time | 15 | 75% |
| Use of group work and pair activities | 14 | 70% |
| Boost in confidence and motivation from feedback | 17 | 85% |
| Respect for authority (cultural norm) | 16 | 80% |
| Traditional educational expectations | 15 | 75% |
| Teacher-centered vs. student-centered learning | 16 | 80% |
| Creation of a relaxed and fun atmosphere | 16 | 80% |
| Personalization of learning experience | 15 | 75% |
| Creating a safe environment for making mistakes | 17 | 85% |
| Demonstrating patience and understanding | 16 | 80% |
| Importance of personal connection | 14 | 70% |
| Value of real-world application of English | 13 | 65% |

As shown in Table 4, most of the respondents recognized that emotional/relational features are important to them as they indicated that the teacher's attitude towards them (80%, $N=39$), the degree of formality vs. friendliness in the teacher-student relationship (90%, $N=42$), the degree of supportiveness and encouragement provided by the teacher (75%, $N=37$), their ability to be confident and take risks in front of the teacher (80%, $N=39$), the creation of supportive environments (80%, $N=39$), and the creation of non-threatening spaces for making mistakes (85%, $N=40$) are significant emotional/relational characteristics of the teacher and affect how they are impacted by their teacher and school. Respondents also described how encouraging feedback was helpful to their confidence and motivation (85%, $N=41$), how much they value patience and waiting for them to respond to the teacher's questions (75%, $N=35$), and how important it is for them to have opportunities to work in group and pair settings to enable their participation in the class (70%, $N=32$). The identified patterns were consistent with the four key qualitative sub-themes that emerged in this research - teacher support and emotional safety; fear of being evaluated negatively; teacher immediacy and approachability; and cultural norms and hierarchies within relationship building.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to examine the relationship between teacher–student rapport and willingness to communicate (WTC) among EFL learners, and the findings provide robust empirical support for the central role of interpersonal dynamics in shaping communicative behavior in language classrooms. The quantitative results revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between teacher–student rapport and WTC, indicating that learners who perceived higher levels of rapport with their teachers demonstrated greater readiness to engage in oral communication. This finding is consistent with the theoretical assumption that WTC is not merely an individual disposition but a context-sensitive construct influenced by social and affective variables (1, 2). In line with this perspective, the results confirm that the classroom environment, particularly the relational quality between teachers and students, plays a decisive role in activating or inhibiting learners’ communicative intentions.

The strength of the observed relationship aligns closely with prior empirical studies that have emphasized the importance of teacher support and relational closeness in fostering communication. For instance, research has consistently shown that supportive teacher behaviors and positive classroom climates significantly predict higher levels of WTC among EFL learners (4, 6). Similarly, Khajavy et al. demonstrated that classroom environment and emotional experiences jointly influence learners’ willingness to communicate, highlighting the mediating role of affective variables such as enjoyment and anxiety (15). The current findings extend this line of research by reinforcing the argument that teacher–student rapport constitutes a foundational element of the classroom environment that directly enhances learners’ communicative engagement.

The descriptive findings of the study, which indicated generally positive perceptions of rapport alongside moderate levels of WTC, further suggest that while learners may recognize and experience supportive relationships, additional factors may still constrain their willingness to communicate. This pattern is consistent with the ecological perspective on WTC, which posits that communication behavior emerges from the interaction of multiple layers of influence, including situational, psychological, and contextual factors (5). Thus, even in the presence of positive rapport, learners may experience residual anxiety or lack of confidence that moderates their communicative participation. This interpretation is supported by previous research indicating that WTC is highly sensitive to fluctuations in learners’ emotional states and perceived communicative competence (3).

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the mechanisms through which teacher–student rapport influences WTC. Students consistently highlighted the importance of teacher behaviors such as encouragement, patience, and emotional support in reducing fear and fostering confidence. These findings resonate with earlier studies demonstrating that teacher immediacy behaviors—such as warmth, humor, and approachability—reduce communication apprehension and enhance students’ willingness to speak (13, 14). Moreover, the emphasis on emotional safety and fear of negative evaluation echoes the well-established role of anxiety as a major barrier to communication in L2 contexts, suggesting that rapport functions as a buffer that mitigates these inhibiting effects (11).

Importantly, the findings also highlight the role of teacher–student rapport in shaping learners’ self-confidence and perceived competence, which are key antecedents of WTC in the pyramidal model proposed by MacIntyre et al. (1). When learners perceive their teachers as supportive and respectful, they are more likely to develop a sense of communicative efficacy, which in turn increases their readiness to initiate interaction. This relationship is further supported by research demonstrating that positive teacher–student communication enhances learners’ emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, both of which are associated with increased engagement and participation (16, 17). Thus, the present findings underscore the interconnectedness of emotional, cognitive, and social factors in shaping communicative behavior.

Another important aspect of the findings is the role of cultural and contextual factors in moderating the relationship between rapport and WTC. The qualitative data suggest that in contexts characterized by hierarchical teacher–student relationships, learners may initially be reluctant to communicate due to cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority and fear of making mistakes. However, when teachers adopt more relational and student-centered approaches, these barriers can be reduced, enabling learners to participate more actively. This observation aligns with previous studies indicating that culturally responsive teaching practices and interactive pedagogies can enhance both engagement and communication by aligning instructional methods with learners’ sociocultural expectations (22, 23). Furthermore, research on teacher–student interaction patterns suggests that innovative and creative teaching strategies can foster more dynamic and participatory learning environments, thereby increasing WTC (20, 21).

The findings also contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of interaction in contemporary educational contexts, including digital and blended learning environments. As highlighted in recent studies, maintaining effective teacher–student rapport in online settings requires deliberate efforts to create opportunities for interaction and emotional engagement (18, 19). The present study reinforces this perspective by demonstrating that the relational dimension of teaching remains critical regardless of the instructional modality. In this regard, teacher–student rapport can be viewed as a fundamental pedagogical resource that supports not only communication but also broader learning outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results support and extend existing models of WTC by providing empirical evidence for the role of teacher–student rapport as a key contextual variable. While earlier models have emphasized the influence of individual differences and situational factors, the present study highlights the centrality of interpersonal relationships in shaping communicative behavior. This finding is consistent with the view that language learning is inherently social and that communication emerges through interaction within a supportive community of practice. Moreover, the results align with systematic reviews indicating that effective teacher–student interaction enhances creativity, engagement, and sustained learning, thereby reinforcing the multifaceted impact of rapport on educational outcomes (24, 25).

In addition to confirming existing theoretical and empirical insights, the study also offers new contributions by providing context-specific evidence and integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of both the strength of the relationship between rapport and WTC and the underlying processes that explain this relationship. This methodological integration enhances the validity of the findings and provides a richer understanding of the complex dynamics involved in language learning. Furthermore, by focusing on a specific educational context, the study addresses a gap in the literature and contributes to the diversification of research on WTC and teacher–student relationships.

Overall, the discussion of the findings highlights the critical importance of teacher–student rapport in fostering willingness to communicate and underscores the need for educators to prioritize relational aspects of teaching alongside cognitive and linguistic objectives. By creating supportive, respectful, and engaging learning environments, teachers can significantly enhance learners’ communicative participation and, consequently, their language development. The findings also suggest that interventions aimed at improving WTC should focus not only on individual learner factors but also on the broader classroom context, particularly the quality of teacher–student interactions.

The study is not without limitations. First, the use of a convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not be representative of all EFL learners. Second, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers. Third, the correlational design of the study precludes causal inferences, meaning that while a strong relationship between rapport and WTC was identified, it cannot be concluded that rapport directly causes increases in WTC. Additionally, the study was conducted within a specific

cultural and institutional context, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other settings with different educational norms and practices.

Future research should address these limitations by employing more diverse and representative samples across different cultural and educational contexts. Longitudinal and experimental designs would be particularly valuable in establishing causal relationships and examining how teacher–student rapport and WTC evolve over time. Further studies could also explore additional variables, such as learner personality traits, language proficiency, and instructional methods, to develop a more comprehensive model of WTC. Moreover, incorporating perspectives from teachers, as well as utilizing advanced analytical techniques such as structural equation modeling, could provide deeper insights into the complex interplay of factors influencing communicative behavior.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of integrating relational and affective considerations into language teaching practices. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt strategies that foster rapport, such as demonstrating empathy, providing constructive feedback, and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction. Teacher training programs should also emphasize the development of interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, equipping educators with the tools needed to build positive relationships with students. By prioritizing the relational dimension of teaching, educators can create learning environments that not only enhance communication but also support students' overall academic and personal development.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

1. MacIntyre PD, Clement R, Dornyei Z, Noels KA. Conceptualizing Willingness to Communicate in a L2: A Situational Model of L2 Confidence and Affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*. 1998;82(4):545-62. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x.
2. MacIntyre PD. Willingness to Communicate in the Second Language: Understanding the Decision to Speak as a Volitional Process. *The Modern Language Journal*. 2007;91(4):564-76. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00623.x.
3. Yashima T. Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language: The Japanese EFL Context. *The Modern Language Journal*. 2002;86(1):54-66. doi: 10.1111/1540-4781.00136.
4. Peng JE, Woodrow L. Willingness to Communicate in English: A Model in the Chinese EFL Classroom Context. *Language Learning*. 2010;60(4):834-76. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00576.x.
5. Cao Y. Investigating Situational Willingness to Communicate within Second Language Classrooms from an Ecological Perspective. *System*. 2011;39(4):468-79. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2011.10.016.
6. Ghonsooly B, Khajavy GH, Asadpour SF. Willingness to Communicate in English Among Iranian Non-English Major University Students. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. 2012;31(2):197-211. doi: 10.1177/0261927X12438538.
7. Frisby BN, Martin MM. Instructor-Student and Student-Student Rapport in the Classroom. *Communication Education*. 2010;59(2):146-64. doi: 10.1080/03634520903564362.
8. Cornelius-White J. Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*. 2007;77(1):113-43. doi: 10.3102/003465430298563.
9. Buskist W, Benassi VA, Wilson J, Ryan R. *Developing Student-Teacher Rapport in the Undergraduate Classroom*. *Developing Student-Teacher Rapport in the Undergraduate Classroom*: SAGE Publications, Inc.; 2012. p. 81-90.
10. Caballero J. *The Effects of the Teacher-Student Relationship, Teacher Expectancy, and Culturally-Relevant Pedagogy on Student Academic Achievement*: University of Redlands; 2010.
11. Zarrinabadi N. Communicating in a Second Language: Investigating the Effect of Teacher on Learners' Willingness to Communicate. *System*. 2014;42(1):288-95. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2013.12.014.
12. Khajavy GH, Ghonsooly B, Hosseini A, Choi CW. Willingness to Communicate in English: A Microsystem Model in the Iranian EFL Classroom Context. *TESOL Quarterly*. 2016;50(1):154-80. doi: 10.1002/tesq.204.
13. Zhang Q. Immediacy, Humor, Power Distance and Classroom Communication Apprehension in Chinese College Classrooms. *Communication Quarterly*. 2005;53(1):109-24. doi: 10.1080/01463370500056150.
14. Zhang Q, Oetzel JG. Constructing and Validating a Teacher Immediacy Scale: A Chinese Perspective. *Communication Education*. 2006;55(2):218-41. doi: 10.1080/03634520600566231.
15. Khajavy GH, MacIntyre PD, Barabadi E. Role of the Emotions and Classroom Environment in Willingness to Communicate: Applying Doubly Latent Multilevel Analysis in Second Language Acquisition Research. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 2018;40(3):605-24. doi: 10.1017/S0272263117000304.
16. Wang L. Correlation Between Teacher-Student Communication and Emotional Intelligence of Primary School Students Based on Positive Psychology. *SHS Web of Conferences*. 2023;180:04008. doi: 10.1051/shsconf/202318004008.
17. Hosseini SA, Mohammadi F. The relationship between the quality of teacher-student communication and teachers' self-efficacy. *Quarterly Journal of Educational Psychology*. 2023;20(1):45-68.
18. Xiao J, Chen M, Yang Y, Liu M. An exploratory multimodal study of the roles of teacher-student interaction and emotion in academic performance in online classrooms. *Education and Information Technologies*. 2025;1-21. doi: 10.1007/s10639-025-13426-7.
19. Guo H. The SNS-mediated Communication Modes and Teacher-Student Relationships in Internet Era: Undergraduates' Perceptions From Four Chinese Universities. 2022. doi: 10.2991/assehr.k.220107.033.

20. Khaleghi Yeleh Gombadi M, Ghayourpour S, Sheikhverdipour A, Ghazi Pour S, editors. The impact of project-based learning, teacher-student interaction, and teacher creativity on improving students' academic performance and sustainable learning2025.
21. Najafi R, Sedaqat M, Hosseini SZ, Rahi Maleki A, editors. Creativity in teacher-student interaction: Innovative strategies for more engaging and effective learning2025.
22. Liu L. Innovation of teacher-student interaction patterns in the context of cultural and creative teaching. *Frontiers in Art Research*. 2024;6(1). doi: 10.25236/FAR.2024.060119.
23. Fu Z. A Contrastive Study of Teacher-Student Interaction Patterns in Spanish Classrooms Between Chinese and Spanish Universities-An Empirical Analysis Based on the University of Alcalá and Fujian Normal University. *The Educational Review, USA*. 2025;9(4). doi: 10.1080/11356405.2016.1237339.
24. Valinejad H, Hanafi AB, Eskandarli R, Shahraki Ghayoor F, Khorramshad Z, editors. The impact of teacher-student interaction on fostering creativity in learning environments: A systematic review2025.
25. Olsson J, Granberg C. Teacher-student interaction supporting students' creative mathematical reasoning during problem solving using Scratch. *Mathematical Thinking and Learning*. 2024;26(3):278-305. doi: 10.1080/10986065.2022.2105567.