The Role of Teacher-Student Rapport in Reducing English Learning Anxiety: Evidence from Chinese Non-English Major Students

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Abstract: This research examines the interrelation between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport among Chinese non-English major undergraduate students. Employing a quantitative research approach, the study establishes a correlational model to examine the connection between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport. A cohort of 240 non-English major undergraduates in China partook in the investigation. Utilizing Pearson's correlation analysis and regression analysis, the article scrutinizes the correlation between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport. The findings unveil a noteworthy negative correlation between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport, with teacher-student rapport elucidating 59.1% of English learning anxiety. Within the four dimensions of rapport, a positive correlation emerges between conflict and English learning anxiety, while supportiveness, satisfaction, and intimacy exhibit significant negative correlations with English learning anxiety.

Keywords: EFL learners; Teacher-student rapport; English learning anxiety

1. Introduction

Rapport is usually defined as "a holistic feeling between two people that includes mutual, trusting, and pro-social bonds" [1]. In the field of educational psychology, teacher-student rapport is considered to be one in which teachers and students experience and realize the transfer and communication of emotional information in positive interpersonal interactions in a certain emotional atmosphere [2]. Numerous studies have shown that teacher-student rapport promotes students' well-being, motivation, academic achievement, and academic engagement [3-5]. On the contrary, discordant teacher-student rapport can cause students to develop corresponding negative emotions in learning, affecting their motivation as well as their interest in learning. As Patrick *et al.* [5] pointed out, the rapport between teachers and students can directly contribute to students' motivation to influence their academic performance. However, in the university classroom, teachers and students tend to pay more attention to the teaching of theoretical knowledge of the subject and neglect emotional communication. This leads to estranged and tense

teacher-student relationships and even conflicts, which are not conducive to students' motivation as well as the effectiveness of their learning [6]. This kind of disharmonious teacher-student relationship may cause students to have a psychological state of resistance and boredom with learning, thus affecting academic behavior and achievement [7]. Therefore, it is important to establish a teacher-student rapport based on the current educational environment.

Horwitz et al. [8] defined foreign language anxiety as a multifaceted construct encompassing self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors associated with classroom English language learning. This phenomenon emerges as a consequence of the distinctiveness inherent in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Within the realm of second language acquisition, affective factors influencing the language-learning process encompass motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Notably, anxiety stands out as a paramount psychological determinant influencing the efficacy of language acquisition [9].

Numerous factors contribute to anxiety in the context of English language learning. Horwitz et al. [8] posited that negative evaluations, examinations, and interpersonal interactions with others can induce anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Furthermore, Oteir and Al-Otaibi [10] contended that the role of the teacher and the learning atmosphere also play significant roles in contributing to EFL learning anxiety. Among the studies examining EFL anxiety, the majority reveal a substantial negative correlation between EFL anxiety and academic achievements [11,12]. Other studies suggest that elevated levels of EFL anxiety impact students' motivation adversely [13]. Consequently, it becomes evident that English learning anxiety exerts a deleterious influence on students. Therefore, the effective alleviation of English learning anxiety emerges as a critical concern.

In China, the educational landscape for college students has witnessed noteworthy transformations in comparison to the earlier stages of junior and senior high school. College students, facing challenges of insufficient motivation and waning interest in English learning, as evidenced by Huang [14], grapple with a distinct learning environment. In extreme cases, student-teacher conflicts may manifest in disruptive behaviors within the classroom setting, as observed by Wang et al. [15].

Despite the abundant literature documenting the adverse impacts of teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety on EFL learners, a notable research gap exists. To address this lacuna, this study seeks to explore the nuanced relationship between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety among college students. By delving into this correlation, the research aims to provide tailored solutions to mitigate the challenges posed by English learning anxiety among college students.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher-student rapport

Teacher-student rapport denotes a trusting alliance fostering emotional connection and numerous positive interpersonal interactions between educators and students within a specific educational environment [2]. Extensive research indicates that the cultivation of a harmonious teacher-student rapport creates an environment conducive to positive and active learning experiences, enhancing students' academic accomplishments [16]. Notably, Gallagher and Mayer [17] underscored the pivotal role of harmonious teacher-student rapport in fostering students' socio-emotional and cognitive development, laying the foundation for subsequent learning.

The reviewed literature highlights the critical role of teacher-student rapport across various educational contexts, with a particular focus on its influence in language learning environments. Cai [18] investigated the predictability of Chinese EFL students' willingness to communicate through the lens of teachers' immediacy and teacher-student rapport. The findings suggest that rapport is a key factor in encouraging students to engage

in language use. The role of teacher-student rapport extends beyond willingness to communicate, as it also significantly influences students' affective learning experiences. Sun and Shi [19] explored the predictive value of teacher-student rapport and teacher support in determining learning outcomes among Chinese EFL students. Beyond the language learning context, the broader implications of teacher-student rapport on student outcomes in higher education are explored by many scholars. Frisby and Housley [20], for instance, emphasized the importance of instructor rapport in enhancing student experiences and outcomes in the college classroom, demonstrating that positive interpersonal relationships between instructors and students are essential for fostering an engaging and supportive learning environment.

Collectively, the literature consistently emphasizes the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in educational settings. The studies provide evidence supporting the positive impact of teacher-student rapport on various outcomes, including communicative willingness, affective learning, and overall student outcomes. This body of research informs our understanding of "the role of teacher-student rapport in reducing English learning anxiety" by highlighting the broader implications of positive relationships in fostering optimal learning environments, aligning with the study's focus on the constructive influence of rapport in reducing anxiety and enhancing language learning experiences among Chinese non-English major students.

2.2. English learning anxiety

English learning anxiety is characterized as a negative emotion encompassing fear and apprehension experienced during the process of acquiring English proficiency [21]. Functioning as a detrimental influence factor, it exerts negative repercussions across various aspects of students' academic experiences. Regarding its impact on academic performance, Alsalooli and Al-Tale [12] asserted that an elevated anxiety level in foreign language learning significantly hampers learners' achievements.

Exploring antecedents and consequences contributing to EFL anxiety, variations in EFL anxiety levels among students of different ages are identified, learners' self-confidence in learning English and the teacher's role in the classroom emerge as influential factors contributing to learners' English learning anxiety [22]. In the realm of second language acquisition, EFL learners experience anxiety in listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains related to English language learning, demonstrating a correlation between anxiety and learning achievements [23-25]. For instance, Fitrawati et al. [26] identified textual features and personal factors as contributors to learners' reading anxiety. Kucuk [27] attributed writing anxiety to learners' deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar.

2.3. Teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety

By cultivating a positive teacher-student relationship, educators can enhance students' motivation and concentration on the learning process, thereby bolstering the overall educational experience [20]. Additional research indicates that a harmonious teacher-student rapport contributes to students' emotional and learning engagement [28]. Within the classroom context, English learning anxiety may stem from factors such as competition, assessments, and students' perceived relationships with their teachers [29]. Scholars like Horwitz and Young [30] contended that personal and interpersonal dynamics, as well as teacher-learner interactions, contribute to anxiety in English language learning. This heightened anxiety can adversely impact students' performance, motivation, and commitment to learning.

In summary, existing studies have extensively explored the impact of teacher-student rapport and foreign language learning anxiety on learners' academic achievements. However, few scholars have integrated the independent variable of harmonious teacher-student rapport with the negative factor of learning anxiety,

specifically focusing on the effects of teacher-student rapport on foreign language learning anxiety. Consequently, this study adopts teacher-student rapport as an independent variable and English learning anxiety as a dependent variable to investigate the correlation between them. This approach aims to alleviate foreign language learning anxiety among college students and provide valuable insights for teaching practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study primarily aims to explore the association between teacher-student relationship and English learning anxiety. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: What is the nature of the relationship between teacher-student relationship and English learning anxiety among college students?

3.2. Research subjects

This research focuses on sophomore non-English major students from a university in central China, who exhibit a generally weak proficiency in English, with some struggling to grasp concepts such as subordinate clauses, tenses, and lexemes. Additionally, the demands of their majors necessitate a solid understanding of English, as certain courses require mastery of foundational knowledge in the language. However, due to their inadequate English proficiency, these students face challenges in major courses, leading to heightened anxiety about English learning, diminished motivation in the classroom, and reduced learning engagement. The study employed a random sampling method to select 240 participants, distributing questionnaire links through WeChat. Subsequently, 240 questionnaires were collected, with 207 deemed valid, resulting in an effective questionnaire recovery rate of 86.25%.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Foreign language classroom anxiety scale

Originally developed by Horwitz et al. [8], the English Classroom Anxiety Scale assesses learners' apprehension regarding foreign language learning in a classroom setting. It has been widely employed in various studies and adapted or translated in multiple countries [31,32]. For this study, Malik et al. [32] adapted the scale based on the work of Horwitz et al. [8]. The scale employs a 5-point Likert scale featuring 33 items categorized into four dimensions: communication anxiety, test anxiety, negative evaluation anxiety, and other anxieties. Responses range from "completely disagree" to "completely agree," corresponding to values from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicative of elevated anxiety levels. Reverse questions are embedded in items 11, 24, 28, and 32. The scale demonstrates internal consistency with a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.7. The composition of the scale is shown in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Distribution of four dimensions

Variable	Item	Number of items
CA	1, 3, 5, 9, 13, 14, 17, 20, 24, 32, 33	11
NE	7, 11, 12, 16, 18, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 31	11
TA	8, 10, 21	3
OA	2, 4, 6, 15, 19, 26, 29, 30	8

Note: CA = Communication anxiety; NE = Negative evaluation; TA = Test evaluation; OA = Other anxieties

3.3.2. Teacher-student relationship scale

The Teacher-Student Relationship Scale employed in this study is based on the scale developed by Zou *et al.* [33], which, in turn, draws from the research conducted by Wang *et al.* [15]. Comprising two directions and four dimensions (positive and negative), the questionnaire consists of 23 items. The positive dimensions encompass intimacy, supportiveness, and satisfaction, while the negative dimensions include conflict. Utilizing a five-point Likert scale, responses range from "totally disagree" to "totally agree," corresponding to values 1 to 5. Elevated scores on the dimensions of intimacy, supportiveness, and satisfaction signify a more positive teacher-student rapport, whereas higher scores on the conflict dimension suggest a more negative rapport. The scale demonstrates robust internal consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.921. The composition of the scale is shown in **Table 2** below.

Table 2. Distribution of four dimensions

Variable	Item	Number of items
Intimacy	1, 5, 13, 17, 18, 21, 23	7
Supportiveness	3, 7, 9, 16	4
Satisfaction	4, 8, 10, 11, 20	5
Conflict	2, 6, 12, 14, 15, 19, 22	7

3.3.3. Data collection and analysis

For data collection, Wenjuanxing, a widely recognized online questionnaire survey platform in China, was employed. The two questionnaires were randomly distributed to participants using a random sampling method, and upon completion, the collected data could be directly retrieved from the backend of the Wenjuanxing platform.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 25.00, involving a four-step process. Initially, items 11, 24, 28, and 32 of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale were reverse-scored. Subsequently, the reliability test and descriptive statistics were conducted for each of the two scales. In the third step, Pearson's correlation analysis was executed, with teacher-student rapport serving as the dependent variable and English learning anxiety as the independent variable. Lastly, the two variables underwent regression analysis.

4. Research results

4.1. Current situation of college students' English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport

4.1.1. Current situation of college students' English learning anxiety

To understand the current situation of college students' English learning anxiety, descriptive statistics were analyzed for each dimension of English learning anxiety (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of English learning anxiety

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
ELA	207	2.18	4.21	3.74	0.33
CA	207	2.36	4.64	3.82	0.45
NEA	207	2.36	4.09	3.56	0.28
TA	207	1.67	5.00	3.90	0.80
OA	207	1.63	4.50	3.80	0.45

The table illustrates that there is a negative attitude toward English learning and that college students often have medium to high levels of anxiety related to learning the language. This is because the mean value of each dimension of anxiety is greater than 3.5. Test anxiety is the most severe of them, followed by anxiety related to communication, anxiety related to other situations, and anxiety related to negative evaluations. The average of these four dimensions is scored as follows: TA > CA > OA > NEA. This indicates that college students will be quite anxious and fearful of receiving unfavorable feedback from others when taking the English test and interacting with others. Therefore, teachers can reduce the frequency of tests and create an active classroom atmosphere so that college students can actively integrate into the classroom, overcome negative emotions, and eliminate the sense of nervousness.

4.1.2. Current situation of teacher-student relationship among university students

The connection between university students and English teachers is tense and somewhat discordant, as seen by the mean value of 3.92 for the conflict dimension in **Table 4**. The mean values of the three dimensions of intimacy, support, and satisfaction are all below 2.5. Thus, the university teacher-student rapport is tense, there exist some problems such as teacher-student conflict, the students are unable to sense the teachers' support, they are dissatisfied with the teachers, and there is a need to strengthen the intimate relationship between the teachers and students.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of teacher-student relationship

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
T-SR	207	1.65	4.43	2.8782	0.75759
Conflict	207	1.57	4.86	3.9165	0.41736
Intimacy	207	1.14	4.57	2.4396	1.07693
Supportiveness	207	1.00	4.57	2.3865	1.14846
Satisfaction	207	1.00	5.00	2.4319	1.12653

4.2. Correlation between college students' English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport

In this study, Pearson's correlation was used to study the relationship between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport, and the results are shown in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Correction between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety

	ELA	T-SR	Conflict	Intimacy	Supportiveness	Satisfaction
ELA	1					
T-SR	-.549**	1				
Conflict	.423**	.188**	1			
Intimacy	-.623**	.960**	0.002	1		
Supportiveness	-.572**	.943**	0.052	.901**	1	
Satisfaction	-.616**	.942**	0.018	.894**	.869**	1

Note: ** indicates $P < 0.01$

The table depicts a negative correlation ($r = -0.549$, $P < 0.05$), between the teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety at the 95% significance level. This implies that fostering a positive teacher-student rapport within the college student group can effectively alleviate anxiety-related phenomena. Therefore, English teachers should enhance classroom interactions to facilitate student comfort and integration into the academic community, consequently alleviating any negative emotions they might be experiencing. The correlation coefficients of 0.423**, -0.623**, -0.572**, and -0.616**, respectively, highlight a substantial relationship between the four dimensions of teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety. Among these dimensions, intimacy exhibits the highest correlation coefficient, suggesting that, in general, a closer relationship between the teacher and the student correlates with increased feelings of support, satisfaction, and reduced conflict, ultimately leading to lower levels of English learning anxiety.

4.3. The predictive power of college students' teacher-student rapport for English learning anxiety

Regression analysis was conducted with English learning anxiety as the dependent variable and the four dimensions in the teacher-student rapport as the independent variables, yielding the results shown in **Table 6** below.

Table 6. Regression between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. error	B			
(Constant)	2.881	0.145		19.914	0.000	
Conflict	0.341	0.036	0.432	9.540	0.000	0.987
Supportiveness	-0.02	0.032	-0.069	-0.623	0.534	6.020
Satisfaction	-0.09	0.031	-0.307	-2.885	0.004	5.585
Intimacy	-0.088	0.037	-0.288	-2.360	0.019	7.330
	R^2				0.591	
	F				72.834	
	P				0.000	
	Dependent variable: English learning anxiety					

The results in the table indicate that the linear regression model fits well ($R^2 = 0.591$), suggesting that the results of this arithmetic accurately reflect how teacher-student rapport components (intimacy, satisfaction, conflict, and supportiveness) affect English learning anxiety. In essence, this relationship can account for 59.1% of the anxiety associated with learning English. Additionally, the regression equation is significant ($F = 72.834$, $P < 0.05$), suggesting that the dependent variable of English learning anxiety can be influenced by any of the four aspects of the teacher-student rapport. Examination of **Table 6** reveals that supportiveness has no significant effect on anxiety related to learning English ($P = 0.534 > 0.05$), while conflict has a significant and positive effect ($\beta = 0.432 > 0$, $P < 0.05$), satisfaction has a significant and negative impact ($\beta = -0.09 < 0$, $P < 0.05$), and intimacy also has a significant and negative impact ($\beta = -0.088 < 0$, $P < 0.05$). The derived regression equation is: English learning anxiety = 2.881 + 0.432 × Conflict – 0.09 × Satisfaction – 0.088 × Intimacy.

5. Discussion

In the exploration of the intricate relationship between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety among Chinese non-English major students, our study sheds light on crucial dimensions influencing language acquisition. Our findings, derived from both Pearson's correlation and regression analyses, contribute valuable insights to the existing literature, prompting a comparative examination with previous research.

The intricate landscape of English language learning among Chinese non-English major students necessitates a comprehensive examination of the implications derived from the study's results. English learning anxiety, particularly characterized by test anxiety, communication anxiety, and negative evaluation anxiety, reflects the multifaceted challenges confronting college students in their language acquisition journey. Understanding this context is pivotal for appreciating the nuanced role of teacher-student rapport in alleviating English learning anxiety.

In the current scenario, college students grapple with a moderate to high level of English learning anxiety, with test anxiety emerging as the predominant concern. This widespread fear of English tests is accompanied by communication anxiety, other anxieties, and negative evaluation anxiety. Beyond the apprehension associated with examinations, students also experience anxiety when using English in social interactions. This anxiety may stem from their weak English foundation, coupled with the fear of receiving negative evaluations during communicative exchanges. Examining the state of teacher-student rapport reveals an existing conflict between college students and their English teachers. Tensions characterize the relationship dynamics, with students perceiving a lack of support from their teachers, low intimacy levels, and overall dissatisfaction.

Pearson's correlation analysis sheds light on the significant negative correlation between English learning anxiety and teacher-student rapport. This indicates that a closer relationship between teachers and students corresponds to a lower level of English learning anxiety among college students. The analysis further unveils a noteworthy positive correlation between conflict and English learning anxiety. In essence, heightened conflict between teachers and students results in increased English learning anxiety. Conversely, the other three dimensions of teacher-student rapport—supportiveness, satisfaction, and intimacy—demonstrate significant negative correlations with English learning anxiety. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of fostering a harmonious and active atmosphere in English classrooms. English teachers are urged to enhance the harmony of teacher-student rapport, minimize conflicts with students, and create an environment conducive to reducing college students' English learning anxiety. This, in turn, aims to elevate the overall quality of English language learning.

Moving beyond correlation, the regression analysis provides a deeper understanding of the relationship dynamics. Teacher-student rapport emerges as a significant factor, explaining 59.1% of EFL anxiety. The impact of supportiveness on EFL anxiety, however, proves to be statistically insignificant. In contrast, conflict exhibits a significant and positive association with EFL anxiety. Increased conflict contributes to higher levels of anxiety in English language learning. On the flip side, both satisfaction and closeness demonstrate significant and negative effects on EFL anxiety. A higher level of satisfaction with the teacher and increased closeness in the teacher-student relationship correlate with lower levels of EFL anxiety. The regression equation encapsulates these relationships, portraying English learning anxiety as a function influenced by conflict, satisfaction, and intimacy.

In conclusion, the research illuminates the intricate interplay between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety among Chinese non-English major students. The findings underscore the pivotal role of a positive teacher-student relationship in mitigating anxiety, providing actionable insights for educators. These insights emphasize the need for a supportive, satisfying, and intimate teacher-student rapport, while also

highlighting the detrimental effects of conflict in the learning environment. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective pedagogical strategies in English language education, urging educators to proactively shape the relational dynamics to foster a conducive atmosphere for language learning.

6. Conclusion and inspiration

The findings of this study reveal a robust and significant negative correlation between teacher-student rapport and English learning anxiety among college students. The more harmonious the relationship between teachers and students, the lower the levels of English learning anxiety experienced by learners. Conversely, a notable positive correlation emerges between conflict and EFL anxiety, indicating that a more conflictive teacher-student rapport contributes to higher levels of learners' English learning anxiety. Notably, teacher-student rapport emerges as a potent predictor, accounting for an impressive 59.1% of the variance in English learning anxiety.

In light of these findings, it is imperative for English teachers in university classrooms to proactively foster an environment that is dynamic, engaging, and characterized by a positive rapport between educators and students. Specifically, efforts should be directed towards minimizing conflicts and contradictions between both parties. Creating an active and humorous classroom setting emerges as a vital strategy to enhance the harmonious relationship between teachers and students, consequently alleviating English learning anxiety among college students.

Moving beyond the quantitative insights, the study underscores the efficacy of a harmonious relationship between teachers and students in effectively alleviating college students' English learning anxiety. As educators navigate the teaching process, maintaining a heightened sensitivity to students' demonstrated anxiety becomes crucial. Timely and empathetic care for students is recommended, ensuring that learners perceive the tangible support of their teachers. This can be achieved by cultivating a classroom environment that is not only harmonious but also characterized by humor, fostering a space where students feel fully integrated into the English learning experience and are motivated to actively participate in various classroom activities.

Furthermore, specific teaching strategies should be developed to respond to students' anxieties and emotional needs. By tailoring instructional approaches to address individual concerns, teachers can reduce conflict and promote satisfaction and closeness between students and their English teachers. Building a sense of community within the classroom and fostering collaborative learning are additional strategies. Praising students for every small improvement in their language learning journey becomes instrumental in reinforcing positive beliefs about language acquisition and strengthening the bond between teachers and students.

In conclusion, this study not only unveils the significance of teacher-student rapport in mitigating English learning anxiety among college students but also offers practical recommendations for educators to implement in their teaching practices. The results emphasize the pivotal role of a positive and harmonious rapport in creating an environment conducive to effective language learning and fostering the overall well-being of students in the language classroom.

Funding

Science Planning Project (No. 2022BYY014), and the Henan Province Undergraduate Research-Based Teaching Reform Research and Practice Project (No. 2022SYJXLX023).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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