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## University Foreign Language Teachers' Perceptions of Professor-Student Rapport: A Hybrid Qualitative Study

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## University Foreign Language Teachers' Perceptions of Professor-Student Rapport: A Hybrid Qualitative Study

### Abstract

Research has shown a consensus that positive professor-student relationship makes meaningful contributions to academic outcomes such as faculty effectiveness, increased motivation, enhanced learning, and excellent teaching. Employing a qualitative research design, the authors of this study examine the conceptualization of one specific aspect of faculty-student relationship; namely, rapport, which they believe is particularly salient in college classrooms characterized by effective teaching and a positive interpersonal climate. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 26 Iranian foreign language professors who were selected through snowball sampling. A hybrid thematic analysis of the data revealed two core themes of rapport antecedents: (1) connectedness, and (2) professionalism and professorial ethics. The two themes and their sub-themes will be elaborated upon in this article. The article concludes by discussing the purposeful insights into the antecedents of rapport to provide concrete aspirational advice on how to potentially improve the higher education process.

### Keywords

rapport, professors, students, higher education, foreign languages, hybrid thematic analysis

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### Acknowledgements

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# University Foreign Language Teachers' Perceptions of Professor-Student Rapport: A Hybrid Qualitative Study

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Research has shown a consensus that positive professor-student relationship makes meaningful contributions to academic outcomes such as faculty effectiveness, increased motivation, enhanced learning, and excellent teaching. Employing a qualitative research design, the authors of this study examine the conceptualization of one specific aspect of faculty-student relationship; namely, rapport, which they believe is particularly salient in college classrooms characterized by effective teaching and a positive interpersonal climate. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 26 Iranian foreign language professors who were selected through snowball sampling. A hybrid thematic analysis of the data revealed two core themes of rapport antecedents: (1) connectedness, and (2) professionalism and professorial ethics. The two themes and their sub-themes will be elaborated upon in this article. The article concludes by discussing the purposeful insights into the antecedents of rapport to provide concrete aspirational advice on how to potentially improve the higher education process.

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## Introduction

In the past three decades, burgeoning research has investigated the professor-student relationship and its impact on teaching and learning, particularly on professor effectiveness and teaching excellence in college classrooms. The findings of most of these studies (e.g., Demir et al., 2018; Gruber et al., 2010; Joseph 2018; Lammers et al., 2017; Richmond et al., 2015; Smith, 2015; Wood & Su, 2017) suggest that academic success and effective transmission of information in instructional settings correlate with good interpersonal faculty-student interaction and relationship (but see Nushi et al., 2022). Ellis (2004) also believes that dedication to learning enhancement and forging harmonious relationships with their students are integral parts of an instructor's job. The latter, he adds, can be created via showing the students that the faculty accept and care about them, pay attention and listen to each of them, and indicate their mental and physical availability.

## Rapport in Higher Education

Rapport is defined as “the ability to maintain harmonious relations based on affinity for others” (Faranda & Clarke, 2004, p. 274). In the academic domain, professor-student rapport, termed (PSR), is the building of positive relationship between faculty and students (Wilson et al., 2010). The relationship emerges when there is favorable compatibility and effective

emotional communication in human interactions such as that between instructors and their students. Lowman (1995) highlights the significance of that relationship by noting that the ability to induce positive emotions in students distinguishes the competent from the outstanding college teacher.

Many professors, however, do not invest in developing close interpersonal relationships with their students in favor of other variables such as respect (perceived as being treated with honor, dignity or recognition), teaching methods, testing, and assessment (Buskist & Saville, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Ryan & Wilson, 2015); in addition, they may not be acquainted with such an invaluable personal factor which is considered the prominent feature of outstanding faculty (Granitz et al., 2009). Ramsden (2003) confirms this by stating that the emotional side of the teacher-student relationship is far more important than the traditional advice on instructional strategies would have us believe (see Martínez Agudo, 2018 and Richards, 2020 for a review of emotions in second language teaching). He noticed that the students were more willing to comprehend the content of a lecture if the interactions between them and their instructors promote involvement, commitment, and interest. A survey of undergraduate students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness exposes PSR as a strong predictor of student ratings of instruction (SRI; Richmond et al., 2015). According to Keeley et al. (2016), professional teachers value rapport with their students as a teaching attribute.

Research (e.g., Demir et al., 2018; Frisby et al., 2014; Granitz et al., 2009; Wilson & Ryan, 2013) has shown that by creating rapport, faculty can enrich learning, motivate students to work harder, engage students to challenge themselves, and reinforce the education process. In the instructional setting, factors and behaviors that contribute to promoting rapport both inside and outside the classroom include substantive interaction with students, encouraging and welcoming attitudes, learning students' names, exhibiting humor, and caring about students' success (Buskist & Saville, 2001; Wilson, 2006; Wilson & Ryan, 2012). Obviously, students are more likely to fail in the course if they find it intimidating to participate in classroom activities or feel anxious about the subject matter (Morse et al., 2017). In other words, moving beyond the formal teacher-student relationship and treating each other as individuals in personal communication, while relational and content-driven, facilitates the formation of positive interpersonal relationships between faculty and students (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

Having scrutinized the extant literature on the positive relationship between professors and students, the researchers of this study noticed a paucity of research on how Iranian university FL professors perceive PSR in their profession, pedagogical practices, and (non-)verbal behaviors. The findings of the present study can shed light on the perspectives of Iranian FL academics toward PSR and how they build and maintain this rapport; the information gleaned through this study can contribute to future pedagogical plans for improving teaching in higher education.

## **A Review of the Research on Rapport in Higher Education**

PSR, which is inextricably linked with a positive supportive learning (Weimer, 2010), is a significant part of college students' experiences contributing to instructors' successful knowledge transmission and effective cognitive-affective learning (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Lowman, 1995; Webb & Barrett, 2014; Worley et al., 2007). Endorsing the view by Jorgenson (1992), who sees rapport as a term that evades an agreed upon definition, Buskist and Saville (2001) maintain that the concept is multifaceted and difficult to pin down. As one of the biggest factors affecting student learning, Lammers and Gillaspay (2013) define rapport as "the degree of personal connection that a student feels toward the teacher" (p. 1). There have been frequent discussions in college teaching literature investigating rapport in classrooms from both college

instructors and, more predominately, students' perspectives (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Granitz et al., 2009; Joseph, 2018; Lammers et al., 2017; Rogers, 2015; Ryan & Wilson, 2014; Webb & Barrett, 2014) highlighting its role in successful collaborative teaching and learning.

To exemplify the interpersonal aspects of excellent college teaching, most studies across different disciplines noted rapport as a consistent remarkable component. Having conducted interviews with university teachers in their business education faculty-student model of rapport, Granitz et al. (2009) uncovered three main themes as antecedents to rapport: *approach*, *personality*, and *homophily*. The researchers state that the approach factors are comprised of two dimensions: physical and psychological. Physically, it refers to the professor's accessibility, approachability, and availability to assist the undergraduates in learning and respond to questions both inside and outside the time frame of class (e.g., open to provide email, home phone number, or office hours). The degree of responsiveness making students feel comfortable to address questions and request advice from the professor deals with the psychological aspect (Faranda & Clarke, 2004). Other factors falling into this category (i.e., approach) are *mutual openness*, which refers to being a good listener as well as willing to open up to students, let them into personal lives, and know them personally through holding conversations (e.g., talking about family and job; Faranda & Clarke, 2004). *Trust* also concerns contingent behavior and promise fulfilment. Moreover, truthfulness, lovability, personalization, shared values and perspectives, and proficiency are known to be the solid bases for trust building (Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Salaun & Flores, 2001). *Respect* is also built upon when the professor listens well, gives students a sense of "on the same side," views students as individuals, is interested in their success, is down-to-earth and non-threatening, and pays attention to his/her courtesies exchanged (Campbell et al. 2006; Faranda & Clarke, 2004).

The second category, *personality*, is characterized by feelings and sentiment, ideas, behavior, and attitudes carrying a psychological connotation (Granitz et al., 2009). *Caring*, *positivity*, and *empathy* are the constituents of this category. A caring educator is principally interested in promoting learning and removing barriers if there are any (Faranda & Clarke, 2004). Sociability, friendliness, cheerfulness, and employing humor, which fall in positivity, also make a significant contribution to PSR. Empathy predominantly deals with the ability to sense students' feelings, perspectives and problems and help them when in need (Faranda & Clarke, 2004).

The third category is *homophily* – this making communication and relationship easier. Homophily refers to when people of similar attributes and characteristics click, as in the proverb, "birds of a feather flock together." Shared ideas, values, and goals with students (e.g., first language) were the only commonalities explicitly referred to. Homophilic situations are of two types: status homophily and value homophily. Granitz et al. (2009) found out that individuals who share some status such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, or religion relate to each other more easily. On the other hand, value homophily connoting simply in similar social style such as thoughts, beliefs, first language, and personalities lead to rapport building.

In addition to the aforementioned studies probing rapport in higher education, it is also worth referring to studies by Moore and Kuol (2007) and Buskist et al. (2002) because they are highly relevant to the present research. Surveying alumni about excellent teachers, Moore and Kuol (2007) identified the same behaviors and qualities. Descriptors, namely humor, approachability, and knowledgeable, were highlighted among both interpersonal and technical aspects of outstanding teaching. Focusing on the perspectives of teachers and students on teaching excellence, Buskist et al. (2002) identified 28 qualities, among which rapport was emphasized as the interpersonal aspect of teaching.

Although there are many studies on PSR, the researchers noticed there exists a gap in that literature when it comes to FL teaching contexts, particularly Iranian FL teaching context.

Moreover, the issue was significant to the researchers on a personal level because they are all second language (L2) teachers with fairly extensive teaching records, which made them realize that PSR acts a major contributor to students' willingness to communicate in the classroom. Therefore, they decided to investigate the issue systematically and find out Iranian university foreign language professors' awareness about the PSR as well as the strategies that they adopt to building rapport in their classrooms.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the purposes outlined above, this study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are Iranian university foreign language professors' perceptions of the professor- student rapport?
2. How do Iranian university foreign language professors build and maintain professor-student rapport?

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 26 Iranian foreign language university professors who were full-time faculty members at five top state universities in Iran. This particular sample size was chosen because the researchers reached data saturation. The teachers, both male and female, were all PhD holders ranging from 32 to 65 in age (mean age: 45.23) and with five to 25 years of teaching experience. Eighteen of those teachers obtained their degrees from Iranian universities and the other eight were graduates of overseas universities. Twelve teachers also had experience teaching at overseas universities, either while obtaining their degrees from those universities or being on a teaching mission at those universities. Meriam (2009) focused on diversity in sampling for qualitative research as a technique for enhancing validity. The participants were selected using the snowball sampling procedure, a purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research whereby information-rich respondents were selected (Patton, 2014). As the current study addressed the conceptualization of PSR by Iranian foreign language university professors, the respondents were selected from the Iranian academics who taught in the field of foreign language studies including Russian, German, Persian, Arabic, French, Chinese, and English to the students whose first language was different from the language being taught. Prior to the interviews and to observe the ethical principles concerning privacy and data protection, the researchers gave the professors consent forms to sign so as to make sure that they (the professors) were informed about the purpose of the study and that they were not compelled to be part of the study. The participants were also assured that interview data would be anonymous and only used for academic purposes.

#### **Design of the Study**

This study employed a qualitative research procedure, including in-depth interviews and a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis to collect and analyze the data to gain novel understandings of perspectives, thoughts and behaviors of the academics from their own commentaries (Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain that qualitative approaches "can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are more difficult to extract

or learn about through more conventional research methods” (p. 11). As feelings, perceptions, and behaviors at specific times cannot be observed (Patton, 2014), the researchers decided to adopt in-depth interviewing through which they are able to discover and learn about perspectives, thoughts and behaviors of others (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It is noteworthy that “by conducting interviews in person, researchers are better able to develop rapport with participants, thereby expanding the likelihood of learning details about participants’ views” (Tavakoli, 2012, p. 219).

Considering thematic analysis as a qualitative research method for recognizing, encoding, and presenting patterns of meaning that might be latent within data, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Furthermore, Patton (2014) drew a distinction between the deductive thematic analysis that is carried out based on “theoretical framework developed by someone else” and inductive thematic analysis in which the inherent patterns and themes emerge without attempting to fit it into an earlier coding frame. In concert with the aims of this study, a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Swain, 2018) was deemed and utilized as a useful qualitative research method. Elaborating on the antecedent thematic categories of the study, the researchers read and re-read the qualitative data to extract the new emergent themes without considering the themes identified in previous research (i.e., inductive analysis). Utilizing deductive thematic analysis, the analysts used some of the pre-determined sub-categories provided by Granitz et al. (2009) and Faranda and Clarke (2004) in pursuit of the recurrent themes and decide which are present in their relationships.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Twenty-six (26) Iranian FL professors were interviewed by the first author of this study, face to face, and in the interviewees’ mother tongue (Persian), with each interview lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. They were all recorded, transcribed, and translated from Persian into English. The faculty members answered open-ended questions about their perceptions of PSR and the strategies to build rapport with students. The interview questions (see the Appendix) were designed based on Patton’s (2014) interview guidelines to elicit rich and detailed responses which could help researchers identify common themes. Occasional notes were also taken, allowing the interviewing researcher to listen attentively to what was said and come up with the follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Further, in the spirit of increasing the credibility and validity of the study, the interviewer practiced member checking during each interview process whereby they could confirm, modify, and elaborate on their findings from the prior responses. Member checking, or respondent validation, is considered a necessary method to validate a qualitative study (Dörnyei, 2007). Indeed, the researchers restated and summarized the information and then requested that each participant determine the accuracy of the information. Moreover, an inter-rater reliability of 0.84 was achieved. The transcripts and translations were handed over to a fourth coder to check the dominant themes obtained, and the researchers came to an agreement on a uniform script and codes. The codes were then analyzed and categorized, the details of which will be discussed in more detail below.

### **Coding Procedure**

Prior to interviewing, to fulfill the ethical principles, the participants were guaranteed confidentiality, in which the researchers promised not to divulge the interviewees’ identity in any report. In fact, pseudonyms were used throughout this paper. In our study, a hybrid

thematic analysis – a combined technique of inductive and deductive thematic analysis – was used to identify overarching themes that captured the phenomenon of PSR in terms of rapport development.

After the data familiarization, to address the research questions, the researchers adopted a set of operations to figure out the important areas across the data set. The classification and description of qualitative data manipulation operations includes categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, and iteration. These operations are neither separate steps, nor are they supposed to be applied in a sequential linear order (Spiggle, 1994). The operations allow the “researchers to organize data, extract meaning, arrive at conclusions, and generate or confirm conceptual schemes and theories that describe the data” (p. 493).

The first phase of data analysis was categorization; that is, coding coherently meaningful chunks of data embedded throughout the interview in the forms of words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. Spiggle (1994) indicates that “categorization may proceed deductively or inductively” (p. 493), both of which have been applied in the present study. Having labeled the initial categories, the researchers derived patterns of codes – a priori categories from the literature review (abstraction). In the next phase, general similarities were explored providing guidelines to represent them as the same category (comparison). Moving onto dimensionalization, the conceptual meaning was clarified (Bagozzi, 1984), adopting the definitions from the literature when new codes added. Conducting inductive analysis, the researchers identified emergent themes from the data without considering any pre-existing unit of analysis and grouping them into more general abstract classes. It is worth mentioning that moving through the data analysis allowed the investigators to make sense of what was happening.

Having moved back and forth between research phases (iteration), the themes were then checked to see whether they worked in relation to the coded extracts. Before producing a report of the analysis, definitions and names were provided for each theme. The three researchers agreed that two higher order themes emerged from the data.

## Results

Analysis of the data led to the extraction of two major themes of rapport antecedents: (a) connectedness, and (b) professionalism and professorial ethics. The themes and their sub-themes are further explored in the following section.

### Rapport Antecedents

#### Connectedness

We named the first theme *connectedness*, which acknowledges a climate of positive emotional connection amongst students, teacher, and the subject matter. Connectedness is also seen as the essence of rapport establishment in education endeavors. Rossetti and Fox (2009) referred to such a concept as *presence*, believing it plays a crucial role in the development of mutual rapport between students and professors and flourishes on trust, respect, and caring. The professors in this study valued their good behaviors and personality preferences which can potentially lead to an enjoyable interaction and a congenial learning and teaching atmosphere whereby teacher-student positive relationship would flourish. Examination of our data revealed that connectedness can be attributed to the professors’ appreciation of *immediacy behaviors* (verbal and non-verbal), and *social-academic integration*.



## Immediacy Behaviors

The (non-)verbal elements of immediacy were largely reflected in participants' comments regarding establishing rapport. As for the non-verbal immediacy behaviors, the professors emphasized that they used a combination of strategies. More specifically, the professors repeatedly practiced facial expressions in combination with kinesics (body language) to communicate a sense of *physical* and *psychological closeness*. The most frequently mentioned patterns of facial behavior consisted of *eye-contact* and *smile*, regardless of gender, as evident in the following excerpts:

I maintain eye contact and smile to reduce stress and show that they are welcome and part of the community (Hamid (he), 38).

I maintain eye contact with all students, no matter male or female... I am really careful to distribute this eye contact among students (Zahra (she), 40).

*Proximity* was also deemed to be one of the crucial non-verbal correlates, of which moving around the classroom and showing expansive postures were the major strategies to reduce the interpersonal physical space. With respect to haptics (touch) as a means of showing intimacy in interpersonal communication, the analysis revealed that our participants, as Muslim professors, highlighted the importance of Islamic religiosity and non-contact culture type, which oblige them not to have physical contact with a member of the opposite gender. Accordingly, male teachers stated shaking hands or a tap on shoulders with only male students to express solidarity and loyalty, whereas female teachers barely favored giving a brief hug to female students.

I move around the classroom, get close to them and monitor their activities such as group work in conversation classes, and give them head nods as feedback. Also, smiling, the motion of hands and my eye-contact keep students' attention and respect. I shake hands with male students or tap them on their shoulders (Saeed (he), 35).

This finding supports Hall's (1976) dichotomization of cultures into "contact" and "non-contact" categories based on how they perceive physical touching in their communications. The participants believed that closer proximity and body openness, considering our cultural norms, could help create a warm atmosphere conducive to better student learning. In combination with kinesics, facial expressions such as smiling and eye-contact were also seen as important gestures to invoke a sense of involvement and friendly emotional states. On the significance of proximity and body gestures to the development of positive teacher-student relationship, Ahmad (he), 42 said:

When moving around I get closer to the students and sometimes tap the male students' shoulders; this makes them feel better.

Moreover, it can be understood from their statements that the incorporation of non-verbal signals and behaviors are subject matter related; the more boring the lesson is perceived by the students, the more immediacy behaviors are adopted to make the lesson interesting and approachable. Christophel and Gorham (1995) contend that students' perception of the structure of the course is linked to the presence of teacher immediacy behavior motivators.

That contention is seen in the two comments, one a French and another by a German language professor:

I also try to spice up grammar teaching, which is typically seen as a dry and boring subject matter, by moving more around in class regularly. This contributes a lot towards a positive teacher-student relationship and helps us communicate in a friendly manner; it shows the teacher's expertise at the same time (Tohid (he), 48).

As for moving around in the classroom, it depends on the subject matter. If I have to sit in a class, the seating arrangement is of paramount importance. I mean I need to see my students and have up-close eye contact with them. In boring classes such as grammar class, on the other hand, I move around and use body language to get them to grasp the concept (Maryam (she), 37).

The respondents also mentioned that using non-verbal behaviors could convey a sense of being down-to-earth.

In my opinion, my sitting in a separate chair suggests a top-down relationship between me and my students; once I sit at my desk, students might think that I have power and this is counterproductive to a positive teacher-student relationship. If the university turns into an authority, it gets away from its function and responsibility (Sara (she), 39).

Regarding the verbal immediacy behaviors, common in the majority of the comments was an agreement that a good sense of humor was associated with mellow and friendly yet serious faculty and deemed an important characteristic of interpersonal bonds in rapport-driven classes. This was particularly reflected in quoting Persian poems, incorporating witty remarks (in both first and second language), icebreakers, relevant personal stories and experiences (personalization on both sides), and introducing fun language learning activities such as role-plays and singsongs into the lessons.

When they get bored, I read some poems of Saadi and Mowlana [renowned Iranian poets] and interpret them; they really enjoy it, as expressed by themselves (Hossein (he), 42).

Whenever they feel bored, I tell them to put aside the books and have fun and return to the lesson afterwards. Sometimes, I play a childlike song to break the ice and make sure there is an air of humor within the class, hoping that they learn to enjoy every single minute. As an illustration, in order to involve students in class activities, I assign roles and encourage them to take responsibilities. This makes class atmosphere more fun and enjoyable to them (Mona (she), 47).

The belief was that humor-tinted behaviors would engage students' interests and enhance receptivity; that is, students would become more receptive to what is being taught through connecting themselves to the subject content. In addition, professors noted that this was an effective strategy to pass time and keep students involved in boring classes.

Faculty members who succeed in building a positive teacher-student relationship are believed to be friendly and serious at the same time. I crack a joke at times to reduce stress. I try to create the most joyful classroom atmosphere to put away the boredom of dry subject matters. I address students directly and make individual remarks, which may sometimes make them laugh and have fun, I sometimes use Persian poems to make the class more enjoyable and friendly (Parvane (she), 40).

Gorham (1988) depicts teacher use of humor in class as the bridge between students' perceptions of their learning, their appeal for the course content, and the instructor. Thus, both teacher and students would find the class more enjoyable, inviting, comfortable, and less stressful. In addition, professors noted this was an effective strategy to pass time and keep students involved in boring classes. Coser (1959, p. 172) stated that "laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation to dinner or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance." In their experimental and observational evidence, Linfield (1977) and Welker (1977) also referred to appropriate use of humor as a teacher-student rapport facilitator.

As it can be inferred from the examples, professors focused on verbal and predominantly non-verbal immediacy behaviors, associated with physical and psychological closeness between teachers and students.

### **Social-Academic Integration**

The most frequently mentioned patterns of this category consisted of *mutual openness, clarity, engagement, and approachability*; we named this category social-academic integration. Throughout, the professors expressed the importance of both faculty-student interactions outside of the immediate context of learning (classroom) regarding personal matters and those which are university and subject matter related. Commenting on the two dimensions of integration (i.e., social and academic), Azar (she), 39, an Arabic language professor stated:

I greet students warmly on campus. I also try my best to be available through social media and in office hours. But outside the university in the social media, I have friendlier relationships with students. By the way, I am also close to my students in the classroom. I generally try to get them talking more than me and I have consulted sources from foreign universities in my teaching methods.

In the following excerpt, one faculty explains how she goes about conducting the first day of her class, emphasizing how she tries to be a welcoming and clear teacher:

On the first day of the course, we get to know each other. I greet them warmly and share some information about myself and about the course, how I chose this field and my attitudes toward the field. I take time to talk to them individually and try to learn about their areas of interest, ambitions and goals (Maryam, (she), 37).

### *Mutual Openness*

Faculty members' disposition to mutual openness was highlighted as a behavior contributing to rapport development. The participants explained that they disclose some personal background information about themselves and learn about the students' interests and

ambitions. This reciprocity is believed to make students feel comfortable coming to professors and talking to them. Granitz et al. (2009) subsumed “openness” under *positive* personality factors contributing to faculty student rapport. To foster instructor-student rapport, they expressed their desire for an engaging environment by disclosing information about themselves and sharing personal insights and experience with the class, especially on the first day. Hamid (he), 38, a Russian language professor said:

I talk about my memories from Russia and relate them to the subject matter so that learning could happen more effectively. Even if there is no relationship between the students and the subject, I try to create an indirect relationship to invite them. For instance, I relate the target language to the students’ background knowledge so that they would learn and have fun at the same time. For instance, I tell them to use the Russian accent when introducing themselves and saying first names so that they relate to the lesson.

### *Clarity*

In addition, to exhibit clarity, they stress that they should clearly explain the course goals and expectations, grading policy, and provide a dynamic semi-consistent syllabus which could be possibly modified later based on the needs analysis of the students.

I used to see my students as my siblings, but now I say they are part of me. One of the easygoing student’s parents met me and shared the problems they had with their son. I came up with some solutions and strategies; thus, the situation was dealt with so successfully that they came to me the following year and expressed their happiness and thanked me (Sanaz, (she), 49).

### *Engagement*

From the data, we can infer that, having built a positive relationship with their professors, students feel comfortable to come and get help and advice on their studies, projects, and even personal struggles hindering their academic performance. Interviewees expressed appreciation for being sympathetic toward students and listening to those students who open up and reveal their personal issues and vulnerabilities. They were unanimous in their opinions that there were many obstacles arising during the semester which could negatively affect the students’ academic performance and understanding their problems and helping them were seen as a part of professionalism. To indicate engagement, the practice amongst the successful professors was to check and make sure the students were OK and perhaps referring those having problems to a helpful organization or office on campus. More importantly from an academic perspective, this did not mean students could obtain higher grades simply because they were facing a problem, but their professors would be more likely to grant them an extension to catch up. Relatedly, Frisby and Gaffney (2015) asserted that the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport did not anticipate final course grades. They believed that such a consideration and care would help instill confidence in students and make them feel safe.

Once I had a student who wanted to commit suicide; having talked to me, she changed her mind and even continued her education abroad. Another one, who failed the course, finally managed to pass it and achieved academic success. I always talk to them and instill a sense of confidence and capability in them. I try to act as a consultant and hope that I can be helpful, and I think I have been.

When this relationship is formed, both sides feel satisfied, and this encourages us to work harder (Kamal, (he), 48).

### *Approachability*

The notion of approachability as an interpersonal concern and also a strength of personal character, drew a wealth of comments. The academics practiced approachability in and out of their classes in order to develop authentic teaching and forge a trust-based congenial alliance as the critical part of their occupation.

Classes are not battlefields; on the contrary, it is a place of beautiful education. I walk with male students on campus, and I try to ward off a sense of being looked from above in them. I provide the, with my phone number and try to be accessible in the college context. I feel like it is my duty, and teachers who are honestly at students' service are unforgettable (Sahar (she), 39).

In order to be approachable, they explained that faculty should be warm, friendly, and inclined to speak with students during office hours, via email, or on campus. As it was reflected in our interview data, it revolves around humility and modesty which are deemed to be righteous traits in teaching profession. It also radiates from availability, accessibility, and faculty-student non-classroom interaction. The following provides another glimpse into approachability:

I believe that faculty-student positive and friendly relationship is a humane, moral, and Islamic value that help students feel comfortable to open up and get advice to solve their problems, which is the result of faculty's demonstration of honesty. I'm also in touch with students through email and social media. I admire those who have progressed academically and communicate this sense through my conversations and greetings with them on campus. There are students who do not share their personal problems with their parents, but come to their professor and ask for advice, which is all the result of the pleasant relationship forged between both sides (Zia (he), 50).

The need for outside and inside classroom interaction, such as inviting students to meet the teacher or telephone him/her if they have questions, using personal examples and experiences and also addressing the students by their first names were mentioned by the participants.

### **Professionalism and Professorial Ethics**

The second extracted theme was named professionalism and professorial ethics revolving around *knowledgeability and credibility, dedication and commitment, humility and humanity*, as well as *courtesy*. We concluded that a prevalent component of professionalism was expert knowledge in the field of the study; that is, pedagogical content and language proficiency in the context of language teaching and learning. Descriptors such as *knowledge, effective learning, and trust* recurred in the interviews. The teachers explained that, to fulfil a friendly relationship, professors, as knowledge purveyors, should inspire students to trust them. This trust would be achievable through possessing a level of expertise in the respective FL sufficient to answer most of the students' questions using social finesse. The teachers in the study agreed that they should be careful not to show off their knowledge. Fariba (she), 65 noted:

When I talk, my students realize that I have deep knowledge in historical, social and cultural matters and they get fascinated by this knowledge and place trust in me. Yet, I try my best not to let my students get anxious about this knowledge gap and develop the idea that “she is much more knowledgeable than me.” Therefore, I do not reveal all I am and my knowledge.

Elaborating on the international students’ expectations of non-native English-speaking teachers as FL teachers, Reves and Medgyes (1994) highlighted the importance of language proficiency, as the language is both the medium and the objective of their profession. Therefore, knowledge and credibility were believed to be conducive to building trust in the students, contributing to effective learning and professor-student relationship development.

I don’t think [friendly relationship] is possible without knowledge. Relationships are very important as well as other aspects; students attend the university to study and learn something. All of us have some shortcomings in our own field of expertise; however, a professor’s having *enough* knowledge is essential (Davood (he), 53).

To facilitate the creation of trust, study participants articulated the need for meticulous preparation for classes so that they would deliver the knowledge on the subject matter beyond the textbooks, a practice which would suggest to the students that their teachers are committed to their work. Granitz et al. (2009) proposes *going beyond the textbooks* in the pursuit of college teaching excellence. In addition, Joseph (2016) also lists *preparedness for class* as students’ expectation of their professors for effective professor-student rapport.

I have realized that students trust me when they realize that I am trying to teach something of importance to them. It is very important to me that I have study prior to the class and come to the class prepared. I prepare PowerPoint slides for the course and include materials and examples that may not be in their textbooks (Masi (she), 41).

Accordingly, the participants believed their role goes beyond mere teaching of the content and subject matter in the educational course of action. Moreover, the respondents valued identifying the potentialities of the learners and nurturing those qualities to build trust and a positive relationship. In fact, they want the students to see what is possible for them to achieve which would signal to them that the professors are interested in them as individuals. The attitude was manifested in the professors’ career suggestions or job offers to grad students. It was important for them that their students find the meaning in their education in their future careers.

Having known them well and recognized their potentials, I offer job vacancies suitable for them. Since there aren’t many job opportunities for the field [Persian Language and Literature], I encourage them to grow their potentials in order to increase their chances of finding a foothold in the job market. I see their eyes light up! This paves the way toward finding jobs, especially after their graduation (Lida (she), 59).

Understandably, dedication, commitment, and courtesy toward learners drew a lot of comments running through the discussions of positive teacher-student relationships. Delving into the data, we found out that conscientious instructors are deemed to be loyal and concerned

about their students' academic development. They stated that their profession involves building future generations so that academics are responsible to create good human resources, responsible individuals, and socialized citizens. Therefore, they have a tendency to be responsible and hardworking as desirable attributes academics should have. In a study on *teachers who attract or repel*, dedication to teaching was mentioned as one of the most important characteristics of higher education teachers (Joseph, 2016). In terms of personal attention, many of them asserted that they cared about their students. Descriptors such as *learning about students' interests, providing thorough feedback on their assignments, identifying individuals' learning styles, sensory channels and qualities, embodying interest in their success, employing fairness and taking care of apprehensive students, and respect and honesty* were inferred. Therefore, caring about and promoting students' learning were identified in effective relationship development activities.

Focusing on outstanding professors, Rossetti and Fox (2009), Weimer (2010) and Joseph (2018) addressed *caring* as an important characteristic expected of effective professors in educational contexts, a quality which is practically expounded in the quotation below:

Good behavior and mannerism together with work ethics and commitment could make a professor successful in building positive teacher-student relationship. I repeat the lesson many times and answer all the questions they ask during class time. I also move around the classroom, get close to them and monitor their activities, and give them feedback. I also reply to their messages outside of the class; I am available in my office in case they need further help with their lessons (Saeed (he), 35).

Further, dealing with apprehensive and uninterested students and solving their issues was also important. The professors asserted that in order to develop a good rapport, they identified students who found participation threatening and helped them portray themselves to others through supporting both their positive and negative faces. In this study, to alleviate students' fears, faculty used a variety of strategies of which engaging in face-supportive communication-production activities indirectly such as allocating bonus points to higher number of errors, the use of politeness strategies like using a soft tone of voice, creating equitable participatory learning environment, and showing care about their success specifically recurred.

I remember having a worried freshman who had a strong accent and was reluctant to talk in front of other students, fearing embarrassment. Purposefully, I started asking challenging questions so that others could not answer. I then addressed that very student directly and had him think about the answer and if he could create an association with his mother tongue (Azari). Then I realized that he was smart but shy. My positive feedback delivered in soft tone of voice accompanied with compliments made him dispel the sense of social and linguistic alienation. In time, he became one of the most active members of the class (Leila, (she), 48).

Faculty's responsibility goes beyond mere teaching a class. In conversation classes there are anxious students, and I have a good strategy to deal with this. I give bonus points to higher number of errors. This way I invite them to participate without any fears. I assign roles and give everyone the opportunity to talk (Azar, (she), 39).

The professors assured the students that they were liked and affiliated and also gave them autonomy through fostering their potentialities. For example, they encouraged them to drop out of a course or even the program that was not to their liking and follow their own interests. In other words, the faculty did their best to put the students on the right track through recognition, interaction, and involvement. Moreover, by sharing their equal attention among individuals they ensured all students were involved and productive. They explained that they would acknowledge differences and did not discriminate on the basis of stress-provoking factors to participation such as gender, age, social class, first language accent, individual achievement, or wealth. Instead, they adjusted their approach to teaching all the students with every social status or identity.

When asking them to take part in classroom activities, I take care to involve students from all social classes, be it poor, rich, attractive, good looking or not, boys, girls and so on. Talking to anxious students is of paramount importance. I do my best to inspire them through direct involvement. I sometimes even recommend dropping out of the course or program [to them] so that they follow their true interests. In severe cases, I tell them to seek counsel from their advisors (Faramarz (he), 54).

In addition, the teachers indicated that they put time and effort into every single student's work and performance. Giving effective and constructive feedback on assignments was also highly valued to cultivate positive rapport. To exhibit honesty in their relationship, they acknowledged that they were in no way infallible and accepted it if they did not know something. Faranda and Clarke (2004) subsumed providing prompt feedback on assignments under the category of *organization and preparation* to represent outstanding professorship.

I provide feedback on their assignments, and I take great care not to offend them via my feedback. Regarding apprehensive students, I talk to them before and after the class and invite them to participate in class activities. I also pay more attention to them. If we compare a math class with an English class, it is obvious that in a math class, there is not that much interpersonal interaction between teacher and students except for some questions and answers; on the other hand, in a language class the teacher triggers them constantly to participate and gives feedback and this facilitates a positive teacher-student relationship (Zia (he), 50).

Discussing the data coding further, the researchers agreed upon some other sub-themes. The participants valued their demeanor and personality preferences which can potentially lead to an enjoyable interaction and a congenial learning and teaching atmosphere whereby teacher-student positive relationship would flourish. In addition, humor, humility, and humanity (the 3 Hs) are all words identified in their responses. They attributed humility to being down-to-earth and not showing a superiority complex due to their social rank. The following extracts from three of the interviewed professors show their concerns for the 3 Hs:

We don't just communicate with our words; we also communicate through gestures. For instance, there is a big difference between a professor who sits behind the desk and doesn't move, and one that walks around. There is a difference between a professor who always looks down on students from the podium and one that sometimes even sits down on students' chairs, to switch the position of professor with that of a student for some minutes. I mean such



behavior that shows that I, as a teacher, am not so different from you (Lida (she), 59).

I try to have a closer relationship with those who are slower in their studies, involve them more, and even when they confess, they cannot produce yet a single word I tell them to do it in Farsi [the official language of Iran]. I offer to counsel those who are stressed; I invite them to my office and encourage them to do better next semester. I sometimes talk to them in a friendly way and even encourage them to drop the field and pursue their primary aim. This could make them motivated and work harder since they realize that the faculty pays attention to them and love and respect them (Reza (he), 53).

Unfortunately, professorship might cause a top-down relationship between the professors and students; however, this is just a mask worn by some professors fearing losing their power and authority. The problem is that maybe, I think, the masks that we wear, and that's the distance that subconsciously we create between ourselves and students.... Most of the time these masks that we wear are for creating a territory for ourselves (Ahmad (he), 42).

As it can be understood from the above-mentioned examples, the university professors alluded to self-conscious emotional tendencies towards pride as a barrier to rapport growth. Referring to inappropriate aloofness and arrogance on the side of the academia, the participants acknowledged that faculty members who are not affable and hospitable often fail to address students' social and emotional needs, which could lead to a damaged relationship between professors and students in the college. They also believed that this arrogant behavior is an acquired aspect revolving around the belief that the high social status and power brought about by their positions of authority, makes them disparate and infallible, and that the less accessible and approachable they are, the more enhanced their image would be. By fearing to lose power, they meant valuing their social status and trying to maintain it through conveying a sense of being special. Conversely, in the rapport-building section many of the survey participants highlighted the importance of egalitarianism and that professors should not see themselves as superior to the students.

The analysis also found out that interviewees supporting humility were often passionate about their desire to be evaluated by their students as it would allow them to become aware of their weaknesses and develop strategies to overcome them and get higher students' approval. This tendency is believed to be conducive to effective teacher-student communication and intensity of engagement for better classroom performance; no superiority complex or top-down relationship is perceived accordingly.

I never look down on my students, and this has directly to do with my personality. I respect them and ask them for their feedback. I ask them to write their opinion (about my behavior) on a piece of paper anonymously and throw it under my office door; their feedback would help me to increase my awareness of my efficacy and learn about my strong and weak points and try to improve in the weak areas. Also, I suppose the top-down relationship and power orientation between faculty and students must be eradicated and humanity should take over (Mehrnaz (she), 47).

By appropriate ways of being a humble teacher, they meant treating their students as whole individuals and communicating a sense of equality to let them know that the only thing

that ultimately distinguishes them from each other is their different levels of knowledge and experience. In addition, they alluded to the fact that it was very important to let the students know that there is always something for the faculty members to learn and that they do not know “everything” and are not infallible. Some of them said that on occasions where they did not know the answer to a question asked, they would openly admit it but let the class know that they would search to find out the answer and share it with them the following session(s).

A real professor is honest with students; when he does not know the answer, he admits it and lets the students know that he does not know everything. Yet, he looks for the information and inform the students later or invite them to look it up and let him know (Ali (he), 40).

To boost rapport between academia and students, the next remarks concern courtesy and etiquette to exhibit polite behavior and respect for the students. The analysis revealed that the respondents alluded to the importance of the faculty being punctual, speaking respectfully to individuals through choosing appropriate words, tone of voice, and language, and calling students by last names, being well-dressed – wearing a clean and tidy smart-casual look – and fragrance. Moreover, eye contact in some passing comments was considered to be an indication of politeness.

During my college days, we would judge the instructors based on their behavior. Therefore, I am careful about my words and tone. I appear energetically in clean and tidy clothes, yet not too formal, to avoid showing too much authoritarianism. I use very polite and kind words and I ask them to get in class before me if I see them at the door (Zahra (she), 40).

A significant finding that emerged was that the academics see their ex-professors as their mentors and role models. They held a high regard for the strategies adopted by their ex-university teachers. To illustrate the exemplary role modelling of the educators, the phrases such as “*I remember my favorite professor..., the professor with whom I had a friendly relationship was ..., I always try to follow my professor who..., etc.* demonstrate the professors’ disposition to admire and follow their inspirational and excellent professors and consider them to be their role models. In their response to the questions, they stressed that they have a role in the character formation of the students, and they will have potential influence on them. From their comments it appears that their students will probably think of them as role models in the future; therefore, they feel compelled to teach them about psychological aspects of teaching such as how to forge friendship and advocate humanity.

## Discussion

Building rapport with students is more important than ever in our current, social, political, and educational landscape. (Frisby, 2018, p. 9)

It is valuable for professors to understand the factors leading to a successful PSR in multiple disciplines. Analysis of the findings in this study led to the emergence of two dominant themes: connectedness, and professionalism and professorial ethics. The first theme included immediacy behaviors and academic integration, which could be actualized through appropriate proximity and body openness, and inside and outside of classroom interaction. In our inquiry into the higher education rapport, we feel that the interconnection between faculty, students and the subject matter would indicate higher levels of PSR. Palmer (1998) cautions that

connectedness is compromised at the expense of constructivism and teaching techniques; he believes that a capacity of connectedness rather than their pedagogical knowledge and skills is what distinguishes good teachers.

Drawing on the importance of building relationships with students, Frisby (2018) puts emphasis on the notion of “rapport and connectedness.” In addition to its significance in actual classrooms through feedback, discussion, and office hours, presence and rapport with students is also referred to even in online courses. She also suggests that the computer-based technology integrating textual and audio/video response can be employed to establish presence and connectedness, no matter how large the number of addressees is.

The salience of professor immediacy, identified in literature as to be a powerful medium of creating rapport (Frisby, 2018; Wilson et al., 2010), was proposed on many occasions. Indeed, the participants explained that not only do these behaviors facilitate rapport building between instructors and students but were also believed to communicate instructors’ expertise and credibility. Many studies support the finding that immediacy has remarkably positive effects on the students’ perceptions of their instructors’ three-dimensional credibility, including caring, trustworthiness, and competence, elements which are considered to build professor excellence and effective college teaching (Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998; Lowman, 1994). Elaborating on the elements of immediacy behaviors as a teacher-student rapport facilitator, researchers (e.g., Gorham, 1988; Linfield 1977; Welker 1977) regard teachers’ appropriate use of humor in class as the bridge between students’ perceptions of their learning, their enjoyment of the course content, and their liking of their instructor. Christophel and Gorham (1995) attribute students’ perception of the structure of the course to the presence of teacher immediacy behavior motivators. Thus, both teacher and students would find the class more enjoyable, inviting, and comfortable, and less stressful. In their experimental and observational evidence, also referring to appropriate use of humor, Coser (1959, p. 172) addressed “laughter and humor” as a strategy to decrease social distance and start conversation. Chesebro and McCroskey (2001) talked about the importance of being both a clear and immediate teacher to mitigate apprehension and facilitate classroom learning. Proximity and body openness have also been cited as being interconnected with a sense of liking and perceived warmth (Richmond et al., 2015).

In combination with the findings reported in previous research, the results of this study added social-academic integration as the second sub-theme. The researchers highlighted approachability and availability of the faculty followed by openness manifest in the interaction both in the learning context and outside the immediate context of learning whereby the students have the opportunity to succeed academically, develop a sense of belonging in the institution, and open up about their personal lives regardless of their social levels. In their study of outstanding professors, Rossetti and Fox (2009) valued the importance of interaction both inside and outside the classroom as a predicting factor in mutual rapport. They referred to such a concept as *presence*, believing it plays a crucial role in the development of mutual rapport. Campbell et al. (2006) also emphasized the need for learning about students’ aspirations, lifestyles, and abilities. Previous research (e.g., Gorham & Christophel, 1990) suggested that the willingness to converse with students outside of class is among immediate professor behaviors. The same was found by Perrine (1998) and Reid and Johnston (1999), who spoke about approachability as an attribute existing in positive teacher-student relationship. They define teacher approachability as being “friendly and approachable” (p. 274). Simon (1997) mentioned that he is always available to his students to provide assistance and inspiration: “I want my students to know that I will be available to them not only during the semester but also through subsequent semesters and after they have graduated” (p. 30). In several studies on effective teachers (e.g., Keeley et al., 2016; Lammers & Smith, 2008; Moore & Kuol, 2007; Ryan et al., 2011), instructor’s approachability was rated as an important characteristic, even

in distance education (Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). Being available before, after, and outside of class and making themselves approachable by greeting students and learning something about their lives outside the learning context were mentioned as strategies for classroom rapport building (Buskist & Saville, 2001; Dörnyei, 2001). Highlighting teaching as social behavior, Wilson and Ryan (2012) also mention approachability manifest in inviting students to out-of-class discussions. Approachability of the instructor was also found to be a key element to creating a trust-based relationship between students and teachers, leading to a climate of independence and collaboration in the classroom (Karnita, 2018).

The notion of students' individuality was also valued in establishing rapport. The faculty believed that they should learn something about the students' experiences and strengths, and this is better to occur at the beginning of the academic year. Having discovered the students' qualities and abilities, the faculty would be able to help nurture their independence. Niemi (1992) stated, "in helping students achieve their highest potential, I realize I must cherish their individuality- their special needs, interests, and rich life experience" (p. 14). In his notion of "pedagogy of confidence," Jackson (2011) stated that by having confidence about the potentialities of students, you can help them go over the limits of their mind. Rossetti and Fox (2009) stressed supporting students' individuality through knowing them as whole individuals and value their potentialities, which can create a healthy learning climate based on trust and caring. This is also in line with the notion of *getting to know students* as one of the characteristics of excellent professors in higher education (Joseph, 2018). Wilson and Wilson (2007) specified positive experience on the first day affects students' motivation and attitudes toward the course and the instructor.

We named the second theme professionalism and professorial ethics, which can be conceptualized through knowledgeable, commitment and courtesy. The professors in this study insisted that it was essential to maintain their proficiency by updating instructional materials and engaging in professional developmental activities. In her exploration of socially just teaching, Chubbuck (2010) states that high-status knowledge and skills are crucial elements to empower learners. Accordingly, elaborating on the international students' expectations of non-native English-speaking teachers as FL teachers, Reves and Medgyes (1994) highlighted the importance of language proficiency maintenance and improvement, as the language is both the medium and the objective of their profession. Granitz et al. (2009) also referred to competence and up-to-date knowledge as expertise contributing to classroom rapport building. This study also confirms findings of previous studies (e.g., Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Granitz et al., 2009; Faranda Joseph, 2018) on the significance of strong content knowledge for faculty-student rapport and college teaching excellence in the marketing domain, respectively. Relatedly, in light of diversity in student enrollment and putting emphasis on rapport in higher education, Sybing (2019) argued that practitioners can better accommodate all students in diverse college classrooms by providing them with a growing body of expertise.

Illuminating commitment, the teachers argued that they should possess the ability to organize and form well-structured lectures as a function of preparedness. As a result, they would be able to convey knowledge, meet students' expectations and motivate their learning. This confirms Faranda and Clarke's (2004) findings on the "delivery" and "organization and preparation;" specifically, the students' "desire for a well-structured and organized learning environment" (p. 278). They also mention "preparation of materials," "linkage of topics," "detailed instruction and review," and a flexible structure (p. 279) adaptable to students' needs. In addition, they spoke about effective professors characterized to be prepared and provide instructional materials in a meaningful and organized manner. Joseph (2018) argues that the majority of the participants in his study expected their professors to be able to recognize their students' learning preferences. In an ethnographic study of a college-level academic writing class, Sybing (2019) demonstrated that in order to establish rapport, it is imperative for the

academics to “center education around the needs and knowledge of the learners” and that “students are the precursor to pedagogies that respect and negotiate differences among all learners” (p. 33). Class preparation and lesson organization were also mentioned among factors describing excellent teachers (Buskist & Keeley, 2015).

The professors in this study spoke of their humility and humanity as being humble and demonstrating a sense of being down-to-earth. They believed that in order to build a positive relationship, they are required to listen to their students, seek feedback from them, accept that they are not infallible and there are occasions in which they don’t know the answer – we do not “know it all” and we admit it when making mistakes or noticing a gap in their knowledge. This acceptance of ever-changing developments mirrors the findings of earlier research (e.g., Joseph, 2018; Rossetti & Fox, 2009; Valmori & De Costa, 2016) that underscores the importance of life-long learning as the distinguishing characteristic of effective and outstanding professors. This practice is closely linked to what Dowd Barnes (2013) described as *lessons learned from my students*, which argues well for positive relationship between professor and students.

Furthermore, Chin and Osborne (2008) suggested that students’ questions “made her aware of her inadequate subject matter knowledge and promoted her to address the gaps in her scientific knowledge” (p. 8). Similarly, Kreuze and Newell (1987) also suggested that instructors interested in maintaining a friendly teacher-student relationship make their teaching behavior the priority and welcome evaluations of their presentation from their students. In the same vein, students’ evaluation of professors is suggested as a precise representation of their teaching excellence (Aleamoni, 1999). Asking for the students’ feedback was seen to constitute teacher immediacy (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). In the rapport-building section, many of our survey participants highlighted the importance of egalitarianism and that professors should not see themselves superior to the students. The participants referred to the mutual learning occurring in the classroom and that they could learn from their students’ questions to think more clearly about teaching and learning. They pointed out that the knowledge-based inequality and academic merits should not make faculty prone to overwhelming self-confidence and creates a sense of top-down influencing the way faculty use their power. According to the literature and the comments provided, the concepts of social distance and power varies among societies depending on the people’s socio-cultural backgrounds.

Professor-like dress etiquette, manner, language, and tone of voice were also among the contributing factors affecting courteous behavior and attitude. In respect of rapport building behavior in the marketing domain, Gremler and Gwinner (2008) listed courteousness as a contributing factor to building the necessary rapport. In their study, courteous behaviors included remembering names, friendly greetings, and showing concern. In their model of faculty-student rapport, Granitz et al. (2009) also referred to a similar concept as respect. The participants in our study mentioned that the differences in dialects and accents representing social class differences do not cause discrimination and the students are all treated equally. Explaining cultural recognition, Fraser (2009) referred to the need to eliminate discriminations. Accordingly, Leibowitz et al. (2017) indicated that “matters of recognition of social status would include respect for one’s ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or age, but in addition, respect for one’s language background, culture, and prior learning” (p. 82). Frisby et al. (2014) examined the impact of face support and professor-student rapport on classroom. In their study, students who felt less participation apprehension perceived more face support and less face threat from the instructor, both of which were linked with positive rapport.

## Conclusion

This study investigated university-level foreign language professors' conceptualization of PSR. Considering prior research which perceived PSR to be unequal due to power, authority, and leadership (Sidelinger et al., 2012), this study provides practical implications for college instructors to create a symmetrical PSR. The findings of this qualitative study attest to the professors' desires for sustaining interpersonal interactions with students within the higher education. More specifically, the results yielded two key constructs – rapport antecedents and rapport barriers. The findings of this study point to a need for college teachers to consider what traits and behaviors facilitate effective communication with students to develop a sense of “connectedness” (Palmer, 1998) both inside and outside the classroom. Accordingly, Sidelinger et al. (2012) have argued that “that connectedness may create a more comfortable environment for students to present speeches and participate in class” (p. 110). The first construct comprises two categories: (1) connectedness and (2) professionalism and professorial ethics.

In light of these findings and the growing emphasis on PSR (e.g., Ryan & Wilson, 2015), we recommend that higher education policy makers across the country, and in the world, for that matter, put more emphasis on positive supportive learning environments in university classrooms via genuine changes toward professor-student interpersonal rapport development as a useful tool to better engage students in a robust system. This can be implemented and managed in two dimensions: the academics and the system. A change at this scale is transformative and must have consistent support from all levels of the organization.

This study was limited in several ways. First, the proportion of the sample was very small (n= 26); therefore, it is not logical to attribute to the PSR perceptions discovered in this study to all foreign language teachers in Iran. Second, it was purely qualitative research; consequently, it is suggested that future studies can employ observation and/or questionnaires with larger numbers of participants to cross-validate the themes extracted in this study. Moreover, further research is required to probe higher education students' descriptions of Iranian university professors' perceptions of rapport. Joseph (2018) argued that students' expectations of their professor is of paramount importance for establishing an effective PSR and students' success. All things considered; it is important to note that rapport in educational context might manifest itself differently across different cultures.

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## Appendix

### The Interview Questions

1. How do you define professor-student rapport in Iranian universities?
2. Would you describe the atmosphere of a (foreign) language class in Iran guided by an instructor with great rapport building?
3. If I were to attend a typical classroom of yours, what kind of nonverbal behaviors would I likely see from you that would make your class milieu enjoyable and inspirational based on rapport?
4. Would you explain how you evaluate your rapport with your students?
5. Would you describe how you deal with apprehensive students and arouse their interest?
6. What characteristics and traits would you attribute to an instructor who has great rapport building?
7. Would you give us examples of your stories and experiences of professor-student rapport when you were a student?

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