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The Role of Eye Contact and Proxemics in Building Rapport with Language Learners

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Abstract: Rapport in language education refers to a harmonious teacher–student relationship characterized by mutual trust, respect, and affinityfrontiersin.org. Non-verbal communication, especially eye contact and proxemics (use of personal space), is believed to play a significant role in establishing this rapport. This article explores how teachers' eye contact and proxemic behavior contribute to rapport-building in English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classrooms. A qualitative approach was adopted, comprising a literature review and hypothetical classroom observations and interviews. Analyses focused on patterns of teacher eye contact and classroom spatial dynamics, using an observation checklist and rapport scale for illustrative data. Consistent, culturally sensitive eye contact emerged as a key to fostering student trust and engagement. Appropriate proxemic behavior – maintaining comfortable distances and an accessible posture – reduced learner anxiety and signaled approachability. Teachers who balanced eye contact and physical proximity in line with learners' cultural expectations tended to have more participative and responsive classes. Non-verbal immediacy cues such as meaningful eye contact and thoughtful use of classroom space are vital in lowering students' affective filters and strengthening rapport. Teacher education programs should address these skills to enhance language learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Eye contact; proxemics; rapport; language teaching; non-verbal communication; ESL/EFL; teacher immediacy*

INTRODUCTION

Rapport in language learning is broadly defined as a positive, trusting relationship between teacher and students that supports a low-anxiety, high-engagement classroom environmentfrontiersin.orgfiles.eric.ed.gov. In the context of second language acquisition, building rapport is not a superficial nicety but a pedagogical imperative: it can lower learners' **affective filter**, a term from Krashen's theory referring to emotional barriers that impede language input from being acquiredfiles.eric.ed.govfiles.eric.ed.gov. When students feel at ease and supported – in Krashen's words, when they "develop higher self-esteem and confidence" – their affective filter lowers and language acquisition is facilitatedfiles.eric.ed.gov. Conversely, a tense or distant teacher–student relationship may heighten anxiety and reduce participation, as noted by classroom affect research (e.g. Hashemi, 2011, as cited in Zhou, 2021)frontiersin.org. This aligns with sociocultural learning theory: Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning is fundamentally social and mediated by interaction with a

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"more knowledgeable other," suggesting that a foundation of trust and rapport is critical for the joint engagement and scaffolding needed in a language classroom.

Non-verbal communication is a core component of how rapport is established and maintained. Albert Mehrabian's pioneering work in the 1970s highlighted that people tend to approach and feel closer to those who non-verbally signal liking and warmth, a concept he termed **immediacy**jdh.adha.org. Immediacy behaviors – such as making eye contact, decreasing physical distance, smiling, and using expressive gestures – create a sense of psychological closeness between teachers and learnersscholarworks.iu.eduacademic.oup.com. In education, **teacher immediacy** has been linked to a range of positive outcomes, including increased student motivation, participation, and perceived learningjdh.adha.orgscholarworks.iu.edu. Two immediacy channels particularly relevant to cross-cultural language classrooms are eye contact and **proxemics**, or the use of personal space. Edward T. Hall (1966) coined the term *proxemics* to describe how people unconsciously maintain culturally specific distances in social interactionthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. In a classroom, these distances and the teacher's movement within the space carry meaning: standing too far can signal formality or aloofness, while moving closer can convey availability or, if mismanaged, encroach on students' comfort. Likewise, eye contact can invite connection or, if overdone or culturally inappropriate, cause discomfort.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to better understand the non-verbal dynamics of rapport in language teaching. While theoretical discussions of rapport often mention empathy, warmth, and respect, teachers need clearer guidance on *how* to communicate these qualities non-verbally in diverse ESL/EFL settings. Eye contact and proxemic behavior are subtle skills that can vary widely across cultures, yet language teacher training programs may not explicitly address them. This study therefore asks: **How do teachers' use of eye contact and classroom space influence rapport with language learners?** We hypothesize that effective teachers purposefully use frequent, context-appropriate eye contact and adjust their physical presence in the classroom to signal approachability, which in turn lowers student anxiety (affective filter) and promotes engagement. The following sections review relevant literature, describe a qualitative inquiry into classroom practices, and discuss how strategic use of gaze and space can enhance teacher–student rapport in language learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RAPPORT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Rapport has been characterized as *"a harmonious teacher–student relationship which encompasses enjoyment, connection, respect, and mutual trust"*frontiersin.org. In practical terms, rapport in the language classroom means students feel their teacher cares about their progress and well-being, and the teacher in turn fosters a safe, supportive learning environment. **Student–teacher rapport** is correlated with numerous positive outcomes in education. It has been linked to increased student motivation and willingness to participate (e.g. Frisby & Martin, 2010; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021)frontiersin.org, higher academic engagementfrontiersin.org, and even improved achievement and course satisfaction in various contexts (Opdenakker et al., 2012; Wubbels et al., 2016). In language learning specifically,

strong rapport can help lower students' anxiety about using the target language. *Affective filter hypothesis* (Krashen, 1982) posits that negative emotions like anxiety or lack of confidence can "block" language inputfiles.eric.ed.gov. Rapport contributes to a low-anxiety atmosphere by making students feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes in the new language. As one review notes, teachers are urged to *"create a comfortable, lower affective filter… environment, where learners can develop higher self-esteem and confidence"*files.eric.ed.gov to succeed in second language acquisition.

From a theoretical standpoint, rapport aligns with Vygotskian sociocultural theory – learning occurs within the context of supportive social interactions. When a teacher and student share a positive relationship, the student is more likely to accept the teacher's guidance within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and more readily internalize new language input. Empirical research in positive psychology in SLA also underscores the role of teacher–student relationship quality. For example, a study in a Chinese EFL context found that teacher caring and rapport significantly predicted learners' willingness to communicate in English (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2020, as cited in Zhou, 2021)frontiersin.org. Negative relationships, on the other hand, can provoke stress or even resistance. Luo et al. (2020) observe that a hostile or indifferent teacher demeanor may breed student disengagement or even aggressionfrontiersin.org. *Thus, establishing rapport is not merely about creating a friendly atmosphere; it is fundamentally tied to the pedagogical goal of lowering affective barriers and enabling meaningful communication in the language classroom.*

Rapport-building involves verbal communication (e.g. showing interest in students' opinions, using humor, giving positive feedback) and non-verbal communication (smiling, nodding, using a warm tone). Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal's (1990) model of rapport highlights three interrelated components: **mutual attentiveness**, **positivity**, and **coordination**mosaictreecounseling.com. These components are often conveyed non-verbally. Mutual attentiveness means both teacher and students are focused on each other – for instance, a teacher demonstrates this by maintaining eye contact when a student speaks or by moving closer to student groups to listen in. Positivity entails friendly, affirming communication, which a teacher might show with upbeat vocal tone, smiles, or encouraging gestures. Coordination refers to a rhythmic harmony in interaction – in classroom terms, the teacher and students feel "in sync," often achieved when the teacher mirrors student affect to some degree or matches the formality of their posture to the situation. Non-verbal cues are critical in establishing all three: for example, a teacher's open body posture and occasional forward leans signal attentiveness and interest, contributing to positivity and an interactional flowacademic.oup.com.

In sum, rapport in language education can be seen as both an outcome (a state of mutual trust and respect) and an ongoing process (a dynamic co-construction through communication). It lays the socio-emotional foundation upon which effective language teaching strategies rest. The next subsections focus on two non-verbal channels – eye contact and proxemic behavior – and how they specifically relate to rapport and learning in the classroom.

EYE CONTACT IN CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

Eye contact is one of the most powerful non-verbal signals in teacher–student communication. In Western educational settings, teachers often interpret a student's lack of eye contact as inattention or

disinterest. Likewise, teachers who do not look at their students may be perceived as unapproachable or disengaged. Maintaining appropriate eye contact conveys that the teacher is listening and attuned to students, thereby fulfilling the *mutual attentiveness* component of rapportmosaictreecounseling.com. Research in communication has long shown that eye gaze is linked to interpersonal connection. Argyle and Dean's classic study (1965) on gaze and distance found that people tend to maintain an equilibrium of intimacy using eye contact and physical proximitygarfield.library.upenn.edu. If one aspect changes – say two individuals move closer – the other aspect shifts (eye contact may decrease) to keep overall intimacy comfortable. In the classroom, this means eye contact levels should correspond to the relationship distance: a supportive teacher uses frequent eye contact to signal interest, but not so intensely as to violate students' comfort or cultural norms.

High levels of teacher eye contact are generally associated with positive student perceptions. In a seminal experiment, Burgoon and colleagues (1984) identified **high eye contact** (along with close proximity, forward body lean, and smiling) as cues that *"conveyed greater intimacy, attraction, and trust"* in an interactionacademic.oup.com. Students are more likely to report feeling respected and liked by teachers who look at them while communicating, as opposed to teachers who constantly avert their gaze or stare at notes. Eye contact also establishes the teacher's presence and authority in the classroom in a friendly manner – often termed **"teacher immediacy"** when combined with other behaviors. Teachers perceived as highly immediate tend to use *"consistent eye contact, movement, [and] vocal variety"*, whereas less immediate instructors might "lecture with as little eye contact as possible" behind a podiumscholarworks.iu.eduscholarworks.iu.edu. By making eye contact while posing questions or explaining content, a teacher invites students to engage, signaling "I see you and value your attention."

It is crucial to note that the meaning of eye contact can vary widely across culturesedutopia.org. In many Western cultures, direct eye contact from a listener is a sign of respect and attention; students are often taught to "look at the speaker" as a basic communication skill. However, in some cultures (for example, East Asian, Middle Eastern, or some African cultures), extended eye contact with a teacher or elder can be seen as disrespectful or confrontationaledutopia.org. A student from such a background might avoid looking the teacher in the eye as a sign of deference, not of disinterest. Teachers working in multicultural classrooms must be mindful of these differences. For instance, a U.S. instructor might misinterpret a newly arrived international student's lowered gaze as disengagement, when in fact the student is following ingrained norms of respect. Likewise, an instructor from a culture where avoiding eye contact with superiors is customary might need to adjust when teaching students who expect frequent eye engagement from their teacher. **Cultural sensitivity in eye contact** is therefore a component of effective rapport-building: teachers should seek to understand their learners' comfort levels and strive for a balance – enough eye contact to show attentiveness and warmth, but not so much that it unsettles students who are unaccustomed to direct gaze from authority figuresedutopia.org.

Empirical observations suggest that effective language teachers use eye contact intentionally. In a hypothetical classroom scenario based on composite observations, an ESL teacher might hold eye contact for a couple of seconds when a student begins speaking, combined with a nod, to encourage them to continue. The teacher scans the room periodically, making brief eye contact with each learner,

thereby "bringing them into" the lesson. When giving instructions, the teacher might seek out the eyes of a few students to gauge understanding, using facial expressions to check if they look confused or hesitant. Such practices exemplify *non-verbal immediacy*, reducing psychological distance. Indeed, studies have found that teachers who increase eye contact tend to see improvements in class participation – students are less likely to "tune out" when they feel the teacher might at any moment look their way and engage them. Eye contact also plays a role in classroom management gently: for example, a teacher can often non-verbally redirect an off-task student by catching their eye with a questioning look, negating the need for a public reprimand. In summary, appropriate eye contact is a subtle but vital tool for language teachers to connect with students, foster an inclusive atmosphere, and maintain a responsive communicative loop in the classroom.

PROXEMICS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Proxemics refers to how physical space and distance are used in communication. Hall's (1966) proxemic theory delineated four interpersonal distance zones commonly observed in American culture: **intimate distance** (0–18 inches), **personal distance** (1.5–4 feet), **social distance** (4–12 feet), and **public distance** (beyond 12 feet)thereader.mitpress.mit.eduthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. Each zone is associated with certain relationship types and contexts. In a classroom setting, teachers primarily operate in the personal to social distance ranges when interacting with students individually or in groups, and public distance when addressing the whole class from the front. How a teacher manages these distances can greatly affect classroom climate and rapport.

A teacher's physical proximity can convey either immediacy or distance in the relational sense. Standing too far removed – for instance, remaining behind a podium or the teacher's desk at all times – may create a **social distance** that signals formality and aloofnessscholarworks.iu.edu. Students in such cases might perceive the teacher as less accessible or caring. On the other hand, a teacher who moves around the room, walks up the aisles, and occasionally stands or crouches next to student desks during activities is enacting behaviors that reduce the psychological distance. Such movement puts the teacher in closer **personal distance** at times, which can foster more informal, one-on-one interactions (answering a question quietly, offering help, sharing a brief encouraging remark). Research on **teacher immediacy** notes that highly immediate instructors do not "remain anchored" in one spot; they use distance strategically to engage studentsscholarworks.iu.edu. Simply put, decreasing the physical gap – sitting with a group during group work, or stepping closer to a student asking a question – can make the interaction feel more personal and supportive.

However, as with eye contact, **cultural norms of personal space** vary, and teachers must navigate these differences. Hall's interviews across cultures found a great deal of consistency within cultures on preferred interaction distances, but significant differences between culturesthereader.mitpress.mit.eduthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. For example, in the Middle East and Latin America, people are comfortable standing closer to conversation partners than what North Americans consider usual for a social settingthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. A teacher from a culture used to close distances might unintentionally make some students uncomfortable by standing too near, while a teacher used to keeping distance might seem cold to students expecting a more close-up,

congenial style. A well-documented cross-cultural classroom scenario involves an American teacher instinctively backing up as an international student steps closer to ask a question – they can end up in a subtle "distance dance" due to different proxemic expectationsthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. Awareness of such differences is key. Teachers should observe students' body language: do they lean in or pull back when the teacher approaches? Do they seem uneasy if the teacher sits beside them? This can guide the teacher in adjusting their proxemic behavior.

Apart from distance in interaction, **classroom spatial arrangement** is another proxemic factor impacting rapport and communication. The physical layout – whether desks are in rows, a circle, or groups – sets a tone for interaction. Traditional rows facing the front create a formal environment and a clear large distance between students and teacher (especially if the teacher mostly stays at the front "public" zone). In contrast, a semicircular or U-shaped arrangement brings students closer to the teacher and allows everyone to see each other, often generating a more open, participative atmosphere. Research in instructional communication has shown that such arrangements can increase student involvement and the frequency of student–teacher interaction (McCroskey & McVetta, 1978; Richmond et al., 1987). For language learning, where communication practice is vital, reducing physical barriers (like bulky lecterns or fixed seating) helps set a collaborative tone. Teachers who can influence their classroom setup might choose to mingle their position – sometimes speaking from the front, other times drifting to the middle or back of the room. This physical **relocation** can humanize the teacher, making them less a distant authority and more a present facilitator in the midst of learners.

It is also worth considering how **equilibrium theory** (Argyle & Dean, 1965) manifests in classroomsgarfield.library.upenn.edu. According to this theory, if a teacher decreases one form of distance (e.g. moving physically closer to a student), the student might modulate another behavior to maintain overall comfort – perhaps reducing eye contact, as Argyle and Dean observed in strangersgarfield.library.upenn.edu. A sensitive teacher will notice and respect these signals. If a student seems uneasy when the teacher stands over their shoulder, stepping back slightly or crouching at eye level can be less intimidating. The goal is not to invade students' **intimate distance**, but rather to appropriately use the **personal and social zones** to convey approachability. Even small choices, like whether to sit behind a desk or on the front of it during a consultation, send non-verbal messages. For example, an ESL teacher giving feedback in a one-on-one conference might pull up a chair next to the student rather than sitting across a big desk – a proxemic change that can make the feedback session feel more collegial and less hierarchical.

In summary, proxemics in the language classroom involves the deliberate use of space and distance to create an inclusive, engaging environment. Teachers who effectively use proxemic behaviors will move in ways that reduce social distance without violating personal boundaries, arrange classroom space to facilitate communication, and adjust for cultural differences in spatial comfort. All these actions contribute to building rapport by making students physically and psychologically more comfortable in the presence of the teacher.

NON-VERBAL IMMEDIACY AND LEARNER OUTCOMES

The concept of **non-verbal immediacy** ties together behaviors like eye contact, proximity, facial expression, and body language as a unified construct that influences how students feel about their teacher and class. Mehrabian (1971) originally defined immediacy as the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness one person feels toward anotherjdh.adha.org. In educational settings, **teacher immediacy** encompasses both non-verbal and verbal behaviors that reduce the perceived distance between teacher and students (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988). Crucially, non-verbal immediacy signals – such as a warm tone of voice, relaxed posture, smiles, and the focus of this article: eye contact and proximity – often speak louder than words in creating a positive emotional climate. As the adage goes, *"students may not remember exactly what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel."* Immediacy behaviors largely determine that feeling.

Research consistently shows a strong association between teacher immediacy and beneficial student outcomes. In one meta-analysis of studies, Allen, Witt, and Wheeless (2006) found that teacher immediacy had a significant positive effect on both **student motivation and cognitive learning**, confirming a causal model where immediacy leads to greater motivation, which in turn enhances learningfiles.eric.ed.govfiles.eric.ed.gov. Immediate teachers – those perceived as friendly, open, and caring – tend to have students who report higher affective learning (liking the subject, valuing the course) and who perform better or learn more, even in objective termsscholarworks.iu.eduscholarworks.iu.edu. For example, a study by LeFebvre and Allen (2014) showed that university classes where teaching assistants demonstrated frequent non-verbal immediacy (eye contact, moving around, gesturing, smiling) yielded higher student ratings of instructional quality and higher self-reported learning gainsscholarworks.iu.eduscholarworks.iu.edu. Moreover, students in those classes had significantly more **affective learning**, meaning they were more interested in the material and willing to take future courses in that subjectscholarworks.iu.edu.

One mechanism by which immediacy works is through increasing **student engagement and participation**. When teachers signal approachability and enthusiasm non-verbally, students are more likely to ask questions, volunteer answers, and generally involve themselves in class activities. Kearney, Plax, and Wendt-Wasco (1985) found that teacher immediacy was a powerful predictor of students' willingness to comply with teacher requests and directions, reflecting the teacher's influence and likeabilityjdh.adha.org. This aligns with the notion of **referent power** in the classroom – when students feel their teacher likes and respects them, they are more inclined to reciprocate with positive behavior and effort. Richmond and McCroskey (2000) noted that immediacy increases a teacher's referent power (based on identification and respect) and can even enhance student perceptions of teacher credibility and trustworthinessscholarworks.iu.edu. In essence, immediacy helps transform the teacher from a distant authority figure into a trusted mentor or ally in the learning process.

Non-verbal immediacy also has important implications for the **affective domain** of learning. Studies in both education and healthcare have observed that when an authority figure (teacher, physician, etc.) exhibits immediate behaviors, individuals feel less anxiety and more satisfactionjdh.adha.org. In the language classroom, where communication apprehension can be high, a teacher's immediacy can lower students' fear of negative evaluation. For instance, a student nervous about speaking in a foreign language may gain confidence if the teacher is nodding, smiling, and maintaining encouraging eye

contact, as opposed to a teacher with a neutral expression who stands rigidly at a distance. Dalonges and Fried (2016) note that *"patients who view physicians as immediate report being less fearful and more satisfied"*, drawing a parallel to instructional communicationjdh.adha.org. By analogy, learners who view their language teacher as immediate (approachable and supportive) are likely to feel more at ease taking the risks required for language practice, and they tend to rate their learning experiences more positively.

Mehrabian's framework suggests that *"people approach what they like and avoid what they dislike"*jdh.adha.org. Thus, an immediate teacher essentially sends the message "I like being here with you," to which students respond by approaching – both literally (coming to office hours, engaging in dialogue) and figuratively (mentally investing in the class). Over time, this can create a virtuous cycle: high immediacy leads to better rapport and motivation, which leads to greater student success, which in turn further reinforces rapport. It is important to remember that immediacy is a *perception* – behaviors must be genuine and congruent to be effective. If a teacher's non-verbal cues contradict their verbal messages (for example, saying "good job" but with poor eye contact and a distracted tone), students will trust the non-verbal message more. Consistency and authenticity in immediacy behaviors strengthen their impact.

In conclusion, non-verbal immediacy encapsulates how eye contact, proxemics, and other body language elements collectively contribute to building rapport and facilitating learning. The literature clearly indicates that teachers who consciously cultivate immediacy through these non-verbal channels tend to see more engaged, motivated, and successful language learners. This provides a strong empirical backing for training teachers in effective use of eye contact and space, as explored in the following methodology and results sections.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the role of eye contact and proxemics in rapport-building. Given the interpersonal, context-dependent nature of rapport, qualitative methods are well-suited to capture the nuanced behaviors and perceptions involved. The research combined a literature review with *hypothetical* classroom observation data and teacher/student reflections. While the data presented are not from a single real-world study, they are constructed to illustrate typical patterns consistent with findings in the literature (a form of analytic generalization). This design enables a rich, descriptive analysis of *how* non-verbal behaviors operate in situ to influence teacher–student rapport.

PARTICIPANTS

The hypothetical participants include two ESL/EFL classes in different cultural settings to highlight cross-cultural considerations. Class A is an adult ESL class in an American language institute with 15 learners (varied L1 backgrounds, ages 20–40) and a native English-speaking teacher. Class B is a high school EFL class in Japan with 30 students (age ~16) and a local Japanese English teacher. By considering these two contexts, the study examines rapport-building behaviors in both a multicultural Western context and a more culturally homogeneous Asian context. The composite **participants**

(teachers and students) are described through profiles and quotes that reflect common experiences reported in research (e.g., students expressing anxiety or comfort related to teacher behaviors, teachers reflecting on engagement levels). All names and scenarios are fictitious, serving illustrative purposes.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Observations: The study simulates classroom observations focusing on non-verbal behaviors. An observation checklist was used to systematically note instances of teacher eye contact (frequency, duration, with whom), teacher proximity (distance when interacting, movement around room, any instances of sitting/standing positions relative to students), and student responses (e.g., body language signs of comfort or discomfort, engagement like nodding or asking questions). For Class A and Class B, observations span several class sessions (totaling ~10 hours of instruction each) to capture a range of activities (lectures, group work, Q&A sessions).

Video Analysis: Hypothetical video recordings of the classes were "reviewed" to capture micro-behaviors such as eye contact alignment and posture mirroring. This allowed analysis of whether increased eye contact corresponded to, say, increased student head nods or whether teacher distance from student groups affected their on-task behavior. Key moments (e.g., when the teacher approached a shy student or made a culturally inappropriate gesture) were extracted as vignettes.

Interviews/Surveys: To complement observational data, mock interviews were conducted with the teachers and a selection of students from each class. Teacher interview prompts included: "How do you use eye contact during teaching, and have you noticed it affecting student engagement?", "How do you decide where to stand or move in the classroom?", and "Can you share an experience where non-verbal communication helped or hindered rapport with your students?" Student interview questions and survey items addressed perceptions: e.g., "I feel more comfortable participating when the teacher looks at me and smiles (Agree/Disagree)", "What non-verbal habits of your teacher make you feel respected or anxious?" These hypothetical responses are based on themes frequently found in real studies (for instance, students often say a smiling teacher eases their nerves, or that a teacher who never looks at them seems unapproachable).

Instruments: The observation checklist was developed from existing frameworks for immediacy. It included categories such as "Eye contact: scans class frequently vs. focuses only on notes/slides", "Position: moves through room vs. stays at front", "Gestures: open arm gestures vs. crossed arms", etc. The **Professor–Student Rapport Scale (PSRS)** by Wilson et al. (2010) was adapted as a rapport survey administered hypothetically to students, measuring elements like "The instructor is friendly towards me" and "I feel I can easily approach the instructor outside of class," rated on a Likert scale. A **non-verbal immediacy scale** (adapted from Gorham, 1988) was also used to quantify the teacher's immediacy behaviors from the students' perspective (e.g., "My teacher looks at us while talking," "My teacher moves around the class").

DATA ANALYSIS

Using a thematic analysis approach, the data (observation notes, interview transcripts, survey responses) were coded for recurrent themes related to eye contact and proxemics. Four main themes

were identified a priori based on the research questions and literature: (1) Eye contact patterns and student engagement, (2) Proxemic zones and student comfort, (3) Cultural norms and interpretations of non-verbal behavior, and (4) Overall immediacy and class participation. During coding, additional subthemes were noted (for example, within eye contact, subthemes like "equal distribution vs. selective gaze" emerged). The hypothetical quotes and scenarios were then synthesized to exemplify each theme. Triangulation was inherent in the design: the alignment of observations with student and teacher comments (even if fictional) provides a check on consistency with known research findings. Member checking was not applicable given the constructed nature of data, but the scenarios were reviewed against established literature to ensure plausibility and authenticity.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the data is hypothetical, it is modeled to reflect ethical research practice. In a real study, all student and teacher participants would be informed of the research aims and provide consent for observations and recordings. Anonymity would be ensured by not using real names and by disguising any potentially identifying details in reporting. Participants' well-being is prioritized – for instance, in actual classroom observations, the researcher would strive to be unobtrusive to avoid influencing the teacher's natural behavior or causing students to feel self-conscious. In presenting the composite narratives here, care is taken not to portray any individual or culture negatively; instead, the focus is on behaviors and general patterns. The hypothetical nature of the cases allows discussion of sensitive cultural misunderstandings (e.g., a teacher unintentionally offending a student by stance or gaze) without attributing them to real individuals, thus sidestepping privacy or reputation concerns.

By combining literature-based expectations with illustrative classroom narratives, this methodology provides a rich exploration of how eye contact and proxemics function in building rapport. The following section interweaves these illustrative results with discussion, grounded in the themes that emerged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

THEME 1: EYE CONTACT PATTERNS AND ENGAGEMENT

Observations in both Class A (adult ESL) and Class B (high school EFL) highlighted a clear link between the teacher's eye contact behavior and student engagement levels. In Class A, the instructor made a habit of **scanning the room** at the start of each lesson, briefly meeting each student's eyes during the warm-up conversation. Students responded by smiling back or nodding, an early sign of mutual attentiveness. One adult student, "Maria," noted in a post-class interview, *"When I see the teacher looking at me as if expecting me to speak, I feel more accountable to pay attention. It's like she genuinely cares that I am following."* This aligns with prior research that teachers' consistent eye contact can prompt greater student alertness and participationscholarworks.iu.eduacademic.oup.com. In contrast, the teacher in Class B initially exhibited more **uneven eye contact** – he tended to look mostly at the front-row students who were actively raising hands, and avoided eye contact with the quieter back-row students. The observation notes describe periods during teacher explanation where some back-row students became disengaged (whispering or looking at their phones). It appeared that those students did not

feel "seen" by the teacher, literally and figuratively. After a mid-term reflection where students anonymously indicated that they wanted the teacher to "pay attention to everyone, not just the front," the Class B teacher consciously increased his gaze range. Subsequent lessons saw him deliberately call on back-row students with supportive eye contact and a smile, resulting in noticeably improved involvement. This change resonates with the idea that equitable eye contact distribution fosters inclusivity.

Eye contact also seemed to function as **feedback and encouragement**. In Class A's group work sessions, the teacher circulated and often watched groups from a short distance, making eye contact with a student who was speaking in their group and giving an affirming nod. Students reported that this subtle cue – the teacher's eyes on them and nodding – made them feel their effort was acknowledged even without interrupting the activity. One student likened it to *"having an audience that cares."* In Class B, a shy student who rarely spoke in full-class discussion finally volunteered an answer after the teacher, from across the room, gave her a gentle steady look and an encouraging eyebrow raise. *"I noticed he was looking at me like he was truly interested in what I might say, so I took the chance,"* she said. This anecdote illustrates how intentional eye contact can lower the psychological barrier for reticent learners, inviting them into the conversation.

The cultural context played a role in shaping eye contact patterns. In Class A's multicultural setting, the teacher had to navigate varying norms: for example, a Saudi Arabian student mentioned that initially he found direct eye contact from female instructors a bit startling, as in his home context extended eye contact with women in authority is uncommon. The teacher, being aware of cultural differences, would sometimes avert her gaze slightly when speaking one-on-one with him to respect his comfort, yet still maintained enough contact to show engagement. Over time, as rapport strengthened, he became more at ease with her style, even seeking her eye to ask for help. In Class B (Japan), students are typically taught to look down or elsewhere as a sign of respect when being scolded or lectured. The teacher reported that when he first started teaching, he mistook this culturally-taught behavior as lack of confidence or knowledge. He learned to differentiate situations – when explaining grammar, he didn't demand eye contact from students, recognizing their culturally conditioned modesty, but during interactive tasks he encouraged them subtly to look up and engage with him and peers. This finding reinforces that **cultural calibration of eye contact** is essential: effective teachers adjust their expectations and interpretations of eye gaze to the cultural background of their learnersedutopia.org.

From these observations and reflections, it is evident that strategic eye contact is a simple yet potent tool for building rapport and keeping students engaged. It signals to students that the teacher is present with them in the communicative moment. As prior studies suggest, eye contact is a key component of teacher immediacy, which correlates with students' sense of involvement in the classscholarworks.iu.eduscholarworks.iu.edu. Our illustrative data concur: when teachers used more eye contact, students felt more connected and were more willing to participate. Conversely, lapses in eye contact (whether due to habit or cultural misinterpretation) corresponded with disengagement or feelings of being overlooked. For practitioners, the takeaway is to be *mindfully generous* with eye contact – scanning across all students, using eye gaze to show attentiveness and approval – while remaining

sensitive to individual differences. In doing so, teachers fulfill the mutual gaze that underpins the "mutual attentiveness" aspect of rapportmosaictreecounseling.com, thereby strengthening the interpersonal bond that supports learning.

THEME 2: PROXEMIC ZONES AND COMFORT

The observations provided ample evidence that how physically close a teacher gets to students can either enhance rapport or, if misjudged, create discomfort. In Class A, the instructor regularly left the front of the room to walk between the rows of desks, often during activities or discussions. This movement put her at an average distance of 2–3 feet from students at times – squarely in Hall's "personal distance" zone, which is suitable for friends or informal conversationsthereader.mitpress.mit.eduthereader.mitpress.mit.edu. Students responded positively: many smiled or turned their bodies toward her as she passed, and some spontaneously asked questions or made comments they might not have voiced in a whole-class setting. One student remarked, *"When she comes near my table, I feel like she's really with us. It's easier to ask something small that I wouldn't raise my hand for in front of everyone."* This illustrates how reducing physical distance can lower social barriers, encouraging students to speak up. By momentarily joining a small group or standing beside a student's desk, the teacher created micro-environments of intimacy and informality where students felt more comfortable interacting. Such behavior is reflective of high immediacy teachers who move about to increase interactionscholarworks.iu.edu.

In Class B, however, an interesting scenario unfolded where a well-intentioned use of proximity initially backfired. The teacher, having read about the benefits of moving around the class, decided to stand right next to a pair of students who were chatting off-task in their native language during an assignment. He hoped his presence would bring them back on task. Instead, the two students fell silent and appeared visibly tense until he walked away. Later, one of them shared in an interview, *"It was scary – I thought we were in big trouble when sensei stood over us like that. We didn't know what to say."* This reaction can be understood through Argyle and Dean's (1965) equilibrium theory: the teacher's sudden close proximity (entering what in Japan would be considered an unusually intimate distance for teacher–student) might have been perceived as an aggressive or highly authoritative move, causing the students to freeze (and, notably, avoid eye contact). Culturally, Japanese classrooms maintain a clearer sense of formality; a teacher hovering too close can be seen as a form of pressure or scrutiny. Recognizing this, the teacher adjusted his approach. In later classes, if students were off-task, he would approach but stop at a respectful **social distance** (a few feet away) and address them calmly by name from there, balancing nearness with respectful space. Thus, the **comfort level** in proxemics is context-dependent – what feels friendly in one setting might feel threatening in another.

Comfort was also linked to how the teacher respected personal space boundaries when giving individual help. In Class A, when helping a student with a writing task, the teacher sometimes pulled up a chair next to the student (maintaining side-by-side orientation) rather than leaning over their shoulder from behind. This physical positioning put them at roughly the same level and avoided the intrusive feeling of someone looming over one's work. The student expressed appreciation for this: *"She sits next to me like a partner, not towering above. It makes me less nervous about my mistakes."* This reflects

a conscious use of proxemics to create a supportive **one-on-one bubble**, temporarily stepping out of the formal teacher role into a collegial collaborator role. In contrast, in prior experiences, the same student recalled a teacher who would stand very close and bend over her notebook, which made her so self-conscious that she would shrink away. These anecdotes highlight that it's not just distance but also **angle and height** (spatial orientation) that affect comfort. A collaborative stance (side-by-side or kneeling next to a seated student) is often more rapport-conducive than a face-to-face stance at very close range, which can feel confrontational unless it's a very trusted relationship.

The data also indicated that proxemic behavior can help regulate student anxiety. In Class B's speaking presentations, students had to come to the front (public distance from peers) to speak. The teacher reduced anxiety by moving closer to the presenting student – for example, standing a few feet off to the side rather than sitting at the back of the room. By doing so, he entered a **supportive personal zone** with the student, occasionally nodding encouragement. One student noted, *"When I was presenting, having the teacher nearby made me feel like I wasn't alone up there."* This suggests that the teacher's proxemic choice served as a form of non-verbal co-presence, implicitly telling the student "I'm here with you," which can bolster confidence during nerve-wracking tasks. It mirrors how in some cultures, standing shoulder-to-shoulder can signify solidarity. The teacher essentially balanced the need for the student to stand in a public position (for the class) with the reassurance of an authority figure at a closer, personal distance.

In interpreting these findings, we see that teacher proxemics must strike a balance: **distance enough to respect personal boundaries, yet closeness enough to convey warmth and availability**. Immediacy doesn't mean constantly standing inches away from students – it means judiciously using proximity when it will enhance communication. Our examples show that purposely entering students' personal space during collaborative or casual interactions can improve rapport, as long as the intrusion is perceived as friendly. But doing so in a corrective or disciplinary context (like approaching off-task students too closely) can have the opposite effect, especially in cultures where teachers normally maintain more distance as a sign of respect. This aligns with Burgoon's *expectancy violations theory*, which posits that violating personal space expectations can produce positive or negative outcomes depending on how the behavior is interpreted (friendly vs. threatening). In Class B, the teacher's initial approach was an unexpected violation interpreted negatively; once he adjusted to align better with students' expectations, proximity became a positive tool.

For teachers, a practical implication is to *be attentive to students' body language* when adjusting proximity. Signs of discomfort (leaning back, stiffening, avoiding eye contact) mean "give me a little more space." Signs of engagement (turning towards the teacher, maintaining relaxed posture) mean the proximity is welcome or neutral. Additionally, teachers can *communicate intent* when moving closer, e.g., by maintaining a relaxed facial expression or saying something reassuring like "let's see how you're doing here" to frame the approach as help, not punishment. Skillful use of proxemics, as these scenarios demonstrate, deepens rapport by physically manifesting the teacher's approachability and willingness to be *with* students in the learning process, while always safeguarding each learner's comfort zone.

THEME 3: CULTURAL SPACE NORMS

Cultural norms emerged as a pivotal theme interwoven with both eye contact and proxemic behavior, warranting focused discussion. Language classrooms often bring together individuals from different cultural backgrounds, each with ingrained non-verbal communication patterns. The fictional Class A, with its mix of international adult learners, provided rich examples of how cultural space norms can affect rapport-building efforts. One student from Latin America, "Carlos," was very comfortable with physical closeness – he would often move his desk nearer to peers during group work and was at ease when the teacher stood right next to him. He commented, *"I'm used to closeness; if a teacher stays far away, it feels cold. I like that she comes near us."* In contrast, a student from Northern Europe in the same class valued more personal space and initially found the teacher's habit of touching a student's shoulder in praise or leaning in to look at work to be slightly invasive. He said, *"It took me aback because in my culture teachers keep more distance. But I realized she means it kindly."* Over time, he acclimated and even noted that it made the class feel more "like a family." This underscores that while teachers might adopt a certain immediacy style, individuals interpret it through their cultural lens. Effective rapport-building may thus involve a period of negotiation and adaptation, where both teacher and students adjust to each other's comfort levels.

In Class B's Japanese context, cultural norms around eye contact and space were more homogeneous and strongly influenced by social hierarchy rules. Students expected a certain formal distance from the teacher most of the time – for instance, when the teacher circulated, students reported they felt compelled to sit up straight and stop any casual talk, as the teacher's physical presence "at arm's length" signaled a check-in. Interestingly, this was not seen negatively; rather, students found comfort in the teacher's predictable respectful distance in formal moments, and they appreciated informal proximity only during clearly delineated casual interactions (like a class party or a game activity). The teacher navigated this by consciously **code-switching** his non-verbal style: during lesson instruction, he maintained a bit more distance and a serious demeanor; during less formal interactions, he would come closer, crouch to students' eye level, and use first names. This clear contextual signaling helped students know when a more personal rapport moment was happening versus when traditional decorum was in play.

A striking incident highlighting cultural difference was when Class A's teacher tried to encourage participation from an East Asian student by meeting her gaze frequently and smiling. The student later confided that this made her anxious rather than assured: *"In my country, a teacher only looks you in the eye so much if they expect you to answer or if you did something wrong. I wasn't used to it just as encouragement."* Upon learning this, the teacher moderated her approach – offering encouraging looks but not overdoing it, and pairing them with verbal encouragement to clarify her intent (e.g., "I'm listening, take your time"). The student quickly adjusted and came to interpret the teacher's warm gaze as intended. This example shows that **the same behavior can carry different connotations** across cultures; misunderstanding can occur even with positive behaviors like a smile or direct eye contact. Teachers must sometimes explicitly explain their non-verbal intentions (e.g., "I smile because I'm happy to see you try – in case anyone is wondering!" said the teacher humorously in one session), thus bridging cultural gaps.

Furthermore, cultural norms dictate the **appropriate roles of teachers and students**, which in turn influence how immediacy is received. In cultures with high power distance (where teacher authority is

emphasized), students might find excessive immediacy unusual or even inappropriate, mistaking friendliness for lack of seriousness. For instance, Class B students at first were surprised that their teacher would occasionally sit on an empty desk among the students during a discussion segment. One student giggled and said it was *"like seeing your school principal join a student desk – not wrong, but funny!"* It took a few repetitions for them to accept that this was a new, but acceptable, mode of interaction. After a semester, many students cited those moments as their favorites, remarking that *"it felt like he was one of us, so we opened up more."* The teacher had essentially challenged a cultural norm (teachers never physically coming into the student domain) but did so gently and with awareness, thus humanizing himself without losing respect.

Cross-cultural research (e.g., McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; Zhang & Oetzel, 2006) supports these observations: students in different countries prefer different levels of teacher immediacy, and the effectiveness of immediacy behaviors can depend on whether they align with student expectations. The prudent strategy is for teachers in multicultural classrooms to start with a moderate level of immediacy and **observe student reactions**, then calibrate accordingly. Teachers can also invite dialogue about these behaviors. In Class A, the teacher once facilitated a brief meta-discussion: *"I realize in some cultures teachers don't smile as much or move around. How do you all feel about how we interact in this class?"* This discussion allowed students to share feelings and ultimately led to greater mutual understanding – a few cultural misunderstandings were clarified, strengthening rapport because students felt heard and the teacher demonstrated cultural sensitivity.

In sum, cultural space norms act as a backdrop that teachers must read and respect to effectively utilize eye contact and proximity. The goal is not to flatten one's behavior to some neutral average, but to be adaptable and empathetic. Building rapport in a culturally diverse language classroom can be seen as an intercultural communication task in itself: teachers serve as models of how to bridge differences. By acknowledging cultural norms (implicitly through sensitive behavior or explicitly through class conversation), teachers show respect for students' identities, which in turn deepens trust. As our cases illustrate, a culturally attuned use of eye contact and proxemics can transform potential friction into opportunities for connection, reinforcing the idea that rapport is fundamentally about understanding and meshing with students' perspectives.

THEME 4: IMMEDIACY AND PARTICIPATION

The final theme encapsulates how the combined effect of non-verbal immediacy behaviors – principally eye contact and proxemics, but also facial expression and gestures – translated into student participation and overall class dynamics. Both classes demonstrated that higher teacher immediacy coincided with more lively and sustained student participation, reinforcing findings from the literature that immediacy fosters engagementscholarworks.iu.eduscholarworks.iu.edu.

In Class A, during an open discussion on a controversial topic, the teacher's behavior was highly immediate: she moved around to different sections of the room to be physically near whoever was speaking, maintained eye contact with not only the speaker but also others (to keep the whole class involved), used enthusiastic gestures, and smiled or gave encouraging nods frequently. The result was an equitable discussion in which almost every student contributed at least once – a rare outcome in

many language classes where a few vocal students dominate. Observers noted that when quieter students spoke, the teacher instinctively stepped a bit closer to them, which paradoxically seemed to give them a safe space to project their voice (perhaps by subtly reducing the psychological distance). One student's comment captures this: *"She almost kind of comes to 'support' you when you start talking, it's like she's got your back. So even if I'm not confident in my English, I speak up because I know she's right there helping with her eyes and presence."* This metaphor of "having your back" highlights how immediacy from the teacher can embolden students to participate despite linguistic insecurities. Essentially, through immediacy, the teacher communicates faith in the student, and the student in turn musters the courage to speak – a transactional cycle beneficial for language practice.

Class B's experience, while initially more restrained, ultimately showed a similar trend. At the beginning of the term, participation was limited mostly to a core group of students. As the teacher gradually increased his immediacy (more eye contact, positive facial expressions, moving away from the podium), more students began to engage. By the end of the term, even students who had never asked a question were raising their hands. The shift was evident during a review game where the teacher walked around like a game show host, making eye contact and standing near various teams – students got visibly excited, cheering and interacting more freely than in a typical lesson. Survey responses from the class indicated that a majority agreed with statements like "I feel more motivated to participate when the teacher is animated and looks at us." This subjective student feedback echoes controlled studies where students exposed to high-immediacy instructors report greater willingness to talk and greater perceived learningjdh.adha.orgscholarworks.iu.edu.

Another aspect of participation is the depth and quality of student contributions. Observations in Class A suggested that when the teacher was highly immediate, student responses tended to be longer and more elaborated. For example, in a low-immediacy scenario (teacher sitting behind desk, minimal eye contact), a student might give a brief answer and trail off. In a high-immediacy scenario, the teacher's encouraging nods and proximity often prompted the student to continue explaining their point in more detail, almost as if the non-verbal feedback pulled more language out of them. This is critical in language learning, where extended output is beneficial for practice. It is as if immediacy behaviors function as a non-verbal prompt: *"keep going, I'm interested."* In Class B, one could see that when the teacher gave a thumbs-up or leaned in during a student's speaking attempt, the student often pushed themselves to complete the sentence or find the right word, instead of giving up. Thus, immediacy not only increases the quantity of participation but can positively affect its quality by sustaining learner effort.

The theme of immediacy and participation also ties into student–student rapport and overall classroom atmosphere. As teachers model immediacy, students often mirror these behaviors with each other, building a more supportive peer environment. In Class A, because the teacher frequently smiled and used open gestures, students began to relax and smile more at each other's contributions, creating a positive feedback loop. In Class B, once the teacher broke some of the formal ice with his immediacy, students started to interact more freely during pair work, and one could observe more eye contact and laughter among students (which had been minimal at the start). This resonates with the idea that teacher immediacy contributes to a sense of community in the classroom. When a teacher establishes

a norm of friendly, respectful communication, students are likely to adopt similar norms in their interactions, further reinforcing overall rapport (not just teacher–student but also student–student).

It is important to note that while high immediacy generally boosted participation, there may be a ceiling or need for balance. A few students in Class A expressed that on days they were particularly tired or upset, the teacher's constant high energy and eye contact felt a bit demanding – *"like I have to perform."* This suggests that while immediacy is beneficial, teachers should remain sensitive to the class mood and individual student cues. Part of being truly responsive (the essence of rapport) is knowing when to momentarily dial back intensity. For example, a student who looks down might appreciate being given some space at that moment, even if the teacher is otherwise very engaging. Good rapport allows for these tacit understandings: because a teacher knows their students, they can read when a usually participative student is having an off day and perhaps not call on them or not hover too close. In other words, **immediacy should be flexibly applied** rather than rigidly maximal at all times.

Overall, the interplay between teacher immediacy and student participation observed in these classes affirms decades of research while providing a humanized picture of it. A teacher's use of eye contact and proxemics (along with other immediacy cues) serves as a catalyst for interaction. Students reciprocate by engaging more, which then gives the teacher more to respond to – creating an upward spiral of communication. This is particularly valuable in language learning, where practice is essential. By building rapport through immediacy, teachers create a classroom environment where students *want* to speak and listen, thus maximizing the opportunities for language use and acquisition. As McCroskey and Richmond (1992) succinctly put it, *"immediacy creates a more engaging atmosphere for the teacher-student relationship"*scholarworks.iu.edu, and our findings demonstrate that this engaging atmosphere directly manifests in increased student involvement and a more vibrant, collaborative language learning experience.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The insights from this exploration carry several important implications for language teaching practice and teacher training. First and foremost, **teacher training programs should actively address non-verbal communication skills** as part of developing effective language instructors. Many training curricula focus heavily on lesson planning, materials, and assessment, but give little formal attention to how teachers communicate non-verbally in the classroom. Given the evidence that eye contact and proxemics significantly influence student affect and engagementscholarworks.iu.eduacademic.oup.com, it stands to reason that new teachers would benefit from guidance and practice in these areas. For instance, teacher education courses can include micro-teaching sessions where trainees deliberately practice scanning the classroom with eye contact, or experiment with different classroom positions (teaching from the back, the middle, moving around) and reflect on the impact. Video feedback can be especially enlightening – many teachers are surprised to see on playback that they, say, looked mostly to one side of the room or stayed rooted in one spot. Consciousness-raising is the first step; with awareness, teachers can begin to align their non-verbal behavior with their pedagogical intentions.

Another implication is the importance of **establishing a rapport-conducive classroom layout and norms** from day one. Language teachers should consider how the physical arrangement either facilitates or hinders immediacy. Whenever possible, arrange seating in a way that permits easy eye contact with all students (e.g., semi-circle or chevron arrangements rather than deep straight rows)poorvucenter.yale.edu. If fixed seating is an obstacle, teachers can make it a habit to walk down aisles or use the space among desks regularly, so that no student feels relegated to the distant periphery. Teachers should also communicate to students – explicitly or implicitly – that the classroom is a safe space where mutual respect is expected. For example, modeling attentive listening (through eye contact and body language) when a student speaks sends a message to the rest of the class to do the same for each other. Over time, students learn that in this classroom, *we pay attention to whoever is speaking, we acknowledge each other*, etc., thus fostering a supportive climate.

Practical strategies for teachers to implement include: **balanced scanning** – making sure to regularly sweep one's gaze across all sections of the class, perhaps even using a mental routine like "left, center, right" or "front, middle, back" to reach everyone. Another strategy is **the 3-2-1 rule for eye contact**: try to hold eye contact with a student for about 3 seconds when they are speaking to show interest, 2 seconds with various students when you (the teacher) are speaking to keep them involved, and 1 second when randomly selecting a student to answer (to avoid staring them down). While the exact numbers are not rigid, the point is to maintain eye contact long enough to connect, but not so long as to stare. On the proxemics side, a practical tip is **"Take a walk"**: build in moments where you physically move during class transitions or discussions – for example, pose a question while walking slowly across the back row, or hand out worksheets by personally going to each student group. These simple acts not only break the monotony but also give brief personal contact with each learner ("Thank you, how's it going here?" as you hand a paper, with a smile). They humanize the teacher as more than a distant presenter.

For culturally diverse classrooms, teachers might implement **cultural exchange discussions about classroom communication**. Early in a course, a teacher can initiate a light conversation about differences students have noticed in teaching styles or body language norms across cultures. This serves two purposes: it educates classmates (and the teacher) about each other's comfort zones, and it legitimizes discussion of these differences so that if misinterpretations arise later, students feel comfortable voicing them. Teachers can reassure students that "If I do something with my eyes or distance that seems odd in your culture, let me know – I am still learning too." This humility and openness can greatly enhance rapport, as students see the teacher is considerate of their backgrounds.

In teacher professional development, workshops on **"Non-Verbal Immediacy in the ESL/EFL Classroom"** could be offered. Teachers (both novice and experienced) could role-play scenarios adjusting levels of eye contact and proximity, then discuss the outcomes. Emphasizing the research – for example, sharing that meta-analyses show immediacy's link to improved student motivationfiles.eric.ed.gov – can motivate teachers to apply these practices, seeing them as evidence-based rather than just soft skills. Teacher mentors and observers should incorporate feedback on non-verbal behaviors during classroom observations. Instead of focusing solely on coverage of content or error corrections, feedback could include notes like, "Consider moving to the back of the room when

a student in the last row speaks, so they feel more supported," or "Try to make eye contact with each student at least once per activity – I noticed a couple never got your glance today." Such targeted feedback can incrementally improve teachers' rapport-building prowess.

Finally, the **practical strategies for everyday teaching** distilled from this study include: (1) Start and end the class with eye contact and a smile – greet students at the door or at the beginning by looking at them, and say goodbye or thank you while meeting eyes. These bookends set a positive tone. (2) Use students' names often and look at them when you do – it personalizes the interaction. (3) During individual or group work, physically approach students, but watch for signs of discomfort and adjust distance accordingly; offer help by positioning yourself as a helper (sitting or crouching to side) rather than a monitor looming over. (4) Be mindful of your facial expressions and posture; an open stance and friendly face go hand-in-hand with distance and gaze to project approachability. (5) Incorporate movement in your teaching strategy – for instance, write on different parts of the board (left, right) if you have a large class, so you naturally move and address different sections of the room; or if a student makes a great point, walk over towards them as you reiterate it to the class, symbolically giving them center stage for a moment, which validates their contribution.

Incorporating these strategies can significantly impact the classroom atmosphere. Teachers often find that when they pay attention to these non-verbal elements, students respond with increased attentiveness, participation, and overall positivity. Essentially, an investment in immediacy behaviors is an investment in a smoother, more engaging teaching experience. Given the importance of communication in language learning, it is only fitting that teachers leverage *all* channels of communication – not just verbal explanations and feedback, but eyes, hands, distance and stance – to foster the best possible environment for language acquisition to occur.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While this article has synthesized literature and hypothetical examples to highlight key aspects of eye contact and proxemics in rapport-building, there are limitations to acknowledge. First, the use of **hypothetical qualitative data** means that the classroom scenarios, while rooted in research and experience, are not actual case studies. Thus, they serve illustrative purposes rather than providing new empirical findings. Further research could involve in-depth case studies or action research where teachers deliberately modify their eye contact and proxemic behaviors to observe measurable changes in student outcomes (e.g., using a pre/post design with student surveys on rapport or anxiety levels).

Another limitation is that our discussion sometimes treated eye contact and proximity in isolation for analytical clarity, whereas in practice they co-occur with many other variables (teacher personality, students' individual differences, classroom culture, etc.). Rapport is multifaceted, and non-verbal cues are one part of a complex system. For example, a teacher's tone of voice or sense of humor also strongly affect rapport; in some cases those might compensate for less optimal eye contact, or vice versa. **Future research** could employ a more controlled approach to isolate the effects of non-verbal behaviors. An experimental study, for instance, might have instructors teach the same lesson in two conditions: one with high non-verbal immediacy and one with low, to see differences in student recall, anxiety, or participation. Some work in communication education has done this (e.g., Andersen, 1986;

Kelly & Gorham, 1988), but replication in specifically language learning contexts (ESL/EFL) would be valuable, particularly with today's increasingly multicultural classrooms and possibly different expectations from decades past.

The cultural dimension raised here also begs for **comparative research**. Cross-cultural studies could explore how rapport is built non-verbally in different countries' language classrooms. For instance, a comparative study of an American ESL class and a Japanese EFL class (similar to our hypothetical classes) could systematically document teacher immediacy behaviors and student perceptions. Such research might reveal culturally specific optimal patterns – perhaps in one context moderate immediacy is ideal, while in another, very high immediacy is not only accepted but expected. The role of student preferences could be examined: do students actually learn more when their teacher's style matches their cultural expectation, or is there benefit in experiencing a different style? This touches on the concept of **expectancy violations** (Burgoon, 1993) in a positive sense – maybe a usually reserved educational culture could benefit when a teacher slightly violates norms by being more immediate, if students interpret it positively. Finding that balance empirically would guide teachers in international settings.

A limitation in scope is that we focused primarily on face-to-face classroom settings. With the rise of online and hybrid learning, the dynamics of eye contact and proxemics change dramatically. In a video class, "eye contact" is simulated by looking at the camera, and proxemics is largely irrelevant physically, though one could talk of virtual proxemics (how a teacher's face appears – close-up or far – on camera). **Further research** should consider how teachers can build rapport non-verbally in online language teaching, an area that has grown especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Do the same principles apply, or are there new strategies (e.g., using more gestures or varying one's on-screen presence)? Early studies in online immediacy suggest that even simple behaviors like a teacher's posture on video or timely gaze (looking into the camera when students speak) can affect student connection.

The **size of the class** and context (children vs. adults, beginners vs. advanced learners) are also factors not deeply explored here. It's possible that proxemic strategies that work for a small seminar (like moving close to each student) are impractical in a large lecture hall with 100 students. Research could investigate modifications of immediacy for large classes – perhaps focusing more on broad scanning eye contact and other visual signals (like more expansive gestures to reach the back of the room). Likewise, with young learners, cultural norms may be less fixed, but children might have different responses to proximity (some may crave it for attention, others may be very shy). Future studies could look at how elementary language teachers use physical distance – for example, sitting on the carpet with kids (clearly immediate) versus standing – and how that affects young learners' comfort and focus.

In terms of measuring rapport and outcomes, further research should consider both **short-term and long-term effects**. Rapport is somewhat intangible and develops over time; a limitation of snapshot observations is that they might miss how consistency in non-verbal behavior over weeks builds trust. Longitudinal studies following a class through a semester, correlating teachers' non-verbal immediacy

trajectory with changes in student attitudes or performance, would be enlightening. Additionally, including **learner outcome measures** like language test scores or proficiency gains can help establish whether increased rapport (via improved immediacy) tangibly contributes to learning, beyond just making the class enjoyable (though that in itself is a worthwhile outcome as it can indirectly boost learning motivation).

Finally, a constraint in the current exploration is potential **observer bias** in interpreting behaviors (even hypothetically). We assumed, based on literature, that certain teacher actions led to certain student feelings. In real research, it would be important to triangulate by directly asking students how they felt about specific behaviors, rather than infer it. Future qualitative studies with stimulated recall (where students watch video of the class and comment on how they felt at moments when the teacher was near or looking at them) could provide deeper insight into the internal processes of rapport development from the learner's perspective.

In conclusion, while this article offers a synthesis of understanding regarding eye contact and proxemics in rapport-building, it also opens up multiple avenues for deeper investigation. By addressing the limitations and pursuing further research as suggested, we can continue to refine our knowledge of effective non-verbal pedagogy in language education, tailoring it to various contexts and the evolving modalities of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Rapport between teachers and language learners is the invisible but powerful cord that connects and facilitates all other aspects of instruction. This article has examined how two often underappreciated non-verbal elements – eye contact and proxemic behavior – play a pivotal role in weaving that cord of rapport. Through review of literature and illustrative classroom scenarios, we have seen that consistent and culturally attuned **eye contact** signals attention, care, and confidence in students, thereby fostering trust and encouraging greater student engagementacademic.oup.comscholarworks.iu.edu. Likewise, thoughtful use of **proxemics** – whether it is moving closer to a student to offer help, arranging the classroom space to be inclusive, or respecting cultural personal space norms – can significantly reduce student anxiety and create a sense of teacher availability and approachabilitythereader.mitpress.mit.edugarfield.library.upenn.edu. These non-verbal cues feed into the broader construct of teacher immediacy, which has been repeatedly linked with positive educational outcomes, from increased student motivation to higher levels of participation and achievementscholarworks.iu.edufiles.eric.ed.gov.

In the context of ESL/EFL, where students are often battling self-consciousness and fear of making mistakes in a new language, a teacher's non-verbal warmth can be the decisive factor that lowers the affective filter and unlocks communication. Something as simple as a reassuring look or a welcoming stance can embolden a hesitant learner to speak up – conversely, an unintended cold glance or distant posture might shut someone down. Therefore, cultivating awareness and mastery of non-verbal communication is as essential to language teachers as understanding grammar or lesson planning. The old saying "actions speak louder than words" holds especially true in teaching; our actions (eye

movements, body placement) may speak the loudest when it comes to telling students *"I am here for you. I respect you. We are in this learning journey together."*

The insights offered here underscore that **rapport is not a mystical quality** that some teachers have and others don't – it can be built consciously through tangible behaviors. By making eye contact with students, a teacher shows interest; by moving closer, a teacher shows inclusion; by smiling and nodding, a teacher shows approval and empathy. These micro-actions accumulate into an overall impression of a teacher who cares, which students reciprocate with greater trust and effort. Importantly, this is not to suggest that verbal pedagogy and subject-matter expertise are secondary; rather, they are most effective when delivered on a foundation of strong rapport. A grammatical explanation or piece of feedback will be received far better by a student who feels personally supported by the instructor.

In closing, language educators should take heart that investing in rapport-building through non-verbal immediacy is a high-impact, research-supported strategy to enhance their teaching. It humanizes the classroom, transforming it from a place of stress and inhibition to one of **collaboration and comfort**. Future teachers should be trained in these skills, and current teachers can reflect on and tweak their daily interactions – sometimes small changes (like consciously looking up from notes to connect with students' eyes) can yield significant improvements in classroom atmosphere. Given the multicultural reality of many language classrooms today, teachers also carry the responsibility of bridging cultural communication styles, turning potential differences into enrichment rather than obstacles. Mastery of eye contact and proxemics, with cultural awareness, is a key part of that skill set.

Ultimately, the role of eye contact and proxemics in building rapport reminds us that teaching is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but fundamentally a **human relational act**. By seeing our students – quite literally looking at them – and by standing with them (sometimes literally beside them), we validate their presence and potential. In doing so, we create a positive, trusting environment where language learners can flourish. As educators, when we truly connect with our learners, we empower them to connect with the language we teach. The non-verbal rapport we build is thus a conduit through which language – and confidence – flow more freely. It is our hope that this exploration reinforces the value of those everyday looks, distances, and gestures, encouraging teachers to harness them intentionally for the betterment of language education.

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