



Main Characteristics of Establishing and Maintaining Rapport in an ESP Classroom

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Abstract

The target goal of the current paper is to thoroughly analyze and introduce the main characteristics of establishing and maintaining rapport in the ESP classroom. The term “rapport” refers to the good working relationship in a classroom: either teacher-student or student-student. It is not primarily technique-driven, but grows naturally when people like working with each other and mostly get on together. On the part of the teacher it basically embraces a number of popular techniques, such as being welcoming, encouraging and approachable, treating each learner as an individual, concentrating on positive features of learner character, expressing empathy, not faking happiness and avoiding sarcasm. However, the ESP context implies and entails another set of personal and professional factors which should be taken into close consideration by the teacher as they may directly influence the quality of the rapport in the ESP classroom. It is a well-known fact that ESP teaching is extremely varied, and ESP work involves much more than teaching. We see the ESP teacher as having key roles of a course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher, evaluator, facilitator and consultant. These roles are difficult to adopt for any teacher, especially an inexperienced one and in many cultures these might seem alien to traditional views of the role of the teacher. However, ESP teachers should be well-aware of some factors which can considerably improve or worsen the quality of rapport in their own lessons. Thus, the role of the ESP teacher in building and maintaining positive working relationship should be implemented considerately and skillfully with ESP learners who have a clear and specific set of purposes in language learning.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, rapport, teacher’s role, technique.*

The most effective teaching and learning basically happens when learners are actively involved, interested and engaged in their work. This is more likely to come about in situations where the learners are asked about, and have at least some direct influence or “say” in, what they study and how they do it. This presupposes a classroom where the teacher and the learners can work together and talk or listen to each other in a respectful and supportive manner. Our aim in the current paper is to shed light upon a number of factors which can affect the quality of the rapport in the ESP classroom. But before passing on to the good working relationship, it would be worthier to define the characteristics of the ESP course and the ESP learners, in particular. It is a common knowledge that ESP is not a monolithic universal phenomenon and it has developed at different speeds in different countries. One of the most important features of ESP in relation to General English is that the status of English changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other specialties. The term “specific” in ESP refers to the specific purpose for learning English. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them. This means that they are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies. Thus, ESP assesses needs and integrates motivation, subject matter and content for the teaching of relevant subject-specific language communicative skills. In other words, ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning. From this perspective, new developments in educational psychology contributed to the rise of ESP, by emphasizing the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning [3]. Learners were seen to have different learning and target language needs and professional interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning. This lent support to the development of ESP courses in which ‘relevance’ to the learners’ needs and interests was paramount. The assumption underlying this approach was that the clear relevance of the English course to their needs would improve the learners’ motivation and thereby make learning better and faster. The focused nature of learning, its relevance and cost-effectiveness ensure that its aims are widely accepted by learners. Opinions about specific work, however, vary. Many learners are hungry for the material and advice that will help them with their specific course or with particular skills related to their course. Thus, for example, team taught courses, where the



language teacher works together with the subject lecturer to help international students understand actual lectures on postgraduate courses, appear to be highly motivating [5]. Thus, motivation in ESP has a profound effect on the question of how specific the course is. High motivation on the part of learners generally enables more subject specific work to be undertaken; low motivation, however, is likely to lead to a concentration on less specific work. Specialists in either academic or occupational contexts, who need English for specific tasks, will be impatient with an ESP course that does not address their difficulties or language gaps. Other students who are studying English because it is on the timetable of their institution, or who have been sent on a course by their company, and who do not have specific, immediate and clearly definable needs may be demotivated by more specific work and may be more motivated by ESP courses based on common-core language and skills not related to specific disciplines or professions or ESP courses for broad disciplinary or professional areas.

Consequently, the first step towards building rapport in an ESP classroom is analysing learners' target language needs. By building a relationship with students and finding out about their needs and interests, the teacher can make the ESP course more relevant to their needs and plan lessons and activities which engage them more. Needs analysis in this context is a complex process, involving much more than simply looking at what the learners will have to do in the target situation. There are a number of ways in which information can be gathered about needs. The most frequently used are: questionnaires; interviews; observation; data collection e.g. gathering texts; informal consultations with sponsors, learners and others. Both **target situation needs** and **learning needs** must be taken into account. Analysis of target situation needs is concerned with language use. But language use is only part of the story. We also need to know about language learning. Analysis of the target situation can tell us what people do with language. What we also need to know is how people learn to do what they do with the language. We need, in other words, a learning-centered approach to needs analysis [5]. From this perspective, rapport in the ESP classroom can be characterised as a kind of indefinable magic that some teachers manage to create where others fail, and certainly it can be detected when there is a sense of lively engagement, a room full of people who are happy to be together and work together. Despite the appearance of magic, good rapport is all down to a number of distinct, concrete, learnable elements. Any teacher can learn to create better rapport. The crucial foundation block in an ESP context, particularly, is **authenticity**, as without that, any relationship will be a façade rather than genuine. Authenticity means behaving in a way that is appropriately real, letting the students see genuine reactions to things, moods and natural behaviour, rather than covering everything up in a performance [4].

Carl Rogers, the US educational psychologist suggested that authenticity was the single most important teacher characteristic. The teacher can be a real person in her relationship with her students. She can be enthusiastic, can be bored, can be interested in students, can be angry, can be sensitive and sympathetic. Thus, she is a person to her students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. He believed that authenticity created the conditions for good rapport and helped build a real depth of trust and respect, and that this made the difference between a successful classroom and an unsuccessful one [3].

Being authentic for the ESP teacher implies the following:

- **Behave as an individual, not as a teacher with an official job title.** ESP is a practical discipline

with the main focus on helping students to learn. In many situations the teacher is expected to control the class, to provide information about skills and language, to control the activities, possibly moving into pair or group work for part of the class. In these situations, the role for the teacher generally matches the expectations of the learners and the teachers remain the classroom organizers; they have clear objectives for the class and finally a good understanding of the carrier content of the teaching material. ESP teachers need to have a great deal of flexibility, be willing to listen to learners, and to take an interest in the disciplines or professional activities the students are involved in. They must be ready to change tack in a lesson to take account of what comes up, and to think and respond rapidly to events. ESP teachers must also be happy to take some risks in their teaching. The willingness to be flexible and to take risks is one of the keys to success in ESP teaching.

- **Avoid pretending omniscience.** If the teacher doesn't know an answer to a question, it is better

to say that, rather than confusing students with rounabout explanations. The ESP teacher is not in the position of being the 'primary knower' of the carrier content of the material. The students may in many cases, certainly, where the course is specifically oriented towards the subject content, know more about the content than the teacher. It is often stated that this provides the ESP teacher with the



opportunity to draw on students' knowledge of the content in order to generate genuine communication in the classroom.

- **Have real conversations.** Where the teacher really listens to learners and responds appropriately

giving her/his genuine personal reactions to students' comments. In many cases, it is essential that the teacher adopts the stance of the consultant, when teaching a much more specific course. A consultant who has knowledge of communication practices, but needs to 'negotiate' with the students on how best to exploit these practices to meet their objectives. The relationship is much more one of partnership. In specific ESP teaching it may be the learner who asks the questions and the teacher who responds. In some situations, the role of the ESP teacher goes beyond that of the classroom teacher and extends to giving one-to-one advice to students.

- **Be authoritative appropriately.** The teacher should not use the cloak of teacher superiority and

hierarchical authority in order to give instructions. In some situations, the ESP teacher manages rather than controls. She may not make decisions about the course design but will negotiate with the learners about what is most appropriate to include, and when to include it. She will often get members of the class to bring material for exploitation in class. We see this role of the ESP teacher as a facilitator or a consultant. A development of this is where the teacher knows relatively little about the content or the skill that is being taught in the ESP class, and proceeds by pulling together and organizing the information that the learners, and - if possible - their lecturers or instructors are able to provide about the language or skill. This role is a difficult one to adopt for any teacher, especially an inexperienced one. In many cultures it is a role that is alien to traditional views of the role of the teacher. However, where it is possible, it is a role that is very appropriate and productive with sophisticated learners who have a clear and specific set of purposes.

- **Be creative and constructive with what is available.** It has often been noted that ESP is a materials-led movement and that part of the role of the ESP teacher has been to write teaching materials to meet the specific needs of learners. It has emerged that the ESP teacher is mainly a provider of materials - selecting material that is available, adapting it as necessary and supplementing it where it does not quite meet the learners' needs - although in some cases it is more appropriate to use the authentic materials that learners can provide.

Often, being creative with what is available is crucial, especially if the work environment is heavily constrained. Situations can vary along the cline of:

- freedom to choose from any material
- small range of material to choose from
- given materials have to be used.

We would dispute that; only a small proportion of good teachers are also good designers of course materials. What all ESP teachers have to be is good providers of materials. A good provider of materials will need to be able to:

- select appropriately from what is available;
- be creative with what is available;
- modify activities to suit learners' needs and
- supplement by providing extra activities and extra subject-specific language input [5].

The balance between these will vary from course to course, situation to situation. Initial questions to ask when selecting materials include:

- Will the material stimulate and motivate learners?
- To what extent does the material match the stated teaching / learning objective. It is rare for a single set of published material to match the exact learning needs of any ESP learner group; and activities do not always meet the stated objectives.
- To what extent will the materials support that learning?

To stimulate and motivate, materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity. The input must contain concepts and/or knowledge that are familiar but it must also offer something new, a reason to communicate, to get involved. The exploitation needs to match how the input would be used outside the learning situation and take account of language learning needs. The purpose and the connection to the learners' reality need to be clear.

- **Provide variety.** Variety is essential in any language class, but we feel that it is particularly important in an ESP class as there is sometimes the danger of the ESP class becoming rather a dry affair that fails to motivate learners. We need to practice a number of micro-skills in one class, we need



to introduce a range of activity types and we need to vary the type of interaction taking place during the class.

- **Variety in Micro-Skills**

Micro-skills are generally defined as lower-level skills that constitute a macro-skill, which are considered to be the basic language communicative skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening to monologue, for example, can be broken down into micro-skills, such as the ability to identify the purpose and scope of the lecture, the ability to deduce meaning of words from context. Thus, an ESP class may have as its aim one particular macro-skill, such as writing, but the use of other macro-skills will both help the learning of the target macro-skill and provide variety for the class. In the same way we feel that we should ensure that we focus on a number of micro-skills in a class; a reading class dominated by, say, deducing the meaning from context is likely to be less effective and motivating than one that focuses on a number of related micro-skills, for example deducing meaning from context, learning certain key core vocabulary items and investigating collocations.

- **Variety in Activity Types**

Actually, textbooks cover a relatively narrow range of receptive exercises but we have always found that the use of productive exercises increases motivation for both the learners and the teacher. Learners welcome this variety, but, when we use a new exercise type, we must familiarize learners with it so they know what they are expected to do. A visual element in an exercise is often effective as it both increases variety and avoids the danger of too much writing to be read and understood as input for a task. We can use visuals for language work, to generate spoken or written production, and as a comprehension check on a reading or listening passage. Visuals include Power Point slides, diagrams, flow charts, graphs, bar and pie charts, matrices, photographs and sketches.

- **Variety in Interaction**

We need to ensure that the ESP class is varied in the nature of interactions. Changes from teacher input to individual work, to pair work, to class discussion can provide this so long as they are not overdone. We should also build in choice as far as possible: some students would rather work on their own than in groups or pairs, so we can allow them to do so for at least part of the class. Class size and learners' expectations of how they should be taught will affect how successful these changes are and the teacher should be sensitive to these issues.

- **Implement Differentiation Techniques**

Differentiation doesn't necessarily mean planning and delivering multiple lessons, but considering how the aim of the lesson as a whole can be met by different learners and in different ways. Differentiation can be done in many ways, for example by **content** (the resources and materials learners will use and study in the lesson), **process** (the way the teacher designs and manages the lesson) or **product** (the work that the learners are asked to produce during the lesson). Many ESP teachers fear that teaching mixed ability classes is one of the biggest challenges that they have to face. In reality, all classes are mixed ability, because learners are unique individuals. Differentiation is the term often given to the principle of recognising differences in the classroom. To achieve effective differentiation, we need to tailor our planning and teaching to enable all learners to participate and achieve the level of challenge which is appropriate for them.

- **Incorporate Subject-Content Materials**

As it has been noted, rapport implies a positive relationship between a teacher and his/her learners, where they understand each other well and communicate well. In contrast to a General English teacher, the ESP teacher is faced by a group of learners with definite expectations as to the nature, content and achievement of the course. Learners in the ESP classes are generally aware of the purposes for which they will need to use English. Having already oriented their education toward a specific field, they see their English training as complementing this orientation. Knowledge of the subject area enables the students to identify a real context for the vocabulary and structures of the ESP classroom. In such way, the learners can take advantage of what they already know about the subject matter to learn. The reasons for having a subject-specific approach rest almost entirely on two affective factors generated by the learners themselves:

- **Face validity.** Subject-specific materials look relevant.
- **Familiarity.** If learners have got used to working with a particular kind of text in the ESP classroom, they will be less apprehensive about tackling it in the target situation.

ESP students are particularly well disposed to focus on meaning in the subject-matter field. Thus, in ESP, English should be presented not as a subject to be learned in isolation from real use, nor as a mechanical skill or habit to be developed. On the contrary, English should be presented in authentic contexts to make the learners acquainted with the particular ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their fields of specialty or jobs.



To conclude, effective teaching requires an in-depth analysis of the classroom environment and a flexible ever-changing reflection as to what might be the best thing to do next. ESP teachers should take higher and higher qualifications involving more and more comprehensive study of aspects of education and become very knowledgeable classroom practitioners. The ESP learners come to the ESP class with a specific interest for learning, subject matter knowledge, and well-built adult learning strategies. It is clear that establishing and maintaining rapport in an ESP classroom is more than just the positive relationship and understanding, the enthusiasm and attitude towards teaching and learning.

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