

# The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on EFL Learning

## El impacto de la dimensión emocional dentro de las clases del inglés como lengua extranjera

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This research report aims at sharing the findings that emerged from a qualitative research study by a student-teacher, under the supervision of two practicing teacher-researchers. The study focused on the impact of teacher-student relationships in English as a foreign language learning according to the collective perceptions of a group of university students. The data generation process employed was comprised of semi-structured interviews, as well as the concurrent analysis of the data, based on aspects of grounded theory. The results of this inquiry revealed that university students' sense of well-being, attitudes, and willingness to learn are improved when teachers demonstrate empathy, interest in student development, and respect.

**Key words:** EFL learning, emotions, empathy, interest, respect

Este reporte de investigación tiene como objetivo principal compartir los resultados de una investigación cualitativa, realizada por un estudiante-maestro, bajo la supervisión de dos maestros-investigadores. Dicha investigación se enfocó en las percepciones de estudiantes universitarios, hacia el impacto de la relación maestro-alumno sobre el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Para la recolección de datos se realizaron entrevistas semi-estructuradas en tanto que el análisis concurrente de la información se basó en aspectos de la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados revelaron que tanto el sentido de bienestar de los estudiantes como sus actitudes y voluntad de aprender, mejoraron cuando la maestra les demostró empatía, interés en su desarrollo como alumnos, y respeto.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje del inglés, emociones, empatía, interés, respeto

## Introduction

Emotions are integral, influential factors in all human beings. They are not only personal dispositions, but also social or cultural constructions, influenced by interpersonal relationships and systems of social values (Zembylas, 2004). That is, according to Denzin (as cited in Zembylas, 2004, p. 186), emotions are “a form of consciousness lived, experienced, articulated, and felt.” Consequently, they have an impact, not only on people’s behavior, what they believe in, and the way they think; but also on their responses to, and relationships with, others in the different contexts in which they live, study and work. For example, in the context of an EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom, the emotional dimension that emerges between teacher and student, as well as between student and student may have an impact, not only on the teaching/learning process, but also on the personal and professional identity construal of both the teacher and the students.

Until recently, emotions have been taken into consideration only rarely in educational contexts. This may be owing to the fact that previously, emotions were considered as “somehow separate from reasoning” (A. Hargreaves, 1998, p. 560), and so did not play a role in the classroom. This is surprising given that many now believe that “feelings and emotion... have a vital role in the development of learning” (Day & Leitch, 2001, p. 406). In fact, nowadays, the existence of positive relationships inside the classroom is considered as possibly one of the most influential factors in language learning, given that they may affect, either in a positive or negative way, students’ achievement and willingness to work as well as improve their knowledge and social skills (Larson, 2011). In addition, Nugent (2009) suggests that by creating a sense of well-being in their relationships, teachers can motivate students during the learning process. A positive teacher-student relationship, therefore, is crucial inside the classroom. Owing to the impact this relationship may have, then, it is necessary for teachers to understand that students need to feel comfortable with, and confident in, the person (teacher) with whom they are learning. That is, teachers need to be aware of the impact of the emotional dimension in their EFL classroom.

This research report provides the basis of this argument. It is a report of a qualitative research inquiry focused on discovering the impact of teacher-student relationships within EFL learning, according to the collective perceptions of a group of Mexican university-level EFL students. In order to explore and understand their perceptions concerning the nature and the importance of the teacher-student relationship inside the classroom—in its effect on students’ motivation to learn in particular—the following research questions were designed:

### Main Research Question:

- What is the nature of the teacher-student relationships within a university classroom?

Research sub-questions:

- How may this relationship affect students' motivation?
- What are the aspects to take into account to build a good teacher-student relationship inside the classroom?

This report comprises four sections. First, in an effort to shed light on the possible issues that teacher-student relationships encompass, research literature and studies regarding the issues that may influence these relationships are presented. This is followed by a summary of the research approach that was adopted. The research context is then described. The research process employed in this inquiry is the subsequent section that includes information about the research participants and how they were selected, as well as how the data collection and analysis were handled. The fourth section reports on and interprets the findings regarding students' perceptions in a university context in Mexico. Finally, this research report concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice and educational research.

## **The Importance of a Positive Teacher-Student Relationship**

Many students still seem to depend completely on the teacher to transmit knowledge (Narváez, 2009). In these cases, teachers carry the whole responsibility for education, while students are expected to be listeners and often do not even have a voice in what is happening in the classroom. However, this practice is changing owing to educational and social needs (D. H. Hargreaves, 1999). D. H. Hargreaves affirms that a globalised world demands reforms in the way relationships are conducted in a social group, and especially in an educational context. As a result, both teachers and students need to play more active roles if they are to establish a more positive relationship.

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships***

The teacher-student relationship has an important impact on students' attitudes and achievements, as well as the relationships that students create inside the school. If students feel comfortable with the teacher and the environment in the school, they can construct more positive relations such as friendship, develop a better way to behave in the social context and improve their social skills (Larson, 2011). In addition to these possibilities, Nugent (2009) suggests that by creating healthy relationships, teachers can motivate students during the learning process, which is one of the main objectives in a teacher's practice. This author also suggests that in order to do this, teachers have to be aware of the students' emotional and academic needs. By these means, the creation of positive relationships between teacher and students would be easier.

According to Giles (2008), it is during the first lesson of a course when both students and teacher establish the bases for this relationship. The greetings, the rules and what is expected from each other are discussed. Furthermore, according to a study performed by Marzano and Marzano (2003), it is where they can establish the procedures and rules related to the interaction and behavior inside the classroom which comprise the basis for a positive relationship. One aspect to take into account when studying teacher-student relationships is the expectations they have about each other, which is a characteristic that defines how satisfied they feel. In our experiences inside a classroom, as a teacher and/or a student, the more satisfied both parties are, the better relationship they can build.

### *Teachers' and Students' Expectations*

When developing a positive relationship inside the classroom, certain factors need to be taken into account that may affect, either in a positive or a negative way, the teacher-student relationship. One of these important factors is teachers' and students' beliefs or expectations. For example, a teacher has expectations when working with new students. Owing to educational and social demands, teachers expect students to develop and improve not only their academic and social skills, but also the skills needed to grow as a person in a changing society. These expectations not only influence a teacher's behavior and practice, but they also have an impact on their relationships with students.

Perhaps even more importantly, Bordia, Wales, Pittam, and Gallois, (2006, p. 3) claim that, "the fulfillment of students' expectations may be directly linked to motivation and performance in language learning." For example, the ways in which both the teacher and the students behave in the classroom may, to a certain extent, be influenced by their expectations of each other (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). According to Narváez (2009), there are two ways students conceptualize teachers. One way is the teacher as a person. Students expect a teacher to be interested in them, not only as students, but as people as well. The other way is the professional concept of a teacher. According to the students in Narváez's study, this refers to the level of the teacher's commitment and dedication to his/her practice. Students like a teacher who is concerned about them, and who does not consider his/her profession only as a job. The combination of these views helps to understand how expectations are constructed and also understand that the relationship between teacher and students is not only the responsibility of the teacher, but also of the students.

### *Aspects in Positive Teacher-Student Relationships*

One of the main objectives in teaching, therefore, is to create an atmosphere that may enhance the learning process. By displaying a good attitude, being communicative, and creating a secure setting, the teacher may be able to help students to feel comfortable and

motivated to learn a foreign language (Vilar Beltrán, 1995). Motivation plays a very important role in the process of building good relationships inside the classroom. For example, if students feel they are not performing as expected, they can lose their motivation and, as a result, the relationship with the teacher may be affected in a negative way, which is why an important task of the teacher is to sustain students' motivation.

In order to sustain students' motivation, a teacher needs to accept that inside the classroom different kinds of students exist who have different styles of learning. These different styles of learning then need to be catered for in the teacher's practice. In addition, Marzano and Marzano (2003) explain that in order to foster a positive relationship inside the classroom, the teacher needs to be aware not only of the students' academic needs, but also of their emotional needs. These emotional needs include empathy, which refers to an accepted level of acceptance and caring, that is, treating students in a friendly way inside and outside the classroom; and respect, by being sincere and professional (Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2000). Furthermore, students may feel more comfortable and motivated to learn when teachers make some kind of extra effort to reward and encourage them, and demonstrate patience when giving explanations and managing the behavior inside the classroom. Finally, teachers need to show they believe in a student's ability e.g. if a student feels confident and also believes in what the teacher is doing, this will help students to learn more (Hawk et al., 2000).

In sum, some of the characteristics to take into account in order to build a positive relationship are empathy, respect, patience, and the expected behavior of teachers and students that all combine to create the atmosphere inside a classroom. These characteristics may help both teacher and students to develop a positive relationship which, in turn, may help to sustain students' motivation and improve their learning process.

## **Research Method**

For the purpose of this inquiry, a qualitative interpretative research approach was employed. It was considered to be the most suitable approach to carry out this inquiry because it offers the researcher a wide range of possibilities in order to gain and understand an interviewed person's ideas and perceptions. In this particular case, we wanted to know the perceptions of the students regarding the teacher-student relationship in the classroom, and how these affect the students' motivation in the learning process of a foreign language.

According to (Cresswell, 1998), qualitative research is defined as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 14)

Qualitative interpretative research also emphasizes the researcher's interpretation based on the information provided by the research participants. The researcher takes into account different aspects, such as the participants' personal experiences, their cultural background, as well as the case to be studied and, as a result, achieves a plausible interpretation of the data. The data collected are words, descriptions and experiences of different processes instead of numbers as in quantitative research. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that as these findings are based on the researchers' interpretation of the informants' perceptions of their realities, other interpretations, meanings and understandings are possible. However, this is acceptable as, according to Parker (1999), "there will always be a gap between the things we want to understand and our accounts of what they are like if we are to do qualitative research properly" (p. 3).

### ***Research Context***

The research context selected was one of the university schools that belongs to a private educational group, where the student-teacher was carrying out his internship by teaching one of the EFL courses. This group has more than 100 schools, in different states, all over Mexico, and offers about 30 different BAs including engineering and gastronomy, among others. This institution offers its students different scholarship study programs, and it also works with different national and international institutions in order to give the students the opportunity to gain experience and prepare themselves to be professionals. The students at this university school have a wide range of ages, most of them are 21 or 22 years old, but others are in their 40s. Each group has between 15 or 20 students on average. Students have one or two hour classes every two days or every day, depending on the schedule provided by the institution, a total of 10 hours per week. These classes are given in English, and students are supposed to speak English in the classes as well.

### ***Research Procedure***

The first step in the research procedure consisted of gaining permission to carry out this inquiry. Once this was achieved, the next step was the identification of the informants who would be involved in this inquiry. They were selected by means of convenience sampling. During convenience sampling or, as it is sometimes called, accidental sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), the researcher chooses the nearest people to be his/her informants and continues doing this until he gathers the number of informants required.

### ***Research Participants***

The research participants consisted of 10 students in their 20s, who were studying for the BA in gastronomy. This number of participants was chosen because of the interest they

showed in the study, but more importantly because of the relationship that the student-teacher had developed with the students inside the school. This was helpful because the students felt comfortable when expressing their ideas. Another crucial aspect when selecting participants was the time that they had available, so as not to interfere with their activities or make them feel under pressure.

## **Data Collection**

In order to collect data, a semi-structured interview (see Appendix) was designed in order to obtain the necessary and relevant information from the students selected. According to Kvale (2008):

Interviews are often used in qualitative research. Such interviews tend to be far less structured than the kind of interview associated with survey research. This kind of interview is less structured, but offers to the researcher a wide range of possibilities in order to achieve an objective which is to catch the most accurate idea from a person interviewed. (p. 472)

This type of interview was conceived as the most suitable for this qualitative research given that “if given the chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on” (Seidman, 1998, p. 2).

By being able to talk freely, the students who accepted to be interviewed expressed their ideas and opinions about the issues encompassed in the teacher-student relationships in the classroom. This freedom was fostered by the interviewer not strictly following an order when asking the questions, but instead altering the order or modifying the questions according to the answers that were being given during the conversation. This allowed the interviewer and the student interviewed flexibility to ask or clarify doubts and give explanations, when needed. This resulted in sometimes different questions for the different research participants, and so improvisation was important. However, the interviewer always steered the interview focus back to the main issue.

## ***Data Analysis***

The data generated by the interviews were analyzed using aspects of the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2003). This method is useful at the time of studying human behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The interview transcripts were examined line by line to identify the key issues. Once the issues were identified they were grouped and named. Then the data were examined using the *constant comparative method* (Charmaz, 2003); that is, first set of data was analysed, and then the second set with the first one in mind. In addition, following Kolb's (2012) suggestions, the researcher also asked himself questions in order to clarify doubts and, as a result, understand the data. These consisted of questions such as

“When, How, or Why does this phenomenon or action occur?” and “What are the consequences of this?” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 143). By means of these questions, new categories could be found and classified. As a result of these methods employed during the analysis and interpretation of the data, an understanding emerged concerning the nature of the issues encapsulated in the informants’ responses.

## **Findings**

The findings from this inquiry reveal information about the issues involved in building a positive teacher-student relationship, and the influence of this on students’ motivation. These include interest in students’ development, pride, empathy, respect, and trust.

### ***Interest in Students’ Development***

Students seem to like a teacher who transmits the desire to learn new things, who opens their minds to new ideas. If students perceive this attitude, they may be more willing to have a closer relationship with their teachers, which is crucial in the process of the acquisition of a second language.

I like a teacher who broadens my mind to new horizons; a teacher who encourages me to learn more and provides me with knowledge about other cultures. A teacher with the desire of being better every day. (Alberto, lines 81-83)

This opinion shared by Alberto was echoed by Juan’s comment below. From both these extracts it would appear also that a teacher’s professional development, the desire to be better and to be up to date, may have a mirror effect on the student who shows the same desire to become better.

A teacher who improves himself every day, I think that is essential . . . every student appreciates the personal improvement and sincerity in a teacher . . . Students in my opinion appreciate a teacher who is devoted to the profession and that desire of being better every day; a teacher who tells you about a new book or about a conference, a teacher who broadens your mind and you have the desire of being like him. (Juan, lines 77-86)

This opinion was shared also by the majority of the students interviewed. It would appear, therefore, that if a teacher manages to transmit his/her interest in his/her own profession, as well as in students’ development, then possibly he/she may lay the foundation for a successful teacher-student relationship.

### ***Pride***

Complementary to development is the desire for recognition. As Ana mentioned, students want to be rewarded by the teacher “who recognizes what I do and encourages me to



be better.” Students like a teacher who encourages them with motivational phrases and compliments, for example: “I would like the teacher to give me some credit and recognition for my work and words like ‘good, keep doing it’” (Luis). Most of the students interviewed expressed the same idea that recognition is crucial for students’ motivation.

A teacher who cheers me up and exhorts me to keep working, keep studying with motivational phrases like “you’re going great!” or “you have the ability to do it, keep doing it” by doing that kind of thing the teacher fills you with happiness and you think “wow, somebody trusts in me.” [sic] (Victoria, lines 59-62)

For students, just as for all other human beings, “recognition is crucial” (Juan); students all need a pat on the back, a sign of “recognition of what I’m doing, and my effort” (Alberto) by a “significant other” (Heikkinen, 2003, p. 3)—in this case the teacher—that they are doing well. It would appear from the extract above that when students receive a sign of recognition, their self-confidence may be boosted and they may feel more motivated in sustaining their engagement in the learning process.

### *Empathy*

A teacher’s empathy, demonstrated by a real concern for students’ learning, is another of the building blocks in a successful teacher-student relationship. Students spend a lot of their time at school, which is why the relationships they have within a classroom are extremely important. If students feel they have a good relationship with the teacher they will feel comfortable and motivated and, as a result, may feel important and therefore willing to engage in the learning process. These particular students, for example, expressed that they like teachers who care about them. For example, Alberto (lines, 71-76) claimed that his teacher had:

A real concern about the students’ assimilation of the topic, not only providing us with activities, I don’t like just answering worksheets...I realize that she always pays special attention if we are understanding what are we doing and wants to know the way we feel as students.

In other words, students want to feel that they are important to the teacher, that they are treated as a person, not only as a student. They expect a teacher to understand that they are experiencing feelings which can affect the way they may perform inside the classroom. This may motivate students to pay attention in class, assist regularly and assimilate the knowledge even if the student does not like the class.

### *Respect and Trust*

As in everyday life, an effective relationship is built through mutual respect and trust. Teachers earn respect by demonstrating that they know what they are trying to teach, and by being professional. This is related to the attitude, behavior, and the amount of effort and

patience a teacher shows in a class. Teachers who treat students as adults and not as children, who put themselves on the same level as the students, are respected and trusted facilitators of knowledge. The following extract is taken from an interview with a student who has a good relationship with the teacher and she expressed this as follows:

Well, she is very good as a teacher and as a person, she is nice and cheerful, she always treats us in a good manner. She has been our teacher for at least two years and always has been respectful and polite with us. [sic] (Tania, lines 67-69)

Apart from respect demonstrated by a teacher's politeness, patience also seems to be a vital ingredient. Students voiced the necessity of patience when giving explanations. Sometimes it is necessary to repeat the information several times, give examples, and try to find alternatives in order to clarify what is being taught.

She makes herself clear, she tries to explain everything in an easy way, if you don't understand she comes back to you, even if you are the only one who didn't understand, she gives the explanation to you again...and if you still have doubts she explains everything yet again; I like that. (Luis, lines 106-109)

If students are treated with patience and respect then this will lead to fostering the trust that is needed in a teacher-student relationship. The importance of listening, paying attention to the explanations, and treating students as equals inside the classroom contributes to establishing adequate communication between students and the teacher.

## Conclusion and Implications

In teacher-student relationships the emotional dimension is something that should not be ignored or taken for granted. If a teacher fosters trust in his/her students by demonstrating interest in their development, as well as care and respect, students may feel more confident and comfortable to approach him/her and share personal and academic issues. As a result, teacher and students may form a successful teacher-student relationship, and so work together in order to achieve any goal related to the acquisition of knowledge, as David (lines 109-112) portrays in the extract below:

Sometimes I make jokes and actually I have a good relationship with her, she's always encouraging me. Once I confided in her, I told her that I challenged myself and I wanted to speak English in six months, I don't speak very well but I got better and I think that now I speak better because when I started university I didn't speak at all. She really helped me.

It should be noted, however, that care of a student's pride is also a necessary factor. Recognition is something that the students expect from a teacher, and as Juan mentioned above, is crucial in the creation of a positive relationship between students and teachers. This recognition provided by the teacher is something that is not taken into account very often. Teachers need to remember that although contents and well planned classes are

important, a student is a person who needs to be motivated with phrases or rewards, who has needs, not only academic ones, but *emotional* ones also (Nugent, 2009). If a teacher is able to make students feel comfortable and confident, then they may not only enjoy the classes and assimilate knowledge, but also enhance positive relationships based on respect and mutual trust, which are the keys in building any relationship in everyday and academic life.

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## Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview

1. Does the teacher enjoy teaching you?
2. Does the teacher get to know you as a person?
3. Does the teacher make you feel that you belong?
4. Does the teacher help you sort things out when you are upset?
5. Can you have a laugh with him/her?
6. Does the teacher treat you with respect?
7. Does the teacher make sure you know what you are supposed to be doing?
8. Does the teacher make the lessons really interesting and fun?
9. Does the teacher help you develop your own interests and talents?
10. Can you choose how to do your work?
11. Does the teacher make you feel confident to tackle harder work?
12. Does the teacher tell you that there are many different ways to do well in life?
13. Does the teacher let you have a say in what goes on in this room?
14. Is the teacher fair?
15. Is the teacher clear about the rules and consistent in the way in which he/she applies them?
16. Does the teacher encourage you to learn and use your initiative?
17. Does the teacher praise your achievements which are not related to academic work?
18. Does the teacher show you how mistakes are a helpful way to learn?
19. Does the teacher encourage you to work out what you are learning?
20. Does the teacher ask you how you are doing and how much you have learnt?

(Adapted from <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/key-motivating-students-7898>)