

3 Teacher–student rapport



REFLECTION TASK 1

Reflect on your own time in school or in teacher training. Can you think back to a favourite teacher in whose class you ‘blossomed’? Or perhaps a fictional teacher who you find inspiring? How would you describe the relationship such a teacher has with their students? What do they do that fosters learning and engagement in their classrooms?

The key figure in any learner’s educational life is the teacher. Like us, you are likely to be able to remember some teachers who were able to engage you, using little in the way of props or fancy techniques, and yet others who seemingly ticked all the boxes in terms of activity design and use of resources, but who just could not get you to engage with them as individuals or the subject they were trying to teach. In fact, how learners engage with the teacher is critical to all other forms of engagement. If learners feel cared for and supported by their teachers, then they are much more likely to be willing to engage with them and, consequently, also with other aspects of the educational experience. The focus of this chapter is this critical engagement and its foundation, the teacher–student relationship. We will explore the nature of this engagement and we will reflect on the main principles and behaviours underlying quality teacher–student rapport.

An extensive body of research suggests the importance of close, caring teacher–student relationships and high-quality peer relationships for students’ academic self-perceptions, school engagement, motivation, learning, and performance.

(Furrer, Skinner and Pitzer 2014: 102)

Rationale

Education is inherently relational. The reason we go to school or any kind of educational institution is to be with, and learn together with, other people. For language learning, the need for fellow interlocutors means that learning is deeply social, possibly more so than for other academic subjects. How well we get on with the people in our educational settings – peers, colleagues, and teachers – can make or break our learning, or our teaching, experience. For both teachers and learners, the central relationship in schools is that between teacher and learner.



REFLECTION TASK 2

Take a moment to think of a relationship that is important to you, such as with a friend, a colleague, or a partner. What are the characteristics that you look for in such a relationship?

Whoever we are, most people want similar things from their relationships. Roffey (2011: 100) lists the following relational qualities:

- Mutual respect
- Trust and honesty
- Reciprocity – give and take
- Acceptance of you as a whole person
- Open communication
- Equality
- Warmth
- Reliability – being there in good and bad
- Feeling comfortable and enjoying being together

As teachers, we often get caught up in the mechanics of teaching, thinking about which resources to use or which language forms to focus on, and continuously considering test formats and administrative pragmatics. These are important, unavoidable aspects of our profession, but it is equally important to plan and teach with the quality of our relationship with our students at the forefront of our minds.

One teacher can help a child love school; another can make a child hate school. It all depends on our relationships with the children.

(Bahman and Maffini 2008: 13)

A positive teacher-learner relationship is defined by characteristics such as *pedagogical caring* (Wentzel 1997), *trust* (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Tschannen-Moran 2014), *teacher involvement* (Skinner and Belmont 1993), *respect* (Tomlinson 2011) and *empathy* (Cooper 2011; Gkonou and Mercer 2017). There are also two theoretical frameworks which help us to better appreciate what learners need from their relationships with us, *self-determination theory* and *attachment theory*:

- Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2000) has been a popular perspective for understanding engagement (Reeve 2012), and we draw on it specifically in respect to relational engagement. The SDT framework suggests that the quality of one's well-being is influenced by whether the person feels that three basic core needs are being met: the need for *relatedness*, *competence* and *autonomy* (Patrick, Knee, Canevello and Lonsbary 2007).

- *Relatedness* refers to our 'need to belong' (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and describes how we are driven to seek out supportive, strong interpersonal relationships. In Chapter 4, we shall see the significance of positive group dynamics and peer relations for determining a sense of belonging in the classroom, and here we add that the learners' relationships with their teachers are also a key contributory factor to this feeling of belonging.
- *Competence* concerns learners' need to believe in their capabilities to cope with and complete tasks. The teacher's input and subsequent scaffolding of learning is a vital ingredient in this respect.
- *Autonomy* is the feeling that learners have some control and direction over what they do. It does not mean independence and is thus not in any way at odds with the need for relatedness. Indeed, autonomy can be highly social (Murray 2014), as long as learners feel an active sense of control over aspects of their learning lives. Of course, this sense of volitional control greatly depends on the teacher's approach (an issue we will come back to later).
- Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) describes the characteristics and functions of a child's attachment to a key caregiver, typically the mother. Ideally, when the caregiver – or in this case, the teacher – responds to the learner in predictable, sensitive and caring ways, then the relationship is characterised by a sense of stability and security. In turn, this enables the learner to explore, take risks, be creative and develop a sense of self-worth and trust in others. Regarding learners, on the one hand, they need to develop a sense of trust and care with their teacher, knowing that they can rely on us for support if needed; on the other hand, they also need the confidence to become autonomous in their actions. Although attachment theory has typically been employed to understand the relationships between teachers and young learners (Wentzel 2009), the core relational qualities are relevant for any type of relationship including between adults (Hazan and Shaver 1994).

Principles for Learner Engagement With Teachers

In order to promote deep learner engagement with teachers in relational terms, learners need to connect with them on all four engagement dimensions described in the introduction: social, affective, cognitive and behavioural. We will begin by considering the kinds of principles that facilitate the more *social* and *affective* aspects of engagement, and then move on to teacher actions which also support the more *cognitive* and *behavioural* dimensions.

Principle 1: Be Approachable

To engage with us, learners have to feel that we are open to being engaged with: that is, we need to be *approachable*. This can be communicated on two levels. First and most obviously, it is conveyed in terms of whether we are actually *physically present* and available to talk to. Often institutions will have opportunities, such as 'office hours', where learners (and parents) can come and talk to teachers about their concerns, but less formal opportunities of contact are perhaps even more welcome, such as a regular time slot spent in, say, the school canteen. More recently, some teachers have started to use social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook) and online platforms (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard) to make themselves more accessible to learners, which is an important practical step towards ensuring we are approachable in the digital age. However, teachers might wish to draw up a basic 'code of conduct' to create boundaries and to protect personal time when they are not available, such as agreeing that nobody may contact the group via social media after 5 pm on weekdays or at all at weekends.

The second level of approachability concerns our *general disposition* as teachers. There are many direct and indirect ways in which we can convey our approachability, with *self-disclosure* being a particularly effective tool. As language teachers, we are continually asking our learners to share many personal details in terms of their likes, dislikes, hopes and fears, etc. as part of the communicative interaction. In building rapport, it can make a considerable difference if we also offer some degree of self-disclosure in return. Research has shown that college instructors who engaged in more self-disclosure were more positively evaluated by their students (Lannutti and Strauman 2006), which in turn is connected to learner motivation and interest (Cayanus, Martin, and Goodboy 2009). However, a word of caution is needed here: everything in moderation – over-sharing is not professional or indeed appropriate.

A degree of self-disclosure shows a desirable openness towards others and an honesty and lack of defensiveness about ourselves. It also shows a readiness to trust others, and is an essential ingredient in social intimacy.

(Fontana 1988: 294–295)

Humour can be another way to lower the affective filter and generate positive affect, revealing to learners our 'human' side. Perhaps it is obvious, but it still needs to be stressed that this, too, must be used with care. Wanzer, Frymier and Irwin (2010) explain that learners need to recognise a statement or comment as being humorous, and only when the content is relevant and the form of humour appropriate will it lead to deeper cognitive processing, better relationships and more effective learning.

[According to communication expert Melissa Wanzer,] 'Students don't necessarily want Jerry Seinfeld [a US comedian] as their instructor. They want appropriate humour that is relevant, lightens the mood and makes the information memorable.'

(Stambor 2006)

Principle 2: Be Empathetic

Learners need to feel understood and appreciated. In any relationship, *empathy* is the key ingredient. Empathy has been defined as getting 'into' somebody else's feelings and thoughts, attempting to understand them, and seeking to convey that understanding to others (Howe 2013: 9). In other words, it means being able to step into somebody else's shoes and see the world from their perspective. Empathy does not mean agreement but is about trying to *understand* others. To do this, we make inferences and interpretations based on other people's behaviours, as well as on their verbal and non-verbal communications. We can continually improve our skills in these areas through conscious effort at learning to read body language and gestures, by reading literature written about our learner age group or population (e.g. young adult literature if we work in schools, or migrant stories if we work with migrant populations) or by learning to improve our communication skills by listening without judgement (see Action Point 3 below). We can also act as valuable role models in displaying empathy in our interactions with learners, promoting such skills consciously in our learners and helping them to work more empathetically with each other (see also Chapter 3).

There must be no misapprehension about the nature of empathy or emotion in learning. It does not represent a sentimental or woolly approach, but is fundamental to every aspect of how human beings relate to and learn from each other.

(Cooper 2011: 3)

Principle 3: Be Responsive to Learner Individuality

Related to our empathic skills is our sensitivity to the diversity among our learners. All our learners like to know that you really *know* who they are and that they are valued as individuals. Learner-centredness has been one important approach that has drawn attention to what learners as individuals bring to the classroom and their learning (see e.g. Brandes and Ginnis 1986; Nunan 1988). A useful definition is offered by McCombs and Whisler (1997: 9):

'Learner-centred' is the perspective that combines a focus on individual learners – their heredity, experiences, perspectives,

backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs – with a focus on the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that promote the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners. (our emphasis)

There are two facets to this definition worth highlighting: the focus on learner uniqueness and the intention to ensure that *all* students learn. The first implies the importance of getting to know the learners as people with lives beyond the classroom and as students with prior knowledge and experiences. You cannot plan your teaching effectively if you do not know what they already know, what you can connect to and build upon, or what would be personally interesting, meaningful or relevant for them.

Understanding the students' current identity concerns ... implies more than merely doing a needs analysis in order to try and make language tasks relevant to the particular characteristics of the learners. What is really involved is a conscious effort to gain an understanding of the persons that the students in the classrooms are and of the range of unique life experiences, dreams and worries that they bring into the learning environment with them.

(Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014: 39)

In terms of getting to know our learners, there are many steps we can take to personalise our interactions and strengthen our rapport. The most basic is to *remember student names*. As Bonwell and Eison (1991: 22) state, 'perhaps the single most important act that faculty can do to improve the climate in the classroom is to learn students' names'. This also means that teachers need to make an effort to learn how to pronounce students' names properly when they come from a different linguistic background to the teacher. This small effort on the part of the teacher can mean a lot for the learner in terms of a sense of belonging and feeling respected. As language educators, we are in the ideal position to connect with learners personally when they share their stories and personalities as part of communicative tasks. We can also build in opportunities for learners to share their histories or stories of their language encounters beyond the classroom (see Mercer 2013). As Rubie-Davies (2015: 174) explains, 'Taking the time to get to know students, enjoy them, and appreciate their abilities can go a long way to building strong interpersonal relationships'. Although we may find relationships easier to build with some learners than others, all learners have individual strengths and characters which we can learn to appreciate.



BUILDING RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS

Dörnyei (2001) lists a variety of small gestures that do not take up much time yet which can convey personal attention, including:

- Greet students and remember their names.
- Learn something unique about each student and occasionally mention it to them.
- Ask them about their hobbies and lives outside school.
- Recognise birthdays.
- Include personal topics and examples about students in discussing content matters.
- Send notes/homework to absent students.

The second part of the definition of learner-centredness offered by McCombs and Whisler (1997) stresses that *all* learners need to be supported. This reflects a tension of balancing individual learner needs with whole group needs (Williams et al. 2015). One current popular approach is to *differentiate* our teaching (see also Chapter 6), which ideally means designing lessons so that all learners achieve the same goals and aims, but in different possible ways. We can differentiate in terms of the task itself, the process of working on it, the form of output required from the learners or the working set-up, such as alone, in pairs or groups (see Petty 2014). Reasons for differentiating can include different preferred ways of working, different interests and also different abilities and degrees of readiness. However, there is a word of caution needed here regarding differentiating for perceived ability: it may lead educators to create overly low challenges and low expectations for some learners perceived as being of weaker ability. This can result in teachers accepting poorer performance from them and may also mean teachers offering less informative feedback about learning progress and future steps to such learners (Rubie-Davies 2015). Instead, the aim is to differentiate but in ways which challenge and engage *all* learners.

High expectations do not mean having the same expectations for all students: high expectations are relative to each individual student. High expectations are beliefs that all students will make accelerated progress, beyond what they have previously achieved. That is, in this classroom, the learning trajectory of all students will be augmented.

(Rubie-Davies 2015: 218; our emphasis)

Principle 4: Believe in All Your Learners

Central to having high expectations of all our learners is the fundamental belief in the potential of all our learners to improve. This means teachers need a *growth mindset* about learners' language learning abilities. In language education, we must resist the myth of the existence of the

'natural-born linguist' (Mercer 2012); it may well be that some learners find it easier to learn a language than others, but there is a potential for improvement in *all* learners. The learners also need to share our beliefs in growth mindsets, and this can be promoted not only through explicit discussion, but also through other actions that can send important growth mindset signals to them. For example, we need to encourage learners to embrace making mistakes and to see them as a non-threatening part of the learning process (see Action Point 2). Gershon (2016) goes so far as to suggest allocating a 'mistake quota' in a lesson and prompting learners if they do not make any mistakes, explaining to them that they are not learning or pushing themselves enough if there are no mistakes. In addition, if a learner does experience a setback, we have to help them have optimism to believe they can still achieve their goals, but maybe need to reflect on things within their control, such as time expended, effort invested and strategic pathways used. Fundamentally, learners need to see that a talent is not something that people are born with, but something they develop with practice (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius and Worrell 2012).

Another way of showing learners that we believe in their potential is through how we *care* for them. In an educational setting, caring involves showing emotional support and investment in the relationship with students, but it is also about what we do and say in our behaviours and interactions about their learning (Davis, Summers and Miller 2012). Students need to feel that their learning and progress is important to us, that we 'care' about their learning. Our investment in our teaching materials, preparation and organisation are all important markers for learners about how seriously we take our responsibilities towards their learning. Indeed, Lucas and Claxton (2010: 163) are right to stress that 'Students often deduce the values of any institution more from the way teachers and other adults behave and from the way the schools actually treat them than from any published statement of belief'.

The research is very clear; students who perceive their teachers as caring tend to engage more with the content, take intellectual risks including probing when they do not understand, and persist in the face of failure.

(Davis et al. 2012: 80)

Principle 5: Support Learner Autonomy

As mentioned earlier, one of the key needs that learners have is for autonomy. Teaching behaviours can be classified as stretching along a continuum from more controlling to more autonomy-supportive (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman and Ryan 1981). In reality, a teacher is likely to move back and forth along this continuum at different points for various purposes; for example, as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) explain, in various phases of a learner group's development different degrees of control serve the group well, moving from a more autocratic towards a more

democratic teaching style. Research has shown that from the point of view of student engagement with the teacher, more autonomy-supportive teaching behaviours are most effective (Reeve 2006). Autonomy-supportive teachers tend to see themselves as facilitators, acknowledging that learners have much to contribute to the learning process and supporting, but not smothering, learners' own curiosity and inner motivational drives. Such teachers acknowledge learner diversity and seek to organise their instruction in such a way that learners can determine to some extent their own learning. Key behaviours include building in an element of choice where possible, sharing decision-making to include learners as democratic partners and giving students positions of genuine responsibility.

An autonomy-supportive style represents the prototype of the sort of interpersonal relationship that facilitates students' autonomous motivation and classroom engagement.

(Reeve 2006: 234)

Principle 6: Be Passionate About What You Do

This final principle is central for both teacher well-being and learner well-being. Crucially, YOU need to be engaged and enjoy your job in order to be able and willing to invest in engaging your learners with you and the learning opportunities you create. Research has shown how teacher and learner psychologies are in fact two sides of the same coin (e.g. Dresel and Hall 2013; Frenzel and Stephens 2013). Essentially, our physiological states and emotions are 'contagious' for our learners. Quite simply, if teachers are engaged and passionate about their work and their languages, then learners are more likely to be too (Mifsud 2011; Skinner and Belmont 1993). Indeed, in respect to language learning motivation, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) contend that the teacher's level of enthusiasm and commitment is one of the most important factors that can affect learners' motivation to learn. Their conclusion coincides with the bidirectional nature of engagement stated above: 'if a teacher is motivated to teach, there is a good chance that his or her students will be motivated to learn' (p. 158).

If at the front of the classroom you are not conveying enthusiasm for your material with at least a reasonable level of energy, how can you expect a class full of sleep deprived, distracted students to eagerly tackle whatever you have planned?

(Cavanagh 2016: 64)

However, teachers are only human and we too quite naturally also suffer occasional lows. The challenge is to maintain our passion for teaching in the long term and recover from any setbacks. As Bentley-Davies (2010: 243) reminds us, 'teaching is a marathon, not a sprint'. For this reason,

teachers need to attend to their all-round well-being. If we are overworked or exhausted, we have nothing left to invest in our teaching and no energy with which to cope with the demands of working in a language classroom. We are quite simply better teachers when we are refreshed and motivated. Looking after our well-being as teachers 'is not an indulgence, it is the key to resilience and good practice in action' (Roffey 2011: 133).



REFLECTION TASK 3

The six principles in this chapter highlight the importance of establishing positive rapport to facilitating learner engagement. You may want to take a moment to reflect on how confident you feel that you already teach with these principles in mind. Are there some you find easier than others? Are there any other ideas you would add about why and how to build rapport with learners?

Teacher Actions

The principles outlined above are the building blocks needed to facilitate learner engagement with us as teachers. Although we mentioned some practical ways of realising them, they concerned primarily the social and affective dimensions of relational engagement. Now we want to turn to specific interactional strategies that foreground more the cognitive and behavioural dimensions of engagement with us. Our focus will be on how we interact with learners, because the discourse we use has the potential to influence all relationships and has particular centrality in the language classroom; as Knight (2016: 3) explains, 'one of the most important and powerful ways we can improve our schools is to improve the way we interact with each other'.

Action 1: Take Care With Teacher Talk

The power of teacher language cannot be overstated. The language we use with students every day influences how they see themselves, their teacher, their classmates, and their experience with learning.

(Denton 2007: 31)

How we talk to learners in our classrooms, and particularly how we talk about language learning, has the power to affect not only what they believe about themselves and language learning but also the nature of their relationship to us. There are two levels of interaction we can reflect on: how teacher talk affects learner readiness for interaction, and *what* teachers say and *how* they say it. Firstly, there is the dialogue between teacher and learner, and learner *readiness* for interaction. As we suggested above, we can enhance our communication by ensuring we are approachable. Fundamentally, we have to give learners the chance

to communicate. This means giving them the space to talk with us and their peers and showing a willingness to truly listen. In language learning specifically, we need to create opportunities for learners to use the target language actively. At the basic level, this means critically evaluating how much *teacher talk* there is compared to student talking time. Petty (2014: 154) reports that, in general education, teachers talk on average for 60% of lessons and he considers this too much; as he then adds, 'good teachers know when to shut up!'.



REFLECTION TASK 4

Who tends to do most of the talking in your classes? How many of the learners are actively using the language and for how long? Who is getting more chance to use the language – you or the pupils?

It requires little justification that there need to be sufficient opportunities for genuine communication on personally meaningful topics. Ideally, speaking tasks should offer learners the chance to bring in their own perspectives on topics that are of personal interest and relevance. Of course, as will be discussed in the next chapter, an open speaking climate requires positive group dynamics, so that learners are not afraid to speak up and feel confident that they will not be mocked or rebuked. If we want learners to engage with us, we must make engaging with us as comfortable and easy as possible.

As the children leave your classroom, don't pass up the opportunity for some mini-conversations. Remember this is what your discipline is founded on. Particularly with the hard-to-reach brigade, this is an ideal moment as they pass you by to say something positive to them, when they don't have the rest of the gallery in attendance.

(Toward, Henley and Cope 2015: 132)

The second level of teacher talk is concerned with *what* we say and *how* we say it. We can use our voices to convey our enthusiasm and engage learners in what we are doing by varying pitch and volume, using facial expression and gesture to add emphasis. We can use eye contact and make sure we 'sweep the room' to embrace all our learners in our visual engagement with the class. Our body language can also communicate a lot about our enthusiasm and confidence as a teacher. Somebody slouching, looking at their shoes, hiding behind a desk with their arms crossed, is not conveying the image of an engaging teacher. We can ensure we move around to be near all the learners, respectful of appropriate gender and cultural distances, crouching down when appropriate and generally being an active and visible part of the classroom community. A simple smile can also be infectious and engaging, and, interestingly, can also help reduce your own stress (Kraft and Pressman 2012).

Our choice of words can also have a powerful effect in setting the tone for our relationship. Language can be open, calm, respectful and inviting or can be indifferent and distancing, closing off dialogue. Language can also communicate our faith in all of learners' abilities and potential to improve. While constructive feedback (see below) is useful, it is also important to tell learners what they are doing well and what aspects of their behaviours and approaches we appreciate. Linley (2008) coined the term 'strengthspotting' and argued that most students are in dire need of help in identifying what they are good at so that they can flourish and confidently engage with the teacher and learning. This focus on learner strengths is also an effective way of implicitly fostering a growth mindset in our learners.

Just as linguists distinguish between the surface structure of language (the actual words) and the deep structure (concepts), so too does the language of classroom exchanges reveal deep meanings about learning and learners, responsibility and effort, intelligence and enterprise, and so too does this language help to build profound beliefs about engaging learners as capable learners.

(VanDeWeghe 2009: 62)

Action 2: Be Thoughtful About Feedback

Feedback has been found to be one of the most influential factors on student learning and achievement (Hattie 2009). Essentially, feedback is about providing the learner with useful information about how they have done on a task or how they are approaching it – both outcomes and process. It can be a way of communicating with learners in a constructive, personalised manner, to bridge the gap between current competence and provide direction for progress towards learning goals. As argued above, feedback should ideally point out strengths as well as areas in need of improvement. To be most engaging, feedback is best conceptualised as a form of dialogue; rather than a 'one-way' street (Nicol 2010), feedback functions best as an interactive process in which teachers and learners communicate together about learning and teaching. This communicates to learners that they are actively involved in their learning progress and processes – that is, it makes them agents rather than merely passive recipients. Campbell and Schumm Fauster (2013) report on an approach to feedback with advanced learners in which learners asked questions about their written work and a question and answer dialogue developed across multiple drafts. Another interesting example was presented by Nakamura (2016): she described how the feedback process became an opportunity for learners and teacher to get to know each other through written comments and questions about the content as well as the language.

From the learners' point of view, the most salient form of feedback is the *grades* they receive. The problem with grades is that they can completely undermine our efforts to build rapport with our students, because of the emphasis on the product rather than on the process, and with the preoccupation with comparing, ranking and categorising students. Unfortunately, because of their ultimate importance in every facet of most education systems, grades frequently become equated in the minds of students with a sense of self-worth; that is, they consider themselves only as worthy as their school-related achievements. One way of mitigating this damage is to complement teacher ratings with students' *self-assessment*. This not only shows students that you trust their honesty and judgement but it can also serve as a valuable vehicle to enhance student engagement. For example, Mercer and Schumm (2009) describe a particularly engaging approach whereby learners and teachers work together in developing grading scales: they invited adult learners to discuss collectively the criteria on which a piece of writing of a specific genre should be assessed and which of these aspects they felt were more or less important. The process created transparency, it got learners to reflect deeply on the task at hand and what it involved, and it also engaged them in dialogue with each other and the teacher about the criteria for appraisal of their work.

Assessment is the area where achievement-based societies and student-centred teaching principles inevitably clash.

(Dörnyei 2001: 131)

Once we help learners to see feedback as part of a joint dialogue aimed at helping them to self-assess and make progress towards their goals, even negative feedback becomes less threatening, particularly if we word criticism as advice (Petty 2014) – feedback will thus be seen as part of the teacher's role as advisor. Emphasising this role is all the more important, because effective feedback has to be informative. Accordingly, Hattie (2009) stresses that for feedback to be useful to students, it must address one of the following three key areas in an informative way: the task itself, the process of working on the task, and/or self-regulation competencies for working further on related tasks. In terms of positive feedback, there tends to be an overwhelming assumption that praise is inherently positive and motivating.

Praise that focuses on the person, however, especially in a generic generalised sense, runs the risk of fostering a fixed mindset, implying that the merit for the praise lies with some innate person-related trait (Mueller and Dweck 1998). In contrast, praise which looks at the process and not the product of learning can highlight the effort, strategies and approach taken, thereby supporting a growth mindset. The most effective forms of praise are specific. If the teacher says, 'Well done, Li Na!', the learner is unlikely to learn much from this as it is vague and unclear. However,

if the teacher provides more detailed feedback, such as 'Well done, Li Na. You used some really good linking words that helped the cohesion of your text', the learner can build on this in future work. Essentially, however, any praise given must be genuine and deserved. As Hyland and Hyland (2006: 221) explain, 'students are adept at recognizing formulaic positive comments that serve no function beyond removing the sting from criticisms and do not generally welcome empty remarks'.

To be effective, feedback needs to be clear, purposeful, meaningful and compatible with students' prior knowledge, and to provide logical connections. It also needs to prompt active information processing on the part of the learner, have low task complexity, relate to specific and clear goals, and provide little threat to the person at the self level.

(Hattie 2009: 177–178)

Action 3: Listen to Learners

Knight's (2016) book, *Better Conversations*, discusses how we can improve our abilities to interact and be better conversational partners with our learners and our colleagues in schools. He offers a range of useful, practical guidelines, including displaying empathy, seeing conversation partners as equals, finding common ground, managing our emotions, building trust, being interested in what others have to say, and being humble in reflecting how we can learn from them. However, the core of his guidelines centres around the conversational skill of being a *good listener*. For educators, this means maybe a shift in our perception of how we see our learners as conversation partners. This means not viewing them as an audience to be talked at or as objects to be influenced, but rather as partners to be engaged with in two-way conversations. A healthy interactive 'back and forth' with students is the foundation of respectful engagement with each other.

Importantly, listening requires effortful thinking, concentration and empathy. A first step to enhance our listening abilities is simply not to interrupt, as it may inadvertently send the message that we feel what the learner is saying does not matter or is not as valid as what we are saying (Knight 2016). Another dimension to effective interaction and listening involves use of teacher *wait time*. This refers to the time between a teacher asking a question and either a student responding or the teacher asking another question. According to research, most teachers tend to wait less than one second for responses; in language classrooms this is more likely to be one to two seconds (Shrum 1984, 1985; Smith and King 2017). However, ideally, we should be allowing three to five seconds for learners to respond. Studies show that extending wait time even by just one to three additional seconds can give a greater number of students the space and time to speak up, thereby significantly enhancing the quality of discourse

in the classroom and boosting learner engagement (Smith and King in press; Tobin 1987).

Listening is an important way to show respect for others. When we really listen, we have a chance to enter into a deeper form of communication. A conversation characterized by people really listening is humanizing for all parties.

(Knight 2016: 56)

Action 4: Use Questions to Engage

The other side of listening is *questioning*, and how we use this in the language classroom can be defining for learner engagement. In language teaching, the most common structure of discourse in the classroom is known as IRF, which stands for Initiation, Response, Feedback. Typically, it is the teacher who initiates an interaction, often through a question to which a learner responds and which the teacher reacts to with feedback. However, if we get the learners to initiate interactions by getting them to come up with the questions, classroom engagement can be transformed. Wallace and Kirkman (2014: 109) go so far as to argue that, 'learners should be encouraged to ask more questions than the teacher asks'. They warn us that in some classrooms, asking questions is interpreted by learners as a sign of being unintelligent and by teachers as an irritating interruption. Instead, engagement benefits from a culture which views learner questioning as a positive indication of engagement and student-initiated dialogue as a chance for learners to develop higher order critical thinking skills as they reflect more deeply and develop their own curiosity (see Chapter 5 for more practical advice).

The prevailing practice of teachers asking questions reflects an assumption that the primary function of questioning is as a way of checking understanding – in that sense, questions are often no more than minimal tests. Walsh and Sattes (2011) are probably right in suggesting that many teachers fail to see the potential in their questions as a rich source of data about learners' overall learning and competencies beyond mere comprehension. In terms of engagement, certain types of questions from the teacher, but especially questions stemming from the learners, can get learners actively thinking about their learning and the tasks at hand.



TYPES OF TEACHER QUESTIONS THAT DON'T WORK WELL

Bonwell and Eison (1991) found that questions were *less* successful if:

- they were too broad or vague and therefore confused students;
- they asked several sub-questions at once;
- they were so convergent that students perceived only one answer was 'right' and therefore hesitated to respond;
- they were factually oriented with one answer.

A particular form of questioning that has been suggested as being beneficial not only for engagement and relationships but also for higher order thinking is what is known as 'academic press' (Fredricks 2014: 142) or what Lemov (2015: 108) refers to as 'stretch it'. This is where teachers make learners stretch their knowledge with additional follow-up questions. The idea is that if the learner provides an appropriate answer to a question, we follow up with further questions, such as more challenging questions or how/why questions, to allow learners to expand on their answers. Not being satisfied with the shortest, quickest or even the first correct answer shows learners you have those high expectations for them all, and models that learning is never done and that there is always more we can do to 'stretch' ourselves. An extension of this process is to encourage learners to listen and respond to each other more. Wallace and Kirkman (2014: 103) propose an activity where students are encouraged to continue the discussion by asking more questions. After a student responds to the teacher's question, this student asks another student a question, and the next student responds and asks another question, and so on. The idea being that the whole class is working together to keep the questioning going. As such, questioning becomes part of classroom life and culture.

Action 5: Deal With Discipline Relationally

A final point we wish to reflect on is the issue of classroom discipline and how this can be addressed from a relational perspective in a way that fosters learner engagement (we shall further discuss this topic in the next chapter from the point of group dynamics). Discipline and, more generally, classroom management, is obviously a topic that can fill a book in its own right (see e.g. Scrivener 2012; Wright 2005) but here we would like to focus only on one aspect of it. Davis et al. (2012: ix) suggest that we need to rethink classroom management, seeing it not as being about managing learners but rather about *managing relationships*. A trusting relationship with the learners is expected to lead to fewer disruptive incidents, and indeed, Marzano, Marzano and Pickering (2003) analysed over 100 studies on classroom management and concluded that teachers who had high-quality relationships with their learners reported approximately 30% fewer behavioural problems in their classrooms.

We no longer live in a deferential age where those in authority are automatically revered and respected. Order is not maintained by fear of the consequences of doing wrong. Discipline has to be earned and the key to successful discipline is relationships.

(Toward et al. 2015: 144)

A frequent challenge for early-career-stage teachers is to find the appropriate professional distance with their learners, fluctuating between being overfriendly or too authoritarian. Perhaps a deep-lying misunderstanding

of this difficulty is that there is no contradiction between being a warm, friendly and kind teacher and also having routines, rules and boundaries. These are not a contradiction, quite the opposite in fact. Roffey (2011: 19) makes the distinction between 'being friendly' and 'being a friend'. She explains that pupils do not want to be your friend, although they would doubtless appreciate you being friendly. Moreover, we are in agreement with Quigley (2016: 148) that, 'Rules do not crush the humanity and individuality of our students. Instead, they provide clear expectations for learning to thrive for everybody.' While teachers can seek to develop mutual trust, this does not mean being gullible, and from time to time discipline and correction of misbehaviours will also be necessary (Tschannen-Moran 2014).

Too easily, a focus on trust and developing a relationship becomes confused with being liked and not establishing the boundaries for the good behaviour that are needed. The kindest act we could ever commit for our students would be to give them the safety conferred by explicit boundaries of how they should behave.

(Quigley 2016: 141)

The autonomy-supportive behaviours and the various actions involving pupils in explicit dialogue about decisions – described earlier in this chapter – can contribute significantly to the emergence of a healthy teacher–student relationship. This is sometimes called the 'proactive' aspect of discipline (in contrast to the 'reactive side') because, given good relationships, we can proactively reduce the need for any reactive interventions. However, this 'ideal' perspective seems to be shattered when sometimes, despite our best proactive efforts, conflicts happen and require disciplinary action. At times like this, some teachers may revert back to authoritarian stances so as to prevent such episodes from happening again. The best advice in such situations is, 'Hold your nerve!' Drawing on the principles of group development, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) emphasise that conflicts are not necessarily bad but can serve a variety of useful purposes: 'they may be the grist for the mill' (p. 141). They argue that conflicts are useful from the group's point of view because they can provide the necessary push for the group to move forward together (see more in Chapter 4).



POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF CONFLICTS

- *Conflicts can increase student involvement:* Heated discussions or even confrontations are the sign that the people who were involved in them care, and if the issue in question can be resolved satisfactorily, the parties will be drawn into a deeper commitment.
- *Conflicts can provide an outlet for hostility:* By bottling things up, conflicting issues do not go away but fester and might develop into deep-seated hostilities. Giving vent to some of the tension can be liberating, provided there is a supportive atmosphere.

- *Conflicts can promote group cohesiveness*: Contrary to beliefs, confrontations do not necessarily ruin the relationship between people but can actually enhance it; even upsetting interpersonal reactions can be constructive, as they lead to a deeper connection between the parties.
- *Conflicts can increase group productivity*: Conflict over issues often promotes critical thinking and can help to improve on various task-specific procedures. It would, in fact, be unusual to find a high-achieving group that is not characterised by vibrant disputes that occasionally escalate into rows.

(Wilson 2002)



REFLECTION TASK 5

How have you personally handled conflict effectively in the past? How comfortable are you with remaining patient and keeping calm? What conflict situations are you in, or potentially in, right now and how might they be resolved?

The real question is how we react when discipline is called for. A key rule is to remain respectful. The simple rule of taking a deep breath, issuing a 'look' and counting a few seconds, gives time for your cognition to catch up and helps to stop our emotions hijacking how we respond. It is usually rightly recommended that we should never engage in an argument with a pupil in front of an audience, but deal with incidents quietly in a space out of the room, or after class, in which there is no public humiliation or battle for either of you. In terms of the language we use, it is best to seek to be as unconflictual as possible. We can simply use a non-verbal signal such as a 'look' or raising your hand to remind and warn learners, or we can describe what the learner is *doing* to remind them of their behaviour, prompting them to reflect on what the desirable behaviour ought to be, rather than telling them what not to do. Ideally, we should always use their names to connect relationally, such as 'Samuel, *you're talking* when Pablo is giving an answer to my question'. It is worth bearing in mind when disciplining to name and focus on the *behaviour*, and not some characteristic or trait of the person – it is the behaviour we are responding to and trying to change. Consider the effects instead of saying, 'Samuel, *you're selfish and never listen*'. This statement suggests a negative personality trait and generalises a single incident to supposed behaviours the learner 'always' or 'never' does. When disciplining, even when you may have an issue with a specific behaviour at a moment in time, it is important for learners to know you believe in them and you still 'care' for them. In particular, following a disciplinary incident, it is important for teachers to demonstrably 'repair and rebuild' (Rogers 2007: 23) their relationship to the learner, to ensure the rapport is not damaged from the experience.



REFLECTION TASK 6

The previous action points all centre around how we interact and communicate with our learners. In this final reflection task, we suggest a series of questions to evaluate your own interactional patterns and relational engagement:

- How at ease are your learners speaking to you in the target language?
- How comfortable are your learners speaking in front of their peers?
- In what ways can you elicit feedback from your learners about tasks and topics?
- Can you think of a strength or positive characteristic for specific learners you work with?
- How many opportunities do you have for really engaging in dialogue with your learners, in written or spoken form?
- What kinds of questions do you typically ask your learners?
- How long, on average, do you wait for students to respond to a question before prompting or moving on?
- To what extent do you use follow-up questions initiated by you or the other learners?
- In what ways could you be more relationally-aware in how you discipline bad behaviour?
- How consciously do you seek to repair your relationship with a learner after a discipline incident?
- What areas of your interaction with learners would you like to work on developing further?

Summary

In this chapter, we have discussed the importance of the relationship between teacher and learner as a basis for all learning engagement, but especially the engagement with us as teachers specifically. We have sought to foreground the importance of putting the relationships we build with learners at the centre of our teaching planning and in-class behaviours. We reflected on six principles to facilitate learner engagement with teachers, especially in affective and social terms. The attitudes and behaviours of the teacher are central. This includes being approachable, empathetic, and responsive to learner individuality, believing in all of your learners' potential to improve, seeking to support learner autonomy, and remaining passionate about what you do.

It is not new to argue that relationships matter [in education] but the body of evidence is now quite large and powerful. We can conclude that the connections between people in schools are a driving force in shaping engagement with school.

(McLaughlin and Clarke 2010: 99)

We proposed five specific action points, which teachers can employ to support these principles and engender learner engagement, particularly in terms of cognitive and behavioural engagement. The key is the importance of balanced, respectful interaction:

- Take care with teacher talk
- Be thoughtful about feedback
- Listen to learners
- Use questions to engage
- Deal with discipline relationally



CHAPTER IN A NUTSHELL

In order to develop learner engagement, we need to work on developing a positive relationship with our students and reflect on how we make ourselves available and interact with them.



IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE

Davis, H. A., Summers, J. J. and Miller, L. M. (2012). *An Interpersonal Approach to Classroom Management: Strategies for Improving Student Engagement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. (This book explores how interpersonal relationships lie at the heart of learner engagement.)

Roffey, S. (2011). *Changing Behaviour in Schools: Promoting Positive Relationships and Wellbeing*. London: SAGE. (This book focuses on how to promote quality relationships between teachers and pupils and how such relationships are connected to better behaviour.)

Weinstein, R. (2002). *Reaching Higher: The Power of Expectations in Schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (This book reports on the ways in which teachers can hold expectations of pupils and how these affect the learning opportunities the teachers generate.)