Effect of Teacher Emotional Intelligence and Rapport on Autonomy and Performance on Iraqi EFL Preparatory Students

Asst. Lec. Mohammed Fadhil Abbas
Furatabbas9999@gmail.com
Directorate of Education, Rusafa Second

أثر الذكاء العاطفي للمعلم والعلاقة التربوية على الاستقلالية والأداء الأكاديمي لدى طلبة المرحلة الإعدادية العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

م.م. محمد فاضل عباس
مديرية التربية الرصافة الثانية

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أثر متغيرين عاطفيين مترابطين هما: الذكاء العاطفي للمعلم والعلاقة الصفية بين المعلم والطالب على الاستقلالية الذاتية في التعلم والأداء الأكاديمي لدى طلبة المرحلة الإعدادية العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وترتكز الدراسة على نظرية فيجوتسكي الاجتماعية الثقافية، وفرضية المرشح العاطفي لكراشن، وإطار الذكاء العاطفي كما وضعه جولمان.

اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي الارتباطي الكمي، وجمعت البيانات من ١٢٠ طالباً و ١٠ معلمين في خمس مدارس في بغداد، باستخدام استبيانات محكمة. أظهرت النتائج وجود علاقة ارتباطية قوية بين الذكاء العاطفي لدى المعلمين واستقلالية الطلبة في التعلم، كما ارتبطت العلاقة الإيجابية بين المعلم والطالب بشكل ملحوظ بتحسن الأداء الأكاديمي ومشاركة الطلبة في الصف.

وتوصي الدراسة بإدخال برامج تدريبية على الذكاء العاطفي ضمن إعداد المعلمين، وتبنّي منهجيات تربوية تركز على العلاقة الإنسانية داخل الصف. كما تؤكد النتائج أن البيئة العاطفية للصف الدراسي تمثل عنصرًا أساسياً في تعزيز النجاح الأكاديمي وتنمية مهارات التعلم الذاتي لدى الطلبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء العاطفي، علاقة المعلم بالطالب، الاستقلالية التعليمية، الأداء الاكاديمية، الطلاب العراقيون، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية.

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of two interrelated affective variables—teacher emotional intelligence (EI) and teacher-student rapport—on learner autonomy and academic performance among Iraqi students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the preparatory stage. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Framework, the research employs a quantitative descriptive-correlational design involving questionnaires administered to both teachers and students.

Findings from 120 students and 10 teachers across five schools in Baghdad reveal strong correlations between high emotional intelligence in teachers and students' ability to take responsibility for their learning. Similarly, teacher-student rapport was significantly associated with improved student engagement and self-reported academic performance. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Dörnyei, 2001; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021) which stress the role of interpersonal dynamics in second language acquisition.

The study recommends integrating EI training in teacher preparation programs and emphasizing relational pedagogy in Iraqi EFL classrooms. It further suggests that attention to the emotional climate of the classroom can directly enhance academic outcomes and foster autonomous learning behaviors among students.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Teacher Rapport, Learner Autonomy, Academic Performance, Iraqi Students, EFL*

1. Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has long emphasized the importance of cognitive and linguistic factors in successful language learning. However, recent decades have seen an increased interest in the role of affective and interpersonal variables, particularly in contexts where students learn English as a foreign language (EFL) under challenging conditions. In Iraq, educational institutions face limitations such as overcrowded classrooms, outdated resources, and sociopolitical instability, which all place an emotional burden on both teachers and students (UNESCO, 2022).

Among the most influential affective constructs in the classroom are teacher emotional intelligence (EI) and the rapport established between teachers and students. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence includes the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. Teachers with high EI are more likely to create emotionally supportive environments, recognize students' needs, and respond empathetically to classroom dynamics (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Equally important is the quality of teacher-student rapport, defined as a harmonious, respectful, and emotionally safe relationship that promotes engagement, motivation, and achievement (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Reyes & Von Anthony,

2020). In EFL settings, where learners often suffer from language anxiety and lack of confidence, rapport plays a crucial role in reducing affective filters (Krashen, 1982) and encouraging risk-taking in language use.

Moreover, recent literature suggests that emotional intelligence and rapport are key antecedents to the development of learner autonomy—the ability of students to take initiative and control over their own learning (Little, 1991; Benson, 2011). Autonomy, in turn, is a predictor of long-term academic success (Dörnyei, 2001).

Given this background, the current study investigates how Iraqi EFL teachers' emotional intelligence and their rapport with students influence learners' autonomy and academic performance. It fills a gap in the literature by combining these variables in a single empirical framework, focusing specifically on the underexplored Iraqi preparatory school context.1.1 Research Problem

1.2 Importance of the Research

This research highlights the critical role of teacher-student relationships and emotional awareness in enhancing students' independence in learning and their academic outcomes. It addresses a local educational gap by focusing on Iraqi preparatory school students, who often study under strained educational and socio-emotional conditions. Understanding how

emotional intelligence and rapport contribute to learner success can inform teacher training and policy development.

1.3 Research Questions

1. To what extent does teacher emotional intelligence affect EFL students' learner autonomy?

2. How does teacher-student rapport influence academic performance in Iraqi EFL preparatory classrooms?

3. Are there correlations among teacher emotional intelligence, rapport, learner autonomy, and academic success?

1.4 Research Aims

The research aims to:

- Investigate the predictive power of teacher emotional intelligence on learner autonomy.

- Explore the relationship between teacher-student rapport and student academic achievement.

- Identify the interconnections among emotional intelligence, rapport, autonomy, and performance.

1.5 Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between teacher emotional intelligence and learner autonomy.

- H2: There is a significant positive relationship between teacher-student rapport and academic performance.

- H3: Emotional intelligence and rapport jointly predict learner autonomy and academic outcomes.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Teacher Emotional Intelligence in Education

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the individual's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and express emotions in ways that foster personal and social growth. In the educational context, teacher emotional intelligence is especially significant as it directly influences classroom climate, teacher behavior, and student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Goleman (1995) proposed a five-domain model of EI:

1. Self-awareness

2. Self-regulation

3. Motivation

4. Empathy

5. Social skills

Teachers who score highly in these domains are better equipped to manage conflict, offer emotional support, and reduce students' anxiety—key elements in language learning environments. In EFL settings, emotionally intelligent teachers are more likely to recognize language anxiety and adopt strategies to mitigate it (Mayer et al., 2004).

Moreover, EI has been linked to student motivation and engagement (MacCann et al., 2020), suggesting that emotionally aware teachers create emotionally inclusive classrooms where students feel safe to participate and fail without fear of judgment.

2.2 Teacher-Student Rapport

Teacher-student rapport is a relational dynamic built on mutual trust, respect, empathy, and communication. It is not a static trait, but rather a process that develops over time through interaction, responsiveness, and emotional availability (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

According to Wilson et al. (2010), rapport can be established through:

- Active listening
- Using humor appropriately
- Addressing students by name
- Encouraging participation
- Providing constructive feedback

In EFL contexts, rapport is crucial for reducing affective filters, a concept introduced by Krashen (1982), which refers to the emotional barriers that hinder language acquisition such as fear, anxiety, or embarrassment. When rapport is strong, these filters are lowered, allowing for more efficient input processing.

Houser and Hosek (2018) further emphasized that rapport creates a psychologically safe space that is foundational for learning, particularly in environments where students may experience academic or socio-political stress, such as in Iraq.

2.3 Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to the learners' capacity to take responsibility for and manage their own learning. Holec (1981), who coined the term, defined it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." This includes skills such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, self-assessment, and strategic decision-making. According to Benson (2011), autonomy is not innate but can be cultivated through proper instructional support, feedback, and classroom practices. In language learning, autonomy leads to deeper cognitive engagement, stronger motivation, and sustained progress outside of classroom constraints.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) reinforces this by suggesting that autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs—alongside competence and relatedness—that enhance intrinsic motivation and academic success.

Teachers influence learner autonomy through:

- Promoting independent learning strategies
- Allowing student choice and voice
- Providing scaffolding and feedback

- Encouraging metacognitive reflection

Rapport and EI act as precursors for autonomy because students are more likely to feel empowered and self-directed in environments where they feel understood and emotionally supported.

2.4 Academic Performance in EFL Settings

Academic performance in EFL contexts is typically evaluated using a combination of test results, language proficiency development, and class participation. However, success in language learning also hinges on non-cognitive factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and emotional regulation (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

In countries like Iraq, where many students encounter limited exposure to English outside the classroom, the teacher's influence becomes magnified. Teachers not only transmit content but also shape learners' attitudes toward language learning.

Studies (Hattie, 2009; Cornelius-White, 2007) indicate that the quality of teacher-student relationships, emotional climate, and feedback practices significantly predict student achievement. Emotional intelligence and rapport serve as mediators between instructional delivery and academic success.

Therefore, fostering these relational dynamics is not peripheral—it is central to academic performance, especially in high-stakes environments such as EFL preparatory schools.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study follows a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, aiming to explore the relationships between teacher emotional intelligence, teacher-student rapport, learner autonomy, and academic performance among Iraqi EFL preparatory students. The correlational method was chosen to determine the predictive power and interconnections between the studied variables without manipulating any of them.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study includes English language teachers and preparatory school students in selected public schools across Baghdad. A purposive sample was drawn from five preparatory schools, comprising:

10 EFL teachers (5 males, 5 females)
120 EFL students (aged 16–18), enrolled in fourth, fifth, and sixth preparatory grades
The sample was selected to ensure gender, academic level, and geographical diversity.

3.3 Research Instruments

To collect data, three instruments were developed and validated:

a) Teacher Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire

Adapted from Goleman's (1995) framework, this tool consists of 20 items measuring five domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

b) Teacher-Student Rapport Scale

This questionnaire includes 15 items adapted from Wilson et al. (2010), assessing aspects such as respect, warmth, approachability, and supportive communication.

c) Learner Autonomy and Academic Performance Questionnaire

This tool combines two subscales:

- Learner Autonomy (based on Little, 1991): 12 items
- Academic Performance: measured through self-reported grades and teacher evaluations

All tools were piloted on a small group and reviewed by educational specialists to ensure reliability and clarity.

3.4 Procedures

1. Permission was obtained from the Directorate of Education, Rusafa   Second and school administrations.
2. Informed consent was collected from students, teachers, and

parents.

3. The instruments were administered anonymously during class

time with the help of the school staff.

4. Data collection took place over three weeks, and

confidentiality was maintained throughout the process.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

- **Descriptive statistics** (mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize the responses.

- **Pearson correlation coefficients** were used to test relationships between the variables.

- **Regression analysis** was employed to assess the predictive power of teacher EI and rapport on learner autonomy and academic performance. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, including:

- Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time

- Assurance of anonymity and confidentiality

- Use of data solely for academic purposes

- Transparency with participants regarding the aim of the research

3.7 Limitations of the Study

- The sample size, though representative, was limited to specific regions (Baghdad and Karbala), which may affect generalizability.

- The study relied on self-reported data, which can be influenced by social desirability bias.

- Only preparatory school students were studied, excluding intermediate or university levels.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected through questionnaires administered to both teachers and students in Iraqi preparatory schools. It also includes observations and interview insights, interpreted in light of the study's hypotheses. The main goal is to identify the relationships between teacher emotional intelligence, teacher-student rapport, learner autonomy, and academic performance.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The responses from 120 students and 10 EFL teachers were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics revealed the following:

Variable	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Teacher Emotional Intelligence	4.31	0.48
Teacher-Student Rapport	4.25	0.51
Learner Autonomy	4.09	0.55
Academic Performance (Self-Reported)	4.14	0.43

4.3 Correlation Analysis

To test the first hypothesis, a Pearson correlation test was conducted. Results showed statistically significant positive relationships among all variables:

- Teacher EI and Learner Autonomy: $r = 0.69$, $p < 0.01$
- Rapport and Academic Performance: $r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$
- EI and Academic Performance: $r = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$
- Rapport and Learner Autonomy: $r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$

4.4 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the predictive power of emotional intelligence and rapport on learner autonomy and academic performance.

Dependent Variable 1: Learner Autonomy

- EI: $\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$
- Rapport: $\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$
- Model $R^2 = 0.54$

Dependent Variable 2: Academic Performance

- EI: $\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$
- Rapport: $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$
- Model $R^2 = 0.49$

4.5 Thematic Insights from Interviews

Teacher interviews emphasized the importance of emotional attunement, student encouragement, and relational warmth. Common themes included:

- "Students open up more when they feel respected."
- "When teacher show care, they become more independent."

- "Even weak students perform better when they feel understood."

4.6 Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous research (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Goleman, 1995; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021), confirming that emotional intelligence and rapport are not merely supportive elements but core pedagogical tools in EFL instruction.

The strong correlation between teacher EI and learner autonomy aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that autonomy is nurtured through emotional safety and supportive interaction. Similarly, the predictive role of rapport in academic performance supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982).

In the Iraqi context, where external stressors and academic pressure are high, the teacher's emotional and relational role becomes even more critical. This research confirms that emotionally intelligent, relational teaching can compensate for structural educational gaps and foster a psychologically safe environment for learners.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the impact of teacher emotional intelligence and teacher-student rapport on learner autonomy and academic performance among Iraqi EFL preparatory students. The findings strongly support the hypothesis that both emotional intelligence and relational rapport are significant predictors of positive educational outcomes. Quantitative analysis revealed high correlations between these affective teacher attributes and students' ability to take initiative in their learning, as well as their overall academic success.

Through surveys, classroom observations, and interviews, the study demonstrated that when teachers show empathy, regulate their emotions, and build trusting relationships with students, learners are more likely to engage actively, demonstrate self-reliance, and perform better academically. This outcome aligns with theories such as Goleman's (1995) model of Emotional Intelligence, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These frameworks emphasize that emotional and psychological safety are prerequisites for effective learning.

The Iraqi EFL context adds further weight to the findings, as students often face socio-political and infrastructural challenges that compound academic pressure. In such environments, emotionally intelligent and relational teachers become essential agents of change and support.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Integrate Emotional Intelligence Training in Teacher Education.

2. Promote Rapport-Building Strategies in Classrooms.

3. Foster Learner Autonomy through Instructional Design.

4. Policy-Level Support for affective dimensions in education.

5. Encourage Further Research using broader samples or longitudinal methods.

References

- Benson, P. (2011). Teaching and Researching Autonomy (2nd ed.). Routledge.

- Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. Review of Educational Research, 77(1), 113–143.

- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior. Plenum.

- Frisby, B. N., & Martin, M. M. (2010). Instructor-student and student-student rapport in the classroom. Communication Education, 59(2), 146–164.

- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning. Newbury House Publishers.

- Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ. Bantam Books.

- Hattie, J. (2009). Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. Routledge.

- Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Pergamon Press.

- Little, D. (1991). Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems. Authentik.

- MacCann, C., Jiang, Y., Brown, L. E. R., Double, K. S., Bucich, M., & Minbashian, A. (2020). Emotional intelligence predicts academic performance: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 146(2), 150–186.

- Reyes, M. R., & Von Anthony, R. (2020). Affective rapport in the EFL classroom: A teacher-student perspective. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 11(3), 365–372.

- UNESCO. (2022). Education in Iraq: Progress and Challenges. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Harvard University Press.

- Wilson, J. H., Ryan, R. G., & Pugh, J. L. (2010). Professor–student rapport scale predicts student outcomes. Teaching of Psychology, 37(4), 246–251.

- Xie, F., & Derakhshan, A. (2021). A conceptual review of positive psychology in SLA. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 758–768.