

The influence of rapport on incarcerated adolescents' speaking skills

La influencia de la relación socio-afectiva (rapport) en las habilidades del habla de adolescentes reclusos

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Abstract:

The effects of rapport in EFL classrooms have been widely discussed by scholars; however, little attention has been given to its impact in unique teaching settings such as correctional facilities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe whether building rapport with incarcerated students enables their oral English development. Data were collected through eight weekly reflections written by the researcher during her teaching period in the youth prison. These reflections were examined using an autoethnography case study approach, which allowed the researchers to interpret the teacher's experience to become the main source of information. The findings suggest that building rapport in a correctional setting contributes to students' confidence and participation, which facilitated the transition from silence to voluntary sentence production. This study offers a valuable contribution by documenting rapport from a teacher's perspective within a context that has received limited attention.

Keywords: rapport, correctional education, EFL, speaking skills

Resumen:

Los efectos de la relación socio-afectiva (rapport) en aulas de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) han sido ampliamente discutidos por diversos académicos; sin embargo, se ha prestado poca atención a su impacto en contextos de enseñanza únicos, como centros penitenciarios. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo determinar si el desarrollo de esta relación con estudiantes reclusos facilita el desarrollo de expresión oral en inglés. Los datos se recopilaron a través de ocho reflexiones semanales escritas por la investigadora durante el periodo en el que enseñó en la prisión para adolescentes. Estas reflexiones fueron analizadas mediante un enfoque de estudio de caso autoetnográfico, lo que permitió a las investigadoras interpretar la experiencia de la docente para que se convirtiera en la fuente principal de información. Los hallazgos sugieren que el desarrollo de rapport en entornos correccionales fomenta la confianza y participación estudiantil, lo cual facilitó la transición de silencio a producción voluntaria de enunciados. Este estudio aporta evidencia valiosa al documentar el rapport desde la perspectiva docente en un contexto poco explorado.

Palabras Clave: relación socio-afectiva, educación en centros de reclusión, inglés como lengua extranjera, competencia oral

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Fecha de recepción: 22/01/2026, Fecha de aceptación: 03/03/2026, Fecha de publicación: 05/05/2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29057/lc.v7i14.16924>



Introduction

Mexico currently ranks among the countries with the highest rates of violent crime (Human Rights Watch, 2024), and minors are part of this reality. Thousands of teenagers live in juvenile detention centers due to serious crimes (Azaola, 2014). These correctional facilities should not only function as places of punishment but also as spaces for reintegration into society. According to Article 18 of the United Mexican States Political Constitution...

The prison system shall be organized on the basis of respect for human rights, as well as work, training, education, health, and sports as a means to achieve an inmate's social rehabilitation, advising him/her not to transgress again and explaining to him/her the benefits of complying with the law.

However, Escobedo (2020) argues that incarceration, far from achieving rehabilitation, increases the criminal recidivism rate. Therefore, he highlights the importance of understanding the role of education in inmates' rehabilitation. In his research, rehabilitation was considered successful when criminal recidivism did not occur. The author further concludes that education in jails reduces the probability of committing another crime, as inmates gain greater job opportunities, which improves their financial situation.

In this sense, learning English in prison transcends academic achievement, becoming a tool for social reintegration. As Kasun et al. (2020) state, proficiency in a second language prepares incarcerated youth for better life opportunities, whether in Mexico or abroad. However, for this educational tool to be effective, the quality of the interpersonal dynamics within the classroom is crucial. Escobedo (2020) emphasizes that teacher-student rapport is essential in the reintegration process, as negative relationships can result in poor academic performance, deficient learning, and limited rehabilitation.

This is particularly relevant given that incarcerated youth often face social stigmatization, which creates resistance to learning and reinserting into society (Young, Philips, and Nasir, 2010, as cited in Escobedo, 2020). Similarly, Patiño (2022) highlights that teachers' prejudices and misconceptions can hinder rapport-building in correctional settings. However, his findings suggested that when rapport is successfully established, it becomes a motivator for inmates to engage with language learning. These findings align with Giron et al.'s (2017) claim that EFL teachers can encourage students to develop speaking fluency by using rapport as a motivational

strategy. This is possible since students are more likely to interact and express their ideas when a friendly learning environment is promoted. "An improvement in classroom rapport, no matter how small, will enhance language acquisition" (Ellsworth, 2008, p. 82).

Speaking is considered one of the most demanding language skills, as it requires spontaneous production and interaction, which cannot occur without a supportive environment. Additionally, developing oral skills requires confidence, trust, and emotional safety (Giron et al., 2017), conditions that are often difficult to develop in confinement. Because oral proficiency is strongly connected to better job opportunities and social mobility in Mexico (British Council, 2015), it provides a meaningful opportunity to examine how rapport influences learning in correctional settings. This connection is particularly relevant for incarcerated adolescents as English language learning may broaden their future opportunities after their release (Kasun et al., 2020), potentially contributing to their integration into society.

Despite the relevance of rapport in EFL classrooms, there is a lack of research on its influence in correctional settings. Teaching in prison presents unique emotional and motivational barriers that differ widely from conventional environments, yet little is known about how these affective factors specifically impact oral production. Therefore, the aim of this research is to describe the influence of rapport on the development of incarcerated adolescents' speaking skills at the *Centro de Internamiento Para Adolescentes (CIPA)* in Pachuca, Hidalgo.

The relevance of this study lies in its potential to provide pedagogical insights for teaching in vulnerable contexts and to contribute to more effective reintegration programs. To guide this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What factors contribute to the development of positive rapport with incarcerated students?
2. How does positive rapport influence the speaking skills of incarcerated students?

To answer this, an autoethnography case study approach was adopted, using eight weekly reflections as the primary data source to provide an in-depth analysis of the classroom dynamics and the teacher's experience.

Literature review

Education in Mexican jails for minors

In Mexico, confinement applies only to teenagers between 14 and 17 who commit a serious crime. By August 2025, more than five thousand minors were in the criminal justice system in Mexico (Gobierno de México, 2025). This is an alarming statistic that is often overlooked by society.

In fact, citizens often fail to recognize the importance of reintegrating these adolescents into society, frequently viewing educational rights as an undeserved privilege rather than a tool for rehabilitation. As Gutierrez de Lucio, Hidalgo, and Espinoza (2018) point out, there is a common social perception that providing young offenders with their legal rights is a form of government maintenance that avoids criminal justice. This societal prejudice directly impacts the effectiveness of reintegration efforts.

Although Article 18 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States mandates that measures must focus on “social and family reinsertion” through full personal development, these principles are far from reality. Azaola (2014) explains that Mexico lacks a real social reintegration policy for adolescents, which limits their access to essential tools and increases the risk of criminal recidivism. In response to this gap, education emerges as a crucial factor. Escobedo (2020) concluded that recidivism is strongly associated with low educational attainment, whereas consistent educational opportunities significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending by improving inmates’ socioeconomic conditions and employability after their release.

In the same way, Kasun et al. (2020) stated that “provided with learning opportunities, especially for language learning, inmates can survive and maintain their dignity and humanity, as well as feel a sense of purpose filled with future possibilities, under the grimmest conditions” (p.3). Thus, this suggests that education plays a transformative role, offering them tools for rebuilding their lives. Reinserta (2018), in a sample of 502 young inmates, revealed that only 26% had completed basic education before their detention. However, 90% decided to continue their studies while in jail. When asked about their motivations, 66.7% stated that education would help them in the future, 62.2% mentioned personal growth, and 49% were motivated by the hope of supporting their families in the future.

Similarly, Azaola (2014) found that 88% of minors interviewed considered the activities offered during

confinement useful for their integration upon release. These findings show that, despite significant educational gaps, many incarcerated adolescents recognize the importance of education in their lives, and educational opportunities given during their incarceration could positively impact their successful reintegration into society.

The role of rapport in language learning

Rapport has been defined as “...the relationship or connection you establish with your students built on trust and respect that leads to students’ feeling capable, competent, and creative” (Brown, 2001, as cited in Ellsworth, 2008, p.63). This means that anything a teacher can do to foster emotional safety, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging will help students’ learning processes.

In line with this idea, Mellgren (2020) identified several factors that affect students’ achievement, such as teacher non-verbal immediacy, sharing concern or interests in students, communication, and having a warm classroom with structure. These practices not only contribute to establishing a supportive relationship with students but also enhance their academic performance.

Ellsworth (2008) explained that students’ stress or anxiety decreases when rapport is established, which aligns with Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, proposing that anxiety, fear, and negative emotions can block language intake. In addition, in a study conducted by Patiño (2022) at a Mexican jail for minors, the results showed that rapport allowed the researcher to motivate an inmate to learn the language. Regarding this, it can be argued that the affective nature of language is inseparable from language performance.

In fact, emotional variables often determine whether learners feel capable of using the target language. In this sense, rapport plays a crucial affective role, because as Arnold (2011) emphasises, the brain requires connection to meaningful experiences to achieve the necessary attention for learning, a process driven by emotions. Hence, rapport has been widely recognized as a tool for a successful learning process, particularly because teachers who prioritize students’ needs for affection and approval improve both classroom rapport and subsequent language acquisition (Ellsworth, 2008).

When it comes to the effects of rapport specifically on developing oral skills, Giron et al. (2017) presented evidence of how rapport motivated Mexican university students to speak English more fluently. In their study, they analyzed the effects of rapport on three different

groups of students and observed that teachers who built a positive rapport encouraged students' confidence and participation. Moreover, they compared the initial and final oral results of the students, and it was concluded that having a positive, friendly rapport with students improved their speaking abilities.

These findings reinforce the idea that speaking development depends not only on linguistic input but also on the emotional conditions in which English teaching takes place. However, building rapport becomes more challenging in contexts such as prisons. Learners' emotional states are shaped not only by classroom dynamics but also by their social contexts, including stigma, institutional control, and past experiences.

Additionally, in these environments, teachers' stigmatization and prejudices arise (Patiño, 2022; Young, as cited in Escobedo, 2020). These misconceptions about incarcerated students were reflected in a personal experience reported by Kasun et al. (2020):

Before and during my very first teaching in the confinement facility, I was nervous and afraid to meet my inmate students. Assuming that prisoners are bad people and would look and behave in a different, unusual way, I felt intimidated and scared of getting to know them in my heart (p.8).

According to Escobedo (2020), incarcerated youth face severe social stigmatization, which often results in internalized feelings of inadequacy and rejection. In the context of language learning, these feelings make students anxious to speak. Therefore, building rapport becomes a necessary strategy to lower this intense affective filter.

It is crucial to understand the impact of teaching in isolated contexts. As Gutierrez de Lucio, Hidalgo, and Espinoza (2018) stated, "...the only way of acquiring some knowledge or to develop a greater level of acquisition is by the interaction with his teacher" (p.7). In this sense, understanding rapport in juvenile correctional settings requires going beyond traditional classroom dynamics and acknowledging the emotional complexity that is required for students to be willing to speak. For students who have experienced punishment and social exclusion, rapport may become the foundation that makes language acquisition possible (Escobedo, 2020; Patiño, 2022).

In the Mexican context, English communicative proficiency has been consistently associated with real-

world opportunities such as social mobility, higher salaries, and better employment prospects (British Council, 2015). Such social value gives relevance to speaking development not only in academic terms but also as a useful tool that may support adolescents' future reintegration opportunities.

Although several studies have examined rapport in EFL classrooms, there is a lack of research on rapport specifically with incarcerated adolescents and how it affects their speaking skills. Existing studies in correctional settings have mostly focused on general educational benefits but not on oral communication. This gap is particularly relevant because the development of speaking skills requires affective conditions that are often difficult to achieve in confinement. Due to the limited research on oral communication in correctional EFL contexts, this study aims to describe how rapport influences incarcerated students' speaking abilities. Therefore, two research questions emerge:

1. What factors contribute to the development of positive rapport with incarcerated students?
2. How does positive rapport influence the speaking skills of incarcerated students?

Methodology

This section provides a detailed explanation of the process used to examine the influence of *rapport* on incarcerated students' speaking skills.

Firstly, an auto-ethnography qualitative approach was adopted to explore how *rapport* influenced the inmates' speaking skills through the interpretation of written reflections. Poulos (2021) defined this approach as: "...a way to include the researcher's experiences and insights more directly into accounts of the scene being studied" (p.4).

Additionally, a single case study design was chosen. According to Yin (2018), this design is particularly appropriate when the case represents an unusual or extreme circumstance. In this study, the case refers to one English group composed of three incarcerated adolescents at CIPA, representing a unique teaching context rarely accessible to researchers.

In line with Creswell's (2014) definition, case studies allow an in-depth analysis of a particular case, understood as a bounded system defined by time, participants, and activity. For this reason, this design was appropriate to examine the effects of *rapport* on the students' speaking

development within the unique environment of a correctional center.

Setting

This research was conducted at CIPA, located in Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo, Mexico. As part of the young inmates' release process, the facility offers educational programs such as English classes. These lessons are taught by pre-service student teachers from the B.A. in English Language Teaching at the *Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*.

When pre-service teachers arrive at the facility for the first time, adolescents are assigned in pairs or small groups to each teacher. Due to institutional policies, female teachers are not allowed to teach alone. Therefore, because the researcher was a woman, she co-taught with another pre-service teacher. However, due to the nature of this study, only the researcher's experience will be discussed. The teaching sessions were monitored by two main teachers who observed the lessons and provided feedback to the pre-service teacher.

The facility includes four classrooms and a large courtyard. The researcher's lessons were taught in the assigned classroom, and some activities were carried out in the courtyard. As part of the institution's regulations, security staff were always present nearby during the lessons, ensuring a controlled and supervised environment.

The incarcerated students' English level was approximately A1, based on their limited vocabulary and minimal oral production. Although no formal assessment was applied, classroom observations indicated basic communicative skills. At the beginning of the course, the group consisted of five male students between 15 and 19 years old; during week 2, one of them was transferred to another group, and during week 5, another student was released. Thus, the course continued with three juveniles for the remaining weeks. To protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were used when referring to them (Ed, Francisco, and Dan).

Instruments

Due to the legal regulations that restrict data collection from minors (such as audio recordings or formal interviews), the primary instrument for data collection was eight weekly reflections written by the researcher. These were open-ended reflections focused on two aspects: (1) the students' oral production during each lesson and (2) the development of rapport over time. This open format allowed the researcher to describe the classroom

experience in detail and to document the instructional decisions made throughout the teaching period.

According to Murphy (2001, as cited in Ellsworth, 2008), the purposes of reflective teaching are three: "(1) to expand one's understanding of the teaching-learning process; (2) to expand one's repertoire of strategic options as a language teacher; and (3) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities one is able to provide in language classrooms" (p.77). Through these reflections, the researcher analyzed each lesson by observing the students' speaking progress, the interactions that developed rapport, and the effectiveness of the classroom strategies implemented. This process allowed her to observe the students' progress and make informed instructional decisions throughout the course in order to strengthen rapport and, consequently, their speaking skills.

As Ellsworth (2008) stated: "By reflecting on lessons taught, teachers will not only improve the quality of their lessons but also strengthen rapport, thus improving student language acquisition" (p.79). Therefore, these reflections provided valuable insights into the teaching experience and the observed effects of positive rapport with incarcerated students.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by following Creswell's (2014) general steps for qualitative data analysis and interpretation. First, the reflections were organized and read multiple times to gain a general understanding of the teaching experience. Then, a coding process was conducted to gather information that could answer the research questions. Creswell (2014) explains that coding "involves taking text data ... gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) ... into categories, and labeling those categories with a term ..." (p. 247).

After the initial coding, the categories were grouped into broader themes. These themes were then interpreted to understand how rapport was developed and how it influenced students' oral production throughout the teaching period. In the next section, the findings are presented and discussed.

Findings and Discussion

The findings presented in this section address the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to the development of positive rapport with incarcerated students?

2. How does positive rapport influence the speaking skills of incarcerated students?

Based on the thematic analysis applied to the weekly reflections and on the interpretation of the data collected under each category. Two main themes emerged: (1) Establishing positive rapport in jail and (2) The effects of rapport on the development of speaking skills.

Establishing a positive rapport in jail

The analysis of the weekly reflections revealed three main factors that contributed to building rapport: classroom strategies, classroom environment, and praise.

Classroom strategies

At the beginning of the teaching period, the classroom atmosphere was characterized by tension and a lack of engagement. As noted in the first reflection, students showed initial resistance and seriousness, creating a barrier for interaction:

They were very respectful; however, I felt a tense environment, especially from one of them, Ed seemed not to be interested in the class, and the others were answering our questions, but they were all serious. (Week 1)

After observing this initial tension, the researcher reflected on the need to modify the teaching approach by implementing two key strategies: introducing interactive and low-pressure activities and personalizing the lessons based on students' interests. After a couple of weeks of implementation, it became evident that this combined strategy was working well to lower resistance. By week four, games emerged as a central and effective component to reduce this resistance. The following excerpt illustrates how shifting the dynamic helped students participate more actively:

We decided to sit down on the floor with them to not feel like the authority, and we played a memory game. Ed seemed to enjoy the activity the most. To my surprise, he participated actively this time. (Week 4)

Interactive and stimulating games not only improved their participation in class but also created a friendly environment that strengthened positive rapport. This emotional shift suggests the emergence of a relaxed and motivating atmosphere that facilitates learning, which aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982).

In addition to games, the second strategy involved planning classes based on the students' preferences.

From the beginning of the teaching period, the researcher asked about their preferred music, sports, movies, and other personal interests. This helped foster a sense of connection and personalization among the adolescents.

Last week, we asked them about their interests, which we used to present the topics. I used Dan's favorite artist as an example to model an activity as my own interests. Dan got very excited when he saw that. After that interaction, I felt more connected to him. I noticed his genuine happiness knowing that I like something he also does. (Week 2)

This supports Ellsworth's (2008) conclusion "...using rapport building strategies, personalizing lessons to include the interests of the students and acting as a model for respectful interaction helps establish rapport, which will strengthen language acquisition" (p.70).

Classroom environment

To build a positive rapport with students, the classroom played a crucial role. The purpose of teaching was not only focused on language learning but also on creating a friendly atmosphere. To achieve this, the researcher made an effort to get to know the students through genuine, casual conversations. These conversations were opportunities to show care, interest, and respect towards the adolescents.

Our students don't share a lot about their lives, and we don't pressure them either. However, today we had a conversation with Ed. He asked us to assign him homework because he wants to practice during his free time. When I asked him what was his motivation to learn English, he said that after his release, he wants to travel to the U.S. to work and support his mom. (Week 6)

This reflection aligns with Giron et al.'s (2017) view about how rapport is developed. They argued that rapport can only be achieved by showing genuine concern for students. In fact, they stated that "...rapport may contribute as a motivational strategy. By creating a friendly learning environment, students may feel free to develop their speaking" (p.22). In this case, Ed's willingness to share his personal aspirations and his initiative to ask for homework demonstrated that the emotional barrier had weakened. This dialogue was not only a casual conversation but a clear indicator that trust had been developed, allowing Ed to visualize a future beyond the prison walls through language learning.

Another key aspect of the classroom environment was the physical arrangement of the space. During this teaching period, the traditional classroom arrangement was intentionally ignored to reduce the formality and eliminate hierarchical barriers. This is especially important in correctional settings where power dynamics are typically rigid.

Instead of only using the board or maintaining distance with students, the researcher conducted activities while sitting on the floor, in a circle, or in the courtyard. This informal arrangement created a relaxed atmosphere that encouraged connection and spontaneous participation.

We had a second activity, planned in which we would review vocabulary using the basketball court and a basketball. Dan was one of the most excited students; he was dribbling and playing with the ball all the time. I started to play with them, and it was my turn to answer a question from one of the students. Dan quickly said: "I want to ask you, teacher," which showed us how much confidence we have built with them. (Week 7)

This reflection demonstrates students' willingness to communicate as Dan broke the hierarchy to start a conversation in the target language. This shift in the physical environment contributed to building rapport by reducing tension and creating a sense of equality. By feeling that the power dynamics had shifted, Dan felt safe enough to move from passive listening to active, voluntary speech. As Kasun et al. (2020) suggest, creating social spaces where inmate students can freely interact facilitates a trusting relationship that overcomes the lack of traditional resources (p.12).

Overall, these reflections show that the classroom environment played a significant role in developing rapport and lowering emotional barriers. Consequently, it encouraged students to participate more confidently in spoken English.

Praise

Another important factor that contributed to fostering positive rapport was continuous and constructive praise; just as breaking physical hierarchies encouraged students to speak, consistent praise functioned as a psychological bridge to oral production. For these students, whose voices are often silenced by the system, positive reinforcement provided the validation necessary to motivate them to speak in a different language.

Francisco was very happy and excited because I checked his homework and everything was correct. Dan and Ed also handed in their homework, and I congratulated them all. I told them that they had done a great job, and I noticed right away that there was satisfaction and happiness from them noticing that they were really learning. (Week 5)

This reflection is in line with Mellgren's (2020) view: "When teachers gave praise and corrective feedback, it allowed students to see and understand what teachers wanted from them. These are ways for teachers to increase and strengthen the relationship with their students who have disruptive behaviors..." (p.18). The act of cheering, congratulating, and expressing pride towards students was intended to reinforce the idea that their efforts were recognized and celebrated.

Positive reinforcement also came in the form of candies, offered as a small reward for their efforts. It is important to highlight that inmates have limited access to items from the outside. Therefore, receiving something as simple as a candy symbolized recognition and genuine care.

At the end of the lesson, I gave them some candies, and Ed told me: "No, I don't deserve it" but I insisted a little by telling him: "Take it, you do deserve it", and he took it. (Week 2)

Once the class was finished, I gave them a candy, this time Ed accepted it without hesitation, he seemed very proud and happy. (Week 5)

This intention highlighted internalized stigma and a feeling of unworthiness. While praise and small rewards (such as candies) might be interpreted as behaviorist reinforcement, in the context of incarceration, they functioned as tools to change their self-concept as unworthy criminals. The students did not participate solely for the candy itself, but for the symbolic value of the gesture. By transforming this perception of unworthiness into a sense of achievement, students felt more empowered to use the target language. This shift in self-concept was essential for their speaking skills, as it reduced the fear of judgment and allowed them to move from silence to more frequent and confident verbal participation.

These findings suggest that praise not only reinforced their effort but also contributed to enhancing their confidence, a crucial factor for oral production. In a similar way, Patiño (2022) found that praise increased his student's self-confidence, leading to more frequent participation. In this sense, praise functioned as both emotional support and linguistic encouragement.

Overall, the first theme demonstrated that rapport was not the result of a single practice or a linear sequence of steps, but rather the interaction between classroom strategies, a supportive environment, and continuous praise. Together, these elements gradually transformed students' attitudes, lowered emotional barriers, and increased their willingness and ability to communicate in English.

The effects of rapport on the development of speaking skills

This theme examines the influence that rapport had on the students' oral development, revealing a clear and progressive improvement in their willingness to participate and take risks. The reflections suggested that rapport functioned as a supportive condition that allowed students to demonstrate knowledge they may have already possessed, but had previously been unwilling or unable to show due to discomfort or anxiety.

One of the clearest examples was Ed's participation. At the beginning, he was uninterested and even uncomfortable when using the target language. His avoidant attitudes, such as leaving the classroom, responding only in Spanish, or refusing to speak, reflected a high affective filter that inhibited him from using English, even when he might have known certain structures (Week 2).

However, as rapport strengthened, Ed began to participate voluntarily and take risks in English. By the fifth class, he produced complete sentences and even used structures that had not been explicitly taught in class.

This time was very surprising for me because for the first time Ed was able to say full sentences in English without any help, and he even used a pronoun we haven't seen in class. They had to guess the activity that their classmates were mimicking, while everyone was saying "I drink water", "I sleep at 8pm" ..., Ed said: YOU wake up at 7am. (Week 5)

This observation suggests that increased emotional safety and self-confidence allowed him to draw on knowledge he may have already internalized, aligning with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis and Patiño's (2022) findings that rapport can increase confidence, motivation, and active involvement. This utterance ("YOU wake up at 7am") is significant because it required Ed to take a social risk by speaking spontaneously and using a different structure than his classmates. Such risk-taking is particularly meaningful in

correctional settings, where adolescents are often reluctant to stand out for fear of mockery.

The sixth class marked a significant milestone in Ed's autonomy as rapport solidified. Rapport had facilitated not only his confidence but also communicative independence.

I decided to leave Ed to interview Teacher P. by himself because he had shown that he had no issue asking questions in English. After he finished asking, he even answered questions from another teacher about his daily routine, and he was able to say full sentences without help. (Week 6)

Ed's progression shows clear evidence for Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982). Initially, Ed's silence was not due to a lack of ability, but a high affective filter caused by his environment. As rapport was established, the emotional barrier lowered. This suggests that rapport allowed students to transition from supported to independent speaking, a central goal in communicative language teaching.

The progress was not limited to Ed. Both Francisco and Dan demonstrated improvement, particularly in pronunciation and sentence production. Francisco initially displayed insecurity when speaking in English, often doubting his pronunciation and avoiding full sentences.

Francisco shows signs of low self-esteem and this makes him think that he is wrong. He seems interested in the class, but it is hard for him to speak or recall words in English. (Week 3)

By the seventh class, this hesitation evolved into active participation, facilitated by an atmosphere where mistakes were normalized and not judged.

Francisco did not have errors when he participated and was producing full sentences with some help. He no longer seems shy or worried about participating and making mistakes because he knows we don't judge him or in any way have made him feel ashamed of his errors. (Week 7)

The reflections above exemplified how important it was for the students to connect with their teacher in order to be comfortable using the target language. These findings strongly align with Giron et al.'s (2017) conclusion that positive rapport increased students' speaking fluency by promoting confidence, reducing fear of judgement and encouraging interaction.

Overall, the findings indicated that rapport played a crucial role in students' oral participation. As positive rapport increased, students (1) displayed greater willingness to speak, (2) improved sentence production, (3) appeared more confident when participating, and (4) showed higher levels of autonomy. These observations suggested that rapport is not just an emotional component of teaching, but a supportive condition that can facilitate the development of speaking skills (Giron et al., 2017), particularly in non-conventional learning environments such as prison.

This study reflects the interconnected nature of rapport, participation, and early indicators of speaking development for incarcerated EFL youth. Although students' oral abilities were not formally measured, the researcher observed more active participation through the implementation of classroom strategies, a supportive environment, and praise; factors that appeared to encourage more complex oral productions as rapport strengthened.

Conclusions

Teaching inside a youth prison presents particular challenges. Nevertheless, the meaningful learning that emerges from this context suggests that these English learning experiences may be significant for both the teacher and students.

It is essential for educators to recognize the impact they can have on students' learning processes, especially in environments where emotional safety, trust, and human connection are not easily established (Escobedo, 2020). Although social prejudices may lead some to believe that incarcerated adolescents do not deserve educational opportunities, this study reinforces the idea that education (beyond a constitutional right) is a humanizing tool that every individual deserves.

The first research question explored the factors that contributed to the development of a positive rapport with incarcerated students. The findings revealed that rapport was not built through isolated actions but through the interaction of three elements: (1) classroom strategies based on games and personalization, (2) a supportive learning environment that replaced formality with proximity, and (3) continuous and constructive praise that acknowledged students' efforts and progress. These elements reduced tension, gradually increased trust, and created conditions in which students felt seen, respected, and safe to engage with the target language.

The second research question examined how rapport influenced students' speaking skills. The reflections demonstrated a clear progression in oral production as rapport strengthened. Students who initially showed resistance, particularly Ed, began to participate voluntarily, produce complete sentences, and interact in English without assistance. Similarly, students like Francisco and Dan overcame pronunciation insecurities and developed confidence, engaging more actively in class.

These findings suggest that teachers working with incarcerated EFL learners prioritize the development of positive rapport. Some practices that may help nurture this relationship include implementing low-pressure and interactive activities, personalizing lessons based on students' interests, and offering consistent praise and encouragement. By fostering positive rapport, educators can increase students' willingness to participate, which facilitates language development even in non-conventional contexts.

Beyond the linguistic improvements observed, the students' response to the teaching experience suggests a deeper impact. On the final day, the participant received a handwritten letter from the inmates expressing gratitude for the time, dedication, and appreciation shown throughout the teaching period. This gesture reinforces the interpretation that rapport was genuinely established and that the students perceived the classroom as a supportive space.

This study contributes to the limited research available on rapport in correctional settings by highlighting its influential role in the development of speaking skills among incarcerated youth. However, the findings must be interpreted considering the study's limitations. The analysis was based solely on the participant's written reflections, which may carry subjective interpretations. Additionally, the small number of students and the short teaching period limit the generalizability of the results. Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insights into the effects of rapport in prison education.

Future research could include interviews with inmates, classroom observations by external teachers, or studies that examine the long-term effects of rapport on reinsertion and language learning. Understanding how this relationship is essential will not only improve EFL education in correctional settings but also strengthen the educational processes that contribute to social reintegration.

Teaching in correctional settings is not about overlooking the crimes committed, but about acknowledging the transformative power that education can have in shaping inmates' future possibilities.

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