




# ABOUT BUILDING RAPPORT IN DISTANCE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Indiana I. Kazieva 

Elena A. Danilina 

Ksenia L. Polonskaya 

Elena G. Dolgova 

## ABSTRACT

This study is based on the experience gained over the period of March 2020- December 2020 when the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic forced millions of students of secondary and higher schools to shift almost overnight to distant or remote learning. Our paper predominately focuses on pedagogical aspects that are required to make online learning more attractive and motivating for students. We carried out a survey of 27 teachers of the Department of foreign languages of the Faculty of Economics at of RUDN University aged 25-67 to find out what advantages and disadvantages of online learning they found and what was the role of rapport during on-line learning. The obtained results point out that rapport remains important in distant learning and part of the teachers consider that its role increased because of the absence of face-to-face communication.

**Keywords:** Distant learning. Building rapport. Higher education. On-line. Covid-19.

## SOBRE A CONSTRUÇÃO DE RAPPORT NA APRENDIZAGEM À DISTÂNCIA DURANTE A PANDEMIA COVID-19

### ACERCA DE CONSTRUIR RAPPORT EN EL APRENDIZAJE A DISTANCIA DURANTE LA PANDEMIA COVID-19

## RESUMO

Este estudo é baseado na experiência adquirida durante o período de março de 2020 a dezembro de 2020, quando o surto da pandemia covid-19 forçou milhões de alunos de escolas secundárias e superiores a mudar quase da noite para o dia para o ensino à distância ou à distância. Nosso artigo enfoca predominantemente os aspectos pedagógicos que são necessários para tornar o aprendizado online mais atraente e motivador para os alunos. Realizamos uma pesquisa com 27 professores do Departamento de Línguas Estrangeiras da Faculdade de Economia da Universidade RUDN com idades entre 25-67 para descobrir quais as vantagens e desvantagens da aprendizagem online que eles encontraram e qual foi o papel do relacionamento durante o aprendizagem de linha. Os resultados obtidos apontam que o rapport continua sendo importante na educação a distância e parte dos professores considera que seu papel aumentou devido à ausência de comunicação face a face.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizagem à distância. Construindo relacionamento. Ensino superior. Online. Covid-19.

## RESUMEN

Este estudio se basa en la experiencia adquirida durante el período de marzo de 2020 a diciembre de 2020, cuando el brote de la pandemia covid-19 obligó a millones de estudiantes de escuelas secundarias y superiores a cambiar casi de la noche a la mañana al aprendizaje a distancia o remoto. Nuestro artículo se centra principalmente en los aspectos pedagógicos necesarios para hacer que el aprendizaje en línea sea más atractivo y motivador para los estudiantes. Realizamos una encuesta a 27 profesores del Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras de la Facultad de Economía de la Universidad RUDN de entre 25 y 67 años para averiguar qué ventajas y desventajas encontraban del aprendizaje en línea y cuál era el papel de la relación durante aprendizaje en línea. Los resultados obtenidos señalan que el rapport sigue siendo importante en el aprendizaje a distancia y parte de los docentes consideran que su rol aumentó por la ausencia de comunicación presencial.

**Palabras-clave:** Aprendizaje a distancia. Construir buenas relaciones. Educación universitaria. En línea. COVID-19.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the experience gained over the period of March 2020- December 2020 when the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic forced millions of students of secondary and higher schools to shift almost overnight to distant or remote learning. The authors were aiming at investigating the students' challenges and attitudes about remote learning and Microsoft Teams platform, about their motivating and demotivating factors. Our paper predominately focuses on pedagogical aspects that are required to make online learning more attractive and motivating for students. We carried out a survey of 27 teachers of the Department of foreign languages of the Faculty of Economics at of RUDN University aged 25-67 to find out what advantages and disadvantages of online learning they found and what was the the role of rapport during online learning. The obtained results point out that rapport remains important in distant learning and part of the teachers consider that its role increased because of the absence of face to face communication.

It was revealed that challenges mostly relate to the geographic dispersion of the students and therefore coming from different time zones, patchy Internet covering, lack of reliable gadgets, work and education overload, resulting in longer hours of exposure to electronic devices and even avoidance of rapport building and maintaining in favor of other issues of education such as methods of teaching and assessment, materials and their format, teaching efficiency, overall negative environment, etc.. This paper can be developed further and can serve as a topic for discussions and guides for teacher behavior during remote learning. The study does not provide an overwhelming insight into rapport-building during distant learning as a finer and more precise follow up study is required.

Rapport in distant learning and to be more precisely during Covid-19 pandemic deserves much investigation as so far there is almost not literature regarding this realm. Rapport is 'the relationship that the learners have with the teachers and vice versa...a class where there is a positive, enjoyable and respectful relationship between teacher and learners and between learners themselves', according to Jeremy Harmer (2015).

According to Benson, Cohen, and Buskist (2005), students were more likely to attend class, pay attention, and enjoy the subject matter if teachers established rapport with them. According to Frisby and Martin (2010) found that instructor rapport emerged as a significant predictor of cognitive and affective learning. Granitz, Koernig, and Harich (2009) linked rapport with enhanced learning, attention, attendance and involvement in the process of education. Frisby and Martin (2010) found that instructor rapport emerged as a significant predictor of cognitive and affective learning. Granitz, Koernig, and Harich (2009) linked rapport with enhanced learning, attention, motivation, attendance, and involvement for students. For faculty, they linked rapport with more rewarding teaching and higher ratings/evaluations. Not surprisingly, given these outcomes, the authors concluded that "one of the key traits of a master teacher is the ability to foster student rapport" (p. 52).

Other scholars, Bernieri (1998) for example, view rapport as harmonious interactions between teachers and students or a relationship with mutual understanding and satisfactory communications. (CAREY, HAMILTON, SHANKLIN, 1986). But it is worth pointing out that the above mentioned authors focused on learning to face-to-face contexts. Two scholars from Memorial University in Canada Elizabeth Murphy and Maria A. Rodriguez-Manzanares found that the "absence of "body language and visual presence as mediators requires e-teachers to find new ways of interacting and building rapport (p.1061). In their study they compared online classroom and offline classroom. In the latter setting "rapport building must be premediated, consciously promoted and can be achieved with more work, while in the former setting teachers can easily build rapport" (p.1068).

The concept of rapport differs from study to study. "Rapport is defined as an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond "(CATT, MILLER, & SCHALLENKAMP, 2007).

Rapport is a dyadic phenomenon (ALTMAN, 1990), experienced only in interaction between individuals, and not a personality trait (TICKLE-DEGNEN & ROSENTHAL, 1990). It is therefore a mutual phenomenon characterized by mutual attentiveness (TICKLE-DENGEN & ROSENTHAL, 1990), mutual respect (KYRIACOU, 2009), mutual openness (GRANITZ et al., 2009), mutual attention (HALL, ROTER, BLANCH, & FRANKEL, 2009), and mutual understanding (CAREY et al., 1988). The mutual attention, however, must be positive or harmonious in nature.

Talking about indicators of rapport and rapport in on line learning we can say that rapport in off classroom is about "providing guidance, feedback, support, help and praise for good work accessibility, responsiveness and openness; as well as caring, bonding, showing concern and empathy, and avoiding favoritism, creating a positive, friendly and cooperative environment, using humour and understanding students' needs. It is also about sharing

values, attitudes, social style and even in self disclosure and sharing or similarity in movement” (Granits) . While in online classrom we can speak about the length of the sentence and level of formality and writing in response in approximately the same style can help build rapport (Stock). Rapport building is also studied by Russian scientists in the framework of information technologies in educational process (MALYUGA, 2016), teacher training issues (MALEY, 2018, DMITRENKO, & KADILINA, 2020), as a component of negotiating process (HUTIU, 2017), a discourse-forming aspect (MALYUGA & MCCARTHY, 2018).

## METHODS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate how rapport building in remote learning during Covid-19 pandemic impacted the education process. We interviewed 27 teachers from the Department of Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Economics of RUDN Universtiry. All of them worked for a single organizations, except for four who taught for two organizations. There were four questions that we asked to the teachers – 1. Do you find rapport building important in distance learning during pandemic? 2. Did you put extra effort to build rapport in distance learning during pandemic? 3 Did you put extra effort to build rapport in distance learning during pandemic? 4. What were the new ways if any of building rapport in distance learning during pandemic. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Do you find rapport building important in distance learning during pandemic?



Our findings are presented in four sets correlating to each above mentioned questions. The first set(Diagram 1). All 27 teachers outlined that rapport building is an integral part of education and it shouldn't be ignored during pandemic establishing some sort of personal connection and bond adds some confidence to anxious students. The questions may relate either about students' personalities or how they handle on-line platforms.

2. Did you put extra effort to build rapport in distance learning during pandemic?



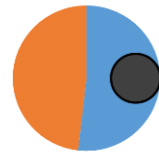
Set number two. (Diagram 2) 24 teachers stated that they put extra effort and time to build rapport as an idea of a given student's situation where they may have relatives who suffered of Covid-19 or overall negative environment or lack of updated gadgets, could help us understand better why they delay participating in the lesson. 3 teachers pointed out that they didn't focus on negative things and put emphases on how students could benefit from online classes.

3. Did you put extra effort to build rapport in distance learning during pandemic?



Set number three. (Diagram 3) Twenty five teachers reported that building rapport with distant students during pandemic turned out to be much more challenging as urgent shift to online platform didn't allow both teachers and students to start working efficiently due the the fact that they lacked required skills, they felt uncomfortable about not seeing their teacher, they couldn't log in, etc.. One more challenge was navigation on the on-line platform Teams Microsoft. Seventeen teachers talked about students who dominated online shadowing shy students. And teachers put extra effort to balance time between them.

4. What were the new ways if any of building rapport in distance learning during pandemic?



Set number 4. (Diagram 4). Fourteen teachers assumed that they tried to replicate their old ploys that they tended to use in off-line classes, while thirteen of them reconsidered their techniques and gave extra encouragement for minor things which resulted in a more friendly atmosphere in the class. When they added more interaction via on-line platform (written comments on the chat with further voting for the best comment,) more students felt relaxed and confident. Four teachers spoke about cases when their attempts to build rapport by retelling a joke backfired. Three of them confirmed that the reasons for that were online classes when the teachers did not know what students were involved into, what they felt and were they positive about the lesson. In offline class that was highly unlikely since body language of the students and the teacher might become indicators of misplaced joke. At this point we can conclude that rapport building in distance learning during pandemic allowed to elicit personal information, support and monitor, praise, provide feedback, etc., but at a larger scale with longer inputs and deliberately. About twenty one of the teachers confirmed that they all their comments in terms of rapport building were more supportive and less negative and even planned in advance. By doing so the teachers noticed this ensured a more comfortable communication and students felt more open.

Interestingly, “emotional reactions (even negative ones) do not always block engagement (JOHNSON AND CONNELLY, 2014); they can also accelerate engagement with feedback and act as a motivator. The participants spoke vividly about emotional blocks/accelerators as powerful influences which they felt somewhat powerless to resist. Arguably feedback as self-regulation should also necessitate learner emotional resilience. The consequence would be that an additional task of the teacher to facilitate the related dispositions within learners. Emotional resilience could be included within Boud and Molloy’s (2013) sustainable assessment (2013) as a learning habit”(ELBRA-RAMSAY, 2021) .

Discussing the importance of rapport and its challenges we may state that array of indicators may be viewed as indicative of effective teaching though our survey did not encompass the full list of indicators of rapport, an. Here we can talk about showing respect for students . (DELANEY, JOHNSON, JOHNSON, & TRESLAN, 2010; GRANITZ et al., 2009), creating a positive atmosphere (GRANITZ et al., 2009), using humour (MALYUGA, 2020), providing timely feedback, or being accessible and communicative (DELANEY et al., 2010). All twenty seven teachers also indicated that rapport building was not confined to online classrooms. They mentioned such tools as corporate emails and chats in Teams Microsoft, Teams Microsoft channels, smartphones and social networks. These tools have not yet been identified from the point of view of rapport building but their impact deserves close study.

The overwhelming majority of fields where rapport is essential (psychology, medicine and marketing, it is seen a reciprocal phenomenon while in the context of education rapport is a realm with a dominant role of a teacher. It is the teacher who sets the tone of rapport showing respect to the students, supporting and monitoring by posting in the chat messages saying that “any questions are welcome” or circulating to the group list of words to be revised before the test, or giving sufficient feedback about their input into the lesson and efforts made to prepare their homework. The use of webcams of Teams Microsoft platform for non-verbal behaviours such as waving a hand when cameras were switched on, encouraging smiles and head-nodding promote rapport building, too. One teacher described promoting rapport by asking students to wave his or her hand before they started the class or send any funny smile in the chat to indicate that they joined the on-line class or even demonstrate their pet. In any case, rapport promotion should be deliberate, planned beforehand tailor-made and adapted to the needs of the students.

## CONCLUSIONS

We carried out this small-scale research based on a limited number of participants in just one institutional context, but still, it does raise some interesting questions about student teachers' interaction. The results of the current study showed that rapport building in distance learning remains a significant factor for successful and beneficial education process, especially during Covid-19 pandemic, when students have to deal with a number of difficulties ranging from emotional stress, health state, well-being of their families, etc. First of all, fostering a positive environment to better motivate students requires extra time and effort from the teacher who is responsible for the overall atmosphere in the class. What is more, teachers should be versatile in terms of rapport building techniques as well as deliberate, planned beforehand tailor-made and adapted to the needs of the students., including navigation on the Teams Microsoft platform, be adaptable to changing situations and be able to manage the pressure that may be heightened by unfavorable social environment. The last but not the least, teachers have to be more analytical, open-minded and creative not only replication their off-line ploys in promoting rapport to ensure improved learning environment and rapport promotion was more deliberate, took longer periods of time. The obtained results are worth to be investigated further with more manifold and larger groups in various settings. The contextual complexity of that such future work will have implications for Higher Education both in off-line and on-line learning.

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<sup>i</sup>Senior teacher, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Economics, Peoples Friendship University of Russia (PFUR, RUDN), Moscow, Russia, 6, Mickloukho-Maklaya Str., Moscow, 117198, Russia. E-mail: [kazieva-ii@rudn.ru](mailto:kazieva-ii@rudn.ru). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6146-8641>.

<sup>ii</sup>Associate Professor, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russia, Stremyanny lane,36, Moscow Russia 117997. E-mail: [Danilina.ea@rea.ru](mailto:Danilina.ea@rea.ru). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6345-0944>.

<sup>iii</sup>Assistant professor, Autonomous Non-commercial Organisation of Higher Education "Russian New University" (RosNOU), Institute of Humanities, department of linguistics and intercultural Communication, 22 Radio St., Moscow, 105005. E-mail: [PolonskayaKL@stud.rosnou.ru](mailto:PolonskayaKL@stud.rosnou.ru). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9761-4006>.

<sup>iv</sup>Associate Professor of the Academic Department of Foreign Languages N 3, Candidate of Philological Sciences Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russia, Stremyanny lane, 36, Moscow Russia, 117997. E-mail: [Dolgova.EG@rea.ru](mailto:Dolgova.EG@rea.ru). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1320-542X>.