






Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationship Dimensions and Their Association with English Learning among Form 3 ESL Learners in Malaysia

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Abstract. Strong relationships between teachers and students are essential because they foster a supportive learning environment where students are acknowledged and understood. These relationships are often linked to improved academic outcomes and emotional well-being, yet their direct influence on ESL students' perception of English learning remains underexplored. Most existing research focuses on general educational settings or tertiary students, with limited studies examining how teacher-student relationships shape English learning among secondary school ESL learners in Malaysian contexts. This study examined the impact of five key dimensions of teacher-student relationships—trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement—on Form 3 ESL learners at Sekolah Menengah Intiaz Besut. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the research employed a structured 15-item questionnaire distributed to 108 students. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that students highly value trust and feedback from their teachers, perceiving these as the most influential factors in their English learning experience. All five dimensions showed strong positive perceptions, indicating that relational support makes a significant contribution to learners' motivation, engagement, confidence and participation in using English. In essence, the key dimensions highlight how students perceive the teacher-student relationship and how these perceptions influence their English learning. This highlights the need for teachers to prioritise relational strategies to support ESL learners' language development. Establishing empathetic, supportive, and responsive teacher-student interactions can enhance classroom participation and overall English proficiency in diverse secondary school settings.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationships, key dimension, ESL learners, English learning.

1 Introduction

English has established itself as a global lingua franca, widely used as a medium of communication across cultures, education, business, and international relations, even among speakers who do not share it as a first language (Loor et al. 2024; Tan, 2024). According to Firdaus et al. (2023), it is more than just a language; it is an essential instrument that people in the modern world strive to master. English plays an important role in many aspects, especially in education. However, not everyone can easily master English, as it is not an easy language to learn. Students need good encouragement and motivation to learn English, especially from teachers at school, since they will be learning English from them. A variety of sources, including parents, friends, teachers, and one's surroundings, can provide good motivation (Syahabuddin et al., 2020). Teachers play a significant role in taking responsibility within the education circle to motivate students to learn English.

Teacher-student relationships are essential to the educational process and have a significant impact on students' English learning and emotional well-being. A significant amount of relevant research has looked into the connection between teachers and students in preschool and early childhood education (Yan, 2019). The teacher-student relationship is a key factor in determining student outcomes in schools around the world. Strong relationships between teachers and their students can significantly lower anxiety and improve the learning environment for English. The quality of teacher-student relationships becomes even more important in secondary schools, where students undergo significant cognitive and social development. A study comparing the teacher-student relationship in Western and Eastern cultures reveals a significant impact on the importance of this relationship, particularly in a global context (Fabris et al., 2023). The role of the teacher extends beyond academic support to include emotional and motivational support, especially for ESL learners, who frequently face additional challenges such as linguistic barriers and cultural adjustments. While past research has explored the role of teacher interactions in general educational settings (Alisoy, 2024; Darazi et al., 2023; Sadoughi & Hajezi, 2021), there is a lack of focused studies examining how these relationships affect ESL learners in Malaysian secondary schools. This research aims to investigate the key dimensions of teacher-student relationships in the context of English learning and how ESL learners perceive the influence of teacher-student relationships on their English learning.

2 Teacher-Student Relationship and ESL Learning

The role of teacher–student relationships in educational contexts has received increasing attention due to its significant influence on learners' academic outcomes, motivation, and emotional development. In English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, where learners frequently face challenges such as low self-confidence, communication anxiety, and limited language exposure, positive teacher–student relationships serve as a crucial support system (Zhou et al., 2023). A well-established body of literature sug-

gests that relational dynamics within the classroom can either facilitate or hinder students' willingness to engage with the language, particularly at the secondary school level, where learners are undergoing critical stages of cognitive and socio-emotional development (Fabris et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023). However, most existing studies have concentrated on early childhood or tertiary education contexts (Alisoy, 2024; Jiao, 2024; Lu, 2022), with comparatively limited research focusing on Malaysian secondary ESL learners. This study aims to address this gap by examining how specific relational qualities influence students' perceptions of English learning.

2.1 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Strong teacher–student relationships are fundamental to successful ESL learning environments, playing an important role in shaping students' perceptions of English learning. This study draws on two foundational theories: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning is mediated through social interactions within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where the more knowledgeable teacher guides the learner through meaningful dialogue and emotional scaffolding, thereby enabling learners to internalise language knowledge through socially mediated interaction, in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective. In the ESL context, such scaffolding does not only involve cognitive strategies but also interpersonal sensitivity and socio-emotional responsiveness. Similarly, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) proposes that students are more intrinsically motivated when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Effective teacher–student relationships are thus crucial in meeting these psychological needs, especially relatedness (feeling connected and valued) and competence (feeling capable through structured support).

Building upon these frameworks, this study focuses on five dimensions of teacher–student relationships identified in the literature as essential to supporting ESL learners: trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement. Firstly, trust establishes a foundation of psychological safety, allowing learners to take risks and engage without fear of embarrassment or judgment (Hyseni & Lundberg, 2022). Secondly, empathy enables teachers to understand students' emotional states and respond appropriately, which is especially important for ESL learners who may feel anxious or marginalised in the classroom (Cooper, 2004; Zhang, 2022). Thirdly, feedback is a powerful instructional and motivational tool that helps students recognise their strengths and areas for improvement, thereby enhancing their sense of competence (Alisoy, 2024; Herra & Kulińska, 2018). Next, availability refers to the teacher's accessibility for academic or emotional support, both during and beyond class time, and has been linked to increased student engagement and academic perseverance (Huang et al., 2024; Syahabuddin et al., 2020). Lastly, encouragement reinforces learner effort and builds confidence, particularly when students face linguistic and cultural challenges; consistent positive reinforcement has been shown to significantly enhance learners' willingness to use English and participate actively (Afzal et al., 2023; Seven, 2020). Fig. 1 illustrates the relationship between the teacher-student relationship and the students' learning attitude.

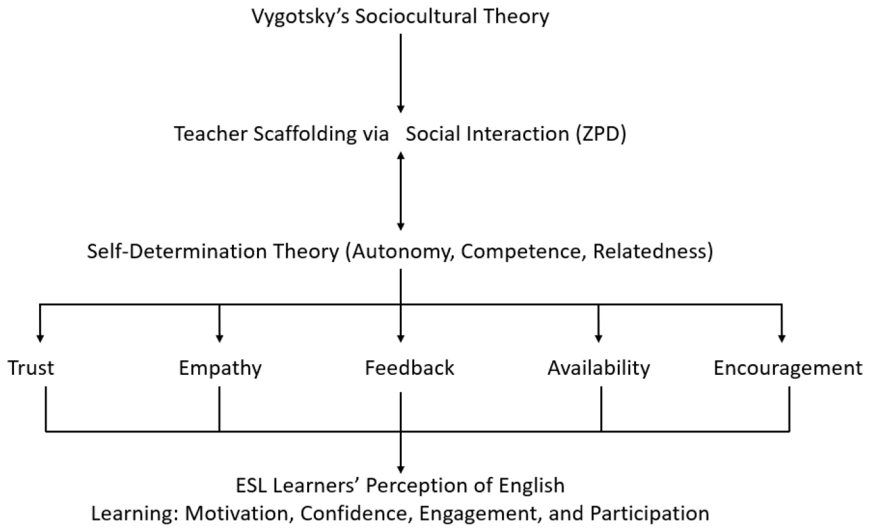


Fig. 1. Relationship between the Teacher-Student Relationship and the Students' Learning Attitude

2.2 The Role of Teacher Support in Enhancing ESL Learners' English Learning

The role of English teachers is crucial in supporting students' language development. While teaching strategies may vary, their combined implementation is essential for helping learners acquire and improve language skills (Ly, 2024). Akram et al. (2022) emphasise that strong social and psychological connections between teachers and students foster resilience and self-confidence, which are key to academic success. This highlights the significance of empathy and trust in fostering students' self-esteem and motivation to learn. In EFL contexts, Sadoughi and Hejazi (2021) found that teachers have a significant influence on the classroom climate, contributing to a safe, supportive, and motivating environment that enhances language proficiency. Similarly, Nghipandulwa et al. (2022) highlight multiple roles ESL teachers play in improving student performance, including motivating learners, assessing progress, planning lessons, creating engaging materials, and involving students in extracurricular activities. Kashinathan and Aziz (2021) further reinforce the value of teacher support, noting that ESL teachers often encourage peer collaboration and the use of English through interactive tasks. Students also reported feeling more motivated and willing to improve when teachers provide constructive feedback on their performance (Nghipandulwa et al., 2022).

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the influence of teacher–student relationship dimensions on the perceptions of English learning among Form 3 ESL learners. A total of 108 students from Sekolah Menengah Imtiaz Besut, a public secondary school in Terengganu, Malaysia, participated in the study. Participants were selected through convenience sampling due to ease of access and institutional approval. The school was informed prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants gave their verbal consent to participate. To keep the privacy, no personal data was collected. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms during regular school hours.

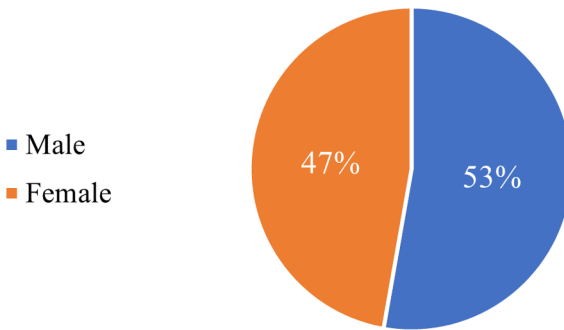


Fig. 2. Participants' Demographic

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of two sections: Section A gathered demographic details (as illustrates in Fig. 2), while Section B comprised 15 Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring five relational dimensions—trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement—with three items assigned to each dimension. The items were adapted from existing literature and reviewed by experts for content validity. It was developed by adapting dimensions of teacher–student relationships commonly emphasized in prior research. Each dimension was operationalized into three items tailored for Form 3 ESL learners. The trust dimension was grounded in the work of Hamre and Pianta (2001), Cornelius-White (2007), and Barile et al. (2012), who collectively demonstrate that students' trust in teachers fosters academic engagement and positive school outcomes. The empathy dimension drew from Cooper (2004), Makoelle (2019), and Zhang (2022), who highlight how empathetic teacher behaviours enhance learner confidence, inclusivity, and motivation in language classrooms. The feedback dimension was supported by Hattie and Timperley's (2007) influential model on the power of feedback, alongside language-specific studies such as Herra and Kulińska (2018) and Alisoy

(2024), which confirm the role of timely, clear feedback in ESL learning. The availability dimension was informed by Assali and Davenport (2024), Dennie et al. (2019), and Li et al. (2022), all of whom underline that teacher accessibility and responsiveness significantly influence student engagement and learning outcomes. Finally, the encouragement dimension was adapted from Afzal et al. (2023), Meng (2021), and Firdaus et al. (2023), who found that teacher encouragement increases students' motivation, persistence, and participation in language learning contexts. Together, these sources provided the theoretical foundation for the development of a valid and contextually appropriate instrument for measuring secondary ESL learners' perceptions of teacher–student relationships. Internal consistency of the instrument was verified using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.94, indicating excellent internal reliability. Data were analysed using SPSS Version 25, applying descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages to summarise learners' perceptions of the five dimensions. While the methodology allowed for efficient data collection, the use of a single school and convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings, a limitation acknowledged in the interpretation of the results.

4 Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on data collected from Form 3 ESL learners. The results are organised according to the five dimensions of teacher–student relationships: emotional support, academic support, classroom interaction, learner autonomy, and participation. Descriptive analysis was used to examine learners' perceptions and to identify patterns related to motivation, engagement, confidence, and participation in English learning. The findings provide an overview of how teacher–student relationships influence learners' experiences in the ESL classroom.

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Five Key Dimensions of Teacher–Student Relationships.

Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Agree (%)
1 Trust			
My teacher provides a safe environment for me to practice using English without fear of judgement which helps me feel more competent with the language.	4.28	0.61	96.3
I believe my teacher values my efforts to improve my English skills, which makes me feel confident in using the language.	4.30	0.75	93.5
My teacher treats all ESL students fairly, regardless of their current level of English proficiency so we feel more comfortable in practicing the language.	4.28	0.63	95.4
2 Empathy			

	My teacher understands the challenges I face when learning English, which makes me feel more confident in improving my language skills.	4.16	0.70	88.9
	My teacher is patient with me and gives me more time and helps me to develop my English skills.	4.22	0.60	95.4
	I feel that my teacher genuinely cares and that helps me to progress in learning.	4.28	0.67	92.6
3	Feedback			
	The feedback I receive on my English tasks helps me understand my strengths and areas for improvement.	4.36	0.63	96.3
	My teacher gives clear explanations when I make mistakes in English writing or speaking, which helps me understand my errors better and improve my confidence in learning English.	4.29	0.67	94.4
	The feedback from my teacher encourages me to improve the use of English in class discussions and homework or tasks, which helps me feel more confident in expressing my ideas.	4.19	0.71	88.9
4	Availability			
	My teacher is always available to provide extra help with English lessons, which enables me to understand difficult concepts better and improve my English performance.	4.20	0.74	87.1
	I feel comfortable approaching my teacher for help with English homework or tasks, which allows me to improve my understanding of the subject.	4.15	0.68	88.0
	I know when and how to reach my teacher if I need help with learning English, which ensures I can address my difficulties promptly and make steady progress in improving my language skills.	4.15	0.74	84.3
5	Encouragement			
	My teacher encourages me to participate in English class activities, even if I am not confident in my skills, which helps me build my confidence and improve my speaking and communication abilities in English.	4.21	0.67	90.7
	I feel motivated when my teacher praises my efforts to improve my English speaking and writing, which encourages me to practice more frequently and enhances my overall language proficiency.	4.32	0.61	97.2
	My teacher motivates me to keep practicing English, even when it feels difficult, which	4.31	0.61	96.3

helps me overcome challenges and gradually improve my confidence in using the language.

Table 1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations for the five key dimensions of teacher–student relationships. The overall mean score across all dimensions was 4.25, indicating a generally positive perception among Form 3 ESL learners. Trust emerged as the highest-rated dimension ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.53$), suggesting that students felt safe, respected, and confident in their interactions with their English teachers. Both feedback and encouragement followed closely ($M = 4.28$), reflecting the importance students placed on receiving constructive input and motivational support during the learning process. Empathy received a mean score of 4.22 ($SD = 0.53$), highlighting the value students attributed to teachers who demonstrated understanding and patience. Although availability was rated slightly lower ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.62$), it still indicated a generally positive perception, with most students agreeing that their teachers were accessible when needed. These findings suggest that relational support makes a meaningful contribution to ESL learners' motivation, engagement, confidence and participation in using English.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations Among Teacher–Student Relationship Dimensions

Dimension	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust	4.29	0.53	.82	—				
2. Empathy	4.22	0.53	.80	.72	—			
3. Feedback	4.28	0.55	.85	.68	.70	—		
4. Availability	4.16	0.62	.78	.64	.66	.71	—	
5. Encouragement	4.28	0.52	.83	.70	.69	.74	.67	—

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations among the five dimensions of teacher–student relationships: trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement. Overall, the learners reported high levels of agreement across all dimensions, with mean scores above 4.0 on a 5-point scale, suggesting generally positive perceptions of their teachers' relational support. Cronbach's α coefficients for each subscale ranged from .78 to .85, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency even for the shorter 3-item scales.

Among the five dimensions, trust received the highest mean score ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.53$), followed closely by feedback ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.55$) and encouragement ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.52$). These findings suggest that students particularly value feeling respected, receiving constructive feedback, and being positively reinforced in their English learning. Empathy ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.53$) and availability ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.62$) were also rated positively, though slightly lower, indicating that while students appreciated their teachers' care and accessibility, these aspects may require clearer communication or structural support.

The intercorrelations among the five dimensions were consistently strong and statistically significant ($r = .64-.74$, $p < .01$). For instance, trust correlated highly with empathy ($r = .72$) and encouragement ($r = .70$), suggesting that perceptions of fairness and

respect are closely tied to feelings of care and motivation. Feedback also showed robust associations with both encouragement ($r = .74$) and availability ($r = .71$), indicating that instructional support is most effective when paired with teacher accessibility and positive reinforcement. These strong correlations underscore that the dimensions are not isolated, but rather interconnected aspects of a broader relational framework that shapes learners' classroom experiences.

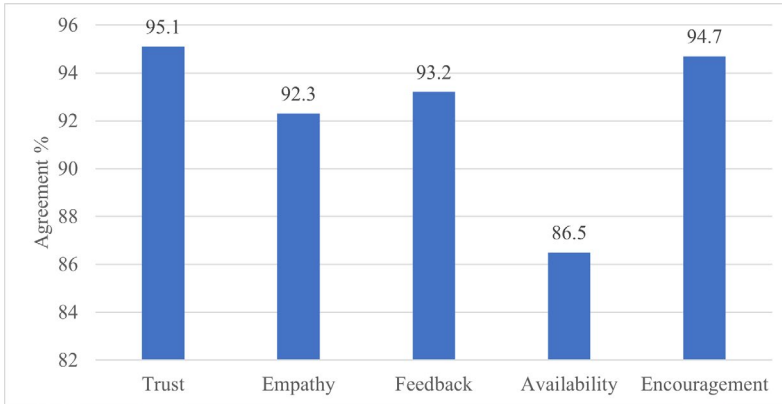


Fig. 3. Participant Perception on Key Dimensions of Teacher-Student Relationship

Learners' motivation, engagement, confidence, and active participation in the learning process appear to be strongly shaped by the level of trust they have in their teachers, as illustrated in Fig. 3. Equally important are the encouragement and constructive feedback that teachers provide, which further support learners' growth and persistence. The presence of an empathetic teacher is also highly valued, highlighting the role of understanding and emotional support in education. Interestingly, students seem to recognize the demands on their teachers' time, as teacher availability is not considered the most critical factor, suggesting a sense of respect and realistic expectations toward their teachers.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that trust, feedback, and encouragement were perceived as the most influential relational dimensions in supporting Form 3 ESL learners' English learning, while empathy and availability, though positively viewed, presented relatively lower ratings. These results emphasize the importance of relational strategies that build confidence, motivation, and opportunities for practice in the ESL classroom.

5 Discussion

This study examined Form 3 ESL learners' perceptions of five key dimensions of teacher-student relationships—trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement—and how these shape their English learning experiences. The findings reveal that students hold consistently positive views of their teachers' relational support, with

mean ratings across all dimensions exceeding 4.0 on a 5-point scale. Reliability coefficients further support the internal consistency of the five subscales ($\alpha = .78-.85$), affirming the robustness of the measures even with three items per scale. These results reinforce existing evidence that relational factors play a central role in shaping learners' academic engagement and affective outcomes (Barile et al., 2012; Cornelius-White, 2007).

Trust emerged as the highest-rated dimension ($M = 4.29$), underscoring its centrality to the ESL classroom. Students indicated that feeling safe, respected, and free from judgment allowed them to participate more actively and take risks in using English. This aligns with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which identifies relatedness as a prerequisite for intrinsic motivation. The strong correlations between trust and both empathy ($r = .72$) and encouragement ($r = .70$) suggest that trust functions as a foundation for other relational qualities: when teachers are perceived as fair and consistent, students are more receptive to care, praise, and motivational support (Afzal et al., 2023; Meng, 2021).

The next item, feedback was also rated highly ($M = 4.28$), underscoring its important role in shaping learners' academic experiences. Students perceived feedback as most effective when it was timely, constructive, and accompanied by emotional support, reinforcing both their confidence and motivation to improve. Darazi et al. (2023) and Sadoughi and Hejazi (2021) agreed that feedback contributes meaningfully to learning when it communicates guidance, care, and teacher involvement rather than mere evaluation. The strong associations observed between feedback, encouragement ($r = .74$), and availability ($r = .71$) further suggest that feedback functions most effectively within a supportive relational context. In this sense, feedback is not perceived as an isolated instructional strategy but as part of a broader pattern of teacher engagement. Relationally grounded feedback enhances learners' sense of competence and sustained engagement in language learning (Afzal et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2024; Meng, 2021).

Encouragement ($M = 4.28$) further highlights the role of positive reinforcement in enhancing confidence and reducing anxiety. Students reported that praise, even for small improvements, motivated them to participate in class and persist in challenging tasks. Encouragement thus contributes directly to learners' willingness to communicate and resilience in overcoming barriers, echoing prior studies showing that motivation is strengthened when teachers validate effort (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021; Seven, 2020).

Empathy ($M = 4.22$), though slightly lower, remained significant in shaping learners' perceptions. Students valued patience and understanding, especially when facing difficulties in pronunciation or writing. This aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises the mediating role of social interaction in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers who display empathy provide not only cognitive scaffolding but also emotional support, helping students regulate anxiety and build a sense of belonging in the classroom (Zhang, 2022).

Availability ($M = 4.16$) received the lowest rating, although still positive overall. Some students expressed uncertainty about how or when to approach teachers outside class, which may reflect structural constraints such as time, institutional policies, or unclear boundaries. Nonetheless, correlations indicate that availability is closely linked to feedback and encouragement, suggesting that students interpret accessibility as part

of broader instructional and emotional support. This finding resonates with Afzal et al. (2023), who noted that teacher approachability shapes learners' willingness to seek help, a behaviour critical to autonomous language development.

Taken together, the strong intercorrelations among the five dimensions ($r = .64-.74$) demonstrate that teacher–student relationships are multidimensional yet interdependent. Trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement reinforce one another to create a supportive classroom climate. The findings thus support both SDT and Sociocultural Theory, highlighting that language learning is optimised when relational and affective needs are met alongside instructional goals.

Moving forward, teacher training programs should emphasise relational competence alongside pedagogical skills. Strategies such as fostering fairness, providing timely feedback, demonstrating empathy, and clarifying accessibility can enhance students' confidence, reduce anxiety, and ultimately promote more meaningful engagement with English learning.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the influence of teacher–student relationships on Form 3 ESL learners' perceptions of their English learning. The findings revealed that all five dimensions—trust, empathy, feedback, availability, and encouragement—were positively perceived and meaningfully contributed to students' motivation, confidence, participation and engagement. Trust, feedback, and encouragement emerged as the strongest dimensions, highlighting the importance of creating safe, supportive, and affirming classroom environments. These results reinforce prior research that links relational factors to positive learning outcomes, showing, for instance, that encouragement enhances willingness to participate (Seven, 2020), while feedback fosters self-revision and sustained effort (Alisoy, 2024). Empathy, though rated slightly lower, was still critical in reducing language anxiety and supporting learner persistence (Cooper, 2004; Zhang, 2022). Availability, while the lowest-rated, nonetheless mattered for learners' willingness to seek help, echoing Syahabuddin's (2020) emphasis on teacher accessibility.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data, its single-school context, and the absence of direct measures of English achievement. Future research could adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs, incorporate teacher perspectives, and examine relational strategies across diverse educational settings. Interventions that explicitly train teachers in empathy, feedback strategies, or availability practices may also yield valuable insights. Practically, the findings underscore the need for professional development programs that emphasise relational competencies alongside instructional skills. By prioritising trust, encouragement, and constructive feedback, teachers can cultivate classroom environments that not only reduce language anxiety but also actively support ESL learners' confidence and sustained engagement in English learning.

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