



Teacher–Student Relationships in EFL Classrooms: Insights into Students’ Engagement and Enjoyment from Teachers’ and Students’ Perception

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Abstract

Teacher–student relationship (TSR) has been recognized as an important factor influencing students’ academic and emotional experiences in language learning. However, previous studies have often examined teacher–student relationships, engagement, and enjoyment separately, with limited attention to the perspectives of both teachers and students. Therefore, this study explored teachers’ and students’ perceptions of teacher–student relationships in English classes and investigated how these relationships influence students’ learning engagement and enjoyment. A qualitative case study was conducted at a public junior high school in Bali, Indonesia, involving two English teachers and approximately 70 eighth-grade students. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis with methodological triangulation to enhance trustworthiness. The findings revealed that teachers viewed positive teacher–student relationships as being built through supportive interactions, constructive conflict management, and emotional connection. Students associated positive relationships with supportive teacher attitudes, effective communication, engaging classroom activities, and a comfortable learning environment. Overall, positive teacher–student relationships promoted students’ participation, confidence, engagement, and enjoyment in English learning by creating supportive and meaningful classroom experiences. These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of teacher–student relationships and emphasize their importance in fostering effective EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Deaf Students; English Language Teaching; CIPP Evaluation Model; Sign Language; Qualitative Program Evaluation

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1. Introduction

English plays a crucial role as an international language that facilitates communication among people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Consequently, English has



become an essential subject in Indonesian education to prepare students for global participation and competitiveness. The effectiveness of English language learning is influenced by various factors, including curriculum, learning environment, and teachers. Among these factors, teachers play a particularly significant role because they not only facilitate language acquisition but also support students' academic development, character formation, and emotional well-being (Fitria, 2024; Alfiah et al., 2025).

Teachers also have an important role in facilitating effective learning and creating classroom experiences that support students' development. Their instructional decisions and teaching strategies can significantly influence the quality of learning experienced by students (Artini et al., 2025). Teachers are responsible for creating a supportive learning environment in which students feel safe, respected, and motivated to participate. Previous studies have shown that students' emotions significantly influence foreign language learning, as positive emotions contribute to higher motivation, engagement, and achievement, whereas negative emotions may hinder the learning process (Al-Jarrah et al., 2024). Therefore, beyond pedagogical competence, teachers are expected to demonstrate social competence, positive personality traits, and professional competence that support meaningful interactions with students (Batee et al., 2025; Fernández et al., 2024).

Within the classroom environment, one of the most influential aspects of teachers' roles is the quality of the teacher–student relationship (TSR). Teacher–student relationship refers to the social and emotional bond between teachers and students characterized by trust, respect, support, and effective communication (Wang, 2023). Pianta (1999) further conceptualized TSR through the dimensions of closeness, conflict, and dependency. From a social constructivist and positive psychology perspective, teacher–student relationships influence how students perceive their classroom experiences. When students perceive their teachers as supportive, caring, and approachable, they are more likely to participate actively, remain emotionally engaged, and enjoy the learning process (Afrilia et al., 2024; Wanders et al., 2020). Conversely, negative perceptions of teacher–student relationships may reduce engagement, diminish learning enjoyment, and contribute to behavioral difficulties.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that TSR is closely associated with student engagement. Engagement refers to students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Students who perceive their teachers as supportive, empathetic, and respectful are more likely to actively participate in classroom activities, express their ideas, and develop a stronger sense of belonging (Li, 2022; Zainullah et al., 2023). Similarly, Thornberg et al. (2022) reported that high-quality teacher–student relationships positively predict students' engagement over time by increasing confidence and reducing anxiety in classroom participation. In addition to engagement, TSR is also linked to students' enjoyment of learning. Enjoyment is a positive emotional state characterized by feelings of satisfaction, interest, and enthusiasm during learning activities (Pekrun, 2024). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, enjoyment has been identified as an important factor that encourages students to participate actively and maintain motivation throughout the learning process (Merghani et al., 2024; Sucipto et al., 2023). Previous study has showed that positive learning experiences can foster enjoyment, happiness, and other positive emotions among EFL learners (Kusuma et al., 2025). Students who enjoy learning are generally more



willing to interact, explore new knowledge, and sustain their effort when facing academic challenges. Previous studies have further suggested that supportive teacher behavior and positive classroom interactions contribute significantly to students' enjoyment in language learning (Halty et al., 2021; Clem et al., 2021).

The interconnected nature of teacher–student relationship, engagement, and enjoyment has attracted increasing attention in educational research. Positive relationships with teachers can foster a supportive learning atmosphere that enhances students' emotional experiences and encourages active participation. Consequently, engagement and enjoyment often develop simultaneously within positive classroom environments. However, despite the growing literature on these variables, previous studies have frequently examined teacher–student relationship, engagement, and enjoyment as separate constructs. Moreover, many studies have primarily focused on students' perspectives, while limited research has explored these issues from both teachers' and students' viewpoints within a single framework. Addressing these gaps, the present study explores teacher–student relationships from both teachers' and students' perspectives using a qualitative case study, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how relationship quality influences students' engagement and enjoyment in EFL classrooms.

Understanding both teachers' and students' perceptions is important because perceptions shape how individuals interpret classroom interactions and experiences (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Since perceptions are influenced by prior experiences, expectations, and individual needs (Bruner, 1957), teachers and students may interpret the same classroom relationship differently. Examining both perspectives therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher–student relationships influence students' learning experiences.

Preliminary observations and interviews conducted in a public junior high school in Tabanan indicated that variations in teacher behavior influenced students' emotional responses and classroom participation. Students appeared more engaged and comfortable when teachers adopted friendly and supportive interaction styles while maintaining appropriate classroom boundaries. These observations suggest that teacher–student relationships may play an important role in shaping both engagement and enjoyment during English learning. Based on these considerations, the questions proposed in this study are:

1. How do teachers and students perceive teacher–student relationships in English classes?
2. How do teacher–student relationships influence students' engagement in English language learning?
3. How do teacher–student relationships influence students' enjoyment in English language learning?

2. Method

Research Design, Setting and Participants

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships (TSR) and their influence on students' engagement and enjoyment in English classes. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions,



and interpretations of a particular phenomenon. The case study design was considered appropriate as the research focused on a specific educational setting and aimed to provide a detailed description of teacher–student relationships within that context.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Kediri, Tabanan Regency, Bali, Indonesia. The school was selected because English is taught as a compulsory subject and provides a relevant context for examining teacher–student relationships in English language learning. The participants consisted of two English teachers and approximately 70 eighth-grade students from two classes. All students completed the open-ended questionnaire, while selected students participated in follow-up interviews to provide more detailed insights into their experiences and perceptions. Participant selection for interviews was continued until data saturation was achieved. The inclusion criteria required participants to be eighth-grade students or English teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Kediri and willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three qualitative techniques: open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation and provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to all participating students and the two English teachers. The questionnaires were administered through Google Forms, allowing participants to express their perceptions, experiences, and opinions freely using their own words. The instrument was developed based on the theories of perception proposed by Robbins and Judge (2013) and teacher–student relationship proposed by Pianta (1999). Prior to implementation, the questionnaire underwent expert validation by two university lecturers to ensure content validity, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives.

To obtain richer and more detailed information, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants. The interviews aimed to explore participants' perceptions of teacher–student relationships and their influence on learning engagement and enjoyment. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to facilitate participants' understanding and encourage more natural responses. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted in both participating classes to capture authentic interactions between teachers and students. Observation allowed the researcher to examine how teacher–student relationships were reflected in actual classroom practices and to compare observational findings with data obtained from questionnaires and interviews. Field notes were taken during the observation process to document classroom interactions, teacher behavior, and students' responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and observations were first organized and transcribed. Subsequently, the researcher conducted repeated readings to gain familiarity with the data.



Meaningful units of information were then coded and grouped into categories based on recurring patterns and themes. The themes were interpreted to answer the research questions concerning teachers' perceptions, students' perceptions, and the influence of teacher–student relationships on engagement and enjoyment in English classes.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by integrating data from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. The use of multiple data sources enabled cross-validation of findings and enhanced the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, expert validation of the questionnaire instrument contributed to the study's dependability and methodological rigor.

3. Findings and Discussions

Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships in English Classes

The analysis of teachers' responses revealed four major themes regarding teacher–student relationships (TSR) in English classes: positive connection, positive interaction, conflict management, and emotional attachment. Teachers perceived these aspects as essential in developing trust, maintaining classroom harmony, and supporting students' participation during learning activities.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

Theme	Description
Positive Connection	Building relationships by understanding students' needs, feelings, and personalities.
Positive Interaction	Encouraging students through praise, support, and positive reinforcement.
Conflict Management	Managing classroom tension through supportive and non-punitive approaches.
Emotional Attachment	Developing trust and emotional closeness through fairness, consistency, and care.

Both teachers emphasized the importance of understanding students' personal and academic needs in establishing positive relationships.

"I try to build a positive emotional connection with students by caring for them academically and personally, understanding their needs and personalities." (T1)

"Trying to be closer with students by caring for them, understanding their feelings, and learning about their difficulties." (T2)

The findings indicate that teachers considered emotional understanding an important foundation for building positive relationships. By understanding students' feelings, needs, and difficulties, teachers believed they could establish trust and create stronger emotional bonds with students. Such connections were perceived as important for creating a supportive classroom environment.

Teachers reported using positive reinforcement and encouragement to maintain productive classroom interactions.

"I use praise, encouragement, and interaction to stimulate engagement." (T1)

"I respond to the students by using positive reinforcement." (T2)



These responses suggest that teachers viewed positive interaction as a strategy for encouraging students to participate actively in classroom activities. Positive feedback was perceived as helping students feel appreciated and supported, which encouraged greater involvement during learning activities.

Teachers acknowledged that classroom tensions occasionally emerged during the learning process. However, they preferred supportive approaches to address such situations.

"To keep the students engaged after tension, I create fun and relaxing activities, such as simple quizzes or games." (T1)

"I add humor while teaching to reduce tension." (T2)

The findings reveal that teachers perceived conflict as a manageable aspect of classroom interaction. Rather than relying on punishment, they attempted to restore a positive classroom atmosphere through enjoyable activities and humor. These approaches were believed to help maintain students' engagement and prevent conflicts from negatively affecting teacher–student relationships.

Teachers highlighted trust and emotional closeness as important elements of positive teacher–student relationships.

"I build students' trust by not judging them too quickly when they answer incorrectly." (T1)

"By being fair, consistent, and supportive toward the students." (T2)

These findings suggest that trust was developed through supportive and non-judgmental teacher behavior. Teachers believed that when students felt emotionally safe, they became more willing to communicate, seek assistance, and participate actively during English lessons. As a result, emotional attachment contributed to stronger relationships between teachers and students. Furthermore, the findings revealed that teachers perceived teacher–student relationships as being developed through positive connections, supportive interactions, effective conflict management, and emotional attachment. Teachers emphasized the importance of understanding students' needs, feelings, and personalities to establish trust and emotional closeness. They also perceived positive reinforcement, encouragement, and supportive communication as important strategies for maintaining students' participation and motivation. Furthermore, teachers believed that constructive conflict management and trust-building practices contributed to stronger relationships and a more supportive classroom environment.

The prominence of emotional closeness in teachers' perceptions reflects the significance of the closeness dimension proposed by Pianta (1999). According to Pianta, closeness is characterized by warmth, open communication, and emotional support between teachers and students. In the present study, teachers attempted to establish closeness by demonstrating care for students both academically and personally. This finding supports Wang (2023), who argued that supportive teacher–student relationships promote students' emotional security and facilitate positive classroom experiences. When students perceive that teachers genuinely care about their well-being, they are more likely to develop trust and feel comfortable engaging in classroom interactions.



An interesting finding emerging from this study is that teachers consistently associated relationship building with positive reinforcement and supportive communication. Praise, encouragement, and positive responses were not merely viewed as instructional strategies but also as relational practices that strengthen teacher–student connections. This finding aligns with Afrilia et al. (2024), who found that supportive teacher behavior contributes to stronger student motivation and participation. Through positive reinforcement, teachers create an environment where students feel appreciated and respected, which subsequently strengthens interpersonal relationships within the classroom. Another notable aspect of the findings concerns the way teachers interpreted conflict. Unlike traditional perspectives that view conflict as a disruption to classroom relationships, the participating teachers perceived conflict as a normal component of classroom interaction that could be managed constructively. Teachers preferred restorative approaches, such as personal communication, humor, games, and ice-breaking activities, rather than punitive measures. This finding reflects the conflict dimension of Pianta’s (1999) framework, which emphasizes that the quality of a relationship is determined not by the absence of conflict but by how conflict is managed. Similar findings were reported by Wanders et al. (2020), who found that supportive responses to classroom difficulties contribute to healthier teacher–student relationships and more positive classroom climates.

The findings also highlight the importance of dependency-related dimensions, particularly seeking help and emotional attachment. Teachers perceived students’ willingness to ask questions and seek assistance as indicators of trust and positive relationships. This finding suggests that dependency should not be interpreted negatively but rather as a reflection of students’ confidence in teachers as sources of academic and emotional support. Such a perspective supports Pianta’s (1999) argument that dependency can become productive when it facilitates communication, trust, and support within educational settings. Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers perceive TSR as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, social, and instructional elements. Relationship building was not limited to academic interactions but involved creating an environment where students felt valued, respected, and supported. Consequently, TSR became a foundation for fostering positive learning experiences within English classrooms.

Students’ Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships in English Classes

Students generally reported positive perceptions of their relationships with English teachers. The analysis identified four major themes influencing students’ perceptions: teacher attitudes, communication and support, learning activities, and classroom environment.

Table 2. Summary of Students’ Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

Theme	Description
Teacher Attitudes	Students valued teachers who were friendly, patient, enthusiastic, and caring.
Communication and Support	Students communicated with teachers primarily to seek clarification and assistance.
Learning Activities	Interactive activities increased students’ interest and participation.



Classroom Environment

Classroom conditions influenced students' comfort and interaction.

Students frequently described positive feelings toward teachers who demonstrated enthusiasm, friendliness, and supportive behavior during instruction.

"I'm happy because the teacher is fun while teaching." (S22)

"I'm happy because the teacher teaches in an exciting and fun way." (S32)

"If the teacher is patient and willing to help when I am confused, I feel cared for. That makes me respect the teacher more and feel closer." (S8)

These excerpts indicate that students associated positive teacher behavior with stronger interpersonal relationships. Teachers who were perceived as caring, patient, and approachable helped students feel respected and emotionally supported. Such experiences contributed to stronger feelings of trust and closeness.

Students reported that they usually communicated with teachers when they needed clarification or additional assistance during learning.

"I want to ask or talk when I do not understand the lesson." (S1)

"I will ask if I do not understand." (S11)

"If the teacher is fun and teaches in a relaxed way, and if the topic is interesting to discuss." (S8)

The findings demonstrate that communication was influenced by both academic needs and classroom atmosphere. Students were more likely to seek help when teachers were approachable and supportive. This suggests that positive relationships encourage students to communicate more openly with teachers.

Interactive learning activities were frequently mentioned as experiences that increased students' interest in English lessons.

"I felt very happy when I got the quiz." (S1)

"Question and answer activities, because they are exciting and fun." (S4)

"When the teacher gave role-play activities, I felt happy." (S7)

"Ice breaking because I got the chance to play." (S15)

These findings indicate that students preferred learning activities that encouraged active participation and enjoyment. Interactive activities not only increased students' interest in learning English but also contributed to positive perceptions of teachers and classroom experiences.

Students reported that classroom conditions influenced their comfort and participation during learning.

"During morning classes I am more focused and during the day I am hungry." (S4)

"I am more focused in the morning classes, and during the day I feel sleepy and hungry." (S9)

"If the teacher is enthusiastic and passionate when teaching, I feel more comfortable learning and more confident to answer in class." (S7)

The findings indicated that students generally held positive perceptions of their relationships with English teachers. Students associated positive teacher–student relationships with teachers who were friendly, patient, enthusiastic, approachable, and supportive. They



perceived that positive teacher behavior encouraged communication, increased comfort in learning, and strengthened emotional closeness with teachers. Additionally, interactive learning activities and supportive classroom environments contributed to students' positive classroom experiences and reinforced the development of positive teacher–student relationships.

This finding can be explained through the perception theory proposed by Robbins and Judge (2013), which suggests that individuals interpret experiences based on personal interactions and contextual conditions. Students' perceptions were largely shaped by how teachers behaved toward them during classroom activities. Teachers who displayed positive emotions, enthusiasm, and supportive attitudes were perceived more favorably and were more likely to establish stronger relationships with students. This finding is consistent with Li (2022), who reported that students tend to develop stronger connections with teachers who demonstrate empathy, support, and accessibility.

A particularly significant finding is that students frequently linked positive relationships with enjoyable classroom experiences. Activities such as games, role-play, quizzes, and ice-breaking sessions were repeatedly mentioned as memorable experiences that enhanced their perceptions of teachers. This finding suggests that relationship development occurs not only through direct communication but also through shared classroom experiences. In other words, engaging learning activities function as relational spaces where teachers and students interact more naturally and positively. This result supports Sucipto et al. (2023), who argued that enjoyable classroom experiences contribute to positive emotional responses and stronger engagement in language learning contexts.

The findings further reveal that students' perceptions of TSR were influenced by contextual factors beyond teacher behavior. Class schedules, classroom atmosphere, and seating arrangements all affected students' comfort and willingness to participate. Interestingly, students preferred morning classes because they felt more focused and energetic, while changes in seating arrangements sometimes reduced their comfort due to separation from close peers. These findings suggest that TSR should not be understood solely as an interpersonal phenomenon but also as a contextual one. Classroom environments shape students' emotional experiences, which in turn influence how they perceive and interact with teachers.

Another noteworthy finding is that students viewed communication with teachers primarily as a means of seeking academic support. However, students were more willing to ask questions and communicate openly when teachers created a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere. This finding indicates that trust serves as an important mediator between teacher behavior and student participation. When students perceive teachers as approachable and understanding, communication becomes easier and more frequent, leading to stronger teacher–student relationships. Taken together, these findings suggest that students perceive TSR as a combination of interpersonal support, enjoyable learning experiences, and positive classroom environments. While teachers focus on building relationships through supportive practices,



students evaluate those relationships based on how those practices affect their feelings of comfort, belonging, and support during learning. This convergence between teachers' and students' perspectives highlights the central role of emotional support and positive interactions in shaping teacher–student relationships within English classrooms.

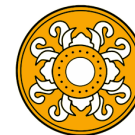
4. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study demonstrates that teacher–student relationships play a central role in shaping students' engagement and enjoyment in English language learning. Rather than functioning solely as interpersonal connections, positive teacher–student relationships create a supportive classroom climate that encourages students to participate actively, communicate confidently, and experience learning more positively. By incorporating both teachers' and students' perspectives, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how relationship quality influences students' emotional and behavioral experiences in EFL classrooms. These findings reinforce the importance of relationship-centered teaching as an essential component of effective English language instruction.

For English teachers, relationship-building should be integrated into daily classroom practice through consistent positive feedback, active listening, and regular opportunities for meaningful teacher–student interaction. Teachers are also encouraged to incorporate collaborative activities, pair and group discussions, role-play, and game-based learning to increase student participation while strengthening interpersonal relationships. For schools, professional development programs should include practical training on communication skills, classroom relationship management, and socio-emotional learning. Schools should also encourage regular teacher reflection and peer observation to help teachers identify effective strategies for building positive relationships with students. For future researchers, studies involving multiple schools, different educational levels, and diverse cultural contexts are recommended to improve the generalizability of the findings. Future research may also examine specific dimensions of teacher–student relationships (e.g., trust, communication, or emotional support) and their individual effects on engagement, enjoyment, and academic achievement using mixed-method or longitudinal designs.

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