

Between Face-To-Face, Hybrid and Online: How Shifting Modalities Shape Rapport and Communicative Competence Among Malaysian University Students

ABSTRACT

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Developing communicative competence in second language learners is challenging due to limited exposure and opportunities to use English, challenges that were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt shift to online and hybrid learning disrupted students' ability to build rapport and engage in meaningful interactions, with reduced non-verbal cues, spoken communication, personalised feedback, and outside-classroom practice contributing to misunderstandings, isolation, and lower participation. Language learning is closely tied to social context, which fosters socialisation and the development of communicative competence. This exploratory qualitative study examines how classroom modality, face-to-face, hybrid, and online, shapes rapport development among ESL university students and how these experiences shape learners' perceived opportunities to engage in classroom communication that supports the development of communicative competence. In-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 university students revealed that there was a shift in individual interactions, class engagement and participation, asking and addressing questions, the role of spoken communication, after-class bonding, and non-verbal communication in online and hybrid learning environments. The findings offer pedagogical insights for ESL instructors and inform higher education stakeholders seeking to design interactionally supportive learning environments across instructional modalities.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, ESL Learners, Higher Education, Second Language Acquisition.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence enables language learners to communicate clearly, effectively, and appropriately, helping them avoid misunderstandings in everyday interaction (Hymes, 1972). However, for second language learners, developing this competence is far from straightforward. Many experience limited exposure to the target language and few opportunities to use it authentically, and these challenges became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, when education systems around the world were abruptly forced to transition online.

1.1. Research Background and Problem

With the rapid spread of Covid-19, physical interaction came to a halt. A systematic review by Liu, Wyver, and Chutiyami (2022) highlights how pandemic restrictions disrupted children's outdoor activities and socialisation. Research has shown that such disruptions affected not only communication quality but also learners' opportunities for meaningful interaction and socialisation (Long et al., 2022; Towner et al., 2022). In language learning contexts, where interaction plays a central role in developing communicative competence, these changes were particularly consequential. Students often experienced reduced participation and engagement in virtual classrooms, partly due to the absence of physical co-presence and the ease with which learners could disengage from online interaction (Singh, Steele, & Singh, 2021). These circumstances highlight the importance of examining how shifts in instructional modality influence interpersonal dynamics and communication in ESL classrooms.

Although online learning is not a new concept given the long history of distance education, its success depends on factors such as maintaining meaningful teacher–student interaction, supporting authentic learning tasks, ensuring engagement, and designing effective communication structures (Agostinelli, 2019). During emergency remote teaching, many of these factors were difficult to achieve. Students could easily disengage by switching off their cameras and this affected their willingness to participate and interact (Singh, Steele, & Singh, 2021). Much of the existing literature focuses on the challenges faced by educators in adapting to online teaching, leaving a gap in our understanding of students' lived learning experiences during this period (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). This gap is particularly concerning in ESL contexts, where social interaction forms the foundation of language learning.

Halliday (1978, 2004) emphasises that language development occurs through socialisation, where learners acquire both language and meaning from interactions within their environment. When physical socialisation became restricted, this natural learning pathway was disrupted. Studies have reported decreased communication, reduced motivation, and heightened feelings of isolation among students in online ESL environments (Alawamleh et al., 2022; Long et al., 2021). These findings raise an important question: how have changes in modality, moving from face-to-face to online, then hybrid, and eventually back to face-to-face, affected ESL learners' ability to build rapport and develop communicative competence?

In navigating these challenges, ESL instructors adopted various strategies to sustain interaction in virtual spaces, such as synchronous computer-mediated communication (Junn, 2023), online intercultural exchanges (Taskiran, 2023), and task-based pedagogical adaptations (Belda-Medina, 2021). While these approaches aimed to emulate authentic communication and support

learners' motivation, the long-term effects of shifting modalities on students' socialisation habits remain unclear.

Rapport, a mutual, prosocial, and trusting connection between individuals (Frisby & Martin, 2010), is particularly relevant here. Rapport plays a crucial role in language learning because it shapes comfort, participation, and learners' willingness to communicate. Research shows that different teaching modalities can significantly influence rapport-building experiences (Denker et al., 2022), which in turn affect participation and learning outcomes (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

In light of this, the present study aims to explore how modality shifts, specifically face-to-face, hybrid, and online learning, shape rapport development in the ESL classroom and how these shifts may influence learners' communicative competence. The university students chosen for this study had enrolled in a compulsory Academic Interaction course taken in their first year that explicitly focused on the development of students' communicative competence. By foregrounding students' experiences of rebuilding rapport after prolonged online learning, the study provides pedagogical insights for ESL instructors and practical considerations for higher education policy and curriculum planning units in designing learning environments that support meaningful interaction and communicative development across modalities.

For the purposes of this study, rapport refers to the relational quality that fosters comfort, trust, and interaction enjoyment between learners and instructors within the classroom environment (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Such rapport is reflected in learners' willingness to participate, share ideas, and engage in communicative activities with the instructor and other learners.. Communicative competence is conceptualised following Hymes' (1972) framework, encompassing grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. These constructs informed the design of the semi-structured interview prompts used in the study (see Appendix A), which explore students' experiences of classroom interaction, participation, and rapport-building across different instructional modalities.

1.2. Research Purpose

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, as empirical research examining rapport development across shifting instructional modalities in ESL contexts remains limited. It is guided by a single overarching research aim, within which the analysis focuses on learners' experiences of rapport development across face-to-face, hybrid, and online classrooms, their perceptions of rapport in supporting communicative competence, and factors influencing the rebuilding of rapport after prolonged online learning.

Guided by this overarching purpose, the analysis attends to the following interrelated aspects of learners' experiences:

1. Rapport development across face-to-face, hybrid, and online ESL classroom settings
2. Learners' perceptions of the role of rapport in supporting communicative competence following modality shifts
3. Factors that facilitate or hinder the rebuilding of rapport after prolonged online learning

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impact of Online Modalities on Socialisation and Rapport

Non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language are central to developing rapport and interpreting meaning. In online and hybrid settings, these cues are often reduced or lost entirely, which can lead to misunderstandings, especially among ESL learners who rely heavily on contextual clues (Ying et al., 2021; Nesprava et al., 2023). Although online platforms offer alternative modes of interaction, they rarely replicate the richness of in-person communication (Ramalingam et al., 2023; Hamid et al., 2025). Students frequently report reduced communication and feelings of isolation when learning online (Alawamleh et al., 2020), and such experiences inevitably affect their rapport with instructors and peers (Singh et al., 2021). Existing studies primarily document the technological limitations of online communication, while offering limited insight into how learners themselves experience these changes in rapport-building across different instructional modalities.

Another challenge lies in the reduced personalised interaction between lecturers and students. Many learners describe feeling disconnected from instructors in online environments, which affects the relational quality essential for rapport-building (Rahman & Razali, 2024; Ash'ari et al., 2025). Even when educators utilise multimodal tools or adapt their teaching approaches, these interactions remain mediated through screens, and the immediacy normally present in face-to-face classrooms is diminished (Belda-Medina, 2021). For ESL learners who depend on scaffolded support to develop communicative competence, this relational distance may constrain both engagement and language use opportunities.

Asking questions is a natural part of language learning, yet many students find it less comfortable in online environments. The absence of non-verbal encouragement and delayed instructor responses often discourage learners from seeking clarification (Hamid et al., 2025; Nesprava et al., 2023). Some hesitate out of fear of miscommunication, while others remain silent due to uncertainties about online etiquette or response time. This hesitation may further reduce opportunities for immediate feedback and interactive negotiation of meaning, both of which are essential processes in second language learning. These changes have been linked to reduced cognitive engagement (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021; Towner et al., 2022), signalling broader implications for ESL participation.

2.2. Shifts in Classroom Communication Dynamics

Spoken interaction forms a central component of ESL learning, as it allows learners to practise language use and negotiate meaning in real time. Studies indicate that spoken communication tends to be less prominent in online and hybrid classrooms, where instructional time is often structured around content delivery rather than spontaneous discussion (Singh et al., 2021; Rahman & Razali, 2024). Although technological tools provide structure, they still cannot mirror the organic flow of real-time conversation (Ramalingam et al., 2023). Studies show that online environments often prioritise content delivery rather than verbal interaction, which may limit opportunities for learners to practise speaking (Singh et al., 2021; Rahman & Razali, 2024). Current research focuses largely on instructional practices rather than examining how learners perceive these changes in interactional opportunities and how such experiences influence rapport and communicative engagement.

Full-class discussions also take on a different character online. Instead of dynamic, free-flowing exchanges, discussion tends to become segmented and less inclusive (Ramalingam et al., 2023). These limitations can hinder the development of collective communicative competence (Roinah et al., 2024). Alawamleh et al. (2020) also note that online classes restrict robust discussions, while Long et al. (2021) highlight how the reduction in social interaction erodes relational capital within the classroom community.

2.3. The Decline in Outside-Classroom Interactions

Outside-classroom interaction plays a significant role in strengthening communicative competence, particularly for ESL learners who benefit from informal language practice. Pandemic restrictions significantly reduced these opportunities, leading to fewer peer interactions and less authentic language use (Hernandez-Ledezma & Janecek, 2025). Towner et al. (2022) further explain that reduced socialisation contributed to increased loneliness, which affects learners' confidence and motivation to communicate. When informal learning opportunities diminish, the development of communicative competence becomes even more challenging. Despite these observations, relatively little research has explored how learners experience the loss and subsequent rebuilding of informal interaction as instructional modalities shift back toward hybrid or face-to-face learning environments.

2.4. Implications for Pedagogical Practice

The reduction of non-verbal cues in online and hybrid learning underscores the need for intentional strategies that promote meaningful oral interaction. Existing studies highlight techniques such as breakout rooms, structured oral tasks, and small-group discussions can recreate aspects of face-to-face engagement, addressing relational and communicative gaps in digital environments (Cho & Cho, 2016; Fehervari et al., 2022; Almendingen et al., 2022; Saltz & Heckman, 2020). However, much of this work remains instructor-centred or strategy-focused, with limited attention to learners' perceptions of rapport across instructional modalities. By exploring how modality shifts affect rapport and communicative competence, this study can inform which strategies are most effective in sustaining interaction and participation among ESL learners.

Scaffolding is equally crucial in online contexts, where limited individual support can lead to disengagement. Multimodal tools, such as interactive videos with embedded quizzes or collaborative online platforms, can enhance engagement while supporting learners' communicative development (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017; Bakla & Demiröz, 2024). While scaffolding through multimodal tools has been shown to support engagement (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017; Bakla & Demiröz, 2024), there is insufficient qualitative evidence examining how such practices influence rapport rebuilding and communicative competence from the learner perspective.

Finally, online learning can disrupt social cohesion, highlighting the importance of opportunities for peer collaboration and informal interaction (Ong & Quek, 2023). Peer-based tasks and interactive group activities can foster rapport and support language fluency, particularly for learners with fewer natural exposure opportunities (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017). By examining ESL students' experiences across modalities, this study can guide pedagogical practices

that strengthen social bonds and communicative competence, even in non-physical learning environments.

Notably, few studies have explicitly examined rapport as a key construct linking modality shifts to communicative competence in ESL higher education contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study explores ESL learners' experiences across face-to-face, hybrid, and online modalities, clarifying how rapport-related interactional behaviours shape communicative development following prolonged online learning.

2.5. Theoretical Framing

This study is conceptually informed by social-interaction perspectives on language development and by research on learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). From a Vygotskian perspective, language learning occurs through social interaction, where meaning is co-constructed through communicative activity and supported by interpersonal relationships within the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). In classroom contexts, opportunities for interaction with teachers and peers create the conditions through which learners practise language use and gradually develop communicative competence. Changes in instructional modality may therefore influence not only the frequency of interaction but also the relational dynamics that support communicative engagement.

Complementing this perspective, the willingness-to-communicate framework highlights how learners' readiness to initiate communication is shaped by situational and relational factors, including perceived comfort, confidence, and interpersonal rapport within the classroom (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In language learning contexts, rapport between instructors and students can foster a supportive environment that encourages learners to participate more actively in communicative tasks.

These theoretical perspectives informed the analytical approach adopted in this study. During the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), initial codes were developed around learners' interactional experiences, perceptions of relational comfort, and opportunities for participation across different instructional modalities. Themes were subsequently refined to capture how modality shifts influenced rapport development and the interactional conditions that shape learners' communicative engagement in ESL classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to examine ESL university students' experiences of rapport development and classroom interaction across different instructional modalities following the COVID-19 pandemic. An exploratory qualitative approach is appropriate when the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences in contexts where existing empirical evidence remains limited.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with undergraduate ESL students, allowing participants to describe their experiences of learning across face-to-face, hy-

brid, and online classroom environments. This approach enabled the researcher to capture nuanced insights into how students perceived rapport, interactional dynamics, and communicative engagement across these modalities.

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) framework. This analytical approach allows patterns of meaning to be identified across participants' accounts while remaining sensitive to the contextual and experiential dimensions of the data. Through this process, the study aims to generate a rich understanding of how learners interpret their interactional experiences across different learning modalities and how these experiences shape the relational conditions that support classroom communication.

3.2. Participants and Setting

Participants were undergraduate ESL students enrolled in a university English language course that had experienced instructional shifts across face-to-face, hybrid, and online modalities. Participants were invited through an announcement disseminated by course lecturers following institutional ethical approval. Interested students registered their willingness to participate via a Google Form, which included screening questions to verify the study's inclusion criteria.

A purposive recruitment strategy was employed to ensure participants had relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Specifically, participants were required to have experienced face-to-face instruction and at least one online or hybrid learning phase within the same course. Thirty students initially indicated interest through the form and met the inclusion criteria. However, ten students did not respond to follow-up communication for interview scheduling. The final sample therefore consisted of 20 participants who met the inclusion criteria and completed the interviews.

The inclusion criteria required participants to:

- Be enrolled in the selected ESL course, Academic Interaction and Presentations during the period of modality shifts,
- Have experienced face-to-face and at least one online or hybrid learning phase, and
- consent to participate in a recorded interview.

The study's participants were 20 university undergraduate students enrolled at a Malaysian public university. Participants were selected based on their enrolment in a compulsory course, the Academic Interaction course taken in their first year that explicitly focused on the development of students' communicative competence. The course entailed them to learn and be tested on how to communicate in group interactions as well as during presentations for 3 hours a week, throughout a duration of 14 weeks.

Each participant was identified with the pseudonym R1 – R20. The participants were informed that demographic data on them that did not impact the findings of the study would not be included in any publications or reports. All participants had experienced face-to-face, hybrid, and online modes of learning English as a second language.

After each interview session, the data was transcribed and coding was done. These codes were categorised and matched to develop themes. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, which was after the 20 university students were interviewed.

To assess the adequacy of the dataset, saturation was monitored during the coding process. As interviews were analysed sequentially, the emergence of new codes was tracked in relation to the study's research questions. After coding the later interviews (approximately interviews 18–20), no additional codes relevant to the research aims were identified, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached. This approach aligns with qualitative research guidance suggesting that saturation may be evidenced when additional data no longer contribute substantially new conceptual insights (Guest, et al., 2006).

3.3. Data Collection and Trustworthiness

The primary data collection method consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to allow participants to share detailed, rich narratives of their experiences, moving beyond simple responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interview protocol was developed and adapted based on the themes presented in Frisby and Martin's (2010) Modified Rapport Measure. While the original measure focused on quantifying rapport, the core constructs of comfort, relational quality, and interaction enjoyment were utilised to frame the open-ended interview questions. The initial 11 quantitative items were transformed into nine open-ended, non-leading questions to explore the following areas:

- Perceived comfort in communication with the instructor and peers
- Perceived changes in the student-instructor and student-peer relationships across different modalities
- Perceived impact of these relationships on the development of communicative competence

The finalised questions in the interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the participants' responses. All interview questions were asked in English, and most of the responses were also in English, except when the participants were at loss of words and needed to revert to their mother tongue. In situations where the participants did not use English, the interviewer would attempt to rephrase the response in English to the participants, asking them if this is what they had meant earlier.

The interviews were conducted in person by a trained research assistant who was not involved in the participants' course assessment to minimise potential power dynamics. The research assistant was a postgraduate student with prior experience in qualitative interviewing and received training from the researcher regarding the study objectives, interview protocol, and appropriate probing techniques. This training included familiarisation with the research questions, discussion of relevant literature, and guidance on maintaining consistency while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim immediately following completion. The interviews were conducted in-person by the research assistant in the campus area. The research assistant was trained, specifically through explanation of

the objectives of the study, the previous literature involved, as well as suggested manners for probing and redirecting the participants if needed. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethic Committee for Research Involving Human Subject (JKEUPM) under Universiti Putra Malaysia, reference number JKEUPM-2024-058.

The transcribed interview data were analysed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti to manage and organise the large dataset. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted with participants, and peer debriefing was performed between the research assistant and researcher. The member checking was conducted within a duration of one to two weeks from the interview date. The participants were given a few days to review the transcripts and codes that were identified. None of the participants requested any changes to the data and coding. Once all the interviews and member checking procedures were completed, the researcher and research assistant conducted peer debriefing to discuss the findings and interpretations made, as well as the themes that could be derived from the data.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase framework. Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to achieve familiarisation with the data.

The coding process followed several sequential steps. First, initial open coding was conducted inductively, focusing on participants' descriptions of rapport development, interactional behaviours, and communicative experiences across face-to-face, hybrid, and online modalities. These initial codes were then organised into a preliminary codebook, where each code was assigned a working definition based on patterns observed in the data.

Second, independent coding was conducted by two coders. The first coder (the research assistant) completed initial open coding across all transcripts, while the second coder (the researcher) independently coded the dataset using the same preliminary coding framework. This step allowed multiple perspectives to inform the interpretation of the data.

Third, the coders engaged in iterative consensus meetings to compare coding decisions, discuss interpretive differences, and refine the coding framework. During these discussions, several codes were merged, renamed, or clarified to enhance conceptual coherence. These collaborative discussions served to strengthen analytic transparency and ensure that the coding framework remained grounded in participants' accounts.

For example, one segment describing students' hesitation to speak during online classes was initially coded by the first coder as "**online participation anxiety**," while the second coder interpreted it as "**lack of interactional cues**." During the consensus discussion, both coders reviewed the excerpt in context and agreed that the hesitation was primarily linked to the absence of non-verbal feedback from peers and instructors. The code was therefore revised to "**reduced non-verbal encouragement**," which more accurately captured the interactional dynamic described by participants.

Finally, codes were organised into broader themes, and relationships among these themes were examined through the development of a thematic map, which guided the final interpretation of

patterns across the dataset. Code definitions were refined iteratively during this stage. An example of the final codebook, including one theme, its definition, and representative codes and excerpts, is provided in Appendix B.

Consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated, as coding agreement is not treated as a measure of analytic validity within this approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Instead, analytic rigour was maintained through reflexive dialogue between coders, peer debriefing, and grounding interpretations closely in participants' accounts.

Reflexivity was integrated throughout the research process to acknowledge potential researcher influence. The researcher is an ESL educator with experience teaching in face-to-face, hybrid, and online higher education contexts. While this positionality provided contextual sensitivity to rapport and interactional dynamics, it also required careful attention to avoid assuming shared experiences with participants. To address this, interpretations were continually revisited during coding discussions and member-checking procedures were conducted to ensure that findings reflected participants' perspectives.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research research assistant shortly after each interview session. The researcher subsequently reviewed the transcripts while listening to the recordings to verify accuracy and ensure that participants' responses were faithfully represented. Where minor transcription ambiguities occurred, they were resolved through discussion between the research assistant and the researcher. As the interviews were conducted in English, no translation was required.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, a member-checking procedure was conducted. Participants were contacted via email and provided with a brief summary of the preliminary themes derived from the analysis. They were invited to review whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Eighteen of the twenty participants responded to the member-check request, and none suggested changes to the interpretations presented. This process helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives.

To assess the adequacy of the dataset, saturation was monitored throughout the data collection and analysis process. Interviews were transcribed and preliminarily coded shortly after each interview, allowing the researcher to track the emergence of new codes in relation to the research questions. The coding framework began to stabilise after approximately the eighteenth interview, with subsequent interviews contributing additional examples and elaborations of existing codes rather than introducing substantively new categories. The remaining interviews were conducted to confirm the consistency of the themes across participants' experiences. This approach aligns with qualitative research guidance suggesting that saturation may be evidenced when additional data no longer generate substantially new conceptual insights (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussion

This study aims to explore how the different modalities, namely face-to-face, hybrid, online, impact rapport in ESL classrooms for the development of students' communicative competence. The emerging themes from this study include the shift in individual interactions, class

engagement and participation, asking and addressing questions, the role of spoken communication, after-class bonding, and non-verbal communication.

4.1. Individual Interactions

Due to the changes in modality, the students in ESL classrooms experience a shift in individual interactions, with a feeling of distance and isolation due to the classroom related interaction being mostly formal and lacking the opportunity for building rapport.

Respondent 3 noticed a shift in interaction, “I do notice small changes depending on the mode of learning. In face-to-face classes, it's easier to connect personally, while in online or hybrid classes, communication can feel more formal”. Though formal language use is deemed appropriate for the classroom, there should also be opportunities for learners to experience individual and casual interaction, as it can be a medium for building rapport between the instructor and learners. Comparing to their experience in hybrid and online classrooms, Respondent 12 notes that “In face-to face class, I can feel a stronger more impactful relationship as there’s no barrier in communication”. Most of the students reported that they would feel that they experienced more personalised and individualised interactions in face-to face classes.

In online and hybrid learning environments, the personal touch often afforded by face-to-face engagement is challenging to replicate. Students frequently report feelings of isolation and disconnection from instructors, which can inhibit their ability to form meaningful relationships that are crucial for language acquisition (Rahman & Razali, 2024). Studies highlight the importance of personalized feedback and interactions in cultivating a conducive learning atmosphere (Ash’ari et al., 2025). This gap in individual attention may further exacerbate existing disparities in learner performance and confidence, particularly for those requiring more tailored support (Alaskar, 2023).

Respondent 18 also mentioned “I think the relationship with instructor will change especially through face-to-face because when we communicate in real life, we can feel the connection but if hybrid or online, it seems like there are some barriers to communicate because even we see through screen of the laptop but still we cannot feel their presence,” where they emphasize the lack of presence of the ESL instructor in hybrid and online mode, affecting communication in the classroom. This presence does not only refer to the physical presence, but also the salience of the ESL instructor, specifically in the personalised interactions. These personalised interactions are vital in students’ development of their communicative competence.

Alawamleh et al. (2020) discusses research where students felt less connection to their instructors in virtual settings, which hindered rapport-building crucial for language development. At the same time, Respondent 11 stated that “in online or hybrid settings, it can feel more distant but still effective if there’s regular interaction,” which does highlight the possibility for the communication in hybrid classrooms to be more effective if initiated constantly and consistently. Belda-Medina (2021) emphasizes this by advocating for more multimodal interactions to enhance communicative competence in an online framework, supporting the need for tailored approaches even in non-physical environments.

The findings show that changes in learning modality significantly affect individual interactions and, consequently, rapport in ESL classrooms. Students consistently report that face-to-face classes allow stronger, more personal connections due to the immediacy of communication and

the instructor's clearer presence, which supports the development of communicative competence. In contrast, hybrid and online environments tend to feel more formal, distant, and less personalised, often leading to feelings of isolation and reduced opportunities for casual, rapport-building exchanges.

4.2. Class Engagement and Participation

The shift in ESL classroom engagement and participation was also found to be a prominent theme in the impact of rapport on the development of ESL learners' communicative competence. Whole-class interactions face changes across modalities, as there is unequal participation among students and reduced class dynamics. With the exception of one of the participants, all the participants expressed their inclination towards face-to-face classes in terms of engaging and participating in the language classroom, compared to hybrid and online classes.

Respondent 12 reported, "I have a low participation rate in communicating in online session with other students, as it feels more structured and restricted". The online classroom environment feels more structured for learners, which causes them to reduce participation and engagement in the ESL classroom, affecting the whole-class engagement. This is also supported by Respondent 2, comparing the student's intention to participate in whole-class discussions in physical classrooms as opposed to online classrooms, "During face to face I am more active and energetic as I can speak out most of my ideas and thinking while during online session I tend to become more passive".

The transition to hybrid learning models has redefined full-class dynamics, where the immediacy of interactions typically seen in traditional classrooms is often replaced by a more segmented and less dynamic exchange in virtual environments. In relation to this, Respondent 6 mentioned that "classes feel less interactive, and sometimes it's awkward to have conversations because people are quiet or distracted". Interactions in online and hybrid classes are often less dynamic due to the reduced engagement from students. Research suggests that while hybrid classrooms can integrate diverse learning methods, they frequently struggle to promote inclusive, lively discussions among ESL learners (Ramalingam et al., 2023; Yang & Foley, 2024). This limitation can hinder the development of collective communicative competence (Roinah et al., 2024), as students may feel less inclined to engage in discussions in less personalized online settings.

Comparing face-to-face, hybrid, and online classrooms, Respondent 8 stated, "In face-to-face classes, it's easier to build connections and engage in group activities, while online or hybrid settings sometimes make communication feel more distant". Discussing group work which usually comes naturally and easily for the students in face-to-face classrooms becomes challenging in online classrooms which requires additional settings in the software used or the implementation of third-party software. At the same time, the same respondent also pointed out that "However, the supportive relationships with both the instructor and other students have positively influenced my overall progress" when explaining their communication in the online classroom, which implies that online classrooms can also be engaging with the presence of supportive instructors and classmates.

The nature of full-class discussions has transformed significantly due to the transition to online learning. Alawamleh et al. (2020) discuss the shift in classroom dynamics whereby online learning has hampered robust exchanges typical of in-person classes, thus affecting collaborative learning opportunities. Long et al. (2021) further elaborate by examining how pandemic-

induced limitations on social interactions alter classroom discourse, suggesting that the relational capital that fuels these exchanges has been considerably weakened.

The findings show that class engagement and participation shift noticeably across modalities, shaping how rapport supports ESL learners' communicative competence. Research echoes these experiences, noting that virtual and hybrid environments often struggle to foster inclusive dialogue, ultimately limiting opportunities for developing collective communicative competence.

4.3. Asking and Addressing Questions

Due to the change in modalities, students experience difficulty in asking questions, hesitation to interrupt for asking questions, and uncertainty in expressing themselves in written form. These have a significant impact on the rapport in the language classroom, undeniably also affecting interaction and their development of communicative competence.

Respondent 20 notes the ease of asking questions to the ESL instructor in face-to-face classrooms, "It is easier for me to communicate, or even ask questions to the instructor since most of the classes are face-to-face. I believe that it is also easier for the instructor to see our facial expressions and offers help when needed". Asking questions is deemed easier in physical classrooms as the ESL instructor would be able to see students' facial expression and body language which would cue their need for assistance. At times, learners might want to ask quick questions, which would be easily done in face-to-face classrooms but becomes difficult in online classrooms. This is expressed by Respondent 8, "In online settings, it's harder to casually chat or ask quick questions like in a classroom".

The modalities employed in ESL instruction also influence how learners approach asking and addressing questions. In face-to-face settings, the familiarity and comfort derived from non-verbal exchanges often encourage more proactive inquiry among students (Hamid et al., 2025). However, studies reveal that in online or hybrid contexts, students may hesitate to engage in verbal questioning due to fears of miscommunication or being misunderstood, reflecting a shift in classroom cognitive engagement (Nesprava et al., 2023; Felcida & Deepa, 2025). The challenge of facilitating an environment conducive to questioning within virtual settings compounds the difficulty ESL learners face (Rahman & Razali, 2024; Ying et al., 2021).

However, the shift to questions in written form via chatbox and messages has also raised other concerns. Respondent 12 stated, "For online classes, I feel a bit insecure about my writing skills as I'm required to write a formal question or statement when needed. Sometimes, I tend to keep the question to myself as I found it hard to express my thoughts through a writing form". Students focus too much on expressing themselves formally and accurately when asking questions in written form, hence halting them from actually asking questions in the ESL classroom. Changes in how students ask and address questions within these varying formats also warrant discussion. Recent research indicates that students may be less likely to engage in interaction when they feel distanced from the preferred modalities of learning (Towner et al., 2022).

Undoubtedly, there are learners who thrive in online situations because of the opportunity to ask questions in written form. Respondent 17 said, "When face-to-face, it is hard for me to ask a question as I'm shy, but in online class I can ask anytime," expressing the convenience of asking questions in the chatbox where they can type in the question to be answered by the instructor without disrupting the class. This student noted that the absence of immediate peer

evaluation and the availability of chat functions reduced anxiety. This divergence may be linked to individual personality traits, prior experience with online learning, or higher self-esteem in written proficiency compared to oral production. However, as Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) reported, while some respondents benefited from the immediacy of live online sessions, the lack of immediate feedback on questions could discourage engagement and result in a more passive learning experience.

The findings show that shifts in modality significantly affect how ESL students ask and address questions, which in turn shapes rapport and opportunities for developing communicative competence. In face-to-face classrooms, students feel more comfortable seeking help because instructors can read their non-verbal cues and respond immediately. Overall, the modality influences students' confidence and willingness to ask questions, directly impacting rapport and communicative competence development.

4.4. The Role of Spoken Communication

When there is a shift in modality, the role of spoken communication becomes peripheral, where students rely more on written or asynchronous communication. Students tend to use the chat-box function and prefer sending the teacher messages after class. A few of the students felt uncomfortable to interrupt by asking questions in online classes and felt more comfortable to express their thoughts via chat or written communication.

Respondent 5 mentioned, "For online classes, the way I communicate with my lecturer is just through the chatbox during our online classes or through WhatsApp", With online classrooms, students choose to communicate more via written communication such as the chat function and other social media communications. For many ESL learners, the dynamics of classroom discussions have shifted significantly with the integration of technology, leading to reduced opportunities for spontaneous verbal exchanges that often enhance language skills (Rahman & Razali, 2024; Yang & Foley, 2024). What would normally be a classroom of learners responding and asking questions verbally in whole-class interactions has become less spontaneous, with reduced opportunities for authentic unrehearsed communication in the target language. This is supported by research which indicates that while online tools can facilitate structured communication, they may not replicate the organic nature of spoken discourse found in physical classrooms (Ramalingam et al., 2023).

A review by Singh et al. (2021) also points out how the blend of online instruction and remote learning typically results in less emphasis on verbal interactions, which undermines the development of vital speaking skills among ESL learners. As synchronous communication often lacks the spontaneous exchanges found in face-to-face settings, students may not engage as deeply, resulting in a superficial engagement with the material. However, some respondents, such as Respondent 3, have maintained that written communication is not necessarily a deterrent for developing bonds with fellow classmates. Respondent 3 said, "It can feel closer in face-to-face settings because we interact more directly, but online or hybrid learning allows us to stay connected through group discussions and chats". Students do not necessarily need to be physically present in the classroom to communicate, build rapport, and develop their communicative skills in the English language classroom.

According to the findings of this study, this shift in modality reduces opportunities for spontaneous spoken communication in ESL classrooms, pushing students to rely more on written messages, which alters how rapport and communicative competence develop. Many students

feel hesitant to interrupt or speak in online settings, resulting in fewer authentic verbal exchanges and a decline in natural speaking practice. Research similarly notes that online tools, while useful for structured interaction, cannot fully replicate the spontaneity of face-to-face discourse.

4.5. After-Class Bonding

The pandemic has restricted opportunities for out-of-class interactions, which are vital for reinforcing language skills and fostering rapport among learners. In face-to-face classrooms, students and teachers would often have authentic meaningful conversations either about the course or other matters. These would not only provide learners with the opportunity to practice their English language skills, but they would also open doors for rapport building.

All the participants reported that they had a better social and informal relationship with their instructors and other students when they attended face-to-face classes. Respondent 11 mentioned, “In face-to-face settings, I communicate more casually and frequently with other students, while in online settings, it’s more formal and task-oriented due to the limited interaction opportunities outside class discussions”. Online communication is limited to the academic and class related matters, as the concept of after-class communication is diminished by the “End call” button. After-class interactions are particularly essential for ESL students, as they often rely on immersive experiences to contextualize their learning (Rahman & Razali, 2024).

Respondent 19 also highlighted the important role of after-class communication with teachers, “As I felt more connected with my instructor, it felt easier for me to communicate with her throughout the class and even after class”. This allows for a stronger connection between the teacher and students, especially in developing their English communication skills, and improving their confidence and motivation in using the language. The limited scope for socialisation outside of structured learning environments places additional barriers on language practice, which can detrimentally impact communicative competence and confidence (Hernandez-Ledezma & Janecek, 2025).

Opportunities for informal after-class interaction which are important for rapport and language practice have diminished in online settings, where communication becomes strictly task-focused. Online learning restricts these interactions, reducing valuable spaces for practising English and building rapport.

4.6. Non-Verbal Communication.

Non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role in establishing rapport, an aspect that has been notably diminished in online and hybrid settings. Face-to-face classrooms allowed for all the participants in this study to express themselves more effectively using non-verbal communication.

Respondent 6 felt a stronger connection with the instructor in face-to-face language classes. “In face-to-face classes, I feel more connected with the instructor because we can talk directly, and it’s easier to understand expressions and body language”. Online classes do not offer the same opportunities to learners. Research indicates that the absence of physical cues in digital environments can lead to misunderstandings among ESL students, affecting their learning experience and communicative abilities (Ying et al., 2021). The reliance on verbal communication

alone may not suffice for effective interactions, particularly for ESL learners who depend heavily on contextual clues present in face-to-face interactions (Nesprava et al., 2023). Moreover, studies suggest that while online platforms facilitate certain types of engagement, they often lack the depth of interaction that physical classrooms provide (Ramalingam et al., 2023; (Hamid et al., 2025).

Respondent 1 also highlights the limitations in terms of non-verbal communication when it comes to online classroom interactions. “Non-verbal cues, such as body language, can help convey understanding or confusion, which can be harder to interpret in online formats,” said Respondent 1. This lack of non-verbal communication manifests as misunderstandings during interactions, particularly for ESL learners who rely on facial expressions and gestures to grasp contextual nuances (Singh et al., 2021). Though the literal meaning conveyed by teachers or other students may be easily understood, some ESL learners may struggle to make sense of the intended or underlying learning, especially when receiving feedback or comments from others.

These findings suggest that on-verbal communication is crucial for building rapport in ESL classrooms, but it is significantly reduced in online and hybrid settings. Although digital platforms support basic communication, they cannot fully replicate the depth and clarity provided by non-verbal cues in physical classrooms. As a result, the reduced availability of such interactional cues may limit opportunities for spontaneous communication and feedback, which are important for supporting the development of students’ communicative competence in the English language classroom.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Overall, this study highlights the significant shifts that hybrid and online modalities have brought to the ESL learning experience, revealing the complex interplay between teaching formats, socialisation, and student engagement. The transition to online and blended learning during the pandemic has exposed multiple challenges that shape how learners interact, communicate, and develop rapport in language classrooms. Among these challenges, reductions in spontaneous spoken interaction and weakened rapport emerged as the most consistently reported and damaging for learners’ communicative engagement across modalities. Understanding these changes is critical for informing pedagogical strategies that can effectively support communicative competence in diverse learning environments.

The implications for ESL pedagogy in online and hybrid contexts underscore the need for prioritised interventions that directly address the most salient modality-related constraints. Evidence from most participants indicates that reduced spoken output and hesitation to initiate interaction were most pronounced in fully online settings, suggesting an urgent need for low-effort, high-impact instructional adjustments. Immediate pedagogical actions should therefore prioritise structured opportunities for oral interaction, such as breakout rooms, small-group discussions, and task-based speaking activities, which directly target reduced participation and support rapport rebuilding.

Equally important is sustaining personalised support and feedback, which can be compromised in online settings. While reported by several participants rather than the majority, delays in feedback and reduced instructor immediacy were nevertheless linked to disengagement and

uncertainty. Medium-term interventions, such as targeted professional development for instructors on multimodal feedback and online rapport-building strategies, may therefore be necessary to maintain relational quality and learner confidence across hybrid and online modalities.

Beyond instructional strategies, the study also emphasises the social dimension of language learning. Online environments can inadvertently reduce peer interaction, limiting informal practice and collaborative opportunities that are essential for fluency and confidence. To address this challenge, instructors may consider incorporating structured opportunities for informal interaction, such as allocating 10–15 minutes of unstructured speaking time within a 90-minute lesson through breakout-room discussions, rotating speaking partners regularly to broaden peer engagement. Interactional competence may also be supported through assessment practices that recognise participation and interactional fluency, for example by integrating a small percentage of course marks for collaborative speaking tasks or discussion-based activities. At a broader level, curriculum design that intentionally embeds peer collaboration, social learning outcomes, and interactional competence can help mitigate modality-related disengagement and sustain communicative development across face-to-face, hybrid, and online learning environments.

Although this issue was more evident among a subset of participants, its cumulative impact on communicative confidence suggests the need for longer-term curricular attention. Curriculum-level design that intentionally integrates peer collaboration, social learning outcomes, and interactional competence can help mitigate modality-related disengagement over time. By aligning immediate, medium-term, and long-term interventions with the relative strength of evidence, ESL educators can mitigate the challenges posed by online modalities and create environments that continue to support effective language acquisition and communicative competence development.

While the findings offer pedagogical insights relevant to ESL instructors and higher education stakeholders, this study is based on a single qualitative case within one institutional context, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The results are therefore intended to support context-sensitive pedagogical decision-making rather than prescriptive policy formulation.

Future research could strengthen the evidence base through multi-site studies across diverse ESL contexts, as well as mixed-methods designs that combine interview data with classroom observation, survey measures of willingness to communicate, or longitudinal tracking of communicative development. Such approaches would allow for broader validation of the patterns identified in this study and support more robust institutional and curricular decision-making.

Importantly, this study does not seek to directly measure changes in learners' communicative competence as a linguistic construct. Rather, the findings illuminate how shifts between face-to-face, hybrid, and online modalities influence the interactional conditions that support the development of communicative competence, particularly through the role of rapport in shaping learners' willingness to participate, ask questions, and engage in spoken interaction. Participants' accounts primarily reflected changes in their comfort, engagement, and readiness to communicate across modalities, which are widely recognised in second language research as enabling conditions for communicative practice and competence development. In this sense, the study contributes by highlighting how modality-related changes in rapport and interactional dynamics may expand or constrain opportunities for communicative engagement within ESL classrooms. Understanding these interactional mechanisms provides a valuable perspective for

educators seeking to create learning environments that sustain meaningful communication and support the longer-term development of communicative competence.

It should be noted that the interviews were conducted in 2024, while the instructional modality shifts experienced by participants occurred between 2020 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, participants were asked to recall and compare learning experiences that occurred several years earlier. Retrospective accounts may be subject to memory distortions, including recall bias or the reconstruction of past experiences in ways that align with present perspectives. Although the interviews focused on salient learning experiences and interactional moments that participants could recall clearly, the temporal gap may influence the completeness or accuracy of some accounts. Future research may benefit from collecting data closer to the time of instructional changes or using longitudinal designs to capture evolving learner experiences.

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Declaration

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language editing, organisation of ideas, and improvement of clarity and academic expression. All content was critically reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors, and the responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the work rests entirely with the authors.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Question	Connection to key constructs
a) Do you feel comfortable communicating in English with the instructor in the language classroom? Why?	Gaining an understanding on the general comfort that the participants have for communicating in English
b) Do you feel comfortable communicating in English with other students in the language classroom? Why?	Gaining an understanding on the general comfort that the participants have for communicating in English
c) How do you feel about your relationship with the instructor? Do you feel it has changed depending on the mode of learning (i.e.: online, hybrid, face-to-face)?	Connected to rapport, and how it is related to the change in modality
d) How do you feel about your relationship with other students? Do you feel it has changed depending on the mode of learning (i.e.: online, hybrid, face-to-face)?	Connected to rapport, and how it is related to the change in modality
e) Do you feel that the way you communicate with your instructor has changed depending to the mode of learning (i.e.: online, hybrid, face-to-face)? How? Why?	Connected to communicative competence, and how it is related to the change in modality
f) Do you feel that the way you communicate with other students has changed depending to the mode of learning (i.e.: online, hybrid, face-to-face)? How? Why?	Connected to communicative competence, and how it is related to the change in modality
g) Do you feel that your relationship with the instructor impacts your development of communicative competence? How?	Connected to rapport, and how it is related to the development of communicative competence
h) Do you feel that your relationship with other students impacts your development of communicative competence? How?	Connected to rapport, and how it is related to the development of communicative competence
i) Do you feel that your development of communicative competence has changed depending to the mode of learning (i.e.: online, hybrid, face-to-face)? Would you say it has been	Connected to rapport, and how it is related to the development of communicative competence, specifically in

impacted by your relationship with the instructor or other students?	different modes (online, hybrid and face-to-face)
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Appendix B: Example from Codebook

<p>Theme: Class Engagement and Participation</p> <p>Theme Definition: Class Engagement and Participation refers to students’ level of involvement, interaction, and communicative contribution during learning activities across different instructional modalities. This theme captures how face-to-face, online, and hybrid learning environments shape students’ willingness to participate, their interaction with peers, and opportunities for spontaneous language use.</p>	
Code	Excerpts
Active Verbal Participation	<p>“Yes. During face to face I am more active and energetic as I can speak out most of my ideas and thinking while during online session I tend to become more passive.” (R2)</p> <p>“Yes. In face-to-face classes, I talk more naturally.” (R6)</p>
Engaging Interaction with Peers	<p>“In face-to-face classes, my friends and I can talk freely and casually. We can ask questions to each other directly even during the ongoing lecture or in between breaks.” (R12)</p> <p>“In face-to-face classes, it’s easier to build connections and engage in group activities.” (R8)</p>
Restricted Communication in Online Settings	<p>“I have a low participation rate in communicating in online session with other students, as it feels more structured and restricted.” (R12)</p> <p>“Online classes feel less interactive, and sometimes it’s awkward to have conversations because people are quiet or distracted.” (R6)</p>