Psychological Distance in Teacher- Student Relationships and Its Reflection in The Teacher Learning Process

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Abstract

This study examined the role of psychological distance in teacher–student relationships and its impact on teaching and learning at Rajshahi College, Bangladesh. Limited understanding exists of how relational dynamics influence educational outcomes. Using a descriptive, quantitative design, 146 students were selected through stratified random sampling from 18,000 students. Data were gathered via structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations in SPSS 26.0. Findings showed that psychological distance moderately influences teacher–student relationships; closer relationships improve teaching effectiveness but have weaker direct effects on learning outcomes. The study recommends student-centered pedagogy, teacher training, and improved communication. Despite limitations of self-reported data and a single-institution scope, the findings offer insights for enhancing engagement, teaching quality, and institutional policy.

Keywords: Psychological distance, teacher–student relationships, teaching effectiveness, learning outcomes, Bangladesh, higher education

Introduction

The concept of psychological distance in teacher–student relationships has emerged as a crucial factor influencing both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Psychological distance refers to the perceived closeness, trust, and emotional connection between teachers and students, which shapes communication, motivation, and engagement in the classroom (Trope & Liberman, 2010). When this distance is reduced, teachers are more likely to foster supportive learning environments, thereby enhancing students' academic achievement and personal growth (Wentzel, 2012). Conversely, excessive distance can create barriers to learning, limiting openness and reducing collaboration.

In the context of teacher learning, psychological distance also plays a significant role. Teachers often learn through interaction, reflection, and feedback, processes that are deeply affected by the relational climate they establish with students (Pianta et al., 2012). A positive teacher–student bond not only enriches students' experiences but also encourages teachers to adapt, innovate, and refine their pedagogical practices (Cornelius-White, 2007). Therefore, exploring psychological distance provides valuable insights into the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning.

Review of Literature

Psychological Distance: Psychological distance, derived from Construal Level Theory, refers to individuals' perceptions of closeness or remoteness in social, temporal, and emotional dimensions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In education, it influences how teachers and students interpret each other's actions, shaping expectations and communication. Reduced psychological distance often facilitates empathy, understanding, and more effective pedagogical exchanges (Sung & Choi, 2021).

Teacher–Student Relationship Quality: The quality of teacher–student relationships is considered a cornerstone of effective teaching. Positive, supportive relationships are associated with increased motivation, engagement, and classroom participation (Pianta et al., 2012). Warmth, trust, and responsiveness reduce psychological distance, fostering mutual respect (Wentzel, 2012). Conversely, conflict or detachment increases distance, negatively affecting classroom dynamics.

Impact on the Teaching Process: Teacher learning and pedagogical practices are strongly shaped by relational contexts. Teachers who perceive strong connections with students are more likely to adopt adaptive strategies, integrate feedback, and experiment with innovative methods (Cornelius-White, 2007). Psychological proximity also enhances teachers' reflective practices, improving instructional quality (Zhang, 2020).

Impact on the Learning Process: For students, reduced psychological distance promotes a sense of belonging, which is linked to higher academic achievement and social-emotional development (Roorda et al., 2011). Supportive relationships encourage active participation, persistence, and positive attitudes toward learning (Hughes, 2011). In contrast, relational distance can heighten anxiety, decrease motivation, and limit collaborative learning.

Methodology

Research Design and Methods: A descriptive research design and quantitative methods were adopted for this study. Descriptive design was appropriate as it provides an accurate account of existing conditions, such as students' perceptions of psychological distance and teacher–student relationship quality, without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative methods were employed to gather measurable data from a large sample, ensuring objectivity and generalizability. In addition, limited qualitative inputs from open-ended responses added depth and context to the analysis (Bryman, 2016).

Target Population: The study population comprised 18,000 students enrolled in Rajshahi College, Bangladesh, across the faculties of Arts, Science, Business Studies, and Social Science (Rajshahi College, 2022).

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size: A stratified random sampling procedure was applied, as the student population consists of distinct subgroups (faculties). This method ensured proportional representation and enhanced the precision of findings (Creswell, 2014). Using Yamane's (1967) formula with a 95% confidence level and 0.10 precision, a sample size of 146 students was determined.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure: Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered both online and offline. The instrument incorporated standardized scales measuring psychological

distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010), teacher–student relationship quality (Pianta et al., 2012), and their impact on teaching and learning outcomes. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Secondary data were obtained from journals, books, reports, and institutional documents. Data collection was carried out between July and August 2025 with informed consent.

Pilot Study: A pilot study using 10% of the total sample was conducted to test the instrument's clarity and reliability. Following supervisor feedback, revisions were made before the final survey.

Validity and Reliability: Content validity was ensured through expert review, while construct validity was established using factor analysis. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Data Analysis Techniques: Descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean, standard deviation) were used to profile respondents. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test relationships among variables. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0.

Results

The demographic profile of the respondents revealed that female students (52.7%) slightly outnumbered male students (47.3%). This distribution suggests a balanced representation of gender in the study sample. Age distribution showed that the majority of students were between 20 and 22 years (69.1%), reflecting the typical undergraduate age group at Rajshahi College. Regarding academic sessions, most participants were from the 2022–23 (45.2%) and 2023–24 (19.9%) sessions, indicating a predominance of current undergraduate students. In terms of education level, the majority (91.8%) were graduates, while 5.5% were postgraduates and only 2.7% were at the intermediate level. Faculty representation was highest from Humanities (46.6%), followed by Social Science (26.7%), Business Studies (15.1%), and Science (11.6%), which aligns with enrollment patterns at the institution.

On psychological distance, the overall mean score was 2.60 (SD = 1.139), suggesting moderate emotional distance between teachers and students. Items such as hesitancy to ask questions (M = 2.73) and feelings of emotional distance (M = 2.79) highlight barriers in communication. Conversely, relatively lower means for misunderstanding (M = 2.33) indicate that while distance exists, it is not primarily due to misinterpretation.

Teacher–student relationship quality (TSRQ) was rated positively, with an overall mean of 3.68 (SD = 0.893). Students agreed that teachers show interest in their progress (M = 3.90) and listen carefully (M = 3.86), though opportunities for free expression (M = 3.36) remain limited.

Regarding the impact on teaching, the mean score of 3.64 (SD = 0.870) indicates that positive relationships foster adaptive and participatory teaching. Students particularly emphasized the role of emotional bonds in enhancing teaching effectiveness (M = 3.82).

For learning outcomes, the overall mean was higher (M = 3.92, SD = 0.844), demonstrating that strong teacher–student relationships contribute significantly to improved learning experiences. Notably, friendly

relationships encouraged regular attendance (M = 4.21) and enhanced willingness to take academic risks (M = 3.82).

Correlation analysis showed that Teacher-Student Relationship Quality (TSRQ) was negatively correlated with psychological distance ($r = –.645$, $p < .01$), confirming that closer relationships reduce perceived distance. TSRQ was positively correlated with teaching process ($r = .431$, $p < .01$), but its correlation with learning outcomes was weak and not significant ($r = .095$, $p > .05$). This suggests that while good relationships enhance teaching approaches, their direct effect on learning may be mediated by other factors.

Qualitative responses further highlighted lack of communication, fear, and rigid teaching methods as key reasons for emotional distance. Conversely, friendly behavior, open communication, and student-centered methods were widely suggested as solutions to improve relationships and enhance learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that psychological distance remains a moderate barrier in teacher–student interactions at Rajshahi College, particularly in students' hesitancy to ask questions and feelings of emotional detachment. This aligns with Trope and Liberman's (2010) construal-level theory, which suggests that perceived distance reduces openness and meaningful engagement. However, the relatively low mean for misunderstanding indicates that distance is not primarily due to miscommunication but rather emotional or relational gaps.

Teacher–student relationship quality (TSRQ) was found to be strong, particularly in teachers' attentiveness and interest in student progress. This resonates with Pianta et al. (2012), who emphasized that supportive teacher relationships foster engagement and positive classroom environments. The results further show that TSRQ enhances teaching practices, reflecting Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis, which established that learner-centered teacher–student relationships improve instructional quality.

Interestingly, TSRQ was not directly correlated with learning outcomes, suggesting that factors such as student motivation, socio-economic conditions, and institutional resources may mediate this relationship (Roorda et al., 2011). Nevertheless, qualitative findings reinforced the importance of open communication and student-friendly approaches in reducing distance and improving learning experiences.

Overall, the study highlights the dual importance of reducing psychological distance and strengthening relational quality to optimize both teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This study concludes that psychological distance moderately influences teacher–student relationships, enhancing teaching effectiveness more than direct learning outcomes. Strengthening relational quality through student-centered pedagogy, teacher training, and open communication is recommended. Applications include fostering collaborative classrooms, improving student engagement, and guiding institutional policy for teacher development. However, the study is limited to one college and self-reported data, which may restrict generalizability. Future research should adopt

longitudinal and mixed-method designs across diverse institutions to explore mediating factors such as motivation and socio-economic context.

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