

English Homework: What Makes Sense?

Controversies over the amount and quality of homework assignments have been in the news for years (Lee and Pruitt 1979; Cooper 1989, 2007) and explosively so more recently due to attention brought about via films such as *Race to Nowhere* (Abeles et al. 2011). Some argue that homework does not provide much benefit for elementary school children and that it is only in the sixth grade that it starts to make sense (Cooper, Robinson, and Patall 2006; Kohn 2006). Others discuss the role of quality versus quantity (Cooper 1989; Thomas 1992; Warton 2001). A few articles address homework in foreign-language education (Wallinger 2000; Chang et al. 2014), and some pertain to adult foreign-language learners.

The purpose of this article is to persuade English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and teacher trainers that homework is indeed beneficial by presenting multiple examples of high-quality homework assignments, as Dettmers et al. (2010) found in mathematics. The argument here is that it is not the time spent on homework that matters in early foreign-language instruction, but rather the types of homework assignments—perhaps different from traditionally assigned practice activities—that make learning more meaningful. There is a need for concrete ideas and discussion among teachers and teacher trainers regarding homework, especially in countries where English is not the local language of instruction and where instruction is limited to two or three lessons a week for varying levels of beginning learners. Altering our mindset about what constitutes effective homework might bring about change in the classroom and learners' relationships to homework.

BENEFITS OF PEDAGOGICALLY SOUND HOMEWORK

Many positive views of homework adhere to the following pedagogical principles, which are based on what learners themselves want from homework (Cushman 2010; Warton 2001) and go in the direction of what teachers know to be important:

- There needs to be a purpose, even if the purpose is for homework to be used in class for practice (as communicative language teaching might attest).
- A focus on learning is paramount, and sharing strategies plays a large role (Cohen 2011; Oxford 2011).
- Homework should transfer to different situations, controlled or through letting learners choose a new context.
- Elements of self-determination are vital

Although some teachers may prefer assigning homework spontaneously, planning homework has the benefit of making it more thought-out, even if the particular assignment has to be left for another day.

to motivation; when learners choose strategies and topics, they have a say in their learning (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011).

Five characteristics of good homework identified by Vatterott (2010) are: (1) purpose, (2) efficiency, (3) ownership, (4) competence, and (5) aesthetic appeal. When teachers assign homework, it is of utmost importance that they think about its purposefulness, consider how well it encourages learners to become self-directed (Blaz 2006), and listen to learners' wishes (Cushman 2010). With this aim, I would like to provide what I consider a healthy approach to homework from three perspectives: those of a teacher trainer, learners, and a mother.

A TEACHER TRAINER'S PERSPECTIVE

In the specific context of the eastern, German-speaking part of Switzerland, EFL instruction begins in the second or third grade (with seven- to nine-year-old children) for two or three 45-minute lessons a week and continues like this until learners are finished with secondary school, at the age of 16. In some cases, the English-language

teacher is the main classroom instructor who teaches the majority of subjects. In this case, the teacher is in charge of all the homework the learners receive and can prioritize and adapt as necessary. Frequently, however, children go to a specialist teacher for subjects such as English or Arts and Crafts. This arrangement makes discussions about homework more difficult to coordinate because each teacher finds his or her subject important and may or may not be aware of the learners' workloads. Furthermore, subject-specialist teachers cannot simply finish an English lesson in the subsequent lesson—for example, in the math lesson—because the English lesson is over. Thus, subject-specialist teachers might do well to have a general homework policy or routine like that in Table 1 to let learners know what has to be done on which days. Following this routine also is less time-consuming than always explaining new homework tasks; I have seen teachers take up to 15 minutes to explain homework.

This type of routine does not mean that every assignment has to be the same, but it does allow learners the comfort of knowing that certain days are homework free. Although some teachers may prefer assigning homework

This sample routine can be written on the board at the beginning of the week and stay the same for a few months.

- Monday: No homework today because it conflicts with math homework.
- Wednesday homework: Read assigned passage to prepare for Thursday's lesson.
- Thursday homework: Complete assigned task to prepare for next Monday's lesson. (Teacher can assign an appropriate written gap-fill exercise that can be swapped with peers, a look-say-cover-write-check exercise, or some other task.)

Table 1. Routine for subject-specialist teachers

spontaneously, planning homework has the benefit of making it more thought-out, even if the particular assignment has to be left for another day.

I have overheard three main comments by teachers of in-service courses as to why they assign homework:

1. They want learners to get into the habit of keeping in touch with the content of lessons between class periods, promoting the idea of repetition and rehearsal.
2. They want to encourage learners to become independent learners, to organize their studying and learn how to learn.
3. They need more time than they have in class and are often unable to finish everything they had planned.

It seems that the first two aims could be merged into one, making it possible for

teachers to assign homework that enables students to keep in touch with the lesson and learn to learn (see Table 2 for examples).

This approach contains aspects of differentiated instruction, as activities can match individual needs (Blaz 2006), while at the same time helping learners develop a repertoire of language-learning and rehearsal strategies (Oxford 2011). As Chang et al. (2014) mention, adults can better self-direct and focus on what they need for homework, but children and adolescents need more training and guidance.

Common assignments such as completing a gap fill, a word search, or a crossword puzzle have little place as homework assignments unless they have a purpose such as transferring to the lesson or supporting learning-to-learn objectives. In addition, homework assignments should not just be collected—the teacher should ask the learners how they went about the exercise or what they did when they got stuck (see Table 3 for examples).

- Vocabulary: Learn relevant words with a look-say-cover-write-check activity (choose a word from a list; look at it and say it out loud; cover the word and form an image in your mind; write the word down and check the spelling).
- Reading: Underline key points of a text from the lesson and transfer these to another sheet of paper for expansion in class.
- Writing: Write an outline of a pertinent text, to be completed in class; prepare relevant cards that can be used for a class game.
- Speaking: Read a text from the lesson aloud in front of a mirror.

Table 2. Homework activities to connect with lesson and learn to learn

These activities require not just checking answers, but also a class or small-group discussion and follow-up through a similar activity.

- Word search: In class the next day, have learners share *how* they searched for words. Did they look for double letters? For common letter combinations? For infrequently used letters, such as *X* and *Z*?
- Crossword puzzle: Have learners share *how* they solved the puzzle. Were the shorter or longer words easier? Did they start with the words that intersected with other words?

Table 3. Ways to make common homework assignments more strategic

Homework assignments should not just be collected—the teacher should ask the learners how they went about the exercise or what they did when they got stuck.

Considering the third comment above, teachers should think about the fairness of having some learners complete what was started in class at home, while others either get to advance in the language or do not get additional homework. This might help to bridge the gap and give weaker students a chance to catch up, but often it is slower students, not weaker students, who get this take-home task. Thus it may be better to have an “everybody has homework” policy with different tasks for different learners than an “only some students have homework” policy.

LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

Learners themselves, especially older ones, have opinions about homework, and luckily at times their voices have been heard. EFL learners, especially the younger ones, may not have had the chance to formulate what they think is worthwhile. Yet perhaps their voices are represented in Cushman’s (2010) and Warton’s (2001) articles on student views

of homework. The following four suggestions from teenagers in Cushman’s (2010) study support self-directed learning (Benson 2007) and purposeful instruction. The student suggestions are followed by possible assignments in the EFL classroom.

Student suggestion 1: Self-created homework task

After presenting new classroom material, teachers often assign students a set of questions to answer for homework. As an alternative, the teacher asks students to create their own “homework task that follows up on this material” and to explain their task choice in class (Cushman 2010, 77).

With older learners, this can be done exactly as explained. When starting a new unit on traveling around the United States, for example, learners can individually decide to make a mind map, go through the textbook unit and list anything they are unfamiliar with, or write a set of questions. Important

Remembering the word *window*

- I said it over and over again in my head.
- I remembered “Oh ... wind!”
- I pictured a round windO.
- I picture Father Wind’s mouth blowing an “O.”
- I wrote it down, covered it, wrote it again, and did this until I did not have to peek.
- I have a box with flashcards; I write the word on the front and a picture on the back of a flashcard. When I know how to say and spell the word from the picture, the card goes in the back section.

Remembering a list of words

- I thought of places in my house and associated the words with those places.
- I made one funny sentence where all the words fit.

Table 4. Student memory tricks to remember words

here is not which exact language features are written down, but rather the discussion in class about the method used to select their own homework and the results.

With younger learners, something more concrete is recommended. For example, when starting a unit on the five senses, the teacher has learners go through the unit and make some sort of matrix for homework. They might decide to have each of the five senses as a category, or they may decide to have parts of speech as categories, but in class learners can look at each other's matrices and even guess the categories. Offering two ideas such as (1) create a mind map or (2) write a list of questions or vocabulary items they want to know also achieves the objective of preparing for a topic.

Student suggestion 2: Memory tricks

Teachers often fall back on having students memorize a list of facts for homework and then testing them on it later. As an alternative, the teacher asks "each student to share with the class a memorization trick (such as a visual cue) that works with one item on this list" (Cushman 2010, 77).

In EFL lessons in Switzerland, learners are often expected to memorize vocabulary lists from glossaries in course books. Asking students how they remember a certain word or set of words and having them share the technique provides learners with different access points to new language and can focus on comprehension, spelling, or simple identification (see Table 4 for examples from students). These learning strategies can also be recorded in a portfolio. After a few lessons of sharing, learners can try a different technique they heard about from someone else, then report back on the technique in class and record their experience with it in the portfolio. This step can soon be part of a weekly routine.

With younger learners, teachers may want to practice a few techniques in class and then share which ones worked for whom and with which adaptations. Granted, some of these discussions may be better off held in the local

language, as this is meaningful use of the native tongue (Butzkamm 2003).

Student suggestion 3: Student-initiated questions and explanations

Another common homework assignment is having students read a text and then giving them questions to determine whether they read it. Another option would be to ask students "to write down two or three questions" they have after they have read the text (Cushman 2010, 77). Likewise, when teachers want to determine whether students understand a main concept, instead of having them fill out a worksheet, teachers can have students "demonstrate the concept for the class in small groups, using any medium" (Cushman 2010, 77).

The underlying idea of both these learner suggestions is that this homework can be used in class. In the same way, EFL learners can do any of the following homework assignments:

- Write questions they have after reading a text. They may need support such as teacher-provided sentence starters (e.g., "When did _____?" and "Why did _____?"). These questions can be shared in small groups in the following class or used for a quizzing activity.
- Write Two Truths and a Lie statements on slips of paper to engage each other to listen attentively in the next lesson.
- Write a gap fill or short summary of a text to share with a partner.

These are simple activities that can be assigned from one class to the next and be supported by projects. For instance, for a lexical set based on the topic of animals, learners have the task of working on a poster or placemat about one particular animal. Each night they add something new, using the language practiced in class. After a few weeks, the posters are presented in small groups in class and displayed around the classroom or school.

Student suggestion 4: Transferring learning

Math teachers will often assign several word problems that involve a certain procedure to help students understand how the procedure relates to different situations. Instead, teachers can “ask small groups to choose one word problem that applies this procedure in a real-world situation, solve it, and present it to the class” (Cushman 2010, 77).

As in suggestions 1, 2, and 3, appreciating the fruits of homework labor in class is of utmost importance. Another idea here is transfer—how to help learners transfer what they are using, as this example from math implies. For instance, in a unit where linking words are one of the main language aims (even with simple words such as *and* and *but*), learners can be given the target vocabulary and be asked to write a short text using the words in a situation unrelated to the topic treated in class (for example, if the topic was “food,” then assign the topic “animals” for the assignment). In this same way, as with the animal poster described above, if the unit is on animals, then the poster could be about something else—a robot, for example—where certain structures and language are certainly transferrable (“It has _____”; “It lives _____”; “It eats _____”). Finally, if the language structure—for example, “Would you like _____?”—is presented in class in the context of a restaurant, for homework learners can make a list of other situations where the same language structure is likely to be used—for example, “Would you like to dance?”

An additional point mentioned in Cushman (2010)—the value of doing homework in pairs or small groups—will be addressed in the following section.

A MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

As a mother, I would argue that some of the homework my children bring home, especially in the case of English, does not provide the concrete means to enable them to become independent learners, although by doing a gap fill or by studying vocabulary

they are indeed coming into contact with the language between lessons. My older daughter has German (the local language of instruction) and two foreign languages in the classroom, and she has a different teacher for each of these subjects. Each teacher works with a flashcard box, so in three languages she has cards with the lexical item on one side and a translation or sentence on the other side. Never has she had to make cards herself; they have all been produced by local publishers. She would probably not have many ideas of her own about how to work with these cards if her parents were not teachers. This is an example of how the three teachers do not communicate about their systems, nor have they used the cards in class in ways that would enable the children to study independently at home—some children have ideas about how to do that; others perhaps not. If three different teachers encouraged three different systems, think of how rich the learning might be!

However, my children have enjoyed homework on occasion, and this is where I would like to focus the following three points.

1. My daughters love homework when they do not have to sit at their desks. Taking it somewhere else allows for a bit of self-determination, helps children find out where they work best, and shows them that they can learn everywhere. Following are some activities my children have found enjoyable:
 - Taking a walk (with a friend) and making a list of all the things on their street that begin with the letter *h* (for example).
 - Learning a rhyme while jumping rope—for example, “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around.”
 - Rewriting flashcards on scraps of paper and having a parent or friend hide them outside or around the house; the child finds them and rewrites the words in chalk on the

driveway or sidewalk (teachers can practice this technique in class and let the learners use it for homework).

2. My daughters love homework when they can work with a friend or read aloud to a parent. Teachers might understandably avoid assigning homework that has to be done with parents, as this will work with some children but not others. In Switzerland, for example, many parents speak English, but in every class there are instances when the children’s knowledge at times surpasses that of their parents. However, completing homework with a friend works just as well. My second-grader loved the fact that once a week she was even expected to do homework with a friend. There are already ideas listed in this article that can be done in pairs, and below are a few more that my own children have enjoyed:

- Memorize little poems: The homework is to stand in one part of the house and shout the poem to someone in another part of the house (like a shouting dictation). This can also be done outside.
- Play a flashcard game: If each child has the same set of cards, the two of them can play Snap with the picture side up and be asked to make a sentence with the word if they get a match.

- Prepare for a play: Memorize lines and practice together with a friend until it sounds just right; this can make homework last hours!

3. My daughters love homework when they are using it for something specific or asked to involve the community. Homework in our house gets done well and efficiently when my daughters know they will have to present something to the class (e.g., a poem or a presentation about a topic) or when someone else’s work depends on theirs (“I have to turn in my text because Fritzli needs the information for his work”). Furthermore, activities such as interviews with neighbors (e.g., asking in English about what type of chocolate they like best) or going to a local shop to see if any advertising is in English are much loved, as they put my daughters in contact with the subject outside the house and require them to share findings once they are back in class. Table 5 provides seven additional ideas for involving the community in homework.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION ON HOMEWORK

I encourage teachers to think about their practices related to homework by using the questions in Table 6 to reflect on homework-related issues and initiate discussions during

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Interview someone about his or her English-language learning history.2. Ask someone to “Count to 10” or whatever the lesson aims are.3. Find someone else to do homework with you and share that experience in class.4. Bring in food labels or packaging and write down words from the labels.5. Cut out words from magazines.6. Label items in a room, house, or local shop, or on a local street.7. Start speaking in English in public (on the bus, in a restaurant) for the fun of it and see how people react.

Table 5. Homework ideas that involve the community

General context questions

1. Can I depend on parental help in all the learners' families?
2. Do learners live within walking distance of one another?
3. How long should homework take? Are there local recommendations?
4. How often should homework be given? Once a week? Every night?
5. Does my homework policy need to be discussed with another teacher?
6. Do learners have access to the Internet?

General questions to help shape homework assignments

7. Which skills should be practiced? What sort of speaking practice makes sense?
8. How good are my learners generally? How motivated are they? Are there general class tendencies in terms of interests or strengths?
9. Who should correct the homework? Is the homework done for me to see the progress of the learner (as an assessment), or is it informal practice that can be used and corrected in class? What assignments do I give that are not based on correcting learner work but rather on discussing an approach to an activity?
10. What purpose should homework serve for the learners and me? How can I make this clear to the learners and their families? Do I need to make this clear for each assignment, or can I have a few principles that are communicated and to which I stick?
11. When I assign vocabulary learning for homework, what do I mean and what should learners do?
12. How can I individualize homework to support individual strengths and needs for improvement?
13. What assignments can I have the learners do outdoors or with movement?

Table 6. Questions for self-reflection and to initiate a discussion about homework

teacher in-service days or in teacher training (see Appendix for answers according to the Swiss context).

CONCLUSION

In contrast to some researchers' views, my opinion is that homework does matter, as it engages and motivates students and helps them to become better learners (Vatterott 2010). Until conclusive evidence is found about when to start assigning homework and how much to give, perhaps the best thing

teachers can do is to take a healthy look at their own practices and ask themselves if they are serving the needs of their learners and if their homework principles reflect good teaching principles. Furthermore, if we do not want learners to have maladaptive homework practices (Bembenutty 2011) and we want them to become self-regulated learners, then the ideas presented in this article can contribute to good habits, strategy-building, and the idea of learning for a reason—not just at desks and for a teacher.

There are many perspectives that have not been treated in this article, such as those of different learner types and learners who do not have the support of the home environment. In addition, this article assumes that English-language teaching is taking place in countries such as Switzerland or the United States, where learners have access to course books, are provided with additional materials, and are expected to do homework as part of the societal norm. That said, many of the ideas here are on the level of sharing strategies, which can be done with any type of learner and with or without course books or flashcards, and are exemplified in the study of different subjects.

Homework does not have to vary as much as is described in this article; it can be as simple as assigning word lists or flashcards every week. The important thing is integrating various ways of working with students that are tried or explained in class and practiced at home, then reflected upon in class. My gut feeling as a mother, as a teacher, and as a teacher trainer tells me that it is not the routine of homework that is important, but the learner engagement involved in doing it. Ensuring engagement takes careful thought and planning on the part of the teacher. And creating engaging homework assignments can lead to good routines and habits on the part of the learner and teacher.

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APPENDIX

Answers to questions in Table 6 based on the author's Swiss context

General context questions

1. *Can I depend on parental help in all the learners' families?*

No, and thus routines and clear assignments are important. Task repetition is also important. If learners write their own gap fills to swap in class, then this task can be explained once and used regularly.

2. *Do learners live within walking distance of one another?*

Yes, and thus they can be asked to work together.

3. *How long should homework take? Are there local recommendations?*

The recommendations here are 10 minutes in the first grade, 20 minutes in the second grade, 30 minutes in the third grade, and so on. These recommendations are not followed by all teachers because by the fourth grade, many think the time involved becomes too much.

4. *How often should homework be given? Once a week? Every night?*

Many teachers assign homework on Monday for the entire week. This approach has the advantage that learners can decide when they do what, but it has the disadvantage that often homework involves just having learners do a certain exercise in a book.

5. *Does my homework policy need to be discussed with another teacher?*

Very often yes. To not overburden learners, teachers will need to reach compromises so that all the teachers are not assigning homework on the same days.

6. *Do learners have access to the Internet?*

Not in Switzerland; thus, teachers do not often ask students to bring information to class, although sometimes they ask students to bring pictures (which can be from the Internet or from catalogs or magazines).

General questions to help shape homework assignments

7. *Which skills should be practiced? What sort of speaking practice makes sense?*

Often, learners do not get enough practice in a certain skill in class, so teachers have to find meaningful activities to allow learners to practice that skill. Learners generally do not have enough writing contact, so having them write funny poems with target words or a riddle to use in class might be useful.

8. *How good are my learners generally? How motivated are they? Are there general class tendencies in terms of interests or strengths?*

One class I taught loved to read, and everyone was happy to come to school having read a chapter of an easy reader. Other classes needed practice in writing, so I tended to assign a writing activity. To answer this question, you can identify what your class needs: more explicit strategy training or more practice.

- 9.** *Who should correct the homework? Is the homework done for me to see the progress of the learner (as an assessment), or is it informal practice that can be used and corrected in class? What assignments do I give that are not based on correcting learner work but rather on discussing an approach to an activity?*

I believe that learners tend to do their homework if it is to be used. Thus I like them to bring things to class to start the lesson with (like quiz questions), and I see homework as a form of learning and not necessarily a formal assessment (though I certainly gather data about their strengths and needs). I find that anything that goes “public” is taken more seriously. With some classes, I tell learners that they are to practice a technique at home; then we use it in class.

- 10.** *What purpose should homework serve for the learners and me? How can I make this clear to the learners and their families? Do I need to make this clear for each assignment, or can I have a few principles that are communicated and to which I stick?*

This has to depend on each class’s needs!

- 11.** *When I assign vocabulary learning for homework, what do I mean and what should learners do?*

Teachers need to teach learning, not just vocabulary, and they should be teaching skills, not just words. Thinking of reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities helps to get away from a focus on vocabulary translation. In the case of word cards and lists, have strategy stations where learners try out different approaches, then choose one to use for homework for a week and then another one for another week, followed by a discussion of the effectiveness of each.

- 12.** *How can I individualize homework to support individual strengths and needs for improvement?*

It can be as simple as differentiated instruction, where (for example) advanced learners have to learn a longer poem and others a shorter one. Or some learners write out a text, and others prepare to read it. A list of possibilities on how to reach an aim from which learners can choose helps them to plan. However, I ask students to make a plan of what they will do each night and for how many minutes (at least at first).

- 13.** *What assignments can I have the learners do outdoors or with movement?*

Many such assignments are suggested in this article. You can also have learners take turns saying a sentence with a partner, each time taking a step back until they are shouting it at one another, or have learners hop out words or sentences as they spell or say them, or have them write phrases in sand.