



Semnan University

Faculty of Humanities

**THE ROLE OF CONCORDANCE BETWEEN HOMEWORK
AND TEACHING GOALS: A STUDY OF TEACHERS' OPINION AND
STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE**

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To:

My dear family (especially Hojat)!

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Abstract:

Homework occupies a large part of students and teachers academic and educational life, yet it is little discussed. As North and Pillary (2002) state, homework makes up a significant part of the workload of many language teachers, yet seems to be surrounded by silence. It rarely features in books about language teaching, makes only fleeting appearances in journals, and judging from our and that of our colleagues, is seldom touched on in teacher training.

In Iran, as an EFL context of language learning, such a need of taking consideration of homework and related issues of it is felt but has not got its deserved attention. As such, in this study the purpose has been to determine how homework is viewed and considered in Iranian schools, what kinds of homework assignments are prevalent, and what changes in giving homework and attitudes toward it are needed compared to what is happening in the realm of ELT and EFL.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Homework or homework assignment has been defined as “tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours” (Cooper, 1989, p.7).

Homework occupies and makes up a significant part of the workload of many language teachers and a large part of students’ lives, but it seems to be surrounded by silence. It rarely features in books about language teaching, makes only fleeting appearances in journals and judging from our experience and that of our colleagues, is seldom touched on in teacher training (Sarah North and Hannah Pillary,2002). Despite these, homework is a time honored practice that can enhance the development of skills and reinforce knowledge gained within the classroom when it is used effectively and appropriately. It is a natural extension of the curricular program because it is an integral component of instruction.

In spite of the awareness that it is a vital component of curriculum and knowing that it is a valuable educational tool, it is a “complicating thing” (Corno, 1996), a “battlefield” (Cooper, 2001) for teachers, students, and parents. Teachers complain about students failing to complete their assignments, students resent the time that homework takes away from more enjoyable activities, and parents grumble about the family stress caused by disagreement on whether, when, and how to do homework (Trautwein, 2003).

Cooper (1989) indicates the distinction between homework that is made up of same-day tasks and homework including elements of practice and/or preparation. The former one is less demanding for organized thinking, primarily consisting of repetitive exercises. Practice and/or preparation homework is more demanding in cognition because it covers materials that have not been completely discussed in class, or materials used in previous lessons.

The purposes of homework are different and they are in close relation to language teaching objectives that respectively are determined by the context, curriculum, material, and policy makers' plans. Stern (1992) expresses that in recent decades, the definition of language teaching objectives has played an increasingly major role in the development of second language curricula. Some teachers and researchers have identified three main purposes to clarify their goals for each homework assignment: instructional purposes (practice, preparation, participation, and personal development), communicative purposes (peer interactions, parent-child relations, and parent-teacher communication), political purposes (policy, public relations) and punishment (not a valid purpose) (Epstein, 1988, Van Voorhis, 2004).

In Iran, English is taught and learnt as a foreign language and it will be discussed that, what the goals of teaching English in Iran are, based on categorization of teaching objectives defined by Stern (1992). He categorized teaching objectives as language proficiency goals (or objectives), cognitive goals, affective goals, and transfer goals. Based on general educational policies, textbooks and materials in Iran, we will see how homework assignments are done and how much they correspond to the teaching goals.

Upon reviewing this topic, related matters of homework, including the benefits of homework, effective homework policies, recommended grade level homework, time guidelines,

conflicts between teaching objectives and homework assignments, and criteria for meaningful homework assignments would emerge.

Also, Richards and Renandya (2001) relate homework to strategy use. They mention that strategy use is reinforced outside the classroom through two types of homework. In the first type, students finish reading the material that have begun in class and respond to various written prompts. Before finishing the assigned chapter, learners may preview the rest of the assigned text, and predict what future chapters will be about. While reading, they note questions they have and describe what other strategies they are using or could be using while they read. At the same time that they use these strategies, they also explain why using them is helpful or worthwhile. In this way, strategy homework does not become simply rote skill learning but requires thought and concentration. In the second type of homework, students keep track of reading they do outside of class for pleasure or for other courses. They note down what they read, how much they have read, and what strategies they have used in reading, and their evaluation of the text. This type of homework is meant to reinforce strategic behavior and to encourage transfer of strategy training to other tasks.

Having a bird's eye on the subject, we can see it in a cost and benefit relationship. Are we achieving anything by having our students spend their time on doing homework? And what is the relation of homework assignments to academic or non-academic achievements of learners?

From another perspective, homework is like a chain that connects school and families together. By assigning homework, parents become involved in homework and what comes in the following chapters will discuss different aspects of this involvement as well.

Last but never least related subject is task and its close relation to homework. Task is defined as an activity which learners carry out using their available language resources and leading to a real outcome. Examples of tasks are playing a game, solving a problem, or sharing and comparing experiences. In carrying out tasks, learners are said to take part in such processes as negotiation of meaning, paraphrase, and experimentation which are thought to lead to successful language development (Richards and Renandya 2001). Also Oxford (2006), gives some definitions for the concept of “task” as - a general activity or exercise for L2 learners, an outcome-oriented L2 instructional segment. These two definitions seem to be identical definitions of homework, regardless of the name we give to such activities. It can be concluded that by such definitions of task, homework is closely or identically related to tasks. Their similarities and differences would be discussed later.

1.2. Significance of the study

Homework can be an integral part of instructional programs and life-long learning experiences. For a new skill to become automatic or for new knowledge to become long-lasting, distributed and sustained practice is necessary (Willingham, 2002, 2004 and Marzano, 2001). Homework provides reinforcement, practice, application, transference, and enrichment of what is taught in class and requires students to integrate skills included in curricula. It also prepares students for meaningful class participation and fosters a closer home-school connection and ongoing parental involvement in the students’ education. As children complete their assignments, they become more invested in and responsible for their learning. Homework places demands on students that help them to develop mental skills such as concentrating, following

directions, organizing materials, solving problems, and working independently. It offers a way for students to develop a sense of competency and independence.

Cooper states that homework likely has a significant impact on students' educational trajectories. Campbell, 1996, reports that homework is an important part of most school-aged children's daily routine (Campbell, 1996, National Assessment of Educational Progress).

In his research on homework, Cooper (1989, p 86) indicates a number of suggested benefits, including improvements in factual knowledge, understanding, concept formation, attitudes, study skills, self-discipline, and problem solving.

We, as teachers of English, most of time force our students to do a lot of homework and spend long hours wrestling with their assignments, but may be it has not been to teachers' interest whether these homework assignments have positive effects on the learning process or not, or if we may just assign them because it's what English teachers used to do and are used to.

The importance of the study can be felt and perceived when we look at related factors to homework in a wider context. Homework is a link between home and school, it is a hindrance of enjoyment for our learners, it is something that the educational context sometimes imposes on language teachers, and from a bigger distance it is something that society is likely to impose on the educational context because it is safer for a society if it's teenagers, that form a large part of language learners, are occupied with school and related after-school activities.

1.3. Statement of the problem

The above-mentioned advantages make assigning the appropriate homework to students a difficult task for language teachers. When all educational activities are meant to lead to Rome; to an academic achievement, the correspondence among different activities is very necessary, and observing such correspondence, if there is any, in Iran is something that this study tries to shed a light on.

In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), and the ministry of education is in charge of providing textbooks and teaching materials and also determining the method of assessment and evaluations for English teachers. The goals of English learning are defined by this ministry and teachers are supposed to help students achieve those goals. One of the efficient factors that can enhance language learning is the amount of learners' exposure to the target language, and one of the ways for increasing students exposure to language is assigning some tasks to do outside classroom and learning contexts. Consequently, when these out of class activities, that homework is such an activity, are in line with teaching objectives, the results of teaching would surely be more fruitful. North and Pillary (2002) in their article state that there is general consensus in educational literature that homework does have a positive effect on learning, through extending the time available for learning.

In this study, the researcher wants to examine the role of correspondence between homework and teaching goals. Teachers of English as persons who are to some extent in charge of determining correlation between homework and teaching goals would help in determining the amount of such correlation in Iran.

By finding out the ways homework is assigned to students, it would be clear which areas English language teachers are paying more attention to and which areas are less attended or are ignored in curriculum. Also, we would know which teaching objectives are considered while assigning homework.

1.4. Purpose of the study

This study intends to provide a general view of current position of ELT homework in Iran and the general attitudes toward it. It also intends to evaluate the amount of correspondence between homework and teaching goals in Iran. In addition, this study will view how the role of such correspondence is paid attention to, and how much this correspondence affects on students academic achievement.

1.5. Research questions

1. What is the current position of homework in English language teaching in Iran as an EFL context?
2. What are the attitudes toward homework among language teachers in Iran?
3. Is there any correspondence between homework and teaching goals in Iran?
4. Does this correspondence have any effect on learners' achievement?