

Homework: re-examining the routine

Sarah North and Hannah Pillay

Homework occupies a large part of teachers' and students' lives, yet is seldom discussed. A survey of Malaysian secondary school teachers suggests that homework practices may be out of line with the communicative aims of the English course, reflecting perhaps the continuation of unquestioned routines. However, at times the workload generated by homework can be so time consuming that teachers rarely have the chance to stop and reflect on what they are doing, and why. This may be a common problem in other language teaching situations as well, and suggests a need for more explicit discussion of homework policies and practices.

Introduction

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 experience and that of our colleagues, is seldom touched on in teacher training. Despite this, homework clearly does get done, with most teachers employing well established routines for setting, collecting, marking, and giving feedback. So where do such routines come from? Do we just fall back on old habits, transmitted with little change from generation to generation, or do homework practices develop in line with changes in other aspects of teaching and learning?

There is a general consensus in educational literature that homework does have a positive effect on learning, through extending the time available for learning. In his survey of research on homework, Cooper (1989: 86) indicates a number of suggested benefits, including improvements in factual knowledge, understanding, concept formation, attitudes, study skills, self-discipline, and problem-solving. The research findings, he concludes, provide clear evidence that homework improves academic achievement for high school students, though the effects are reduced at lower levels. He comments, however, that research has focused almost entirely on academic achievement, and has largely ignored other suggested benefits, such as improved attitudes and study habits.

On the other hand, Cooper also draws attention to the potential disadvantages of homework, such as a loss of interest in academic material, physical and emotional fatigue, denial of access to leisure time

and community activities, parental interference, cheating, and increased differences between high and low achievers. These problems are likely to be familiar to anyone who has coped with homework in any quantity; indeed, several of them may affect not only the students, but the teachers as well. Painter (1999) describes a negative experience with her own class, with both teacher and students 'glazing over' as they approached their homework tasks. 'Were we all just going through the motions?' she asks, echoing our own concerns that homework practices may sometimes be based on unquestioned routines.

Background to the survey

This paper is based on an investigation of Malaysian English teachers' views and practices concerning homework. Firstly, we were interested in finding out whether schools have a coordinated policy for dealing with homework as part of the overall curriculum. Secondly, we wanted to investigate how teachers make planning decisions to ensure that the homework tasks they set are effective in contributing to course objectives. Although there are some guidelines on these issues in relation to general education², little has been written on homework in English language teaching³.

Malaysia is a former British colony with a multiracial and multilingual population. Despite the increasing importance of the national language, English still retains an important role as the official second language, and a compulsory subject at primary and secondary school. Standards vary widely, however, reflecting differences in the role of English in different regions and social sectors, and for many students the only exposure to English comes from their five lessons a week. The traditional structure based English course was replaced from 1988 onwards with a new syllabus which aims at the integration of skills and grammar within a more learner-centred approach. The syllabus documents do not, however, give any guidelines on the nature or frequency of homework in English.

Our investigation involved a total of 85 English teachers from secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. We were not able to ensure a representative sample, but simply distributed questionnaires in schools where we had contacts who could collect and return them. The schools were, however, a fairly typical mix of single sex and co-educational schools, in a variety of locations in the city. The teachers, who ranged from novices in their probationary year to senior teachers with up to 30 years of teaching experience, were involved with classes from Form I to Form 5.

Amount of homework One of the policy issues which interested us was the amount of time spent on homework. Most teachers in our survey (73%) reported setting English homework two or three times a week for each class of students. When we asked how much English homework an average Form 4 student should ideally be expected to do in one week, the most common answers were 1 to 2 hours (34% of teachers) and 2 to 3 hours (32% of teachers). These figures seem surprisingly high, when we consider that a student has at least 7 other core subjects to deal with. If each subject teacher gave 2 hours homework a week, students would end up with a total of 3 hours or more every working day. By comparison, the US Department of Education (1998) recommends a total homework load of up to 40 minutes a day from 4th to 6th grade, and up to 2 hours a day from 7th to 9th grade.

Excessive quantities of homework run the risk of generating negative effects such as loss of interest, fatigue, and curtailed leisure activities. To avoid these problems, it seems important for schools to ensure that there is an overall policy on how much homework is set in each subject, and when. Without such guidelines, individual teachers of different subjects may inadvertently combine to produce an unmanageable workload for the students. However, when we asked teachers who decides how much homework is given to a class of students, 60% reported that it was the subject teacher alone who made the decision. This situation, we feel, may be fairly common in schools around the world, and may perhaps contribute to some of the problems associated with homework. If students are overburdened with homework, we can hardly expect them to perform it well, or indeed to maintain motivation and interest. It is quite possible that, in many cases, a coordinated policy on homework could reduce the workload for both teachers and students. Would this necessarily reduce standards? Perhaps with less to do, and more time to do it in, teachers and students could both concentrate more on delivering homework of high quality.

In dealing with homework, the teacher has to prepare the tasks, as well as mark and provide feedback on completed work. The questionnaire asked teachers to rate how often they used various types of material for homework, on a scale from very often (3) to never (0). There was some use of textbooks and other published materials, but the most frequent materials were the teacher's own worksheets. Other teachers' worksheets, however, were not often used. This suggests that although teachers may spend time preparing materials for homework, there is relatively little sharing of worksheets between colleagues. Once again, it appears that co-ordination might help to reduce the workload.

Materials used for homework	Rating
Your own worksheets	2.0
The prescribed textbook	1.7
Commercial workbooks	1.7
Other ELT books	1.6
Other teachers' worksheets	0.9

FIGURE 1

Teachers' aims and practice

So what is all this work for? The questionnaire presented teachers with a list of possible reasons for giving homework, and asked teachers to rate their importance on a four-point scale, from very important (3) to unimportant (0). The average ratings are shown below, and indicate the overwhelming importance of homework in providing practice for students and diagnostic information for teachers. Clearly, though, homework is seen to serve a variety of purposes, and many of those rated most highly relate to its role in encouraging and facilitating learning. While pedagogic aspects are viewed as important, far less weight was given to administrative issues, such as record-keeping. Finally, the teachers in the survey seem to regard homework as important in its own right, not simply as a way of measuring up to what is expected of them.

<u>Reasons for giving homework</u>	Rating
To practise what has just been learnt	2.9
To give the teacher feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses	2.8
To complete work started in class	2.6
To provide a more individualized programme of learning	2.4
To apply recent learning in creative ways	2.4
To motivate students to pay attention in class	2.3
To provide preparation for the next lesson	2.1
To provide information to parents on students' progress	2.1
To meet school requirements on record-keeping	1.8
To involve parents in the teaching/learning process	1.7
To enable the teacher to complete the syllabus	1.7
To provide a record of marks	1.5
To provide evidence of the teacher's diligence/hard work	1.3
To meet society's expectations of what a teacher should do	1.2
To punish students for poor work in class	0.7

FIGURE 2

Teachers' views on the purpose of homework tend, then, to accord with the approach to teaching generally advocated in Malaysian schools: broadly, a communicative approach, encouraging creativity and individual development. But are these purposes matched by the types of homework actually set? The questionnaire asked teachers to rate different types of homework according to how often they used each one, from 'very often' (3) to 'never' (0). Once again, the results suggest that although teachers' espoused opinions may have developed in line with current thinking, homework practices seem little changed from those of an earlier era. The most frequent types of homework tended to be traditional exercises leading to a written product. Grammar exercises, surprisingly, topped the list, even though the syllabus downplays overt grammar teaching. In general, 'closed' types of task were preferred to more open-ended tasks, and there seemed to be a preference for homework which generated a written product.

A further question asked teachers to indicate how they gave feedback to teachers about their homework, using a scale from 'very often' (3) to 'never' (0). Once again, the results suggest a preference for traditional approaches, in which the teacher bears the responsibility for providing feedback and assessing the quality of the students' work. More learner-centred approaches using self or peer-assessment were far less frequently used.

Key issues
Heavy workload

One point to emerge clearly from the survey was that current practices in dealing with homework tend to be labour intensive. Teachers seem to be

Types of homework task	Rating
Doing grammar exercises	2.4
Doing guided writing exercises	2.3
Doing corrections	2.3
Doing reading comprehension questions	2.1
Writing compositions (free writing)	2.0
Using the dictionary to find the meaning of words	1.9
Reading the comprehension passage in advance	1.8
Writing new vocabulary in sentences	1.8
Making an outline for a composition	1.7
Practising reading aloud	1.7
Extended reading (eg. short stories, novels)	1.6
Writing summaries	1.5
Writing dialogues (free writing) Checking/finding	1.5
out rules in a grammar book Editing and revising	1.5
compositions	1.4
Memorizing vocabulary	1.4
Doing research on a topic	1.4
Practising oral dialogues	1.4
Reading for fun (e.g. comics, jokes, magazines)	1.3
Doing puzzles, quizzes, crosswords, etc.	1.3
Preparing for a role play	1.2
Listening to TV/radio programmes	1.1
Keeping a diary	1.0
Practising choral speaking	0.9
Carrying out interviews	0.9
Memorizing poems, songs, etc.	0.9

FIGURE 3

working largely on their own, setting homework two or three times a week for each class, finding suitable material from various textbooks or producing their own worksheets, and taking in most homework for individual marking.

Traditional tasks

Despite the communicative approach advocated in the syllabus, in practice teachers appear to follow a rather conventional approach in the types of homework they set, and the types of feedback they give. There is a tendency to use traditional activities such as grammar exercises, guided writing, and reading comprehension questions, which typically involve reinforcement of points recently covered in class. Homework, however, need not be restricted to this purpose only. In addition to practice, it can

<u>Types of feedback on homework</u>	Rating
Indicating mistakes/corrections	2.7
Giving overall comments to the class	2.4
Giving written comments	2.3
Giving a grade or mark	2.2
Giving individualized oral comments	2.1
Providing extra practice in class	2.0
Re-teaching/revising in class	1.9
Providing more practice homework	1.8
Providing model answers	1.7
Letting students compare their work	1.4
Displaying students' work	1.3
Getting students to mark each other's work	1.2
Asking students to read homework to the class	1.1
Getting students to mark their own work	1.0

FIGURE 4

also be used in preparation for forthcoming lessons, extension (transferring what has been learnt to new situations), and creative use (Burden and Byrd 1994: 305). In the survey, two of the teachers' most important aims for homework were practising what has just been learnt and completing work started in class. However, they also gave a high rating to providing preparation for the next class, applying learning in creative ways, catering for more individualized learning, and enhancing student motivation. These purposes may not be met successfully if homework is restricted to rather mechanical tasks.

Focus on written product

Another feature of the homework set is that it tends to involve a written product. Clearly writing is an important skill, and it is appropriate to allow students to develop it in their own time and at their own pace. But other skills are important as well, and they seem to be largely neglected as homework activities. We can only guess at the reasons for this, but one that springs to mind is that writing, unlike other skills, provides visible evidence that work has been duly performed. So written homework can act as a check on the students' progress, and as a measure of the teacher's professional competence. Another reason may be a need to assess what has been done by giving it a mark, grade, or evaluative comment, a need which may derive both from external pressures, such as parental expectations and administrative requirements, and from internal pressures reflecting teachers' own concerns.

Teacher-assessment

Marking by the teacher is a characteristic feature of homework practices, as reported in the survey, with feedback reflecting a traditional, teacher-centred approach. First, we may query whether everything a student produces does, in fact, need to be checked by the teacher. Alternative approaches using peer- and self-assessment can help students to become

more independent learners, and can also help to promote intrinsic motivation, with students developing a sense of satisfaction at their own achievements, rather than working simply to satisfy the teacher. In addition, though, there may be types of homework where there is no need for overt checking at all. For example, creative writing may be pinned on a noticeboard, and dialogues may be practised at home and then acted out in the classroom, just as a story may be read in private and then used as the basis for a class activity. In all these cases, the success of the homework is measured simply by its effectiveness in meeting its purpose—the same sort of assessment that happens in real life when we use a foreign language for a genuine communicative purpose. While marking by the teacher will always have a role to play, there seems to be no reason why it should be applied to every kind of homework. It generates an enormous workload, and teachers who go home every day with a pile of books to be corrected have correspondingly less time to think about other important aspects of their teaching.

The previous section highlights four aspects of homework which we feel tend to be taken for granted, but may not be for the best. So what do teachers themselves feel about the effectiveness of their homework? At the end of the questionnaire, we asked two yes/no questions:

- Are you generally satisfied with the way you deal with homework?
- Are you generally satisfied with your students' performance in their homework?

The results showed an interesting discrepancy, with many teachers reporting satisfaction with their own performance, but not with their students' performance. The overall impression was that a significant number of teachers feel they are doing the right things, but not achieving the results they would like.

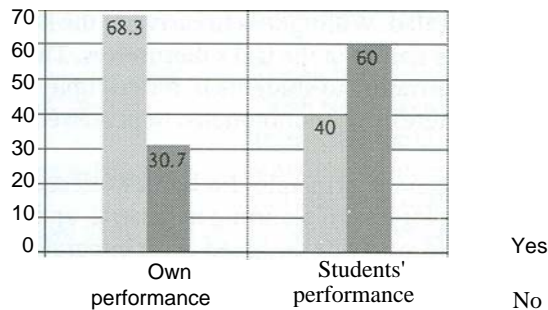


FIGURE 5
Teachers' satisfaction with homework

Most of the teachers gave additional comments on these questions, and was striking that, to a large extent, they tended to evaluate their students' performance in homework in terms of whether it was or was not done. Out of 70 comments, 25 related to this point, while 12 were about the frequency of copying, and a further 11 concerned whether or not students took homework seriously. Some typical comments were:

Students don't want to do their homework. They rather copy or get scolded from me.

At least half of them try to complete the work started in class, while the rest copy each other's work. Most of the students have the tendency to copy answers since they have too many other subjects and co-curricular activities to cope with.

There were very few comments on the students' performance concerning the quality of the work produced, or its effectiveness in improving students' proficiency or motivation. In comments on the teachers' own performance, the same issues tended to emerge, with the addition of marking as a sign of satisfactory performance. Teachers sometimes noted other limitations on their work, for example:

- I sometimes give too much work and am overwhelmed by the marking.
- Very often discussions on homework is neglected somewhat as I am in a hurry to move on to the next unit
- My pupils are generally weak so that quantity and quality of homework I am permitted to give is rather restricted.

In the earlier question concerning the aims of homework, teachers showed a concern for pedagogic issues such as individualization, creativity, motivation, and diagnostic feedback. Yet when asked to evaluate the overall effectiveness of homework, these issues were rarely mentioned. Instead, they seemed preoccupied with the problem of students who don't do their homework, or don't do it properly. If this problem is widespread, with students failing to do the work set, then the supposed benefits may be significantly outweighed by the possible disadvantages, and the teachers' work may be to little purpose.

So what are the possible reasons for students to shirk their homework? One has already been mentioned: if they are overburdened with too much homework in different subjects, then they may be demotivated and frustrated. Willingness to carry out the homework may also be affected by the nature of the tasks themselves. The type of homework set may be demotivating to students if, for example, it is too difficult, too easy, uninteresting, monotonous, or perceived as irrelevant.

Conclusion

The general principles for homework seem to us to be broadly similar to those for lesson planning in general, and indeed, a homework task should surely be designed as an integrated part of a scheme of work. But while lesson planning and task design are frequently discussed within E L T, there is little advice for teachers on how to apply methodological principles to homework. To make matters worse, while a teacher can turn to the textbook for help in planning lessons, very few textbooks include material explicitly designed for homework, or provide guidance on how to adapt activities as homework tasks. The need to re-examine homework practices will become even more important as increasing use of the Internet brings English language resources into the community, changing the relationships between work at school and at home.

Issues that we feel need to be considered by teachers, teacher educators, and materials designers include:

At least half of them try to complete the work started in class, while the rest copy each other's work. Most of the students have the tendency to copy answers since they have too many other subjects and co-curricular activities to cope with.

There were very few comments on the students' performance concerning the quality of the work produced, or its effectiveness in improving students' proficiency or motivation. In comments on the teachers' own performance, the same issues tended to emerge, with the addition of marking as a sign of satisfactory performance. Teachers sometimes noted other limitations on their work, for example:

I sometimes give too much work and am overwhelmed by the marking.
Very often discussions on homework is neglected somewhat as I am in a hurry to move on to the next unit
My pupils are generally weak so that quantity and quality of homework I am permitted to give is rather restricted.

In the earlier question concerning the aims of homework, teachers showed a concern for pedagogic issues such as individualization, creativity, motivation, and diagnostic feedback. Yet when asked to evaluate the overall effectiveness of homework, these issues were rarely mentioned. Instead, they seemed preoccupied with the problem of students who don't do their homework, or don't do it properly. If this problem is widespread, with students failing to do the work set, then the supposed benefits may be significantly outweighed by the possible disadvantages, and the teachers' work may be to little purpose.

So what are the possible reasons for students to shirk their homework? One has already been mentioned: if they are overburdened with too much homework in different subjects, then they may be demotivated and frustrated. Willingness to carry out the homework may also be affected by the nature of the tasks themselves. The type of homework set may be demotivating to students if, for example, it is too difficult, too easy, uninteresting, monotonous, or perceived as irrelevant.

Conclusion

The general principles for homework seem to us to be broadly similar to those for lesson planning in general, and indeed, a homework task should surely be designed as an integrated part of a scheme of work. But while lesson planning and task design are frequently discussed within ELT, there is little advice for teachers on how to apply methodological principles to homework. To make matters worse, while a teacher can turn to the textbook for help in planning lessons, very few textbooks include material explicitly designed for homework, or provide guidance on how to adapt activities as homework tasks. The need to re-examine homework practices will become even more important as increasing use of the Internet brings English language resources into the community, changing the relationships between work at school and at home.

Issues that we feel need to be considered by teachers, teacher educators, and materials designers include:

- How should homework be co-ordinated within the curriculum whole?
- How should homework be incorporated as part of an overall scheme of work or lesson plan?
- How can teachers best exploit the resources available for home?
- How can homework tasks be designed to be both motivating and useful?
- What are the most effective ways of providing feedback?

If such issues are not explicitly discussed, there is a danger that homework practices will continue to reflect unquestioned tradition rather than advancing in line with developments in other areas of language teaching.

Revised version received March 2001

Notes

- 1 It is not mentioned, for example, in the Index or Table of Contents of such general texts as Doff (1988), McDonough and Shaw (1993), or Ur (1996). The only ELT books we could find that discussed homework were Dangerfield (1985), Cross (1991), and (briefly) Krashen and Terrell (1983).
- 2 See for example, Beattie (1987), Berger (1991: 194-7), Burden and Byrd (1994: 305-12), and the US Dept of Education (1998).
- 3 Buckland and Short (1993) have some interesting suggestions on homework activities for foreign language learning in general, and Painter (1999) gives an example of involving students in designing their own homework tasks.

References

- Beattie, N.** 1987. 'Homework in the teaching and learning of modern languages, 11-16'. *British Journal of Language Teaching* 25/2.
- Berger, E. H.** 1991. *Parents as Partners in Education*. (Oxford.) Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Buckland, D. and M. Short.** 1993. *Night Shift: Ideas and strategies for Homework*. CILT Series for Language Teachers. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- Burden, P. and D. Byrd.** 1994. *Methods for Effective Teaching*. London: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cooper, H.** 1989. 'Synthesis of research on homework'. *Educational Leadership* 47/3.
- Cross, D.** 1991. *A Practical Handbook of Language Teaching*. London: Cassell.
- Dangerfield, L.** 1985. 'Homework and Correction' in A. Matthews (ed.). *At the Chalkface*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Doff, A.** 1988. *Teach English: A Training Course for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Homework

- Krashen, S. and T. Terrell.** 1983 *The Natural Approach*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- McDonough, J. and C. Shaw.** 1993. *Materials Methods in ELT*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mohd Asraf, R.** 1996. 'The English language syllabus for the year 2000 and beyond: Lessons from the views of teachers'. *The English Teacher*, xxv.
- Ornstein, A. C.** (1995) *Teaching: Theory into Practice*. London: Allyn and Bacon.
- Painter, L.** 1999. 'Homework'. *English Teaching Professional* 10.
- Ur, P.** 1996. *A Course in Language Teaching Practice and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- US Dept of Education.** 1998. 'Helping You Students with Homework'.
Online:
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/HelpingStudents>

The authors

Sarah North is currently carrying out doctoral research at the Open University, after several years working within higher education in the UK has also been involved in teaching and teacher training in several countries, including China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Malaysia, and Tanzania and is particularly interested in academic writing, pedagogic grammar, and CALL.
Email: s.p.north@open.ac.uk

Hannah Pillay is currently principal of a secondary school in Malaysia, having previously worked for several years at the Specialist Teachers Training College in Kuala Lumpur. She obtained her doctorate at the University of East Anglia, and has research interests in ELT teacher education, study research, and the use of ELT in the teaching English.

Email: hannahpillay@excite.com