

The Effect of Homework Assignment on Preparatory School Students' Achievement in Learning English as a Foreign Language

تأثير الواجبات المنزلية على تحصيل طلاب المدارس الإعدادية
في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

The practice of assigning homework assignment is a polarizing issue that has been extensively studied in different countries and at various levels of education. Despite the massive amount of research on this particular topic, there is still debate about its effectiveness on students' achievement. This study therefore, was aimed to investigate this issue and determine its impact on academic achievement of preparatory school students. To collect the data required, six preparatory school teachers were interviewed in a semi-structured way. Analysing the data obtained came up with a number of interesting and fascinating findings. Homework assignment has a direct and influential influence on students' progression in learning a second/foreign language. It helps students to strengthen the skills they learn at school, build on that their understanding and knowledge and use it in preparation for future lessons. Moreover, doing homework assignment regularly helps in establishing positive study-habits which in turn help in creating self-dependent learners. Another interesting finding is that homework assignment can be exploited to establish an efficient and beneficial link between home and school.

Key words: homework assignment, preparatory school students, EFL teachers.



ملخص البحث :

تحديد وممارسة أداء الواجبات المنزلية يعتبر مسألة محورية درست على نطاق واسع في العديد من الدول وعلى مستويات مختلفة من التعليم. على الرغم من هذا العدد الهائل من البحوث والدراسات التي أجريت في هذا الموضوع لا يزال الجدل حول مدى فاعليته وتأثيره على مستوى تحصيل الطلاب، عليه فان هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى تحديد مدى أثره على التحصيل العلمي لطلاب المدارس الإعدادية، ولجمع المعلومات والبيانات المطلوبة أجريت ست مقابلات مع معلمي اللغة الانجليزية بمدارس مرحلة التعليم المتوسط بمدينة صرمان. نتائج البحث أثبتت أن الواجبات المنزلية لها تأثير فعال ومباشر على: تطور مستوى الطلاب في استيعاب مادة اللغة الانجليزية، وترسيخ المهارات التي يتم اكتسابها بالمدرسة، والمساعدة في تحضير الدروس بالصورة المطلوبة، والمساعدة في اكتساب عادات دراسية ايجابية والتي بدورها تكسب إمكانية التعلم الذاتي، بالإضافة إلى إيجاد حلقة وصل فاعلة ومباشرة بين المدرسة والبيت.

Introduction:

The term homework assignment is used in this study to refer to the task assigned to the students to be done either at home or during non-school time. Most homework assignments reflect different purposes; some relate to syllabus instruction, and others relate to purposes of the teachers. In fact, homework assignment usually includes at least one of the following tasks: gaps in knowledge to be bridged, some reading to be performed, a piece of writing to be completed, comprehension problems to be solved or any other language skill to be practiced after school time.

In literature, the realm of homework and its influence on student achievement was and still controversial (Walberg et al., 1985; Carr, 2013; Fernandez-Alonso et al., 2017). Researchers, educationalists, stakeholders as well as teachers have multiple views in this regard. Many inquiries have no explicit vision yet, for example the amount of given homework, time bound for submitting the homework, what it should entail and do homework assignments help or obstacle the process of teaching and learning? Researchers and educationalists have long struggled with such questions as they strive to implement appropriate and effective strategies to support second/foreign language learners. Among those who believe in the importance of homework assignment and its effective influence on students' achievement are Gill and Schlossman (1996). They view homework assignment as “essential to raise educational standards, foster high academic achievement ..., and link family and school in a common teaching mission” (27).

Research Aims:

This study was planned to explore how homework assignment is viewed by preparatory school language teachers. It was also aimed to investigate the possible impact of homework assignment on students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language.

The Significance of the Research:

The influence of homework assignment on students' achievement is considered to be an argumentative issue (Cooper et al., 2006). It is seen as another area in which schools can interfere in an attempt to promote students' progress in language learning and raise their achievement. Comparing the Libyan educational system to that of the neighbouring countries, there is a lack for a push to raise the Libyan schools standards so that it can be competed in the global marketplace. One of the aspects that necessitate to be investigated in depth, is the influence of homework assignment on students' progress in learning English as a foreign language. According to Cooper (2006), teachers need not only to be aware of the importance of designing a meaningful and purposeful homework assignment but also what to do when homework is completed and submitted.

Scope of the Research:

This research was conducted on six preparatory school language teachers selected from three preparatory schools. These schools are located within very populated areas in Surman city, and they include a big number of students at all levels. The six teachers involved in this research have BA degrees, and have almost the same experience in teaching English.

Research Questions:

The research in hand was planned to answer the following research questions:

1. What perceptions are held by preparatory school teachers concerning homework assignment?
2. Does homework assignment have any impact on students' achievements?

Literature Review:

The Importance of Homework Assignment:

The idea that homework assignment is a valuable tool in education is convincing to the majority of language teachers, students as well as parents (Cooper



et al., 1998; Voorhess, 2011). Homework assignment is meant to discipline students' minds. The brain is viewed as a muscle that needs to be exercised, mostly by memorising important information that has already been taken in class (Cooper et al., 2006). Since memorisation is believed to be an important activity that needs to be practised after school time, homework assignment is favourable among almost all teachers (Cooper, 1989). In literature, homework assignment is seen as a central part of most school students' daily routine, and has a very significant influence on their achievements (Henderson, 1996; Ehsan & Stan, 2011). It has also been stated by the same authors that researchers as well as teachers believe that homework assignment can be a crucial supplement to in-school academic activities. However, the effect of homework assignment might vary from one student to another, depending in that on how much each student completes (Cooper et al., 2006). Furthermore, homework assignment is often considered as a source of interaction between home and school, in that, conflicts or clashes might appear. Students on the first side, generally protest that assignments are too long or too short, too hard or too easy (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Students usually complain about the amount of time that homework assignment takes away from their leisure activities (Coutts, 2004). They also consider homework assignment a major source of stress in their lives (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). Teachers on the other side, always complain about the lack of support from parents and the lack of training on how to construct an effective and purposeful homework assignment (Farkas et al., 1999). According to Cooper et al. (2006), homework assignment can be classified according to the following categories: (1) the amount, (2) purpose, (3) skill area, (4) degree of choice for the students, and (5) completion deadline.

Teachers and Homework Assignment:

In order to construct an effective and beneficial homework assignment, teachers should identify their purposes in advance (Van Voorhis & Frances, 2001). Teachers should also evaluate the most suitable amount of time and the appropriate assignment for their students (Cooper, 2006). In fact, homework assignment offers various benefits to teachers and students of all needs and abilities (Heitzmann, 2007). It offers second language students the opportunity to practice the target language skills after school time, prepare themselves for the next class, develop personal responsibility and promote teacher-parent communication. Furthermore, collecting, and carefully correcting homework assignment reinforces a positive relationship between homework assignment and achievement gains (ibid).

Factors that might Influence the Utility of Homework Assignment:

Cooper et al. (2006) stated that homework assignments can be influenced by different factors. Student individual differences, for example could play a significant role because “homework allows students considerable discretion about whether, when, and how to complete assignments” (9). Another important factor is that home environment might create either positive or negative surrounding atmosphere. More to the point, the larger environment could affect the utility of homework assignment through providing other leisure activities that compete for students’ time.

The Optimal Amount of Homework Assignment:

In literature, there is a lack of consensus on the ideal amount of homework assignment that students should be introduced to per-week. Many researchers confirmed that the more homework assignments, the better achievements could be attained (Walberg et al., 1985; Neilson, 2005; OECD, 2013), while others argued that much homework assignment might diminish its effectiveness, or even become entirely counter-productive (Hanushek, 2003). Lam (1996) carried out a research with American and Asian American high school students and came up with a number of interesting conclusions. In Lam’s research, a strong relationship between homework assignment and achievement was found among students reporting doing seven to twelve hours of homework assignment per-week, followed by students reporting doing thirteen to twenty hours per-week. In fact, these findings go against the salient idea that emphasises more homework assignments cause better achievement. Lam’s findings are still limited as the optimum amount of homework assignment likely depends on many factors, for instance the nature of the assignment and student individual differences (Cooper et al., 2006).

Methodology:

According to Leedy (1997:3), “our knowledge is incomplete and problems are waiting to be solved ... the role of the research is to provide a method for obtaining those answers by inquiringly studying the evidence within the parameters of the scientific method.” Research methodology, therefore, includes a number of actions or procedures used by the researcher to construct an organised and systematic plan to achieve a set of predetermined research goals (Glatthorn, 1998; Sarantakos, 2005; Chohen et al., 2007). The methodology adopted in the current study includes the following steps.

**Research Design:**

It is very important for researchers to carry out a plan to design their research inquiries. The researcher should identify the research design in order to describe the methods and instruments that are used in both data collection procedures and data analysis. Designing the outlines of the research methodology with proper tools will assist to obtain the validity and reliability of the research data. It also makes the steps of the research design clear, enabling the researcher to foresee and prevent eventual errors, bias and distortions (Sarantakos, 2005). In the current study, pure qualitative methods were utilized to collect and analyse the research data. The researcher, therefore, was able to explore “experiences and imagining of the research participants” (Mason, 2002: 1).

Research Instruments:**Data Collection:**

To collect the data required for this study, the researcher employed a number of semi-structured interviews. This type of interviews is widely used in flexible designs, either as the sole instrument or in combination with others (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al., 2007; Bryman, 2008). In the present research, six preparatory school teachers were interviewed in a semi-structured way. The researcher managed to conduct two interviews per-day. The places of the interviews were carefully selected in consultation with the headmasters of the three schools selected, and were prepared to carry out the interviews individually with the participants. Fortunately, the researcher managed every time to have a quiet office, free from any interruptions. All the interviews were recorded and the participants were informed in advance that they could use L2 or L1 or mixture in their contributions.

Interview Questions:

The interview questions were built upon the research questions and the literature review helped in formulating them to suit the research context (see appendix A). During the interviews, more questions were determined by the flow of discussion or responses of the interviewees.

Data Analysis:

To analyse the data obtained, the Thematic Analysis Method was employed. This particular method is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research (Sarantakos, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007; Bryman, 2008; Bernard,

2010). It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording themes within the gathered data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to particular research questions.

Analysing the data gained from six semi-structured interviews offered a big number of themes which were identified, summarised and then presented in (table 1). Throughout the analysis process, some extracts of the interviewees' actual contributions were utilized to exemplify the findings and consolidate the analysis. The process of data analysis proceeds systematically according to the sequence of the research questions.

Results:

By the analysis of the qualitative responses reported by the interviewees, the research applied a systematic classification process of identifying themes to answer and interpret the research questions.

Research Question One:

• What perceptions are held by preparatory school teachers concerning homework assignment?

Regarding the above mentioned research question, the process of analysing the data revealed a number of interesting findings that will be discussed as follows. Almost all the teachers interviewed showed a high interest in regularly giving homework assignment to their students. They believe that this particular activity is essential for students to revise what they have already covered in class and make it more comprehensible and memorable. In this respect, one of the interviewees said, *"Well, homework assignment is very important for students, it helps them to understand more and can remember any piece of information they want at any time"*. The same idea was expressed by another teacher, *"We have to always give our students homework assignment to enhance their understanding"*.

Some teachers showed a remarkable convention that doing homework assignment regularly enriches students' background of the new items taken in class and consequently achieve better understanding. Regarding this, one of the teachers stated, *"For me, I look at the homework assignment as a chance to understand better, the students do the homework assignment to enhance their understanding"*.



Since English is being taught as a foreign language in Libya, the chances to expose to the target language are very limited. Having realised that, some of the interviewees utilize homework assignment as a technique to keep the students use English after the school time and, therefore, compensate that lack of exposure. In this respect, one of the participants confirmed, *"I always give my students homework assignments, yes ... usually three times a week ... to keep them use English even at home"*. Another participant also confirmed, *"Doing homework assignments means practising the target language after school time, which all the students really need"*.

Analysing the data obtained revealed that students' attitude towards school can be improved if teachers not only give students homework assignment but also follow them up in doing it. In this respect, one of the teachers said, *"The teacher should keep giving homework assignment to his students at least three times a week, I think this can improve their proficiency level which in turn creates positive attitude towards their teacher as well as the school as a whole"*.

The process of data analysis showed that assigning homework assignments regularly establishes good study-habits. Students can benefit from regular homework assignments because they are offered an opportunity to revise and practise what they had previously studied at school. Concerning this, one of the interviewees said, *"We language teachers should work hard to implant positive study-habits and learning strategies in our students' behaviour after school ... and of course this behaviour enhances their understanding"*.

Almost all the teachers interviewed stated that, the task of homework assignment requires to be completed within a specific time limit and also with less supervision; home study, therefore, trains students to be well organised, well-self-directed and well self-disciplined. More to the point, home study can also help students to be more independent problem-solving. In this regard, one of the participants said, *"I always ask my students to submit the homework assignment on time and I am always very strict on that"*. Another interviewee said, *"When students are always asked to submit their homework assignment on time, this particular behaviour gradually becomes part of their characters, and of course, creates very well organised students"*.

During the interviews, almost all the teachers stressed the importance of homework assignment as a beneficial practice for class tests. According to their contributions, students who pay more attention to their homework assignment

always do better in their class tests. In this respect, one of the participants commented, *“In fact, teachers must pay more attention to the homework assignment due to important benefits that can be attained. I personally look at the homework assignment as an effective practice for examinations”*.

Throughout their contributions, some interviewees confirmed that they consider homework assignment as genuine mirror that reflects their students’ actual language level. One of the participants mentioned, *“Yes, the results of homework assignment usually provides an important feedback about students’ progress in language learning ... this feedback helps me to determine the method, technique and strategies that I should employ with my students”*. Another teacher said, *“When I correct my students’ homework, I can discover the areas of weaknesses and also the areas of strengths, and in both cases I will be offered an opportunity to decide what I should do with them next”*.

The process of data analysis indicates that if the homework assignment meets students’ needs and expectations, it will be a big motive, and that can be achieved through a careful construction and careful correction. This conclusion can be sensed in the following contribution, *“the teacher should carefully think of the purpose of the assignment, think of how to construct it according to the level of the students ... yes, correcting the assignment and giving marks are very important for students ... marks can be an effective motive for students”*.

Analysing the data showed that homework assignment is considered to be an effective link between home and school. Teachers utilize homework to increase parents’ involvement in schooling. In this respect, one of the teachers commented, *“Yes, I believe that parents can play a very effective role in the process of teaching and learning, I mean, parents can complete the role of the teacher”*.

According to the analysis of data, homework assignment might have deleterious influence on student behaviour and it might be turned into an emotional negative pressure especially when it is complicated or not clear for students. More to the point, if the homework assignment is not well constructed or ambiguous students might lose any interest in doing it, and consequently becomes a meaningless task. In this respect, one of the teachers said, *“The homework must be very well constructed and sufficient time must be given for submission, or it might turn to be a negative pressure on students’ behaviour”*.

During the interviews, some teachers confirmed that homework assignments do not reflect students’ real language level or provide any beneficial feedback



and that because students usually have their homework assignments done for them by their parents. This significant conclusion can be sensed in the following contribution, *“sometimes I see giving students homework assignments is a matter of wasting time ... simply because students' parents usually do these assignments”*.

Table 1: Themes obtained throughout the interviews

Themes obtained
Better retention of factual knowledge
Increased understanding
More learning during leisure time
Improved attitude toward school
Better study habits and skills
Greater self-direction and self-discipline
More inquisitiveness
More independent problem-solving
Effective practices for class-tests
Potential motive for improvement
Link between home and school
Active resource of feedback
Physical and emotional fatigue
Loss of interest in academic material

Research Question Two:

• Does homework assignments have any impact on students' achievement?

In response to the second research question, analysing the data obtained revealed that the homework assignment has a direct and influential impact on students' achievement. It showed that teachers should be very tentative and careful as the influence of homework assignment can be positive and in the same time can be negative. Positive impact can be witnessed, for example in enhancing students' understanding and the possibility of compensating the lack of exposure to the target language. On the other hand, negative impact exists

when homework assignment does not meet students' expectations or seen as a boring meaningless task. In this respect, one of the teachers commented, *"Well, I believe that the homework assignment must be well prepared by the teacher ... if the homework assignment is complicated or very easy, I mean below the students' level, this assignment will be taken lightly by students and of course will be seen as a useless task"*. Another teacher said, *"Homework assignment helps students to improve their understanding, it helps them to overcome any comprehension failure ... homework assignment must be purposeful"*. More contributions in this regard, *"If the homework assignment is complicated, students will struggle, ... will get bored and might start having negative attitude towards the subject matter, towards the teacher or towards the school as a whole"*.

The process of analysing the data showed that doing homework assignment regularly has a direct impact on students' performance during class time. Students usually do their best to follow and comprehend the lesson well, because they are quite sure that this behaviour reinforces their ability to do their next homework assignment without any difficulties. Regarding this, one of the interviewees stated, *"Yes, I believe that homework assignment always has an effective influence on students' learning ... when students realize that their homework assignment is related to the lesson they are having, they will be more motivated, more attentive and consequently more active in class which in turn positively affect the whole process of language teaching"*. Another interviewee said, *"Teachers can convert the homework assignment into a very effective incentive for students, and that can be attained by regularly correcting the assignment and giving marks ... students usually love to be given marks as a reward for their work"*.

Analysing the data also revealed that encouraging students to do regular homework assignment is a good technique to establish good study-habits at home. Regarding this, one of the teachers' commented, *"Yes, the teacher can exploit homework assignments to engage students in learning while they are at home"*. According to the interviewees' participations, when homework assignment is regularly collected, carefully corrected and students are given feedback, the results will be positive and satisfying. In this regard, one of the participants said, *"Yes, I always collect homework assignments on time ... I carefully correct the students' assignments and also give them feedback... yes, this technique works"*.



well with my students". During the interviews, some teachers confirmed that too much homework may diminish its effectiveness and becomes just a daily routine. Regarding this, one of the interviewees said, "*Teachers must be aware of the reasonable amount of homework that must be given to the students ... because too much homework might lead to less effectiveness*".

According to the teachers' contributions during the interviews, the main purpose that stands behind giving homework assignments is not only grabbing students' attention during class time but also to maintain their involvement in the teaching and learning situation even after school time. As an example, one of the interviewees commented, "*students need be engaged in the learning process even while they are at home, and this can be attained by regularly giving them homework assignments*".

Discussion of Findings:

The process of data analysis came up with a massive number of findings; however, this section discusses only the most impressive and interesting ones in relation to the existing literature. The findings attained indicated a notable consensus among the participants on the significant role that homework assignment could play to accelerate students' progression in learning the target language. Students, who regularly do homework assignments, would obtain effective study-habits, which in turn, increase the amount of improvement in their language learning. Interestingly, this conclusion corresponds with Cooper et al.'s (2006) argument in which they confirmed that effective study-habits are a must to improve students' achievements. Being on the same track, Cooper and Valentine (2001) and OECD (2013) stated that homework assignment helps students to acquire more positive academic attitudes, and stronger responsibility toward learning.

The research findings showed that doing homework assignment regularly helps students to attain better retention of knowledge that has already been received at school. According to Brown (2001), revising materials that have been already covered is very essential due to its direct influence on the learners' comprehension and retention.

Most of foreign language teachers always complain from the lack of exposure to the target language which in turn might negatively affect students' achievement. Regarding this, the findings of this study confirmed that homework assignment increases the time spent on academic tasks after school-time and that improves students' language proficiency level. According to

Warton (2001), the main purpose of giving homework assignment is to engage students in learning while they are at home, and that could compensate the lack of exposure to the target language, and improves students' language level.

Another interesting finding is that homework assignment can be utilised as an important supplement to in- school academic activities but this according to Henderson (1996) and Buijs & Admiraal (2013) requires teachers to regularly assign homework assignments and students should complete all the assignments they are assigned. The research findings indicated a more significant influence of homework assignment on students' achievement; however, this influence can be positive only if the homework is carefully prepared, meets students' expectations and satisfies their needs. Moreover, doing homework assignment regularly helps students to become more independent learners, the stage which all learners dream to embark. According to Benson (2001) and Dam (1995), independent learners are those who are capable of understanding the purpose of the learning task and accepting responsibility for their leaning task. Homework assignment could also have a negative impact on students' achievement when it is seen as routine task by both teachers and students.

One more fascinating finding obtained from analysing the research data is considering homework assignment as an effective link between school and home. However, some teachers complained about the lack of support from the parents' side. They also went further stating that students usually have their homework assignment done by their parents which leads to create passive and dependent learners. In fact, this conclusion reflects the parents' ignorance of the potential impact that homework assignment might have on students' achievement.

Giving homework assignment regularly, at least three times per-week, is a must to maximize the process of language teaching and learning. This finding goes in accordance with Trautwein et al.'s (2002) findings in which they stated that students could benefit from regular homework assignment because they were practising new concepts, previewing concepts to be learned, or reviewing previous ones. The research findings also revealed an important caution from over loading students with too much homework which might cause physical and emotional fatigue. It might also lead to the loss of any interest in the process of language teaching and learning as a whole. In this respect, Kouzma and Kennedy (2002) stated that many students look at homework assignment as a major source of stress in their lives.



Conclusion:

This study investigated teachers' conceptions about homework assignment and its influence on students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language at preparatory stage. In the light of the data analysis and discussion presented before, a number of impressive and fascinated findings can be drawn. Homework assignment has a positive and beneficial impact on students' progress in learning English as a foreign language. However, this impact might be also negative and consequently slow down or obstacle students' progress in language learning. Homework assignment, therefore, should be carefully constructed to satisfy or meet the teachers' pre-determined goals as well as students' needs (Voorhees, 2011). More attention should also be given to the amount of homework assignment that students are supposed to do per-week in addition to the deadline of submission. Another interesting finding is considering homework assignment as an effective link between school and home which establishes a beneficial cooperation between teachers and parents to improve students' achievement. The research findings also indicated that students who regularly do homework assignments progress steadily and systematically towards being independent language learners. The research findings also showed that doing homework assignment regularly establishes good study-habits that could effectively contribute in compensating the lack of exposure to the target language, and creating autonomous learners who are convinced that their own efforts are essential for progression in learning language (Scharle and Szabo, 2000).

By the completion of this study, it is hoped that the picture of the influence of homework assignment on preparatory school students' achievement in learning a second/foreign language is clearer. It is also hoped that the findings obtained could maximize the strengths and minimise the obstacles that might encounter the process of second/foreign language teaching and learning at preparatory stage.

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Appendix:

Interview questions

1. What does the term homework assignment mean to you?
2. Why do language teachers give homework assignments?
3. Does homework assignment help or obstacle the teaching and learning process?
4. How many times a week should teachers give homework assignment?
5. Do you regularly correct your students' homework assignment?
6. Should teachers give marks for homework assignment?
7. As a teacher, do you benefit from the feedback of homework assignment?
8. Do you think correcting the mistakes on students' homework assignments helps them to do better in their class tests?

Finally, if you would like to add anything to this interview, please go ahead.