

Reflections on Two Years of Drastically Different Homework Policies

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Abstract

The idea that homework is a near necessary component of foreign language learning through the formal education system is practically a truism (Wallinger, 2000). Even while recognizing this fact, homework comes with self-evident difficulties for teachers and students alike. Concerned about these drawbacks, this writer attempted a school year with a drastically reduced homework policy. When the student responses to this practice were not as anticipated, this writer resolved to give homework on a weekly basis the following year. Despite this massive shift in class philosophy, students across both years did not report a large difference in homework load on end of semester course evaluations. There are some reflections to be made on what then may be unexpected or tertiary benefits to having regular work.

Key words: homework, language learning, student feedback

1. Introduction

The discussion around homework is a complex one. When teachers plan homework for their courses, the number of factors they must consider seems to be almost endless. How difficult should the work be? How much time should the homework take? Should the homework be preparatory or revisionary in nature? Should the teacher check it for completion or correctness as well (Cooper, 2006)? The list goes on. Burnham (1988) even suggests that teachers ought to coordinate between one another just *how much* combined work they are giving, although this is certainly easier said than done. At the university level, it may be near impossible given the nature of electives.

Without research guiding practice, it can be hard to know what the correct choices may be. On the surface, there seem to be merits to basically any approach (Burnham, 1988). This paper will initially look at the research surrounding homework as a whole. This will be followed by some research specifically concerning homework in foreign language education (in some cases in Japan). Following that, there's a description of the school and classes in which the present paper's reflections take place, and an explanation of the two contrasting homework policies implemented in the academic years 2022 and 2023. Finally, student responses to amounts of homework on course evaluations will be shared and interpreted.

2. Literature Review

2.1 On the Homework Question

In a paper concerning student experiences with homework, it would be prudent to define just what homework is. Cooper (1989) provides a definition often applied in other studies, which works well for this paper's purposes, too. Homework will be defined here as any task given to

students which is supposed to be worked on during non-school hours. An operative phrase here is “supposed to”, because, as many teachers are made aware weekly, students will work on homework even during other classes.

When categorizing homework, researchers can approach it from many different angles, such as by frequency, amount in a given assignment, the difficulty, the purpose, among others (Cooper et al., 2006). Within the realm of *purpose*, there are a number of different options, as well. Practice is one of the most common, which is homework intended to solidify material introduced in class. Preparation is another; homework for introducing new content that will be fully taught in the next class. Extension, whereby students use learned material in new contexts, is a less common purpose, though still seen in many subjects. Finally, integration is a type of work that manifests itself in language learning classes often in the forms of roleplays or presentations, in which students combine material or skills learned at various points of the course into a single work (Cooper et al., 2006).

Opinions on homework can be manifestations of the cultures and eras that we were raised in, as chronicled by Gill & Schlossman (1996; 2004). I, being born in 1994 USA and finishing high school in 2013, had an upbringing marked by a national homework dialogue which was mostly homework ambivalent. In contrast, most of my teachers grew up during an era when homework was viewed as an effective tool to increase the speed that students gained knowledge (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Most of these attitudes shared are in response to socio-cultural and historical factors that might not be as applicable, or at all, outside of the USA. Beyond this point, though, lies another. A massive portion of the prior research on homework attitudes among students and teachers extends only so far as the secondary education system (Cooper et al., 2006).

Given that, for the vast majority of people, university is the final stop on the formal education path, there is not as much of a sense that students must absolutely be prepared for the next step on the path. Students, of course, ought to be prepared for the next step of their *life*, that being full-time work for most, but not for the next step of education. This might be one reason most of the research ends here. Another reason might be that parents, who are another major stakeholder in the homework process (Rosário et al., 2018), become much less involved.

But among the homework research which is plentiful, what do the results say about homework’s effects on student achievement?

2.2 Effectiveness of Homework

Cooper (1989), in a synthesis of 20 experimental studies between 1962 and 1986, shows that in studies where students who did homework vs. no homework were compared, 14 produced results that show students who did homework had higher achievement, where achievement was defined as performance on standardized tests *or* class grades. This effect was greatest for high school aged students, and weakened for lower aged groups. Dufresne and Kobasigawa (1989) demonstrated one possible explanation in their study for why older students could benefit more with homework, where older students spent more of their study time on harder word items, thus demonstrating older learners’ attention to their own struggles.

But caution is highly advised with the synthesis' results, as Cooper et al. (2006) warns that these correlations could not be shown to be causations because the purposes of homework between the older students and younger students may be different. For example, if younger students are assigned homework for the express purpose of promoting their learner autonomy, as opposed to synthesizing the classroom material, then one would not expect this to manifest in their academic achievement (where academic achievement is measured by test scores or the like).

It is noted in a follow-up synthesis in 2006, however, that the results found in the earlier synthesis appeared only so strong when homework was compared to no other treatment type (e.g. no homework). These results were less suggestive of the effectiveness of homework when compared to an alternative approach, such as in-school supervised study (Cooper et al., 2006). There were many more studies surrounding the topic of homework in formal education, but they weren't included in the syntheses because they were not experimental in nature, and thus their includability was limited.

Most teachers would agree that homework practices ought to be based on what the research says. Yet what the research suggests is often unclear or the applicability is dubious. Avoiding either extreme seems wise (Costley, 2013). While the value of discussing the work of Cooper (1989, 2006) is clear, given the seminal syntheses on homework outcomes in education, their applications to this report's specific context are limited, as are many others', as Cooper's work only included one foreign language study, and the country/education system difference is large.

2.3 Homework in the Foreign Language Class

It is well documented that many of the beliefs students hold with regard to language learning as a concept, as well as their own language learning experiences, are not reported by researchers in realms outside of foreign language learning (Brown, 2006; Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1987). This is evidence of the limited applicability of homework research as a general concept as it pertains to language learning.

Homework in the foreign language classroom is more than standard. It is practically deemed essential (Wallerstein, 2000). The means by which homework is said to increase language proficiency is that it increases contact time with the language being studied (Nation, 2013). Almost any foreign language teacher would say that daily practice of the foreign language, usually through homework, since many learners cannot have class every day, is a critical ingredient to success.

So, what do the students think, specifically? Takahashi (2011) states very clearly that, "students' perceptions are as important as teachers' for making the classroom a productive place of learning." (p.174). Brown (2006), in his questionnaire to students about their motivations for participation in English homework, says that students' strongest motivations for completing homework is a desire to learn English. Although students have made it clear elsewhere that if given the choice, they would prefer no homework over any. This could explain another finding of Brown's (1996), where students shared that they believed that the primary goal of a given activity (in this case, homework) could be achieved, to some degree or another, by simply taking part in

the activity, even without its completion, or without ensuring complete accuracy. Therefore, it may not come as a surprise that Isaji (2009) found that there is a disconnect between the amount of effort that teachers expect their students to put into their foreign language homework, and the amount of effort that students *actually* put into it.

Foreign language teachers recognize that the homework best suited for different skill levels, or ages is different (Wallinger, 2000). Teacher decisions on what to assign for homework is based both on practicality, reading and writing being easier homework to give, as well as an opportunity to focus on skills perhaps less emphasized in the classroom, where speaking and listening are often encouraged (Wallinger, 2000). Indeed, it seems many teachers ask their students to copy text from their textbook onto their own paper and translate readings for next-class preparation (Saito, 1996, as cited in Isaji, 2009). Perhaps this is because, as Brown (2006) says, some students may deem speaking homework as less valid. However, the dated nature of this article may cause its relevance to be less strong today since the proliferation of smartphones has allowed for easy recordings by many students, not to mention that the covid-19 pandemic has had profound ramifications on the education landscape. Either way, classes which are supposedly based in the 4-skills may not distribute their (home)work evenly, as is noted in the classes surveyed by Isaji (2009).

But in addition to the skills that are practiced on the homework in the foreign language class, what do both students and teachers think about the purpose? In Wallinger (2000), the most common type of foreign language homework was that of the “practice/revision” variety, as opposed to the preparation type or extension type. Corwin (2016) reported that while English teachers in both the United States and Japan were in favor of homework both as a preparatory and revision tool, Japanese students of English in both countries were more positive toward only the reviewing type. This is slightly at odds with Takahashi’s (2011) tips for homework assignment in ESL classes, which were informed by student responses as well, suggesting teachers assign homework related to topics that will be covered in the next class (preparation) but *was missing* any tip outlining the assignment of homework to synthesize/confirm knowledge learned in the previous classes.

It is certainly possible that some students feel less interest in practice or revision type homework when they do not get adequate feedback on their performance. As echoed in other studies, Wallinger’s (2000) teachers involved in the study most often only checked homework for completion. Checking the homework for both completion and correctness did occur, but it was to a lesser degree. In a paper about what students’ conceptions were of the value of homework, MacDonald (2017) suggested that future research could ask students what types of homework they like and dislike, with the end goal of giving students the homework types they enjoy which would boost engagement and therefore hopefully result in better achievement results, or just simply higher completion rates.

All in all, although the effects of homework on foreign language education outcomes swung greatly between strong effects and weak effects, it was not concluded to be harmful in hardly any studies (Foyle and Bailey, 1988, as cited in Wallinger, 2000). There is justified concern, however,

about what we are using to determine educational outcomes. What *ought to be* the measure of achievement? Chen and Ehrenberg (1993, as cited in Wallinger, 2000) prefer class grades as opposed to standardized tests. This writer certainly agrees as, depending on the class being taken, the skills being taught/learned may not be what a standardized test is even evaluating, whereas class scores are, naturally, based on the very content taught in the class.

If our goal as teachers is that our practices follow research outcomes, then certainly our views toward homework and its assignment should be mostly positive. While the certainty of just how positive homework is on student achievement, and whether these benefits of achievement are enough to outweigh student frustrations with doing the work is low, we have no more informed view than this for the time being.

3. Methodology

3.1 Teaching Context

Chubu University is a private university in Aichi prefecture of about 10,000 students. Within Chubu University is a program known as “PASEO” (Preparation for Academic Study in English Overseas), taught by teachers with ties to one of Chubu University’s partner universities, Ohio University. Students can take a number of elective English courses intended to assist them with the classroom style they may encounter in American universities should they study there. That said, it is by no means necessary for students to be studying abroad in order to register for the classes. In fact, it is not even necessary for the students of PASEO classes even to be “students” at all. In the past and, indeed currently, some staff and faculty elect to take PASEO classes as well. By extension, this means that PASEO students can elect to take the classes for credit or not, a point worth emphasizing when discussing the attitudes or thoughts students share regarding their classroom experiences, because students can take PASEO classes for a variety of reasons with a scale of motivations.

The program offers three major categories of classes: “Listening & Speaking”. “Reading & Writing” and “Content” classes. While the first two categories are skills-based courses, and taught almost in their entirety in English, the classes within the third category can vary greatly. While they are still taught almost totally in English, the content itself can be as different as a class entitled “All About the USA” to “Science”. Many of the class offerings within this category are akin to CLIL classes, where the focus might not often be on the language itself, but still plays a large role in the learning.

3.2 2022 Academic Year

Following one and a half years at Chubu University, characterized strongly by on and off periods of in-person and online lessons because of the covid-19 pandemic, I could not help but notice a trend among my students. In conversations both within and outside of classrooms, I frequently heard students say how tired they were. When often inquiring why that was, the most common response was that students felt that they had too much homework, and were unable to get the rest they needed while also balancing their academic responsibilities.

This repeated interaction, perhaps some of my own biases from the era I grew up in, and a desire for more time to dedicate to my own professional development, led me to implement an informal teaching policy that I had never attempted before.

At the beginning of each of the 2022 semesters, I told my students that in the class there would be virtually no homework. I explained to them that I was tired of seeing students so drained and lethargic and that if they gave me all of their effort and energy during the limited class time we had, then I would do my best to avoid giving them homework. If we could not get enough done during the lesson to stay on pace with the semester plan, then I would give only enough homework to catch up to where we needed to be.

In the 2022 academic year, this resulted in 34 homework assignments across 210 lessons, or a homework assignment in 16.2% of lessons. During this year, most of the homework was practice in nature, although there were a few assignments that were extension or integration types.

On-time completion rates for these works were lower than I expected. The average on-time assignment completion percentage per assignment was 67.8%, and the total percentage of on-time submissions for all possible assignments was 67.4%. Considering the overall frequency of the homework was low, and the amount of work in the homework itself was relatively low by previous standards of mine, I was taken aback at the seemingly very low turn-in rates.

3.3 2023 Academic Year

After 2022, I began to suspect that while students ought to be completing their homework better, I was also not doing them any favors, so to speak, by sporadically assigning things. Therefore, I resolved to give homework weekly to my students. For some classes, that meant homework in every class, as we only met once a week. For others, that meant an assignment in every other class as we met twice a week.

Although this was the goal, not every week had an assignment. Most classes did not on the first day, as well as in all classes on the final day. Some classes also lend themselves easier to homework, so on occasion I had trouble creating a suitable assignment for students and did not give them any homework.

In the 2023 academic year, this resulted in 122 assignments, or a homework assignment in 58.1% of all lessons. Again, most of this homework was practice in nature, without hardly any preparation assignments and a few more integration assignments.

On-time completion rates for these were higher than the previous year, despite a substantially increased amount of homework. The average on-time assignment completion percentage per assignment was 66.5%. However, the total percentage of on-time submissions for all possible assignments was 77.7%, just over a 10% increase over the previous year. The greater discrepancy for these numbers in 2023 compared to the last year can be explained by a few factors. The fall semester of 2023 was a semester with very few students, where assignment on-time completion percentages can be easily swayed by a single student missing an assignment. For this reason, the second figure is the more informative of the two.

3.4 Course Evaluation Student Responses

In the last few weeks of every semester, the PASEO program administers dual English-Japanese course evaluations to all of its students to be completed during class time. These course evaluations cover student thoughts on their own efforts, the class, and the teacher, on a 5-point Likert scale. This is followed up by a final section for open-ended responses.

In the Spring semester of 2022 there were 100 students across all PASEO classes I taught. This resulted in 80 course evaluation responses being collected. In the fall semester there were 71, with 55 course evaluations, for a combined total of 171 students and 135 course evaluation completions.

In the 2023 academic year there were 93 students during the Spring semester, which resulted in 75 course evaluation responses. There were an additional 34 students in the Fall, and 27 course evaluation completions, for a total of 127 students in 2023 and 102 course evaluations.

This is a combined 298 students across both years with 237 course evaluations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Student Responses

On the student evaluations there is an open-ended question which asks students: “How did you feel about the homework assignments and the amount of homework?” Students are free to answer in either English or Japanese.

Student answers were all translated into English and then coded into one of three categories. “hardly any”, “appropriate amount”, “too much”, represented by “1”, “2”, and “3” respectively. Among the 135 course evaluations in 2022, 129 were includable because they contained a reference to homework amount. Among the 102 evaluations in 2023, 97 were able to be included. That left 226 course evaluations available for testing.

After coding into groups, independent samples t-tests were run in RStudio to determine whether there was a significant difference in the reported amount of homework between the two groups of students in 2022 and 2023.

For the year 2022, which comprised of 129 responses, the mean was 1.775, with a standard deviation of 0.548. For 2023, with 97 responses, the mean was 1.773, with a standard deviation of 0.420, representing a mean difference of 0.001. The 95% confidence interval (-0.129, 0.133) along with the significance value ($p = 0.97$) shows that there is very little which differentiates these two groups.

4.2 Interpreting Results

Part of the reason for these results may simply be that the teacher tried to keep assignments, while very regular, light, insofar as their difficulty and length were concerned. Students therefore might report a low amount of homework even if the frequency with which it is assigned is much higher. In addition, student on-time submission rate difference could be a result of a higher degree of regularity. In other words, when students *almost always* have something to do before the next class, it reduces the mental burden on them to remember whether or not they needed to complete

some homework before the next class.

Another factor that is potentially at play is the clear messaging between the students and teacher. In 2022, the teacher made a concentrated effort to tell the students they were going to receive little homework, and in 2023 made no mention of just how much the homework would be at all. Had the teacher reported giving little homework in 2023 but given the same amount, the students may have felt more inclined to report a higher amount.

Overall, the students in both years reported homework to be a little more on the lighter side, but without more in-depth evaluations, it would be hard to know just how much time students spent on homework on average or total during a semester.

5. Limitations and Future Suggestions

The above analysis shows that despite a very high difference in the amount of assignments given to the students, there was no real difference in their attitudes to the amount of work they received. Some context will be added for any teachers who are now revising their homework policies.

These course evaluations were written by different students in different years of coursework and therefore could not be properly reflecting a particular student's attitudes toward two varying levels of homework quantity. An insight into students' reported differences from two continuous semesters of differing policies would be perhaps even more illuminating.

Another shortcoming of the present paper is that this was not a clearly intended experiment from the outset. The idea only arose when after the first semester of 2023 had finished, the student evaluations, and overall homework performance, had surprised the teacher. With a clear plan from the beginning, homework type, length, frequency, and student responses could be more effectively tracked and manipulated for the most enlightening results.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the actual classes themselves between both years were not completely the same. One of the classes offered in 2022 was removed from the course offerings and replaced with another timeslot for an already offered course. In addition, said course changed textbooks which could have had ramifications on the overall difficulty of the course. As well, teachers within PASEO rotate between the skills-based classes by year, so the students, although already explained to be different, may also not be as comparable, as they would be in an ideal world.

Future research would ensure all of these factors remain unchanged, or only change them in isolation for the clearest interpretations to be made. Nonetheless, this may be a beginning step toward understanding how increased homework assignments may not result in large differences in reported homework amounts or difficulties from students.

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