# Exploring students attitudes towards english homework

## Abstract

This research aims at exploring students' attitudes towards English homework. There is abundant literature regarding homework, but the voice of the students is absent from most of the literature.

In this study, qualitative case study approach is used to look into the perspectives of one junior form class (F. 1) and one senior form class (F. 4). The literature review includes four major trends in the latest homework research: 1) relationship between homework and achievement, 2) relationship between time and achievement, 3) parental involvement and 4) homework design. I conducted 45 questionnaires and 6 in-depth interviews by purposive extreme sampling. After synthesizing all the data, I analyzed them by using constant comparison method and transcript based analysis. The results of the reserach showed that most students think homework is important to their learning. But the poor design and lack of teachers' constructive feedbacks discourage them to complete their English homework. In addition, it is shown that different ages and genders require different kinds of homework to meet the learning diversity. This study contributes to the current literature in terms of its latest and uniqueness.

## Introduction

When talking about homework, it seems that everyone has an opinion concerning its worth and purpose. Interestingly enough, in discussions of homework, it quickly becomes a debate. People either with adamantly favour or strongly oppose the practice. For myself, I struggled with the English homework when I was a secondary student. I thought it was just a burden for

me without any meaningful purpose. On the other hand, when I was a student teacher, I liked assigning homework to my students because I assumed homework could improve both teaching and learning. Most importantly, homework was the communication channel between student and me. Some students who seldom handed-in their homework, but they still got a good grade in the exams, vice versa. This situation perplexed me. I have ideas and doubts about homework, but never really studied the issue. Therefore, I wanted to conduct an action research study in my honour project, in the hope that I could modify it so as to fit the needs of the students. After reviewing the literature, I decided to examine the attitudes students hold towards their English homework. My general intention was to obtain evidence indicating whether I neglected some factors when blaming on students who do not complete their English homework. I perceive the homework issue is faced among many teachers. No matter which schools and what kinds of students are the teachers working with, they must face the homework completion problem. Hopefully, this research can help teachers to handle the homework issue easily in the coming future.

## Part 1: Literature Review:

The literature review consists of articles and books from 1980 to 2007 on the history of the homework debate. The majority of the scholarly articles are from EBSCO Databases (e. g.: A+ Education, Eric and Education Research Complete). The themes discussed in the literature are relationship between doing homework and achievement, time spent on doing homework, parental involvement and homework design.

## 1. 1 The History of Homework Debate

According to Copper (2007), homework is described as " tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours "(p. 5). Copper explains that the use of word-" intended" because students may do the homework during recess, lunch time or even during subsequent classes. Homework is not new. It has a long and controversial history (Gordon 1980; Cooper 1989a-2007; Bonyun 1992; Earle 1992; Foyle 1992; Hallam 2004; Jha 2007 and so on). Among these studies, there are both pro and anti- homework groups respectively. Gill and Schlossman (2000) analyzed the views of different stakeholders: educators, teachers and parents. Different parties hold very distinct views towards the issue of homework. Up till now, there is a lack of consensus among researchers which they only agreed that homework is a complicated issue. Apart from different stakeholders' views, there are many variables related in the topic of homework: environment, students' ability, time and researchers own biases. Some of the critical views are discussed in the following part.

## 1. 2The relationship between homework and achievement

When the researchers analyzed whether there is a relationship between the amount of time spent on doing homework and achievement, they mostly used one of two research designs. The first one is experimental. They typically compared two groups of students who were assigned homework and who did not receive any homework. And then, these two groups of students were given the same test to check whether homework can carry a positive influence on students' academic achievement. Copper (2007)

showed that students doing homework had higher unit test scores than 73 percentage of students not doing homework

## 1. 3The relationship between the amount of time spend doing homework and achievement

The second type of research examines the relationship between time spent on homework and achievement. Kohn (2006) mirrored the work of Copper (2007), they found a positive relationship between time spent doing homework and achievement. That means time spent on homework increases, achievement increases. However, Kralovec (2000) examines that the relationship between achievement and time spent on homework is negative for younger students. He suggested that homework appears to be more effective for older students than younger students.

All in all, homework appears to be positively correlated with achievement, but the effect varies dramatically with grade level. According to the research conducted by Vatterott (2009), in grades 3 to 5, the correlation was zero, in grades 6 to 9, the correlation was . 07; and in grades 10-12, the correlation was. 25. However, 1. 00 is a perfect correlation between two measures and zero means there is no correlation between the measures.

## 1. 4Parental Involvement

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on encouraging parents to become involved in the education of their children. Most parents think the setting of homework as necessary and important (Vatterott, 2007). There are two reasons for parents wanting children in doing homework. The first reason is because homework works as the school's commitment to

educational achievement and also that it gives them a " platform" to apply what they have learnt in the lesson. The second reason is parents who view homework as a criterion for assessing schools. Since communication between home and school is often difficult, homework takes up the role of providing a bridge between home and school. Parents can easily check what the teacher is teaching and the progress of their children based on the homework.

However, we cannot interpret parents wanting their children to do well in school to mean that they want their children to have homework if the homework is not going to improve academic achievement (Jha, 2006). Some research has suggested that parental help with homework improves achievement (Hallam 2007; Chen and Stevenson 1989). Other research suggests that the findings are not conclusive or that effects are trifling (Levin el al. 1997; Vatterott 2007). This contradictory result implies that parents may provide more help for the students than they actually need with their school work. The worst situation is that tension may develop between parents and their children over their homework. Later on, it can cause frustration and disappointment and may be counter-productive to the students' performance in school.

## 1. 5 Homework Design

Among most findings, there is a considerable agreement among teachers that homework is worthwhile. There are two major reasons for teachers to give students homework: instructional and non- instructional (Xu, 2005). For the instructional objective of homework, teachers use homework as a means of ensuring that students have went over and learned the curriculum in

preparation for tests. The non-instructional purpose of homework is to develop student responsibility, social skills and communication between parents and teachers. Despite this, homework was seen to have a negative influence on family involvement (Van Voorhis 2003).

There has been considerable interest in the feedback given to students when homework has been completed. There is general consensus that homework must be collected and marked (Van Voorhis, 2003). However, there is much less agreement about the most effective marking procedures. Marking homework is time-consuming. Most teachers assign, collect and mark the homework regularly. However, there is variation in the kind of feedback the teachers give. Feedback can vary from teachers providing students with a mark, grade, a written comment, e. g.' Very good, good or seen'. Giving grades seems to be effective (Xu, 2005) but the type of grading given seems to make little difference to learning outcomes.

## 1. 6 Summary of the literature review

With the support of the literature review, the definition of " homework" is clear to all readers in this report: " tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours (Copper 2007)." The major issue surrounding the homework controversy is whether it can improve students' achievement, the views of different stakeholders and the weakness of the existing research. We can see that there is a lack of students' voices among the research.

## Part 2 Research Questions

What kinds of homework do the students prefer?

Do students' attitudes to homework vary according to characteristics such as age-group and gender?

Does homework help to instill positive attitudes and study habits?

Nowadays, almost all research regarding homework is from the adults' point of view. Very few of them try to put themselves into the shoes of students to look into the homework issue. Student is the core of our education; therefore, the research regarding homework is always incomplete without the voice of students. This study aims at finding students' attitude on their English homework and the reasons why students do not hand in English homework.

## Part 3 Methodology

## 3. 1 Design

This research is an explorative qualitative case study, but also with some quantitative features. Multiple methods are used because they will provide the data I require to produce a complete piece of research. It is unwisely to solely depend on one method because it is labeled as ' qualitative study'. The aim of this study is to explore the students' attitudes to homework in order to encourage students to complete their English homework. Finally, educators and teachers may design more effective homework to help students learning better in the future.

I collected data from both teachers and students by 6 in-depth interviews (Appendix E & F) and 45 questionnaires (Appendix C & D). The reason for using in-depth interviews is due to its adaptability and credibility of the

study. On the other hand, the use of questionnaire is due to its convenience and time effectiveness (Patten, 1998). This research explored the Form 1 and Form 4 students' attitude towards English homework.

## 3. 2 Participants

The setting of this research is a secondary school in Tuen Mun. Participants were one Form 1 class and one Form 4 class students and 5 English teachers. The study required exploring the attitude towards homework on two groups of students taking the English course at school.

## 3. 2. 1 Sampling

For the questionnaire, all students and their English teachers in those classes were asked to participate in the questionnaire research. For the interviews, I only picked up some samples from the participants. I had in-depth interviews with 4 students and 2 teachers using purposive extreme sampling. Patton (1990) defined extreme sampling should be used when the case " are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way." (p. 109)

## 3. 3 Instrument

## 3. 3. 1 Interviews

One major advantage of the interview is its adaptability. With interviews, I could follow up ideas, probe responses and explore the feelings of the respondents, which the questionnaire cannot do. I could ask follow up questions based on the response of the interviewees, such as, the tone, the facial expression and even the hesitation. According to Bell (2005), " questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified" (p. 157)

However, since interviews are time-consuming, I used group interviews instead of one to one interviews in the beginning. But I discovered that the disadvantages of group interviews overrode the advantage of one-to-one interviews. The first disadvantage is that some strong personality's interviewees influenced and in some extent they took over the group and made it difficult for the less assertive interviewees to speak (Refers to Extract 2). In addition, one to one interview can maintain higher privacy than group interviews. After considering all the factors, I decided to redesign my interviews to individual interviews instead it is more time-consuming.

Extract 2. The transcript of the interview

Interviewer: Why do you not hand in the homework on time?

Student A: Well, I do want to do it. But as you know, the English homework is really boring. It doesn't matter we do not do it as I can still can good results from the exam.

Interviewer: We? How about students B? Do you agree with student A?

Student B: am……yes…. probably. (Feel embarrassed)

Student A: Let me tell you more. And we are very busy all the time. It is common that different subject teachers assign the homework on the same day…. It's impossible for us to finish them…Besides….

## 3. 3. 2 Questionnaire

Since there are only twenty students in each class, it is feasible to give out all questionnaires to the whole classes. With questionnaires, all respondents

are presented with the same questions. Therefore, I could compare the responses among different groups easily. As long as, there is no interviewer coming between the respondent and the question, it is essential to design the effective question wording. Before I sent out the questionnaires, I discovered the wordings in my questionnaires were very ambiguous. Bell (2005) suggested that " words which have a common meaning to you may mean something different to other people" (p. 138). For example, I wanted to find out how often students are able to hand in their English homework on-time. Originally, I used some very ambiguous wordings, such as, always, often, sometimes and etc (Refers to Example 3A). But after the pilot testing, I changed the options to a specific period of time. (Refers to Example 3B). Precision in wording is important since it enables me to compare the data later.

Example 3A. BEFORE the pilot test : Question 3 in the students questionnaire

Example 3B. AFTER: the pilot test: Question 3 in the students questionnaire

## 3. 4 Procedure

First of all, I obtained permission from Hong Kong Institute of Education, the school principal, the participating teachers and students to collect the data. This study lasted for 8 weeks, from 14th March 2011 to 20th May 2011. At the beginning of the study, I collected archival data in the form of their first uniform test scores and some of their English homework from the participating students, so that I can get a general picture of students' completion of English homework. Since I have decided my research questions, I used the ' problem oriented' approach to limit the amount of

documents. The sources included both primary and secondary sources. According to Bell (2005), primary sources are those which came into existence in the period under research, such as, the English homework, the scores of the uniform test. Apart from the primary sources, I also collected some secondary resources. Secondary sources are interpretation of events based on primary sources (Munn, 2004), for example the report card given by the teachers. All these documents gave me the background of the participants and reinforced the core of my research.

In the second week, I gave my cousin, who is a secondary school student, to do the questionnaire as piloting the questionnaire. With the trial, I understood how long it takes recipients to complete them, to check that all questions and instructions are clear and to enable me to remove any items which do not yield usable data. There are two reasons why I chose my cousin to pilot the questionnaire. The first reason is that her background is similar to those that would form the population of my study. Therefore, her perception and understanding are similar to my respondents. The second reason is sincerity. Since she is an outsider of this research, she is willing to tell me her true feeling towards the questionnaire.

I distributed the questionnaires in the lesson and asked the students to do them during the lesson at once. It makes sure that the return rate is one hundred percentage and students could ask questions when they were doing the questionnaires. After glancing through all responses from the questionnaires, I carefully picked up some extreme case from the respondents to the questionnaire. Since these respondents are rich in information and they possess the common characteristics of the groups. For

example, I picked up two students: 1) one hands in ALL English homework and 2) one never hands in any English homework respectively. Therefore, I could compare the similarity and differences among these distinct groups easily.

## 3. 5 Data Analysis

First of all, all data got from document, questionnaires and interviews are only raw data. They have to be categorized and interpreted; otherwise, they are useless. After synthesizing all the data, they were analyzed by constant comparison, comparing the emerging themes from all the participants in all categories (Hatch, 2002). Next, I compared the categories yield by each of the subgroups: gender and age, to check the differences and similarities among their responses. Based on students' preference, I synthesized the results by using the summary sheet. Lastly, I used the transcript-based analysis to evaluate the information from the in-depth interviews.

Based on Krueger (1994), Transcript-Based analysis includes the below steps:

1) Make backup copies of the recordings

2) Transfer the recordings to transcript

3) Category the data

4) Go through the research questions

6) Develop coding categories and code the data

7) Classify the data into coding categories

8) Diagram the analysis

9) Revise data to check is there any important information missing. (p. 157)

# 4. Findings

## 4. 1 Background

Diagram 5 shows that over 80% of students think homework is important. They agree that in ideal situation, homework can help them learn better and practice what they have learnt in the lessons. However, less than 35% of them can hand-in the English homework more than 3 times a week (Refers to diagram 6). Due to this contradictory result, the following research questions will look into the attitudes of students towards English homework deeply.

Diagram 5: Is English homework important to your learning? (from the Questionnaire)

Diagram 6: How often do you hand-in the English homework on-time? (From the Questionnaire)

## 4. 2 Students' preferences for different kinds of homework

The findings show that students disliked homework which was about copying, boring and tedious. Students also complained that sometimes the English homework sometimes has little relationship to the work in hand, is poorly set, marked late and poor feedback from teachers.

In students own words:

" I do not return the English homework because I don't like doing those kinds of homework, such as, newspaper cutting and writing journal. They are not related to what we are learning. It is very boring to do the same type of English homework every weekend."

(From a Form 4 student)

" I wanted to hand-in the homework, but sometimes I just can't. Once I go back home, I can't control myself to play the computer games. In the beginning of the semester, I was still able to hand in their English on time, or at least able to hand them in one day. But later on, I discovered that my English teacher did not scold me, even I did not hand in the homework. So, I'm just used to not hand in the English homework now." (From a Form 1 student)

From the findings, I found out that there is a range of factors affected pupils' attitudes towards doing their English homework including motivation, mood, teachers' response and quality and quantity of homework. Surprisingly, more than 80% students said that they would hand in their English homework if the teachers carry out some actions if the students do not hand in the homework (Refers to Diagram 7).

Diagram 7: Teachers will take some negative consequences to students who cannot hand in the English homework.

Do you think it is useful to encourage you to hand in the English homework on-time?

In teachers own words:

" I'm just very busy. It's impossible for me to check whether every student has handed in their English homework." (From a male English teacher)

" What actions I can take? If I ask them to attend the detention class, I have to go too. And somehow, I think students should take up their own learning responsibility." (From a female teacher)

Students said that they enjoyed and valued homework when it was: well-explained; had adequate deadlines; interesting and at their level. Similarly, the findings show that students dislike doing homework that neither consolidated nor contributed to their learning. However, the reality is teachers are under heavy workload. They do not have extra time to care for the homework issue.

## 4. 3 Relationships between students' characteristics and altitudes to homework

Students' attitudes to homework seem to vary according to background factors, such as gender and age. For example, apart from spending more time on homework, female students seems to have a better attitudes towards it than the male students

## 4. 3. 1 Gender and Age

Diagram 8: Relationship between gender and time spent on English homework a week

From the above table, we can conclude that female students tend to spend longer time doing their English homework than the male students. Apart from the longer time, the English teachers expressed that female students

are more conscientious with regard to homework and their homework are tidy, well planned and showed evidence of effort. On the other hand, male students seem spending very few amount of time on it. They are easily distracted by other things, such as, extra-curricular activities, computer games and some gang activities. Both boys and girls believe that homework is important in helping them to do well in school, although this tendency is stronger in girls especially in the senior forms. Based on the findings from the questionnaires, male students tended to spend more time in larger groups after school, whereas girls like spending time with a single close friend, which may be working on homework together.

## 4. 4 Homework's influence on attitudes to study

Instilling a positive attitude towards study is always claimed the major reason of assigning homework to students. Diagram 9A &9B show that older students seem to give ' internal reasons' for doing their homework, such as, revision and keep themselves on the track to the lessons. On the other hand, junior students tended to give more ' external reasons' for doing English homework: obeying the teachers and parents.

Diagram9A Diagram 9B

This is probably an indication that students are developing more self-regulated and responsible attitudes when they are grown-up. Some students, especially junior students, are forced to do homework, so it is difficult to prove whether doing homework can facilitate the acquisition of self-regulatory skills. Therefore, this is another area that could clearly benefit from further research.

## 4. 5 Summary of the responses

The result reveals that most students think that homework is important to learning. Students prefer homework that is interesting and let them feel successful. Homework like journal and newspaper cutting make students feel bored because " they are tedious and they only do a lot of copying instead. (Extract from the student interview)". In addition, the relationship between students' characteristics and attitudes towards homework is directly related. Male students like playing outside and hanging out with friends after schools, especially for junior students. Some students indicated that they learnt better through researches, projects and other learning activities. The key point in the data shows that students change their attitudes towards when they are grown up.

## 5. Discussion

In the following parts, future directions are given based on previous literature reviews and my research findings. And then, I will suggest some future studies so as to make the homework issue clear to everybody.

## 5. 1 Explanation of the findings

## 5. 1. 1 Students' preferences for different kinds of homework

Both the literature reviews and findings show that homework is mainly for scrutiny. It is routinely given to satisfy school requirements or meet the curriculum needs. It is high time that careful consideration to its purpose and the need to align tasks with aims.

The role of teachers to the students' completion of English homework cannot be underestimated. Both the amount the teachers set and the types of

feedback given have an impact on the motivation of the students to complete it. It is rare that schools will reward students for completing homework. They always assume that students should take up their own responsibility to finish the homework. If teachers do not give constructive feedbacks or even worse they do not mark it, then the students will have no motivation to do the homework.

The data from the study suggests that 80% of the participating teachers have not received any training related to designing homework. It is essential to provide professional development for designing homework. And government should help to balance the workload of teachers, so that teachers can put more time to design high quality homework.

## 5. 1. 2 Relationships between students' characteristics and attitudes to homework

Almost all students agree that homework is important; however, they think the nature of homework hinder them to hand in their English homework on-time. Teachers like assigning homework, like, writing journal and newspaper cutting. All these assignment are easily set by the teachers; however, students do not see the points of learning from these authentic materials. It is suggested that homework should be tailored to be aligned to the learning aims. For example, if the aim is to promote independent learning, then the teachers should try to devise some interesting tasks. Ideally, homework can even have a bigger function if teachers can skillfully set the homework. For example, homework can even help to improve examination performance. Combinations of aims can be met over time through providing variety in homework.

## 5. 1. 3 Homework's influence on attitudes to study

Students value homework because they think it can improve their learning and future prospects. At the same time, some regard homework as an encroachment on their leisure time, especially male students. They expect that teachers can give different types of homework to different students and which have to be related to their ongoing classroom work. For example, boys should be given more group work rather than individual work.

Although different students hold various attitudes towards homework, all of them hope the same attitude: we need someone to listen to our concerns. There is no doubt that students are the ones who bear the consequences of not completing homework. But, as an educator, we have the responsibility to explore the students' attitude towards homework and design appropriate homework to them.

## 5. 2 Recommendations for further study

The weaknesses of this study prompt three major recommendations for further study. Firstly, this study is a small scale qualitative study due to the time and resources constraints. A larger qualitative study is needed to increase the validity. It is suggested that we set up a forum for discussion, so that students can leave the comments freely in anonymous. Secondly, I tried to relate attitude to time spend on English homework in the third research question. However, students may do the homework because their parents force them to so, rather than they sincerely want to do the English homework by themselves. Moreover, it is difficult to define when the effect of classroom teaching ends and the effect of homework begins. Besides, it is not easy to check how the prior learning influences the achievement.

Homework research is especially complicated because we are checking the effect of something than happens out of our sight and out of our control (Vatterott, 2009). Therefore, the setting of the research should extend to the home, rather than simply classroom. The third recommendation is to add socio economic factors to the study. This study mainly reveals students' attitude from their own individual factors, another factors should be included to strengthen the findings.