

Homework as an integral part of the educational process

Why do I love setting homework so often?

Since I believe that doing homework is a vital part of learning a foreign language at school, and it serves as an extension of classroom activities, I would like you to read my own publication investigating the subject matter. Enjoy!

Introduction

Both teaching and learning English require a lot of time to bring satisfactory results. What is more, the process demands systematic work of the student, at school as well as at home. That is why homework plays such a significant role. It is widely used but very often too little attention is paid to it. And, unfortunately, homework causes students' dissatisfaction as doing it takes some of their free time. The problem is usually too much homework given or homework of an over-difficult nature, and also lack of learning skills. However, homework, if properly assigned, helps overcome difficulties and reinforces students' achievement.

Definition of homework

In didactic literature, there are several terms defining out-of-class student study. They are 'home tasks' or 'activities', or 'individual study', however, the most widespread one, both in literature and school practice, is 'homework'.

The word 'homework', according to Longman Active Study dictionary (2000: 324) is defined as: work for school that a student does at home. Consequently, it is any planned educational activity to be completed by students outside of their regular classes.

In his book "Dydaktyka kształcenia ogólnego", Franciszek Bereźnicki writes that the act of doing homework involves learning and doing tasks given by a teacher as well as carrying out

duties for school. Additionally, he treats homework as an activity strictly connected with a given lesson (Bereźnicki 2001: 351). This concurs with Liciana Tavares's statement that "Homework is both a part of and an extension of the class" (Tavares 2003: 48). Others have also discussed this form of study. For example Okoń claims: "It is a traditional constituent of the school system as it is a complement of the basic form of educating" (Okoń 1987: 360). Instead, Józefa Kwołek points out that "homework is a continuation of schoolwork and they both are strictly connected in terms of material that is covered" (Kwołek 1987: 123).

According to the suggestions above, homework is an inherent element in the process of learning, and it makes students not only complete the work done during the lesson but also prepare for the following one.

The role of homework

"Contrary to work done during the lesson, where it is the teacher who organizes the work, homework makes students work individually" (Zborowski 1972, cited in Okoń 1987: 336). Zborowski makes this suggestion, and adds that it is hardly ever possible to adjust the speed of work to each student's ability. Moreover, the length of the lesson makes it impossible to recycle all the new items. As is pointed out by Kwołek: The pedagogical practice proves that all the teacher's effort put into handing down knowledge is not efficient if not accompanied by the individual work of a student (Kwołek 1987: 122). It means that the time of the lesson is not long enough to have a given item practiced and recycled, as it is often only possible to refer to it, which is why homework is so desirable. Thus it is homework that, as a continuation of school work, gives students the possibility to deepen and recycle their knowledge. At the same time, they learn to think individually and use their knowledge to deal with different tasks.

When analyzing the functions of homework presented in didactic literature, it is usually emphasized that homework is for recycling, extending and deepening the knowledge handed

down during the lesson as well as shaping some abilities and skills, and developing independent thinking and students' interests. Furthermore, it forms a positive attitude to work (Bereźnicki 2001: 352), which serves another homework function, namely, the educational one. Zborowski gives an explanation for this: By making students take up everyday duties, their will and character is shaped, their regularity, precision, initiative and ingenuity are developed, their belief in their strengths is reinforced, and their positive attitude to work is shaped (Zborowski 1972, cited in Okoń 1972: 360).

Generally, it is emphasized that that homework stimulates the students' activity in many areas. Lech (cited in Bereźnicki 2001: 352) argues that it, as a continuation, completion and extension of the work done at school, lets students use the knowledge they gain at lessons in new situations. Additionally, it may serve new observations and experiences, and at the same time helps to deal with different tasks individually.

When discussing the individual work of students, another very important role of homework should be mentioned. It is the learner autonomy which, as Jeremy Harmer writes, gets a powerful boost when homework is set for students to do outside of class, as then they have to study without the help of the teacher (Harmer 2004: 338). As he claims, students will never learn a language only during class time no matter how good a teacher is. He explains: "This is because language is too complex and varied for there to be enough time for students to learn all they need in a classroom" (Harmer 2004: 335). So in order to compensate for the limits of classroom time, students need to develop their own learning strategies, which, to some extent, makes them autonomous learners.

The conclusion is that homework gives students time to absorb, process and practice what they have learned at school. It also keeps them involved between lessons and maintains their commitment to learning. Besides, the extra work outside class is essential, as the amount of time available in class is not sufficient for language learning. This implies that homework is the opportunity to help students remember the previous lesson and prepares them for the following one. Likewise, doing homework is a chance to lengthen the time of contact with a

foreign language, which means increasing the possibility to learn the language.

Homework tasks

“A task is usually thought to be something that should be done in order to reach an intended aim” (Bereźnicki 2001: 354).

From the didactic point of view, it is essential to clarify tasks in relation to their aim, type of activity, form and content as well as the place and time of realization of the task (Bereźnicki 2001: 354). Okoń (1987: 36—363), taking into consideration the aims of given tasks, distinguishes different types of homework. One of the aims is commending a piece of material, which, as he claims, happens rather seldom when comparing to others. However, what students are expected to do, is to prepare some material for the following lesson, or to complete the material done during a lesson. Okoń highlights the value of students preparing material; namely generating interest and what follows- profiting from the lesson. Likewise, it gives students the possibility to touch on a given content several times, which facilitates the memorization of the information.

Another aim is to remember a given content better and recycle absorbed material. This can be done by learning texts by heart or writing a piece of work using the knowledge gained during the lesson.

A further group of tasks intend to shape some abilities and habits, and they are very often used in teaching foreign languages. They generally concern speaking, reading and writing activities; therefore, they influence the development of writing and reading skills, as well as communication skills.

Okoń (1987: 363) argues that teachers often set homework tasks that have all the aims presented above, and at the same time some others like those concerning tasks that require more individual work, or even some element of creativity. So that students are encouraged to

use their own potential.

The content and form of a task depend on its instruction. To be precise, there are open- and close-ended tasks. Open-ended tasks are those to which there is not a single absolutely correct answer, or where a variety of answers are possible. They are differentiated from closed tasks, where students have to answer in a particular way. Both tasks are useful in language learning. On one hand, close-ended tasks force students to make sure in finding the correct answer while open-ended tasks, on the other hand, let students answer at the level of their ability and they are allowed to contribute their own ideas. This means that open-ended tasks allow for more student involvement, and in this way, the students' autonomy in their use of English can be extended. Finally, such tasks allow the teacher to get a good idea of what students are capable of producing in a target language.

Regarding the relations between a lesson and homework, there are three types of tasks:

- after-class work that reprocesses certain material and directs the practical use of it – by repetition and answering questions but with understanding and the opportunity for increasing the ability to use knowledge in practice;
- completion work that extends particular material, for example by making teaching aids, writing papers, using authentic materials such as articles;
- before-class work that prepares for the new lesson – by doing some reading, preparing material, learning vocabulary or doing exercises.

According to Bereźnicki (2001: 355-356), most homework tasks aspire to enhance the absorption of knowledge, while there are too few tasks that make students acquire new knowledge on their own, which would serve as an opportunity to provoke thought and act creatively.

As Dziubowa (1987: 130) claims: In conditions from school, when students are left to work

individually, they use the language and do their homework on their own, creating something that is theirs”.

The choice of homework tasks should be adjusted to the level of the students and the actual needs referring to the coursework. Nevertheless, there should be a positive relationship between homework and student achievement.

Summary

Summarizing, learning a language is a constant process in which students and teachers are involved. The time devoted to it at school is not enough for learning effects to become satisfactory. Students should, or even must continue learning on their own. Homework is an important constituent that usually makes them improve their language. Taking into account all the aspects I have presented, I hope no one will disagree with those who declare that homework is a necessary element of education.

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(Jest to praca własna, nie wyrażam zgody na jej rozprzestrzenianie.)

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