Giving young learners a choice of homework

Benjamin Moorhouse suggests that involving the learners leads to more fruitful homework.

Around the world, homework is a part of many children’s lives and plays a prominent role in ELT. Despite this, homework practices are rarely discussed or reflected. They are often neglected from teacher-training courses and core reference texts in ELT (North & Piley, 2002). This means teachers continue the practices of the past and homework routines have not moved on.

In the ten years I have worked in Hong Kong, I have seen how students and English teachers are burdened with homework. I have witnessed firsthand the conflict between teachers and students because of incomplete or substandard homework, the loud ‘sigh’ when the teacher writes the homework assignment on the blackboard and the following morning, teachers scolding students for not doing their homework correctly or at all. This puts both the student and teacher in a ‘bad mood’ before the real school day even begins.

I believe the negative experience most students have with homework is our fault. We often fail to explain to students the purpose of the homework task, consider their interests or needs and prescribe to them what and how they must complete the homework task. Often students find the homework tasks too easy or too hard. The tasks are boring and lack little imagination or creativity. Students lack any motivation to complete the task other than the fear of disappointing their parents or teachers. These homework tasks are often poorly designed, which reduces their effectiveness as a learning tool (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2013).

I have observed great lessons only to see the ending ‘ruined’ by the teacher assigning a poorly designed and meaningless copying activity for homework such as the one below. This sort of homework task is set to meet school quantity requirements or for ease of marking and does little to move students’ learning forward.

Copy these words three times in your copybook.

- a. apple
- b. banana
- c. orange
- d. carrot
- e. lettuce
- f. onion

Of course, I realise setting quality and meaningful homework in ELT can be challenging. Often students do not have any home support and this can lead to teachers giving homework that just repeats what has been done in class. However, we are doing a disservice to our students if the homework does not move their learning forward and may give them a negative view of English. It is better to set no homework at all unless we can set quality, meaningful and learner-centered homework tasks.

Students' motivation and effort in homework is influenced by teacher’s homework practices, particularly the quality of homework given, frequency, the guidance provided and the links between the content of the homework and students' own interests (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

One way we can improve our homework practices is through providing our learners with choice.

Choice of homework task

We all hate to be told what to do and young language learners are no exception. We have to make choices every day; however, how often do we give students choice over what they do? Giving students a choice makes them feel more grown-up and that their opinion and preferences are valued. Providing choice can help enhance students’ motivation and helps develop their autonomy. Choice can also help us consider students’ learning styles, which ensures students are getting the most out of the homework task (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2013).

We can provide learners with choice by offering them different homework content, different tasks to choose from or a variety of means to provide answers and responses. Teachers can support students by guiding them to make informed decisions regarding the best homework task for them.

Let’s look at the copying task example earlier, this time with different options of homework for the learner. Following a vocabulary lesson on fruits and vegetables, the teacher wants students to consolidate the words at home. The teacher decides to give students four choices of homework task which all help to consolidate the words learnt in the lesson.

- Task 1 is a simple copying task; however it is ‘disguised’ by the need for
students to sort the words. This makes it more meaningful to do and tells the teacher whether the student knows the categories of the words or not.

- Task 2 allows students to make judgment about the fruits and vegetables they like, while still ensuring they go over the words they are learning. The teacher can also see if they know more fruit and vegetable words than they have been taught.

- Task 3 again allows students to relate the topic to their own personal experiences.

- Task 4 allows students the option of both writing and drawing, which young learners are motivated to do.

In all these tasks, students have the same content. However, the product they produce from them are different. By informing students that the homework will be in class the next day, students have an additional incentive to complete the homework.

Choose the task that will help you improve your English.

- Task 1: Sort the words on page 30 of the textbook into the fruit and vegetables columns. You can add more words.
- Task 2: Write down all the fruits and vegetables you like and don’t like.
- Task 3: Write a journal of all the fruits and vegetables you ate this week.
- Task 4: Make a picture dictionary for all the fruits and vegetables you know.

We will use the words tomorrow to make posters about healthy eating.

We can start off by giving students choice over how they practise spelling (see Figure 1) or other simple skills and then move on to offering more choices (see Figure 2). I call these activities, ‘Homework Pick n’ Mix’ as it adds another motivation to the students and emphasises the students’ choice, just like ‘Pick n’ mix’ does.

Challenge of choice

Integrating choice into your homework practices will take time and it is important that students and parents know what they need to do. They can easily get confused and not know which homework needs to be done. Clear instructions can help as well as asking students to choose the homework task during your lesson, and marking their choice down in their homework log can also help.

Students may choose tasks that are too easy or too hard for them. Teachers can support students to make choices. If students attempt a task that’s too difficult, teachers can praise the effort and guide students towards suitable tasks for them.

Offering choice and differentiated tasks could take a long time to prepare and give feedback on. Providing a realistic amount of homework and longer completion deadlines will free up time for teachers to give feedback that will help students develop.

Conclusion

Homework can be a useful tool in extending our students’ English learning outside of the classroom. Within ELT, homework is often seen as necessary, as there is insufficient class time for learners to become capable language users (Thornbury, 2012). However, the homework must be well designed and consider the learner. By providing our learners with choice, it leads us to think more about the task and cater for their differences.

I hope you choose to give your learners a choice of homework task!

References


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