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## **BENEFITS OF PEDAGOGICALLY SOUND HOMEWORK**

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### **Rezumat**

*Scopul acestui articol este de a convinge profesorii de limba engleză ca limbă străină (EFL) că temele pentru acasă sunt într-adevăr benefice, prezentând mai multe exemple de sarcini de înaltă calitate. Argumentul este că nu timpul petrecut pentru pregătirea temelor pentru acasă contează în învățarea limbilor străine, ci, mai degrabă, tipurile de sarcini - probabil diferite de activitățile tradiționale, care fac învățarea mai eficientă.*

The purpose of this article is to convince English teachers and teacher trainers that homework is indeed beneficial. The argument here is that it is not the time spent on homework that matters in early foreign-language instruction, but rather the types of homework assignments that make learning more meaningful [2, p. 448]. There is a need for tangible ideas and discussion among teachers concerning homework, especially in countries where English language instruction is limited to two or three lessons a week. Adjusting our attitude about what constitutes productive homework might bring change in the classroom and learners' relationships to homework.

A lot of positive visions of homework stick to pedagogical principles, which are based on what learners want from homework and what teachers think to be important:

- There needs to be a determination, even if the purpose is for homework to be used in class practice (as communicative language teaching might attest).
- An emphasis on learning is more important, and sharing strategies plays a great role [5, p. 1050].
- Homework should convey to different situations, through letting learners choose a new context.
- Components of self-determination are essential to motivation; when learners choose strategies and topics [5, p. 1051].

Five features of good homework identified by Vatterott [7, p. 11] are: (1) purpose, (2) efficiency, (3) ownership, (4) competence, and (5) aesthetic appeal. When teachers give homework, it is of utmost importance that they think about its purposefulness, consider how well it encourages learners to become self-directed [3, p. 202], and listen to learners' wishes [6, p. 75] With this goal, we would like to supply what we consider a healthy approach to homework from two perspectives: those of a teacher trainer and learners.

EFL instruction begins in the second grade in the Republic of Moldova for two or three 45-minute lessons a week and continues like this until learners are finished with secondary school, at the age of 16. In some private schools especially at primary level the English-language teacher is the main classroom instructor who teaches the majority of subjects. In this case, the teacher is in charge of all the homework the learners receive and can prioritize and adapt as necessary. Frequently, however, children go to a specialist teacher for subjects such as English or Arts and Crafts. This process makes discourse about homework more difficult to

correlate because each teacher finds his or her subject important and may or may not be aware of the learners' workloads. Furthermore, subject-specialist teachers cannot simply finish an English lesson in the subsequent lesson because the English lesson is over. Thus, subject-specialist teachers might do well to have a general homework policy or routine to let learners know what has to be done on which days. Following this routine also is less time-consuming than always explaining new homework tasks; we have seen teachers take up to 15 minutes to explain homework.

This type of routine does not mean that every assignment has to be the same, but it does allow learners the comfort of knowing that certain days are homework free. Although some teachers may prefer assigning homework spontaneously, planning homework has the benefit of making it more thought-out, even if the particular assignment has to be left for another day.

We have overheard three main comments by teachers of in-service courses as to why they assign homework:

1. Teachers want learners to get into the habit of keeping in touch with the content of lessons between class periods, promoting the idea of repetition and rehearsal.

2. Teachers want to encourage learners to become independent learners, to organize their studying and learn how to learn.

3. Teachers need more time than they have in class and are often unable to finish everything they had planned.

It seems that the first two aims could be merged into one, making it possible for teachers to assign homework that enables students to keep in touch with the lesson and learn to learn.

This approach contains aspects of differentiated instruction, as activities can match individual needs [3, p. 205], while at the same time helping learners develop a repertoire of

language-learning and rehearsal strategies. As Chang et al. [5, p. 1059] mention, adults can better self-direct and focus on what they need for homework, but children and adolescents need more training and guidance.

Common assignments such as completing a gap fill, a word search, or a crossword puzzle have little place as homework assignments unless they have a purpose such as transferring to the lesson or supporting learning-to-learn objectives. In addition, homework assignments should not just be collected - the teacher should ask the learners how they went about the exercise or what they did when they had a problem and kind of got stuck.

Considering the comment above, teachers should think about the fairness of having some learners complete what was started in class at home, while others either get to advance in the language or do not get additional homework. This might help to bridge the gap and give weaker students a chance to catch up, but often it is slower students, not weaker students, who get this take hometask. Thus it may be better to have an "everybody has homework" policy with different tasks for different learners than an "only some students have homework" policy.

Learners themselves, especially older ones, have opinions about homework, and luckily, at times their voices have been heard. EFL learners, especially the younger ones, may not have had the chance to formulate what they think is worthwhile. Yet perhaps their voices are represented in Cushman's [6, p. 77] article on student views of homework. The following four suggestions from teenagers in Cushman's study support self-directed learning [3, p. 206] and purposeful instruction. The student suggestions are followed by possible assignments in the EFL classroom.

### **1. Self-created homework task**

After presenting new classroom material, teachers often assign students a set of questions to answer for homework. As an alternative, the teacher asks students to create their own "homework task that follows up on this material" and to explain their task choice in class [6, p. 77].

With older learners, this can be done exactly as explained. When starting a new unit on travelling around the United States, for example, learners can individually decide to make a mind map, go through the textbook unit and list anything they are unfamiliar with, or write a set of questions. Important here is not which exact language features are written down, but rather the discussion in class about the method used to select their own homework and the results. With younger learners, something more concrete is recommended. For example, when starting a unit on the five senses, the teacher has learners go through the unit and make some sort of matrix for homework. They might decide to have each of the five senses as a category, or they may decide to have parts of speech as categories, but in class learners can look at each other's matrices and even guess the categories. Offering two ideas such as (1) create a mind map or (2) write a list of questions or vocabulary items they want to know also achieves the objective of preparing for a topic.

## **2. Memory tricks**

Teachers often fall back on having students memorize a list of facts for homework and then testing them on it later. As an alternative, the teacher asks "each student to share with the class a memorization trick, that works with one item on this list" [6, p. 77]. Asking students how they remember a certain word or set of words and having them share the technique provides learners with different access points to new language and can focus on comprehension, spelling, or simple identification. These learning strategies can also be recorded in a portfolio. After a few lessons of sharing, learners can try a different technique they

heard about from someone else, then report back on the technique in class and record their experience with it in the portfolio. This step can soon be part of a weekly routine. With younger learners, teachers may want to practice a few techniques in class and then share which ones worked for whom and with which adaptations. Granted, some of these discussions may be better off held in the local language, as this is meaningful use of the native tongue [4, p. 29]

### **3. Student-initiated questions and explanations**

Another common homework assignment is having students read a text and then giving them questions to determine whether

they read it. Another option would be to ask students "to write down two or three questions" they have after they have read the text [6, p. 77]. Likewise, when teachers want to determine whether students understand a main concept, instead of having them fill out a worksheet, teachers can have students "demonstrate the concept for the class in small groups, using any medium" [6, p. 77].

The underlying idea of both these learner suggestions is that this homework can be used in class. In the same way, EFL learners can do any of the following homework assignments:

- Write questions they have after reading a text. They may need support such as teacher-provided sentence starters (e.g., Why did and ....?)

These questions can be shared in small groups in the following class or used for a quizzing activity.

- Write Two True and one False statements on slips of paper to engage each other to listen attentively in the next lesson.

- Write a gap fill or short summary of a text to share with a partner.

These are simple activities that can be assigned from one class to the next and be supported by projects. For instance, for a

lexical set based on the topic of animals, learners have the task of working on a poster or placemat about one particular animal. Each time they add something new, using the language practiced in class. After a few weeks, the posters are presented in small groups in class and displayed around the classroom or school.

#### **4. Transferring learning**

Math teachers will often assign several word problems that involve a certain procedure to help students understand how the procedure relates to different situations. Instead, teachers can "ask small groups to choose one-word problem that applies this procedure in a real-world situation, solve it, and present it to the class" [6, p.77].

As in suggestions 1, 2, and 3, appreciating the fruits of homework labor in class is of utmost importance. Another idea here is transfer - how to help learners transfer what they are using, as this example from math implies. For instance, in a unit where linking words are one of the main language aims (even with simple words such as *and* and *but*), learners can be given the target vocabulary and be asked to write a short text using the words in a situation unrelated to the topic treated in class (for example, if the topic was "food" then assign the topic "animals" for the assignment). In this same way, as with the animal poster described above, if the unit is on animals, then the poster could be about something else - a robot, for example- where certain structures and language are certainly transferrable ("It has \_\_\_\_").

Finally, if the language structure - for example homework learners can make a list of other situations where the same language structure is likely to be used - for example, "Would you like to dance?"

In contrast to some researchers' views, our opinion is that homework does matter, as it engages and motivates students and helps them to become better learners [7, p.13]. Until conclusive evidence is found about when to start assigning homework and

how much to give, perhaps the best thing teachers can do is to take a healthy look at their own practices and ask themselves if they are serving the needs of their learners and if their homework principles reflect good teaching principles. Furthermore, if we do not want learners to have maladaptive homework practices [1, p.449] and we want them to become self-regulated learners, then the ideas presented in this article can contribute to good habits, strategy-building, and the idea of learning for a reason- not just at desks and for a teacher.

There are many perspectives that have not been treated in this article, such as those of different learner types and learners who do not have the support of the home environment. Homework does not have to vary as much as is described in this article; it can be as simple as assigning word lists or flashcards every week. The important thing is integrating various ways of working with students that are tried or explained in class and practiced at home, then reflected upon in class. Personal feeling as a mother, as a teacher, and as a teacher trainer tells that it is not the routine of homework that is important, but the learner engagement involved in doing it. Ensuring engagement takes careful thought and planning on the part of the teacher. Creating engaging homework assignments can lead to good routines and habits on the part of the learner and teacher.

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## **RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION AND GENERAL AMERICAN STANDARDS OF ENGLISH**

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### **Rezumat**

*Acest articol scoate în evidență unele aspecte de pronunție a vocalelor, inclusiv diftongilor în engleza britanică (RP) și engleza americană (GA). Problema fundamentală a pronunției engleze stă în vocalizmul ei și în valorile vocalelor și ale diftongilor.*

It has long been believed that RP is a social marker, a prestige accent of an Englishman [8, p. 39]. In the nineteenth century “received” was understood in the sense of “accepted in the best society”. The speech of aristocracy and the court phonetically was that of the London area. Then it lost its local characteristics and was finally fixed as a ruling-class accent, often referred to as “King's English”. It was also the accent taught at public schools. With the spread of education cultured people not belonging, to, the upper classes were eager to modify their accent in the direction of social standards.

We may definitely state now that RP is a genuinely regionless accent within Britain; i.e. if speakers have it you cannot tell which