Ideas for Evaluating Homework Design

Robert Cochrane
Kyushu Sangyo University, Fukuoka, Japan

Homework is a part of almost any teacher's curriculum and can take on many purposes: academic functions, socialization purposes, curriculum requirements, and even in some cases, punishment. In communicative language teaching, the classroom is king and homework frequently an afterthought. This paper presents the results of exploratory action research into the use of homework to scaffold low-proficiency English language learners accustomed to grammar-translation lessons into a communicative language-learning classroom. A homework program based on the task-based learning framework was created to provide support and better use of limited class time. A variety of task types were presented, both novel and familiar to students, along with a survey recording student perceptions on factors of time required, difficulty, interest, relevance, and desire to do the task again. The results were positive but somewhat unexpected. Results suggest some areas for consideration when designing homework and further research.

I. Introduction

Homework is taken for granted as a part of almost any course of study and can fulfill various functions: from academic functions, socialization purposes, and curriculum requirements to punishment (Epstein, 1988). General education research reports that homework, overall, has a positive effect on academic performance (Cooper & Valentine, 2001). Some teachers do not always think carefully about the homework they assign. In a series of interviews with ten full-time native English-speaking instructors at one university located on the island of Kyushu in Japan, nine of the ten reported assigning homework in every class. Of those teachers, two reported creating original materials while the remaining teachers reported assigning activities from the textbook or unfinished class work. Unfortunately, some teachers reported using homework as a threat or a form of punishment. At the university level, class time is limited. One ninety-minute class per week is usual, so homework can be vital to increasing student time with the target language. For good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), seeking out ways to interact with the language is natural, so assigning homework may not be necessary, but for low-proficiency learners, assigning homework may be the only way in which students will even think about the target language outside of class. For homework to be truly effective, students must actively engage themselves with the homework and with what they are doing. As Coutts (2004, p. 5) suggests, "If we want students to be intrinsically

motivated to learn and to complete homework, it would be of benefit if the task itself was valued and viewed as interesting and engaging, regardless of any links between the task and other outcomes."

A great deal of communicative language-learning research is dedicated to creating engaging classroom activities; however, not much time is devoted to researching how to create engaging out-of-class or homework activities. For low-proficiency learners, homework can be especially important. Properly designed homework activities can provide the scaffolding and support that students require as well as allowing them to engage with the language in their own time on their own schedule. The pressure to perform is decreased, and students can utilize a wide range of resources that are not available in class. Effectively designed homework can provide support by helping students prepare for class and review class work to help reinforce what they have studied in class.

II. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants in this study were first-year students enrolled in a mandatory English course at a mid-level Japanese technical university. All English classes are under the umbrella of the Language Education Research Center (LERC), which is responsible for the English instruction of all departments. The study examined four classes using the same intermediate-level textbook with TOEIC Bridge scores ranging from 100-115 (N = 108). Students have two 90-minute English classes per week during two 15-week terms. One class (Eigo) focuses on grammar and reading and is taught by a Japanese teacher, the other (Eigokaiwa) is a listening and speaking course taught by a native English-speaking instructor. In this study, different instructors taught the Eigo classes while a single instructor taught the Eigokaiwa class.

Students take the TOEIC Bridge test at the beginning of the year as a placement test and take it again at the end of the year as an achievement test. The TOEIC Bridge test is worth 30% of their final grade. The students also take a vocabulary pre-test and post-test to measure vocabulary gains based on the in-house vocabulary program. Also at the end of each term, the university administers a class evaluation survey. The survey is multiple-choice with an optional section for comments.

These students are not what would be considered "good language learners" (Rubin, 197; Stern, 1975), and generally do not exhibit traits like seeking out ways to use the target language or organizing their time. There are some assumptions that can be made regarding their study habits. From their TOEIC Bridge scores, it may be assumed that they do not know or employ effective study strategies. They are accustomed to studying English for exams and most likely have been taught English in Japanese using the grammar-translation method. Exposure to English listening has probably been via textbook dialogues. Exposure to authentic English for study purposes has probably been very rare. Most likely the predominant study strategy is to cram before a test and hope that enough information can be remembered to pass.

With these assumptions in mind, communicative language learning is a challenge for these learners. Having English-speaking instructors will also be a major challenge, especially if the teacher expects students to be active, motivated, and outspoken. The learners generally have little motivation to study in general or to study English in particular. Lack of achievement has led many of them to believe that they are just not good at English. Viewing English as a collection of rules and words to learn for a test rather than a tool for communication is a major obstacle to effective communicative language learning.

A solution may be to find a way to change students' perceptions of English, increase their engagement with the language, support their use of class time, and improve their English study skills. Homework could possibly be the solution if factors that increase student engagement can be discovered.

B. Procedure

Through a series of observations, the problem being addressed became evident. The observations were that these learners did not do homework, and did not do work in class. When they did complete homework, it was done poorly, frequently looking like it was done in the five minutes before class started. Their participation in class activities was half-hearted, and they took a great deal of time to get started. Many of these students were smart, but they seemed to have given up on English.

These students were accustomed to studying English solely for tests, especially university entrance exams. English was a subject for exams and not necessarily a tool for communication. It may have been perceived by students as a list of words to belearned and complex grammar rules to be memorized. The idea that English was actually used by people to communicate seemed like an alien concept to many of these students.

They were also accustomed to a grammar-translation method of teaching with little exposure to spoken English. What little exposure they had would be in the form of scripted textbook audio that rarely contained the features of authentic speech. This became a problem when they entered university and were faced with a native English-speaking teacher using a communicative approach who expected them to have discussions in English. Students were reticent and reluctant to respond because they had no knowledge or experience in what to do. Unfortunately many university teachers do not have experience teaching at the high school level and do not see the huge gap between what they expect students to be able to do and what the students have experience doing.

One possible solution to the issue is to find some way to scaffold students into a communicative teaching environment within the limited amount of class time available. A solution presents itself with task-based learning. Task-based learning is an approach that brings real-world relevance to language. The focus is not on learning the language but on learning how it is applied, and then learning the language needed to accomplish tasks. One framework provides a three-step approach: pre-task, task, and post-task (Willis, 1996). As task-based language teaching mainly focuses on classroom activities, the pre-task and post-task parts of the framework are the focus of the current research.

In order to help students use class time more effectively and to be better

prepared, homework activities were created with the pre- and post-task phases in mind. Homework has several benefits:

- Low pressure — Students can do it on their own time.
- Unlimited resources — Students can use reference materials.
- Novelty — Assignments can take the form of activities that have a closer connection to the real world.

The main research questions then became:

- What types of tasks have a positive effect on student engagement?
- What design factors, if any, have an effect on engagement and student desire to do a task again?

Willis (1996, p. 26) provided a list of task types that served as a basis for the homework creation.

1. Listing
2. Ordering and Sorting
3. Comparing
4. Problem Solving
5. Sharing Personal Experiences
6. Creative Tasks

Assignments were also ranked on the dimensions of novelty and personalization.

Assignments were designed to prepare students for class work, review language points, reinforce vocabulary, and expose students to ways English is used to communicate. A wide variety of assignments were created to expose the students to as wide a variety of activities as possible. All assignments were posted on a website created by the teacher containing information relevant to all classes. Each class had its own individual weekly blog on this site. The blog contained the homework assignment for the next week. Students were responsible for downloading, printing, and completing the assignments for the following class. Students were also responsible for completing a survey for each assignment.

The website was employed for several reasons. The main reason was to make students responsible for seeking out and completing their assignments. The website also helped students become more familiar with using computers. If students were absent from a class, they were still responsible for assignments, and the website made it possible for students to complete them. Overall, it was designed to help make students more active in their studies.

In addition to the assignments, all classes participated in a mandatory vocabulary program. The vocabulary program covers the most frequent 1600 spoken and written words according to the *Longman Eiwa-Jiten Dictionary*. Each year covers eight hundred words. The words are divided into twenty lists of forty words each. All classes must participate in the program and must take a pre- and post-test. Instruction of the list is left up to each individual instructor. The students in this study each week completed a vocabulary notebook and were administered a 15-question quiz. The quiz was used by students to check their

progress. Students were instructed to complete the wordbook in a specific format that included the word, word class, two meanings, and two example sentences from the *Eiwa Jiten*. The students were also presented with and encouraged to use a four-day cycle to complete each weekly list. Each day required approximately 25 minutes to complete the work.

A survey was administered with each assignment. The survey was originally written in English, translated into Japanese, and back-translated to ensure accuracy in the translation. The survey contained five questions and a space for comments. The questions asked about time, interest, difficulty, relevance, and desire to do the same type of activity again. Each question had four answers. See Appendix A for the English/Japanese version of the survey.

III. RESULTS

Survey results were collected for six target activities, TOEIC Bridge practice activities from the textbook, and the vocabulary wordbook. The target activity surveys were completed along with each assignment, but the surveys for the TOEIC Bridge and wordbook were administered once at the end of the term with students asked to reflect on an average week when answering the questions. This was due to the fact that these homework activities contained the same features and only the content changed week to week.

In each class, there were several students who did not complete the homework assignments and surveys, and if they did it, it was done inconsistently and poorly. This happened even though students were informed on a regular basis that homework was mandatory and a large part of their grade for the term. The results of the survey can be seen in Figure 1.

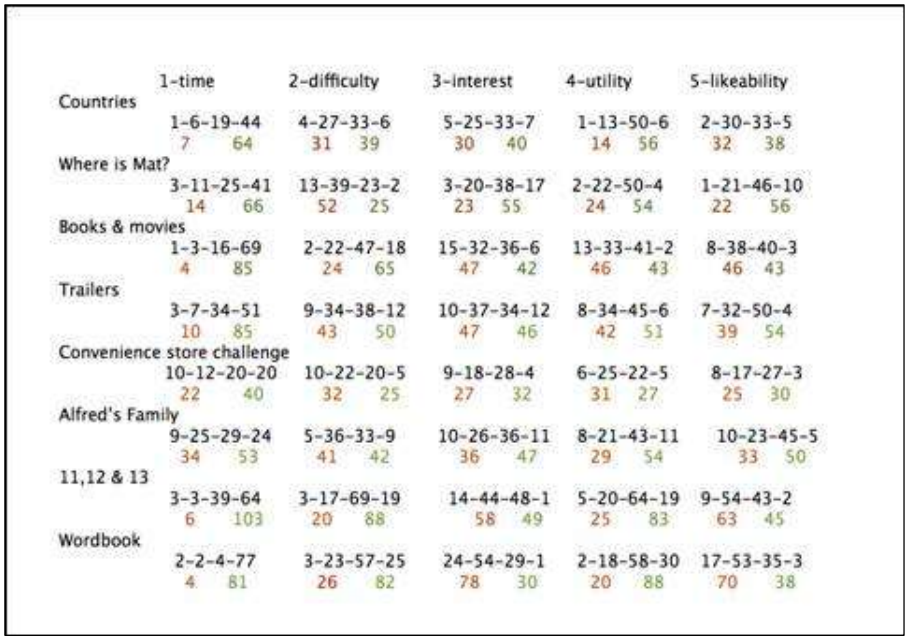


FIGURE 1. Survey results measured time, difficulty, interest, utility, and likeability for the six target activities (Countries - Alfred's Family), the TOEIC Bridge textbook practice activities (11, 12, & 13), and the vocabulary wordbook.

The top four numbers under each question are the actual scores. Under those scores is a combination of positive and negative scores for ease of comparison. It should be noted that the total number of surveys collected varied from activity to activity because students did not always complete assignments.

The results of particular interest are the scores for the traditional tasks; wordbook; and parts 11, 12, and 13 of their textbook, which consist of TOEIC practice. The desire to do these activities is low, but the relevance is high. These activities are directly related to tests students must take. Student completion of these activities was also quite good. These activities were also the least interesting to the students.

The target activities were generally well received. The activity that required the most personal thought and opinion (Books & Movies) was the activity that was least desirable. It was also the least interesting to the students. This activity required students to list their favorite books and movies along with information such as author, main character, and genre. This was cognitively challenging as students had to think about their own opinions and make decisions. There was no easy answer to copy. This was also rated the most difficult of the target tasks.

The activity that students most wanted to do again was the video activity (Where is Mat?), which was the most novel. It was also the most interesting to the students. This activity required students to watch a three-minute video on YouTube, "*Where the Hell is Matt? 2005*" (Harding, 2005), which showed a man doing a silly dance in various locations around the world. The name of each location is presented on the screen, and students needed to write the names of all the locations. This was a simple listing task with very little cognitive challenge.

Class evaluation comments provided some valuable information. These comments were entirely voluntary, students were free to just answer the survey questions, but many chose to provide comments. There were two spaces for comments, positive and negative features of the course. The negative comments fell into two groups: "too much homework" and "teacher needs to speak more Japanese in class."

The positive comments were varied, but they also fell into several groups. The groups were comments stating that the students felt "the homework really helped and made class easier," "using only English helped my listening," and "there was a lot of homework, but it helped me improve my English." Generally the positive comments outnumbered the negative by 4 to 1. Some students even tried to write comments in English even though the survey was entirely in Japanese and was administered in all of their classes, not only English class.

TOEIC Bridge results were difficult to calculate. The average gain was quite small (0-5 points). However, when the students were divided into groups of students who completed the majority of the homework versus students who completed little or no homework, the results were very different. For students who did the assignments, TOEIC Bridge gains were approximately 15-20 points. For the remaining students, there were no gains or negative gains. The average gain for the entire first-year English program was 5 points.

IV. DISCUSSION

The homework tasks seemed to have a positive effect on student achievement on vocabulary test scores and TOEIC Bridges cores. Students who completed most, or all, of the homework assignments showed above average gains on their TOEIC Bridge scores. Students who did not see a gain, or who saw a decrease, generally did not do much of the homework. This suggests that the tasks did help students understand and improve their English comprehension. The class evaluation comments also support this suggestion. Student comments reported that homework helped them, made the class easier to understand, and made English study interesting.

There were 4 or 5 students in every class who did not do any assignments but continued to come to class. There were also several students who only came to a few classes and were never seen again. Further studies could benefit from select interviews to expand on students' perceptions and attitudes towards homework and why they do not do their assignments. One option may be to make homework activities optional, but the potential drawback to this approach is that students will not do anything if given a choice.

One interesting point regarding the task types is that the most personalized, and possibly most cognitively demanding, activity was the least desirable of the target tasks. It is worth further investigation as to why this was so. Was it due to the fact that they previously had little experience expressing their own opinions and were accustomed to remembering the answers their teachers gave them? Was it that they did not have their own opinions or were rarely asked to express them? Could it be possible that the students wanted to merely copy what they were told was the right answer and did not want to think? This may deserve further research.

The more traditional tasks had a high completion rate yet did not rate high on desirability or interest. They were seen as very relevant probably because the students saw a direct relationship to the tests they were required to write. It does not answer how engaged the students were in the activities. They were accustomed to doing a great deal of homework in high school but may have been stumbling through it without an effective approach. This would result in poor English proficiency. The familiarity of the activities may have made them more compelling than the other tasks, which were not directly related to tests.

Students did seem to enjoy the target activities, and class evaluation comments suggest that eventually they saw the value in them. It may have taken some time for students to adjust to a different type of English class. Some students managed to see the connection between the homework and the class work. This suggests that this line of research may merit further study, especially with low-proficiency learners.

The class evaluation comments, which were voluntarily reported by the students, indicate that the homework assignments had a positive influence on the students' attitudes towards the homework assignments. The comments support the original idea of the study: that homework can influence students' beliefs and behaviors. It suggests that if students do this type of homework, they will see the value in it. Creating activities that are interesting and relevant to students may increase student engagement, which over time, can change students' attitudes.

One other point to consider that may require further investigation is the role of the survey itself. The survey caused students to stop and contemplate the activities that they had just completed. It is possible that these students previously did not engage in self-reflection of this kind. It may be worth investigating what influence the survey itself had on students' engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

One thing that may be taken away from this study is some ideas to consider when designing an action research project or homework activities. The first would be to keep activities relevant. It seems to help students when they know what the purpose of the activity is. Even if it is time-consuming or uninteresting, if it is directly related to a test, they will do it. Second, try to avoid activities that require personal information or opinions. These can be used when students reach a level where they can discuss topics. For low-proficiency students, it may help to start with activities that require available information. Also, try to introduce activities that introduce and reinforce how English is a communication tool. Grammar activities are acceptable if they are related to communication. Using homework to prepare students for classroom activities is another point to consider along with homework as consolidation. Overall, homework can be a very useful scaffolding tool that with time can change students' perceptions of studying English.

It may be said that this study provided some positive results but no concrete conclusions. Its purpose was achieved in showing that positive gains can be attained with a careful approach to homework, but how this is achieved is still unknown and has opened the door to a range of possible future studies. Further research is needed in narrowing down the effects of each activity type and why students rate them the way they do. Much of the current second language research focuses on the classroom, but more studies investigating homework may also prove beneficial, especially in the case of poorly motivated, low-proficiency learners.

THE AUTHOR

Robert Cochrane has taught at all levels in the Japanese education system from elementary school to university. With a master's degree from the University of Birmingham, he is now lecturing and conducting research at Kyushu Sangyo University in western Japan. His present research covers material development based on task-based language learning, language learning strategies, cognitive approaches to second language acquisition, and CALL. Email: bobklingon@gmail.com

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APPENDIX

The English/Japanese Version of the Homework Survey

学生番号: _____Class code=_____
アクティビティ番号:
講義時間帯: 火曜日 水曜日 木曜日 金曜日 1 2 3 4 5 6
□ □ □ □ ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

今回の課題アクティビティについて、アンケートに答えてください。最も当てはまると思われる率直な答えを選んでください。質問を読み、よく考えた上で選択肢の中から当てはまる回答を選んで○をつけてください。1質問につき1回答とします。すべての質問に答えてください。なお、アンケート結果が成績に影響することはありません。ご協力の程よろしくお願いします。

How long did this activity take to finish? (How much time did you spend doing the activity?)
このアクティビティをやり終えるのにどのくらいの時間がかかりましたか?(このアクティビティにどれくらい時間を使いましたか?)
Under 5 minutes 5-10 minutes 10-20 minutes over 20 minutes
5分以下 ① 5~10分 ② 10~20分 ③ 20分以上 ④

How easy or difficult was the homework to understand for you?
課題は簡単に理解できましたか?それとも難しかったですか?
Very easy a little easy a little difficult very difficult
とても簡単 ① まあまあ簡単 ② 少し難しい ③ とても難しい ④

How interesting was the homework? (Did the activity keep your attention?)
課題は面白かったですか?(興味を引くような課題でしたか?)
Not interesting at all not very interesting somewhat interesting very interesting
まったく面白くない ① あまり面白くない ② まあまあ面白い ③ とても面白い ④

How helpful was the homework? (Did it help you learn, remember or understand?)
課題はどの程度役立ちましたか?(課題をやることで、英語の学習、暗記、理解に役立ちましたか?)
Not helpful at all not very helpful somewhat helpful very helpful
まったく役立たない ① あまり役立たない ② まあまあ役立つ ③ とても役立つ ④

Did you like this homework activity? (Would you like to do similar activities in the future?)
この課題のアクティビティを気に入りましたか?(今後、同じようなアクティビティを行いたいと思いますか?)
I hated it I did not like it I liked it I loved it!
大嫌い ① 嫌い ② 好き ③ 大好き ④

他に意見はありますか?アクティビティをより良いものにするため、みなさんの意見を提案してください。前向きで、役立つ意見をお願いします。日本語で記入して構いません。