

Action Research Series

This publication is part of the Action Research Series of CELT Matters which started in 2021. The main goal of action research is the advancement of English language teaching practice and the personal professional development of (student) teachers: During an extensive Master Practicum (9 ECTS; one semester) accompanied by the university-based Practicum Course (4 ECTS), student teachers systematically and critically explore one aspect of their teaching.

In line with action research conventions, the research interest and research questions are partly formulated in a personal way, and conclusions include personal insights drawn closely to the concrete teaching situation. Please, refer to the [introduction article](#) for further information.

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Views on homework in ELT:

An Action Research project.

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This project report provides

- Insightful extracts from an Action Research project on homework in ELT;
- A concise exploration of potential purposes of homework;
- Insights into teachers' and students' perceptions of homework.

1 Rationale

Homework seems to be a central component of the didactic repertoire of language teachers in past and present classrooms alike. Both as a former pupil and current pre-service teacher, I could observe this teaching practice in many lessons and classes. However, although assigning homework is a common teaching practice in many classrooms, university courses and the research literature focus on this teaching practice only to a very limited extent. Therefore, this common teaching practice posed a challenge to me as a pre-service teacher and became the focus of the Action Research project which I carried out as part of the ELT methodology course accompanying the mandatory school practicum in the Master in

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Education programme at the University of Vienna. I chose to design a project investigating students' and teachers' views on homework in order to enhance my ELT competences related to setting meaningful and varied homework, thereby promoting my professional development as an EFL teacher. I aimed to analyse the discrepancy between intended purposes and perceived purposes of homework and to identify potential differences in perceptions of and attitudes towards homework by teachers and students.

Homework has been examined in the literature only to a limited extent. There are several studies on homework as a general teaching practice and on its educational purposes, but only very few with a focus on ELT. Homework is employed by teachers to serve a variety of purposes such as practice, preparation, participation, personal development or even punishment (Epstein, 1988; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). North and Pillay (2002) investigated English teachers' motivation for setting homework in Malaysian English classrooms, showing that the majority of teachers view homework as an important tool for practice and diagnostic purposes, while also recognising other purposes with a clear focus on facilitating and encouraging learning (2002, pp. 139–140). Another study focused on the conceptions of homework of pre-service and experienced teachers in Austria and Switzerland (Hascher & Hofmann, 2011). A great number of in-service teachers mentioned assignments which complement class-taught contents such as practice, revision and completion of exercises at home as familiar forms of homework, while they did not consider preparation for the following lessons as a typical purpose (Hascher & Hofmann, 2011, pp. 225–226). In contrast, pre-service teachers listed assignments which required a high degree of autonomy, served as preparation for the next lesson and completed class-taught contents and tasks as common forms of homework (Hascher & Hofmann, 2011, p. 226). These findings clearly reveal differences in the perceptions of various didactic purposes of homework between in-service and pre-service teachers.

In addition to teachers' intentions when setting homework, students' views on homework have been examined in a limited number of studies. In her meta-analysis, Warton (2001) could identify a wide range of factors influencing learners' motivation to complete homework tasks. One finding was that it is important for students at elementary and middle school level in the U.S. to recognise the "utility value", i.e. the value ascribed to the usefulness of homework, and the purposes of homework for their academic achievement (pp. 160–161). Similarly, Coutts (2004) could show that the value of homework perceived by students and their positive attitude towards the tasks greatly influence their intrinsic motivation and the subsequent completion of homework (p. 185). These findings suggest that students' perceptions of homework are significant, and that teachers should therefore be aware of these perceptions when setting homework assignments.

The literature review provided insights into the potential variety of purposes of homework and the relevance of students' perceptions. The presented Action Research project aimed at combining both, namely a critical reflection of the purposes of homework tasks, from the view of an experienced teacher, my mentor, and myself as a student teacher, and the perceptions and attitudes of the learners.

2 Research questions

The following research questions formed the basis for the intervention:

RQ1

- What are potential purposes of homework as described in the research literature?

RQ2

- How is homework perceived by my mentor teacher, myself, and our learners?

RQ3

- Do these purposes and perceptions of homework coincide?

RQ4

- How can I set meaningful homework assignments based on my findings?

3 Project description

For this project, I adhered to the conventions of Action Research. The goal of Action Research is to build a solid, research-based and reflective foundation for improvements of future teaching practices by the teacher conducting Action Research (cf. Burns, 2010, p. 2) and serve as inspiration for new ideas for other teachers and researchers (Burns, 2010, p. 95). My teaching intervention and the accompanying data collection and analysis were thus planned accordingly. Although findings from Action Research cannot be generalised due to its scope being limited to one classroom only, it nevertheless needs to adopt an objective approach to collecting and analysing data as Burns emphasises (Burns, 2010, p. 95). The specific classroom setting, the teaching intervention, and the data collection will be outlined in this section.

3.1 Participants

This project was carried out in 2nd form of a HAK, a college for higher vocational education, in Vienna. The class consisted of 30 students and was divided into two equally large groups for their English lessons. The groups differed significantly concerning language competence and attention spans, which posed a challenge because the same contents needed to be taught in both groups at the same pace. The regular English teacher can draw on extensive teaching experience and was my mentor teacher throughout the practicum period. She was also interviewed as part of this project. After several observations and individual lessons taught by me, I was the class's English teacher for three consecutive weeks as part of the Master practicum.

3.2 Intervention

Teaching the same class for three consecutive weeks allowed me to explore the practice of assigning homework extensively and systematically as a future language teacher. I aimed at enhancing my methodological competence with regards to homework since I had no previous experience and only limited knowledge on which I could rely.

As it is required, every teaching activity was prepared on the basis of the curriculum, ELT theory and core documents, such as the *EPOSTL* (Newby et al., 2007), the *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018) and the *ESP* (ÖSZ, 2014). I subsequently used these frameworks for coherence in assigning homework at the intervention stage of my Action Research project. The intervention was therefore less based on previous research findings and to a greater extent on actual descriptors of language competence due to the limited extent of research in this area of teaching.

In total, I designed seven homework assignments during those three weeks. In my analysis, I focused on three of them which were selected as the most relevant for my future teaching practice. These three assignments consisted of textbook exercises, writing a blog entry, which was introduced as a new text type, and posting a video of oneself on *Flipgrid* (Microsoft, 2020) discussing questions relating to the class reader. *Flipgrid* (Microsoft, 2020) is a platform on which teachers can assign tasks which need to be completed by posting a video, and the settings either allow universal visibility of all videos for the entire class or restricted visibility, when only the teacher can see the students' videos. The students were familiar with all three types of assignments since the mentor teacher regularly set them herself in this class.

3.3 Methodology

Due to my interest in teachers' and students' viewpoints on homework and any differences between the two groups, I adopted the approach of triangulation, which "usually means collecting more than one type of data" (Burns, 2010, p. 96). Data collection for this project thus consisted of my teaching journal, a homework survey for the students, and an interview with my mentor teacher. The aim of each method employed in this project will be further described in the following section.

3.4 Instruments

The aim of the teaching journal (instrument 1) was to reflect on my current teaching practices in a systematic way (cf. Richards and Farrell, 2005, p. 70). In the journal, I recorded my thoughts and plans for each homework assignment I intended to set during the three weeks of consecutive teaching. These assignments (instrument 2) were thus critically assessed in the journal entries. These entries were based on a set of guiding questions (see box below) that were found relevant from the literature review and which should allow for a systematic analysis afterwards.

Guiding questions for the teaching journal

- Why did I assign this homework?
- What methodological considerations guide my decision? What is the ulterior motive for the chosen homework tasks?
- Could students do this in the lesson as well?
- Relevant *EPOSTL* descriptors (my benefits) and CEFR/ESP descriptors (students' benefits) to ensure an educational purpose for the homework assignments

During the writing process, several sub-questions proved most relevant: My considerations for homework tasks strongly interrelated with questions about the general learning objectives of the lessons coupled with students' needs and linguistic competences. I thus referred to the *EPOSTL* (Newby et al., 2007), the *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018) and the *ESP* (ÖSZ, 2014) descriptors to focus on my development as a future language teacher and students' needs and linguistic competences. The journal entries were later used to analyse my teacher beliefs and methodological considerations and critically relate them to the other data sets.

At the end of my three weeks of consecutive teaching, a survey of learners' perceptions was conducted in the form of a questionnaire (instrument 3). This survey was used to collect "attitudinal information" (Burns, 2010, p. 81) from students concerning their perceptions of homework. The survey consisted of 23 questions (11 Y/N items, 7 multiple or single choice items, and 5 open-ended items), which were adapted from two studies on homework (Sallee & Rigler, 2008 and Jagadesh, 2012) and from a set of questions for teachers to explore students' homework preferences in ELT classrooms (Painter, 2003, p. 10). In addition, several questions were formulated to target specific homework assignments in order to obtain insights into students' perceptions of those specific tasks.

The interview with my mentor teacher (instrument 4) was intended to gain insights into an experienced teacher's views on homework and to explore the particular teaching context further. The interview was conducted at the end of the three weeks of consecutive teaching and consisted of 11 questions, 10 of which focused on setting homework in this one specific class. The questions were only loosely based on questions about homework as suggested for practitioners' self-reflection on purposes for setting homework (Painter, 2003, p. 7) and were specifically adapted to this class and the three types of assignments. They covered purposes, preparation, importance in terms of grading, the mentor teacher's beliefs on student motivation for doing homework and other considerations when designing assignments. The questions did not focus on positive or negative affect towards homework by the teacher.

3.5 Data analysis

To allow for a coherent data analysis and triangulation of those four different sets of data, both the quantitative and qualitative data analyses were based on a category system established through deductive and inductive coding (Burns, 2010, p. 107). The category system is presented in Table 1. During the process of analysing and forming the category system, it was important to set each viewpoint in relation to the others, to establish differences and similarities of perceived purposes of homework and examine students' affective perceptions of homework.

answers in the homework surveys. However, this article only contains parts of the findings from the project because the presentation of the findings in their entirety would be well beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 1: Category system

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Students' purposes | Practice (Epstein, 1988) | |
| | Good grades (Sallee & Rigler, 2008) | |
| Students' perceptions | Positive affective response (Warton, 2001) | Practice opportunity / improvement of English skills |
| | | Low level of difficulty |
| | | Freedom of expression |
| | | Enjoying doing homework |
| | Negative affective response (Warton, 2001) | Aversion to homework in general |
| | | Embarrassment and/or discouragement |
| | | Boring character of homework |
| | | Time needed for completion |
| | Perceived utility value (Warton, 2001) | e.g. grammar practice, structuring paragraphs, reflecting on topics |
| Teacher's purposes | Intended purpose (Hascher & Hofmann, 2011) | Practice |
| | | Revision |
| Teachers' perceptions | Estimated time frame (Hascher & Hofmann, 2011) | Experience |
| | | Relying on experienced teachers |
| | Importance of students' needs | e.g. a new text type creates the need for writing practice |
| | Integration of learning and teaching aims | |

4 Findings

The results of the data analysis offer a range of highly practice-relevant insights into purposes of homework and the differences between students' attitudes towards homework. These insights can be a strong impetus to further professional development and a refined, more targeted ELT practice as a language teacher.

As an Action Research project focuses on the personal and professional development of teachers, RQ1 was used to familiarise myself with the literature and theory about homework assignments in general and specifically for English language teaching. The acquired knowledge then represented the theoretical foundations for the analysis of the collected data, which aimed at addressing the remaining research questions. The Application Box serves as an answer to the last research question, which was related to my own professional development as a language teacher in the specific area of setting meaningful and efficient homework in ELT. Although the findings of an Action Research project may not be generalised, due to its situatedness and strong focus on the particular teaching context, these personal conclusions may be considered universal recommendations for homework practices derived from my specific teaching context.

4.1 Purposes of homework (teachers' perspectives)

The results indicate significant differences between the mentor teacher's and my intended purposes of homework as a pre-service teacher. The teacher interview revealed that the primary purpose of homework is needs-driven practice with a focus on writing skills, although other skills such as speaking, reading and grammar are also practised through homework. The mentor teacher also specified that she would not ascribe much weight in grading to the completion of homework. The overview of homework assignments in the teaching journal showed other, more differentiated purposes of homework, such as producing input for a class discussion, preparing a speaking activity or raising awareness of common writing mistakes. This comparison between the purposes for homework established by an experienced teacher and those by a pre-service teacher also suggests that the variety of homework assignments might become less diverse throughout the teaching career.

4.2 Purposes of homework (students' perspectives)

The survey revealed that only 30% of the students do homework for practice, but 61% of them completed their homework for good grades. These results show that the teachers aimed to assign homework for practice or other purposes, while students focused on their grades, although their regular English teacher claimed that homework did not influence the grade to a great extent. The views on the use of homework clearly differed between teachers and students.

4.3 Perceptions of homework by teachers

The mentor teacher's perceptions of specific homework assignments revealed significant insights into the differences between the mentor teacher's, my own and the students' perceptions and the planning processes for homework. Concerning the *Flipgrid* videos, the mentor teacher seems to be particularly in favour of posting videos of students talking in English on this platform to prepare students for the monologic speaking format of the school-leaving exam in English. Similarly, new text types automatically create needs and therefore require practice, as she asserts. She generally focuses very much on written homework. She also assumes that students usually complete their homework because they acknowledge their need for practice and because they aspire to good grades, which again requires practice. Therefore, she usually plans homework with clear learning aims in mind and always clarifies her teaching focus for the next lesson, as well as the means for reaching it and the significance

of homework. This approach to planning homework assignments described by my mentor teacher, formulating learning objectives and designing homework accordingly, is very similar to the one I attempted to adopt in my teaching journal, as is evident in its guiding questions.

4.4 Perceptions of homework by students

In the survey, the students were asked about their attitude towards doing English homework in general and for three chosen homework assignments set during my three-week period of teaching. The survey showed that 59% of the students generally enjoyed doing their English homework. The reasons formulated as positive affective responses to the open-ended follow-up item were mainly a combination of practice, a low level of difficulty and general enjoyment of doing English homework.

This rather favourable view of homework was also reflected in the results concerning the textbook exercises and producing a text. When asked specifically about textbook exercises as homework, 59% of the students indicated that they enjoyed doing them for various reasons such as the opportunity for useful practice and a low level of difficulty. These reasons thus also coincided partly with the intended purposes of homework. The main reason for disliking this textbook-based homework was that it was perceived as boring. Furthermore, 71% of the students stated that they liked writing texts. Almost 80% of the positive affective open-ended responses could be categorised as enjoying writing, an opportunity for expressing feelings and improving their English, while the negative affective responses could be mainly associated with boredom while writing texts for homework and the time needed for composing the texts.

When students were asked about the *Flipgrid* video, 67% of them replied that they disliked doing this task, which is the highest number of negative affective responses in this survey. Half of the open-ended responses can be attributed to embarrassment and discouragement due to the videos being visible for their classmates. Surprisingly, two thirds of the students' responses indicate that the *Flipgrid* task helped them to get used to hearing themselves speaking English and raised their awareness of using appropriate words and expressions in speaking. However, only 15% of the responses referred to this task as being useful for improving the structure of their monologue in terms of content, although this was the main intended purpose of the *Flipgrid* homework as the teacher stated in the interview.

5 Conclusion

This Action Research project helped me considerably to make reflected and meaningful decisions on homework assignments. It also raised my awareness of the importance of taking students' opinions on specific homework tasks into account since they certainly need to recognise the value of these tasks, i.e. the intended purpose, which may need to be clarified repeatedly. In addition, it showed that an experienced English teacher mainly relied on a limited number of task types, although there appears to be a greater number of purposes for homework. While the findings of this Action Research project are certainly not generalisable, they may be an impetus for pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect on their homework practices and their students' perceptions of them.

Further research into homework in ELT could investigate this teaching practice in a more systematic manner in order to obtain generalisable results. These could then also inform teacher education and EFL teachers who are eager to change their homework routines or aim

at setting effective assignments. Homework may have unfulfilled didactic potential which needs to be examined further and subsequently exploited since it appears to be an integral part of English language classrooms in Austrian schools.

Application Box

These findings led me to conclude the following:

- EFL teachers consistently need to communicate the purpose of homework assignments to their students and make their contribution to grading transparent.
- EFL teachers need to design varied and meaningful assignments with a specific purpose and clear focus. This variety should be continuously updated throughout their teaching career.
- Teachers need to remember that students' perceptions of the purposes of homework may differ greatly from their own conceptions.
- Student feedback should be relevant to teachers because the usefulness of homework perceived by the students may play a pivotal role in completing it. This might then also influence students' academic achievement since a great deal of homework appears to serve as practice.

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