

Increasing the Effectiveness of Homework through Student-to-student Interaction

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Abstract

It is always a challenge to encourage unmotivated English as a Foreign Language students to complete homework tasks in a timely manner. However, in Extensive Reading classes at Toyo Gakuen University, normally unmotivated second year students showed a high rate of homework completion when given the responsibility of orally presenting weekly book reports in small groups. Classroom observations and informal interviews indicate that the type of interaction, student-to-student, played an important role in improving completion rates. This paper discusses possible reasons why student-to-student interaction may lead to more effective homework than the usual student-to-teacher interaction and suggests possibilities for greater utilization of this interaction.

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of homework

It is often the case that teachers assign tasks to be completed outside of the classroom in the form of homework. In fact, it is probably safe to say that all teachers have assigned homework at one time or another and likewise all students at some point have had to complete homework assignments. Typically, at the end of a class, the teacher instructs students to complete a task for homework whether it be the completion of work not finished in the classroom, preparation for the following class, or the completion of a project such as a presentation.

Generally, the term “homework” conjures up a very limited image in the minds of most people; however, homework can be exceedingly varied in scope and purpose. Homework in the English as a Foreign Language class provides many functions depending on the course goals and class objectives. In general terms, homework is often used as a tool to review language covered in class, provide reinforcement, and provide opportunities to expand and give the language covered in class greater meaning and depth. Also, language teachers frequently assign homework requiring students to prepare for upcoming lessons in order to maximize the time spent in class.

Usually homework is given in accordance to course goals and objectives; however, teachers may choose to assign homework which is designed to promote general goals such as the building of vocabulary, the developing of listening skills through online multimedia, or to encourage communication in English outside of the classroom. These general goals are aimed at encouraging self study or autonomous learning. In recent years, Toyo Gakuen University has initiated such a program by employing a stamp card system (Talandis, et al, 2011) where first year students are required to complete certain tasks in order to receive stamps. These general tasks include spending lunch time in the university's English speaking lounge, known as the "English Lounge," reading graded readers, and participating in several web-based learning sites such as quizlet (www.quizlet.com) and English Central (www.englishcentral.com). Students are required to hand in their stamp cards at the end of each term and will receive a score based on the number of stamps received. A completed card is worth 10 to 20 percent of the final grade in first year English speaking class, depending on the teacher.

1.2 Motivation and homework

Motivation obviously plays an important role in the completion of homework assignments. According to Dörnyei (2001), students who are motivated to learn in order to improve their overall language ability are said to be intrinsically motivated. For students who are intrinsically motivated, homework is not necessarily viewed as an obligation but as a tool to reach his or her goal of language fluency. Unfortunately many first year university students in Japan are not motivated to study English as a foreign language, especially students who are non-English language majors.

Motivating first year university students to study English can be quite challenging. When designing homework tasks, English teachers must consider strategies to encourage students to complete their homework assignments in a timely manner. It stands to reason that interesting homework should stimulate student interest and result in a higher completion rate. If homework is designed imaginatively and creatively, it will provide students with an interesting and meaningful way to review and give meaning to the language. The opposite is true in that purely repetitive tasks which do not engage students will fail to hit the mark leaving students unmotivated and the homework uncompleted. Even if completed, monotonous homework results in meaningless practice in which students simply just go through the motions and are not cognitively engaged which may result in a further drop in motivation.

In addition to intrinsic motivation, motivation resulting from outside influences is known as

extrinsic motivation. In the context of homework, extrinsic motivation is a common influence, especially for homework which is required to be submitted and graded. Not only is the student under pressure to complete the homework assignment for a score, the teacher will probably spend more time reminding students to complete and submit the task, possibly allowing class time for completion in some cases.

The amount and impact of homework on the overall grade of a course will vary and depend somewhat on which language skill is being taught. Obviously, the level of extrinsic motivation will increase in proportion to the weight of the assessment assigned to the homework task. Therefore, in comparing different factors and strategies when determining the effectiveness or completion rate of the homework as a measure of effectiveness, one must consider the impact of the assignment on the overall grade of a course. At some point, there should be a distinction between what constitutes “homework” versus what is a “major assignment” worth a significant percentage of the final grade. Clearly, even the most unmotivated student will think twice about not submitting an assignment worth 25% or more of his or her grade.

1.3 Defining Interaction

Homework can be defined in terms of different types of interactions such as interaction with text, media, and so on. An important type of interaction is with people, including the participant with himself or herself. This type of interaction, the concept of an audience, is very important especially for second language writing as discussed by Casanave (2004). Perhaps the most common type of interaction is the student-to-teacher interaction in which the teacher is the audience. Typically, this type of homework includes assignments turned in by the student to be checked or graded by the teacher. The second type of interaction, student-to-self, represents the type of homework which is not usually checked by the teacher and is completed for the benefit of one's self. This type of interaction includes self-study such as review and expansion of materials covered in class and autonomous learning such as reading in English for interest, keeping a daily journal, and so on. Also, homework which is assigned for the purpose of previewing or preparation of materials to be covered in an upcoming class which may or may not be checked by the teacher could be considered of this type. The third type of interaction is student-to-student interaction where the completion of homework influences another student or another group of students. Peer interaction is an important theme in communicative language learning as discussed by Richards and Rodgers (2001) and has extended to the completion of tasks outside the classroom. This type of interaction includes homework where students work together with a partner, in groups, or individually as part of the group assignment or to be

presented to a group. Naturally, the three human interactions may not always work in isolation of each other. For example, a group of students could work together (student-to-student) to complete a project to be submitted to the teacher for grading (student-to-teacher).

In each form of interaction the student has responsibility which correlates to the interaction. Naturally, motivation is a factor and if a student is highly motivated then one could expect the student-to-self interaction to be the most fruitful since the student is intrinsically motivated and his or her main objective is increasing personal knowledge and improving language skills. However, as mentioned earlier, in most Japanese universities motivation is a problem and the reverse situation is common in which homework associated with the student-to-self interaction results in the lowest completion rate. Unmotivated students may still complete homework of this type of interaction due to other factors such as a sense of responsibility to parents, the teacher, guilt associated with not completing the homework or a feeling of obligation to complete the homework which results in 'just going through the motions.' Students who are not motivated to learn English rarely feel the need to do homework for their own self good, and even though they may complete the homework task, they do not really benefit because they are not cognitively engaged.

Homework that is given at the completion of a unit of study is typically of the student-to-teacher type interaction. Here students are frequently asked to complete homework that is checked by the teacher and demonstrates the student's understanding or competence level of the language covered in class. At this time, the teacher may take the opportunity to expand on the material which often includes asking students to apply the language to describe an experience or a personal aspect of the student's life. The teacher may also decide to give homework that requires students to apply the target language to another language skill. For example, if the teacher is reviewing the past tense and the topic is past vacations, the teacher of a speaking class may be inclined to assign homework requiring the students to write several paragraphs about a past vacation.

The third type of interaction, student-to-student may be used in a number of different situations in the language classroom and conforms with the principles of the currently popular communicative language learning methodology as mentioned earlier. Communicative Language learning emphasizes the need for students to interact in order to complete a task using the target language. Homework typical of this type of interaction usually involves group work where each member is responsible for contributing a part that is needed to complete an assignment. The

assignment may be in the form of a information gap or a jigsaw activity where each member is responsible to contribute a “piece” that will later be used as an in-class speaking activity or as a group project to be presented to the class or other groups. Similarly, students may work independently on tasks that are not part of a group project, however, they are still responsible to present to the group or class. With group activities, it is clear that each member has a responsibility to the other members. If one member does not complete his or her role, then the other group members will not be able to complete the task. This form of peer pressure should result in formable extrinsic motivation.

2. Homework completion rates and interaction

2.1 General observations and results

Like all full-time English language instructors at Toyo Gakuen University, I am responsible for teaching a variety of classes, both first year basic mandatory English classes (Kiso Eigo) and second year elective courses (Oyo Eigo). In these classes I assign a variety of homework tasks which involve the three types of interactions mentioned in the introduction. Table 1 below provides an example typical of each type of interaction.

Table 1

Class	Homework Task	Interaction	Verification	Completion Rate
First year speaking	Preparation for upcoming class	Student-to-self	Visual check	Low
First year writing	Writing tasks	Student-to-teacher	Students submit to teacher	High (though often late)
Extensive Reading	Individual presentations in groups	Student-to-student	Visual check	High

The findings presented in this section do not represent an action research project as outlined by Nunan (1993), they are based on general observations and general data collected in class during the course of every day classroom management. Typically, at the beginning of a class when homework had been assigned in the previous class, students are asked to show their completed homework for a visual check or submit if required. In the case of a visual check, a check mark is usually written next to the student’s name on the roll book to indicate completion. Other times an “x” mark is given to indicate the homework task was not completed.

The first row of table 1 presents observations for first year speaking classes (Kiso Eigo 4) in which the interaction was typical of student-to-self. Activities of this type of homework included preview tasks where the activities were to be performed or reviewed in class. The aim

of these activities is to prepare students for upcoming lessons by introducing grammar, language functions, and vocabulary that will be used in class. Another type of task is the preparation in advance of speaking activities in order to maximize speaking time in class and hopefully mentally prepare students to perform the task. The completion rate for this type of homework was generally low. This could be attributed to the fact that the students in general are not motivated and there is less responsibility to complete this type of homework than homework that has to be turned in to be checked or graded.

The second row of table 1 presents observations for first year writing classes (Kiso Eigo 1) in which the interaction was typical of student-to-teacher. Homework consisted of writing assignments which were checked and returned to the student for revision or final drafts which were graded and returned to the student. In this case, where homework was turned in to be marked or checked, the vast majority of the students completed and turned in the homework, however, quite often the assignments were turned in late or students required extra class time to complete the assignments. Also, in many cases, students had to be reminded or warned verbally several times before turning in completed assignments.

2.2 The presentation of book reports in groups in Extensive Reading classes

For the past several years at Toyo Gakuen University, I have taught Extensive Reading as a second year elective class for non-English Language majors. The class follows a guide line similar to the one described by Boon (2009) in which students select a graded reader from the library each week and are responsible for reading the book and completing a simple book report to be handed in the following class. At the beginning of the next class, students are arranged in groups of three or four and asked to describe their books following the book report as a guide line (see Appendix 1). Basically the students are asked to give their names, the title of the book, author, genre, a brief summary of the plot, and whether they recommend the book or not. This cycle repeats for eight weeks, therefore, after the ninth class students will have read eight books, completed eight reports, and will have given eight in-group presentations. After the ninth class, students will spend the next several weeks preparing a poster and a class presentation on one of the eight books they have already read or a new book.

The grading for the course as outlined in the syllabus is broken down as follows: each book read is five percent ($5\% \times 8 = 40\%$). This score is assessed by the submission of the book reports which students are encouraged to complete and hand in every class, though they are not penalized if the report is turned in late. At the end of the term, students are required to give a poster

presentation where the poster is 20% and the class presentation is 20%. The final 20% is based on attendance. Although students do not directly receive a score for group presentations, giving verbal feedback about their books is considered an important part of the course which provides practice summarizing and stating their opinions.

In Extensive Reading classes it is quite clear whether students have completed the homework task on time or not. Students are arranged in groups of three or four at the beginning of class to talk about their books to group members. If a student has not read and completed the book report, then he or she will not be able to participate, which becomes very apparent to both the other group members and the teacher.

3. Conclusion and Discussion

Since beginning the Extensive Reading class in spring 2010, I have noticed that the timely completion of reports and thus the readiness to give group presentations is high compared with the homework completion rates of other classes. I believe the high homework completion rate can be attributed to a large extent to student-to-student interaction where peer pressure acts to enhance extrinsic motivation.

The most common form of peer homework is the group project where group members are expected to contribute to the completion of a task or a project in which the finished product results as part of the grade in the course. These types of assignments may include an oral group presentation to the class, including slides, posters or other visuals, or a written assignment where each member in the group is responsible for a part such as providing text, a graph, etc and all should have an equal say in the editing of the (final) draft. Naturally it is up to the teacher to provide the guidelines for this type of project.

In the case of group projects the interaction actually begins as a student-student interaction followed by student-teacher interaction where the teacher is responsible for assessment. This greater “interaction” involves different forms of responsibility which should stimulate increased motivation to complete the assignment and produce quality work. This kind of extrinsic motivation hopefully leads to greater intrinsic motivation in the future. Also, when giving a class presentation students feel pressure to produce greater quality work since they feel the responsibility, challenge, and the fear not to embarrass themselves in front of their peers.

As mentioned above, factors such as importance in terms of impact on course grade will lead to greater completion. Also, the amount of time the teacher spends checking, following up, encouraging, policing students to comply, should also lead to higher completion rates, though in a perfect world teachers should not have to spend much time reminding students to complete their homework. Some follow up is important, however, teachers in general would like to reduce the time spent chasing students around to complete their homework on time.

Reference:

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Appendix 1:

Extensive Reading

What is extensive reading?

Extensive reading is reading for fun! Yes, that's right! By reading books that you are interested in and that are not too difficult, you can enjoy reading in English and greatly improve your overall English skills.

What books should I choose?

Choose a book, any book, from the graded reader section in the library. Make sure to choose a book that is not too difficult, in fact, it is better to choose a book that is easy for you to read. Choose a book from the level that you think is appropriate for you and open a page. If you find more than five words you don't understand then it is too difficult. Try the next level down.

Your name: _____

Name of book: _____

Author: _____

Type of book (genre): _____

Brief summary of the plot (three or four sentences)

Would you recommend this book? Why or why not?

