

Homework: Should we give it or not?

Homework... should we or shouldn't we? What are the benefits and what are the drawbacks? Are we really helping our learners develop their language skills or are we merely complicating their lives? Here are my favourite four arguments for and against giving learners homework:

The case for #1: Class time isn't enough and learners need extra practice

Homework should, above all else, serve to review and build upon what has been learned in class, or to offer further practice of something that was new and particularly tricky. With this in mind, make sure that whatever homework you assign can be completed by learners independently and with relative ease.

Homework that gives the student an opportunity to further practice what he or she has just learned in class to further fix the concepts in their mind can be extremely worthwhile. Ideally, it should be something that is useful but that might have been boring had it been done in class (such as a gap fill exercise).

KEY QUESTIONS:

- ♦ Does this build on what you did in class?
- ♦ Will they be able to do it after what you did in class, or do they need more input?
- ♦ Is it something that would, realistically, have been a waste of class time, in terms of not maximizing their contact with you as their teacher?

The case against #1: People need a life

If you teach adults, it's almost entirely likely that they will have a work life and a social life outside of your classroom. Are you really doing them a favour by eating into this time with your demands that they do extra study?

If you teach young learners, these children need unstructured play time to become social creatures more than they need homework from you. Homework can have a negative influence on learning experiences.

Adults in particular will feel guilty about not doing the work you've assigned... or resentment about having to do it when they should be getting on with something else. This will affect how they feel about your class and not in a good way. Children will also be negatively affected by the addition of homework.

IF YOU REALLY MUST...

- ◆ Find out how much time your learners have to do homework and assign work accordingly.

The case for #2: Homework helps learners remember the things they've learned in class

Homework can do a great job of reinforcing the content of lessons, and provides a valuable opportunity for extra practice... before they have a chance to forget everything! Basically, homework should always supplement and mentally click that 'I remember' button, so don't assign new material because there's a big chance that A) they will not understand it, and B) they will become frustrated with the tasks, as well as being less open to discussing the work in class later on. This point is particularly important with classes that you see infrequently, as they have many chances to forget what you did in the last class!

KEY QUESTIONS:

- ◆ Is this a useful reminder and revision of a tricky new language point?
- ◆ Does it present new concepts?
- ◆ Does it go over something you did in class but in a slightly different way?

The case against #2: Let's face it, you don't really know what you're doing

As qualified as you might be and with as much knowledge of teaching pedagogy as you might have, do you honestly believe you know exactly what you're doing when you assign homework? What objectives are you aiming to cover? How will this further your learners' ability to do whatever it is you've done in class? Granted, a lot of coursebooks have workbooks which are largely intended for self study, but you nevertheless have to be careful that there is a definite purpose behind what you're assigning.

IF YOU REALLY MUST...

- ◆ Consult your learners and ask them what they see as an appropriate follow-up task for them to do at home to supplement what you have done in class.

The case for #3: Homework can help learners make more rapid progress in their language acquisition

Homework can provide valuable practice of the skills learned in the classroom. We know that we are pushed for time and that each lesson is valuable contact time. We don't want to be going into too much detail or doing too many tasks on one language point, regardless of whether or not the learners need it. At some point, you need to provide ways for that practice to take place in the learners' own time, so you can get on with new stuff next lesson!

KEY QUESTIONS:

- ◆ Does it compliment what you've done in class in a useful way?
- ◆ How well does it work as a self reference document that learners can return to at a later point?

The case against #3: Homework doesn't lead to better performance

Too much homework can be a bad thing. Research indicates there is a weak link between achievement and homework, particularly in young learners. Furthermore, countries that assign more homework don't outperform those with less homework. Countries such as America and the UK have relatively high levels of homework in schools and yet don't show a correlation with high performance. Japan is one country that has taken the opposite route, having instituted no homework policies at younger levels to allow family time and personal interests. Finland, one of the most successful nations in terms of international tests, limits high school homework to half an hour per night. While a small amount of well thought out homework can be beneficial, assigning excessive amounts of homework is at best counterproductive.

IF YOU REALLY MUST...

- ◆ A good tactic, particularly for teachers of young learners, is to assign homework for improving study skills, rather than learning.
- ◆ Assign homework that is uncomplicated and short, which involves families or friends, and which above all engages learner interests.

The case for #4: Homework can allow learners to use materials and other sources of information that are not always available in the class room

Some of us have the luxury of computers and projectors in class, others do not. Some exercises that are on the net work best as self study materials anyway. Think about the resource you want learners to use and in particular whether it is more suited to classroom use or for personal study. Furthermore, assigning research tasks that require learners to go out into the wider world and independently find resources that link to what you did in class can be a useful and motivating activity.

KEY QUESTIONS:

- ◆ Does the task work better as homework than it would in the classroom environment?
- ◆ How can you get learners to find a resource that develops on what you did in class?

The case against #4: They don't really need it

People are constantly learning in the 21st Century and traditional homework should become obsolete within the next decade. Thanks to technology, learning is now a constant in our lives. With access to applications, software programs, as well as educational websites such as the Khan Academy, learning is an ongoing process. So much of what learners can access is through the medium of English that it is unlikely that they can spend many days of their lives without acquiring some knowledge of the language from their everyday environment.

IF YOU REALLY MUST...

- ◆ Instead of assigning homework, utilise the technological tools that your learners use in their everyday lives. Get them doing something in English with their phones or on Facebook.

Summing up

I'm not the world's biggest fan of homework, but used correctly it can be a good teaching tool. To use it effectively, you have to ensure that it is benefiting your learners and that the exercises you give them are not merely busy work.