



A Design of Junior High School English Homework under the 'Double Reduction' Policy in China

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ABSTRACT

Through literature review, questionnaires and interviews, this paper summarizes the present situation of English homework teachers leave in public junior high schools and how the students and parents evaluate in a Chinese inland city after the “double reduction” policy was issued in China, studies the design of English homework at junior high school level, analyzes the feedback of students, finds out that present after-class English assignment is featured by test orientation and lack of diverse, graded and interesting tasks and suggests some principles and effective designs for specific cases to make up for the deficiencies.

Keywords: double reduction policy; homework design; junior high school

1. Introduction

In China, students in junior high school are encouraged to cultivate good habits of self-learning ability and keep a balance between schooling and social life while facing great pressure from entrance examinations and competition in choosing better senior high schools. Student-centred class teaching is advocated and teachers are encouraged to design language tasks and guide the students to practise the target language in class while a large number of intensive exam-oriented exercises are left to students in the form of homework after class. Under academic pressure, junior school students and their parents turn to tutoring institutions, some of which are even not qualified and focus only on examination training. Therefore, the students suffer double academic burdens before senior high school. With the promotion of the "double reduction" policy, the tutoring courses have been significantly reduced and the students returned to focus on in-class teaching and self-learning when losing tutoring aid. How to improve the quality of after-class homework, make it helpful for students to preview or consolidate what they have learned in class, stimulate their passion and broaden their horizons while ensuring clear instructions and controlling their error rate has become a concern in English basic teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 "Double Reduction" Policy and its Impact

After the release of the "double reduction" policy as a national policy to regulate the tutoring industry in June 2021, in July of the same year, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Off-campus Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education*, further clarifying guidance on effectively reducing the heavy homework burden of students in compulsory education, avoiding shortcut and short-sighted education. It provides new requirements and some quantitative standards for the content, difficulty, format, total completion time, and supervision of homework in primary and secondary school teaching, objectively playing a role in promoting the reform of on-campus curriculum subject teaching. These requirements are also applicable to middle school English teaching and its extracurricular homework design. For example, in terms of the content, it opposes assigning rote-demanding homework or tasks needing massive repetition and advocates assigning homework that is conducive to students' creative learning ability enhancement and practical operation; In terms of the difficulty, it suggests to give graded tasks and provide students with optional assignments at basic, intermediate, and comprehensive levels according to their language ability; In terms of the form, it advocates diversity such as daily reading,

situation response, dairy, practical writing, retelling, oral task, required and optional tasks and etc; In terms of the total completion time, there is a clear time limit, which states that "the amount of written homework in grades 7-9 of junior high school shall not exceed 90 minutes," and "the total amount of written homework for students on holidays shall not exceed their daily homework amount." In terms of supervision, it proposes that Dean's Office should conduct irregular homework inspections and feedback and keep a balance between the total amount of homework for each discipline.

Over the past two years, a series of regulations and measures related to "double reduction" have been adopted. As a result, the primary role of school education is strengthened while off-campus exam-oriented tutoring is significantly reduced and for the students during the compulsory education, especially for the students in the primary schools, the previously written assignments have been replaced by reading, exercise, oral expression or more sleep. The amount of time spent on homework in junior high schools is limited effectively in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, which were reported as good examples of quality-oriented teaching reform.

2.2 Homework and Homework Design

Homework is defined as a part of course design, an auxiliary form of classroom teaching and a common means for students to consolidate and apply their knowledge learned in class. It requires students to complete it independently (Shao, 2012); Extracurricular homework is a learning activity that students independently engage in during their extracurricular time according to the teacher's requirements (Hornby, 2010; Q. Lu, 2022). It accounts for a certain proportion of teaching activities (Zhang, 2021). Many school teachers define homework as "Real Life", which is also done at home, but it provides children with more opportunities to create success. Homework is closely related to students' personal situations, making them aware of the value of their knowledge and helping them form a positive attitude towards school education (He, 2004). Cooper (1989) believes that homework can have both positive and negative effects on students. It undoubtedly plays a positive role in helping students enhance their memory of the subject knowledge they have learned, and homework is also conducive to the development of students' thinking, the formation of concepts, and the reprocessing of information obtained in their minds. However, homework can also cause students to lose interest in the learning materials, leading to boredom and affecting their consolidation and use of knowledge negatively (Hu, 2007).

Osborn suggests that homework design should avoid content that is external to the students, far from their real life, abstract, repetitive or boring. Instead, exercises should be highly relevant to the knowledge learned in class and not easily misunderstood by students about the concepts learned. Homework should be interesting, diverse, novel, and challenging (Zhou, 2011). The learning of students is a hierarchical construction process from low-level intelligent skills to high-level ones. The difficulty level of homework set by teachers should be in line with students' learning level, cognitive level, ability differences, etc. It is advocated that the homework should be categorized into two to meet the different academic needs of learners: one at a mild difficulty level which is required to complete and the other at a high difficulty level which is optional. (Yang, 2022). To stimulate students' interest in learning, extracurricular assignments need to be diverse in forms, including reading assignments, oral and written assignments, practical activity assignments (Z. Lu, 2022; Zhao, 1988), or practice, preparation, and expansion assignments with different purposes (Shi & Cui, 1999). A survey conducted on 18 junior high schools in Shanghai shows that junior high school students prefer practical, interesting, and practical assignments to those only related to classroom knowledge (Z. Lu,

2022). Regarding the amount of homework for students, Cooper's study of 709 students in Tennessee found that if the amount of homework was controlled within a reasonable range, the more homework students had, the better their learning outcomes (Yang, 2022). On the contrary, exceeding a certain amount of homework not only does not have a positive correlation with improving grades but also brings negative effects (Yao, 2003).

In summary, homework is a targeted routine, requiring students to participate in and complete independently, achieving a virtuous cycle of reviewing, consolidating, applying, and expanding classroom learning. The “Double reduction” policy put forward the higher request for the homework design. Therefore, to improve the positive impact, the requirements for the content, difficulty, form, total amount, and evaluation in homework design need to be carefully considered.

3. Method

To understand the English homework assigned in junior high schools in Chinese inland cities since the implementation of the “double reduction” policy, two local junior high schools were selected for questionnaire surveys and interviews. Based on the analysis of its present situation, this paper mainly focuses on putting forward some suggestions on the design of English homework to improve the weaknesses found. In this way, the research questions can be as follows:

1. What types of English homework are assigned in Junior high schools? What is the purpose of these assignments for the teachers?
2. How do students evaluate the homework assigned?
3. What are the problems with the existing homework design?
4. How to optimize the existing homework design?

4. Results and Discussion

The two schools selected are in the same city but in different districts. One is renowned for its high admission rate to key high schools. The other is ranked second among the school applications. To understand the design and implementation of junior high school English extracurricular homework, the questionnaire covers multiple dimensions, including homework type, the expected purpose of teacher homework design, quality of students completing homework, attitude and evaluation towards homework, and parental evaluation of homework. A total of 42 English teachers filled out the survey questionnaire. A total of 22 students in Grade 8 from the two local high schools and 25 parents were interviewed.

4.1 Type of Homework and Expected Purpose of Homework Assigned

The survey found that there are two main types of extracurricular English homework focusing on exam-oriented language practice and preparation for class learning. For the first type, the students are asked to finish exam paper exercises like reading with multiple-choice questions, cloze tests, and writing according to the outlined requirement. Teachers expect students to master the knowledge points learned in the class by exercise training and improve their reading and writing skills within a limited time. For the second one, the assignments aim at accumulating language vocabulary and cultivating good handwriting and memorizing habits, like copying vocabulary and sentences as well as reciting text paragraphs.

Mrs Liu, a director of the class group, reveals that students in lower grades are demanded to copy the new words and phrases learned in class 3-5 times per copy every day and says it is a mandatory

memory method. “This is a simple and effective task for the students. They need to spend time on the spelling of words exactly. And it is also a good chance to practice handwriting. In exams, good handwriting contributes a lot to the grade of writing. Besides, the students need to recite some passages in the textbook. This is also the first step for language accumulation.” She says full of confidence. Language accumulation is simply understood as recitation by most teachers. The students are expected to complete assignments in 30-40 minutes. About 98% of teachers state that the amount of homework has decreased or remained unchanged, and over 85% of students can complete some of the homework at school during recess time. Overall, the English homework in the two junior high schools focuses on exam-oriented exercises and basic vocabulary accumulation.

4.2 Students’ Evaluation of Homework

The survey shows that 45% of the students believe completing homework is good for self-improvement, 50% admit they do it for exams and promotion or to satisfy their parents and teachers, and only 5% do it out of a hobby. In addition, 82% of the students report that the homework consists of the exercises from the teaching aids workbook and 59% of the students report that exercise sections on grammar, vocabulary, translation and writing in *English Weekly* are required homework or are used as weekly exam paper while the rest part of story-reading or news is ignored.

Only 23% of students mention that the rare homework is hobby-based, such as singing English songs, learning English videos and other interesting assignments. Wang Xiaoyu, the English monitor, whose duty is to assist English teachers in distributing and receiving homework, said “Since I was in junior high school, English class has meant reading and writing. English learning is not as funny as before. We spent a lot of time reading and writing words, phrases, sentences and passages existing in the textbook. Sometimes it is boring and even a waste of time. Even in the oral homework, we read aloud rather than talk or speak. The funny things like singing and dubbing for the roles in the films we enjoyed are not encouraged by teachers because time is limited.”

It is worth noting that about half of the students learn the English language as a discipline and never build a connection with daily life. Influenced by exam-oriented education, they complete English homework as fast as they can and believe the training can help them pass the daily quiz and prepare for the entrance examination for further education, which is also confirmed in the parent interviews, with nearly 90% of parents expressing their concerns and worries about The Academic Test for the Junior High School Students.

The survey shows that 55% of the students complain that the homework assigned is difficult or less challenging for them and most of them take more time to complete the homework than the teachers expect, and they hope that the homework could be less or more difficult in interview. Qi Xiaoning, who has learned English for eight years and finished reading 2 original English novels per year, said “I always finish the homework ahead of schedule. Besides the oral activities in class, I scarcely listen to the teacher and the exercise in the workbook is done in class. Homework is too easy but a must-do for me. I plan to finish all the exercises in the shortest possible time and do something challenging.” In comparison, Zhang Kunyu, a beginner, complains “I learned English in primary school when teachers only required us to read words and some simple dialogues. So I hardly read long stories or wrote before junior high school. That is why homework is difficult and time-consuming for me since my first year in junior high school. And I really envy those who can read and write fast.”

For repetitive tasks like copying words and phrases, half of the students tend to write faster rather than better. Therefore, only a small part of the students have good handwriting, even though all of the

students realize good handwriting contributes to a higher grade for writing in exams. 82% of the students report that the homework was mainly after-school exercise books, and they thought that this form of homework was too homogeneous and that other forms of homework could be added, such as oral, reading and practical tasks. 95% of the students complain that the homework is boring, with most of the homework consisting of copying and memorizing words, grammar exercises, etc. Kang Ning, a second-year student ranked medium admits “A high score gained in exam motivates me to work hard on the reading and writing homework. If the exam results are not good enough, I would feel very frustrated doing this boring homework.” They hope that the homework would be more interesting, flexible and less relevant to the exam, with more connection with daily life.

4.3 Findings

The results of the questionnaire and interview indicate that in the case of limited homework volume and time, teachers, students, and parents pay more attention to the exam. Exam-oriented homework dominates and students are exam-conscious. The present after-class English homework is featured by deficiency of graded tasks, lack of diversity and shortage of interest.

Deficiency of graded tasks results in poor efficiency and time consumed in language learning. The students with weak linguistic foundations suffer from frustration and physical damage caused by prolonged sitting while the students with good linguistic foundation risk losing motivation to challenge or develop their learning potential with long-term relatively low learning requirements.

Lack of diversity contributes to students’ misunderstanding of the mono-path of language application. Too many exercises on spelling, grammar and reading and writing in the form of test papers block the connection between language and the real world. Many students are confused about the practical significance of learning English.

Lack of interest leads to less attractive homework, decreasing the possibility to stimulate more passion for learning and reduction in learning time.

4.4 Suggestions on English Homework Design

If homework design can follow the following two principles, it could achieve diversity, difficulty classification, different pragmatic goals and increasing interest while effectively weakening exam anxiety.

1. Divide a big task into small tasks with clear directions.
2. Make sure the tasks are arranged in the order of easy first and hard later with the previous tasks serving the subsequent ones.

Take Unit 1 of the English textbook in Grade 8 published by People’s education press as an example. Health problems are discussed in this unit. The homework could be designed as follows:

Task 1: Collect as many words as possible related to body parts, common diseases and the typical symptoms. Observe the formation of these words.

Task 2: Select three diseases from the word collection you got in task 1 and use the following sentence patterns to talk about the illness.

1. -What's the matter with... ?
-I have a... .
2. -Do you have...?
-Yes, I do/No, I do not.

Task 3: Interview parents, friends, relatives or neighbours to learn about their medical history.

Record what you find like the disease name, symptoms, treatment methods, and recovery time. Please use adjectives and verbs to describe the symptoms and the interviewee's feelings of illness.

Task 4: According to your recording, make tips for understanding and preventing diseases.

Through the above design, how are the problems of deficiency of graded tasks, lack of diversity and shortage of interest improved?

First of all, from a knowledge perspective, the purposes of homework design are quite prominent and the difficulty in each task grades. The tasks could be set as mandatory or optional. The goals of tasks 1 and 2 are to review and expand vocabulary related to diseases, as well as basic dialogues and sentence structures for inquiring about illnesses. These two tasks are designed with low grades of difficulty at the vocabulary accumulation stage and the students at different language levels can be competent. Tasks 3 and 4 are designed for writing preparation and practice, providing a framework for describing a disease objectively. The students are asked to complete an applied essay finally, which is more comprehensive and difficult. However, with the preparation of the previous tasks, its difficulty decreases a lot. Most students are able to complete the task. For those who suffered from time-consuming, task 4 could be set as optional. Instead of it, short suggestions on disease prevention could be listed.

Secondly, diversity and interest stimulation are connected closely in the design. From the perspective of homework format, the design provides diverse forms of tasks. The students are required to look up dictionaries, organize word lists, communicate with family and friends, conduct surveys, take notes, and provide poster tips. Various activities involved in the design weaken the core performance of knowledge learning and increase the probability of interesting homework. For example, different from mechanical copying of words existing commonly in the survey, task 1 guides students to observe and summarize the word formation rules during the process of searching for words. The word "ache" and the suffix "-ache" in the word collection of stomachache, backache, headache, toothache, etc. indicate a connection between spelling and meaning. If the students summarize the rule by themselves, they are most likely to expand their vocabulary in the same way willingly. The addition of inquiry objects and language input for communication is more interesting than reciting the text. For another instance, the students express care using the key sentence patterns of this unit through questioning in task 2. Task 3 allows students to investigate and understand the basic situation of family and friends' illnesses. They play the role of reporters in daily life to systematically collect information, pay attention to the process and feelings of family and friends getting sick, and promote parent-child relationships as well. In task 4, the Students express their concern about health issues and as a result, such language output promotes more interesting and efficient language input.

Thirdly, from a cognitive perspective, once the students are asked to obtain information through exploration and communication, their interest can be more easily stimulated, compared to dealing with the known and specified materials. In task 1, the students need to search for words, collect vocabulary, list vocabulary, observe word structure and summarize word formation rules. Their learning autonomy can be stimulated by doing. Tasks 2, 3 and 4 are student-centred. The students can select interviewees independently and experience the jobs the journalists do in the real world through interviews and recordings. Task 4 provides a platform for problem-solving and showcasing results based on investigations.

Overall, this design breaks down a writing task into four small tasks with clear directions. Four tasks are related to the same topic, and the first three tasks prepare for the fourth one. The tasks are interconnected and the difficulty increases. Homework is not a test paper anymore. Unlike the section

on writing in tests, the series of tasks guides students to complete the entire process of language application through social activities of communication, investigation, sorting out information, and drawing conclusions, weakening exam-oriented training.

In China, the awareness of exam-oriented education has deeply rooted in people's hearts, and the "double reduction" policy reduced off-campus tutoring, proposing to teachers how to balance exam-oriented training and language learning after school. Schools can also reduce the pressure of examination by designing the homework as a series of original tasks combining textbook content with various social activities, grading by difficulty and guiding students to explore and apply the language.

5. Conclusion

Through questionnaires and interviews with three groups of teachers, students, and parents from two local junior high schools in an inland city, we found that the current English homework focuses on language points understanding, listening and reading ability improvement, featured by test orientation and deficiency of graded diverse and interesting tasks.

The "double reduction" policy puts forward higher requirements for English homework design at the junior high school level. To make up for the deficiencies, this paper suggests several principles for improving English homework design as follows. 1. Homework should consist of a series of graded tasks with clear directions. 2. Previous tasks should serve the subsequent ones. 3. The tasks should be combined with various social activities. 4. The tasks should be designed to give paths of exploration and communication to apply the language.

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