

영어교육, 60권 4호 2005년 겨울

A Call for Effective Homework Assignments in Middle School English Classes

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Kim, Sung-Ae. (2005). A call for effective homework assignments in middle school English classes. *English Teaching*, 60(4), 23-46.

This study is intended to call for effective homework assignments in middle school English classes. In order to obtain information about what the middle school English teachers and their students think about and do with homework the study analyzed two questionnaire surveys: one for 85 middle school English teachers and the other for 206 middle school students. Also, in order to find out what the actual homework assignments by middle school English teachers are like and how well their teaching and homework assignments match, the researcher observed eight middle school English classes. According to the analyses of the questionnaires and homework assignments the middle school English teachers, though their teaching goal was to develop the communicative language ability in their students, lack both knowledge and techniques for effective homework assignments which match their teaching goal. Based on the results of data analyses, the study makes some suggestions that are considered necessary to help the teachers develop the knowledge and techniques required for effective homework assignments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Last year the author had an opportunity to observe eight middle school English classes. No one who had observed those classes would deny that the teachers in the classes made great efforts in order to make their classes communicative. Their classes included various materials and activities which they believed helpful to achieve their teaching goal, the development of the communicative language ability in their students. Unfortunately, however, despite the potential efficacy of those materials and activities in improving the students' communication ability, they did not seem to contribute very much to achieving the teaching goal because of the teachers' lack of knowledge and failure to use appropriate techniques. An overall impression after the observation was that there was a serious discrepancy between what the teachers need to do and what they actually do in our middle

school English classes.

The discrepancy between what the teachers need to do and what they actually do was also found in their homework assignments.¹ Despite their teaching goal, the development of the communicative language ability in their students, and despite all the materials and activities employed to make their classes communicative, the teachers still followed a rather conventional approach in assigning homework, mostly focusing on rote practice. Thus, it was very doubtful that the homework assignments by the teachers contributed to achieving their teaching goal.

With the recognition of the difficulty involved in assigning appropriate homework in a communication-oriented classroom (Bragger, 1985), the discrepancy between the lesson objectives and the homework assignments in our middle school English classes is still considered a serious problem, given the importance of homework in the learning process. And it is necessary to provide the teachers with the necessary help for better homework assignments. Unfortunately, however, few studies have been conducted on homework in the EFL context and in Korea only one study (Kyong-hyon Pyo, 2005) has been found dealing with the topic. And even that study was on a university level and virtually no information has been available within the country for middle school English teachers regarding what to do with homework.

The purpose of this study is to call for effective homework assignments in our middle school English classes. More specifically, the study has two aims. Firstly, it is to raise middle school English teachers' awareness of the ineffectiveness of the homework assignments they currently practice and to help them develop insights into effective homework assignments. Secondly, it is to advocate that more attention should be paid by teacher educators and textbook/material developers to help the teachers. It is hoped that the result of this study could be of help in improving the quality of middle school English teachers' homework assignments.

II. BACKGROUND

1. The Role of Homework

Regardless of the subject that the students are learning, homework is generally known to

¹ Most researchers of homework generally agree that homework is work assigned to students by teachers that was intended to be done outside of school time (Wallinger, 2000, p. 484). In this study, the term "homework" is used to refer to what is to be done by the students outside of class time, and the term "homework assignment" to refer to what is made and given out to the students by the teacher.

play an important role in the learning process. According to Battle-Bailey (2003), homework is a leading factor for improving academic performance among students who have the ability to work independently. Despite the important role of homework, however, students themselves often fail to appreciate the fundamental role that homework plays in learning.

Homework, as Painter (2003) maintains, is an extension of the classroom which allows the students to internalize what they have learned in class. As such, Painter maintains, homework bridges the gap between lessons in the sense that regardless of the number of English classes they have per week, it can make the students continue to work on English throughout the week. A similar view has been expressed by Wallinger (2000), who claims that the use of homework could become especially important on certain schedules where there is a time lapse between classes.

Homework is considered more important in studying a foreign language because of the limited time for target language input. Especially when the language is learned in the classroom context, the importance of homework becomes higher than in the natural context. This is because in the former case the class time is usually unreasonably limited for enough language input required for the development of a language (Byungmin Lee, 2003) and the extension of class time is absolutely necessary in order to make up for the time limitation. Moreover, when the class size is too big for individual students to have enough opportunity to use the language, as is the case with most EFL classes, the importance of homework as a means to provide the students with more time to experience the language is doubled.

Another benefit that homework offers is the development of learner autonomy. According to Harmer (2001), the first time homework is set for students to do out of class, learner autonomy gets a powerful boost because they now have to study without the help of a teacher. Given that autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning, explicitly accept responsibility for, and take charge of their own learning (Little, 2002; Painter, 2003; Smith, 2003; Thanasoulas, 2000), and that homework helps the learners develop autonomy, there is no reason for the teachers not to utilize such a useful tool to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching.

Summarizing the benefits of homework stated by scholars (e.g., Battle-Bailey, 2000; Harmer, 2001; Keoth, 1982; North & Pillay, 2002; Painter, 2003; Wallinger, 2000), it can be said that homework, a cornerstone of students' learning process, not only consolidates classroom teaching and bridges the gap between lessons but also promotes independent learning. As such, it can and must be used by both students and teachers to monitor progress.

Despite its potential benefits, however, homework is often seen as a necessary evil rather than an important contribution to learner autonomy (Harmer, 2001). This is probably because without a careful preparation it can go wrong and do harm to the students, forcing them to waste their precious study time. In order for the students to take full advantage of the opportunities it offers, therefore, it will be necessary for the teachers to practice it right

with a careful preparation.

2. The Effect of Homework

There is a general consensus in educational literature today that homework does have a positive effect on learning, through extending the time available for learning (North & Pillay, 2002). However, differently from the general consensus, the results of research studies on the subject of homework effectiveness are not conclusive (Thomas, 1992; Wallinger, 2000). Some studies refute but some others support the effectiveness of homework on academic achievement. Pascal, Weinstein and Walberg (1984), for instance, argue that the uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of homework made educators and lay writers oppose homework on the grounds that it was unwholesome, professionally unsupervised, and allowed students to practice their mistakes. Also, Bents-Hill and others (as cited in Thomas, 1992) found that the amount of homework did not contribute significantly to a student's achievement test scores, competency test scores, or teacher-assigned grades. Based on this study, Thomas wondered if it was possible for homework to even be counterproductive beyond a certain point. In a similar vein, Cooper (1989, 1994), recognizing that whether or not homework affects a student's academic performance is a highly individual matter tied to his age, ability, motivation, and course load, claims that there are potential disadvantages of homework as well as the advantages.

Other researchers, however, have documented that homework improved student achievement, especially if it was assigned on a regular basis (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992). For instance, Keith (1982) conducted a study using a large sample of 20,364 high school seniors and found that there was a strong linear relationship between grades and homework time at all ability levels. His study confirmed that an increase in time spent on homework had a positive effect on students' grades on high school. Also, Foyle and Bailey (1988), admitting that homework had varying impacts at different grade levels and with different subject areas, argue that it was at least not harmful to students' learning and achievement. More recently, Painter (2003) claimed that homework helps students retain class-taught language, reinforce what they have learned, and develop study habits which ultimately allow them to develop as independent learners.

Regarding these mixed results about the effectiveness of homework, scholars (e.g. Cool & Keith, 1991; Wallinger, 2000) point out that the disagreement results from the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of homework because there are so many contributing variables. In order to assess the effectiveness more clearly, therefore, a distinction should be made, as Chen and Ehrenberg (1993) suggest, on how student achievement was measured when considering the effectiveness of homework.

Considering that there are a number of variables that contribute to the effectiveness of

homework, including student motivation, academic course work, gender, and quality of instruction, it seems safe to say that any discussion on the effect of homework must also include information about those variables. In fact, the result of the study by Kazmierzak (1994) supports this view. She conducted a small study with only 13 students in a high school German II class and found that the issue was not the time spent on homework or its completion but rather the type of homework assignment that she gave. According to her, the students felt that the most helpful assignments were those in which they wrote paragraphs in German to express their own thoughts. Through this study she found that assignments where she had made written remarks were more beneficial because the comments were individualized to the particular student.

It may be true that much of the homework research may not be totally credible because of its reliance on surveys and self-report and failure to consider other intervening variables (North & Pillay, 2002). Despite such inherent limitations, however, the arguments made by previous research on homework are considered persuasive enough to help the readers understand the important role that homework plays in the learning process. Summarizing what has been claimed thus far, one can conclude that homework can have both positive and negative effects depending on how to practice it.

3. Tips for Effective Homework

Regardless of whether or not further research proves homework to be an effective tool in foreign language teaching/learning, foreign language teachers are clearly convinced that it is an essential component of successful language learning (Wallinger, 2000). If this is the case, it would be the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the assignment brings about positive effects to individual learners. This would require the teacher to keep in mind in their homework practices that in different teaching/learning contexts and with different learners in terms of their language ability, motivation, learning environment, life experiences, etc., the effects of even the same homework could be different. In order to make homework meaningful and thus effective to all the students, therefore, individual differences in these contributing factors should not be ignored.

Despite the important role that the teacher plays in making homework meaningful to the students (Kazmierzak, 1994; Paulu, 1998; Wallinger, 2000), not all the teachers in schools seem to be skillful enough in assigning homework to their students. In fact, there are teachers who make brilliant assignments that are both exciting and meaningful, teachers who use homework as a routine to provide the students with additional practice on the points taught in class, and teachers who simply assign busywork that harms the educational process by making the students feel that it is meaningless to them and does not help their study. Thus, as Paulu (1998) maintains, the homework assignments by individual teachers

can produce quite different effects in their students, which can hardly be considered fair from the students' standpoint.

The effectiveness of homework depends on the students as well as on the teacher. However, despite the potential benefits that homework can bring about, students often fail to see the value of homework and thus fail to commit themselves in completing the homework. When this happens, however, they may not be the only to blame but the teachers too are responsible for the failure. This is because one cannot expect the students to dedicate themselves to doing meaningless, unchallenging, and thus boring homework. In order to make students feel that homework is useful and beneficial to them, therefore, teachers must carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed (U. S. Department of Education, 1987). Also, teachers must keep in mind, as North and Pillay (2002) rightly point out, that excessive quantities of homework run the risk of generating negative effects such as loss of interest and fatigue. In addition, instead of sticking to "practice" homework only, the most common one, teachers will need to assign various types of homework including "preparation" homework, "extension" homework, and "integration" homework (Wallinger, 2000) in order to keep the students attracted.

For a homework assignment to achieve its intended goal it is also important to provide the students with appropriate feedback (Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Paulu, 1998). However, due to the enormous workload (North & Pillay, 2002), providing individual students with enough feedback is never an easy matter for the teacher. Especially when the class size is big enough to have more than 30 students and the teacher has to take care of several classes, like in many EFL contexts, the difficulty will increase tremendously. As a natural result, teachers often inevitably give up providing individual students with the necessary feedback but instead only check if they completed the homework or not (North & Pillay, 2002). This in turn may cause the students not to commit themselves fully in doing the homework.

Considering the different effects of homework assignments, the importance of the teacher's knowledge and techniques for effective homework assignments cannot be over-emphasized. Regarding effective homework assignments, recommendations, even though they are mostly addressed to the elementary school teachers in the L1 context, have been made by quite a few scholars (e.g., Battle-Bailey, 2003; Lehr & Osborn, 2002; Pascal, Weinstein & Walberg, 1984; Paulu, 1998; Warger, 2001). Unfortunately, however, few studies are yet available regarding homework in the foreign language. As a result, foreign language teachers have little information to rely on when they experience difficulties with homework practices (Kazmierzak, 1994; North & Pillay, 2002; Wallinger, 1998).

Even though the recommendations currently available on effective homework assignments are mostly for the teachers in the L1 context, the basic ideas of these recommendations can also be applied to the teaching of a foreign language in the sense that

they are to help the learners in the learning process. Thus, adapting the tips suggested by Paulu (1998) for L1 teachers' homework practice, one can make some general recommendations for the homework practice in the EFL context as follows:

- 1) Create assignments with a purpose and make sure students understand the purpose.
- 2) Make assignments relevant to the learning in the classroom.
- 3) Match assignments to the skills, interests, and needs of the students.
- 4) Create assignments that challenge students to think and to integrate.
- 5) Assign an appropriate amount of homework and do not overburden the students.
- 6) Vary assignment and avoid repeating the same type of assignment.
- 7) Give homework that makes learning personal.
- 8) Develop a reasonable way to give correction and feedback.
- 9) Let the students have incentives to do their best in doing the homework.

With the general recommendations above in mind, however, individual teachers will still have to take various factors into consideration which may be specific to their own teaching context.

III. METHOD

1. Collection of Data

1) Questionnaire Surveys

In order to obtain information about teachers' and students' views and attitudes toward homework and what they actually do with homework, the researcher conducted two questionnaire surveys; one for 85 middle school English teachers and the other for 206 middle school students. The teachers were from 16 middle schools in a metropolitan city in Korea and the average length of their teaching experience was 13.8 years. The students were from the six schools randomly selected from the 16 middle schools. One second or third year class was again randomly selected from each of the six schools. The reason that first year classes were excluded from the survey was that since the survey was conducted in early April, the students were considered not to have enough experience with middle school life including study and homework.

Since the questionnaire items were to find out what the teachers and the students think about and do with homework, they were developed based both on the arguments made by the scholars in the previous studies and on the discussion with the middle school teachers enrolled in the graduate school program where the researcher was involved.

Each questionnaire was composed of 24 items, the contents of which were basically the same for both groups (For the contents of each questionnaire items see Tables 1-6). However, the wordings in some items were inevitably different because they were addressed to two different groups, i.e., the teacher group and the student group. For the coding of the data a 5-point Likert scale was used and the respondents to each questionnaire were requested to select one of the five possible responses: Strongly agree(5), Agree(4), Undecided/ Neutral(3), Disagree(2), Strongly disagree(1).

The questionnaires were delivered to each school and collected by a teacher from that school. With the cooperation of the teachers all the questionnaires were collected and returned to the researcher within two weeks.

2) Teachers' Homework Assignments

In order to examine how well the teaching and the homework assignment match in the middle school English classes, the researcher observed eight middle school English classes. The eight classes were selected by the local Office of Education to present a model for communicative English classes. The classes were open to be observed by the visiting English teachers from other middle schools and some school inspectors including the researcher. Through the observation of the classes, however, the researcher only found that the "believed-to-be" communicative classes by the teachers were far from being communicative. What the teachers were practicing in their classes including the homework assignments was not quite what was expected in a communicative class.

Since the schools inspected were not selected randomly by the researcher and since the eight classes observed were quite limited in number, it may not be argued that they are representative of all the middle school classes in this country. However, since they were selected by the local Office of Education from three out of six different school districts, they were considered, along with the information obtained from the questionnaire analyses, to provide us with sufficient information necessary to figure out what the middle school English teachers generally practice with homework.

Through the observation of the classes the researcher found that the homework assignment given out to the students in each class was exactly the same as had been described in the teacher's lesson plan distributed to the observers before the class. That is, in the class no further information than was described in the lesson plan was provided to the students regarding what to do with homework. Thus, for the purpose of finding out what the middle school English teachers' homework assignments were like, there would have been no need for the researcher to sit in the class; checking their lesson plans would have been enough. However, the observation of the classes was necessary for the researcher to obtain information on how well the teaching and the homework assignment

matched in each class.

Details of the homework assignment in each class along with the lesson objectives are provided in Appendix.

2. Analysis of Data

1) The Questionnaires

The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in six categories to examine what the teachers and the students think about and do with homework. The six categories, which have been developed based both on the discussion on homework in many previous studies and on the discussion with the middle school English teachers, are (1) usefulness of homework, (2) students' sincerity about homework, (3) amount of homework, (4) content of homework, (5) difficulty of homework, and (6) feedback to homework. However, even though the categories and also the items in each category were developed based both on the arguments made by scholars and on the discussion with the teachers, they may not be argued to be exhaustive. Also, the division of the categories being arbitrary and the items belonging to each category being inexhaustive, each of the categories should not be interpreted as the construct which the items under each category are intended to measure. For each item in each category a t-test was conducted in order to find out the similarities or differences between the teacher group and the student group.

2) Homework Assignments

The homework assignments collected from the eight middle school English classes were analyzed in six categories, which have been argued by scholars as important considerations in homework assignments: (1) skills required in homework, (2) types of homework, (3) relation to lesson objectives, (4) relation to real-life experience, (5) amount of time required, and (6) provision of guideline or help. However, these categories were considered to be limited in the sense that they did not cover all the factors considered to be necessary for an effective homework assignment. One source of the limitation was that the examples of the homework assignments analyzed in this study were obtained from only one class period and those from other periods were not available to the researcher. Another source of the limitation was that the researcher was not able to obtain any information about what the teachers did after the assignments.

Since one aim of the analysis of homework assignments is to help the teachers recognize how ineffective their homework assignments can be and what they should do to improve their homework assignments, the analysis will focus on the weaknesses of their homework

assignments in each of the six categories. Despite the limited samples of the homework assignments, the weaknesses revealed in the analysis are believed to provide sufficient information on what the teachers can and must do to improve their homework assignments.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Questionnaire Surveys

1) Comparison between Teachers' and Students' Views of Homework

(1) Usefulness of Homework

There seems to be differences as well as similarities between the teachers' and the students' views of the usefulness of homework. As indicated in the responses to Items 2, 3, & 4 in Table 1 below, both the teacher group and the student group do think that homework is necessary even though the students tend to be less positive than the teachers.

There was a discrepancy between what the teachers and the students think about the usefulness of homework as a means to improve one's language ability. As the responses to Item 1 show, the teachers are pretty positive about the contribution of homework to the development of the target language ability, whereas the students are rather negative about it. This discrepancy may be interpreted as the difference in the two groups' views of what is meant by language ability. The students may simply regard language ability as spoken language ability, which is emphasized in their communication-oriented classes, whereas the teachers may regard it as a more comprehensive ability including the lexical and grammatical knowledge.

TABLE 1
Teachers' and Students' Views of Usefulness of Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers (N=85) M (SD)	Students (N=206) M (SD)	t-test (p)
1	Homework is necessary to improve students' language ability.	3.78 (0.75)	2.93 (0.93)	.000***
2	Homework helps students understand what they have learned or what they will learn in class.	3.80 (0.70)	3.28 (1.08)	.000***
3	Homework only deprives students of time for study.	1.92 (0.74)	2.88 (1.11)	.000***
4	Students must be on their own for English study and homework is not necessary.	2.28 (0.93)	2.81 (1.14)	.001***

*P < .05, **P < .01, ***P < .001

(2) Students' Sincerity about Homework

Both the teacher group and the student group think that students are not serious enough in doing their homework (see Items 5 and 10 in Table 2). However, about the role of scoring in making the students do their best doing their homework, the two groups showed quite a difference. As the responses to Item 21 indicate, the teachers think scoring is important in getting the students to do homework, whereas the students do not. This gap between the two groups may reflect the general tendency that students usually do not like to feel stressed with scores. Considering that what is first and foremost important about effective homework is to get the students to complete it doing their best, students' lack of sincerity about their homework is considered a serious problem. In order to solve this problem, efforts must be made to raise the students' motivation above all.

TABLE 2
Teachers' and Students' Views of Students' Sincerity about Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers (N=85) M (SD)	Students (N=206) M (SD)	t-test (p)
5	Students do their best to complete their homework.	2.58 (0.84)	2.81 (1.19)	.084
10	Some students never make any efforts to do their homework.	3.68 (0.98)	3.75 (1.10)	.671
21	If the teacher does not score the students' homework, students do not do their best to do their homework.	4.02 (0.71)	2.83 (1.29)	.000***

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$

(3) Amount of Homework

Regarding the amount (in length and frequency) of homework both the teacher group and the student group seem to agree that too much homework does not help or can even harm the students (see Items 6 & 9 in Table 3). Also, as the responses to Item 8 in the above table show, neither the teacher group nor the student group think that more homework necessarily contributes to better learning.

However, there were some statistical differences in the teachers' and the students' views (See Item 7 and Item 12 in Table 3) regarding whether more homework means more help to the students and regarding whether the teacher gives an appropriate amount of homework. These differences may reflect the general tendency that teachers usually feel that they have to make the students study more through the homework assignment, whereas the students usually do not like to be burdened by homework.

TABLE 3
Teachers' and Students' Views of Amount of Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers (N=85) M (SD)	Students (N=206) M (SD)	t-test (p)
6	As long as it can help the students improve their E. ability a large amount of homework is acceptable.	2.75 (1.05)	2.74 (1.16)	.926
7	Even though students don't like homework, more homework means more help to the students.	3.18 (0.94)	2.87 (1.13)	.050*
8	Teachers who are more enthusiastic in their teaching tend to give more frequent homework assignment.	2.91 (0.84)	3.09 (1.14)	.224
9	If doing homework takes too much time, it can harm one's study.	3.51 (0.93)	3.35 (1.22)	.333
12	The teacher gives the students homework pretty often.	2.65 (0.91)	3.14 (1.03)	.001***

*P < .05, **P < .01, *** P < .001

(4) Content of Homework

About the content of homework the teachers tend to think that it could be on what the students have already learned or what they will learn in class (See Table 4). However, students seem to think that homework should be based on what they have learned in class and they tend to be less positive about the latter type of homework. At least partly, this is probably because students feel more comfortable with the practice type of homework which helps them review their classroom learning than with the other types which make them explore on their own. This result seems to reflect that exploration takes more time and students usually do not like homework which takes too much time.

TABLE 4
Teachers' and Students' Views of Content of Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers (N=85) M (SD)	Students (N=206) M (SD)	t-test (p)
14	Homework must be based on what students have already learned.	3.59 (0.88)	3.54 (1.02)	.751
15	Homework can be on what they have not learned in class so that students could explore on their own.	3.89 (0.67)	3.04 (0.93)	.000***

*P < .05, **P < .01, *** P < .001

(5) Difficulty of Homework

Both the teachers' and the students' responses to the items in Table 5 below reveal that there exist serious individual differences in the same classroom. Thus, as both groups admit (See Item 16), the same homework can be too difficult to slow students, while it can

be too easy to advanced students. This can make both groups of the students feel unchallenged and unmotivated in doing homework. In fact, as revealed in the responses to Items 18 and 19, quite a few students fail to see the value of homework and thus fail to commit themselves in doing homework. In this regard, the teachers (See Item 17) seem to feel more strongly than the students that they need to adjust the difficulty of homework to students of different abilities. This, however, is not an easy matter for the teachers especially due to the large amount of time involved in practicing it. In fact, as the responses to Items 13 and 23 indicate, few teachers seem to practice it currently.

Despite the difficulty involved in the teacher's part, it seems necessary to somehow adjust the difficulty of homework to the different abilities and needs of the students. Otherwise, it seems hard to expect that all the students in the same class could see the value of the homework assignments. In addition, teachers should also be ready to provide help when any of his/her students who has difficulty with the assigned homework. With students who do not feel challenged because the homework is too easy and with students who give up their homework because it is too difficult, it is very doubtful for any homework assignment to achieve its intended goal successfully.

TABLE 5
Teachers' and Students' Views of Difficulty of Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers (N=85) M (SD)	Students (N=206) M (SD)	t-test (p)
11	Students often have difficulty with their homework.	3.51 (0.87)	3.68 (1.12)	.244
13	The teacher assigns different kinds of homework on students of different abilities.	2.20 (0.96)	1.70 (0.94)	.000***
16	The same homework to all the students would mean it is too difficult to some and too easy to others.	3.93 (0.75)	3.61 (1.04)	.020*
17	If possible, students with different abilities need different homework assignments in terms of difficulty.	4.08 (0.74)	3.19 (1.37)	.000***
18	Difficult homework would force some students to rely on other's help.	4.06 (0.76)	3.72 (1.02)	.012*
19	Some students don't understand their homework and just copy other's work.	4.08 (0.83)	3.77 (1.19)	.041*
23	The teacher does not distinguish between slow and advanced students in assigning homework.	3.52 (0.80)	3.41 (1.13)	.452

*P < .05, **P < .01, ***P < .001

(6) Feedback to Homework

Providing appropriate feedback to students' completed homework has been argued important in enhancing the effectiveness of the homework assignment. Despite its importance, however, many teachers have expressed that one of the difficulties they face

with homework practice is giving appropriate feedback to individual students' work. The survey results also revealed this known difficulty. As indicated in the responses to item 24 in Table 6, the teachers feel that due to the time constraint, giving feedback to individual students' work is very difficult and the students also understood the difficulty fairly well.

Regarding the scoring, considered to be one type of feedback, the teachers' responses to Item 20, along with the responses to Item 21 in Table 2, seem to show that students are sensitive to scores and it is necessary to score their work to make them more dedicated to doing homework. However, the students' responses to the same items show that students usually do not enjoy being scored on their homework.

TABLE 6
Teachers' and Students' Views of Feedback to Homework

Item No.	Content	Teachers	Students	t-test (p)
		(N=85) M (SD)	(N=206) M (SD)	
20	It is necessary to distinguish by score between students who make efforts and those who do not in doing their homework.	3.85 (0.87)	2.95 (1.29)	.000***
22	The teacher always gives appropriate feedback to students' homework.	3.29 (0.86)	2.91 (1.07)	.008**
24	It is often impossible for the teacher to give individual students enough feedback on their homework.	3.60 (0.85)	3.42 (1.10)	.211

*P < .05, **P < .01, ***P < .001

2) Summary of Similarities between Teachers' and Students' Views about Homework

The comparison of the responses to each questionnaire item by the teachers and by the students reveals that there are similarities as well as differences between the two groups in their views about homework. As has been indicated in the Tables above, both groups view that students are not very sincere about homework, and that an appropriate amount of homework is necessary and too much homework does not help the learning process. In addition, the responses of both groups also show that differentiated homework in terms of difficulty that considers individual differences in language ability is necessary. Another view shared by the two groups is that appropriate feedback to students' homework is necessary despite the difficulty involved in practicing them.

From the responses of the two groups one can figure out that the homework practices in the middle school English classes today can hardly be considered to be ideal and have much room to be improved. Making the students commit themselves to doing their homework requires the homework assignment to be meaningful and challenging, much of which the teacher is responsible for.

3) Summary of Differences between Teachers' and Students' Views about Homework

As has been indicated in the Tables above, the teachers' and the students' responses to many items in the questionnaire show statistically significant differences, some of which revealing quite a serious gap between the two groups in their views about homework. The different views between the two groups are in various points including the contribution of homework in the development of language ability and the importance of homework in the learning process.

What draws our attention is the fact that the students are generally more negative than the teachers, suggesting that something must have been wrong in the teachers' homework assignments or in the students' attitude toward the assignments. Without the efforts to remove or at least diminish the observed discrepancy between the two groups, therefore, it is very doubtful for the teaching to achieve its intended goal in any successful sense.

2. Teachers' Homework Assignments

It was found through the observation of the eight classes that the teachers, whose goal of teaching was to develop the communicative language ability in their students, actually gave their students homework which was hardly considered to match their teaching goal. Their homework assignments were hardly considered to be different from those found in the traditional English classes following the grammar-translation method (see Appendix for details). What the teachers did through the homework assignments was basically forcing their students to memorize or copy down the material already learned or to be learned in class. Their homework assignments were far from those designed to extend the learning in the communication-oriented classroom. Thus, what the students did in doing homework was basically little more than a rote practice.

With the kind of homework which hardly matches the lesson objectives, it was considered impossible to make homework beneficial to the students in developing communicative language ability. Described in the following are the weaknesses found in the teachers' homework assignments. Even though the categories of weaknesses as described below may not be exhaustive, they are considered to be sufficient to give the readers information about what was wrong with the teachers' homework assignments in the observed classes.

1) Limited Skill Areas Required

Homework assignments can ask the students to use different skill areas: reading, writing, memorization, rehearsal, and so on (Cooper, 1994). Also, more than one skill can be

involved in one assignment. However, the homework assignments analyzed (e.g., Classes A, C, D, & G) tend to focus mostly on either memorization of words or writing down words or sentences that are in the textbook. This is quite understandable in the sense that in the communication-oriented English classes, as currently practiced in our middle schools, the teacher mostly focuses on the spoken language and little time is available for the written language and homework is a good chance to make up for the neglected areas. However, the problem is that the written task itself is usually so simple and tedious that it can hardly help the students develop higher-order thinking skills. Given the claim that the most suitable assignments engage the students in higher-order thinking and is given in a variety of forms (Kazmierzak, 1994), this is obviously a weakness of the assignments.

2) Limited Types of Homework

There are different types of homework including the practice type, preparation type, extension type, integration type, and creation type (Wallinger, 2000). Among the various types of homework the most frequently assigned types were the practice type (e.g., Classes A, D, E, G, & H) and the preparation type (e.g., Classes, B, C, & F). There was no extension, integration, or creation type of homework. Considering that different types of homework are intended to accomplish different purposes, it will be natural to suspect that the limited types of homework can satisfy only limited purposes. In addition, given the claim that the type of homework assignment is more important than the time spent on homework or its completion (Kazmierzak, 1994), teachers must recognize that simply having the students spend a lot of time memorizing the words or dialogue or having them write down the alphabet or the new words can not help the students very much.

3) Mismatch Between Lesson Objectives and Homework

The homework assigned by the teachers also failed to match the lesson objectives as well as the teaching style. As is well revealed in the lesson objectives and homework assignments (See Appendix), while their classroom teaching focused on communication, the teachers' homework assignments mostly emphasized memorization or rote practice. With this mismatch between the lesson objectives and the homework assignments, it is natural that the students lose opportunities to extend, deepen, and internalize what they have learned in the classroom. The lesson objectives as well as the teaching style and the homework assignment must go together in order to achieve a desirable result of the teaching. It is very unfortunate that this very basic requirement is not satisfied in the teachers' homework assignments.

4) Little Relation to Real-life Experience

None of the eight homework assignments required the students to relate what they had learned in the classroom to their real-life experience. This lack of relation between the school learning and the real-life experience is in a sense a result of too much teacher control on homework. By not allowing the students any freedom to experiment with what they have learned in class but only asking them to do exactly what they were told to do, the teachers forced all the students to come up with the same answer or product regardless of their personal experiences in the real world, which is not recommendable in the communicative language teaching.

With the teachers' excessive control on what to do with homework, the teachers not only deprive the students of time for making efforts to relate their learning in class to their real life, but also make them feel that homework is meaningless, unchallenging, and boring. In order to motivate the students to study English harder, teachers need to develop homework assignments that are more related to the students' personal experiences in the real life.

What also needs to be mentioned here is a very basic but often forgotten point that an English homework assignment should require the students to study English. Asking the students to "learn the names of the cities that will host the next World Cup" (Class B) cannot be an assignment for the subject of English even though it certainly is related to the real world. This is because, as can be figured out, students do not have to use English at all in order to complete this kind of homework; all they have to do is just ask anyone around him/her to get the answer and it is finished! This kind of homework makes one suspect that the teacher does not have an appropriate concept of English homework.

5) Inappropriate Amount of Time Required

A discussion on the amount of homework should include both the length and frequency of homework (Wallinger, 2000). However, since the eight assignments analyzed in the present study were only from one class period, there is no way to tell about the frequency of homework. Thus, the discussion on the amount of homework here will be limited to the length of homework.

For homework to help the students internalize what they have learned in the classroom making up for lack of class time, it will be necessary to make the students spend a reasonable amount of time. In other words, the students must have an appropriate length of homework. Homework should not be too long or too short. However, the eight homework assignments revealed that the teachers were not quite aware of this matter. The time required in completing the homework was quite different from homework to homework. Some of them can take quite a little time (e.g., Classes C, D, E, & G), while some others

can take only a few minutes (e.g., Classes B & H).

Even though it may be true, as revealed in the analysis of the questionnaire (See Item 6 in Table 7) that homework should not require an excessive amount of time, it is still believed that a homework assignment should make the students spend some time with the target language in order to fulfill the role. Making the students get the right answer in one minute by asking other people around him/her (e.g., Class B), or allowing them ignore homework because the teacher would not know whether they actually did it or not (e.g., Class F), will never help the students develop the target language ability.

6) Lack of a Specific Guideline or Help for Doing Homework

Through the observation of the classes it was found that the teachers gave no further information than was described in their lesson plans regarding what the students have to do to complete their homework. All they did was just making an announcement about what the students must do by the next class. This lack of specific guideline or help for doing homework may not be a problem when the homework itself is obvious enough or easy enough not to require any guideline or help. However, homework assignments such as “Learn the names of the cities that will host the next World Cup.” (Class B) or “Prepare new words for ‘Read and Think’ part.” (Class F) could be too vague for the students. The teacher needs to provide an answer to “How?” For instance, in the case of Class B students must be given an instruction on where to check (e.g., an English internet site) to learn the names. Otherwise, it is very possible that they will just ask someone around them to get the answer, which cannot help them study English at all. Also, in the case of Class F the assignment should be more specific to ensure that the students do the homework. With such an assignment as was given in Class F there is no way for the teacher to know whether the students actually did the homework or not. Thus, it is very possible that not all the students will feel obliged to do the homework with such an assignment.

Such lack of a specific guideline or help for doing homework also reflects that there was little consideration about individual differences in the language ability, a serious problem in our English classes today. Thus, the same homework assignment with no consideration of the students’ different ability levels could be too easy for the advanced students and too difficult for the slow students.

Given the time constraint, this lack of consideration about individual differences is quite understandable. However, it should also be remembered that in order to make homework to be effective and beneficial to all the students, individual students’ different needs should be met. If it is impossible to adapt the difficulty of homework to different individual abilities, it would be necessary for the teacher to provide some specific guideline or help with a model when decided necessary.

Thus far, some of the weaknesses found in the examination of the teachers' homework assignments were described. One of the main sources of the weaknesses is considered to be the teachers' lack of knowledge and techniques for effective homework assignments. No one can teach what he/she does not know. It seems definitely necessary, therefore, to provide the teachers with enough opportunities to receive the necessary training in this matter.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the results of the questionnaire and homework analyses, it is concluded that the teachers in our middle school English classes do not fully understand what to do with homework and their assignments do not contribute very much to helping their students in the learning process. In order to help the teachers improve the quality of their homework assignments, therefore, it is absolutely necessary for teacher educators, textbook writers and material developers to pay more attention to what the teachers need. Unfortunately, however, there has been little advice for the teachers on what to do with homework. Thus far, even when the teacher turns to the textbook for help in planning lessons, very few textbooks include material explicitly designed for homework, or provide guidance on how to adapt activities as homework tasks. In order to make the teaching in the classroom more effective, therefore, more attention and efforts are required in this regard.

Described in the following are some suggestions that might have to be considered to improve the current situation:

First, teacher educators should provide the necessary training for knowledge and techniques for effective homework assignments. Despite the communicative language teaching advocated in the syllabus, most middle school English teachers still follow a rather conventional approach in their practice of homework. Those teachers mostly use traditional activities which typically involve reinforcement of the points covered in class. It must be said that the teachers do not have a very clear idea about what to do with homework. One cannot be expected to teach what s/he does not know. Without the necessary training and specific guidelines, therefore, it is very possible that the teachers continue practicing what they currently do, which is far from an ideal and cannot be of much help to the students.

Second, textbook writers and material developers should provide the guideline with specific examples of homework on which the teachers can rely for the preparation of their own homework assignments. At the present time almost everything including the content, amount, and frequency of homework is up to individual teachers. As a result, individual teachers assign homework based on their own judgments, which unfortunately can hardly

be considered ideal enough. Quite naturally, it can be easily assumed that through the different homework assignments in terms of quality and quantity, the students, taught by different teachers, are not provided with the same quality of education. In fact, there are teachers who rarely assign homework to their students. Also, there are teachers, as we have seen in the analysis of the data, whose homework assignments are too weak in quality to be of any help to the students in developing the target language ability.

Third, the analyses of the questionnaire responses and teachers' homework assignments give a strong impression that not very many middle school English teachers make enough efforts in preparing the assignment, thoroughly explaining it, and giving prompt comments and criticism, when their students have completed the work. In fact, there are not a few teachers in the field who rarely give out homework to their students. Unless the teachers themselves feel more responsibility for the effectiveness of homework assignments, it is very doubtful that any help from outside will bring about any good result. Of course, there is a lot of difficulty that discourages the teachers. This difficulty itself, however, does not make a reasonable excuse for lack of efforts itself.

Fourth, providing appropriate feedback to students' homework is part of the teaching and it would be the teacher's responsibility to do it. However, this very basic job for the teacher itself is quite demanding and time-consuming, and it is true that few teachers provide their students with enough feedback. Though this lack of feedback is quite understandable considering the time constraint teachers experience, this still may not be a reasonable excuse. Teachers, therefore, will need to develop ways to compensate for lack of time. One possibility could be using the teacher's homepage.

For many teachers who understand its importance, homework is a major source of concern. If homework is to achieve its intended goal in the learning process, what is first and foremost necessary for the teacher is to make sure that their students do it by making homework fun to them, relevant to their needs, and matching to their preferences. In addition, the teacher must also remember that it is necessary to assign appropriate amount of homework both in length and frequency. A homework assignment which is not relevant to the students' needs, which does not match the students' interests and learning preferences, or which overburdens the students will not be successful in making them see its value. It must be borne in mind that such an assignment can neither make the students commit their time nor be helpful in achieving its intended goal. In order to make the teachers' homework assignments achieve their intended goal, helping the students in their learning process, efforts must be made by all those directly or indirectly involved in the teaching.

There are limitations to this study. One limitation is that just like most previous homework studies (Wallinger, 2000), this study also relied much for its arguments on the results of the surveys from the teacher group and the student group. This has led a

questionable reliability and accuracy of the information that has been collected. Moreover, in order to carry out a significant homework study, many teachers and students must be sampled (Wallinger, 2000). However, by using as the teacher sample only 85 middle teachers from the 16 middle schools easily accessible to the researcher and by using as the student sample six classes only, each of which was randomly selected from the 16 schools, the study showed weaknesses in the representativeness of the samples and the survey results may not reflect exactly the same views and attitudes as each population has.

Another limitation is that in order to investigate what the homework assignments by middle school English teachers are like, the study used data from the observation of eight middle school English classes. However, eight classes are considered quite limited in number. Moreover, each of the eight classes, especially prepared for the observation by the visiting school inspectors and teachers from outside, may not reflect the kind of classes that middle school English teachers normally teach.

Despite all those inherent limitations in the process of data gathering, however, it is hoped that the result of the study can help the teachers develop insights into effective homework assignments and thus contribute to the improvement of the homework assignments in our middle school English classes.

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APPENDIX

Examples of Lesson Objectives and Homework

	<i>Lesson Objectives</i>	<i>Homework</i>
	1. Students will be able to understand and say the traffic signs and signals.	
Class A	2. Students will be able to know and express Busan Subway Network and Busan Symbol Mark.	Write Italic alphabet three times.
	3. Students will be able to tell “Let’s”, “Let me”, “We should” ----	
	1. Students will be able to read and understand the short passage on sports.	
Class B	2. Students will be able to answer the reading comprehension questions.	Preview the next lesson; Read 2.
	3. Students will be able to understand the expressions of ‘every ----’.	Learn the names of the cities that will host the next World Cup.
	4. Students will be able to memorize sentences by doing a ‘Wall Dictation’.	
	1. Low level: Being able to talk about simple symptoms of sicknesses	For next reading task, preview the new words by looking up the dictionary. Write the new words, pronunciations, and meanings on your notebook.
Class C	2. Intermediate level: Being able to ask and talk about various symptoms	
	3. High level: Being able to write about their own health condition	
Class D	1. Students can listen and understand a funny story.	Memorize the words. You’ll have a quiz next class.
	2. Students can remake and tell the story.	Worksheet-1:
	1. The students can make comparing sentences with the chart.	Make comparisons of the words provided below and write down five sentences.
Class E	2. The students can describe facts with the expression, ‘There is(are)-’.	Worksheet-2: Using the picture provided make 13 sentences using “There is/are ~.”
	1. Students can get knowledge of the kinds of hobbies and use the related expressions fluently.	
Class F	2. Students can understand the meaning of auxiliary verb “can” and put it to the practical use.	Prepare new words for “Read and Think” part.
	1. Students can understand the dialogue of the different opinions about men and women.	
Class G	2. Students can express their different opinions about men and women.	Memorize the dialogue that you learned today.
	1. Students can read and understand the main idea of the text.	
Class H	2. Students can know about Australia.	Solve the crossword puzzle about Australia.
	3. Students can talk about Australia.	

Applicable level: Middle School

Key words: homework, assignment, middle school English

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Received in August, 2005

Reviewed in September, 2005

Revised version received in November, 2005