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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

Homework: Voices from EFL teachers and learners

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have mainly focused on homework in courses such as math and physics with little attention to homework in EFL (English as a foreign language) classes. The main purpose of the study reported in this paper was to give a voice to both EFL teachers and learners with regard to English homework. To this end, 8 EFL teachers and 19 EFL learners took part in a semi-structured interview first. Then, based on their responses to the interview questions and a comprehensive review of the literature, a questionnaire was developed and validated to investigate EFL learners' and teachers' perspectives on different aspects of English homework. The questionnaire was finally completed by 283 EFL learners and 46 English teachers from two famous English institutions in Iran. Results revealed that English homework can help EFL learners with their language learning apart from enabling them to improve their reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. However, the homework assignments that are currently being used are not very interesting and do not help EFL learners improve all their English skills. The majority of EFL learners usually finish their homework in a hurry just before class begins; others do not spend the time that their teachers require them to spend on doing homework. English teachers should, therefore, design homework based on their students' needs and interests as well as resort to employing modern opportunities such as online resources and self-access centers.

Keywords: homework; out-of-class learning; voice; needs; interest

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 10 Dec. 2015

Revised version received: 20 Feb. 2016

Accepted: 1 June 2016

Available online: 1 July 2016

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Introduction

Homework is a widespread educational activity that has been long viewed as an important part of the teaching–learning process (Xu & Wu, 2013). Homework is believed to have beneficial effects, such as increasing students’ learning immersion time and helping them consolidate their learning, get better scores in tests, become self-regulated, develop good study habits, and practically use their knowledge (Bembenutty, 2011; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Tam & Chan, 2010; Trautwein & Koller, 2003; Xu, 2010; Xu & Wu, 2013). There are, however, scholars who argue that homework is a waste of time and energy and that it can have detrimental effects on students’ health and learning (Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Loveless, 2014).

EFL learners around the world are also given homework to increase their exposure to English, to reinforce and help them retain their English knowledge, and to enable them to continue their language learning even outside educational institutions (Wallinger, 2000). Unfortunately, over the last century, scholars in the field of English teaching and learning have mostly focused on classroom-based learning and on “how the classroom, together with teachers, learners, and learning resources can provide the necessary conditions for learning to occur” (Richards, 2015, p. 6). Out-of-class learning, which usually occurs through doing homework, has not received the attention it deserves (Nunan & Richards, 2015).

To investigate English homework, the present study sets out to give a voice to two groups of English teachers and learners from two different English institutes with different policies toward homework.

Homework: Proponents and opponents

Two strands of research are relevant for this study: one focusing on the pedagogical benefits of homework and the other on its drawbacks. For proponents, homework is considered an important vehicle through which students learn better and achieve educational goals faster (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Katz, Kaplan, & Buzukashvily, 2011; Warton, 2001). These scholars contend that homework makes students spend more time on their lessons, which can contribute to their learning success. According to these scholars, homework informs parents of the events within the classroom and encourages them to sit beside their children to help and to monitor their progress. Furthermore, homework can inform teachers about their students’ strengths and weaknesses, which would enable them to plan instructional materials and classroom activities accordingly. Moreover, the results of some studies (Plant, Ericsson, Hill, & Asberg, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003) show a positive relationship between homework time and achievement scores.

Conversely, the opponents of homework argue that the drawbacks of homework outweigh its benefits and that homework should be either limited or abandoned (Kralovec & Buell, 2001; Loveless, 2014; Mikk, 2006; Swank, 1999; Trautwein & Koller, 2003). According to these scholars, homework is a nightly grind that stresses students and deprives them of rest and play. The opponents also believe that homework has little to do with increasing students’ achievements. Homework does not have a pleasant image for this group. For them, homework means punishment imparted by teachers, long hours of sitting for a boring and tiring thing, and a waste of time and energy (Loveless, 2014). Interestingly, some scholars (Kralovec & Buell, 2001; Swank, 1999; Trautwein & Koller, 2003) argue that homework assignments can lead to a loss of interest in education and learning due to the burnout that these assignments cause. Moreover, Mikk (2006) asserts that homework can have destructive effects if it is the basis of classroom discussion and

teaching, and if it is a part of the final score. Similarly, Kralovec and Buell (2000) believe the following:

Homework may increase time-on-desk for better students from better homes, but at the same time, for disadvantaged children create frustrating situations that are detrimental to learning. In such cases, homework can contribute to a social ill rather than help remedy it. (p.67)

Taken together, what is unequivocal in the literature is that many studies with inconclusive results have been done on homework. These studies have mostly concentrated either on homework, in general, or on homework in subjects such as math and physics. However, English homework has been under-researched in the literature.

Critical pedagogy and the concept of voice

The tenet behind a critical pedagogy is that the quality of teaching and learning should be increased by ensuring they are based on equality, justice, and morality. According to a critical pedagogy, education is a social process that has the major goal of enhancing the academic success of students, thus enabling them to change society for the better (Mallot, 2011). This can be achieved by making students and teachers critical thinkers who can make educational reforms by questioning the status quo and challenging traditional assumptions and patterns (Haque, 2007; Olivos & Quintana de Valladolid, 2005; Wink, 2000). This notion is contrary to the traditional approaches to education that considered teachers as the sources of knowledge and students as empty cups, and that provided teachers with materials and tools by means of which they transmitted their knowledge to their students (Sahragard, Razmjoo, & Baharloo, 2014). These approaches failed to establish a connection between different aspects of education and students' lives and failed to consider the active role that teachers and students can play in the teaching-learning process (Abednia, 2009). These shortcomings urged scholars to develop a critical pedagogy that seeks to ensure the social relevance of education by relating classroom practices to the real lives of teachers and students (Kumaravadivelu, 2009).

To develop such pedagogy, teaching and learning environments must be dialogic, provide empowerment, and incorporate the concept of voice (Haque, 2007). The concept of *voice* refers to any attempts that are made to elicit and respond to teachers' and students' perspectives on their experiences of educational patterns and practices (Cook-Sather, 2006; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). It involves consulting teachers and students while regarding them as the most significant agents of educational reforms in the critical analysis of educational issues and practices (Rudduck, 2007). Rudduck believes that students and teachers can make a huge contribution to the betterment and empowerment of teaching and learning if they are listened to. He believes that by consulting teachers and students, valuable insights can be obtained about what learning and educational practices resemble from different perspectives. This consultation can lead to a review and, as a result, to the improvement of the available pedagogical practices. It can also provide teachers and students with a sense of self-esteem, agency, and membership, which can increase their motivation and engagement. Unfortunately, teachers' and students' voices are lacking in the studies that are supposed to affect them (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013).

English homework, the focus of this study, is an educational practice that is inculcated in learners with the aim of improving the quality of their language learning and development. As such, teachers should try to increase the effectiveness of homework assignments through incorporating effective and interesting tasks and activities and encouraging learners to spend more time on them. To do so, based on the notions of the critical pedagogy, one must listen to teachers' and students' voices

to see how they feel toward homework assignments and also as to what improvements should be made. This can help teachers stand out of their practice and assess it from a wider perspective (Tin, 2006). By doing so, improvement can be obtained in English homework and, as a result, in out-of-class learning, which mostly occurs through doing homework in developing countries such as Iran.

While issues related to areas such as lesson planning and methodology are frequently discussed and studied, issues related to homework are rarely addressed in the field of language teaching and learning (Fukuda & Yoshida, 2012; North & Pillay, 2002; Nunan & Richards, 2015). It is, therefore, imperative to study issues related to English homework and find ways to improve it.

Research questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the benefits of homework for EFL learners?
- (2) Can homework help EFL learners improve their speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar?
- (3) Can homework help parents monitor their children's learning of English?
- (4) Are EFL learners and teachers satisfied with the current homework assignments and the way these assignments are treated?
- (5) When do EFL learners do their homework and how many hours of homework do they do for each session of the class that they attend?
- (6) What types of homework assignments do EFL learners prefer to have?

Method

Participants

The sample of the study included 329 participants comprising 283 EFL learners and 46 English teachers. The participants of the study were selected from two famous and prestigious institutes in Iran; institute A (henceforth IA) and institute B (henceforth IB). The EFL learners who participated in this study were learning English in different levels from elementary to advanced at the adult departments of these institutes in the Spring semester of 2014. They attended two sessions of the English classes a week. Their age ranged from 16 to 42, and their degrees ranged from high school diploma to Ph.D. The teachers' age, on the contrary, ranged from 21 to 56, and their degrees ranged from B.A. to Ph.D. in English Language Teaching, English Translation, or English Literature. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants of the study.

Table 1
Participants' characteristics

	IA Teachers	IA Students	IB Teachers	IB Students
Number	22	148	24	135
Male	18	82	7	84
Female	4	66	17	51
Age	23-56	16- 42	22-45	16-36
Degree	B.A to Ph.D.	Diploma to Ph.D.	B.A. and M.A.	Diploma to M.A.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. IA students and teachers were selected to listen to the voices and to attend to the perspectives of those who had experienced an educational context in which homework is mandatory and is strictly controlled, corrected, and marked by the teachers. IB teachers and students were selected to have the voices and perspectives of those who had experienced an educational context in which homework is not strictly treated and is done at the teachers and students' ease and convenience.

The context of the study

As mentioned, the participants of the quantitative phase of the study were recruited from IA and IB. The reason that these institutes were selected was because they have different policies toward homework. To gain insights into each institute's homework policy, at first, the researcher examined the materials, teachers' manuals, and observation forms of each institute. Then, based on the information obtained from the previous stage as well as the researcher's experience of cooperation with these institutes, the information was prepared, reviewed, and, finally, checked by some experienced teachers and classroom observers at each institute to ensure its credibility.

Homework is a mandatory practice at IA, and the students are required to do homework assignments nearly for all the sessions related to the classes that they attend. Homework assignments for EFL learners at IA involve the following: (1) using the new vocabulary elements in sentences at lower levels and writing paragraphs or essays at higher levels; (2) making wh-questions for the new passages and dialogues studied in the classroom; (3) memorizing the dialogues and summarizing the passages already taught; and (4) doing the assignments in their workbooks after each unit is finished. The assignments in their workbooks include vocabulary, grammar, writing, and communicative activities. The assignments are checked in the following ways: (1) for oral assignments (memorization of dialogues and/or oral summary of passages), the students are randomly called to the board one by one or two by two. During each session, several students are called to the board. If a student is not ready, a not ready (NR) sign is indicated in his/her grade sheet. When the students come to the board, they have to bring along with them their written assignments (wh-questions and sentences) to be checked, corrected, and marked by teachers. If necessary, the teachers sometimes write some comments that are intended for the students or for their parents; and (2) for the assignments in the workbooks, when each unit is finished, the related homework assignments must be done by the students at home. During the session after this one, the teachers check the students one by one to ensure that all the students do their assignments correctly and on their own. Then, the teachers call the students one by one to

read out their assignments to be checked and scored. If the teachers neglect homework at IA or do not treat it as required, they will be given warnings by class observers that can affect the raise in their salary. The teachers' grade sheets have a column that is specifically devoted to the scores allocated to the students' assignments, and the scores given for homework count toward their final score.

On the other hand, homework assignments for EFL learners at IB should include the following: (1) working on dialogues and listening parts before they are taught in the class; (2) doing the writing tasks assigned by the teachers; and (3) doing the workbook assignments, which include vocabulary, structure, reading comprehension, and communicative activities. At IB, homework assignments are usually done at the teachers and students' ease and convenience. The teachers either neglect the assignments or just assign those parts of homework that students find problematic. Unlike IA, homework is not usually a routine practice in IB classes. Volunteers are usually asked to do the assignments. Homework assignments are not usually marked and do not affect the final score.

Instruments

The interview

Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) recommend that to devise a new instrument such as a questionnaire, a short-scale exploratory qualitative study (i.e. an interview in the case of this study) must be conducted first. Therefore, to gain insights into the Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perspectives on the issues related to English homework, a semi-structured interview was first carried out preceded by a comprehensive review of the literature. The interview consisted of the following four questions: (1) What do you think about English homework? (2) Is it good to give homework to EFL learners? Why? (3) Can homework help EFL learners improve their speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar? (4) What are the challenges to English homework? Based on Brown's (2001) suggestion, the interview was conducted in Persian to minimize the measurement errors. The general structure of the interview was based on Lynch's (1996) interview guide.

All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and content-analyzed to discover potential patterns and themes. A systematic approach suggested by Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010), which consists of three coding stages, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, was employed to codify the raw data. To check the validity of the patterns and themes extracted, peer debriefing was used, which involved an external check by an experienced and knowledgeable EFL teacher and researcher. This person was provided with the data, which had to be critically examined and checked to ensure the validity and feasibility of the data obtained and also of the themes and patterns extracted.

The participants of the qualitative phase of the study were 8 EFL teachers and 19 EFL learners who were selected through purposive sampling. The teachers were EFL teachers who had experience of teaching English for more than 10 years in different institutes and centers in Iran. Six of the teachers held M.A. degrees and two of them held Ph.D. degrees in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The students were senior EFL learners at different institutes in Isfahan, Iran. The teachers and the students were selected from different institutes; these institutes had different materials and various types of homework, which enabled perspectives from different contexts.

The questionnaire

To delve deeper into the categories and concepts drawn from the qualitative phase of the study, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire containing 24 items was used. To develop the questionnaire, at first, 29 items were extracted and listed based on the comprehensive analysis of the literature and the concepts drawn from the qualitative phase of the study. Then, the items were reviewed; the items that were identified as repetitive or overlapping were eliminated; and the number of the potential items was reduced to 27. The available items were classified into seven major categories, which asked for the participants' perspectives on the following: (1) the benefits of homework for EFL learners; (2) the impact of homework on different English skills and sub-skills; (3) homework and parents' monitoring; (4) satisfaction with English homework and the way it is treated; (5) time spent on homework; (6) homework time; and (7) the preferred English homework assignments.

The anchor points for part one, part two, and part three ranged from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree. On the other hand, the items available in the other parts were rated based on the following anchor points: 1: not at all, 2: slightly satisfied, 3: moderately satisfied, 4: very satisfied, 5: extremely satisfied for *part four*; 1: no time, 2: half an hour or less, 3: half an hour to 1 hour, 4: 1 to 2 hours, 5: 2 to 3 hours, and 6: more than 3 hours for each session that students attend their English class for *part five*; and 1: on several occasions between two class intervals, 2: at the first possible time after the class, 3: before the next session starts at home (for example, the next session is on Wednesday evening at 6 and before the students leave for the institute, they do their homework), and 4: before the next session starts at the institute for *part six*. Part seven was only completed by the students; they were provided with seven options and also a space to choose and/or to write down (if the preferred ones were not included) the English assignments they preferred. They were informed that they could choose more than one option. The options available to them were as follows: (1) fill-in-the-blank assignments, (2) multiple-choice assignments, (3) matching assignments, (4) writing assignments, (5) listening-based assignments, (6) video-based assignments, and (7) reading-based assignments. These items were prepared based on the results of the qualitative phase of the study and the homework assignments available in different English textbooks (see Appendix 1).

The questionnaire was then subject to review for content validity by six experts in the field of English learning and teaching and three experts in the field of education; necessary changes were made based on their validation. The final format of the questionnaire was given to a group of 45 English teachers and 105 EFL learners who were comparable to the participants of the study; the aim was to explore the reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire. The results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests showed that the KMO was above 0.6 ($\alpha = 0.803 > 0.6$) and the P value was smaller than 0.05 ($P = 0.00$), indicating the suitability of data for factor analysis. Then, confirmatory factor analysis was used to check factor loadings. Through this process, three items were eliminated because they showed either low or high factor loadings. The number of the items was, therefore, reduced to 24. Finally, the reliability of different parts of the questionnaire was assessed through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All the Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.8, suggesting a very good degree of internal consistency reliability.

After getting the necessary permission and observing the related ethical issues, the participants were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire preceded by a brief explanation of the purpose and nature of the study. To minimize the measurement errors, the Persian equivalent of the questionnaire was given to the participants.

Results

The interview results

For the qualitative phase of the study, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, codified, and categorized using the procedures mentioned earlier. In this stage, the objective was to find any specific examples of English teachers' and students' perspectives on English homework in their answers to the interview questions. For the first and the second interview questions, the instances of the teachers' and students' responses were as follows: "practice makes perfect and English homework is a way to practice English lessons," "homework can help students to learn more," "homework can help EFL learners to be prepared for the exams," and "homework can make language learners take responsibility for their own learning." In general, the participants of the qualitative phase of the study believed that homework can enhance the quality of English learning because English homework can help language learners understand their English lessons better, review the learned materials and elements, use the learned materials and elements in meaningful contexts, and have a regular plan for their English learning.

As for the third interview question, varied answers and perspectives were given. Some students and teachers believed that English homework can only improve English reading and writing but not English listening and speaking. In their perspectives, most of the homework given to EFL learners contains assignments that focus on linguistic elements such as vocabulary and grammar, and these assignments cannot prepare EFL learners for meaningful interactions. They also believed that communicative assignments available in workbooks are usually done individually and are not, therefore, effective. They believed that there should be assignments that involve meaningful interactions through pair work or group work.

Others, on the other hand, believed that communicative assignments such as making a conversation or completing an incomplete conversation at home can increase EFL learners' communicative abilities and pragmatic knowledge, thus improving their speaking ability. They also believed that the assignments on vocabulary elements and structures can help EFL learners know how to use them appropriately, and in this way their communicative abilities would improve. Some of the students, however, criticized the available homework assignments as being mostly mechanical. They believed that EFL learners are mostly given fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice assignments that are not very interesting and effective. In their opinion, "there should be assignments that are based on interesting English videos or interesting English audios." The teachers also believed that there is ample evidence in the literature about the effectiveness of language learning strategies but that no homework assignments are usually given on them.

For the last part of the interview that asked the participants about the challenges to English homework, both the teachers and the students believed that "EFL learners do not take their homework assignments seriously and do not do them well." They also believed that EFL learners need to do their homework on several occasions between two class intervals to have the benefit of being exposed to the learned materials and elements and review them over and over again. However, in their opinion, "EFL learners either spend no time or spend the minimum amount of time on their homework assignments" and they sometimes do them "in a hurry before the teachers come to the class or even copy their friends' and classmates' assignments." In their opinion, this is so because EFL learners do not like the available assignments, or they are busy with their lessons at school or university, or with their jobs at work. They believed that parents cannot monitor their children's English learning through homework and are unable to give them the necessary support and encouragement, because most parents either are very busy or do not know English. With the aim of solving these problems, the teachers suggested that English homework should be short and varied as well as based on the language learners' understanding and English proficiency.

Both the students and teachers also believed that homework assignments should not be just limited to the tasks and activities included in the textbooks. They suggested that teachers or institutes can prepare a collection of English movies, audio clips, magazines, newspapers, and passages for the students; they could allow the students to go through the collection, work on those parts that are based on their needs and interests, and report back a summary to the classroom. They also believed that as homework, students can be encouraged or even required to get into online chat rooms, interact with others in English, and/or use the online sources available to improve their English.

In conclusion, based on the analysis of the responses to the interview questions, the following themes and categories were induced: (1) the benefits of English homework; (2) the impact of homework on different English skills and sub-skills; (3) English homework and parents' monitoring; (4) satisfaction with English homework; (5) time spent on English homework; (6) homework time; and (7) the preferred English assignments.

The questionnaire results

According to Oxford (1990, p. 300), the mean scores of questionnaire items that fall between 3.40 and 5.0 are identified as "high." The examination of the participants' responses to the response categories available in parts one to four of the questionnaire also revealed that a mean score of 3.40 and higher can show that the majority of the participants (higher than 50%) selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for the items available in parts one, two, and three, and "satisfied" and "very satisfied" for the items available in part four. For the convenience of comparison and presentation, the mean scores and the standard deviation for these parts are presented and used in the result section. However, because of the nature of the response categories in parts five, six, and seven of the questionnaire, the percentage of the responses to each response category is presented and used for these parts.

Benefits of homework for EFL learners

As can be seen from Table 2, the mean scores for all the items except for items 8 and 10 are higher than 3.40. The analysis of the responses to these items also showed that the majority of the teachers and students (more than 50%) at both IA and IB selected "agree" and "strongly agree" in response to these items.

Table 2
Benefits of homework for EFL learners

Homework can help EFL learners.....	IA		T		IB		T	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. review the materials	3.81	0.91	4.71	0.47	4.26	0.61	4.10	0.44
2. get prepared for English exams	3.77	0.96	4.76	0.43	4.00	0.95	4.15	0.48
3. understand their lessons better	3.98	0.87	4.76	0.43	4.30	0.81	4.25	0.78
4. communicatively use the learned materials and elements	4.00	0.86	4.65	0.49	4.17	0.85	4.42	0.60
5. consolidate their English knowledge	3.61	1.11	4.41	0.87	4.04	0.86	4.10	0.71
6. recognize their weaknesses and strengths	4.11	0.65	4.35	0.86	4.24	0.79	4.05	0.99
7. take responsibility for their own learning	3.50	1.16	4.47	0.62	3.78	1.01	3.63	1.01
8. become self-regulated	3.30	0.9	4.56	0.81	3.23	1.14	3.30	0.86
9. make less mistakes	4.00	0.73	4.38	0.61	3.96	0.85	4.25	0.55
10. become more fluent in English	3.04	1.10	3.07	0.98	3.37	1.23	3.25	0.99

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, M = mean, SD = standard deviation

However, for item 8, more than 55% of IA students and IB teachers and students either had no idea about or disagreed with the idea that English homework can make language learners self-regulated. The majority of IA teachers, on the other hand, selected "agree" or "strongly agree" in

response to this item. For item 10, the majority of IA and IB students and teachers (more than 70%) either had no idea about or disagreed with the statement that homework can make EFL learners fluent in English.

The impacts of homework on different English skills and sub-skills

Table 3 shows the participants' perspectives about the impacts of homework on English speaking, listening, reading, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The mean scores of items 2, 3, 6, and 7 are higher than 3.40. The frequency of the responses also revealed that the majority of IA and IB students and teachers (more than 55%) selected "agree" or "strongly agree" in response to these items.

Table 3
The impact of homework on English skills and sub-skills

Homework can help EFL learners improve their English ...	IA		T		IB		T	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. speaking skill	3.13	1.28	3.01	1.04	3.37	1.18	2.95	0.75
2. reading skill	3.70	1.03	4.29	0.77	3.89	1.01	3.60	0.75
3. writing skill	4.04	1.01	4.35	0.78	4.09	0.83	4.00	0.45
4. listening skill	2.40	1.14	3.36	0.89	3.23	1.18	3.15	1.08
5. pronunciation	3.32	1.14	3.33	1.06	3.30	1.21	2.95	1.09
6. grammar	4.61	0.75	4.75	0.82	4.40	0.76	4.55	0.79
7. vocabulary	4.35	0.73	4.27	0.63	3.85	0.92	4.25	0.87

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, M = mean, SD = standard deviation

However, the analysis of the responses showed that more than 60% of IA and IB students and teachers either had no idea about or disagreed with the idea (stated in items 1, 4, and 5) that homework can improve English speaking, listening, and pronunciation.

English homework and parents' monitoring

With regard to English homework and parents' monitoring, as shown in Table 4, the mean score of IA teachers is higher than 3.40. The frequency of their responses to this item also showed that around 83% of IA teachers selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for this item. More than 65% of IA and IB students and more than 50% of IB teachers, however, either had no idea about or disagreed with it.

Table 4
English homework and parent's monitoring

1. English homework can help parents monitor their children's English learning.	IA		T		IB		T	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
	2.58	1.17	4	0.85	2.98	1.16	3.15	1.13

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, M = mean, SD = standard deviation

Satisfaction with the current assignments and the way they are treated

This part of the questionnaire inquired whether the teachers and the students at IA and IB were satisfied with the homework assignments and the way they were treated at their institutes. As shown in Table 5, all the mean scores for the first item are lower than 3.40. The analysis of the responses to this item showed that the majority of IA and IB teachers and students selected “moderately satisfied” (55% of IA and 53% of IB students, and 53% of IA and 54% of IB teachers) for this item, showing that the homework assignments at these institutes are not very satisfactory according to the teachers and students.

Table 5
Satisfaction with English homework

Are you satisfied with	IA		T		IB		T		SD
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1. the homework assignments of your institute	3.20	0.97	3.14	0.90	3.17	0.87	3.20	1.04	
2. the way the homework assignments are treated in your institute	3.50	1.15	3.19	0.65	3.80	0.87	3.23	1.32	

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, M = mean, SD = standard deviation

However, the mean scores of the students at both institutes are higher than 3.40 for the second item. The analysis of their responses to this item showed that around 54% of IA students and 69% of IB students selected “very satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” in response to it. The mean scores of the teachers at both institutes are, on the other hand, lower than 3.40. The analysis of their responses to this item showed that the majority of the teachers (around 56%) were moderately satisfied with the way homework assignments were treated at their institutes.

Time spent on homework

In response to how much time is spent and how much time should be spent on homework, as can be seen from Table 6, more than 70% of the teachers and the students at IA and IB selected either less than 30 minutes or 30 minutes to an hour for the first item, showing that the majority of the EFL learners at these two institutes spend less than an hour on their English homework for each session of their English class that they attend.

Table 6
Time spent on homework

How much time			1	2	3	4	5	6	SD
1. do you/your students actually spend on your/their English homework for each session you/they attend the class	IA	S	1.8%	38.6%	40.4%	15.8%	3.5%	0.0%	0.85
		T	0.0	85.7%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.36
2. should you/your students spend on your/ their English homework for each session you/they attend the class	IB	S	4.4%	26.7%	55.6%	8.9%	2.2%	2.2%	0.90
		T	0.0%	82.4%	11.8%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.56
1. do you/your students actually spend on your/their English homework for each session you/they attend the class	IA	S	0.0%	28.1%	35.1%	24.6%	7.0%	5.3%	1.11
		T	0.0%	5.9%	11.8%	76.5%	5.9%	0.0%	0.87
2. should you/your students spend on your/ their English homework for each session you/they attend the class	IB	S	0.0%	18.2%	36.4%	25.0%	15.9%	4.5%	1.11
		T	0.0%	10.0%	30.0%	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.61

Response options: 1: no time, 2: less than 30minutes, 3:30 minutes to 1 hour, 4: 1 to 2 hours, 5: 2 to 3 hours, 6: more than 3 hours

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, SD = standard deviation

However, for the second item, there is a meaningful difference between the responses of the students and the teachers. The majority of IA and IB students again selected either less than 30 minutes or 30 minutes to an hour; whereas 60% of IB teachers and 76% of IA teachers selected 1

to 2 hours for item 2, which shows that in their opinion their students need to spend more time on their English homework.

Homework time

As can be seen from Table 7, the majority of the teachers at both IA and IB selected *before the next session at the institute* or *before the next session at home* for the first item, showing that in their opinion their EFL learners remember their homework when getting ready to go to the institute or on arriving at the institute, which results in them doing their homework in a hurry. About 60% of the students at both institutes also selected these two response options. As for the second item, the majority of IA and IB teachers and students, on the other hand, selected either *on several occasions between two class intervals* or *at the first possible time after the class*. It can be concluded from Table 7 that although EFL learners at these two institutes know that they should not do their homework just before the class, either at home or at the institute, in reality, they do it.

Table 7
Homework time

When.....?		1	2	3	4	SD	
1. do you/your students usually do your/their English homework	IA	S	17.5%	22.8%	21.1%	38.6%	1.14
		T	5.9%	11.8%	29.4%	52.9%	0.91
	IB	S	8.7%	28.3%	13.0%	50.0%	1.07
		T	15.0%	30.0%	25.0%	30.0%	1.27
2. should you/your students do your/their English homework	IA	S	39.3%	36.8%	18.1%	5.8%	1.13
		T	23.5%	41.2%	17.6%	17.6%	1.25
	IB	S	21.7%	50.0%	19.6%	8.7%	1.23
		T	35.0%	30.0%	25.0%	10.0%	1.27

Response options: 1: on several occasions between two class intervals, 2: at the first possible time after the class, 3: before the next session at home (for example, the next session is on Wednesday evening at 6 and before the students leave for the institute, they do their homework), 4: before the next session starts at the institute

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B, S = students, T = teachers, SD = standard deviation

The preferred English assignments

As stated earlier, the students were provided with seven options and also with a space to choose or to write down their favorite English homework assignments. The students could simultaneously choose several options. The item included in this part was: "Which of the following homework assignments do you prefer to have? If your preferred assignments are not included, please write them down in the space provided." This part was completed only by the students.

Table 8
The preferred English assignments

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IA and IB students	48.3%	39.4%	27.6%	64.2%	78.3%	86.2%	75.7%

Response options: 1: fill-in-the-blank assignments, 2: multiple-choice assignments, 3: matching assignments, 4: writing assignments, 5: listening-based assignments, 6: video-based assignments and 7: reading-based assignments

Note: IA = institute A, IB = institute B

As shown in Table 8, the majority of the EFL learners at both institutes liked having video-based assignments, listening-based assignments, reading-based assignments, and writing assignments. About half of them also liked having fill-in-the-blank assignments. Some students had also written that they liked to be given short stories or English movies to prepare summaries or reports based on them as their homework. It can be concluded that the majority of the students did not like to

be limited to the old mechanical homework assignments such as matching or fill-in-the-blank assignments, which can usually be seen in most of the English textbooks, and they liked to work on audio clips, videos, and passages.

Discussion

This study was an effort to study English teachers' and learners' perspectives on different aspects of English homework. It was unique in several ways. First, it focused on English homework, which has not been sufficiently investigated (Richards, 2015). Second, the relevant data were collected from two different English institutes with different policies toward homework. This study provided the opportunity to attend to teachers' and students' perspectives in different educational settings. There is a paucity of research in this regard.

The results showed that based on the perspectives of the majority of the participants of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, homework can help EFL learners do the following: (1) understand the materials better; (2) get prepared for exams; (3) review the learned materials and elements; (4) communicatively use the learned elements and structures; (5) consolidate their English knowledge; (6) know their weaknesses and strengths; (7) be more accurate; and (8) improve their English reading, writing, vocabulary, and structure. The results, on the other hand, showed that the current English assignments: (1) cannot improve EFL learners' speaking, listening, and pronunciation; (2) cannot make EFL learners self-regulated; (3) cannot help parents monitor their children's English learning; and (4) are not very satisfactory in terms of the types of the assignments given. Interestingly, unlike the teachers, IA and IB students were satisfied with the way homework was treated at these institutes.

Moreover, the results showed that the EFL learners at IA and IB usually spend less than an hour on their homework for each session of the class that they attend, which, based on the teachers' perspectives, is not enough and should be more. They also do their homework assignments before the class, either at home or at the institute, although both the students and the teachers at IA and IB believe that the assignments should be done either right after the class at home or on several occasions between the class intervals. It is so because, according to the participants of the qualitative phase of the study, English assignments are mostly mechanical and boring and are not based on the students' needs and interests. The participants of the qualitative phase of the study believed that English assignments must be interesting, short, and varied. The majority of IA and IB students also reported that they like assignments that are based on interesting English audio clips, videos, and/or passages.

The results of this study, therefore, support the studies (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Katz et al., 2011; Warton, 2001) indicating that homework is beneficial. English homework also has important benefits, such as helping EFL learners spend more time on their lessons, become more exposed to English, understand their lessons and materials better, and review the words and structures learned over time. According to the scholars in the field of language teaching and learning, exposure to comprehensible input (Ellis, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Loewen, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011) and repetition and review (Larsen-freeman, 2012) have beneficial effects such as developing automaticity in and faster access to language components and increasing students' attentional and processing capacities.

The results of this study do not, however, support the ideas put forth by scholars such as Mikk (2006) and Kohn (2006), who believe that homework has destructive effects, especially when it is the basis of classroom instruction and a part of the final score. Based on the results of this study, all the participants, especially the teachers and the students of IA, where homework is an important

part of the class and a part of the learners' final score, believed that homework has significant benefits for English learning. Moreover, the results of this study do not support the studies (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Katz et al., 2011; Warton, 2001) indicating that homework can help parents get involved and check their children's progress. According to the participants of the qualitative phase of the study, parents in countries such as Iran are either busy or unfamiliar with English and cannot get involved in their children's English homework to monitor and support their English learning.

Furthermore, the results of this study showed that homework assignments available in workbooks or given to EFL learners are not very effective for English listening, speaking, and pronunciation. This is because the current assignments are mostly mechanical and do not involve language learners in negotiated interactions. Kumaravadivelu (2009) believes that there are two types of activities: (a) activities such as fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice items, which draw learners' attention to specific forms to make them salient and hence help learners internalize them; (b) activities that focus learners' attention on the negotiation of meaning and interactional modifications. Unfortunately, most of the English assignments given to the students rarely involve the latter.

English assignments should, therefore, be designed in a way that can involve students in communicative tasks and improve all English skills and sub-skills equally. One way to achieve this objective, according to the results of the study, is to have assignments that involve pair work or group work and are video or audio based. English assignments can also involve the use of the Internet, online resources, the media, and social networking, which can engage learners in the authentic use of English. Also, there should be some assignments on the use of vital language learning strategies. English assignments, based on the results of the qualitative phase of the study, rarely involve the use of language learning strategies, which are considered really effective in language learning and in making language learners independent (Amiryousefi, 2015a; Hedge, 2008; Little, 2007; Zarei & Elekaie, 2012).

Finally, the results revealed that the majority of the participants especially those from IA, where doing homework is compulsory and affects learners' final scores, did not spend the amount of time expected by their teachers on their assignments. One possible explanation might be that the assignments, as reported by IA learners, did not include interesting tasks and activities that were designed based on their needs. Thus, these results support the findings of the studies (Amiryousefi, 2016; Marashi & Tahan-Shirazi, 2015; Mazer, 2013; Rahimi & Hosseini Karami, 2015; Tin, 2013) suggesting that interest is a very strong motivational factor that can fuel language learners to strive and to develop their language proficiency. Ostensibly, if learners do not find homework assignments interesting and related to their needs, they will not invest their time in them although they know it will affect their final scores.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that homework as a part of out-of-class learning can have beneficial effects if it focuses on all English skills and sub-skills, and if it is based on students' needs and interests. Homework assignments should, therefore, be designed in a way that can provide greater opportunities for meaningful language use and in a way that all language learners can feel their predispositions are addressed at least some of the time (Amiryousefi, 2015b). To do so, English homework should not be limited to the activities and exercises available in the textbooks and classroom materials. Nowadays, there are many facilities such as the Internet, the media, and social networking that can provide students with lots of opportunities for authentic and meaningful language use (Richards, 2015). As homework, teachers can encourage students to use

the Internet and the online resources; to go through English materials, movies, audio clips, books, and magazines available online or in self-access centers or collections that can be prepared by English centers and/or teachers; to work on those parts that they find interesting and useful in a stress-free environment; and to report them back to the classroom. Consequently, teachers need to become familiar with different assignments that learners can make use of and the potential benefits these assignments can have for out-of-class learning (Richards, 2015).

Teachers and students also bring their own beliefs to educational contexts and have their own perspectives about different educational aspects such as homework. By listening to their perspectives, valuable insights can be obtained. Teachers, for example, can recognize their students' inaccurate beliefs and wrong practices with regard to English homework and thus provide them with necessary directions and support. They can also understand the problems of the current assignments and make the necessary changes. According to the followers of critical pedagogy (Galloway et al., 2013; Rudduck, 2007), this can lead to betterment, engagement, and improvement.

Despite the abovementioned positive findings, some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the present study focused only on EFL learners' and teachers' perspectives on different aspects of English homework; there is a need for future research on the influence of different variables such as self-regulation, interest, and parents' familiarity with English on the aspects studied in the present article. Second, the inclusion of valid and reliable instruments including retrospective interviews in the design of the study could enable the present researcher develop a better understanding of the reasons the participants had for their responses to different sections of the questionnaire. Finally, the present study could not examine the effects of different types of homework on EFL learners' language learning and development; there is a need for future research to examine the influence of homework assignments incorporating recent developments such as task-based language teaching and learning and recent technologies such as the Internet and on-line resources on learners' out-of-class learning.

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Appendix 1**The questionnaire****Part one: Benefits of homework for EFL learners**

Homework can help EFL learners	1	2	3	4	5
1. review the materials					
2. get prepared for English exams					
3. understand their lessons better					
4. communicatively use the learned materials and elements					
5. consolidate their English knowledge					
6. recognize their weaknesses and strengths					
7. take responsibility for their own learning					
8. become self-regulated					
9. make less mistakes					
<i>Response options: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: no idea, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree</i>					

Part two: Influence of homework on English skills and sub-skills

Homework can help EFL learners improve their English	1	2	3	4	5
1. speaking skill					
2. reading skill					
3. writing skill					
4. listening skill					
5. pronunciation					
6. grammar					
7. vocabulary					
<i>Response options: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: no idea, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree</i>					

Part three: English homework and parent's monitoring

	1	2	3	4	5
1. English homework can help parents monitor their children's English learning.					
<i>Response options: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: no idea, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree</i>					

Part four: Satisfaction with English homework

Are you satisfied with?	1	2	3	4	5
1. the homework assignments of your institute					
2. the way the homework assignments are treated in your institute					
<i>Response options: 1: not at all, 2: slightly satisfied, 3: moderately satisfied, 4: very satisfied, 5: extremely satisfied</i>					

Part five: Time spent on homework

How much time?	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. do you/your students actually spend on your/their English homework for each session you/they attend the class						
2. should you/your students spend on your/ their English homework for each session you/they attend the class						
<i>Response options: 1: no time, 2: less than 30minutes, 3:30 minutes to 1 hour, 4: 1 to 2 hours, 5: 2 to 3 hours, 6: more than 3 hours</i>						

Part six: Homework time

When.....?	1	2	3	4
1. do you/your students usually do your/their English homework				
2. should you/your students do your/their English homework				
<i>Response options: 1: on several occasions between two class intervals, 2: at the first possible time after the class, 3: before the next session at home(for example, the next session is on Wednesday evening at 6 and before the students leave for the institute, they do their homework), 4: before the next session starts at the institute</i>				

Part seven: Preferred English assignments

Which of the following homework assignments do you prefer to have? You can choose more than one option. If the assignments you prefer to have are not listed below, or you prefer to have them in addition to the assignments listed below, write them down in the space provided.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Response options: 1: fill-in-the-blank assignments, 2: multiple-choice assignments, 3: matching assignments, 4: writing assignments, 5: listening-based assignments, 6: video-based assignments and 7: reading-based assignments</i>							

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