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## HOMEWORK AND PRACTICE

### Homework

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Homework provides students with opportunities to practice, review, and apply knowledge. Given that “schooling occupies only about 13 percent of the waking hours in the first 18 years of life” (Fraser, Walberg, Welch, & Hattie, 1987, p. 234), homework is an effective means of extending student learning beyond the school day.

There are some general guidelines to keep in mind regarding homework for ELLs. In its online resource, *In the Classroom: A Toolkit for Effective Instruction of English Learners* (n.d.b), the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) recommends that mainstream K–6 teachers include the following items to help ensure that homework assignments will be understood and accomplished:

- Concrete, nonlinguistic examples such as photographs, objects, visual organizers, graphics, demonstrations, notes, or outlines
- Opportunities for students to ask questions and discuss assignments orally
- Native language support through bilingual tutors, instructions, or materials

- Peer support for note taking and homework
- Modified or additional instructions
- Tips and strategies for learning

In another online resource, *In the Classroom: Guiding Principles* (n.d.c), NCELA advises teachers to make time available for ELLs to ask questions about the homework and receive further explanations from the teacher. Students will better understand their assignments if you provide clear and concise directions, post the assignment on the board, and offer visual organizers.

Homework can be modified for ELLs by reducing complexity and increasing applicability. For example, Echevarria and Graves (1998) suggest shortening the list of science terms on a study sheet (reduced complexity) or extending the due date (increased applicability). Appropriate homework assignments require students to practice things they have already learned in the classroom, such as vocabulary, concepts, or written language activities.

### **Generalizations from *Classroom Instruction That Works***

*Classroom Instruction That Works* suggests four generalizations from the research on homework practices.

**1. The amount of homework assigned to students should increase as they progress from elementary school through high school.**

**2. Parental involvement in homework should be minimal.** Parents can support their children by providing the place, time, and resources for their children to engage in homework. They can also offer feedback and prompts as homework is being worked on. If students can do their homework independently, then it has been assigned at an appropriate level.

Special homework issues arise with parents of ELLs. For example, some parents hesitate to discuss homework with their children because they do not understand the language of the assignment. You should always encourage parents to use their native language at home. If a student tells a parent that she's studying earthquakes, for example, the parent probably will not describe plate tectonics but may relate a personal story of experiencing an earthquake. When parents use their native language to relate a story, their narrative will be rich with vocabulary and explanations.

Parents should be encouraged to model literacy in their native language as well. Because native language development may not occur during the school day, opportunities for primary language

growth at home become even more important. Years of research stress the importance of a strong foundation in the primary language in helping students acquire another language.

**3. The purpose of homework should be identified and articulated.**

There are two reasons for homework: to practice or elaborate on what has been learned and to prepare for new information. ELLs do not have to receive the same homework as English-dominant students. In fact, if they are given the exact same homework, they may be using unfamiliar skills or incorrectly practicing them. Students should be given homework that requires them to use what they already know or what they are learning.

**4. Feedback should be provided on homework assignments.** It is not always the teacher who has to make the comments; students can offer feedback to one another. Such peer feedback can be helpful for ELLs, provided that students are not inundated with advice from English-dominant students on how to correct every single error.

## Classroom Recommendations

There are three recommendations about homework from the research.

**1. Establish and communicate a homework policy.** Homework policies should inform students and parents about the purpose of homework, estimate the amount of homework that students will typically receive, discuss consequences for not turning in assignments, and suggest ways in which parents can help. For ELLs, whenever possible, be sure to send this policy home in a language that their parents can understand.

**2. Design homework assignments that clearly articulate the purpose and outcome.** When ELLs are in mainstream classrooms, their homework assignments will vary depending on their level of language proficiency. All students should understand the purpose of each assignment. Some assignments may be for practicing or elaborating on vocabulary or other knowledge and skills already learned in school, while others will focus on preparing students for new information or will elaborate on information that has already been introduced.

**3. Feedback should be varied.** As noted above, students can discuss homework with each other as well as with teachers. ELLs will benefit from seeing examples of homework from other students and hearing the explanations provided.

Many students were English language learners, and they were at all different levels. So a lot of the time it would be, "You are going to do it at your level." The homework is based on what they can do and what they can choose. So if they choose a writing assignment—to write about what they did last weekend using complete sentences, for example—it might be seven sentences from one person, whereas for somebody who is [in Speech Emergence], it might be just two sentences. They still put in the same amount of effort or time. We would talk about it: "Your homework should take you no more than 30 minutes. If it takes you more than 30 minutes, then something is going on, and we need to have a discussion as a teacher and student." I think they did really well with that. They felt ownership of what they were doing.

—D. H.

## **Adapting Homework to the Stages of Language Acquisition**

In general, stage-appropriate questioning strategies and the Word-MES formula will be your best guides to determining appropriate homework and feedback for your ELLs. Let's look at how this works when commenting on homework—an area where the Word-MES formula is particularly appropriate.

### ***Preproduction***

Students will benefit from a peer helping them with word selection (i.e., vocabulary) on their homework assignment. Homework for students at this level may be different than everyone else's because it could focus on vocabulary. This is fine, as students need to learn the vocabulary of a topic before they can make sense of the content.

### ***Early Production***

Students can make gains in English proficiency if classmates model correct grammar for them. One way to do this is to allow ELL students to examine homework completed by English-dominant students.

### ***Speech Emergence***

Students can also benefit from explanations given by English-dominant students on how to expand or combine sentences on a homework assignment.

### ***Intermediate and Advanced Fluency***

Students can share their ideas with English-dominant students, which will help to broaden their knowledge base and improve homework assignments as they use academic English and begin to "sound like a book."

## **Classroom Example**

*Subject:* Social Studies

*Content Objective:* To recognize a variety of influences on consumers and how these influences affect decisions about purchases.

Students have already discovered that they are surrounded by images and messages telling them what to buy, what is better, what tastes better, and so forth. They have also explored the creators of these images and messages, and the audiences they are targeting. Students chose a product as a whole-class activity and then discussed and demonstrated advertisers' claims about the product (e.g., it tastes good, improves health, is fast-acting). They also talked about how the

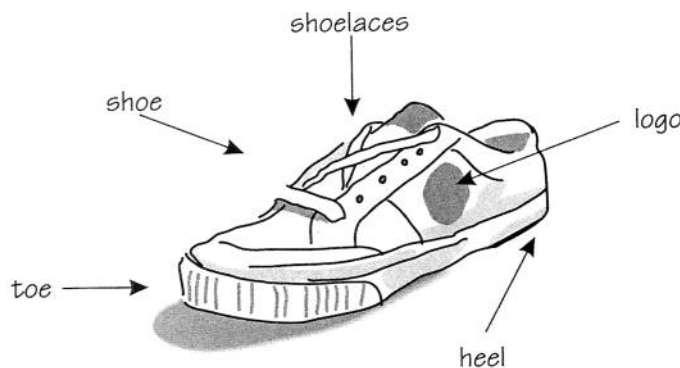
advertisers got the audience's attention and what factors induced the students to buy the product. They pointed out pictures or words that persuade consumers. They discussed and brought in examples of advertising from various media sources (e.g., TV, radio, billboards, flyers, signs at grocery stores, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, coupons).

After much discussion, demonstration, and classroom activities, the following homework was assigned. Students were asked to gather examples of advertising that influenced a purchase made by their mother or father or one that incited the students themselves to convince their parents to buy a product for them. The students then were asked to either draw or write a description of that experience. They were also given the choice of writing about an ad they saw on TV, heard on the radio, or saw in a magazine that was convincing, and discussing how it was convincing (e.g., message, presentation, price). The teacher was careful to set a reasonable expectation for this assignment by stating how many paragraphs were expected and by emphasizing that drawings should illustrate what was convincing about the advertisement.

### **Preproduction**

Students can practice words for items they studied during class by finding or drawing another example from home. For example, when the class talks about Nike shoes, students learn the words "toe," "heel," "shoelaces," and "swoosh." For homework, they can draw a shoe and label the parts (see Figure 8.1). They can also be assigned to

**Figure 8.1**  
Homework Adapted for Preproduction Students










draw and label five items from home that have been discussed in class. Any word selection activity you can provide will keep them in the learning loop. You can then assess vocabulary with statements such as "Show me the toe" or "Point to the shoelaces."

### *Early Production*

Students can also use practice with vocabulary. In addition to nouns, they should be working on vocabulary for sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell. For homework, they can select four items from home and practice writing their new vocabulary in the chart provided (see Figure 8.2).

**Figure 8.2**

Homework Adapted for Early Production Students

Product Name:		Item #1	Item #2	Item #3	Item #4
Sight					
Sound					
Taste					
Smell					
Feel					

### *Speech Emergence*

Students can select items from home and complete the chart depicted in Figure 8.3. The first row gives an example for students.

**Intermediate and Advanced Fluency**

Students can draw something they saw on TV and describe why it was convincing according to at least three criteria (e.g., message, presentation, and price).

**Figure 8.3**

Homework Adapted for Speech Emergence Students

<b>Product Name</b>	<b>Why did you buy it?</b>	<b>Why do you think you like it?</b>
EXAMPLE: <i>Cap'n Crunch cereal</i>	EXAMPLE: I bought it because <i>I saw it on TV.</i>	EXAMPLE: I like it because <i>it has sugar. The box is cool.</i>

**Practice**

Students practice to deepen their understanding of content and to become proficient at skills. During practice, teachers can carefully point out errors and common difficulties so students do not continue to make mistakes.

Students should practice skills or processes so that they can attain automaticity. It is up to you, as the teacher, to decide what is worth

practicing. You must then also make sure enough time is available to engage in practice.

When it comes to ELLs, practice is particularly important. You do not want students spending too much energy on certain skills and not enough on others when time is of the essence (as with older ELLs). Choosing practice activities carefully helps make the time you have with these students more productive and focused.

### **Generalizations from *Classroom Instruction That Works***

Although we found no literature that focused specifically on the role of practice for ELLs, the authors of *Classroom Instruction That Works* examined two generalizations in this area. These generalizations are as applicable to ELLs as they are to English-dominant students.

**1. Mastering a skill or a process entails focused practice.** If English-dominant students need to practice a skill or process at least 24 times to obtain 80 percent proficiency (Anderson, 1995; Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981), then ELLs need even more focused practice, some of which can be assigned for homework.

**2. During practice, students should adapt and shape what they have learned.** Multiple practice sessions allow students to familiarize themselves with the steps involved in learning a skill or process. During this learning time, ELLs should not be pressed for speed; instead, you should attend to these students by slowly walking them through a few practice examples and providing immediate feedback.

### **Classroom Recommendations**

*Classroom Instruction That Works* suggests three approaches to classroom practice with this strategy.

**1. Ask students to chart their speed and accuracy.** Some skills depend on speed, and some depend on accuracy. Telling time is a skill requiring both speed and accuracy; converting metrics to standard English measurement requires accuracy but not speed. This recommendation would not apply to early- to mid-stage ELLs, but it can be introduced to Intermediate Fluency students and used with Advanced Fluency students.

**2. Design practice that focuses on specific elements of a complex skill or process.** For example, if there is a particularly difficult skill in



the reading or writing process for ELLs, give them assignments that work on strengthening that one aspect.

**3. Plan time for students to increase their conceptual understanding of skills or processes.** There is no way to become truly fluent at a task if automaticity is not accompanied by background understanding. The reasoning behind the skill or process will need to be made explicit for ELLs; this can be accomplished through think-alouds, which let teachers use the language of reasoning as they perform and describe the steps required for a particular skill. Think-alouds contribute to conceptual understanding for ELLs.

### **Classroom Example**

*Subject:* Math

*Content Objective:* To add and subtract using pictures or stories.

Ms. Chasse's 1st grade students were excited about learning their addition and subtraction math facts, but she didn't want them to simply memorize the numbers. Ms. Chasse knew that a strong conceptual understanding of the processes of addition and subtraction would help her students as they progressed to more difficult math problems. Each time they went over a new "fact family," she reviewed what "adding" meant and what "subtracting" meant. Students worked with manipulatives and drew pictures to represent what was happening with the numbers as they performed the processes.

Students practiced their math facts for homework that night. The next day in class as they reviewed, Ms. Chasse called on students to tell a story that explained the fact.

### **Preproduction**

Students can draw or find pictures to represent their math facts. Instead of telling a story that explains their math facts to the class, you can ask for them to respond nonverbally: "Show me one strawberry plus one strawberry equals two strawberries." This will help their word selection and vocabulary development because they are associating the spoken word with an image or a number word with their own drawing.

### **Early Production**

Students can also share a pictorial representation of a story about their math facts. To help with their explanations, you can prompt them with yes/no questions or questions that require a one- or two-word response. Because their responses to your prompts will be limited, model English for them by telling them what you see in the picture using present tense verbs as you point to the pictures: "I see two strawberries. You eat one. Now there is only one left."

***Speech Emergence***

Students can tell a short story with simple sentences about their math facts. To help expand their English, you can prompt by asking “why” and “how” questions. Expand whatever they are telling in their stories with an additional adjective or phrase. If the student says, “Here is a man buying two apples,” you can say, “Yes, I see a man buying two apples at the store,” or “Yes, I see a man buying two red apples.”

***Intermediate and Advanced Fluency***

Students can tell a story about their math facts with native-like fluency. Help them sound more like a book and use academic language by probing with statements such as, “Tell your story as if you were the teacher.”

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**Summary**

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Not all homework or practice needs to be the same. Some students may reach 80 percent proficiency well before 24 practices. If so, they should move into extension activities. English language learners, however, are likely to need more than 24 practice sessions to be competent at a skill, so some of those practice sessions can be assigned as homework. It is important to be clear about the purpose of homework: practice, review, or preview. Keep in mind that it is OK for ELLs to review something they have already learned, and be mindful of giving them homework assignments they are able to understand.