

Changing Homework Habits: Rethinking Attitudes

L I L I A N A T A V A R E S

Many teachers complain that very few students do their homework regularly. Some teachers say that students seem to reject, ignore or forget their homework. Others say that students are stressed, full of physical activities, and they end up too tired to cope with all their responsibilities, especially the ones that require quiet and concentration. Whatever the psychological reasons are behind these opinions, they will not be discussed in this article. We will talk about daily class routine. What can teachers do to enhance students' interest in their homework?

This question led me to carry out some studies on the subject. After one year of research among my colleagues, I came up with the following data:

- 72 percent consider homework to be as important as the other class activities.
- 64 percent assign homework every class.
- 60 percent assign homework at the end of the class.
- 39 percent correct homework at the beginning of the class.
- 40 percent don't have a systematic manner of assigning the amount of homework.
- 36 percent assign at least one exercise.

Based on the observations I made before collecting such information, I decided to change some of my attitudes towards homework: what, how, how much, when, and why when assigning homework. Here are some suggestions that you could try out with your students.

1. Don't condition your students to leave class immediately after homework has been assigned. Assigning homework always at the end of the class will focus the students' attention on leaving, not on the exercise that is asked to

be done. When the teacher says the word *homework*, students seem to start to get ready to leave. Try to alternate the time of giving the homework assignment, so students can take their time taking notes and/or understanding the assignment.

2. Make sure the students understand the homework. It is extremely important that the student is familiar with the exercise he/she is going to do at home. Homework should be something that students have already talked about or done in class. Teachers should give clear instructions or ask students to read them, and check for understanding. Students should know what they are going to do at home. Unclear instructions can be a discouraging factor or a good excuse for not doing the exercise.

3. Create a correction habit. Remember to correct homework every time you assign it! Otherwise, students may think that the teacher is not responding to their effort, or they might prefer to study another subject next time. If the time you planned for homework has been taken by another activity, make sure you tell the students that you're not going to be able to correct the homework during the class, and tell them when you will do it. Don't forget to ask for students' participation when correcting it. Teacher-centered homework correction can be monotonous and disparaging to the students. Homework correction can also lead to negative competition. Be careful not to praise too much when students get it correct or the less confident students won't share their answers. Remind them that they can learn from their mistakes. Be flexible when planning the time to correct homework. The habit of correcting homework the first or last thing in class can perhaps explain some student delays or early departures.

4. Assign just enough homework. Students' classroom habits depend on the teacher's classroom habits. Remember to assign a little bit of homework every class. Never less than one nor more than three exercises. Students usually have much to do. We don't want to overload them.

5. Give them the choice. You can plan more than one type of homework and tell the students to choose the one they prefer, or you can ask them what they

want to do for homework so they are free to choose their own home exercises.

6. *Better late than never.* Do accept it when students bring late homework. They should be encouraged to do the exercises even if they are not on time. Be aware of the student who is always handing in late homework. Students are too generous sometimes, and there are some that like to lean on others all the time.

7. *Link homework with classroom activities.* Homework is both a part of and an extension of the class. Find the appropriate time to join it to an activity, especially when correcting it. It can also be used to connect two classes, to start or end a unit review, or to review a specific subject.

8. *Don't use homework as a punishment or reward.* Both punishment and reward can work as palliatives. Some teachers assign a lot of homework when the students are not behaving well or give extra marks for those who do the exercises. One or the other attitude can make the students think of homework as good or bad, and not as an important or challenging activity that helps their learning process.

Changing some of my attitudes helped me. When I introduce homework (assignment and correction) as part of the classroom routine, and as a systematic activity, students start to make it a habit. I have noticed that students are more comfortable about homework, and they don't seem pressured doing it. When they don't do it, instead of hiding it from me, they usually tell me why they didn't. We figure out if the reason was a true one, or a good excuse for not doing it. Students need to be aware why they don't do homework, and take the responsibility for it. I believe that the students' interest in homework will depend on the teacher's credit to it, and on the effort in planning, presenting, and working with it. Students' habits reflect the teacher's attitudes.

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