

## Exploring Teachers' and Learners' Attitude towards Homework: The case of English versus Non-English-Major Teachers' Homework Practices

Fatemeh Khonamri<sup>1</sup>, Martina Pavlikova<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Mazandaran, Iran

E-mail: [fkhonamri@yahoo.com](mailto:fkhonamri@yahoo.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6833-5347>

<sup>2</sup> Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Nitra, Slovakia

E-mail: [mpavlikova@ukf.sk](mailto:mpavlikova@ukf.sk)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6738-3320>

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### Abstract

Homework assignments provide a channel of communication between students and teachers especially in an EFL context where there is little exposure to English language out of the classroom context. Thus, exploring attitudes and homework features may provide teachers with useful information to know how to plan their homework assignments to improve students' learning opportunities. This study aimed to explore both teachers' and learners' attitude towards homework; the difficulties faced by both teachers and learners with regard to homework as well as the assignment characteristics of English-major versus Non-English-major teachers. The study participants were 120 randomly selected adult male and female EFL learners and 81 EFL teachers. The data were collected through questionnaires and subsequent semi-structured interviews. SPSS 24 software was used to analyze the questionnaire data and interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and categorized for further analysis. The results indicated that students had positive attitudes towards homework assignments. There was no significant difference between students' attitude towards homework given by English Major (EM) and Non-English Major (NEM) teachers. The data showed that teachers do feel that homework is essential to students' language development. Similarly, there was no significant difference among EM versus NEM teachers in their attitudes toward homework. The results revealed the following reasons for the difficulties that teachers and learners faced in assigning/doing homework assignments respectively. Those reasons varied from not learning the required concept, not knowing the instruction, not enjoying homework, not paying attention when homework assignments were presented, not understanding homework instruction, copying homework or cheating, the absence of related and meaningful tasks, parents' lack of knowledge, lack of word power and grammar, to anxiety and stress of homework. The findings illustrated that there were some differences between EM and NEM teachers in terms of amount, skill area used, and degree of individualization in their homework assignments. The results of this study offer a number of pedagogical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and institute managers.

**Keywords:** homework, assignment characteristics, attitude, English-major teachers, non-English major teachers.

## Изучение отношения учителей и учащихся к домашним заданиям: на основе практики учителей со специализацией в области английского языка и без специализации

Фатима Хонамри<sup>1</sup>, Мартина Павликова<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Университет Мазандарана, Баболсар, Мазандаран, Иран*

*E-mail: fkhonamri@yahoo.com*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6833-5347>

<sup>2</sup> *Университет Константина Философа в Нитре, Нитра, Словакия*

*E-mail: mpavlikova@ukf.sk*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6738-3320>

DOI: 10.26907/esd15.4.07

### Аннотация

Домашние задания выступают каналом связи между студентами и преподавателями, особенно в контексте EFL, где английский язык практически не изучается вне класса. Благодаря изучению отношения к домашней работе учителя могут получить ценную информацию о том, как планировать домашние задания для улучшения возможностей обучения учащихся. Настоящее исследование было направлено на изучение отношения учителей и учащихся к домашнему заданию. Были выявлены трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты и педагоги. Также были определены характеристики заданий учителей английского языка по сравнению с заданиями педагогов, для которых английский не являлся областью их специализации. В исследовании принимали участие 120 человек, изучающих английский язык, и 81 учителей английского как иностранного (EFL). Данные были собраны в ходе опроса и последующих полуструктурированных интервью. Анализ результатов анкетирования был проведен с помощью программного обеспечения SPSS 24. Интервью были записаны, транскрибированы, закодированы и сформированы в группы для дальнейшего анализа. Результаты показали, что студенты положительно относятся к домашним заданиям. Исследователи не выявили никакой существенной разницы между отношением студентов к домашним заданиям, подготовленных преподавателями со специализацией в области преподавания английского языка (EM) и без соответствующей специализации (NEM). Результаты показали, что учителя действительно считают, что домашнее задание имеет важное значение для языкового развития учащихся. Так же не было никакой существенной разницы между учителями EM и NEM в их отношении к домашним заданиям. Авторы выявили причины трудностей, с которыми сталкиваются учителя и учащиеся при определении/выполнении домашних заданий соответственно. Эти причины варьировались от незнания нужного понятия, методов преподавания, выполнения нелюбимого домашнего задания, невнимательности, непонимания этапов выполнения домашнего задания, копирования домашнего задания или обмана, отсутствия связанных и значимых заданий, отсутствия помощи со стороны родителей, отсутствия словарного запаса и незнания грамматики, до беспокойства и стресса от домашнего задания. Полученные результаты показали, что существуют некоторые различия между учителями EM и NEM с точки зрения объема, отработываемой области навыков и степени индивидуализации в подготовке домашних заданий. В статье предложен ряд рекомендаций для учителей, разработчиков учебных программ и руководителей институтов.

**Ключевые слова:** домашняя работа, характеристики задания, отношение, учителя со специализацией в области английского языка, учителя без специализации.

### Introduction

The development of modern communication depends primarily on the role played by the education system (Pushkarev & Pushkerva, 2019). Homework is often a hot-button

issue and a frequent topic of educational research. Over the last century, the focus of researchers was mostly on classroom-based learning, while out of-class learning which happens by doing homework assignments has been overlooked (Nunan & Richards, 2015). Today, millions of children arrive home from school or institutes. Some bring large amounts of homework with them; however, some bring no homework at all. For some students, homework is easy; for others, it is hard and laborious. Some children are given homework assignments, but they do not get their homework done; others begin their homework, but they cannot finish these tasks on time. Some teachers assign no homework, while others assign minimal homework. However, homework is a vital part of learning and students' lives, and it is beneficial for students because the more time they spend on practicing English the more engaged they become and so they progress. Moreover, homework is a good means of reinforcement and reactivation of students' learnt knowledge and skills, which is completed at home (Paudel, 2012).

Harris Cooper, a leading figure on the subject, defines homework as tasks assigned by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during non-instructional time (Bembenutty, 2011).

According to Yücel (2004), assignments are mental or physical tasks related to a particular topic or unit for students to cover. Generally, there is a widespread interest in the area of homework because it affects a variety of persons including students, teachers, parents, homework designers, and institute managers. Students are affected because they must carry out the assignment. Teachers and homework designers are involved in many ways such as planning and evaluation of homework assignments or workbooks. Parents regard homework as a good complement for their children's learning. From the teachers' and administrators' viewpoint, homework is an effective way to provide students more instruction and the opportunity to be responsible in their own learning. Generally, teachers use homework as educational supplement to improve their students' performance and learning experience.

There has been a considerable controversy about the effectiveness of homework among researchers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Cooper and Valentine (2001) through a quantitative synthesis of research concluded that learners who did their homework generally performed better than those who did not. The benefits of homework are obvious: checking the students' degree of learning and their mastery of the knowledge learned, linking the new experience with the previous one, paying attention to the students' individual differences, attracting students' interest to the lesson and achieving independence, responsibility and self-guidance in order to increase learning (Al-Shar & Ayid, 2008; Zeiton, 1998). Beside the positive effects of homework, it has some drawbacks as well, such as loss of interest in academic material, physical and emotional burnout, preventing students' access to leisure time and community activities, pressure to complete homework on time, confusion of instructional techniques, and cheating (Cooper, 1994). However, it is generally accepted that homework has a positive influence on students' achievement especially in an EFL context. Foreign language teachers believe that homework is an integral part of foreign language learning. However, foreign language teachers face challenges and difficulties in assigning homework to students and express concerns about the lack of opportunity to design effective homework.

In an increasing number of institutes in Iran, we see both English-major (EM) teachers and non-English major (NEM) teachers teaching in institutes. This study investigated the possibility of differences between these two types of teachers in terms of their assignment characteristics. In addition, EFL learners' attitude toward homework, the difficulties they have faced during doing homework assignments, and the characteristics of their

homework in both EM versus NEM teachers which remain noticeably absent from much contemporary homework literature was investigated.

Cooper's (1989) model was used as a perceptual framework. He proposes a modified and expanded temporal model of the homework process which provides a number of variables that might influence homework. The model shows that the homework process could be divided into two phases: classroom phases, and home-community phase.

Additionally, research of affective factors in learning a second language is receiving great attention (Stranovská et al, 2013; Stančeková, Chválová & Stranovská, 2017; Stranovská et al, 2019). It is obvious that the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition is not negligible. The affective factor explored in this study is the learners' attitude toward homework which plays an important role. Corno (2000) believed that imposing homework to learners leads to frustration and demotivation; thus, they perceive homework as a routine and uninteresting task (Warton, 2001). The literature supports the claim that when learners' preferred ways of learning are accommodated, they become more productive, they show more positive attitude and their performance improves (Haar, Hall, Schoepp & Smith, 2002; Minotti, 2005). Geiser (1999) stated that students will have more positive attitudes toward homework when they understand their preferences and use it in homework processes. Therefore, it would be better that teachers and learners talk together and share their ideas and preferences toward homework in order to have more effective homework. In this study, the probability of any difference in assignment characteristics of English versus non-English major teachers was investigated. Furthermore, English versus non-English major teachers' and students' attitude and difficulty toward homework were also explored.

The present study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are learners' attitudes toward homework in English major versus Non-English major teachers' classrooms?
2. What are English-major versus Non-English-major teachers' attitudes towards homework?
3. What are the difficulties of homework in the view of learners and teachers?

## **Methodology**

### *Design*

A mixed-methods research design was used for this study to gather both students' and teachers' voice toward homework. Although a number of different approaches to data gathering on homework could be taken, the authors preferred to go straight to the source and ask the students and teachers themselves. In general, the student voice has been lacking from the conversations about educational issues, such as homework. Therefore, the study used mixed methods to first, ask students and teachers to respond to both Likert-type questions in a survey to examine students' and teachers' attitude, and difficulties. Then, an interview was conducted to provide with richer students' and teachers' voices, and help to explore how students and teachers view homework assignments.

### *Participants*

The study sample included 201 participants comprising 120 EFL learners and 81 English teachers. Because there were some students with random missing data (i.e., a page or some items were skipped randomly), only those students who had completed questionnaires were included in the sample. The participants were selected from different institutes in Mazandaran Province, which is next to the Caspian Sea, North of 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 EFL learners who participated in this study were learning English in different levels from elementary to advanced level at the adult departments of these institutes in the summer semester of 2018. They attended two sessions of the English classes a week. Their ages ranged between 15 and 32 years.

The participants of the qualitative phase of the study were 7 teachers and 13 EFL learners who were selected through purposive sampling. The teachers had the experience of teaching English between 3 to more than 10 years in different institutes. Their degree ranged from B.A to M.A. in both EM and NEM.

### *Instruments*

A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire containing 22 items was used. To develop the questionnaire, firstly, 24 items were extracted and listed based on the comprehensive analysis of the literature. Some items were adapted from standard instruments (Cooper, 1998) or taken from related literature (Paudel, 2012; Amiryousefi, 2016), while others were derived from previously validated measures (Xu, 2011). These items included a mix of scales and individual items relevant to our research questions. After reviewing the related literature, a more detailed questionnaire was developed based for the purpose of the study. Then, the items were reviewed, revised, and edited; the items that were identified as repetitive or overlapping were eliminated from the study. The teacher version of the questionnaire included almost parallel questions. The English version of the questionnaires was translated into Persian for students. The focus of the translation was to maintain conceptual rather than literal meaning.

In order to obtain new rich data and to gain insights into the EFL teachers' and students' perspectives on the issues related to English homework, there was a comprehensive review of the literature and then a semi-structured interview was carried out. This enabled the researchers to obtain the data on the questions which addressed the research questions, and allowed some unexpected yet valuable views. Firstly, the questions were designed in the hope of eliciting answers that addressed the research questions indirectly. Secondly, the interview began with the comparatively easy and more general questions and was ordered logically according to the content. This was done to ensure that interviewees might feel free to join the talk. Thirdly, questions were asked in a colloquial way to make students feel at ease.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

The questionnaire was piloted with small samples of students and teachers, before the actual data collection began. The pilot test led to revisions in wording and the omission of questions. Two university instructors also examined the instrument. The 21-item scale was in the students' native language (Persian) so as to eliminate any language barriers and to minimize the measurement errors. After the pilot questionnaire was revised, the final questionnaire was administered to 120 students.

After obtaining an official permission from the managers of the institute, the questionnaires were distributed to students and teachers involved in different classes at various institute.

From a qualitative perspective, personal interviews with teachers and students were scheduled. The good relationship between the participants and the interviewer made it easier for them to talk freely and comfortably. All the data were gathered over a 10-day period and were recorded for note-taking purposes. The interviewing techniques used in this study were derived by the desire to learn as much as possible information from the participants. During in-depth interviewing of participants, researchers engaged with participants by setting questions in a neutral manner, listening attentively to participants'

responses, and asking follow-up questions and search for the responses. They did not lead participants according to any preconceived opinion, nor did they encourage participants to provide particular answers by showing approval or disapproval of what they say (Mack et al., 2005, p. 29).

## Results

### *Analysis of the First Research Question*

The first research question focused on learners' attitude toward homework in English-major (EM) versus non-English-major (NEM) teachers' classes. As noted earlier, the 120 participants in the study were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they rated attitude, difficulty and assignment characteristics of homework on a 5-point-likert scale. The students' attitude for doing homework was assessed with 6 items in students' questionnaire. Items were phrased to focus on homework. Participants indicated the extent to which they enjoyed doing homework or the extent to which they disliked it.

*Table 4.1. Frequency and descriptive statistics of students' attitude*

		<i>Attitude 1</i>	<i>Attitude 2</i>	<i>Attitude 3</i>	<i>Attitude 4</i>	<i>Attitude 5</i>	<i>Attitude 6</i>
Valid	Always	49.2	20.0	23.3	11.7	40.8	5.0
	Usually	38.3	40.8	30.8	35.0	35.8	31.7
	Sometimes	10.8	25.8	27.5	31.7	17.5	31.7
	Seldom	1.7	8.3	11.7	14.2	5.0	17.5
	never		5.0	6.7	7.5	.8	14.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0	100.0
	Mean	1.6500	2.3750	2.4750	2.7083	1.8917	3.0417
	Std. Deviation	.74077	1.05370	1.16650	1.08771	.92397	1.12568

The data obtained through questionnaire survey is interpreted descriptively below. Table 1 shows that, generally, 98.3% of students believed that homework assignments help them learn better; 49.2% stated always, 38.3% stated usually and 10.8% believed sometimes homework helped them learn. In general, 86.6 % of students believed that homework increased their interest, 20% of them stated always, 40.8% stated usually and 25.8% of them expressed sometimes homework increased their interest. 81.6% of students broadly enjoyed doing homework; 23.3% of the students believed always, 30.8% stated usually, and 27.5% said that sometimes they enjoyed doing homework. Items 4 and 6 of the questionnaire measured the same concept. Item 6 was reverse coded in the process of analysis. 78.4% of students stated that they had a better mood than other activities while doing homework; 11.7% believed always, 35% of them usually and 31.7% of them stated sometimes they had better mood than other activities. Generally, 94.1% students stated that they did their homework; 40.8% of students always, 35.8% of them usually, and 17.5% of them sometimes do their homework assignments.

In order to find out whether there was a significant difference between students' attitude in EM and NEM teachers' classrooms, independent sample T-tests were run, as shown in Table 2, Levene's Test for Equal variances yielded a p-value more than .05 for the six variables of attitude. This means that the difference between the variances was statistically insignificant and the statistics in the first row should be used. After administering t-test, the means and the standard deviations for both groups (EM and NEM) were calculated. As the results indicated, the calculated mean and the standard deviation for attitude 1 for EM were 1.7033 and .76731 and for NEM were



1.4828 and .63362, respectively. The p-value=.164,  $t(118) = 1.402$ , was more than .05. As table 4 shows, there was no significant difference between the two groups.

Table 2. Independent Sample t-test for students' attitude toward homework in EM versus NEM teachers' classrooms (Levels test for Equality of Variances, 90% confidence level of the difference)

		F	sig	t	Df	sig.	Mean	Std. Error	upper	lower
							(2-tailed)	Difference	Differences	
Attitude 1	Equal variances assumed	1.08	.300	1.402	118	.164	.220	.157	-.091	.532
Attitude 2	Equal variances assumed	1.57	.211	-.025	118	.980	-.005	.225	-.452	.441
Attitude 3	Equal variances assumed	1.15	.285	1.241	118	.217	.308	.248	-.183	.799
Attitude 4	Equal variances assumed	.573	.451	.497	118	.620	.115	.232	-.345	.576
Attitude 5	Equal variances assumed	1.15	.285	.658	118	.512	.129	.197	-.261	.521
Attitude 6	Equal variances assumed	.376	.541	-.338	118	.736	-.081	.240	-.558	.395

### Analysis of the Second Research Question

The second research question aimed to investigate the attitude of EM teachers versus NEM teachers toward homework. Table 3 summarizes percentages, means and standard deviations for teachers' attitude toward homework in the two modes of EM and NEM. Generally, 95.1% of teachers had a good feeling toward homework. All the teachers believed that homework helped students learn; 56.8% of teachers stated that homework always helped students, 35.8% said it usually helped and 7.4% of them stated that homework helped students learn sometimes. In addition, 86.3% of teachers thought that homework increased learners' interest; however, only 8.6% of them believed that homework always increased student interest, 40.7% of teachers stated usually, and 37% believed that homework sometimes increased students' interest. All the teachers stated that they assigned homework. 28.4% of teachers always, 49.4% of them usually, and 22.2% of them expressed that they assigned homework.

Table 3. Frequency and Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Attitude

	Attitude 1	Attitude 2	Attitude 3	Attitude 4
Always	28.4	56.8	8.6	28.4
Usually	46.9	35.8	40.7	49.4
Sometimes	19.8	7.4	37.0	22.2
Seldom	4.9	0.0	13.6	0.0
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean	2.0123	1.5062	2.555	1.938
Std deviation	0.82906	0.63489	0.8366	0.71319

To find the differences in the attitude toward homework assigned by the teachers in EM and NEM mode, independent sample t-test was run. Table 4 shows the results of the t-test comparing the scores in EM and NEM mode. As shown, for attitude 1 in EM teachers' mode, the mean and standard deviation were 1.965 and .8369, and for NEM teachers' mode were 2.130 and .8148, respectively. According to the result of the t-test, there was no significant difference in teachers' feeling between two groups, t-observed (-.805), p-value=.423 >.05. Moreover, there was no significant difference between EM teachers (M=1.4828, SD=.65538) and NEM teachers (M= 1.5652, SD=.58977) for Attitude 2, because the p-value=.601 is greater than .05, t-observed (-.525). It means that both EM and NEM teachers believe that homework helps students learn. For Attitude

3, the difference between EM teachers ( $M=2.6552$ ,  $SD=.80681$ ) and NEM teachers ( $M=2.3043$ ,  $SD=.87567$ ) was not meaningful,  $t$ -observed (1.722),  $p$ -value=.089>.05. Therefore, it shows that teachers in both modes of EM and NEM believe that homework increases student's interest. However, for Attitude 4,  $p$ -value=.026 is lower than .05,  $t$ -observed (-2.275); therefore, there is a significant difference between the two groups of EM teachers ( $M=1.8276$ ,  $SD=.70432$ ) and NEM teachers ( $M=2.2174$ ,  $SD=.67126$ ) in frequency of assigning English subject homework.

Table 4. Independent samples test for teachers' attitude in two modes of EM vs NEM (Levels test for Equality of Variances, 95% confidence level of the difference)

		<i>F</i>	<i>sig</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>sig.</i>	<i>Mean</i> (2-tailed)	<i>Std. Error</i> <i>Difference</i>	<i>upper</i> <i>Differences</i>	<i>lower</i>
Attitude 1	Equal variances assumed	.015	.903	-.805	79	.423	-.164	.204	-.572	.242
Attitude 2	Equal variances assumed	.401	.528	-.525	79	.601	-.082	.157	-.395	.230
Attitude 3	Equal variances assumed	.068	.795	1.72	79	.089	.350	.203	-.054	.756
Attitude 4	Equal variances assumed	.072	.782	-2.27	79	.026	-.389	.171	-.730	-.048

#### Analysis of the Third Research Question

The third research question investigates the difficulties and challenges of homework in the view of teachers and students. Six questions in the students' questionnaire and seven questions in the teachers' questionnaire were related to the difficulties of homework. Descriptive statistics were calculated for both teachers and students.

#### Teachers' Difficulties in Homework

According to the frequency of teachers' answer in Table 5, of 65.4% of the teachers, 16% of them usually found their homework which they assigned was quite hard, and 49.4% of them sometimes assigned difficult homework. 2.5% of teachers believed that their student always asked for help because the questions were too hard, 13.6% of them usually, and 43.2% of teachers stated that their students sometimes asked for their help; however, 37% of teachers expressed that their students rarely asked for help. 92.6% of teachers stated that homework was difficult for students, because they did not pay attention when homework assignments was presented or discussed. 88.9% of teachers believed that homework was mostly difficult when students did not understand homework instruction. 76.5% of teachers stated that copying homework assignments was one of the difficulties of homework. 93.9% of teachers expressed that homework was difficult when students had not learned the required concept. 91.4% stated that one of the difficulties and challenges of homework was when students disliked doing homework.

Table 5. Frequency and descriptive statistics of teachers' difficulty toward homework

		<i>D1</i>	<i>D2</i>	<i>D3</i>	<i>D4</i>	<i>D5</i>	<i>D6</i>	<i>D7</i>
Valid	Always		2.5	16.0	7.4	14.8	21.0	17.3
	Usually	16.0	13.6	42.0	46.9	21.0	45.7	43.2
	Sometimes	49.4	43.2	34.0	34.6	40.7	27.2	30.9
	Seldom	29.6	37.0	7.4	7.4	21.0	4.9	8.6
	Never	4.9	3.7	0.0	3.7	2.5	1.2	0.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Mean	3.2346	3.2596	2.333	2.530	2.753	2.197	2.308
	Std deviation	0.7789	0.8333	0.8366	0.88157	1.0311	0.8720	0.8608



*Student' Difficulties in Homework*

According to the frequency and descriptive statistics of students' questionnaire, only 35% of students found their homework assignments difficult, and 50.8% of students asked for their teacher's help when the homework assignments were difficult. 70.8% of students stated that homework was difficult when they did not pay attention to the teachers' explanation in the classroom. 73.3% of students expressed that doing homework was difficult at home when they did not understand teacher's explanation in the classroom. 86.7% of the students had difficulty in doing their homework when they had not learned the required concepts well, and 69.2% of them believed that doing homework is difficult when they disliked doing it.

Table 5. Frequency and descriptive statistics of student' difficulties in homework

		D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6
Valid	Always	5.0	5.8	14.2	8.3	20.0	15.0
	Usually	8.2	14.2	23.3	30.0	41.7	26.7
	Sometimes	21.7	30.8	33.3	35.0	35.0	27.5
	Seldom	44.2	40.0	16.7	18.3	10.8	20.8
	Never	20.8	9.2	12.5	8.3	2.5	10.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Mean	3.675	3.325	2.900	2.883	2.541	2.841
	Std deviation	1.0545	1.0221	1.2110	1.0704	0.9065	1.2090

**Interview Results**

It was decided to use the semi-structured interview because this technique is more flexible and follows a checklist of issues and questions that the researcher wishes to cover during the session. This supports the authors' aim to encourage the interviewees to discuss freely their own opinion on the subject. The segment of population selected for this research was not chosen by a random selection method. In order to prepare fluent interviews, the questions were distributed into different categories. However, the order of the questions was not strictly followed during the interview. Due to the open and semi-structured character of the study, it seemed to make more sense to let the interviewees answer the questions in an unconstrained way, mentioning everything that came to their mind.

**Theme 1 - Attitude***Students' Attitude toward Homework*

To get an understanding of what was interviewees' attitude toward homework, we started the interview by asking a general question 'how do you feel about homework?' Eleven students answered that they had a good feeling and a positive attitude toward homework assignments. For example, one of the participants stated that;

[Extract 1]: *I think homework assignments are really useful and practical. In my idea, it should occur each session in order to review or write what we have learned in the class and to master that part of new lesson.*

However, two of the students stated that they did not like homework assignments, although both of them expressed that it was good for learning. Here is an example of a learner who did not like homework assignment; however, he did not completely disagree with it:

[Extract 2]: *Actually, to tell the truth, I don't like homework assignments, but we have to do it and if our teacher assigns it in a right amount, it is good and useful.*

### *Teachers' Attitude toward Homework*

The same interview question was asked of seven teachers. Almost all of them had a positive attitude toward homework and considered it really important in enhancing students' knowledge and fixing the input they received from the classroom. They mostly believed that homework was a supplementary process for language learning and helped them understand what the goal of the class was. However, there were two teachers who had a notably different opinion about homework assignments:

[Extract 3]: *To answer this question, generally I have a good feeling toward homework, but I sometimes feel it is good to assign students homework, and sometimes not, but we live in a country that parents and the manager of the institutes expect us to assign homework each session while I think it is not necessary for that session. So it annoys me as a teacher to do something that I have to.*

[Extract 4]: *My feeling toward homework is some kinds of wasting time. Mostly, teachers ask students to read from their workbook carelessly and then start their teaching after that. They do not worth homework assignments. But if I assign homework that I design it and I believe in its efficiency. I have a good feeling toward that. When I force students to do too much homework assignment that is imposed by the institute, I think it is useless.*

These two teachers' views implied that they did not disagree with homework assignments, but they felt that homework was good provided it was not imposed by administrators or parents. It is due to the fact that whenever they were asked about homework they attended to the workbook and most of them did not consider other types of homework. These two teachers put the blame on the curriculum developers or managers of the institute who consider homework just as a workbook. This implies that homework designed by teachers themselves is considered efficient.

## **Theme 2 - Purpose of Doing Homework**

### *Students' Purpose for Doing Homework*

The second interview questions were to discover students' opinions on the purpose or the benefits of homework. The analysis of the data and co-construction of knowledge with learners, showed that most of the students considered homework assignments important and useful for language learning. Most of the students believed that homework could help them stabilize the knowledge they have learned in the class.

[Extract 5]: *In my opinion, homework is important because whenever I do homework, I practice more and I learn the new lesson better; moreover, as I practice more and more at home, new lesson sticks to my mind and I send it to my long-term memory, therefore, I will master that lesson.*

It is clear from the statements that homework plays an important role in stabilization of knowledge and reviewing of materials and help students understand their lessons better. In order to add more benefits to homework, one of the students stated that homework developed a sense of responsibility and discipline:

[Extract 6]: *I think by doing your homework, somehow you feel responsibility, and homework connects you to the class and what you have learned in the class. Actually by doing homework, you do something related to the class but outside of the classroom context. It helps you continue the process of learning regularly. If I don't have homework assignments, I postpone reviewing each lesson and it is hard for me to study when I have final exam.*

This implies that homework has a key role in the process of learning, mainly in the sense that it helps learners practice knowledge already learned for at least a second time and make them prepare for the next lesson or for their English exam. Moreover, three of the students believed that doing homework assignments helps them learn study skills and practice language items. One of the students stated:

[Extract 7]: *when I do homework assignments, not only it helps me practice the grammar or vocabulary, but also it helps me to strengthen some skills, for example, when I make sentences with words, actually it helps me improve my writing and also it develops my speaking.*

One of the students specifically referred to the fact that homework helps them recognize their weakness and strengths and so they try their best to solve their problem by asking the teacher or their classmates and reach mastery to that weakness point. This extract is a proof to this claim:

[Extract 8]: *I think when my teacher gives me homework, she wants to assure that we have learned the lesson and ask us to do homework at home in order to see in which part we have problems, and if we have problems, we ask our teacher next session and solve our problem, so by asking questions and seeking answers we master that part.*

#### *Teachers' Purpose for Doing Homework*

The same question about the benefits and purpose of homework was asked of teachers who provided more sophisticated responses to the question. There were two main ideas that most of the teachers mentioned in their statements. Their first purpose of assigning homework was that students had an opportunity to review materials at home in order not to forget the materials they had learned in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, by reviewing the materials frequently, they can stabilize the knowledge they have learned and send it into their long-term memory. The second purpose of assigning homework is so that they could recognize their weaknesses and strengths and try to solve their problems by reviewing the lesson or asking their teacher or classmates. This engaged students in the process of learning in a context other than the classroom. As they engaged more, they could learn better. These two related statements give evidence to these results:

[Extract 9]: *I think homework helps students review the materials and practice and repeat it at home, so it stabilizes the information in their mind, actually if they concentrate. They learn new words or grammar too, this creates a gap for them, then next session they come and ask me to solve the problem. I think by doing this they engage more and they interact with teachers or classmates to learn better.*

[Extract 10]: *Because we are in foreign language context, students come to English institutes twice a week. If they don't have homework, they put the book aside until next session, so homework helps them review the lesson. Also, they can study and search for the answers if they have problem in some parts. Finally, they can activate the new lesson and reach the production level.*

It is obvious from these statements that homework has a determining role in students' learning and development in English language. Students can not only stabilize the new lessons, but can also can activate the previous knowledge and it helps them to improve the production of language.

### **Theme 3 - Difficulties of Homework**

#### *Students' Difficulties in Homework*

In our third interview question, we asked students about the difficulties or challenges they had faced during doing homework assignments. Eight of the students stated that sometimes they were not in a mood for homework and it was boring for them to do a huge amount of homework each session. Two students said that they did not understand the questions in their homework and they did not know what to do, therefore, doing homework assignments became difficult for them. Five students mentioned specifically some parts of homework assignments including grammar, new vocabularies and their pronunciation, writing stories and sentences to be very difficult for them. Moreover, one

of the students stated that homework is stressful and when they postpone homework assignments, they become anxious and disturbed the whole day. One of the students said that not all of the homework assignments are useful and they are mostly time-consuming and tedious:

[Extract 11]: *In my idea, our teacher gave us a large amount of homework and most of the time I do my homework carelessly. I think homework assignments should be efficient, and it should not be time-consuming.*

#### *Teachers' Difficulties in Homework*

Teachers' were asked for their opinion on the difficulties or challenges of homework. The responses were comprehensive and detailed. Two teachers stated that one of the important problems is cheating. Teachers do not know whether students complete their homework themselves or copied from their friends. These two extracts demonstrate this claim:

[Extract 12]: *One of the challenges of homework is that students cheat from each other, and me as a teacher don't know that they complete it by themselves or not. Sometimes parents argue that neither their children nor themselves do not understand homework assignments and ask me to explain it in Persian. Actually, one of the major problems is that students do not know what to do and how to do homework.*

[Extract 13]: *Obviously, I cannot assure that students do their homework by themselves. Maybe they ask parents or relatives' help or they can use the upper-term students' book and copy from them or even nowadays they use virtual applications like telegram to share the responses. It means that one of the students do homework and shares it in a group of telegram.*

It is clear from these statements that cheating in different ways including using virtual application or using upper-term students' book is one of the teachers' main concerns. Moreover, teachers believed that one of the reasons that students cheat on homework is that they do not understand homework instruction or they do not understand the teachers' explanation about homework. Four teachers said that the other serious challenge of homework is that it is difficult to design a homework that includes the major four skills simultaneously. They believed that students need more resources in order to do homework at home; therefore, a major difficulty that they face during assigning homework is the absence of related and meaningful tasks. When the tasks are not comprehensive, meaningful and creative students become boring and demotivated:

[Extract 14]: *In my idea, there is a challenge for both teachers and students. For teachers, designing a meaningful task is difficult and if they assign a useless task or homework, students get bored and they not only learn anything, but also they become demotivated. Also, there is a challenge for students that they resist toward homework, but little by little they understand that homework is good and helps them learn, so their resistance decreases.*

[Extract 15]: *One of the important difficulties of homework is that we cannot design homework assignments that include all of our purposes for learning. For example, a task for reading just includes reading and searching vocabulary, I think designing a homework that comprise all the four skills and their sub-skills is very difficult and I haven't designed a homework yet that contains all aspects and skills for English language learning.*

From these statements, we can conclude that some students also dislike homework assignments, because they think it is boring and useless to do some repetitive task carelessly; therefore, they resist doing it. However, according to the teachers' statements, if teachers could design a meaningful task that comprises the four skills, then homework will no longer be boring and tedious.

## Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this mixed method study was to investigate EFL learners' and teachers' attitude and difficulties toward homework in the Iranian context of language learning. Assignment characteristics of teachers and learners were investigated in EM versus NEM teachers' classrooms. A mixed method design including questionnaires and interviews was used on the assumption that this mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches provided a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.

Homework has been a controversial issue for several years. Teachers and students constantly differ in their opinions as to whether or not homework actually proves to be an effective way of increasing student performance. The first and second research questions helped the researchers focus the study on finding out just how students and teachers perceived homework and whether or not they felt it was effective in both modes of EM and NEM teachers. The answers to these research questions could help teachers and students identify what works and what does not, in regards to homework, so that it is as meaningful as possible for students' learning.

When talking about homework, it seems that students have different attitudes towards homework concerning its worth and purpose. It is essential to motivate the students to develop a favorable attitude towards homework. Some students find it interesting and important while others develop an unfavorable attitude towards it. Hence, discovering their attitude is of great help for teachers in handling homework issues easily. Generally, students' usual opposition and resistance to homework led to the thought that students adopted a negative attitude toward it; however, a careful analysis of the tables and extracts from questionnaires and interviews, showed that there was a positive attitude toward homework assignments in the learners' minds. The results are in line with findings that students' views about homework play an important role in their homework behavior (Cooper et al., 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Warton, 2001; Xu, 2012). The findings showed that (as explained in extract 2) even those students who disliked homework assignments, believed that it was beneficial for their learning and it helped them review, repeat, and consolidate what they had learned in the class. In line with these findings, Rengma, Saikia & Sunny (2015) found that homework is seen as a valuable and crucial resource for teaching, allowing students to practice, and learn the unit material. Generally, it can be concluded that students have high level of attitudes towards homework assignments. This is supported by the study conducted by Sharp et al. (2001) who had also found that students have positive attitudes towards homework, and feel it is important in helping them to do well at school. As shown in Table 4, there is no significant difference between students' attitude in EM and NEM teachers' classes. It is obvious that students' attitude toward homework is not related to their teachers' majors and students in both classes have favorable attitude toward homework. 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. Based on the results of this study, almost all the participants believe that homework has significant benefits for English learning and the results supported the study by Cooper and Valentine (2001) who suggests that homework has a positive impact on student achievement. Moreover, students who complete homework generally outperform students who do not on some measures of academic achievement.

The second research question investigated EM and NEM teachers' attitude towards homework. Foreign language teachers are clearly convinced that homework is an essential part of successful language learning. This observation, coupled with Foyle and Bailey's (1988) conclusion that homework is not harmful to students, more or less ensures the continued use of homework in foreign language classes. Findings of this study

showed that 95.1% of teachers had good feelings toward homework and all the teachers believed that homework helped students learn. Moreover, 86.3% of teachers thought that homework increased learners' interest. There was no significant difference among EM versus NEM teachers in their attitude toward homework. In addition, interview results showed a high level of attitude between both EM and NEM teachers. Most of the teachers stated that in the EFL context, students spend only two hours in the class and then put it aside till next session; therefore, homework is a beneficial practice to enhance students' English knowledge, engage them, consolidate knowledge, review lessons and increase their connection with English language. The results of Wallinger's (1997) study on the role of homework in foreign language learning indicated that foreign language teachers do feel that homework is essential to language teaching and learning. The current data supports the idea that teachers generally portray positive attitudes toward homework. However, the data also brings forth the idea that teachers may implement homework in ways that they may not believe are most effective. The data from this study has led the researchers to believe that some teachers felt constrained to assign homework that they did not believe was always necessary. In the interview results, two teachers had different opinions about homework. As explained in extract 3, these teachers had partly a negative attitude toward homework because of the obligatory institute curriculum and sometimes because of parents' expectations. These teachers believed that teachers know better than institute managers or curriculum developers as to how, when and what homework to assign to their students. Brock et al. (2007) discussed similar ideas that teachers may assign homework for reasons that may not benefit their students. More specifically, he believes that some educators may actually assign homework, regardless of its effectiveness, to fulfill district homework policies or as punishment. Therefore, teachers' attitudes toward homework can also be greatly affected by the homework policies of institutes at which they teach.

The third research question discussed the difficulties of students and teachers in doing or assigning homework assignments. The study explored reasons for incomplete assignments by directly asking students and teachers to respond to questions about amount and quality of homework, difficulty, tardiness, lack of interest, and extracurricular activities—all of which have been considered in the literature as possible reasons for unsuccessful homework completion (e.g., Hong, Milgram, & Rowell, 2004; Margolis, 2005).

Teachers find that a number of students do not complete homework assignments for various reasons. According to their perception about the difficulties of homework in both quantitative and qualitative methods, there were seven main sources of homework difficulties. First, a high percentage of teachers (93.9%) stated that homework is difficult for students when they have not learned the required concept. Second, 91.4% of teachers stated that one of the difficulties and challenges of homework is when students dislike doing homework, because homework assignments are boring, repetitious and lack creativity; they therefore resist doing homework, they lose their interest and become demotivated. Darling-Hammond & Olivia (2006) reported that students did not feel that the assignment was meaningful, and they did not understand how the work related to the lesson of the day. Third, 92.6% of teachers stated that homework was difficult for students, because they did not pay attention when homework assignments were presented or discussed in the class. Forth, 88.9% of teachers believed that homework was difficult when students did not understand homework instruction. Hence, they asked for help from teachers, classmates or siblings. This result supports the study of Darling-Hammond & Olivia (2006) who suggest that one of the most frequently reported reasons is that students do not know how to do the work. Some students reported not knowing how to begin the



homework assignment, and in some cases they did not understand the instructions for their assignment as given by the teacher. Fifth, 76.5 % of teachers stated that copying homework assignments was one of the difficulties of homework. According to the interview results, most of the teachers complained of students cheating and copying from their friends. One of the teachers stated that using upper terms students' book, copying from their friends and even sharing the answers in messaging application like Telegram has become one of the difficulties. Apart from the items listed in the questionnaire for homework difficulties, some teachers remarked on challenges of homework. As in extract 14, the sixth challenge is to design a comprehensive and meaningful homework that includes the four skills and also be interesting for students. They believed that students need more resources in order to do homework; therefore, the absence of related and meaningful tasks is a major difficulty that they face in assigning homework. When the tasks are not comprehensive, meaningful and creative students become bored. Based on three decades of studies on the relationship between homework and achievement, Cooper (quoted by Bembenutty, 2011) suggests that teachers need to employ assignments that are meaningful and avoid draining children of their motivation. Most teachers believed that by designing a meaningful and purposeful homework for students and engaging them in the process of learning, their resistance or negative attitude toward homework will decrease little by little. The last difficulty of homework is parents' lack of knowledge. Few teachers argued about parents' expectations and complaint about homework. They believed that most parents did not understand homework assignments and they asked teachers to translate it in Persian for students. Moreover, some parents expected teachers to assign too much homework. If a teacher assigned less homework or did not assign homework at all, they thought that they did not care about students' lessons and complained to the manager of the institutes. The relevant literature reported that teachers assign homework because some parents expect their children to come home with one or two tasks (Brock, Lapp, Flood, Fisher, & Han, 2007). Of 65.4% of the teachers, 16% usually found their homework which they assigned quite hard, and 49.4% of them sometimes assigned difficult homework. 2.5% of teachers believed that their student always asked for help because the questions were too hard, 13.6% of them usually asked for help, and 43.2% of teachers said that their students sometimes asked for their help; however, 37% of teachers said that their students rarely asked for help. It showed that most of the teachers do not assign difficult homework and that the difficulties and challenges of homework are not due to the difficulty of the questions.

The research determined that the students face difficulties in doing homework due to the problems of boredom and "emotional" weariness, inability to understand the homework instruction, not paying attention to teachers' explanations, new untapped topics, and "cognitive" difficulty of the homework assignments. According to the results, only 35% of students found their homework assignments difficult, and 50.8% of students asked for their teacher' help when the homework assignments were difficult. 70.8% of students stated that homework was difficult when they did not pay attention to the teachers' explanation in the classroom. 73.3% of students said that doing homework is difficult at home when they did not understand teacher's explanation in the classroom. 86.7% of the students had difficulty in doing their homework when they haven't learned the required concepts well, and 69.2% of them believed that doing homework is difficult when they disliked doing it. The qualitative results showed that one of the main difficulties of students and which makes them bored is assignments that are repetitious, meaningless and lack creativity. Students stated that not all of the homework assignments are useful and they are mostly time-consuming and tedious; therefore, they are not in a mood for doing homework and it is boring for them to do a huge amount of homework each

session. These findings align with Corno (2000) that homework often involves tasks that many view as boring, repetitious, irrelevant, difficult, or unimportant, which must be done without the structure present in the classroom.

Some students specifically mentioned some parts of homework assignments including grammar, new vocabularies and their pronunciation, writing stories and sentences to be a major difficulty for them. This finding is consistent with Paudel's (2012) study that the high proportion of students who feel English subject homework difficult is due to the lack of word power and grammar. The other difficulty is its anxiety and the stress imposed on students. Students get nervous when they postpone their assignments. To conclude, it seems that doing homework is a necessary part of the education according to both students and teachers who are involved in language learning. According to Pushkarev & Pushkerva (2019) the education system plays a primary role in instilling this value and strengthening it in the stakeholders.

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