

A Brief Study on the Strategies of Fun English Homework Design in Primary School under the “Double Reduction” Policy

Yuting Zhou^{1*}

¹ Qiubei Primary School Affiliated to Yunnan Normal University, Qiubei, Wenshan Yunnan, China

Email Address

1242040892@qq.com (Yuting Zhuo)

*Correspondence: 1242040892@qq.com

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Abstract:

Since the implementation of the “double reduction” policy two years ago, localities, schools and educators have been actively exploring measures to reduce study burden and improve teaching quality. However, in the design of primary school English homework, new problems such as reduction only in quantity, excessive reduction, and static multilevel homework design have begun to appear, failing to achieve the goals of “double reduction” and educating people. In a hope to reduce study burden and improve learning quality, this paper reviews new problems in the design of primary school English homework since the implementation of the “double reduction” policy, and puts forward four strategies for designing fun primary school English homework which are creating a genuine situation of experiences, adding beats, designing games, and recognizing differences.

Keywords:

Double Reduction Policy, Primary School, English Learning, Fun Homework

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council introduced a set of guidelines to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education (hereinafter referred to as “double reduction”),^[1] and asked all localities and departments to fully implement the policy according to the actual situation. In August of the same year, “the Education Supervisory Commission Office of the State Council issued a notice to report to the public every 15 days on the progress of work in implementing the ‘double reduction’ policy.”^[2] In order to implement the policy, provinces and cities have issued specific implementation plans. It can be seen that the strength of the policy is unprecedented, and the country’s determination to effectively reduce study burden and increase learning efficiency is rock solid.

Under the “double reduction” policy, the arrangement of English homework in primary school is in a difficult situation. On the one hand, study burden has to be reduced. In 2013, the Ministry of Education issued a regulation on primary school pupils’ homework which clearly pointed out that “there should be no written homework for Grade 1 and 2 students, and less than an hour of written homework for other grades”[3]. In other words, for the subject English, only a small amount of oral homework can be assigned for Primary One and Two students. And for Primary Three to Six, the amount of English homework should be limited to 5 to 10 minutes, taking into account the homework of other subjects. On the other hand, it is of great necessity to improve students’ ability to use English in life because it’s still a global language spoken by “around 1.5 billion people worldwide in 2022”[4].

In this two-way stress situation, teachers should design the English homework that is high in quality but low in quantity. However, some teachers fail to find effective methods to cope with the situation, so they mechanically reduce the quantity of homework, mechanically stratify students by matching them with homework of different ability levels, resulting in a heavy implicit burden, high implicit pressure and unattended feelings of students. The paper aims to explore strategies of fun primary school English homework so as to reduce study burden and increase learning efficiency.

2. Materials and Methods

Taking the teaching practice and students in Qiubei Primary School Affiliated to Yunnan Normal University as the object of study, the study uses the following methods in the research process: citing related papers and websites, empirical methods such as classroom observation, interviewing, summarizing teaching experience, pedagogical experimental methods.

2.1. Acronyms

Table 1. Acronyms and Meanings.

Acronyms	Meanings
TS	Top students
AS	Average students
SBA	Students below average
GSE	A genuine situation of experiences

3. Problems of Primary School English Homework Design under “Double Reduction” Policy

“‘Double reduction’ is not solely an ‘external cure’ to treat ‘symptoms’. It should also be an ‘internal cure’ that goes down to the root to achieve quality improvement and innovation”[5]. Since the implementation of “double reduction”, the main problem of English homework design in primary school can be summarized as treating the “symptoms but not the root cause”. Therefore, related problems emerged.

3.1. Reduced Quantity but not the Burden: Hidden Burden Still Heavy

Some teachers did not design less but better homework by integrating key and difficult knowledge points together, nor did they try to make homework more

interesting, targeted and various in form etc. On the contrary, they simply reduced the quantity of homework.

Interviews with 12 randomly selected students (two in each grade) from Qiubei Primary School Affiliated to Yunnan Normal University (hereinafter referred to as “Qiubei Primary School”) showed that some effort had been put to reduce students’ English homework. A fourth-grade boy said their English homework was reduced “from copying each word five times to one time”; a third-grade girl said their English homework has reduced “from reading each word three times to one time”, a sixth-grade girl said their English homework has reduced from “doing three drills to just one” etc.

This mechanical homework reduction can hardly cultivate students’ interest in learning, and at the same time, releases to students a wrong signal that “homework is a burden”. So no matter how much the homework there is, the students would be doing it with a passive attitude. Such practice, for a one thing, brings hidden burden to students. For another, the unified assignment fails to meet students’ individual study needs and does not reflect student-centered learning approach which can be described as “flexible”[6], and is “designed to meet the needs of each student individually”[7].

3.2. Excessive Reduction: High Implicit Pressure

Teachers generally do not pay enough attention to homework, nor do they not take homework as a necessary supplement to class teaching, so they spend less time and effort on careful homework design[5]. And, through face-to-face communication in a teaching study section in Qiubei Primary School, the author found that some teachers lacked a correct understanding of the function of homework, believing that so long as they focus on improving the efficiency of classroom teaching, they need not design any after-school homework, and students would have no homework burden and their interest in learning English would increase accordingly, thus “achieving” the goal of “double reduction”.

However, in the absence of homework, teachers, firstly, miss an opportunity to test his/hers teaching outcomes and may therefore fail to adjust his/hers teaching method timely. Secondly, students and their parents could hardly find a way to test students’ school study result, and that can lead to a more implicit pressure because they are afraid of being lagged behind. Thirdly, students fail to reap the joy of learning, and teachers of teaching.

3.3 Stratified but Mechanical Homework Design: Students’ Feelings Ignored

Since the implementation of “double reduction”, in order to enable students of all ability levels to benefit from homework, teachers will roughly divide students into three categories: top students (TS), average students (AS), and students below average (SBA), and then assign them with different homework. Through classroom observations, the author found that the teachers in Qiubei Primary School would assign students numbers based on exam scores, such as A, B, C, D students or No.1, 2, 3 students etc. When assigning homework, directly specify which type of students shall do what kinds of homework. This approach is relatively mechanical, careless, and does not allow students to experience the joy of choosing assignments independently, nor does it successfully stimulate students’ interest in learning by utilizing the advantages of stratified homework design. Grading based on exam scores

neglects students' inner feelings and the teacher fails to take on the responsibility of being a mental health provider for students.

4. Functions of Homework

The teacher's perspective on homework largely determines the quality of homework design. If teachers position homework as one of the "errands" of work or "compensation for inefficient classroom teaching," it would be difficult to design high-quality homework. On the contrary, if the teacher understands the functions of homework, then after school homework can be: a little helper to help students consolidate knowledge, improve their ability and to develop their habits; or, it could be a little assistant to help teachers test the results of teaching, accurately analyse the learning conditions and improve teaching methods.[8]

5. Fun Homework: A Catalyst for Learning

The so-called fun homework refers to homework that can make students feel happy and can give them a feeling of interest. It not only helps to reduce the burden of homework, but also improves the quality of learning. For a long time, homework has been regarded as a burden on students that requires various means of control and continuous reduction. However, in fact, homework can also be a fun learning activity conducted by students themselves. If a child's motivation to learn is stimulated and he or she actively and happily completes the homework, then even if the workload is a bit heavy and the time it takes to finish is a bit long, they will still be willing to do it. And the key is to make the homework both interesting and challenging.[5]

6. Strategies of Primary School Fun English Homework Design

Designing homework that pupils enjoy has always been a great challenge for primary school English teachers, because there are many factors to consider and lots of work to do. In the early stages of design, they need to investigate students' interests and hobbies and their access to learning devices. During the design, they need to integrate and compare different teaching resources. In the later stages, they need to assign homework specifically and give feedback to students. Yet teachers' time and energy are limited, and their homework designing skills vary. Oftentimes, they "would easily ignore homework process," a third-grade English teacher in Qiubei Primary School said in an interview. As a primary school English teacher, the author actively explores fun homework design methods in daily practice, and summaries the following strategies for primary school fun English homework design.

6.1. Creating A Genuine Situation of Experiences

The American philosopher and educator John Dewey believed that "knowledge takes place in concrete and meaningful situations." [9] He also laid down five essential steps for his problem or project method and the first one of it is "the pupil should have a genuine situation of experiences" (GSE).[10] It can be seen that teaching activities should be based on specific situations. Since the design of homework is also an important part of teaching activities, teachers should create vivid and interesting situations in homework to promote students' self-learning ability.

6.1.1. Fun Audiovisual Homework with GSE

For a long time, most of the homework assigned by teachers has focused on doing numerous exercises or reciting passages. These tasks require pupils to demonstrate sufficient self-control or need external supervision to ensure completion, which can easily lead to polarization of study performance. At this point, teachers can design homework that only consists reading or listening, in a bid to make students feel refreshed and relieved. For example, when the author said “Today’s homework is watching a video at home. If interested, you can also dance and sing with the video!” Students were amazed. Firstly, because the homework was easy, and secondly, they were curious about the “video”. As soon as school was over that day, some students asked their parents to quickly check if the English teacher had posted the video. Some parents even said, “I have never seen my child being so interested in doing homework.” In fact, this video is just a chant song of the textbook which covers the key and difficult vocabulary and sentence patterns learned in class. The pupils clicked on the video and immediately enchanted by the scene. They were quickly inspired by the dynamic rhythm and animated characters inside, and couldn’t help but sing and dance with it. TS and AS can basically watch it once and can then sing and dance along with the video. Some TS even adapted this chant using other vocabulary. SBA also spontaneously went back and read it multiple times, trying to imitate the pronunciation and intonation, and finally could memorize it.

This type of homework is very specific and operational, not difficult for teachers to design. Also, it can achieve the teaching objectives to a large extent, because it is fun for the students. In the first place, the teacher’s words can stimulate students’ curiosity, encourage active engagement in homework and, more importantly, cultivate positive attitudes towards learning. In the second place, the use of audiovisual teaching materials to re-create lively and vivid scenes can re-present the important and/or difficult words and/or phrases to the students, which can further strengthen students’ perception and understanding of those words and/or phrases. In the third place, the homework combines rhythms and actions to enrich the context, stimulating the students’ visual, auditory and kin-esthetic senses, thereby achieving the goal of improving language skills. Last but not least, cultivating a love of sport, optimism, confidence and a positive emotional attitude, the homework is beneficial to the physical and mental development of the students.

6.1.2. Fun Written Homework with GSE

Unlike other forms of homework, written homework, as one of the most traditional forms of homework, has always been accompanied by students’ school life in China. During weekdays, it is often seen that Chinese students practicing writing, doing calculations, and writing vocabulary under the supervision of teachers or parents. In fact, written assignments can also be fun, depending on whether the teacher can stimulate students’ interest at different stages. For example, when designing tasks to consolidate knowledge, a teacher might set a scene in a movie theater. The homework question can be: Today, “cute animals” and “fruits” have come to watch a movie. Can you help them find their seats? In this movie scene, each seat is marked with corresponding English words, and many cute animals and fruits are drawn next to it. They stand next to each other and look at each other, not sure which seat to take. In actual classroom teaching, when assigning this homework, the author said to the students, “Class, our good friends are encountering some difficulties. Can you help them?” The students answered in unison, “OK!” Then they picked up their homework

and started doing it. After class, they didn't run out of the classroom, but said they wanted to finish their English homework before going to play.

6.2. Adding Beats

Memorization of words and phrases can be boring and uninteresting for pupils. If homework focuses only on reading and memorizing, children will inevitably feel dull and bored, leading to a decrease in enthusiasm for learning and a lack of motivation. At this point, teachers can play songs that children like, and then adapt the lyrics with the words or phrases they have learned and, of course, sing the song aloud. In this way, students' interest of learning can be stimulated. More importantly, one can add beats to every word, phrase, sentence pattern etc.

To be specific, songs like "Two Tigers", "Little Bees" and "Baby Shark" that have strong beats are catchy and could bring people joy and happiness. They are often loved by children. Teachers can therefore start by adapting those songs, singing them to their students in class, and then ask the students go home and sing them to their family or friends. Teachers can even encourage those students who are interested to adapt the songs on their own.

On the one hand, starting with students' favourite songs, this type of homework makes it easy for them to embark on the journey of learning English, to experience the fun of English, and to get motivated in writing English. On the other hand, it can cater to the study needs of students at different levels: for SBA, they can easily grasp key and difficult language points with the help of the rhythm, thereby enhancing their confidence in learning English; for TS and AS, they will actively try to adapt songs and share them with others, which can cultivate their learning ability.

6.3. Designing Games

Famous educator Jean Piaget once pointed out the "learn through play" theory that viewed "play as integral to the development of intelligence in children".[11] Lev Vygotsky hold a similar idea that "In play, a child is always above his average age".[11] Indeed, children are naturally lively and playful. If children can learn from playing and have fun during the learning process, it will greatly increase their interest in learning and thus boost study efficiency. In class, with so many factors to consider, it is difficult for teachers to let every student play to his or her hearts' content. However, after-school homework can play a role in extending classroom learning so that each student can fully play, have fun and learn happily. Teachers can install fun game apps on their classroom computers and/or encourage parents to use computers or other mobile devices at home to install English games such as Cutting Fruit, Word Puzzles, Saving Pandas, Balloon Quiz, Fishing Words etc. Students can arrange their own time to play after class. For example, there are many built-in English games on the Sewo whiteboard, such as Happy Darts, Car Racing and Whack a Mole, which are very popular with students. Teachers can also ask students to pair up and compete after class to encourage playful learning.

This homework greatly innovates the form of primary school English homework, stimulates students' interest in learning, allows students to learn while playing, and at the same time, trains their English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, student's hand-brain coordination ability and concentration, expands English learning channels, cultivates cooperation ability, and helps strengthen class unity.

6.4 Recognizing Differences: Design Careful and Personalized Homework

Stratified homework has always troubled teachers because, on the one hand, it is easy to overlook the inner feelings of some students when assigning such homework, which is not conducive to their overall development. On the other hand, the assignment of homework with a different content will significantly increase the workload of homework design, marking and evaluation. But each student is a unique individual who needs personalized guidance and attention from teachers. The more the homework is designed to meet the individual needs of the students, the more interested they will be in completing it. Moreover, “double reduction” does not mean reducing the workload of teachers and schools. Rather, teachers should combine teaching with love. They should have strong passion for education and teaching. They should use the power of love to consider as many factors as possible when designing personalized homework and explore design strategies of stratified homework.

First to be considered, gender differences. Teachers must take into account gender differences and design personalized assignments. Because there are both boys and girls in a class, their interests, hobbies and preferences are usually not the same. Therefore, rather than adopting a “one size fits all” approach, teachers should take full account of the different interests and hobbies of both boys and girls when designing homework. They should be inclusive and not create a homework situation based solely on the content that students of a particular gender like, as this can cause some students to lose interest in their homework. At this point, teachers can create two GSEs simultaneously, design two assignments, and allow students to make independent choices in the assignment, without mechanical distribution, to meet individual needs. Due to the strong curiosity of primary school students, they can be curious about the content of other students’ homework, spontaneously compare with each other, actively communicate and learn, and improve their sense of cooperation.

Second to be considered, students’ different abilities. There are students of all ability levels in a class who are all unique individuals. The more the homework can respond to individual needs, the more it can reflect the concept of individualized teaching. Teachers can design two or more assignments with different content. When assigning the homework, they can say to the students “I have prepared two “gifts” for you, one is a bit difficult and the other is easier. If you want to challenge yourself, please raise your left hands. If you want to challenge the time you finish homework, please raise your right hand. And those who want both homework can raise two of your hands!” After saying that to four of my classes in third grade, the author found that most of TS and AS raised both of their hands, while students with learning difficulties joyfully raised their right hand. It can be seen that personalized homework design can better cater to the individual needs of students with different abilities. With sincere love and care for students, it can also achieve the goal of “seeking beauty in assigning homework”, which can further cultivate students’ love for learning and for life.

7. Conclusions

After-school homework, which is seen as an extension of the school study, also has a fundamental role to play in establishing a moral education and should not be neglected. Although the design of primary school English homework is full of challenges against the backdrop of “double reduction”, it is more of an opportunity to promote continuous improvement of homework design. Only by bravely facing the

challenges, grasping the opportunities, finding the problems in time, and actively thinking about the countermeasures to solve them, can elementary school English teachers better cultivate students' core ability of English in a new situation, strive to "reduce study burden and increase learning efficiency", and promote students' overall development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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