Effective Homework Design Based on MI Theory:
An Action Research in a College English Class

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This paper aims to explore new ways of homework design based on the Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). By action research which lasted for a whole semester, it has been found that the new-style homework can greatly increase students' interest in learning English and develop their creativity and critical thinking skills as well.

Keywords: homework design, action research, MI Theory, College English class

Introduction

Homework is a most important supplement and extension of classroom teaching. It plays an indispensable part in consolidating and deepening the knowledge learned in the classroom. It is also an important tool for testing the effectiveness of classroom teaching and students' learning. Well-designed homework can not only improve students' learning effect, but also enhance their autonomous learning capacity. As Zhang (2001, p. 41) indicated, "Homework is an important way for students to acquire classroom knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate emotional intelligence".

Despite the significance of homework in effective learning and teaching, homework design can be hijacked by learning outcomes, departmental standardization, and textbook projects, which, unfortunately, do not take students' enjoyment of homework into account. In addition, we teachers have become accustomed to the "pot meal" and "duck-feeding" style of teaching, which ignores the main role of students and disregards the differences and diversity of students, and therefore the "one size fits all" type of homework design has come into being and prevailed for many years in China. No wonder most students nowadays are very averse to this type of homework. It has been found in a survey that over 70% of students in the intensive reading class the author has been teaching do not consider homework for the course constructive or enjoyable. According to the survey, homework for the course is often monotonous, tedious, and repetitive. To most students, homework is just a mandatory task, whether they like it or not. The author further realized through interviews with some students that most of the homework comes from the exercises in the textbook, which are mostly grammar, vocabulary, and translation exercises. These exercises can help students master the language points in the texts, but they are too easy for some students and too difficult for others. Moreover, most of the exercises have fixed answers, rendering it hard to boost students' interest in learning. All these indicate that the traditional homework for the course needs to be optimized to ensure its effectiveness in learning and teaching.

With that aim in mind, the author adopted the method of action research. Through reading related literature and consulting experienced teachers, the author identified the principles and theoretical basis of homework design

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for the integrated English course she had been teaching, and practiced them in the classes she taught from September, 2022 to January, 2023, carrying out a whole semester of observation and reflection on which this paper is based.

Literature Review

In recent years, most studies on English homework focus on innovative homework, like cooperative homework, task-based homework, and open-ended homework, which can be chosen, decided, and completed by the students individually or in small groups. Some others focus on utilizing various teaching platforms, such as "Rain Classroom" to test the effectiveness of assignments (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Still others base their homework design on various theories, such as Dissipative Structural Theory (Xie, 2014) and Theory of Multiple Intelligences (hereafter referred to as "MI Theory") (Shi, 2008). No matter which method is adopted or what theory homework design is based on, all the authors focus on theory and fail to give detailed information or examples as to how to carry out reforms on homework design in class. In this paper, the author is to adopt the MI Theory to carry out homework design for the course of intensive reading she has been teaching in a university in China, and more importantly, the author will not only supply specific examples of assignments for the course, but will give suggestions as to evaluation of homework for teachers.

Theoretical Basis

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences was proposed in 1983 by Howard Gardner, an American educational psychologist. According to the theory, intelligence is the ability to solve a problem or create a product that is recognized as valuable in a particular culture or a particular environment. Gardener (1983) suggested that the traditional notion of intelligence, which is centrally based on IQ testing, is far too limited. Gardener (2006) believed "…that human cognitive competence is better described in terms of abilities or mental skills, which I call intelligences. All normal individuals possess each of these skills to some extent, individuals differ in the degree of skill and in the nature of combination…" (p. 212). According to Gardener, human intelligence is multifaceted and consists of eight major intelligences, namely musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence.

In light of MI Theory, students should not be treated exactly the same in schooling or to be viewed as identical. Teachers should also keep in mind that students' intelligences are not fixed. Moreover, according to the MI Theory, all human intelligences operate in the brain in a complex way, and since no one intelligence exists in isolation, only when the various intelligences are actively utilized can the best results be achieved when learning a language (Fang & Li, 2007). This theory coincides with the idea of "teaching in line with the student's ability" first put forward by Confucius.

Research Design

Subjects of Study

As the author teaches sophomore English majors the course of intensive reading in a Chinese university, she had the students in her class as subjects for this study.

Method

According to the survey results as to homework for the intensive reading course, the majority of students do not like the traditional homework assigned to them, which is mostly exercises in the textbook following each text.

It is therefore imperative to make some changes to the old way of homework design. As a result, the author carried out action research which is based on MI Theory in class for a whole semester. In the process of carrying out the research, whenever new problems arose, the author would attempt to make appropriate adjustments.

At the end of the semester, the author conducted another survey in class to get to know students' attitudes to the new way of homework design. In the survey, most students gave positive feedbacks, which proves that the new style of homework is more popular with them than traditional homework.

Implementation

In light of MI Theory, human intelligence is multifaceted, so is students' intelligence. There is no difference in the level of intelligence of students, but only a difference in the tendency and strength of intelligence(s). It is the responsibility of the teacher to find out in which area or areas a student has more potential so that he or she can be taught according to his or her needs.

As to homework design. Teachers can assign tasks of different styles and difficulty levels for students to choose from and accomplish. For instance, for pre-reading tasks, the teacher can supply several open-ended questions which are different in complexity for students to choose from. After learning a text, the teacher can ask students to write a follow-up or a summary of the story in the text, or adapt the text into drama, or even shoot a vlog to make their comments on the text. The teacher must ensure that all students have absolute freedom in choosing the assignment they want to accomplish. Such differentiated teaching is supposed to better cater to the students' intelligence(s) and help each and every student realize his/her full potential.

As to evaluation. Instead of simply giving each student a grade for his/her homework, teachers can evaluate students' different assignments in various ways, including making detailed comments and supplying suggestions for improvement. Sometimes teachers' words of encouragement can work wonders. In addition, for some simple assignments, such as open-ended questions for discussion, the teacher can encourage students to make comments on each other's answer. As a result, the interaction between the teacher and students as well as that among students will be greatly enhanced.

As to creativity and critical thinking skills. Traditional homework that demands the only right answers might not be conducive to exercising students' creativity and critical thinking skills, namely evaluating, analysing, reasoning, problem solving, and decision making skills. By contrast, flexible homework, such as open-ended questions, summary writing, and drama writing can not only greatly enhance students' creativity and critical thinking skills, but add great fun to the process of doing homework.

Results

At the end of the semester, the author conducted another survey among students to collect their thoughts regarding homework of the new style. According to the survey, about 92% of the students in the author's class believe that the new style of homework has greatly increased their interest in the study of English and about 90% of them think their creativity and critical thinking skills have also been improved. Those so-called "poor students" in English also reported that they have much more confidence than before after they are given the freedom to choose whatever assignment that suits their English level and abilities best.

To sum up, the implementation of the new-style homework in the author's College English class has been proved very successful in arousing and maintaining students' interest in English study and improving their various thinking skills.

Conclusions

Effective teaching is never easy to achieve. Moreover, with the development of science and technology, teachers need to constantly keep track of the development and adjust their teaching methods and strategies accordingly.

As traditional homework which mainly comprises grammar, vocabulary, and translation exercises does not take students' enjoyment into account and fails to arouse students' interest, teachers should set specific teaching objectives about "what they want their students to know and be able to do" (Wahyuni & Kuswardhani, 2016). On the basis of that and with MI Theory in mind, teachers can design specific assignments that are student-oriented, novel and diversified and matched to those teaching objectives. Only in this way can we ensure the best teaching and learning outcomes and more importantly, the students' interest in the study of English can be promoted.

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