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To Do or Not to Do: EFL Learners' Perception on and Practice of Homework Assignment

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Abstract

Homework assignments have been explored from several different perspectives over the past few years. Learners' views and their practice of homework have been explored in different disciplines. This study attempted to explore English language learners' perception on and their practice of homework throughout a term of study. To this end, 110 adult male and female EFL learners agreed to participate in this study. Questionnaires and subsequent semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. SPSS Software was used to analyze the questionnaire data and content analysis was used for the interviews using content analysis. The results showed that students had a positive perception towards homework assignments. Moreover, the results also revealed that learners had certain difficulties in doing homework assignments. They stated that mostly the difficulties are due to some specific reasons namely not learning the required concept, not knowing the instruction, not enjoying the homework, not paying attention, not understanding homework instruction, anxiety and stress of homework. The results offer a number of pedagogical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and managers of language institutions.

Keywords: homework, assignment characteristics, micro-genetic analysis, perception.

1. Introduction

Man is born into a tangle of standard processes and behavior patterns, and through gradual socialization, he gets acquainted with the admissible modus operandi for the social group he is a member of. He deepens these principles and confronts them with the experiences of others

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(Tkáčová et al., 2021; Martin et al. 2022). Therefore, the school becomes a place of reciprocity, that is, individual and collective academic learning and growth. As part of today's education and educational process, it is difficult for a teacher to attract and engage students. One of the reasons is the huge amount of available information and online possibilities which appear to be very popular among young people because they provide information and entertainment, including a wide range of web technologies (blogs, Wikis, social networks and virtual networks) that are available all around us (Gadušová et al., 2021; Tkáčová et al., 2021a; Záhorec et al., 2013). The exploitation of ICT has been widely used by large amounts of young people attending educational institutions of any level. At the same time, the exploitation of technologies for education has been considered standard (Faltýnková, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to choose appropriate methods and actively prepare various teaching aids that can motivate students, arouse interest in self-study, and thus educate them" (Petřikovičová et al., 2021, Stranovská et al., 2019, Stranovská, Gadušová, 2020). Equally important seems to be promoting the sustainable well-being of students during the educational process (Tkáčová et al., 2021a), which also prepares them for the complexity and challenges they face and will face every day. Of course, in the conviction and hope that they lead to personal development, application, to a higher standard of living, but also to the overall "social development, which is a part of a process that has consistently been a process considered a more or less direct series of assumed improvements (Tkáčová, 2021). Gadušová, Malá and Predanocyová (2020) assume that alternative suggestions may correspond to a more consistent approach to systematizing learners' knowledge in the active application of cross-curricular connections and topics.

This study is going to survey the assignment characteristics of homework, such as amount, purpose, skill area, degree of individualization, degree of students' choice, completion deadlines, and the social context in which they are going to perform. Assignment characteristics play an important role.

Homework is defined as individual or group tasks assigned to students by the teacher to be completed outside of school time for various purposes, such as getting prepared for a new learning material or reinforcing, expanding, practicing or completing newly learned material (Cooper, 1989: 7; Corno, 1996: 27). Homework, part of the daily routine, can bring a positive attitude to some students, but a kind of busy work to others that leads to frustration. There has been considerable controversy about the effectiveness of homework among researchers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Cooper and Valentine (2001) by doing 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 students' degree of learning and their mastering of the learned knowledge, linking the new experience with the previous one, paying attention to the students' individual differences, attracting the students' interest towards the lesson and achieving independency, responsibility, and self-guidance in order to increase learning (Azizi, Kralik, 2020; Azizi, Pavlikova, Masalimova, 2020; El-shar'a, Abed, 2008; Zeiton, 1998). In addition to the positive effects of homework, it also has some drawbacks, 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 EFL context.

Homework assignments may be short or long, or they can differentiate in both the frequency and length of individual assignments. They contribute to the building of "individual competencies and group work activity" (Azizi et al., 2021a) as well as to the development of "the academic collaboration, which is proving to be necessary especially in the present, when teaching cannot be provided in person due to COVID-19 restrictions" (Pavlíková et al., 2021; Tvrdoň et al., 2021; Azizi et al., 2021b) which brought "drastic changes that occurred in everyday life of every human being" (Ionescu et al., 2021). A lot of questions may appear dealing with the quality of distance education, both of teaching and learning-via the latest technologies, for example via social media platforms (Tkáčová et al. 2021b; Tkáčová et al. 2021c) or via mobile technologies (Al-Rahmi et al., 2021), whether students know how to learn efficiently in this manner. Moreover, researchers and academics are continuously trying to use and experiment with variable combinations of established pedagogies, tools, and technologies that lead to enhance or sustain the student learning process and motivation (Durrani et al., 2022). Based on the data, some didactic recommendations were

defined towards designing and conducting online distance courses (Faltýnková et al., 2021; Entlová et al., 2018).

Homework assignments have various purposes, such as purposes related to instruction, teachers, or school administration. They lead to the formation of education experiences that have a significant impact on the quality and type of experience that the child is exposed to and, therefore, could have a direct impact on the child's natural personality and its further development (Máhrík, Králík, 2019). Homework thus ultimately contributes to the sense of satisfaction and happiness of students; despite the fact, that we can talk about the complexity of the term happiness that is today emerging as a part of new concepts such as happyology (happiology) or science of happiness (Petrovič et al., 2021).

The purposes of homework assignments can be divided into (a) instructional and (b) non-instructional objectives (Epstein, Van Voorhis, 2001). The most common instructional purpose of homework is that learners have the opportunity to practice and review the learned materials in the class. In addition, by assigning homework, learners can transfer previous learned skills to a new situation. The non-instructional purposes of homework are to develop communication between parents and children (Balli et al., 1998; Van Voorhis, 2003), to do directives from school administrators (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995) and to punish students (Epstein, Van Voorhis, 2001). Moreover, letting parents know what is going on in school is the other non-instructional objective of homework (Coleman et al., 1982). Wallinger (1997), Stranovská, Hvozdková, Munková (2019) stated that four skills are used in language learning, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills can be used in homework assignments; however, these skills were not emphasized equally. For example, writing and reading is used more than speaking and listening. That's because teachers generally think that speaking and listening are emphasized and used in class, and homework is a good way to practice reading and writing. The degree of individualization is related to whether the teacher assigns homework to all students or a particular group. Also, it refers to whether the teacher assigns homework according to the needs of each student. The degree of choice refers to whether the homework assignment is compulsory or voluntary. The completion deadline means that if the learners can do the assignment in a short period of time, for example, by completing homework for the next session, or the learners can complete it for several days or weeks. Finally, homework assignments can be different according to the social context. Some assignments can be done individually and independently. Some assignments need the involvement of other people or can be done in a group (Cooper et al., 2006).

Additionally, research on affective factors in learning a second language is receiving great attention. It is obvious that the influence of affective factors on second language acquisition is not negligible (Stranovská et al., 2019a). The affective factor explored in this study is the attitude of students towards homework, which plays an important role. Corno (2000) believed that imposing homework on learners leads to frustration and demotivation; therefore, 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, show a more positive attitude, and their performance improves (Haar et al., 2002; Minotti, 2005). Geiser (1999) stated that students will have more positive attitudes toward homework when they understand their preferences and use them in homework processes.

Despite the bulk of research on homework, there is still paucity of studies on learners' perception toward and their practice of homework in an EFL context. The purpose is to shed light on the effectiveness of homework from the perspective of the learners and discover the challenges and problems they face while doing it.

With this purpose in mind, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are learners' attitudes towards homework in English classrooms?
2. What are the students' accounts of the difficulties of homework?

2. Methodology

Design

The study used both quantitative and qualitative designs in order to first ask students to respond to a Likert-type questionnaire to examine their attitude, difficulties, and assignment characteristics of homework. Then an interview was conducted to provide the study with richer students' voice, and help to explore how students viewed homework assignments.

Participants

The sample of the study for the first quantitative phase included 120 EFL learners. The participants of the study were selected from different institutes in the Mazandaran Province, North of Iran. These institutes had different materials and various types of homework, which enabled getting perspectives from different contexts. The students attended two sessions of the English classes per week. Their ages ranged between 15 and 32 years and 70 were male and 50 were female. Most of the students have been studying English for more than 3 years,

For the qualitative phase of the study, 13 EFL learners were selected from the population pool based on purposive sampling.

Instruments

Questionnaire: A five-point Likert scale questionnaire containing 22 items was used. To develop the questionnaire, at first, 24 items were extracted and listed based on the comprehensive analysis of the literature. Some items were adapted from standard instruments (e.g., Cooper et al., 1998) or taken from related literature (e.g., Paudel, 2012; Amiryousefi, 2016), while others were derived from previously validated measures (e.g., Xu, 2011). These items included a mix of scales drawn from previously validated work and individual items relevant to our research questions. After reviewing the related literature, a more detailed questionnaire was developed based on the purpose of the study and was piloted. All responses to the questionnaires were loaded into a statistical software database (SPSS version 24.0) and analyzed. Because in several measures the items were newly constructed, exploratory factor analyses were conducted. All exploratory factor analyses were conducted with maximum likelihood extraction and with an oblique rotation because the factors were expected to correlate with each other. We used a combination of eigen value greater than 1 and a visual scree test to determine the number of factors in each analysis. The results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests showed that the KMO was above 0.6 ($\alpha = 0.672 > 0.6$) and the P value was smaller than 0.05 ($P = 0.00$), indicating the suitability of data for factor analysis. Then, confirmatory factor analysis was used to check factor loadings. Through this process, two items were eliminated because they showed either low or high factor loadings. The number of the items was, therefore, reduced to 22. Finally, the reliability of the questionnaire consisted of 22 items was assessed through the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Considering the small number of items (four items for some elements), the reliability estimates are considered acceptable for the current research. All the Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7, suggesting almost a good degree of internal consistency reliability.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity of the questionnaire

Elements	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Attitude	.732
Difficulty	.702
Purpose	.838

The items were reviewed, revised, and edited; the items that were identified as repetitive or overlapping were eliminated from the study.

The available items were classified into three major categories, which asked for the participants' perspectives on the following: (1) attitude toward homework; (2) difficulties and problems that students face during the process of assigning or doing homework; (3) assignment characteristics of homework which was categorized into seven subscales including: amount, purpose, skill area used, degree of individualization, degree of students' choice, completion deadline, and the social context in which they were going to perform. Afterwards, the questionnaire was established in five sections according to the goal of the research. In the first section of the questionnaire students were asked to provide demographic information. For demographics, students reported on gender, grade level, age, and years of studying English. The second section, explained the title and aim of the research. In the third section, respondents were asked to answer questions about their attitude and difficulties in homework, the amount of homework, the degree of individualization, the degree of students' choice, completion deadline, and the social context in

which they were going to perform. The anchor points for part three ranged from 1: always to 5: never. Section four was established for the purpose of doing homework. In section five, respondents were asked to answer questions about the degree of skill area used in their homework. The items available in section four and five were rated based on the following anchor points: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: no idea, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree.

In an attempt to avoid respondents' possible guesses as to the investigator's viewpoint, the questionnaires contained statements both for and against homework. However, when the mean value and percentage of the responses were calculated, the numbers of statements which were against their attitude and viewpoint toward homework were reversed. Therefore, students' attitudes were more obviously shown from their choices of the numbers.

Interview: In order to obtain rich data and to gain insights into the Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perspectives on the issues related to English homework, a semi-structured interview, a kind of interview "between the completely structured and the completely unstructured points on a continuum" (Bell, 1993: 94), was first carried out preceded by a comprehensive review of the literature. The reason was on the one hand, to obtain the data on the questions which addressed the research questions; on the other hand, it allowed some unexpected valuable views. First of all, 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 felt free to join the talk. Thirdly, questions were asked in a friendly way to make the participants feel at ease.

The interview consisted of the following six questions: (1) how do you feel about homework? (2) What do you perceive to be the purposes or benefits of homework? (3) What are the challenges or difficulties to English homework? (4) How much time do you spend and how many days of a week do you assign or do homework assignments? (5) Do you think anyone helps you/your student to do English subject homework? If yes, who? (6) You prefer to assign homework which mostly includes: a) writing skill (workbook, sentence writing or writing a paragraph) b) speaking skill c) reading skill d) listening skill (your reason). Based on Brown's (2001) suggestion, the interview was conducted in Persian to minimize the measurement errors. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and content-analyzed to discover potential patterns and themes.

After conducting the interviews, the questions and answers were organized and transcribed using Microsoft Word. Once the data were transcribed and produced, the researchers began to reflect on the overall assumptions and started exploring themes. An analysis of the data began by coding the information and exploring patterns within the text. After transcribing the interview, the coding process started by reading all transcriptions at least once and creating notes about the transcripts looking for emerging patterns and themes. In the first phase of the coding process, information was arranged from a single word to a full paragraph or even an entire response in order to derive meaning from the actual language of the participants to generate a sufficient list of subtopics to establish themes from the perspective of respondents. In the second phase of the coding process, Pattern Coding was used as "critical links" which were examined to find consistent chunks of information to explain meaning from the data collection (Saldana, 2016: 4-68). Through the process of coding and decoding, themes emerged from the data. Once themes developed, the researchers grouped similar statements to support meaningful themes. These themes were then used to support or show dissimilarities to the quantitative data gathered.

3. Results

Analysis of the First Research Question

The first research question focused on learners' attitude towards homework in English 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. 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.

The data obtained through questionnaire survey have been interpreted descriptively below. It was shown 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 % of them stated usually, and 27.5 % expressed sometimes they enjoyed doing homework. Item 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 different teachers' classrooms, independent sample T-tests were run, as it is shown in Table 3, 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 meaning that students' attitudes towards homework were not different in different teachers' classes.

Table 2. Independent Sample t-test for students' attitude toward homework

Levens' Test for Equality of Variances 95 % Confidence Interval 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 investigated the difficulties and challenges of homework in the view of students. Six questions in students' questionnaire were related to the difficulties of homework.

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 teachers 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 hadn't learned the required concepts well, and 69.2 % of them believed that doing homework is difficult when they disliked doing it.

Table 3. Frequency and Descriptive Statistics of students' difficulties in homework

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6
Valid always	5.0	5.8	14.2	8.3	10.0	15.0
usually	8.3	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	3.6750	3.325	2.90	2.883	2.541	2.841
Std. Deviation	1.0545	1.0221	1.211	1.070	.9065	1.209

Assignment Characteristics in the View of Students

Amount of Homework

According to the descriptive statistics, 91.6 % of students believed that their teachers assigned them the right amount of homework.

Degree of Individualization

Descriptive statistics was used to calculate means and standard deviations. The frequency of results showed that 98.3 % of students stated that their teachers assigned homework for all of the students, and 19.2 % of them expressed that their teachers assigned different types of homework to different students in the class.

Degree of Students' Choice

Descriptive statistics showed that among 20.8 % of the students who agreed on doing their homework voluntarily, 1.7 % stated that they always do their homework voluntarily, 5.8 % said usually and 13.3 % of them stated that they do their homework voluntarily.

Completion Deadline

According to the results of descriptive statistics, 98.3 % of students stated that they should complete their homework until the next session.

Social context in which students were going to perform homework assignments

According to the descriptive statistics, 98.3 % of students stated that they did their homework assignments individually, and 38.4 % of students expressed that they preferred to do their homework in groups. 28.4 % of students stated that an adult person helped them with their homework.

Purpose of Doing Homework

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire showed that 90.8 % of students believed that homework helped them practice language items. 65.9 % of students believed that doing homework brought them teacher approval. 26.6 % of students believed that doing homework brought them approval from their classmates. 53.4 % of students expresses that doing homework made parents more aware of their learning and 90% of them stated that doing homework helps them understand what is going on in the class. Moreover, 74.1 % of students believed that doing homework helps students develop a sense of responsibility, and 80.8 % of them stated that doing homework helps students work independently. 65.8 % of students believed that doing homework creates discipline. In addition, 87.5 % of students expressed that doing homework helped them learn study skills and 85.9 % of students stated that doing homework helped them get a good grade. 90 % of students expressed that doing homework helped them prepare for the next lesson and 85.8 % of students expressed that doing homework helped them review the materials. Furthermore, 89.1 % of students believed that doing homework helped them get prepared for English exams. 85.8 % of students stated that doing homework helped them understand their lessons better. 49.1 % of students believed that doing homework consolidated their English knowledge and 80.8 % of them stated that doing homework helped them recognize their weaknesses and strengths.

Sixteen questions in students' questionnaire measured the purpose of doing homework. Five questions including, purpose 2, 3, 4, 10, and 13 were related to extrinsic purpose of doing homework, and eleven questions were related to intrinsic purpose of doing homework including purpose 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 16.

Skill area used in homework

Four questions were used in students' questionnaire to assess the four skills including speaking, listening, reading and writing used in homework assignments. According to descriptive statistics in [Table 4](#), 60 % of students stated that their homework included speaking skill. 66.7 % of students expressed that their homework assignment included reading skill. 95 % of students stated their homework assignments included writing skill, and 31.7 % of students expressed their homework included listening skill.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of skill area used in homework

	Speaking Percent	reading Percent	writing Percent	listening Percent
Valid Cdisagree	5.0	2.5	.8	10.8
disagree	8.3	5.8	.8	17.5
noidea	26.7	25.0	3.3	40.0
agree	38.3	41.7	35.0	24.2
Cagree	21.7	25.0	60.0	7.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
mean	3.63	3.80	4.5250	3.0000
Std. Deviation	1.06	.964	.68553	1.07688

Interview Results

It has been decided to use the semi-structured interview in this thesis because the semi-structured interview is more flexible and follows a checklist of issues and questions that the researcher wishes to cover during the session (Bryman, Bell, 2007). The reason for choosing a semi-structured interview was due to our aim to encourage the interviewees to freely discuss their own opinions on the subject. According to Damper (1995) the semi-structured interview is neither a free conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire. The segment of population that has been selected for this research has not been chosen by using a random selection method. In order to prepare fluent interviews, the questions were distributed into different categories. However, during the interview, the order of the questions was not strictly followed. Due to 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.

For coding, as a first step, the transcript was read several times and every statement that seemed relevant at a first glance was underlined. After considering the defined categories, statements, opinion or quotes were taken out and summarized into the category system. After coding all the interviews, the collected statements were analyzed and interpreted as follows.

Theme 1 – Attitude

Students' Attitude toward Homework

To get an understanding of what was interviewees' attitude toward homework, the general question 'how do you feel about homework?' was asked and 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 didn't 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.

Theme 2 – Purpose of Doing Homework

The second interview question attempted to discover students' opinion on the purpose or the benefits of homework. Through analysis of the data and co-construction of knowledge with learners, it was revealed 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.

It can be implied that homework has a key role in the process of learning, mainly in the sense that it helps learners practice already learned knowledge for at least a second time and make them prepare for the next lesson or for their English exam. Moreover, about 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 mentioned specifically to the point that homework helps them recognize their weakness and strengths and 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.

Theme 3 – Difficulties of Homework

The third interview question was about the difficulties or challenges they had faced during doing homework assignments. About 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 of the students expressed that they did not understand the questions in their homework and they did not know what to do, therefore, doing homework assignments turned in to a big deal for them. Five students mentioned specifically some parts of homework assignments including grammar, new vocabularies and their pronunciation, writing stories and sentences to be a great amount of difficulty 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 stated 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.

Theme 4 – Average time and Frequency of Homework in a Week

The fourth theme investigated the average time spent on homework by students. Ten students stated that they spent between thirty minutes to one hour for their homework assignments. One student stated that he spent less than thirty minutes and two students stated that they spent more than one hour for English homework assignments. Furthermore, all of the students stated that they did homework assignments twice a week. Actually, they had English class two times in a week and each session their teachers assigned them homework. One of the students stated;

[Extract 16]: Actually, it depends on the task and expectation of teachers. I, myself spend between thirty minutes to one hour for homework each session. But if the task was difficult or my teacher assign too much homework and check them next session, so I spend more time on it even more than two hours.

It is obvious the amount and difficulty of the task is the important aspect for the time spends on homework. More homework assignments desire more time. In addition, teachers' expectation and care for homework is an important reason for spending more time doing homework. If students suppose that teacher do not check homework, then they will not pay attention on doing it carefully.

Theme 5 – Assistance in doing homework

When asked whether there was someone who helped them in homework assignments, four students stated that they asked for their parents', sibling's and classmates' help. Mostly, they asked

their sibling and classmates' help rather their parents. Nine students expressed that they did not ask for others help and they did homework assignments themselves.

Theme 6 – Four skills used in homework assignments

Students' preference on the four skills in their homework was asked. Eleven students put speaking skills in priority for different purposes. The first reason was to communicate with foreigners and express their intention when they travel to a different country. The second reason was to talk about different subjects in the class, share their experiences and feelings, and improve their speaking as a basic skill because the speaking skill has been attended much in foreign language learning countries like Iran. The third reason was that the speaking skill was a comprehensive skill and students not only speak, but also listen to other people and can use different skills and sub-skills, such as listening, grammar, vocabulary and so on.

[Extract 18]: I like speaking skill first, and then listening skill because as we talk more and more we can improve our speaking. Also, when we go to a foreign language context, nobody asks us grammar, but we need to speak to communicate, I like listening skill because I can understand what the speaker says.

After the speaking skill, about eight students preferred the listening skill in their homework assignments. It was important for students to understand what their teacher says in the classroom or at least understand what people in the movies or songs say. Moreover, one of the students stated that she preferred the writing skill in her homework assignments because she had weaknesses in writing and one of them expressed that after the speaking skill, she likes reading story books, because she enjoys reading. Furthermore, one of the students had a neutral idea and considers all four skills fundamental:

[Extract 19]: I think all the skills are good. I think we should strengthen all the skills and master all of them simultaneously. None of skills has priority over the other. In my idea, all of them are important and students should reach proficiency in all of the four skills.

4. Discussion

Homework has been a controversial issue for several years. Teachers and students are constantly differing in their opinions on whether homework is actually an effective way to increase student performance. The first and second research questions helped the researcher focus the study on finding out just how students perceived homework. The answers to these research questions could help teachers and students identify what works and what does not, with respect to homework, so that it is as meaningful as possible for the learning of students.

When talking about homework, it seems that students have different attitudes toward homework with regard to its worth and purpose. It is essential to motivate students to develop a favorable attitude towards homework. Some students find it interesting and important, while others develop an unfavorable attitude towards it. Hence, it is important to find out their attitude, which will be of great help to teachers in handling homework issues easily. Generally, students' usual opposition and resistance toward homework led to the thought that students adopted a negative attitude toward it; however, after careful analysis of the tables and extracts from questionnaires and interviews, it was revealed that there was a positive attitude toward homework assignments in the minds of the learners. The results are in line with the 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, 2005). According to the learners in this study, homework plays a key role in their language learning process. 98.3 % of the students believed that homework assignments helped them learn better and 86.6 % of the students believed that homework increased their interest. Furthermore, 81.6 % of the students generally enjoyed doing homework and 78.4 % of the students stated that they were in better mood than other activities while doing homework. 94.1 % of the students stated that they did their homework regularly. Findings showed that even those students, as explained in extract 2, who disliked homework assignments, believed that it was beneficial for their learning and it helped them review, repeat, and stabilize what they had learned in the class. In line with these findings, "Attitude of school students towards homework", Letterman (2013) 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 a high level of attitudes towards homework assignments. This can be supported by the study conducted by Shumow (2011) who had also found that students have positive attitudes towards homework and feel it is important in helping them to do well at school. 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 participants believe that homework has significant benefits for English learning, and the results supported the study done by Cooper and Valentine (2001), who suggested that homework has a positive impact on student achievement and students report positive attitudes to homework, and feel some homework is important in helping them do well at school. Furthermore, students who complete homework generally outperform students who do not on some measures of academic achievement.

The second 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 to respond to questions about amount and quality of homework, difficulty, tardiness, lack of interest, and extracurricular activities – all have been considered in the literature as possible reasons for unsuccessful homework completion (e.g., Hong et al., 2011; Margolis, McCabe, 2004; Vatterott, 2010).

As a result of the research, it was determined that students face difficulties doing homework due to the problems of boredom and weariness “emotionally”; inability to understand the homework instruction, not paying attention to the explanations of the teachers, new untapped topics and difficulty in homework assignments 'cognitively'. According to the results, only 35 % of the students found their homework assignments difficult, and 50.8 % of the students asked their teacher for help when the homework assignments were difficult. 70.8 % of the students said that homework was difficult when they did not pay attention to the teachers' explanation in the classroom. 73.3 % of the students expressed 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 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 dislike doing it. Qualitative results showed that one of the main difficulties of students that make them bored is to do assignments that are repetitious, meaningless, and lack creativity. The students stated that not all homework assignments are useful and are mainly time consuming and tedious; therefore, they are not in a mood to do homework and it is boring for them to do a lot of homework each session. The findings of this study are in alignment 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. This finding is also consistent with Palardy's study (1995) that students may not complete homework assignments which they feel are boring and routine. Teachers should make the homework relevant, but interesting and appealing to the students' learning style.

Some students mentioned specifically some parts of homework assignments including grammar, new vocabularies and their pronunciation, writing stories and sentences to become a major difficulty of homework for them. This finding is consistent with Paudel's (2012) study that the highest frequency of students who find English subject homework difficult is due to lack of word power and grammar. The other difficulty of homework is the anxiety and stress that has been imposed on students. The students got nervous when they postponed their assignments. Many students consider homework the chief source of stress in their lives (Kelley, Kahle, 1995).

Characteristics of the assignment are also important. According to Cooper (1989), variations in homework can be classified according to its (a) amount that can appear as differences in both the frequency and length, (b) skill area, (c) purpose of homework which can be divided into instructional and non-instructional objectives, (d) degree of choice for the student which refers to whether the homework assignment is compulsory or voluntary, (e) completion deadline which can vary from short term, meant to be completed overnight or for the next class meeting, to long term, with students given days or weeks to complete the task, (f) degree of individualization, which means homework can be designed for individual students or whole classes and whether the teacher tailors assignments to meet the needs of each student, (g) social context in which they are carried out. Some assignments are meant for the student to complete independent of other people. Assisted homework explicitly calls for the involvement of another person, a parent, or perhaps a sibling or friend.

On the other hand, 50 % of the students believed that their teachers always assign them the right amount of homework and 28.3 % of them stated that their teachers usually assign the right amount of homework. According to the interview results related to the average time spent on homework by students, most of them stated that they spent between thirty minutes to one hour for their homework assignments. The findings are in line with Cooper's (1989) meta-analysis that for

high school students, the positive relationship between homework time and achievement did not appear until at least one hour of homework per week was reported. According to the interview results, the amount and difficulty of the task was mentioned as the important aspect for the time spent on homework. Another aspect for spending more time on homework is teachers' care for homework. Students will pay more attention, spend more time, and do their homework carefully if their teacher checks the answers and values homework assignments. Furthermore, all students stated that they should do homework assignments twice a week. However, 40.8 % of the students stated that they always completed their homework assignments and 35.8 % of them expressed that they usually did homework. However, it is also clear from the surveys mentioned above that not all students complete the homework they are assigned. Overall, it seems that some homework is better than too much or none at all. This research indicates that the 'more homework, the better' view is misleading and should not be the basis of policy and practice.

The results of the questionnaire showed that 90.8 % of the students believed that homework helps them practice language items. 90 % of the students stated that doing homework helped them understand what is going on in the class. Furthermore, 74.1 % of the students believed that doing homework helped them develop a sense of responsibility and 80.8 % of the students stated that doing homework helped them work independently. 65.8 % of the students believed that doing homework created discipline. Furthermore, 87.5 % of the students indicated that doing homework helped them learn study skills, and 90 % of the students indicated that doing homework helped them prepare for the next lesson. 85.8 % of the students said that doing homework helped them review the materials. 85.8 % of the students stated that doing homework helped them understand their lessons better. 49.1 % of the students believed that doing homework consolidated their English knowledge and 80.8 % of them stated that doing homework helped them recognize their weaknesses and strengths. EFL learners around the world are also given homework to increase their exposure to English, to reinforce and help them retain their English knowledge, and to enable them to continue their language learning even outside educational institutions (Wallinger, 1997).

Furthermore, 65.9 % of the students believed that doing homework brought them teacher approval. 26.6 % of the students believed that doing homework brought them approval from their classmates. 53.4 % of the students said that doing homework made parents more aware of their learning. This finding is further supported by the outcome in which the students in this sample more likely agreed that they did homework for intrinsic rather than extrinsic reasons. As students go through school, their parent's involvement in their academics may decrease each year as students become more independent. The results are in line with interview and observation data from previous studies (Xu, Corno, 1998; Xu, Yuan, 2003), which showed that children perceived homework as a way to reinforce school learning (an intrinsic reason), as well as to seek approval from adults (an extrinsic reason). Researchers such as Xu (2011) along with Cooper et al. have also found that students at higher grade levels received less direct involvement from parents on homework (Cooper et al., 2000). Furthermore, 85.9 % of the students stated that doing homework helped them get a good grade. 89.1 % of the students believed that doing homework helped them prepare for English exams.

Another characteristic of homework is the social context in which they are carried out. Some assignments are meant for the student to complete independent of other people. Assisted homework explicitly calls for the involvement of another person, a parent, or perhaps a sibling or friend. About 82.7 % of teachers stated that their students did their homework individually. It means that they do most of their homework by themselves; however, the interview results revealed that the students got help from others and mainly siblings and then their classmates helped them with homework assignments. It is obvious that students get help from others during the different levels of their learning, and adult monitoring becomes less necessary as students get older and more experienced with homework. However, students who are in lower level or weaker than other students mostly get help.

The results of this study do not support the studies (Kackar et al., 2011; Warton, 2001) indicating that homework can help parents become involved and check their children's progress. According to the participants of the qualitative phase of the study, parents in countries such as Iran are either busy or unfamiliar with English and cannot get involved in their children's English homework to monitor and support their English learning. It seems reasonable to suggest that as students get older, the role of parent facilitation of homework may have a diminishing influence on grades. That would occur because parents become less able to directly instruct students as the material becomes more difficult. We might also expect that the importance of the student's own attitude towards homework would become

stronger. As students gain autonomy and as they approach upper-grade levels, they gradually prefer working without someone looking over their shoulder (Warton, 2001).

5. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate Iranian language learners' perception, difficulties, and assignment characteristics of homework given to them. Concerning this, the mixed method design as a method of collecting data in both quantitative and qualitative way was used. Based on the results it seems that, when teachers design homework assignments, their understanding of students' homework problems would help them develop assignments that meet each individual student's readiness and needs. To generate homework more relevant to students, teachers need to have an understanding of homework difficulties that students are experiencing and the reasons students do not complete their assignments. The results showed that learners mostly agreed on the compulsory nature of their homework, besides, learners stated that homework should be completed until next session. Most of the learners do their homework individually; however, students who are in lower level or weaker than other students mostly get help. In addition, based on the perspectives of the majority of the participants of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, homework assignments are done mostly for intrinsic reason such as, understanding the materials better, knowing their weaknesses and strengths, practicing language items, getting prepared for exams, reviewing the learned materials and elements, working independently, developing a sense of responsibility, consolidating their English knowledge, helping students learn study skills, understanding what is going on in the class, and developing good discipline. On the other hand, extrinsic reason of doing homework such as, teachers' approval, peer approval, parents' awareness of what is going on in the class, getting good grade, and getting prepared for English exams are paid less attention.

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