

# **Guidelines on Setting Assignments in English - *Towards a Homework Policy***

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of these guidelines is two-fold: to encourage the setting up of a homework policy in schools and to outline some broad principles regarding the setting and marking of homework assignments for the subject of English.

It is generally accepted that effective use of assignments, both in class and at home, can enhance classroom teaching and learning. However, in order not to exert unnecessary pressure on pupils, all homework should be given on a need basis. In this regard, the complementary nature of homework and class work should always be borne in mind.

It is also important to note that homework should not be confined to written assignments only. Other types of work such as reading story books or newspapers, listening to the radio and collecting information for a particular purpose can also be set to give pupils a variety of meaningful as well as enjoyable activities for language practice and use.

In these guidelines, various aspects of assignments and homework are presented under separate headings merely to facilitate clarity in discussion. When setting assignments for English, teachers should look upon all these aspects as an integrated whole because they are closely related to one another.

An earlier version of the guidelines was compiled and distributed to schools in 1993. Since then, feedback from school teachers has been gathered and collated through inspection visits, in-service teacher training programmes, and in particular, a series of seminars for English panel chairpersons on designing exercises and setting up a homework policy. Subsequently, the guidelines have been updated to ensure that the opinions of practitioners and the constraints under which they are working have been adequately taken into account. As part of this continual process of communication and sharing of experiences, further comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address them to

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## **Homework and Class Work**

### **I. BASIC CONSIDERATIONS**

Homework and class work serve similar purposes and are complementary to each other.

Carefully selected and well-designed homework assignments can have a positive effect on

1. consolidating, reinforcing and facilitating classroom learning
2. preparing pupils for classroom learning
3. monitoring teaching effectiveness and pupils' progress
4. providing information about pupils' strengths and weaknesses
5. fostering pupils' ability and self-discipline to work independently

On the other hand, equal importance should be attached to class work for practice and consolidation. If properly monitored, class work is also an effective means of strengthening classroom teaching and learning. The teacher can provide immediate, on-the-spot feedback to pupils on their performance, acknowledge success or administer remedial work as appropriate.

To ensure that pupils are given sufficient but by no means excessive practice, it is essential that homework and class work complement each other. For example, if pupils' performance in class already suggests a good grasp of a particular item, assigning plenty of exercises as homework on that item will not be necessary. On the other hand, some exercises may be required to consolidate the mastery of difficult items at home, especially when these cannot be completed within class time.

Sometimes, homework can also be assigned as an extension to class work. For instance, after a class discussion on the composition of the pupils' immediate family, the teacher can ask the pupils to update the information on the families of their uncles and aunts at home to complete an extended diagram of a family tree.

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates the relationship of class teaching, class work and homework. The three share a lot of common ground and are bound together by the same language focus (represented by the shaded area). Class work is part and parcel of class teaching because of the opportunity it offers for immediate feedback and consolidation of pupils' learning. Homework is a follow-up or an extension to class work and / or class teaching as it provides additional or extended practice. Both class work and homework in their own rights add meaning and variety to the language item(s) / structure(s) in focus. At the same time, pupils' performance in their class work as well as homework enables the teacher to reflect on his / her teaching so that suitable adjustments and reinforcements can be

made. The two-way arrows in the diagram suggest the mutual impact each carries upon the others.

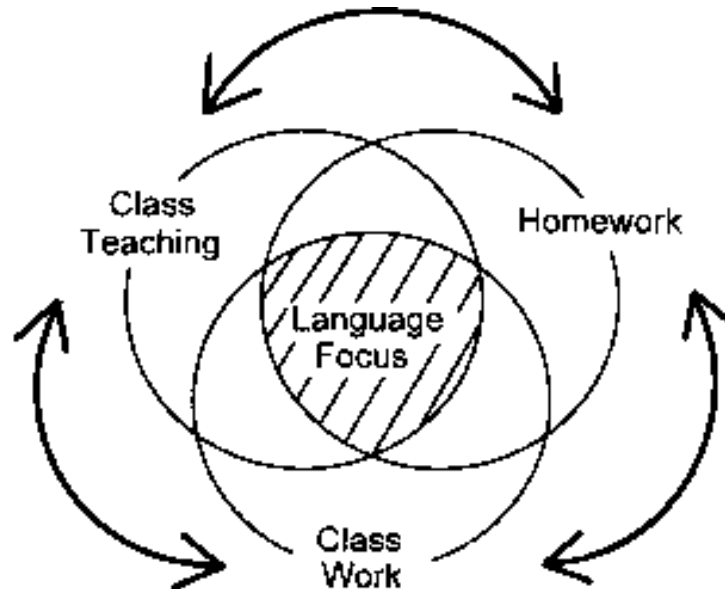


Figure 1 : The Relationship of Class Teaching, Class Work and Homework

### **Language Practice and Language Use**

Since the mastery of basic structures and their application for communicative purposes are two essential elements in language learning, teachers should give equal emphasis to language practice and language use when setting assignments.

#### **Exercises selected / designed for language practice**

1. aim at familiarising pupils with language forms and structures
2. focus on accuracy
3. are usually more controlled and patternised

#### **Exercises selected / designed for language use**

1. aim at enabling pupils to apply language for everyday communication
2. focus on meaning, fluency and appropriacy
3. are contextualised (through means such as pictures or extended prose)
4. are often task-based
5. are more open to unpredictable answers/responses as the scope for choice is greater

The following example demonstrates the relationship between language practice and language use. In the case of making comparisons, exercises that require pupils to fill in blanks with the comparative or superlative forms of adjectives are considered language practice because of their focus on the language form. On the other hand, if an exercise requires pupils to find out each other's height and weight so that any two pupils can be compared and the tallest or thinnest person of the class be named, it is providing an opportunity for language use.

It should be noted that the two types of exercises are mutually reinforcing along a continuum of language learning. Generally speaking, language practice exercises tend to be less complex as they often centre round specific target language items or structures. Success in language practice exercises easily paves the way for success in language use which is set in the larger context of communication. On the other hand, language use exercises make language practice much more meaningful and authentic. It is therefore important to have an appropriate mix of language practice and use when setting assignments.

## **II. SETTING ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Quality**

Assignments set should best be

1. a natural follow-up to classroom teaching and learning
2. geared to pupils' language abilities
3. relevant to pupils' needs, interests and everyday life
4. contextualised with equal emphasis on language form and function, practice and use
5. integrated as much as possible to provide pupils with ample opportunity to practise the four language skills
6. graded carefully from the easier to the more difficult to give pupils a sense of progress and achievement
7. varied in type and format
8. task-based as far as possible

### **Quantity**

In view of the wide variation in pupils' learning needs, abilities and home environment, there can be no hard-and-fast rules about the amount and type of homework which should be set at each level. Teachers are expected to exercise professional judgement on what constitutes an appropriate amount of homework. As a general rule, pupils should not be overloaded with excessive work.

When deciding on the amount of homework to be given, teachers should

1. consider pupils' learning needs as reflected by their performance in class, class work and previous assignments
2. aim at short but frequent rather than lengthy exercises
3. allow sufficient time for pupils to relax, engage in hobbies, social functions, outdoor activities, extra-curricular activities etc.
4. check against the amount of homework given by teachers of other subjects

### **Use of Coursebook/ Supplementary Language Exercises**

Exercises in coursebooks and supplementary language books should be used flexibly and judiciously. Teachers can

1. *select* suitable exercises directly from the books without making any modifications
2. *adapt* the chosen exercises by
  - a. simplifying, resequencing or bridging gaps between exercises to suit pupils' language abilities
  - b. contextualising them so that they become more meaningful and communicative
3. *design* new / replacement exercises when existing materials do not meet pupils' needs or abilities

### **Guidance**

Pupils should be adequately prepared for their work so that they can feel confident of success when approaching the given assignments. In most cases, this should not be a problem if the work assigned is a natural follow-up to the lesson.

Other forms of guidance include

1. explaining difficult vocabulary or expressions which are likely to create comprehension gaps
2. giving examples to illustrate what pupils are requested to do where the format is unfamiliar or where complicated instructions are involved
3. ensuring opportunities for oral preparation, especially in weaker classes
4. providing pupils with adequate hints to enable them to finish the work on their own when the assignments aim at preparing them for classroom learning

### III. MARKING ASSIGNMENTS

To ensure that homework is effectively employed as a device in enhancing classroom learning and monitoring pupils' progress, all work handed in should be properly marked and recorded.

There is no one best way of marking English assignments. Different types of work call for different treatment. For example, the emphasis in marking dictation or General English (G.E.) exercises may be primarily on accuracy. On the other hand, teachers may wish to focus more on pupils' ideas and reactions when going through their book reports in a reading scheme. Where the marking of compositions is concerned, it is desirable for teachers to provide pupils with comprehensive feedback on content, accuracy, appropriacy, presentation as well as organisation.

The following are some useful points to bear in mind :

1. To provide pupils with a sense of achievement and thus motivation, teachers can give them more concrete feedback by writing specific, constructive as well as encouraging comments in the margin of their exercise books. Acknowledging pupils' strengths is as important as pinpointing their weaknesses or areas for improvement.
2. Consistency in marking ensures fairness in assessment, particularly in cases where performance in coursework forms part of the end-of-term grades or scores. Through consultation and team work, teachers are encouraged to work out and abide by standardised marking schemes so as to provide reliable information on pupils' performance and progress.
3. Teachers may flexibly adjust their marking when necessary to encourage improvement in specific areas. For example, in order to promote the importance of neatness and tidiness in presentation at the junior levels, teachers may award bonus marks or a grade for clear handwriting in pupils' assignments. If teachers intend to highlight the significance of planning before writing at the senior levels, they may allocate marks for outline-drafts of essays.
4. Pupils' performance in the assignments provides important feedback to teachers. Based on this information, teachers can reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching, the design and the level of difficulty of the assignments given as well as other aspects of teaching and learning to make suitable adjustments.

#### **IV. MOVING TOWARDS A HOMEWORK POLICY**

To maximise the benefits of homework and minimise its pressure on pupils, the school management should work out a homework policy in consultation with the teaching staff and, wherever possible, communicate clearly to parents the objectives and desirable results of the policy.

Within the school, such a homework policy involves coordination at two levels :

- a. within the English panel
- b. across other subject panels

##### **Coordination within the English Panel**

Through consultation with panel members on various aspects of English assignments discussed in these guidelines, a framework specific to the needs of the school and acceptable to the panel can be drawn up and implemented systematically.

##### **Coordination across Subject Panels**

An overall policy regarding the type, frequency and amount of homework is also necessary. This can be done through the collaboration of different subject panels and is best controlled by a homework time-table. It is strongly recommended that such a time-table be drawn up for each class to ensure an even spread of homework over the week or teaching cycle as well as a balanced coverage of the subjects.

##### **Liaison with Parents**

Outside the school, a lot of parents actively supervise, give guidance or lend moral support to their children when they are doing assignments. It is advisable for the school to seek parents' views and understanding in formulating a homework policy, and enlist their support in its implementation. Close liaison can be established through formal and informal channels such as the parent-teacher association, home-school social gatherings and seminars for parents.

##### **Constant Review**

In order that a homework policy answers the changing needs of an ever-improving school curriculum, it is advisable for the school to keep the policy under regular review through consultation with both teachers and parents.

## V. DIAGRAMMATIC SUMMARY

The following figure highlights the main points made in these guidelines :

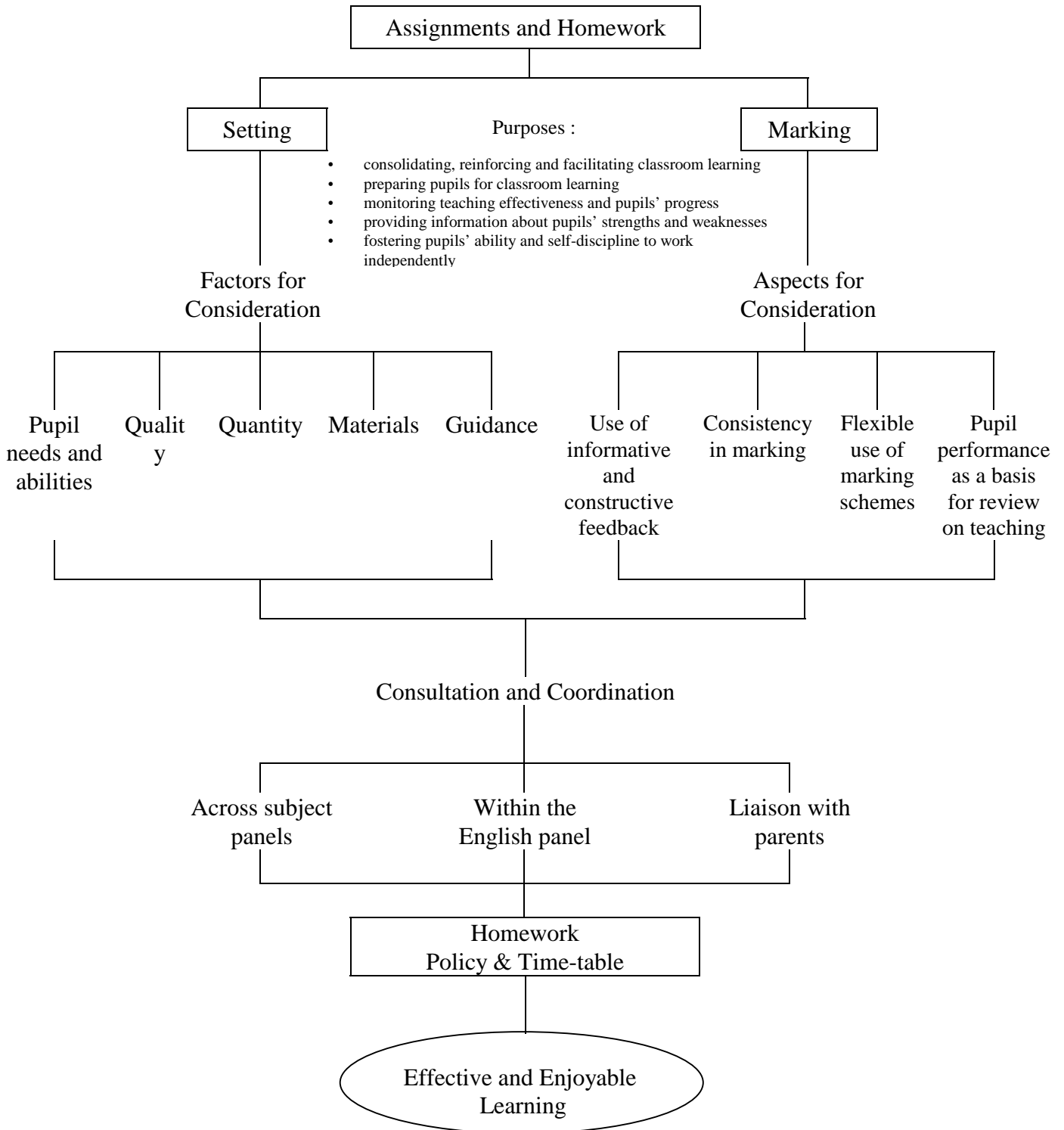


Figure 2 : A Diagrammatic Summary