

Ask Your Students: Japanese Students' Feelings and Beliefs on Homework in *Juku*

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With the knowledge that students' views can often be different than those of the teacher, this paper describes an action research project undertaken in an English Program at a *juku* (Japanese cram school) to discover students' perceptions on the benefits of homework and their feelings towards it. Analysis of students' responses to a questionnaire on homework allowed for critical reflection of my teaching practices by informing my assumptions on the benefits that homework brings. It also provided an opportunity for the identification of additional areas for further research, to better meet students' learning needs.

Homework is a traditional, common and well-known outside-the-class activity, providing students with the chance to do further study and practice than in the limited time available in the classroom. It allows students the opportunity to prepare in advance for a subsequent lesson, and reinforces and improves retention of classroom learning (Burnham, 1988; Harmer, 2015). In the case of second-language learning, homework allows students to practice language items and grammar points, and develop their language skills. It is also a way of increasing learners' contact with English (Nation, 2013). In addition, students must have a high degree of self-reliance when doing homework, which can "promote and build up learning autonomy" (Harmer, 2015, p. 106).

Assigning homework can also have potential downsides. Students may not enjoy doing it and see it as "a necessary evil" (Burnham, 1989, p. 1), and enforcing homework compliance can be difficult (Harmer, 2015). It can give students additional stress, and deprive them of time for their own personal interests and development (Burnham, 1989; Costley, 2013). It has also been questioned whether homework actually leads to greater academic achievement (Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006).

While the benefits of homework can be seen from a teacher's point of view, students' perceptions may be quite different. In order for a teacher to gain greater awareness of their teaching practices, it is important to understand students' beliefs and attitudes, which Brookfield (2015) proposes as one of the four lenses that a teacher can use to become a critically reflective teacher. Understanding student perceptions allows teachers to see to what degree their beliefs and assumptions resemble those of the students, and can help them to make necessary changes to their classroom practices that assist student learning.

Japanese education often extends outside of school to include what are called *juku* (cram school) and *eikaiwa* (English conversation school). Homework is not often part of the *eikaiwa* experience (Hooper, 2017), but it is common in *juku*. However, there has been little academic research on homework in *juku* despite its existence.

Literature review

Concerning English education in Japan, research on students' perceptions of homework is limited. However, several studies are informative in examining students' motivations, views, and preferences.

Brown (2006), in a study of EFL Japanese college students, found that the strongest motivator for doing homework was to 'learn English', with a desire to improve specific language skills. Other strong motivators were to be successful in future classroom sessions, and to be able to follow the lesson content and participate in the classroom. Less frequently

mentioned motivators included academic success, an interest in English, avoiding negative personal affect, and for personal or instrumental goals that English could help them achieve in the future. Among students who participated in a communicative oral English homework assignment at a Japanese university, Provenzano and Yue (2011) reported that most students believed the homework was beneficial to their oral English ability, through improving their fluency and helping them feel more relaxed when speaking.

In some cases, students' perceptions towards homework contrasted with those of teachers. Corwin (2016) reported that a majority of Japanese college students of English believed that homework should include revision, but were less certain whether it should include preparation, whereas most teachers believed homework should have both review and preparatory purposes. While vocabulary study was a preferred homework activity of many students and teachers, a large number of students also expressed a desire for homework activities requiring negotiation of meaning. However, teachers generally preferred to assign homework involving drills and practice. In a study conducted in Japanese senior high schools, Isaji (2009) reported that students recognised the importance of preparing and reviewing for class, but did not put as much effort into homework as their teachers expected. In addition, their homework activities were generally limited to translation and looking up new words, but not reading aloud the texts used in class, despite teachers' awareness of the importance of doing so. With students and teachers often holding different perceptions, Takahashi (2011) suggested tips for assigning homework, stating that "students' perceptions are as important as teachers' for making the classroom a productive place of learning" (p. 174).

Negative views towards homework have also been reported. Corwin (2016) noted that while Japanese college students generally understood the benefits of doing homework, many would rather not do it at all. Some students mentioned other demands for their time that conflict with doing homework, including commitments such as work and club activities, as well as other classes and tests. In addition, if students have a lack of understanding of the homework or find it too difficult, this can reduce their willingness to complete it (Brown, 2006; Corwin, 2016).

In the case of the cram school industry in Japan, research on homework is limited, which is a gap that this study sets out to explore. In order to gain insights from my own students, and with an awareness that their perceptions may be different to mine, I carried out a small classroom research project with the objective of learning more about my students' views on their homework, and how this could improve my teaching practices.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this study were 19 students in an English Program at a small cram school in Yokohama, ranging from 1st year junior high school students to 3rd year senior high school students. The program aims to train students to achieve high scores in English proficiency examinations by using reading passages from past examinations to strengthen reading ability and grammatical knowledge, and also to improve students' ability in the four core language skills for communicative purposes.

Homework is provided to students for each class. The reading passage for the following lesson and an audio file of the passage that I record are distributed to students a week in advance. The purpose is to help students prepare for the next lesson. Students are expected to listen to the audio recording, practice reading aloud, and confirm their understanding of the content of the text, so they become familiar with the passage.

After the class, a writing worksheet is given as homework based on that day's lesson. This consists of controlled exercises which require students to use the grammar point from the day's lesson, and a composition task in which students respond to a question by writing a short paragraph. Students are encouraged to use the grammar point in their composition, but also need to make decisions on the language they use. Students are provided with written feedback on the homework, which is returned a week after submission. The purpose is to reinforce what students learned in class and to strengthen their writing ability, by providing them with writing practice using the target grammar point acquired in class. It also provides an opportunity for students to retrieve previously acquired language when writing the composition.

My purposes in assigning the homework are influenced by what I believe are the benefits that students will gain, particularly being able to follow lessons more easily, retaining more of the lesson content, developing learner autonomy, improving the four language skills, and in the case of writing homework, having an opportunity to decide on the language they use.

However, I undertook this research to learn how students feel about the homework, the benefits they believe the homework has for their English learning, and whether their perceptions of the benefits reflect my own. I was also interested in learning to what extent students take charge of their own learning through the use of resources when doing homework. Importantly, the data I collected would allow me to be more informed when reflecting on my teaching practices. Students were asked the following questions:

1. What are your feelings on the homework?
2. What resources do you use to do the homework, and how?
3. What do you believe are the benefits for your English learning from doing the homework?

Instruments

A questionnaire containing three open-ended questions was used in order for students to give views on the homework in their own words, which would provide me with deeper insights than using close-ended questions. In order to receive informative responses for all homework given, students were asked to answer each question in relation to both the listening and reading homework, and the writing homework. Questions were translated and written in Japanese (see Appendix).

Procedures

Data Collection

As the participants in the study were under 18 years old, permission forms were provided to students' parents, asking for their signed consent for their children to participate in the research project.

Before delivering the questionnaire to students across different classes, I informed them in both English and Japanese that I was interested in learning their feelings and beliefs on the homework, as well as the resources they use to do it. I explained that their answers to my questions would help me to be better informed on the suitability of the homework I give them. Students were told to answer anonymously and in Japanese, and to place the completed questionnaire form into a box. The questionnaire was delivered at the end of the lesson, and students were given 15 minutes to answer.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the students was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and translated into English. Responses to questions 1 and 3 were examined together, as these questions related to students' perceptions on homework. Question 2, regarding resources students use was examined separately. Instances of similar responses in relation to different themes which emerged from the questions were then coded accordingly. Once these common themes were established, responses were entered into separate lists under the respective themes for analysis.

Findings

Students' perceptions on homework

Students' responses on how they feel about the homework, and the benefits that they believe doing the homework has for their English language learning are presented under the following five themes:

1. Improvement in language skills and knowledge
2. Reinforcement of classroom learning
3. Perceived future benefits

4. Classroom readiness and preparation

5. Personalisation of classroom learning

Figure 1 depicts the number of students who gave a response connected to each theme.

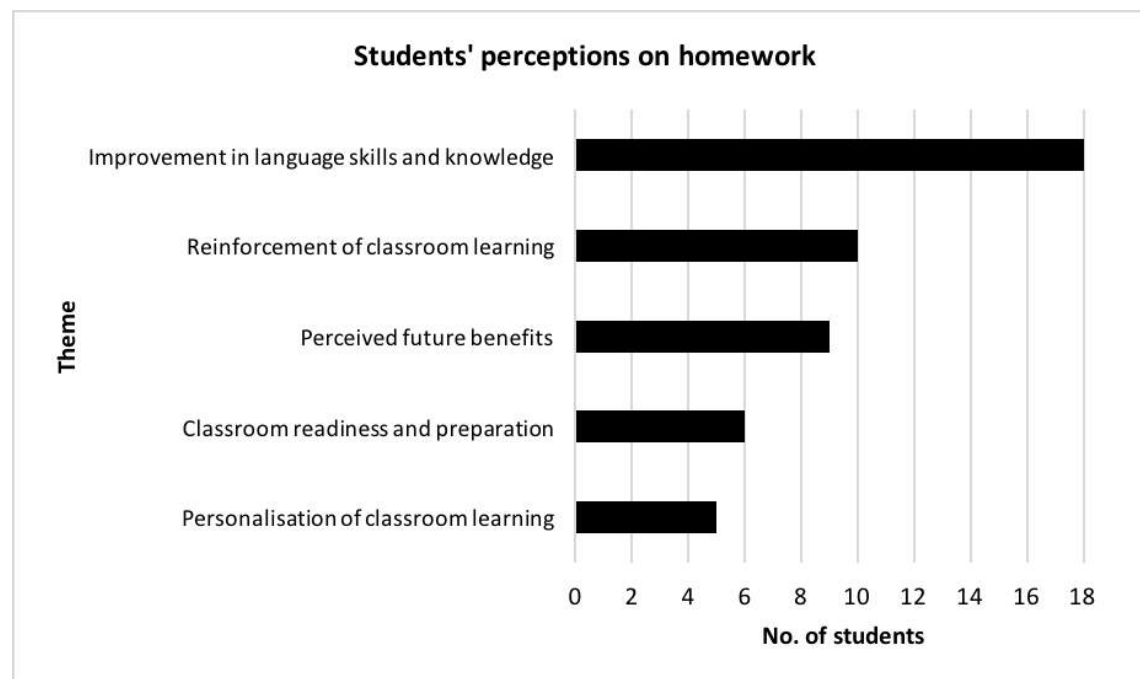


Figure 1. Students' perceptions on homework by theme (N=19).

Improvement in language skills and knowledge

Eighteen participants believe the homework helps them improve in at least one of the four core language skills of reading, speaking, writing and listening, or helps to increase their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge.

In regard to listening ability, 11 students feel that the voice recording is useful as they can listen to pronunciation carefully, improve their listening comprehension and become more accustomed to listening in English.

Student 13: "Because I seldom listen to the pronunciation of real people, the listening is very useful."

Student 17: "Because I can listen to the teacher's voice, I seem to become more accustomed to English."

Eleven students responded in regard to their writing ability. Several students feel that writing an English composition every week helps them acquire the ability to compose sentences or English compositions, or gives them increased confidence. Two students also stated having feedback provided on their writing is beneficial for improving their writing.

Student 7: "By making sentences myself, I think I can gain the ability to put to use and combine together the words and grammar I have learnt until now."

Student 17: "Because I normally have no opportunity to write an English composition, I don't have confidence. However, by writing every week I can get used to it."

Student 2: "Because my compositions are properly corrected, I think it leads to an improvement in my writing."

Seven students responded in relation to their speaking ability. Students generally feel they can improve their pronunciation and become more fluent by listening to the recording, helping them get used to speaking and communicating in English.

Student 7: "I think improving my pronunciation will lead me to be able to speak with foreign people."

Student 14: "I became able to speak more smoothly than before."

Five students responded regarding their reading ability, with the reading homework helping them get used to reading or increase their reading speed.

Student 4: "Through listening and shadowing, I think I am able to read faster."

Five participants mentioned grammar and vocabulary in their responses. Three students believe the acquisition of grammar is important, including for entrance examinations, while two students mentioned the homework allows them to learn new vocabulary.

Student 18: “I think it is important to acquire English grammar. By repeatedly using it, I think I can firmly grasp the grammar.”

Student 3: “[The homework] is a good opportunity to learn new words.”

Reinforcement of classroom learning

Ten participants mentioned that the writing homework helps to reinforce the content of the lesson. Several students feel that by reviewing the lesson content and writing sentences using the target grammar point, they can better remember and acquire what they learnt.

Student 2: “Because the writing homework mainly deals with the grammar learnt in class, it leads to a deeper understanding of the lesson content.”

Student 13: “It is helpful to look back at the lesson again and confirm the points that I didn’t understand. Also, receiving homework like this helps me to know how much I have to review.”

Student 17: “By writing using the grammar that I learnt in the lesson, I think I can remember that grammar.”

Perceived future benefits

Nine participants stated future uses for English which they believe the homework can help them accomplish.

Seven of these students believe the homework will assist them in meeting success on future examinations by increasing their listening, reading, or writing ability, acquiring grammar, or reinforcing the lesson content.

Student 12: “Because the impression in my mind becomes stronger, I won’t forget it, and I can expect to get good scores in regular tests.”

Student 14: “By acquiring grammar firmly, I think it will become very advantageous for entrance examinations in the near future.”

Four students recognised the concept of globalisation, and how acquiring aspects of spoken English will help them be able to participate in a global community. Other students mentioned being able to utilise English when travelling or working abroad, or at international events such as the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Student 15: “Because of globalisation, in order to communicate with foreigners when entering society in the future, I can acquire correct pronunciation and tone, and I believe I can deepen my involvement in the world.”

Student 14: “For anything in the future, English is necessary, and if I have an understanding, I think it can be advantageous to me compared to other people.”

Classroom readiness and preparation

Six participants feel that the listening and reading homework helps them prepare for class. A common response was how preparation in advance helps the content of the lesson enter the students’ minds, and thus makes the class easier to understand.

Student 15: “Because I can prepare in advance, it is easy for the content of the lesson to enter my mind.”

Student 18: “I think it is good to be able to understand the sentences dealt with in class in advance. I think it is necessary because it is difficult to easily understand all the sentences just in the class.”

Personalisation of classroom learning

Five participants recognise that the writing homework allows them to make active choices in what they choose to write about.

Student 2: “I think [the homework] is practical because I often write my own opinion.”

Student 14: “Because I can write about my own things using my own words, [the homework] is very beneficial.”

Students' use of resources

Students' responses on the resources they use to do the homework are presented under the following four themes:

1. Use of electronic devices for listening
2. Use of dictionaries
3. Receiving parental help
4. Use of other resources

Figure 2 depicts the number of students who gave a response connected to each theme.

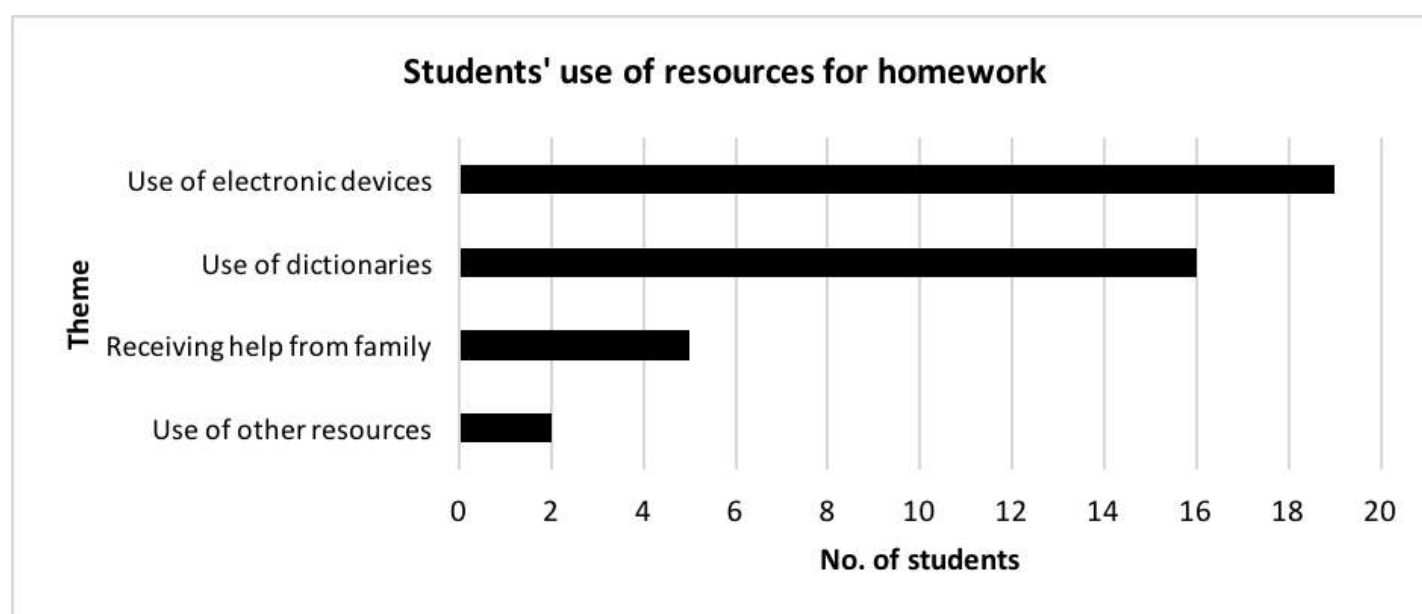


Figure 2. Students' use of resources for homework by theme (N=19).

Use of electronic devices for listening

All 19 participants mentioned that they use electronic devices, such as smartphones and computers, to listen to the voice recording before class, with some listening multiple times. Several students also reported using shadowing.

Student 18: “I put the listening audio on my smartphone and repeatedly listen.”

Student 4: “I listen to the voice while speaking along.”

Use of dictionaries

Sixteen participants said that they use dictionaries to check the meaning of new words, while one student also checks the pronunciation of words.

Student 1: “I use an electronic dictionary to look up words I don't know.”

Student 9: “I check phonetic symbols using a dictionary to learn the pronunciation of words.”

Receiving help from family

Five students said that they ask family members for help.

Student 13: “When there are things that I can’t do by myself, my mother helps me.”

Use of other resources

Two students reported using Google Translate, with one also using grammar and vocabulary books.

Student 7: “After I have finished making sentences, I enter them into Google Translate to make sure they are right.”

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, it can be seen that students clearly perceive the homework in a positive way, which reaffirms the value of assigning homework on a weekly basis. Many of the benefits that students feel the homework provides show consensus with my own beliefs, and also reflect various student perceptions outlined in the literature review (Brown, 2006; Provenzano & Yue, 2011).

It was encouraging to observe that many students feel listening to the voice recording helps them to become more accustomed to listening to English and acquire correct pronunciation. This supports my belief that providing students with an audio of the passage is worthwhile, helping them feel more confident about their listening ability, and for some students their speaking ability in turn. I was also pleased to see some students notice the benefit in transferring their classroom learning into situations where they actively choose what to write about, while practicing the grammar point from the lesson. In addition, most students indicated that they check the meaning of unknown words using dictionaries, a positive point which shows a degree of learner autonomy (Gairns & Redman, 1986).

The responses in the category of perceived future benefits showed that students may perceive important long-term aims that do not immediately relate to my primary goals of assigning homework. Some students believe the homework will help them when taking examinations in the future. In addition, other students mentioned situations in the future where they feel being able to communicate in English would be advantageous, such as using English in a globalised world.

Implications

As all students gave positive perceptions on the homework, the study confirms the benefits of my current practices. However, on reflection several points emerged that I intend to investigate further to better meet students’ needs.

At present, when assigning homework, I ask students to read the instructions out loud to check their understanding, provide examples on the handout, and then do the first question of the homework with them. However, I believe a suggestion from two students to spend additional time on homework in class would be beneficial. Nation (2013) comments that doing this while providing guidance and feedback can help ensure that homework is completed successfully by students at home.

While all students can see benefits in doing homework, and some of these benefits suggest they are quite motivated to learn, it does not necessarily mean that all students are motivated about their homework or learning. It is also possible that students may hold perceptions on what kind of homework would be better suited to them. One student thought that the homework would be better “if it was a little more difficult”, while another student expressed a desire for a wider “variety of topics to write about”. One student also expressed a preference for writing homework only, stating that they feel “a sense of accomplishment” when completing it, a feeling that they cannot experience from doing the listening homework.

In order to maximise student engagement and motivation, Harmer (2015) suggests involving students in discussions about homework, and even getting students to say what kind of homework they would like to do and believe would be helpful, as “student choice is a powerful motivator” (p. 107). Therefore, in response to this study, I plan to conduct further research where I will ask students the following questions:

- How do you believe the homework can be improved?
- What would you like to do for homework? How will this be valuable for your English learning?

I am also interested in knowing how the students use their dictionaries when doing homework, as responses indicated that most students use dictionaries for checking new vocabulary, but only one mentioned checking pronunciation. Based on my observations, it seems that students usually check the meaning of unknown words and translate them into Japanese. However, students often do not know how to pronounce the words, which could indicate that they seldom check the pronunciation, a common finding in previous research (Alhaisoni, 2016). Therefore, I intend to find out how students use their dictionaries, and discuss with them the best methods to look up and learn new vocabulary.

Limitations

This study was undertaken with a small number of students. Although the study was made to be as anonymous as possible and students were asked to write their feelings and beliefs honestly, students may not have felt entirely anonymous when answering the questionnaire. Therefore, some students may have avoided answering in a negative way that they felt may offend their teacher, and instead wrote what they perceived the teacher would like to hear. A question for future consideration could ask what students do not like doing as homework tasks.

In addition, participants in the study were across a range of grades at school, however due to the small class sizes and students of different grades being in the same classes, a comparison of the responses could not be made between students from different grades. The age of the students could also have influenced their perceptions, with older students possibly having more internalised adult views about homework (Xu & Yuan, 2003). It is also possible that although some students did not indicate a particular perception with regard to all themes, this does not mean that they do not hold these views if they were asked.

Conclusion

This study examined the feelings and beliefs of 19 students in regard to their homework, as well as the resources they use when doing the homework, in the context of an English program at a Japanese cram school. Analysis of the responses indicated that overall, students had positive perceptions on the homework, believing that they benefit in terms of improving language skills and knowledge, reviewing and preparing for lessons, using what they learn in class to express their own meanings, and also perceive long-term advantages. It was valuable for me to gain insights into students' perceptions, confirming but also informing my assumptions on the benefits of the homework I assign.

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Appendix

Questionnaire form in Japanese

1. 宿題についてどう感じますか？

[授業の前に行うリスニング（聞く）やリーディング（読む）の宿題について]

[授業の後に行う英作文の宿題について]

2. 宿題をする際、何をどのように使いますか？（宿題をするのに、役立てているものや人など）

[授業の前に行う、リスニング（聞く）やリーディング（読む）の宿題について]

[授業の後に行う、英作文の宿題について]

3. あなたの英語学習において、宿題をすることでどんな利益が得られると考えていますか？

[授業の前に行うリスニング（聞く）やリーディング（読む）の宿題について]

[授業の後に行う英作文の宿題について]

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