Achievement of Iraqi ESL College Students Engaging in Home Assignments for Developing Writing Skill during Lockdown and Teacher's Role

*Rajiha Abbas Sadej, **Prof Dr Bushra S Al-Noori

*Ministry of Education, General Directorate of First Al-Karkh
**University of Baghdad, Department of English, Baghdad, Iraq
DOI: http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v11i01.022

ABSTRACT

Educational institutes all over the world were not exempted from the lockdown created on account of COVID 19 pandemic in the beginning of the year 2020. Educational institutes were compelled to shift to the online mode without time for preparation or training of any kind. The situation was challenging for all but more so for teachers teaching English as a second language. They adapted to the online mode at a short notice. Yet, one can imagine how difficult it must be for language teachers since language is a skill-based subject. Even while engaged in online teaching, teachers experimented with various strategies to make the online virtual learning experience as effective as possible.

One such strategy was the use of home assignments. Starting with the assumption that home assignments can complement classroom teaching for developing the writing skills of ESL students, the researcher implemented the experiment in a college of education. 50 students in the first year were randomly selected for the experiment and divided into 2 groups of 25 each. All the 50 students attended the same online sessions; however, the students in the control group were given home assignments regularly for three weeks.A researcher made test was conducted which was based on a standardized writing achievement test. The students who were given home assignments performed better than their counterparts in the control group.

The second variable was the role of teachers in using home assignments strategy for improving the writing skills of students. The qualitative analysis intended not to examine the opinion or attitude of teacher; they had no option. So, the set of statements that they responded to were related to their role in the entire process. On the basis of their responses, the researcher was able to list the mandatory duties and responsibilities of English teachers while assigning home tasks.

Key words: Home assignments, writing skills, lockdown period, achievement tests, second language

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The year 2020 is going to be marked in history as a black year that dawned with a virus that corrupted all the existing systems in the world and led to a turmoil. Mankind, even after making so much progress in technology, found itself weapon less to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Offices, schools, colleges, everything was locked down, as if the world had come to a standstill. However, education could not be brought to a standstill. Mankind soon realized that lockdown or no lockdown, we cannot stop the education of children. It cannot be suspended with uncertainty. The walls enable people to remain at a distance from each other but the internet connects the world. Hence, inevitably, the only means of communication that worked was utilized for the purpose of education. Terms like online education, zoom meetings and google classroom were added to dictionaries and became buzz words. Live class sessions were replaced by virtual classrooms.

Teachers tried to devise many ways and strategies that could work in the online mode. The most challenging task was for language teachers, especially those engaged in teaching English as a second language. Even in normal circumstances, this was difficult, made all the more acute by the new normal. Since conducting online sessions for long hours is not advisable as it can damage eyesight, the virtual sessions were conducted for a limited duration in the day. Consequently, teachers were compelled to assign homework to students, particularly at the college and higher levels because older students are quite independent and can do the home assignments independently. Many teachers started relying to a great extent on home assignments.

Of all the language skills, writing is the most advanced and difficult writing skill as it requires a good degree of competency in the remaining three skills namely listening, speaking and reading. Among the various strategies employed by college students to develop the writing skills of students in Iraq, one was assignment of tasks to be done at home. This study is related to home assignments, their benefits during the lockdown period, the exact role of teachers and writing skills.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To prepare home assignments for students for improving writing skills in English

- To administer the home assignments during lockdown period

- To create an achievement test for testing the writing skills of students

- To define the exact role of teachers in this strategy

- To test the effectiveness of home assignments in developing writing skills of students

HYPOTHESIS

T H_0 (hypothesis) – There is significant difference in the means of scores of students in the control group and experimental group.

H_1 (null-hypothesis) -There is no significant difference in the means of scores of students in the control group and experimental group.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are home assignments effective in developing the writing skills of students?

2. What is the role of teachers while employing home assignments strategy for improving the writing skills of ESL students?

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

- The study is limited to college level students studying English as a second language in Iraq.

- The study is limited to writing skills.

- The results apply to all ESL students at college/ higher education level.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

A never before situation arose at the beginning of the year 2020 in the form of complete lockdown of all human engagements. While teachers and students leaped into it without preparation, teachers found time to employ techniques and strategies that would work in the circumstances. One of the strategies was assigning home tasks, especially for students studying at college level. Home assignments serve a number of purposes and can also be designed for self-learning if designed with care and planning. During the lockdown period, teachers had to stick to limited screen time. Hence, they gave a number of tasks and exercises as home assignments. It not only helped to keep the students engaged fruitfully at home, but also complemented the teaching sessions conducted online.

Home assignments played an important part in the routine schedule of the student community during lockdown period. Teachers teaching English as a second language exploited this activity to a great extent to fulfil the objective of developing writing skills among students. From this point of view, this study is important since it tests the achievement level of students

who regularly completed home assignments. The results of the study will be useful to all language teachers who work remotely, especially during the lockdown period.

Even in normal circumstances, teachers find it challenging to teach writing skill in spite of several resources, material and teaching aids that are available. Students also are apprehensive regarding writing skills. Hence, the study and success of the nature and implementation of home assignments for developing writing skills will go a long way in enabling teachers to plan and implement pedagogy that suits the new normal.

The role of teachers and the nature of their work has also changed in the online mode. This study includes an examination of the precise role of teachers when it comes to assigning home tasks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Writing Skills

Among the expressive skills, second language learners prefer the oral culture and look upon writing as a painful activity (Iftani Erna, 2016, p1). Writing skills seem to be the least popular and most difficult to acquire in the second language (Klimova B. F, 2013, p 9).

Archibald (2001) defines writing as a multidimensional skill requiring knowledge and proficiency in a number of areas. Writing is important because it not only serves the purpose of written communication, but it is also a means of learning. English as a medium of instruction is being introduced in all parts of the world because English is a library language, hence, it provides access to world knowledge. Writing helps to overcome the limitations of speech, namely time and space. A written document can be read any number of times, anywhere in the world and after any number of years. When students learn in English, they are expected to answer questions in English while writing examinations. This is not possible if they have not mastered adequate writing skills. Writing is part of informal communication as well as daily communication at the workplace. This is a purposive objective of writing skill, besides creative writing. The latter is even more difficult and challenging for ESL students. "Writing is defined as an art of a writer" (Khansir 2012, p 281). Writing is an integral part of language learning process in an ESL classroom (Khansir, p 282). Activities like self-planning, self-monitoring, self-regulation, which are also part of metacognitive writing strategy. Writing involves physical and cognitive processes; hence it takes time and effort to develop the skill. A mere ability to write is not

enough. One must have the readiness and self-motivation. There is a psychological dimension to writing skill. Written communication is used generally when information is lengthy and complex, which cannot be easily explained verbally.

Sub-Skills of Writing:

Bell and Burnaby in Nadwiah (2002:16), point out that writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously. Writing includes the knowledge of graphology or the way to write letters, words and sentences in a language. Another difficult area is English spellings, especially because there is no one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds in English. The purpose of writing is to convey a message to the reader. In order to be successful in conveying the message, it must be rightly worded, clear, precise, well organized and logical. The purpose of writing is not served if the reader is unable to understand the message. There must be clarity and unambiguity. Writing is a permanent record; hence, quality and correctness are important factors. A 'slip pf the tongue' while speaking is accepted but not 'slip of the pen'. The latter is a serious issue.

The more challenging part of writing is organization. Information about a topic has to be systematically organized. It must be divided into sub-sections and arranged systematically. Reflective writing is even more difficult; one must express thoughts, opinions or beliefs logically and develop the topic point by point chronologically. It is necessary to support these thought or beliefs with appropriate examples and illustrations. Creative writing goes a step further and is the most advanced type of writing that demands mastery in the language in order to use it figuratively, metaphorically and genuinely. Hedge (2000:124) stated the different activities involved in the writing process: "It involves a number of activities: setting goals, generating ideas, organising information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then revising and editing. It involves a complex process which is neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language writers".

A piece of writing can be judged for its quality on the basis of 5 components: content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics.

The Process of Writing

Writing is a combination of skills that is complex in nature. Hence, it is advisable to break down the process of writing into stages and teach writing step-by-step.

1. *Prewriting:* This is the initial stage when the writer has to plan the writing considering the age group of readers, the purpose of writing. Before beginning to write, the writer has to gather information and ideas about the topic through various sources like books, magazines, websites, videos, or through discussions and brainstorming and research. A rough outline is prepared at this stage. Richards et al 2002, p 315) state that experienced writers always plan what they are going to write before they begin.

2. *Drafting*: The ideas are noted down in a sequence logically so that the writer is clear how they are going to be presented.

3. *Revising:* This is an important stage although often not taken seriously or neglected by writers. Reading what is written gives a general idea about the appropriateness of the style and diction. Modifications or changes are made in this stage.

4. *Editing:* At this point in the writing process, writers proofread and correct errors in grammar and mechanics, and edit to improve style and clarity. Having another

writer's feedback in this stage is helpful. Editing helps to maintain the quality of writing and make sit errorfree.

Teaching Writing

There are two approaches to teaching writing: The process approach and the Product Approach. There is also the genre approach.

The Product approach: In this approach, the product is given more emphasis. The final version is assessed and evaluated on the basis of use of language, style, diction, organization of ideas and content. A product approach is an approach which suggests students to imitate the writing model given by teachers (Gabrielatos, 2002: 5, cited by Hasan and Akhnan, 2010: 77). This approach helps students particularly in writing descriptive, narrative and persuasive essays.

The process approach: Following the advancement in psychology, the process approach gained more importance. Rather than the final product, it focusses on the process of writing. The process approach includes the stages prewriting, drafting revising and finalizing. The process in this approach is recursive and dynamic. According to Maarof et al. (2011, p.30) "teacher feedback is regarded as a main requirement for improvement in students'

essay writing". Although the approach has its advantages, it is criticized for being time consuming.

The genre approach: According to this approach, students benefit from a study of the different types of writing. They go through the different genres and keeping them as models. They learn to imitate them. This approach gives importance to a variety of text types. For this purpose, "Learners should be exposed to many examples of the same genre to develop their ability to write a particular genre" (Elashri 2013, p.7). the approach is advisable for beginners.

Home Assignments

Homework or home assignments are not something new. Since ancient times, teachers have been giving homework to students. The work that is done in the class is called classwork. The work assigned for doing at home is called homework. Teachers give homework for various reasons. It provides practice, develop study skills, self-discipline and self-regulation, keeps teachers and parents informed about the student's progress, and saves class time.

Teachers have to take care while assigning homework. If students are unable to do the homework independently, it may lead to frustration. It should not be a burden, it should be based on class activities and accompanied by clear instructions. It must be given with a specific purpose in mind and must be able to fulfil the purpose. It is not surprising to note that homework often becomes "a source of complaint and friction between home and school more often than other teaching activities" (Cooper, 2001, p. ix).

The variety of home assignments that can be given by teachers depends upon their creativity and resourcefulness. Teachers must however take care that the assignments suit the age level of the students and fulfil the objectives of the course.

Achievement and achievement tests

Achievement is defined as a result gained through efforts. A personal achievement is an attribute that provides an individual with a sense of pride. Achievement test measures present proficiency, mastery and understanding of general and specific areas of knowledge. Achievement test can be of different forms like oral test, written test and practical test. Items of achievement test can be essay type questions or short answer questions or objective type of questions or combination of all these types.

Tests can be standardized or teacher-made. The latter type is designed to solve the

368

problems or requirements of the class for which it is prepared. It is prepared to measure the outcomes and content of local curriculum. It is very much flexible so that, it can be adapted to any procedure and material. It does not require any sophisticated technique for preparation. It is easy to construct. In the Dictionary of Education C.V. Good has described a standardized test is that "for which content has been selected and checked empirically for which norms have been established for which uniform methods of administering and scoring have been developed, and which may be scored with a relatively high degree of objectivity."

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A good deal of research has been conducted on improving the writing skills of students at all levels. However, the lockdown situation is unique. Giving home assignments was also a strategy used regularly and widely in traditional teaching. The question now is to examine how it works for the benefit of ESL students at college level during the lockdown period when the teaching is taking place online. The research on writing skills and home assignments conducted till date enabled the researcher to understand the nature of the problem, and to understand the various advantages of home assignments.

William Zinsser has written a book titled 'On Writing Well'. the book is all about how to improve writing, particularly non-fiction. The writer advises beginners to use simple sentences and clear language. If thoughts are clear, clarity in writing follows automatically. Writing is undoubtedly hard work. According to him, clear and good sentences do not come accidentally. First, a writer must decide what he wants to write and then check whether he has written it. One must stick to content that is necessary and avoid anything that is irrelevant, extra, additional, and unnecessary. He advises writers to check each and every word before finalizing. He points out that writing is learnt through imitation. Hence, writers must first be voracious readers. Words must be carefully selected. They must be appropriate to the topic. The writer differentiates between good usage of words and jargon, and advises avoiding jargon. He talks about three unities that must be maintained – unity of pronoun, unity of tense and unity of mood. Content is the most important part of any piece of writing. One cannot fill up pages with trash content. Writing should be linear and sequential. Entertainment and element of surprise can be judicially embedded in writing.

Iftanti Erna (2016) experimented with the idea of improving the writing skill of

students through writing journal articles. The skill of writing journal articles is considered as process / cognitive approach. The sample selected was college EFL students because they are required to do many projects and surveys and write reports. The reports they write are important to increase their own knowledge and also contribute to academics. Most of the reports are neglected because they remain unpublished. The reason is that students have little know-how about writing journal articles. This study is important because it contributes directly to research-based knowledge. The writer explains the concepts of writing skills and writing ability. A journal article is a particular kind of document containing specific information and requisites like logic, clarity and precision. It is a scientific report where certain norms are mandatory. The writer discusses the structure of a scientific journal article, the various parts like title, methodology, review of literature, experiments, statistical treatment, analysis and discussion / conclusion and major findings.

Javed M. et al (2013) attempted to assess and evaluate the writing skills of secondary school students in 5 major areas namely word completion, syntax, comprehension, tenses and grammar and handwriting. The major objectives of the study were to find out students'

competency in different types of sub-skills of writing and to compare the students' proficiency in sub-skills of writing on the basis of gender, location, and public and private sector. An achievement test was designed to test the competency of 440 students randomly selected from schools in Pakistan. English is taught as a compulsory second language in Pakistan. It was found that the overall performance of the students was best in comprehension compared to that in other skills. The writers first explain the importance of writing skill and the difficulties faced by ESL students. They have listed the micro skills of writing and writing at the secondary level.

Carr Nicole (2013) has written a research article on the topic "Increasing the Effectiveness of Homework for All Learners in the Inclusive Classroom". The writer states that homework is a contentious issue for students, teachers and parents. The writer opines that "Increasing the effectiveness of homework is a multifaceted goal. Accommodations, organization, structure of assignments, technology, home–school communication, and students' home life all influence the effectiveness of homework" (p 170). Homework should promote positive attitudes, habits, and character traits; allow appropriate parent involvement; and reinforce learning of simple skills taught in

class. The main concern of the writer is to examine what makes homework effective. He concludes that firstly, homework should be limited and should not require a long time to complete. Secondly it should not be too easy or too difficult. The third hallmark of effective homework is ownership. The last condition is aesthetic appeal. The writer concludes that effective homework should be purposeful, efficient, personalized, doable, and inviting (p 175). Parent communication is also an important consideration for effective homework practices.

Jianzhong Xu (2013) raised the question – Why do Students have Difficulties Completing homework? - The Need for Homework Management. He observed that students do find homework meaningful and interesting but it comes in the middle of other attractive and competing activities in the after-school hours. Students have to create a homework environment, handle deadlines, manage distractions and keep themselves motivated. All this is challenging for most of the students. The researcher tried to find out the strategies used by students to cope with homework. The writer observes that attitudes towards homework keeps changing and has changed over the past hundred years, yet, homework continues to be an important educational activity.

Mohammad Amiryousefi (2016) studied the opinion of both students and teachers of English as a second language in the study titled " Homework: Voices from EFL teachers and learners". 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, 2000). Unfortunately, over the last century, scholars in the field of English teaching and learning have mostly focused on classroom-based learning and on "how the classroom, together with teachers, learners, and learning resources can provide the necessary conditions for learning to occur" (Richards, 2015, p. 6). Out of-class learning, which usually occurs through doing homework, has not received the attention it deserves. Homework, according to the researcher, has both proponents and opponents. English homework, the focus of this study, is an educational practice that is inculcated in learners with the aim of improving the quality of their language learning and development. As such, teachers should try to increase the effectiveness of homework assignments through incorporating effective and interesting tasks and activities and encouraging learners to spend more time on them.

METHODOLOGY

The mixed method was used in the research. Quantitative data was collected via a writing test administered to the students after the treatment. Qualitative data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to the teachers. The writing test was designed especially for assessing the writing skills of students. The population consisted of 600 students studying in Ibn Rushd College of Education, Baghdad University. 50 students studying in the first year were randomly selected for the study. They were divided into two groups of 25 each. The two-group post-test design was used.

Procedure

Students in both the groups attended the same online session. Students in the experimental group were assigned homework on a daily basis. A test specially prepared for the experiment was administered to students in both the groups at the end of three weeks. The scores were noted by two raters.

The sum of scores by both raters was taken into consideration for each item. The total of both raters for all the items was calculated as the final score of each student. The scores were calculated for all students in both groups. Mean, SD and t score were calculated at the end to find if there was a significant difference in the mean of scores of both groups.

Scoring

Scoring was done in the following way. The raters assigned marks for each item anywhere between 1 to 10.

Each item was given a weighted score in the following way:

RANGE	Weighted score
1 to 4	3
4 to 8	5
8 to 12	8
Above 8	10

Hence if a student scored marks from the two raters in the following way, the calculation would be as follows:

Item	Rater 1	Rater 2	Total	Weighted score
Organization of ideas	5	6	11	10
Relevant content	6	6	12	10
Vocabulary, spellings, punctuation marks	8	6	14	10
Grammar	4	4	8	8

372

The total score of the student will be 10 + 10 + 10 + 8 = 38

The researcher-made test

The researcher designed a test which was based on the CATW. Teachers who taught English to the selected students regularly in the college assisted in preparation of the test. Similar rubrics were prepared so that scoring would be possible. The scores were assigned by two raters who were given clear instructions about the rating. Instead of a passage, a prompt in the form of writing was provided to the students.

The following prompt was given to the students:

"The number of Corona cases increased tremendously in our area during the last two weeks. There was a wave of fear…."

Instructions to students:

- Read the prompt carefully.

- Write a paragraph continuing the idea in the prompt.

- The paragraph must have minimum 150 and maximum 200 words.

- The following points will be considered while rating the passage – use of appropriate words, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, punctuation marks.

Rubrics for raters

The marks will be allotted in 4 categories or items:

Each rater will assign marks anywhere between 1 to 10 for each category. The following criteria will guide in allocation of marks:

1. Organization of ideas

- Complete lack of organization – 0

- There is some structure but no logic – 3

- There is logic but lack of links – 7

- Well organized paragraph with logic and links – 10 marks

2. Relevant content

- Totally irrelevant content – 0

- Scanty information related to the topic – 3 marks

- Sufficient information – 7 marks

- Rich genuine content – 10 marks

3. Vocabulary

- Use of appropriate words – 3

- Variety of words – 7 marks

- Correct usage of words and phrases – 10 marks

4. Grammar

- Proper use of tenses – 3

- Appropriate parts of speech – 7 marks

- Well-constructed grammatically correct sentences – 10 marks

Role of teachers

The following set of statements was distributed to 10 teachers teaching English as a second language in Ibn Rushd College of Education in Baghdad. The response to each statement will be either positive or negative.

1. It is necessary to make an overall plan of home assignment schedules initially.

2. The type of home assignments needs to be designed according to the age group.

3. The home assignments suitable for writing skills have to be identified.

4. There has to be a variety in the assignments.

5. Assignments can be for reading, writing and in the form of activities.

6. Homework must be accompanied by detailed and clear instructions.

7. It is necessary to check whether the home assignments can be completed independently by the students.

8. Some class time needs to be spent for discussing home assignments related issues.

9. Checking the home assignments regularly and giving feedback is important.

10. Planning home assignments is challenging and time consuming.

After collecting the responses from the teachers, a percentage of positive and negative responses to each statement was calculated. Conclusion was drawn on the basis of the responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Scores given by the raters

The raters followed the given instructions and submitted the total weighted marks for each student in both the groups.

Table 1 – Table showing total of weighted scores of each student in the control group

Serial number	Scores given by rater 1	Scores given by rater 2	Total scores
1	14	10	24
2	20	24	44

3	18	12	30
4	16	18	34
5	21	15	36
6	15	15	30
7	17	15	32
8	12	14	26
9	22	20	42
10	10	14	24
11	20	20	40
12	15	20	35
13	22	18	40
14	16	22	38
15	18	18	36
16	21	20	41
17	16	21	37
18	21	20	41
19	18	22	40
20	18	15	23
21	22	20	42
22	15	22	37
23	20	15	35
24	18	20	30
25	22	21	43

Table 2 – Table showing total of weighted scores of each student in the experimental group

Serial number	Scores given by rater 1	Scores given by rater 2	Total scores
1	18	18	36
2	22	24	46
3	20	18	38
4	18	22	38
5	22	20	42

375

6	18	18	36
7	20	15	35
8	20	18	38
9	22	26	48
10	18	20	38
11	20	20	40
12	24	20	44
13	24	20	44
14	20	22	42
15	22	18	40
16	24	20	44
17	26	24	50
18	24	24	48
19	24	22	46
20	22	15	47
21	22	22	44
22	24	26	50
23	20	20	40
24	20	26	46
25	20	24	44

Mean of scores for control group – 35.2

Mean of scores for experimental group – 42. 56

Difference Scores Calculations

(Refer to Appendix 1)

Treatment 1

N_1: 25

$df_1 = N - 1 = 25 - 1 = 24$

M_1: 35.2

SS_1: 960

$s^2_1 = SS_1/(N - 1) = 960/(25-1) = 40$

Treatment 2

N_2: 25

$df_2 = N - 1 = 25 - 1 = 24$

M_2: 42.56

SS_2: 482.16

$s^2_2 = SS_2/(N - 1) = 482.16/(25-1) = 20.09$

T-value Calculation

$s^2_p = ((df_1/(df_1 + df_2)) \ s^2_1) +$

$((df_2/(df_2 + df_2)) \ s^2_2) = ((24/48) \ 40) +$

$((24/48) (20.09) = 30.04$

$s^2_{M1} = s^2_p/N_1 = 30.04/25 = 1.2$

$s^2_{M2} = s^2_p/N_2 = 30.04/25 = 1.2$

$t = (M_1 - M_2)/\sqrt{(s^2_{M1} + s^2_{M2})} = -7.36/\sqrt{2.4} = -4.75$

The t-value is -4.7473. The p-value is < .00001. The result is significant at p < .05.

Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. The research hypothesis is accepted.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

The next research objective in this study is to understand the new role of ESL teachers in using home assignments as a strategy for improving writing skills of college level ESL students. The responses of the 10 teachers who participated in the experiment to the statements presented to them were as follows. The teachers were asked to tick the response to which they agreed.

Table 3 Table showing responses of teachers

Statement	Positive response	Negative response
It is necessary to make an overall plan of home assignment schedules initially.	7	3
The type of home assignments needs to be designed according to the age group.	5	5
The home assignments suitable for writing skills have to be identified.	6	4
There has to be a variety in the assignments.	2	8
Assignments can be for reading, writing and in the form of activities.	4	6
Homework must be accompanied by detailed and clear instructions.	7	3
It is necessary to check whether the home assignments can be completed independently by the students.	9	1
Some class time needs to be spent for discussing home assignments related issues.	5	5

377

Checking the home assignments regularly and giving feedback is important.	8	2
Planning home assignments is challenging and time consuming.	7	3

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Maximum teachers (70%) agree that home assignments schedules must be planned. If it is not planned, the load of home assignments can be too much and demotivate students. Hence, it is necessary to coordinate with other teachers and check how much total homework is given for a day. Another way out is to fix weekdays for each subject and assign homework according to the time table. It is also necessary to see what kind of home assignment is given. For example, if it is a survey or collection of information, it can continue over weeks or several days. The important point is that students must get sufficient time to complete the home assignments and do justice to them.

For 50% teachers, the age group was not an issue. This may be because they assign homework to students with whom they are familiar and are aware of their levels.

60% teachers opined that appropriate home assignments must be selected form the options available. The home assignments must fulfil the objectives that are outlined for developing writing skills, failing which, they are futile.

Only 20% teachers felt that there has to be a variety in the assignments. Once the assignments for writing skills are identified, there is little choice left. Variety in assignments would affect students and not teachers, hence they do not give much importance to it.

Only 40% teachers felt that assignments could be in various forms. 60% teachers believed that since the writing skills have to be improved, assignments must be writing tasks. However, for writing tasks, reading is also important. Silent reading can be done by students at home.

It was through experience that 70% teachers realized that it was necessary to give very clear instructions regarding homework. Many students were unable to complete their homework or did it in a wrong way due to lack of clear instructions.

Another cause of frustration observed was the nature of the assignments. 90% teachers felt that it was mandatory to make

sure that students would not need any help from parents or other colleagues to complete the homework. Students are often reluctant to ask friends or colleagues for help because they think that if others are able to do it, something must be wrong with themselves. This notion directly affects their self-esteem and can be harmful in the long run. Self-esteem is closely related to writing skills.

Giving some class time for discussing home assignments got a 50-50 response. When clear and detailed instructions are given, all the teachers did not feel it was necessary to spend any additional time on discussing home assignments.

Students do not give importance to home assignments if they experience that teachers never bother to check whether they are complete and what has been done at home. The very purpose of home assignments is destroyed if feedback is not given. Although checking the homework of every student is a tedious job for teachers, it is necessary. It also keeps the teachers informed about the progress of students. 80 % teacher swere in favour of this statement.

The last statement is the only statement that seeks the opinion of teachers regarding home assignments. During the lockdown period, though the online sessions were short and brief, teachers were kept quite busy planning lessons, preparing and searching for online support, preparing slides for presentation and so on. Designing and assigning homework drafting instructions etc are all additional tasks. It is not something that can be done casually; a lot of planning and thought goes into it. Hence, 70% teachers agreed that it is both challenging and time consuming. However, looking at the necessity and advantages, they spared time willingly.

CONCLUSION

Results showed that home assignments helped second language teachers to develop the writing skills of students during lockdown period by minimizing screen time and saving a great deal of time during the online sessions. Students are motivated to do home assignments and take them seriously if they are explained the importance. Home assignments not only helped in achievement in writing performance but enabled students to develop independent study habits and study skills. Home assignments afforded practice, thus boosting the confidence of students. Regular checking and feedback are important. Students understand their mistakes and weaknesses and try to avoid them later.

Home assignments can be successful only when teachers understand their exact role

379

in the process. They have to follow certain norms while assigning home tasks and keep the students in focus.

SUGGESTIONS

Suggestions for students:

- Students must take the home assignments seriously and complete them in time.
- Students must manage time for home assignments regularly and daily, as part of routine.
- Students can do similar assignments on their own when and if they have extra time.
- As far as possible, students must do the assignments on their own and avoid taking help from parents or colleagues.
- Students should have a positive attitude regarding home assignments. They must understand that they are meant for their own benefit.

Suggestions for teachers:

- Teachers must plan and schedule home assignments timetable carefully and in advance.

- Teachers must not be too strict regarding deadlines for home assignments. At the same time, they should not be too liberal that students take disadvantage.
- Teachers must try to introduce variety. Although it does not affect them, teachers have to think of the psychology of students.
- Teachers must give fair amount of homework that can be completed by students in fair amount of time. Too much homework is likely to demotivate students who may develop a negative attitude towards them.
- Teachers must check the home assignments regularly and provide feedback. They should avoid being critical or judgmental.

Recommendations for further study

Similar studies can be carried out for all levels and for all language skills. Other strategies that can work in lockdown period must be studied for the benefit of ESL students.

REFERENCES

1. Amiryousefi, M. (2016). Homework: Voices from EFL teachers and learners. *Iranian Journal Of Language Teaching Research*, *4*(2), 35-54.

2. Cooper, H. *The battle over homework* (3rd ed.). Corwin Press.

3. Iftanti, Erna. (2016). IMPROVING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS THROUGH WRITING JOURNAL ARTICLES. Lingua Scientia: Journal Bahasa. 8. 10

4. Hodges, T. (2017). Theoretically Speaking: An Examination of Four Theories and How They Support Writing in the Classroom. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *90*(4), 139-146. doi: 10.1080/00098655.2017.1326228

5. Javed, M. (2013). A Study of Students' Assessment in Writing Skills of the English Language. *International Journal Of Instruction July*, *6*(2).

6. Khansir, A.A., 2012. The role of process and product approaches to the teaching of writing. Language in India, 12(7): 280-295

7. Klimova, Blanka. (2012). The Importance of Writing. Paripex - Indian Journal Of Research. 2. 9-11.

8. Richards, J. (2015). The Changing Face of Language Learning: Learning Beyond the Classroom. *RELC Journal*, *46*(1), 5-22. doi: 10.1177/0033688214561621

9. Xu, J. (2008). Validation of Scores on the Homework Management Scale for Middle School Students. *The Elementary School Journal*, *109*(1), 82-95. doi: 10.1086/592368

10. Zinsser, W. (1994). *On writing well*. New York: Harper Perennial.