



## English Language Teachers' Homework Practices in Hong Kong

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### Introduction

Research in English language education has focused on learning and teaching in the classroom 'and how the classroom, together with teachers, learners, and learning resources can provide the necessary conditions for learning to occur' (Nunan & Richards, 2015, p. xi). While understanding what happens in the classroom is important, it is not the only environment students are learning. This has begun to be noticed by researchers, who have shown an interest in students' learning outside of the classroom (Nunan & Richards, 2015). To date, research has presented the learners' out-of-class learning as distinct from their in-class learning, with a focus on self-directed and autonomous learning (Benson, 2001). This focus neglects a key part of students' out-of-class educational experience, homework. This leaves a gap in our knowledge (Rudman, 2014).

Homework is the only component of the school curriculum that is experienced by teachers, students and parents alike. It is unique in that it bridges both in-class and out-of-class learning. Teachers are seen to have the main role in the practice of homework (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Teachers choose the topic and assignments, decide whether to set homework, and are chiefly responsible for the homework routines. In spite of this, the homework practices of teachers are under-researched (Cooper, 2007; Rudman 2014) and are almost non-existent in English language education (Moorhouse, 2017; Moorhouse, 2018). The majority of research on homework that has been done has looked at teachers' homework practices as a whole and not individual subjects such as the English language (Rudman, 2014).

Knowing teachers' current practices will allow for better support of teachers as well as better informed school-based homework policies. This exploratory study aims to shed light on English language teachers' homework practices by answering the following question:

What are the homework practices of English language teachers in Hong Kong primary schools?

### Literature Review

#### The Effect of Homework in English language Education

Homework has been defined as 'tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours' (Cooper, 1989, p. 86). It is a component of children's school experience in most countries around the world (OECD, 2014). It is unique from classwork, as students are

expected to complete it without the support of the teacher, either on their own or with their family (Murillo & Martinez-Garrido, 2014).

Although the research on the effectiveness of homework in English language education is limited, many scholars have commented on it and tend to see it as universally beneficial. For many in English language education, homework is seen as necessary (Moorhouse, 2017). They argue that there is insufficient class time for learners to become capable English language users and they must continue learning beyond the classroom (Thornbury, 2012; Scott, 2015). Painter (2004) describes homework as the 'cornerstone of students' learning process' (p. 5). She argues that it provides learners an incentive to practice and use English outside the classroom and keeps English learning 'in their minds' (p. 6). Thornbury (2006) goes as far as to say that 'there are grounds to believe that what happens between lessons may have as much importance as what happens during lessons' (p. 96).

## **Teachers' Homework Practices in English Language Education**

In studies conducted on teachers' homework practice in the United States, a number of different reasons for assigning homework have been identified. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) outlined ten purposes: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relationship, parent-teacher communication, peer interactions, policy, public relations and punishment. Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006) offer similar reasons teachers have for assigning homework, and divide the possible purposes into two broad categories, instructional (e.g., review, practice, preparation, extension, and integration) and noninstructional (e.g., communication between parent and child, fulfilling directives from school administrators, public relation, and punishing students).

Although research on English language teachers' practices is also limited, one study conducted by North and Pillay (2002) explored the homework practices of English language teachers in Malaysia. Their study involved 85 English language teachers from secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. They found that teachers were setting homework two to three times per week. North and Pillay believed this was a relatively high amount of homework and argued that the students could be 'overburdened with homework' (p. 139). For materials, teachers were primarily using their own worksheets, prescribed textbooks and commercial workbooks for homework, and the primary purposes were for practice, feedback to teachers and to complete work started in class. The most common activities were grammar exercises, guided writing exercises, corrections, reading comprehension question and free writing. They found that 'closed types of tasks were preferred to more open-ended tasks, and there seemed to be a preference for homework which generated a written product' (p. 140). This focus on written products, North and Pillay argue, could be due to the need for 'visible evidence that work has been duly performed' (p. 142). The teachers in their study were teaching secondary learners. Teachers of younger learners might have different practices, due to the learners' cognitive development, abilities and proficiency in English (Rudman, 2014).

Questions regarding English language teachers' homework practices, such as how teachers respond to students' completed homework, whether teachers differentiate their homework practices to meet students' needs, what expectations teachers have of parental involvement, and whether teachers have received training in using homework have yet to be explored through empirical research. This review has shown how little we know about English language teachers' homework practices. This makes research on their practices paramount (Moorhouse, 2017; Moorhouse, 2018; North & Pillay, 2002; Rudman, 2014).

## **Research Design**

The study explored the homework practices of 89 English language teachers working in 22 government or aided primary schools in Hong Kong through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to find:

- The quantity of homework teachers were assigning, as well as the amount of time teachers and students were spending on homework related activities;
- The types of homework were teachers assigning, for what purposes were they assigning homework, and what they did with the homework once it was submitted;
- Whether teachers catered for diversity;
- If teachers had received training on assigning homework, and;
- The types of parental involvement teachers expected.

Draft questionnaires were piloted with four teacher educators who were familiar with the Hong Kong educational context (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The questionnaire was revised for clarity and content based on their feedback. The final version was distributed to teachers working in 22 different schools in Hong Kong through professional contacts of the researcher. English language teachers known to the researcher were approached and asked if they would be willing to complete a questionnaire, and if they were, they were asked if they could recruit colleagues or other English language teachers they knew to complete the questionnaire. In total, 100 questionnaires were distributed and 89 were returned. This high response rate could be due to this personal distribution method.

The data were analysed using standard statistical procedures with descriptive statistics generated for the different closed items, including frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Open responses were analysed for content and the responses were coded. Themes were identified. These are presented numerically.

## Results

The findings show that homework is a universal practice among the English language teachers in the study, with 99% of respondents stating they set homework daily. Despite this large number, only 48% reported receiving any training on assigning homework. The results are presented under these themes: Teachers' purposes for assigning homework, type of homework assigned, quantity and amount of homework assigned, catering for diversity, feedback given to homework and parental involvement. These themes will then be discussed.

### Teachers' Purposes for Assigning Homework

Participants were asked to rank six possible purposes for assigning homework from the most common reason (1) to the least common reason (6) (See Figure 1 for frequencies). The questionnaire results overwhelmingly show that the most common reason reported by respondents for assigning homework was so that students can 'practice what they have already been taught in lessons' (M=1.06, SD=0.24). This was followed by 'students can apply what they learnt in different settings' (M=2.88, SD=0.89), 'students can extend their learning beyond what they did in lessons' (M=3.07, SD= 1.09), 'students can prepare for future lessons' (M=4.01, SD=1.11) and 'students can revise for future assessments, exams, and dictation' (M=3.95, SD=1.06). The least common reason was 'punish students for bad behaviour' (M=5.99, SD=0.11). The small value of standard deviation shows these purposes are relatively consistent.

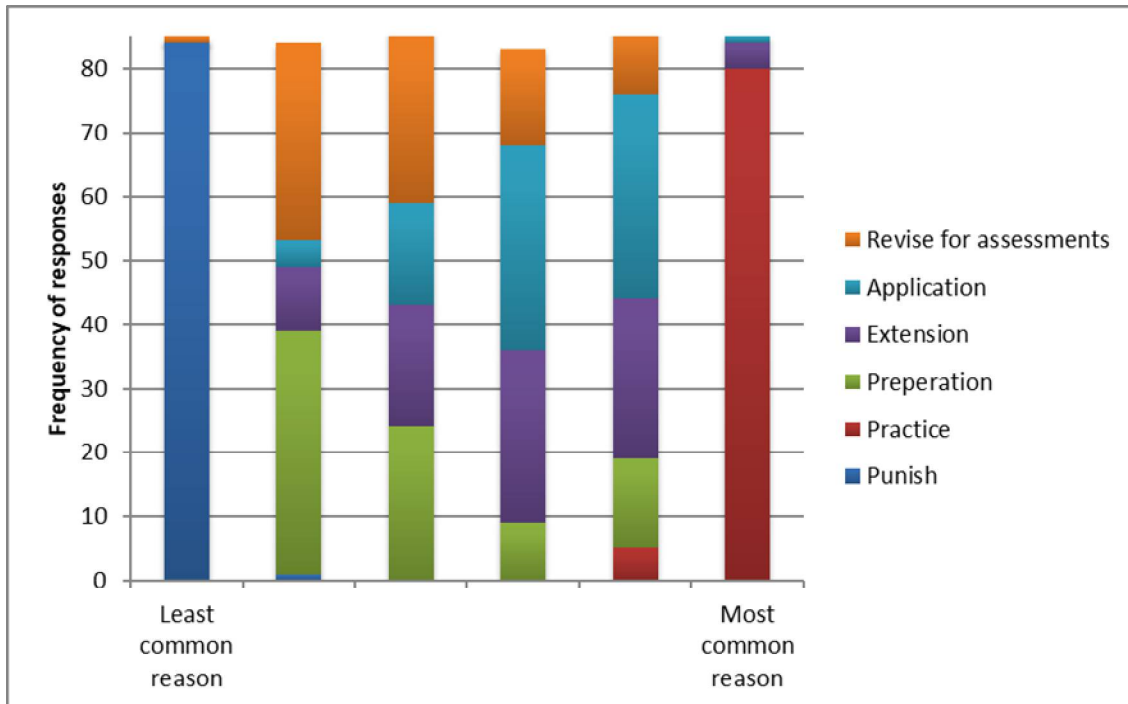


Figure 1. Teachers' purposes for assigning homework.

### Type of Homework Teachers' Assign

Participants ranked eight skills they assign homework to practice or develop from the most common (1) to least common (8). The most common skill was 'grammar' ( $M=1.65$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ) followed by 'reading' ( $M=2.48$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ), 'vocabulary' ( $M=2.81$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ) and 'writing' ( $M=4.07$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ). The least common skills were 'memorization' ( $M=5.17$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ), 'handwriting' ( $M=5.17$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ), 'speaking' ( $M=6.76$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ) and 'listening' ( $M=7.14$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) (See Figure 2. for frequencies).

Participants were further asked to rank the homework tasks they assign. They were given a list of 10 items to rank from most regular (1) to least regular (10). The most regular homework task was 'grammar practice' ( $M=1.59$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ) followed by 'vocabulary practice' ( $M=2.58$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ), 'writing activities' ( $M=4.05$ ,  $SD=1.65$ ), 'home reading' ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.97$ ) and 'penmanship' ( $M=5.04$ ,  $SD=2.50$ ). The least regular were 'finishing classwork' ( $M=5.21$ ,  $SD=2.17$ ), 'exam preparation' ( $M=7.06$ ,  $SD=1.57$ ), 'project work' ( $M=8.05$ ,  $SD=1.70$ ), 'speaking activities' ( $M=8.19$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) and 'listening activities' ( $M=8.80$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) (See Figure 3 for frequencies).

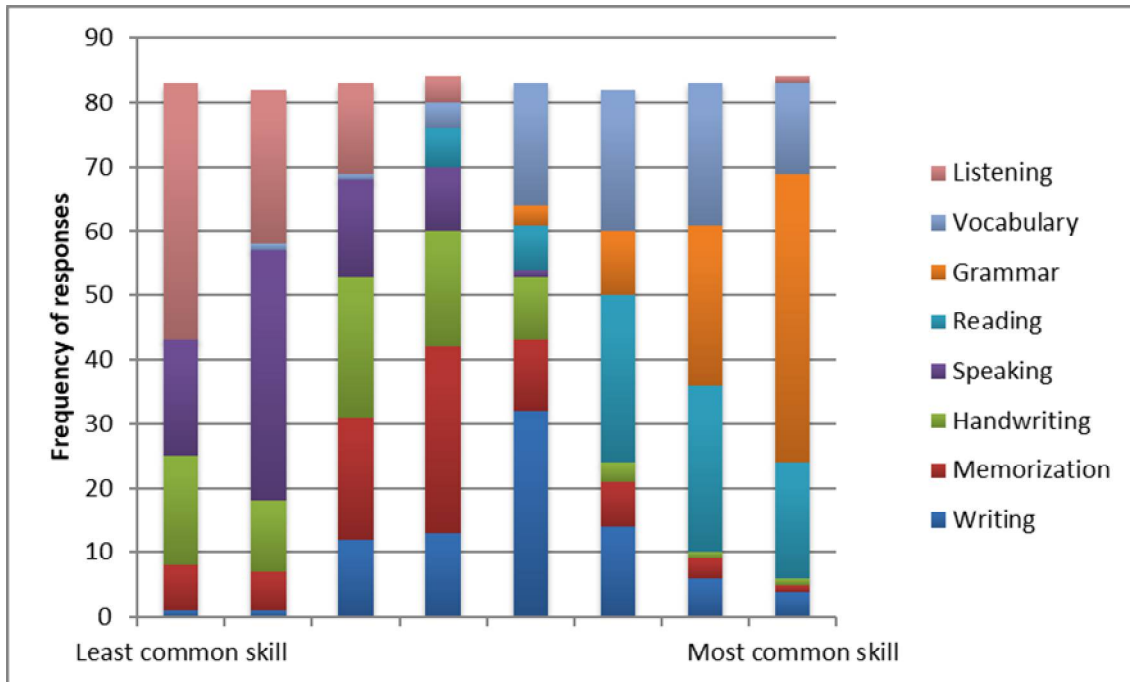


Figure 2. Type of homework teachers assigned.

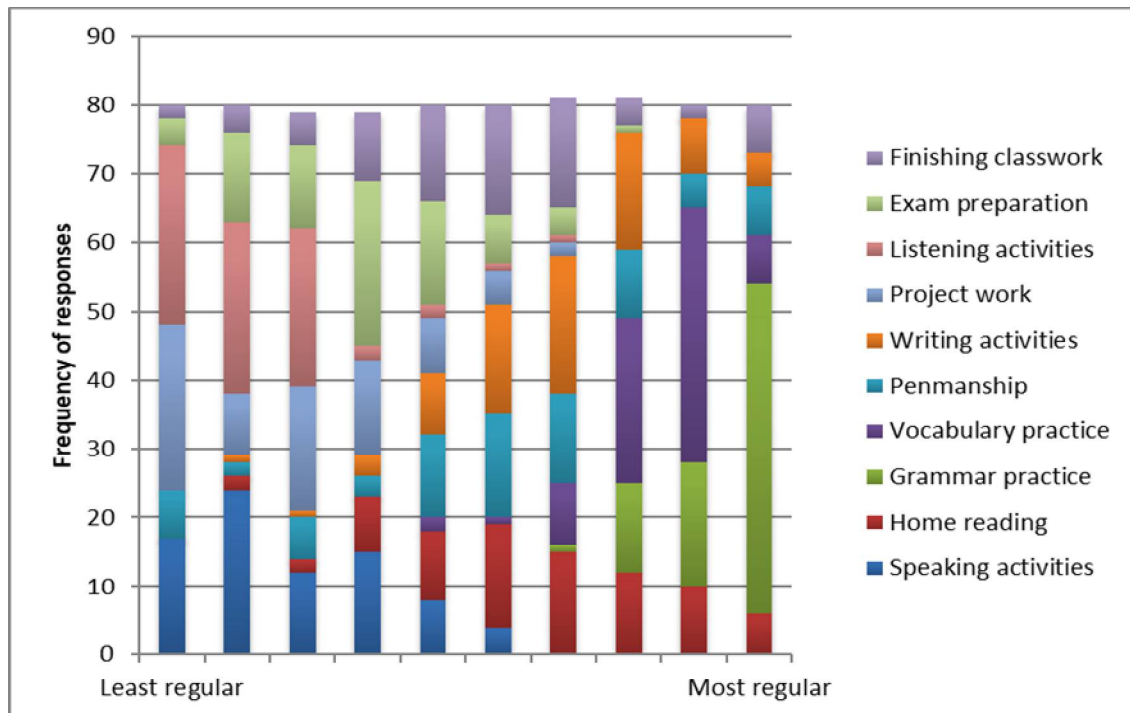


Figure 3. Kinds of homework tasks teachers assigned.

### Quantity and Amount of Homework Assigned

Participants were asked six questions regarding the frequency, quantity, amount of time they expect students to spend on homework each day, class time spent on homework related activities (such as setting, explaining, demonstrating and giving feedback) and how much time they allow students to complete homework. The questionnaire shows that 99% of respondents set homework every day; 63% of respondents assign two pieces of homework a day, while 25% give three pieces (see Table 1). On average,

97% of respondents reported allowing students one day to complete their homework; 63% of respondents expect students to take 21-30 minutes to complete their homework daily, with 25% expecting students to take 31-40 minutes (see Table 2). When asked if they co-ordinate with other subject teachers of the same class regarding the amount of homework to assign each day, 17% said they did, 25% said they did not, and 55% said they did sometimes.

For class time spent on homework related activities, 49% responded that they spend 0-10 minutes, 37% responded that they spend 11-20 minutes, and 8% responded that they spend 40 minutes or more (see Table 3).

TABLE 1  
*Number of Pieces of Homework Teachers Assigned Daily*

Number of daily assignments	0	1	2	3	4	>4
Frequency	0	9	56	22	1	1
Percentage	0%	10%	63%	25%	1%	1%

TABLE 2  
*Average Time Teachers Expect Students to Spend on English Homework*

Average time teachers expect students to spend on English homework (minutes)	0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	>60
Frequency	1	18	34	28	3	4	1
Percentage	0%	10%	63%	25%	3%	4%	1%

TABLE 3  
*Average Time Teachers Spend on Homework-related Activities Daily*

Average time teachers spend on homework related activities daily (minutes)	0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	>40
Frequency	44	33	5	0	7
Percentage	49%	37%	6%	0%	8%

## Catering for Diversity

When asked if they offer different homework to different students in the same class depending on English ability, 46% responded 'yes,' while 54% responded 'no'. Respondents were asked to provide a reason for their response; 83 participants wrote a reason. Of the 41 participants who said they did differentiate, 74% responses provided a reason related to 'catering for learner diversity.' Of the 48 participants who responded that they do not differentiate, 27% mentioned that 'students are of similar ability', 17% mentioned 'school policy', 15% mentioned a 'lack of time,' 13% mentioning 'parents' expectations' and 8% mentioned 'difficulty in differentiating.'

## Feedback Given to Homework

Respondents were given an open-ended question that asked them to state how they provide feedback to the homework they assign. Responses, such as comments, suggestions for improvement and grades were provided. All 89 participants wrote a response or multiple responses. Figure 4 shows the percentages of responses to each kind of feedback; 79% of respondents mentioned giving a grade, while 64% provide comments. Other forms of feedback include, 'suggestions for improvement' (34%), 'sticker, stamps, prizes' (15%) and 'oral/verbal feedback' (12%).

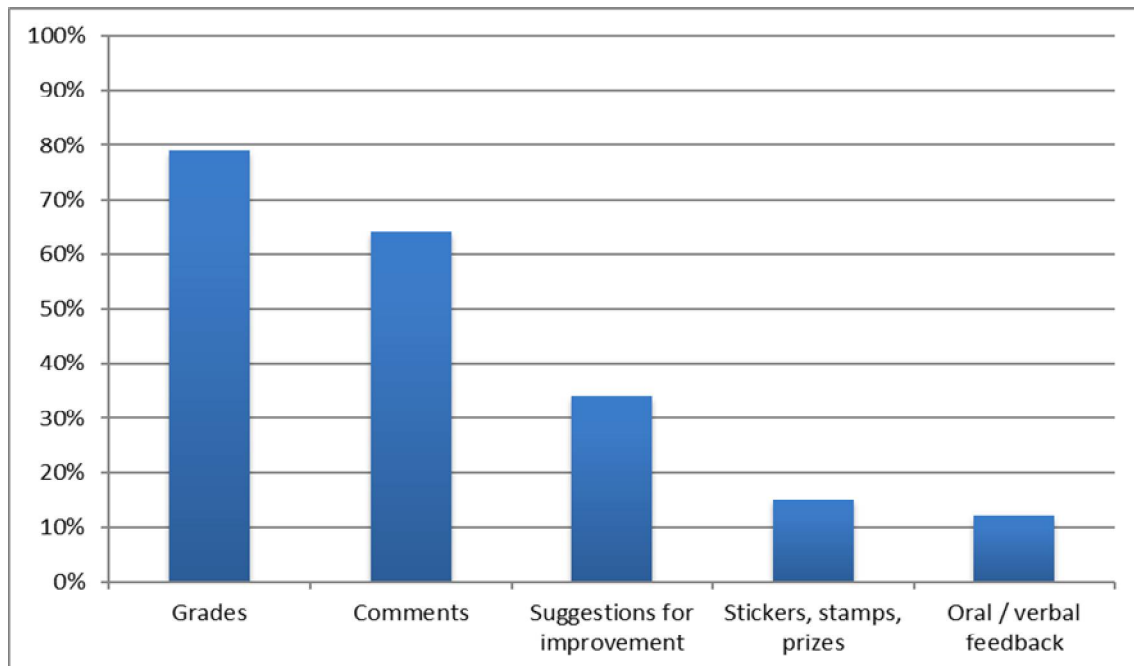


Figure 4. Type of feedback teachers give to students' homework.

## Parental Involvement

Participants were asked to comment on the expectations they have of parent and/or guardian involvement in their students' homework; 83 provided a response. While 14% had no expectations on parents, the majority, 86%, expected some kind of parental involvement. Of these, 49% expect parents to offer students support to complete their homework through guidance and help, 34% expect parent to check whether students had completed their homework, and 17% expected parents to check whether the homework is correct.

## Discussion

This study has provided us with a better understanding of English language teachers' homework practices in Hong Kong. It can be seen that teachers are primarily assigning homework so students can practice what they have been taught in lessons, while other academic functions, such as extending the learning outside of the classroom and preparation for upcoming lessons, are given less frequently. An interesting finding is that 'revising for future assessments, exams and dictations' are less common than other purposes. This may be due to the frequency of assessment compared to the frequency of the homework. Indeed, the study shows that English language teachers in Hong Kong primary schools are setting on average two to three pieces of homework every day and expecting students to spend 20-40 minutes on English homework. This is more than what North and Pillay (2002) found secondary English language teachers in Malaysia were assigning their learners and more than what primary teachers in the UK assign (Rudman, 2014). This seems high, as students will also be assigned homework for other subjects, such as Chinese, Mathematics and General Studies. While a number of teachers coordinate with other subject teachers of the same class, 25% do not, and 55% only do so sometimes. This may lead to excessive homework going home on certain days, and as 97% of respondents only give one day for the students to complete their homework, this may overburden them (North & Pillay, 2002). Students may struggle to prioritise homework and identify which pieces require more time than others (Rudman, 2014). This could also limit the kind of homework activities teachers can assign to only those that can be

completed in a short time. This may partially account for the dominance of grammar and vocabulary activities rather than speaking activities, listening activities or project work. Another surprising finding is that the amount of class time relegated to homework related activities seems low considering the number of homework pieces going home every day. This may suggest students may not be receiving adequate guidance on the homework they are assigned (Trautwein et al., 2006). It would be worth conducting some further research, particularly observations of classroom practice, to see if this is the case.

It is interesting to observe a rather even split between teachers that do differentiate their homework practices and those that do not. While the benefits of differentiation are relatively well known in the classroom (Gregory & Chapman, 2012), there can also be benefits of differentiating outside of the classroom. Teachers can provide choices and different homework tasks to cater for students with different abilities and interests (Moorhouse, 2016). If teachers do not differentiate, this could lead to the homework being too easy for some students and too hard for others (Vatterott, 2009). Although it can be time consuming, participants raised this as an issue, and surprisingly, respondents mentioned 'school policy' as a reason for not catering for diversity. The idea that these policies may be preventing teachers from catering for their students' needs could be seen as troubling and requires further research.

For feedback, the majority of respondents mentioned giving a grade to learners, followed by comments and suggestions for improvement. As scholars have mentioned, grades may not provide much information to learners on what they did well or did not do well (Vatterott, 2009). It would certainly be worth exploring the kind of feedback given to completed homework in more depth and the impact the kind of feedback has on learners' awareness of their learning.

The vast majority of respondents expected parents to be involved in their students' English language homework. The expectations seem to match the reality, as found by Tam and Chan (2010), who reported that 'Chinese parents in Hong Kong in general commit considerable time to supervising their children's homework' (p. 94). The expectations on parents to provide support on homework, check if it is complete and even check if it is correct could both be positive and negative. While being involved in their children's homework, parents can gain a better understanding of what their children are learning. Parental involvement has been shown to have a positive impact on students' academic performance (Harris & Goodall, 2008). However, if parents do not feel equipped to help with homework, such as not being able to speak English or lacking the time to help, parents may feel helpless, and this could lead to disputes between parents and their children (Kohn, 2006). Teachers may need to consider their expectations on parents and decide whether these expectations are realistic.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to shed greater light on the under-researched homework practices of English language teachers. It can be seen that the respondents assign a large amount of homework to help students practice what they learn in lessons. It is suggested that teachers, school managers and policymakers consider the purpose of homework in English language education and ensure the practices are meeting these aims. It may also be worth exploring the types of training teachers receive in assigning homework and looking for means of providing more support for effective homework practices (Moorhouse, 2017).

This study was limited by its scale and design. Further research using a mixed-methods design that includes observations, interviews and collection of homework artefacts would help us gain a better understanding of the teachers' practices as well as other issues related to homework practices, such as teachers' beliefs and internal and external influences on both practices and beliefs. As homework practices may vary from country to country, research in different countries and contexts is also suggested. It is then that we can gain a more complete picture of our English language teachers and learners' homework practices.



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