

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES REGARDING HOMEWORK IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN ISTANBUL

¹Narimane OKAZ, ²Osman SABUNCUOGLU

¹Narimane Okaz, MA student, Istanbul Aydın University, Institute of Graduate Studies, English Language and Literature, narimaneokaz@stu.aydin.edu.tr

²Assist. Prof. Osman Sabuncuoglu, Istanbul Aydın University, osmansabuncuoglu@aydin.edu.tr

Abstract: Homework, which is like a magic, has been a key topic of interest in foreign language teaching and learning. The more students do it, the better their English becomes. Yet, this is not the case and its efficiency is under debate. Many studies have been conducted to explore the effectiveness of homework for students and their attitudes toward the use of this pedagogical practice. Yet, less effort has been put into English language instructors' perceptions and practices of assigning homework. To fill this gap in the literature, this research aims to explore English language instructors' beliefs and practices of homework in the context of International private schools in Istanbul. To achieve the objectives, mixed-method research involving the elements of quantitative and qualitative data was undertaken. A questionnaire in which 129 English language instructors working at three international schools in Istanbul and an interview with five teachers were administered by the researcher. To analyse the collected data the researcher used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and a descriptive analysis to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. In addition to highlighting the current homework practices in the international schools in Istanbul and the factors influencing them, this research's findings pointed out the instructors' beliefs regarding the quantity of homework, kind of tasks and time spent on it. The results also show that there is no significant relationship between the instructors' socio-demographic background and their homework beliefs and practices. These findings can be significant in enriching the literature covering homework and boosting the students' academic and non-academic skills, lowering their stress level and ameliorating the parents, teacher and student triangular relationship. **Key words:** Homework, Pedagogical Practices, Assign, Effectiveness, Efficiency.

Keywords: Homework, English language, Teachers' beliefs, Teaching learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Homework is like magic, so it has been a major topic of research in the field of foreign language teaching and learning for a number of reasons. First, it is a widely used pedagogical practice in English classrooms all over the world. Second, the views regarding homework tend to significantly vary among teachers, parents, students and school administrators. Third, it is related to many other educational practices and can strongly affect the students' physical and emotional well-being. Thus, it has become one of the most controversial topics among researchers and educationalists in terms of its effectiveness and implementation procedures.

Most arguments supporting the use of homework are based on the fact that it has a significant academic impact on students. Teachers assign homework because they expect it to promote learning achievement, parental involvement, study skills, work habits, and motivational behaviour (Bempechat, 2004; Warton, 2001). In addition, most parents have strong opinions about the academic benefit of homework; they believe that when learners have more homework, it is a sign of a critical curriculum and a rigorous teaching (Vatterott, 2007). The researchers supporting this claim have highlighted that homework has been shown to have a positive impact on learning in high schools (Xu, 2010; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005).

In contrast, many studies conducted recently indicate that homework has a negative or no effect on student achievement. Many researchers have questioned the relationship between homework and achievement and they have claimed that there is no significant effect between the time spent on homework and the student success in primary schools (Cooper et al., 2006). In other words, homework is useless for children. Kralovec and Buell (2001) have also suggested that homework can be harmful if learners are required to do activities that they are not developmentally ready to do. Vatterott (2009) has mentioned that homework negatively affects the time spent on academic activities, parent-child relationship, unorganized educational opportunities, and students' mental health. These strong claims have made many authors advocate for the reduction or elimination of homework, especially for young students (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2001).

In response to the belief in the null relationship between homework and academic achievement for primary students, many teachers and parents continue to support the use of homework at this age. They believe that there is not enough evidence to support the abolishment of homework as many homework researchers acknowledge it. Petall, Cooper, and Wyn (2010) have argued that although homework is more appropriate for learners in higher grades than in primary school, it is useful for a range of learners. Cooper (2006) has maintained that all children must do homework, but the amount and type of homework may vary depending on the child's stage of development. According to Cooper, homework for preschoolers needs to be short so that it can lead to success without much effort and it can be fun. Ideas for homework that are appropriate for preschoolers must include colouring or taking pictures, writing names several times, or listing items that begin with a certain letter. To sum up, views on homework use can be different,

Homework is one of the educational pedagogies that should be further explored by researchers in the field. First, every procedure followed and all the strategies implemented in or outside the classroom may have an unlimited long-term effect on the learners' academic and non-academic lives. Therefore, all the teaching practices should be scientifically justified, tested and agreed upon by most of the educational authorities. Second, being a pedagogical practice that takes place outside the classroom, homework has been less investigated because the scope of interest in most cases was in-class work. In other words, tasks and activities conducted by the learners in the classroom under the direct supervision of their teachers have received more attention rather than homework. Third, within the spread of the student-centred approach and the limitation of the teacher's role as a facilitator, homework use has become more important. For instance, it can be a great remedy to overcome any weakness in the educational system. All in all, investigating homework can be beneficial for the pedagogical field besides enriching the educational literature.

Despite its wide social and academic acceptance, homework is very controversial for all parties including. Investigating homework effectiveness and homework value in relation to students' educational or academic achievement cannot be separated from investigating the teachers' homework practises in classrooms. Many researchers have argued against homework and questioned its effectiveness highlighting the drawbacks that are related to this pedagogical practice including boosting stress, decreasing motivation and deprivation of rest and leisure time. However, the controversial debate centred over homework is, in most cases, discussed from learners' points of view rather than teachers' perceptions. Teachers are the first to be responsible for the students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor development. This means that their homework beliefs and practices are highly important for the effectiveness of homework. There is a dominant belief held by students and their parents that teachers' homework beliefs and practices are sustainable. Briefly, less is known about how teachers perceive homework.

Considerably, this research assumes that it is highly important to have a complete and clear insight into how homework tasks are currently implemented in schools from teachers' perspectives. Initially, teachers' homework practices before, during and after the lesson should be described in detail. In addition, it is a priority to highlight the teachers' beliefs regarding homework as a pedagogical practice, and how these beliefs may vary according to the teachers' academic and demographic background. Finally, it is imperative to know the other external factors that might influence the homework choices made by the teachers in the classroom. In short, this research seeks to highlight the insisting need for giving a priority to question homework from teachers' perspectives.

By reviewing the teachers' opinions of homework as a main scope of this research, their attitudes towards homework can be very significant to the field of language education. First, this research can help enrich the literature background covering homework. The English language teachers who have participated in this study will reflect on their own practices and state their perceptions of the current use of homework in private schools in Istanbul. Second, by knowing how

homework is currently used by teachers, weaknesses and strengths can be better identified and effectively used to call for needed reforms that can change attitudes towards this practice. Last but not least, the findings of this research can be significant in boosting students' academic and non-academic skills, lowering their stress level and ameliorating the parents, teacher and student triangular relationship.

Although much research into students' attitudes towards homework is available in the literature, teachers' voices have been absent from such an analysis and little is known about teachers' beliefs and practices of homework use. This is a significant gap to be filled in the literature. To achieve this objective, a questionnaire and an interview in which EFL instructors working in international schools were the participants have been conducted. Therefore, it is essential to focus on EFL instructors' perceptions of homework and practices in language classrooms and what other factors affect these practices in international schools in Istanbul. To assign students high-quality homework and motivate them to utilise homework, this research based on how teachers approach homework needs to be explored in great detail.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study that aims to explore the current homework beliefs and practices of EFL instructors in international schools in Istanbul. In this study the researcher seeks to investigate the relationship between the teachers' demographic and educational background and the way that they use homework in their classrooms. This study is not a longitudinal study since it does not follow teachers over time; however, it is a cross-sectional study because it involves a one-time interaction with English language teachers.

This study has employed mixed methods including quantitative and qualitative research methods for gathering and analysing data. A questionnaire, which is a quantitative data collection instrument, and an interview, which is a qualitative data collection instrument, were adopted from Moorhouse (2017), who did research into English language teachers' beliefs and practices of homework use in high schools in Hong Kong in 2017.

The questionnaire is grouped into three sections and there are 50 items in total. The first section, which aims to collect demographic information about participants, includes five questions on gender, age, teaching experience, currently taught levels and highest qualifications. The second section about homework practices includes six questions. The fifth question includes 9 items, while the sixth question includes 14 items. The third section on teachers' beliefs is made up of one question that includes 16 items representing the negative and positive expected effects of homework.

The questionnaire and interview were conducted at three international schools, where the medium of instruction is English. The sample was 129 EFL instructors who taught English at these schools in the 2021-22 academic year. Non-probability sampling was adopted in the interview. However, the questionnaire respondents were chosen by voluntary sampling.

This study has analysed the relevant data collected through an online questionnaire to identify EFL instructors' beliefs and practices of homework in international private schools in Istanbul. Therefore, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) as an adopted primary statistical program was used in this research data analysis (Anghel et al., 2019). The collected data was subjected to descriptive and inductive statistics. Also, a descriptive analysis is used for obtaining the numerical data and also a T-test and an ANOVA test are used for analysing the relationship between the demographic data and the research variables.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part the researcher aims to present the findings and discuss the research questions.

3.1 RQ 1: What is the relationship between EFL instructors' demographic data and their homework practices?

To answer the first research question, socio and demographic data have been analysed in relation to the homework beliefs and practises. The first variable is gender. The results have revealed that the sample consists of 85 female respondents compared to 42 male respondents. However, there is no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents with regard to homework practices and beliefs when it comes to the first socio-demographic variable of gender as revealed by the independent samples T-test. As for age, which is the second variable, the majority of the respondents are aged 21-30. Teachers in their 20s constitute 48% of the sample and they are followed by respondents whose age ranges from 31 -40. There are 45 respondents, and they constitute almost 35%.

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals that there is a statistically significant difference in the regular assignment of homework. Older teachers are found to assign homework more often than younger teachers. This finding adds up to the findings on age and homework (Kackar, Shumow, Schmidt, & Grzetich, 2011).

The third variable is the teaching experience; the majority of the respondents are novice teachers. The number of teachers whose teaching experience ranges from one to five years are 66 respondents. They constitute 51% of the sample. The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between teaching experience and homework assignment. This finding can be contextualised within other studies by Dudley and Shawver (1991).

The fourth variable is the teaching qualifications. The majority of the respondents hold a master's degree. These are 51 respondents who constitute 39 % of the sample. The results of ANOVA show that there is no statistically significant difference between different qualifications and homework. However, school levels show a statistically significant difference with regard to beliefs about homework in favour of secondary schools.

3.2 RQ 2: What are the EFL instructors' homework practices in international schools in Istanbul?

3.2.1. Quantity of homework

All the respondents report that they regularly assign homework. This indicates that teachers all around the world assign homework at different amounts. Teachers' responses concerning the number of tasks are different, but there is a tendency to agree on the homework routine experience. Teachers have assigned homework to their students daily with the majority of respondents assigning one piece of homework a day. At the same time on a typical day, the large majority expect the students to spend a maximum of 30 minutes working on their homework. With 28% expecting less than 10 minutes, a similar percentage expecting 21 to 30 minutes, whereas 33% expect 11 to 20 minutes which is the highest percentage. These responses which make up the popular belief discussed in the literature review suggest that teachers use homework to increase the amount of time spent on learning. The quantity of homework assigned by teachers has also been investigated in the interviews. All of the five interviewees have highlighted that they regularly assign homework; however, the amount varies from one to three pieces depending on various factors, such as the type of the homework task, the students' weekly plan, students' levels, and homework assigned by other subject teachers. The interviews have also revealed that teachers in most cases are the only to be responsible for the number of the tasks they assign. In these cases, the interviewed teachers have reported that they decide on the amount based on other factors related to the students and the subject itself while planning their lessons; however, others have mentioned that they are controlled by the school homework policy.

3.2.2 Purposes of the assigned homework

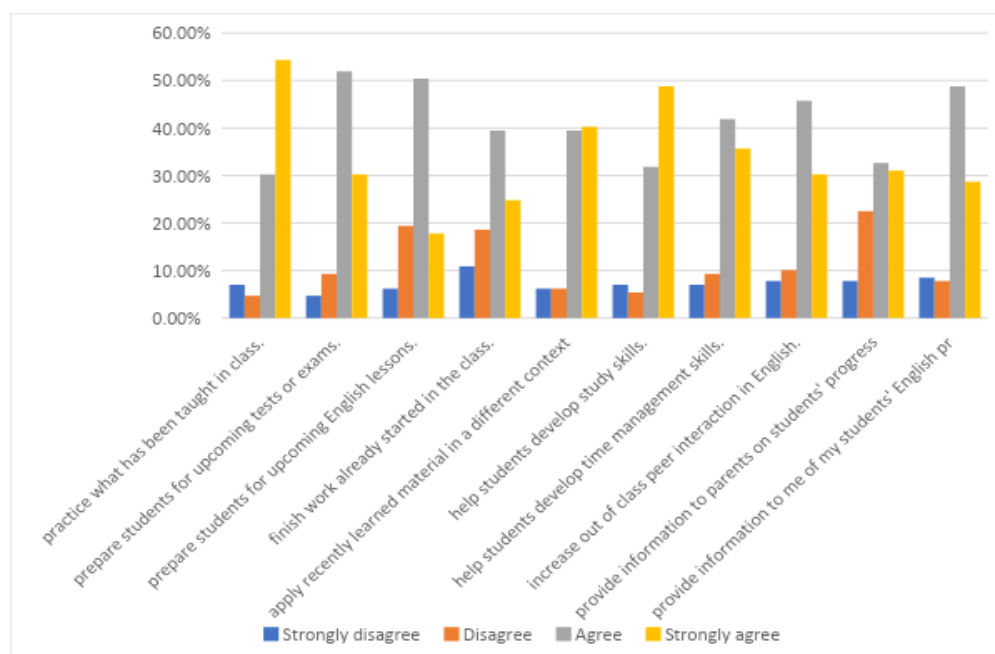


Figure 3.2.1. Purposes of assigned homework

The questionnaire results show that the majority of respondents assign homework for all the potential purposes. The most commonly given reasons are to ‘practise what has been taught in class’, followed by to ‘help students develop study skills’ and “apply recently learned material in a different context’. These top agreed reasons suggest that teachers mostly use homework for practice purposes. The interviewees have also highlighted that they assign homework because students do not revise what has been taught unless they have a task to do at home. Meanwhile, homework affects the students' other skills which have been discussed by one of the teachers. It has been reported that homework does more than practice for young students; it can develop other skills that students need to master in their first schooling years.

These findings can be linked to the literature review, where Cooper (2006) sheds light on the effect of homework on young learners and how it is primordial for the development of other non-academic skills rather than boosting educational achievement. On the other hand, the use of homework for practice can be interpreted as a result of the fact that these are private schools, where parents and the administration exercise an intensive pressure regarding exam and daily classwork marks. Practice is seen as a way to reach the full mark on the exam.

3.2.2 Type of homework assigned

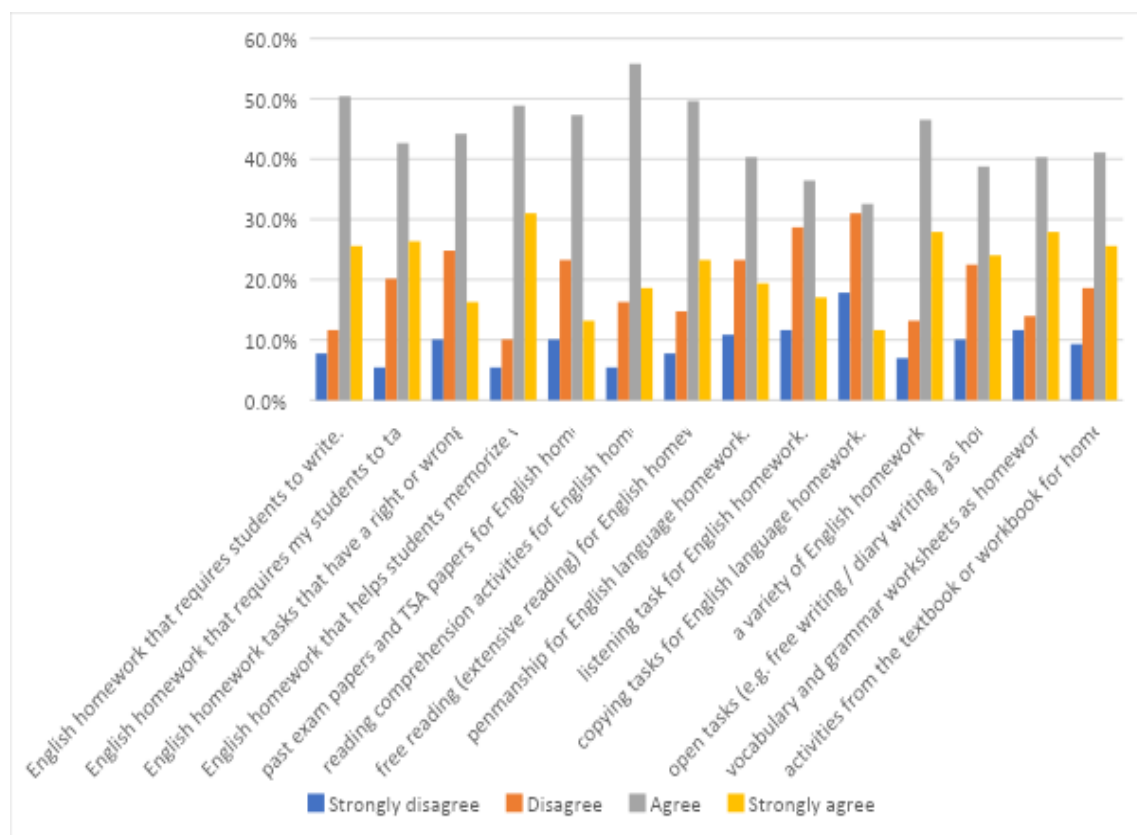


Figure 3.2.2 Kinds of assigned homework

Teachers who have participated in the questionnaire report that they assign a variety of English homework tasks. The statement “I assign a variety of tasks” comes second. More precisely, in most cases teachers assign vocabulary tasks followed by tasks that require students to write as the data show, while listening and copying tasks are the least assigned. In the interviews teachers point out that they have gained a new insight into the choice of homework tasks. They state that their selection might be affected by several reasons that can be related to the students, the lesson itself, or the school policy. The students' levels and their preferences, the parents' ability to help and the school preferences are the most given reasons that have been mentioned in the literature review and by teachers in the interviews.

3.3 RQ3: What beliefs do EFL instructors have regarding homework?

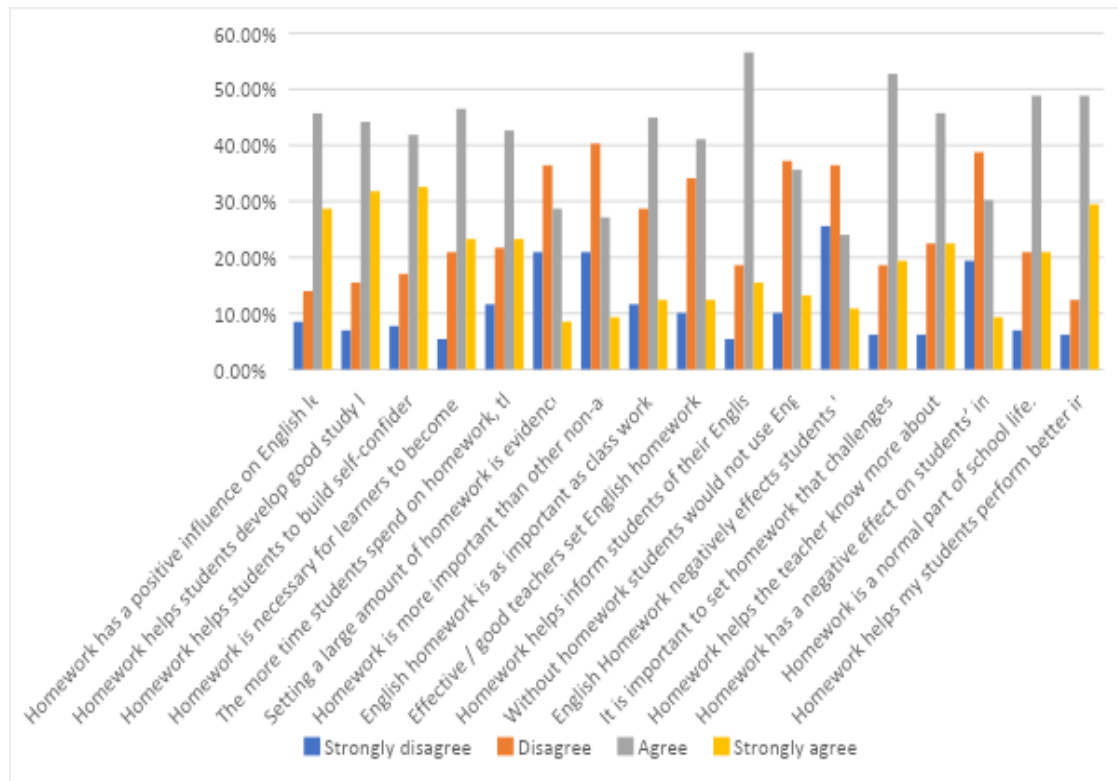


Figure 3.2.3 Teachers' beliefs regarding homework

3.3.1 Assigning homework is the duty of a teacher

The questionnaire results indicate that the majority of English language teachers see homework as a normal part of school life. A large percentage of participants also think of assigning more homework as an indication of being an effective teacher and part of a rigorous curriculum. The teachers who have been interviewed have emphasised these triangular homework use, teachers' effectiveness and rigorous curriculum relationship. In their responses, teachers have highlighted that homework has been used for years as a fundamental part of school life. Therefore, it has become a standard routine that everyone uses by default without questioning its effectiveness or implementation procedures. Teachers take responsibility for assigning homework. Based on their attitudes towards homework, in most cases they expect that they will be judged by parents, students and school administration. They have also reported that if they do not assign it, their students might get negatively affected. Although students do not like to be assigned homework, they tend to view the teacher who does not assign as a permissive teacher and they can reflect on their attitudes in class and at home. The participants in the interviews and questionnaire have clearly reported that homework is one of the school's routines that cannot be easily challenged or changed due to its use. This corresponds with what has been mentioned in the literature review regarding the homework.

3.3.2 Homework is beneficial and necessary

The data indicate that teachers have positive attitudes towards the implementation of homework as a pedagogical practice that can maximise students' chances to learn and develop other skills. Concerning the alternative homework effects, a vast majority of teachers have agreed that it is necessary for students to fulfil tasks at home to become more fluent in four skills. When homework is compared to classwork, the majority of respondents have asserted its importance. Furthermore, respondents are found to hold positive attitudes towards the non-academic effects of homework including boosting the students' self-esteem on using the language and developing good study habits. Last but not least, the data show that teachers believe that homework can be a great tool of communication between the school and parents. It serves to keep parents informed about their kids' academic progress and discipline at school. Teachers also think that homework can provide teachers with information about the students' strengths and weaknesses.

These findings are echoed in the interviews where the respondents have provided more insights into the positive effects of homework on the students' educational achievement especially for students in higher grades. The high school teachers who have been interviewed strongly believe in the massive effects of homework on their students' English level especially when good-quality tasks are assigned rather than many useless tasks. These findings are echoed in the interviews where the respondents have provided more insights into the positive effects of homework on the students' educational achievement especially for high school students. The high school teachers strongly believe in the massive effects of homework on their students' English level especially when good quality tasks are assigned rather than a large number of random tasks. From their perspectives, teachers teaching in primary schools have also reported good effects. However, they maintain that the non-academic effects are much more interesting at this age. This can be compared with Cooper's (2006) findings regarding the use of homework with young learners. He stresses that homework in primary schools should be primarily used to establish discipline and good habits. English teachers positively believe in the majority of the statements that indicate the positive alternative effects of homework. Yet, they strongly disagree to force students to spend most of their spare time doing home tasks at the expense of enjoying doing other non-academic activities in their spare time.

3.4 RQ4: What factors affect EFL instructors' practices and beliefs?

3.4.1 School policies, norms and expectations

All the teachers who have been interviewed report that they are not the only to be responsible for making decisions regarding the implementation of homework in their classrooms; however, the school homework policy has a direct control over their homework practices and a considerable influence in shaping their beliefs. To illustrate, the respondents have made it clear that teachers are required to fill a weekly plan that contains all details concerning the classwork and homework that will be done during the week. The weekly plan contains a separate section for homework; in this section the number of homework sheets, deadlines and resources must be explicitly mentioned so that parents and students can see it after the school administration approves the weekly plan.

School policies have been differently described by teachers. Some teachers describe their school homework policy as strict since teachers have a very limited freedom regarding assignments. In most cases, schools are primarily concerned with the quantity of assignments. Four out of five teachers claim that their schools expect them to assign between one and two pieces of homework every session. Others have described the school policy as logical and helpful; they mention that there is a certain guidance provided by their department's head to put them on ray at the beginning of every semester. Teachers have a general agreement on what kind of tasks are preferred and how much homework is needed. According to the respondents, homework school policy is helpful. It can serve as a practice guide that is clear for everyone. Hence, within time flow, these rules become standards that are hard to be changed or adopted if needed.

Not only teachers' practices but also teachers' beliefs are affected by the homework policy. Within the lack of homework training, teachers' homework beliefs can be easily influenced by any powerful voice. One of the teachers has reported that after he has worked for the school, his homework beliefs have considerably changed, especially when he has the chance to try and test different kinds of homework. Others claim that generally a teacher cannot stand alone challenging rules concerning the homework implementation, so he ends up sharing these beliefs.

This can be linked to the fact that the majority of teachers, as the data show, are novice. For some of them this is their first-year of experience; therefore, they tend to be curious about respecting all the school's rules to the point of adapting their beliefs regarding one aspect of teaching to match the common and the socially accepted ounces. Another reason is that respecting the school policy can keep the teacher safe whenever an issue regarding homework is faced between parents and administration.

3.4.2 Parental involvement:

All the teachers who are interviewed highlight that all the international schools in Istanbul are private. This makes them subject to parents' criticism. Parents in these schools generally try to impose what they think is correct, based on their own educational experience or what their kids' previous schools policies are. In most cases, the homework practice that receives criticism from parents is the number of assignments and feedback. According to the respondents, teachers are required to answer all the parents' questions regarding anything related to the classroom and at any time using the school's platform. Teachers have reported that whenever the weekly plan is sent and checked by parents, many questions and

comments are sent to the teacher asking for more or less homework. Administration policies towards this involvement differ from one school to another and teachers do not want to provide more details.

The respondents claim that their students' parents care about their kids' homework routine. First, teachers stress that homework is one of the pedagogies that has a wide acceptance and an exaggerated value among parents. Some teachers link these positive attitudes towards homework to the parents' educational experiences and others mention that it is related to their culture. Other teachers state that homework is supposed to link the school and home and keep parents and teachers informed about their kids' levels. Therefore, parents are required to give a great value to the home duties. To sum up, in most cases teachers consider the parental involvement in the homework practice as a normal and justified thing that mirrors their keenness and interest in their kids' educational progress.

However, based on the responses, there is a negative relationship between the students' age and the parental involvement; high school students' parents are less involved in comparison to primary school students' parents. Teachers relate this to the students' ability to cope and take responsibility for their own learning in higher grades whereas students in primary schools might need assistance at home. Another reason might be that the material is generally easy and understandable for parents; therefore, they take the initiative to provide extra teaching at home, which makes them question every homework practice the teacher assigns.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, there is no relationship between the socio and demographic background of the teachers working in international schools in Istanbul and their homework practices and beliefs. The analysis of the qualitative and the quantitative data indicates that teachers in these schools pay great attention to homework implementation procedures including the awareness of the purposes of assigned tasks. Teachers in these schools generally assign for practice purposes and they expect their students to spend between 10 to 30 minutes per day working on multiple home tasks. The researcher has also highlighted that teachers are careful with the task choices as far as the kind is considered. According to the findings, there is a trend to prefer the task that allows students to write. This can be associated with the need to control the homework and the fact that home tasks are in most cases compulsory in these schools. Concerning EFL instructors' homework beliefs, they tend to be influenced by other external factors, such as the school homework policy and parental involvement.

This study paves the way for other researchers to conduct further research in the field of education, especially investigating pedagogical strategies that can be used to extend learning outside the classroom. Homework use can be explored from different perspectives, using different research tools in larger samples. First, researchers can investigate the relationship between teachers' homework beliefs and their practises in the classroom. Likewise, research can question the effectiveness of homework for students' educational achievement in relation to teacher's beliefs. Second, the same research can be undertaken, using classroom observation. It would be a good idea to analyse several homework sheet models in order to provide further details about EFL instructors' homework practices and beliefs in private international schools in Istanbul. Third, future research can be done by a larger sample including more participants from other schools in Istanbul to reach more general results.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bempechat, J. (2004). The motivational benefits of homework: A social-cognitive perspective. *Theory into practice*, 43(3), 189-196.
- [2] Bennett, S., & Kalish, N. (2007). *The case against homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*. Harmony.
- [3] BMoorhouse (2017) The English Language Teachers Homework Beliefs and Practices in Homkong.
- [4] Burt, D. J. (2012). *The prevalence, beliefs, and instruction of using homework materials as reported by physical educators in Arkansas*. University of Arkansas.
- [5] Cooper, H., Robinson, J. C., & Patall, E. A. (2006). Does homework improve academic achievement? A synthesis of research, 1987–2003. *Review of educational research*, 76(1), 1-62.

- [6] Dudley, S., & Shawver, D. L. (1991). The effect of homework on students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. *Journal of Education for Business*, 67(1), 21-25.
- [7] Kackar, H. Z., Shumow, L., Schmidt, J. A., & Grzetich, J. (2011). Age and gender differences in adolescents' homework experiences. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 32(2), 70-77.
- [8] Kralovec, E., & Buell, J. (2001). *The end of homework: How homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning*. Beacon Press.
- [9] Moorhouse, B. (2017) The English Language Teachers' Homework Beliefs and Practices in Hong Kong.
- [10] Vatterott, C. (2007). *Becoming a middle level teacher: student-focused teaching of early adolescents*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages.
- [11] Vatterott, C. (2010). Five hallmarks of good homework. *Educational Leadership*, 68(1), 10-15.
- [12] Warton, P. M. (2001). The forgotten voices in homework: Views of students. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 155-165.
- [13] Xu, J. (2010). Predicting homework time management at the secondary school level: A multilevel analysis. *Learning and individual differences*, 20(1), 34-39.
- [14] Zimmerman, B.J. & Kitsantas, A. (2005). Homework Practices and Academic Achievement: The mediating role of self-efficacy and perceived responsibility beliefs. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 30, 397-417.