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The *Younger Learners* column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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Young Learners and Homework

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Let's talk about homework and small children. In my *eikaiwa*, or private language school, I assign weekly homework with religious fervor to even my four-year-old nursery students. For some, that might be seen as not only unnecessary but cruel. According to my students, their regular elementary school homework is repetitive and "like torture". Yet these same students from age four and upwards complete my school's weekly English assignments in a timely fashion. Moreover, they receive no extrinsic rewards for completing their homework nor any penalties for not completing it. For the most part, their written homework submissions are thoughtful and creative rather than dashed off at the last minute. Also, their speaking homework videos show concentrated faces and happy smiles upon completion. It took a pandemic to make that happen, and since the first submissions were posted on the online platform *Padlet* in June 2020, I've been determined to keep that momentum going.

Evolution of a Homework Management System

For the first 16 years of its existence, my school had had no homework policy at all. However, after completing a graduate program in TESOL, I realized that my monolingual non-returnee students had not been receiving enough input to make a significant difference in their language learning. After rewriting my school guidelines and policy statements, I began giving homework assignments, correcting student work, and listening to them read aloud the following week in the reception room before class. Was this system successful? Well, some students did begin arriving before class time with their worksheets neatly and accurately done and

stories in hand, ready to read aloud to me. Many others, however, arrived having hardly looked at the reading assignments, submitting hastily written or even untouched written work. As you might imagine, appealing to the parents of those children to do homework supervision was unpleasant and yielded mixed results. To complicate matters further, as a result of the homework system, I then had an imbalance within classes—those who did the homework and practiced reading were understandably progressing faster and winning the in-class games. The situation was hardly ideal, but perhaps part of me didn't believe from the onset that students and parents would take my homework requirement seriously. Grumbling, I stuck with the status quo.

When the pandemic struck in March 2020, the status quo was no longer an option. Our school chose to move online almost immediately and the homework system that had never worked properly became no longer feasible. Knowing from experience that the key to survival in the *eikaiwa* industry is adaptability, my staff and I moved quickly. We chose *Padlet*, an online bulletin board to both assign homework and provide a space for parents to upload their children's work. In the weeks that followed, children and parents had time at home together; they downloaded the *Padlet* application, took photos of completed homework, made speaking videos, and got used to online learning.

Figure 1

A *Padlet* Page with Assignments and Submissions



To my surprise, homework was uploaded consistently, and the quality was impressive. Why the change? One reason might have been that homework submissions were posted on a shared class *Padlet* page and visible to other families, creating a sense of accountability and pride. Another reason might have been that I began writing the assignments and giving detailed feedback in Japanese so that the parents of the youngest children could read my instructions and comments. At any rate, the improvement in both quantity and quality of work submitted was undeniable and when we moved back to live lessons in the fall of 2020, I resolved to continue managing homework online. It's now a full year later and I am still doing so.

Challenges and Benefits of the New System

It goes without saying, however, that no learning management system is perfect. I admit that providing specific written feedback in the learners' L1 is time-consuming for me and that time is precious. My school's previous approach to feedback had been much more efficient in terms of time: a few words of spoken praise after a story reading, or a big *hanamaru* (Japanese flowery circle that indicates perfection) and GOOD JOB! written in bold, red ink across the top of worksheets. Yet, how could I have believed that this kind of standardized, impersonal approach was meaningful to or impactful for students? To be painfully honest, most students' responses had been to glance at their returned papers imperviously, stuff them back into their study bags in a random fashion, and make a beeline for the alphabet puzzles or origami. I now spend significantly more time on homework than I did pre-pandemic. I don't get that time back, but I am richly rewarded in other ways. Let me mention some of them.

The first benefit for me is better parent participation. Perhaps I can best describe this by explaining how the homework system works. For the moment, let's keep the focus on my youngest students, who are four years old and not yet literate in Japanese. Their homework assignments are designed to develop phonological and phonemic awareness as well as fine motor skills. A typical speaking homework assignment might consist of a short close-up video of myself doing a simple phoneme chant. Students watch it at home, practice, then post their own videos on *Padlet*. I do watch their videos, and observe closely. Below each child's video, I add comments in Japanese; my comments are addressed directly to the child and read to them by a parent.

What kind of feedback is appropriate at this age? Most little ones are naturally good at catching and

repeating sounds, so I focus my comments on personal details rather than accuracy of execution. For example, "I like how you chanted with a big smile and a loud voice!" or "You said the words very clearly—I could understand you easily!" Yet parents can be insecure and sensitive when it comes to pronunciation; they want reassurance that their child is hitting the target sound correctly. Because of this, I do address errors that I judge as easily correctable by offering a simple explanation and encouraging the parent and child to try again. An "easily correctable error," for instance, would be the voicing of an unvoiced phoneme, such as saying "pa" rather than /p/. This is easily remedied once the child understands that /p/ is made by simply puffing out air, which young children can easily do. Writing is more straightforward. When each child completes a drawing or worksheet, their parent snaps a photo of the completed picture and uploads it to *Padlet* for me to check. When the parent reads my comments to the child later in the week, the feedback cycle is complete. Figure 2 shows a typical written homework assignment for a four-year-old. Based on a story heard in class, the letter M's shape is represented as two mountains; details of a pool between the mountains and stick-figure hikers are the student's own personal touch.

Figure 2

A Typical Nursery Class Homework Assignment

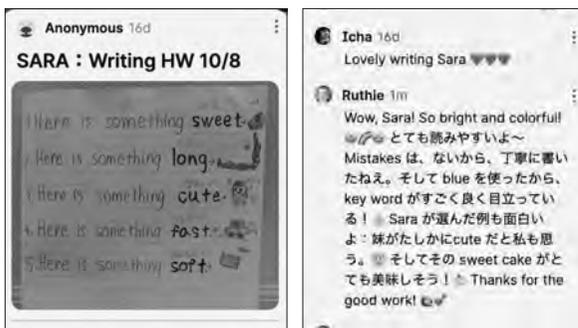


In short, since recordings, photos, and smartphone uploads are all part of the homework process, parents have become a necessary intermediary between myself and my youngest students. In the past, parents would cheerfully register for classes in April saying, "I'll leave my son/daughter's English education up to you, Sensei." Now, they are informed from the first day that their involvement will be an essential part of the equation. The majority of parents are no longer detached from the

language learning experience; they are busy reading the assignments, cheering on their child's efforts, taking videos, and checking my comments on *Padlet*. Because personally involved parents clearly see their children's skills develop, their vocabularies expand, and their confidence increase with each year of study, most parents are highly motivated to continue, even when it means juggling work, health concerns, other weekly lessons, and family commitments.

Another benefit of online homework is the chance to dialogue with each student as an individual on a weekly basis. As worksheets requiring students to choose correct answers are hardly conducive to dialogue, my writing assignments are now more open-ended (For instance, questions that can be answered with a picture of the student's choice) and done in notebooks that form the basis of a portfolio-style assessment at the year's end. An example of this would be the type of homework assigned to my lower elementary age learners who are still focused on letter and word formation. At this stage in their language development, they are unable to produce written sentences on their own, but enjoy practicing phrases or sentence patterns and adding their own descriptive pictures. As I do with the nursery students, I post a short video of myself standing next to the classroom whiteboard on which the target words, phrases, or sentences are clearly written. In my most engaging teacherly voice, I read the text on the whiteboard aloud, giving students a clear listening model. I then explain the writing task, which involves drawing pictures to match the meaning of what is written. Last, students are challenged to read their own completed assignments back to me and upload to *Padlet*, which will be their reading/speaking practice.

Figure 3
Lower Elementary Level Homework With Feedback



When I enlarge their tiny drawings on my laptop every evening, their pictures often show me which concepts they understand and which are still fuzzy on. After offering suggestions on their writing or choice of pictures, I open the conversation by commenting on their drawings. My feedback might include, “Wow! Your dragon looks real!” or “Thanks for drawing all those details. I can see what your house really looks like.” Also, because adult minds are not always aligned with a child's view of the world, I might ask “What's that animal on the right? It looks like a cat...” I'll often get an answer within the week informing me that “Mahiro says it's not a cat, it's a fox.” In the next week's lesson, I often follow up, allowing the artist to have a good laugh over my inability to see the obvious and completing the dialogue full circle. In this way, through noticing the details of their drawings, I get to know my students better as individuals and have a chance to engage with them personally outside of the group. They know I look closely and read the tiny messages they sometimes add in hiragana or English. They know that I find them interesting as people and I suspect that the feeling is mutual. As long as I keep up my end of the bargain—to faithfully look and comment—we are connected.

Assessment

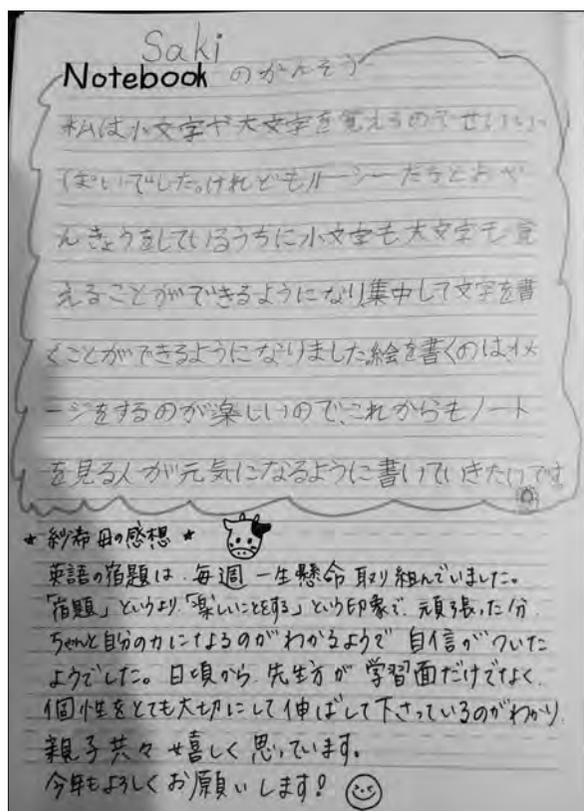
At the end of the last school year, elementary age students reviewed their writing notebooks and assessed their own progress, often sharing details about their study habits, frustrating barriers they encountered, or small achievements that they were proud of. One girl admitted that until recently she could barely remember the names of all the capital and small letters of the alphabet and expressed joy at finally being able to read and write.

Another boy complained that doing his homework was a chore until he realized that he could read English words and phrases on TV and in stores; suddenly, he was motivated to sit down and practice reading so he could read more. Many parents, who were also asked to assess their child's progress, expressed surprise and pleasure at the evidence of their child's developing literacy and speaking ability. Being asked to fix writing errors or resubmit speaking videos had been stressful and time-consuming, but they recognized the value of perseverance and expressed pride in the results. The notebooks were solid proof of progress, since parents could see their children's letter formation gradually improve from page to page as their fine motor skills developed. The parents of older children observed the steady development of more complex skills as the target of their children's assignments changed from writing

words to constructing phrases and sentences. Lastly, according to their evaluations, most parents did not mind taking the time to record and upload their children's speaking assignments. Instead, they were pleased to hear their child's pronunciation and to hear them reading independently.

Figure 4

Reflective Comments by a Student and Her Mother



Final Comments

In the English as a Foreign Language field, those of us working with young learners cannot avoid confronting the issue of homework. How do we devise assignments that are meaningful and motivating to students? How do we ensure that instructions are understood and followed correctly? How can we use homework to both reinforce previously learned language and create opportunities for connection and communication? What kind of feedback is appropriate and effective? As teachers, how do we justify the time on task? Whatever our teaching context, the questions are the same. Right now, I am focused on the online homework management system that is working for my particular teaching context. Nevertheless, I want to hear what others

do and compare their systems with mine. I want to find the hidden pockets of inefficiency and smooth out the rough edges. I believe in the potential of my students and in my own resourcefulness as a teacher. As long as my energy and sense of humor hold out, I'll be ready for another day of teaching.

Ruth Iida has lived and taught in the Kanto region of Japan since 1999. As a longtime owner and head teacher of an *eikaiwa* in the countryside, she is passionate about developing and refining curricula for young Japanese learners. The challenge of making language meaningful and personal for her students allows her to sing, dance, act, read and write stories, play and referee games, practice yoga poses, and indulge her passion for stationery items.



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