

# The Increase in Percentage of Students Who Actually Do Homework by Means of Communicative Out-of-Class Tasks instead of Homework Assignments: A Case Study of Adult EFL Students in the Conversation Courses at The University of Costa Rica

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## Abstract

This study investigates how communicative out-of-class tasks instead of homework assignments can increase the percentage of students who actually do homework in the conversation courses at the University of Costa Rica. The review of the literature indicates that communicative out-of-class assignments facilitate learning through purposeful language use. The information gathered supports the premise that communicative out-of-class tasks enhance learners' rate of response to homework assignments. In addition, the results indicate that goal-oriented communicative tasks make students reflect on their own learning, and that homework complements the teaching and learning process when it fulfills the learners' interests and needs.

**Key words:** homework, conversation courses, communicative out-of-class tasks, teaching, learning

## Resumen

Este estudio investiga cómo los trabajos comunicativos fuera de clase, en lugar de la tarea regular, pueden incrementar el porcentaje de los estudiantes que realizan la tarea en los cursos de conversación de la Universidad

de Costa Rica. La revisión de la literatura indica que los trabajos comunicativos fuera de clase facilitan el aprendizaje a través del lenguaje con un propósito definido. La información recopilada apunta a que dichos trabajos mejoran la respuesta de los estudiantes hacia la asignación de tarea. Asimismo, los resultados indican que dichos trabajos, con fines específicos, contribuyen a la reflexión de los estudiantes sobre su propio aprendizaje y que la tarea complementa el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje cuando ésta satisface las necesidades y los intereses de los estudiantes.

**Palabras claves:** tarea, cursos de conversación, trabajos comunicativos fuera de clase, enseñanza, aprendizaje

Homework is useful in the process of teaching and learning since it constitutes a source of information about the students' performance in the subject matter (Vatterott, 2009; Kumar, 2006). Since homework is assigned to fulfill different purposes and needs, it has been classified into different types (e.g. Halam, 2004; Kumar, 2006; MacBeath and Turner (1990) cited in Hallam, 2004). Information about homework as part of the communicative approach—both the definition and characteristics of this approach are to be presented in the review of literature—was not found (see Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan 1989, 1999, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996). However, some communicative tasks presented by Nunan (as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) and Richards (n.d.) will be adapted in order to accomplish the purpose of this research project. In addition, examples of studies conducted to practice oral skills outside the class will be described in order to acknowledge the contributions that a number of authors (e.g. Carralero, 2010; Stannard's, 2007; Rance-Roney, 2008) have made to the field of homework in the EFL classroom.

As part of those contributions, this study aimed to answer how communicative out-of-class tasks instead of homework assignments can increase the percentage of students who actually do homework. In other words, this research project attempts to determine if communicative out of class tasks are a means to enhance students' rate of response to do homework. Three of the researchers of this study have been working at the Conversation Courses for one year average, and they have noticed that some students do not hand their assignments in. A possible reason for this is that learners tend to limit themselves to what they do in the classroom and practice little on their own, which affects directly their acquisition of a foreign language. The little availability of native speakers and of other second-language speakers outside the classroom also affect negatively, which in turn pushes instructors to look for resources that allow learners to practice their oral skills. This basically describes how we arrived to the following

question: how can assigning out of class communicative tasks instead of workbook activities increase the percentage of students who actually do homework? To answer the aforementioned question, the research was carried out with a group from the Conversation Courses at the University of Costa Rica.

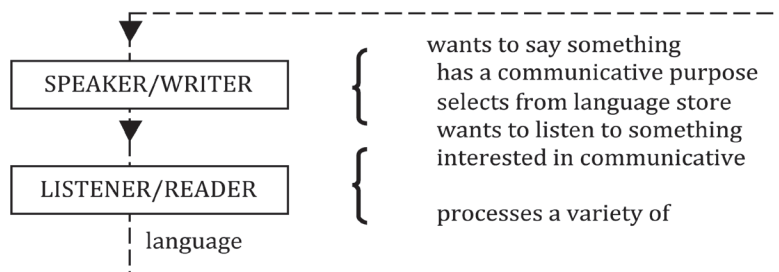
## **Review of the Literature**

### **Types and Purposes for Assigning Homework**

Homework assignments as a complement for teaching and learning has been discussed by Vatterott (2009) and Kumar (2006), who highlight the contribution of out-of-class assignments to learning and also point out that learners are able to develop mental skills by means of these tools. Kumar (2006) also stresses the potential of homework assignments to provide teachers with an insight of the pupils' strengths and weaknesses. Some authors have classified homework into different types. For example, MacBeath and Turner (as cited in Hallam, 2004), point out the existence of four types of homework: "finishing off work started in class[,] self-contained or parallel homework (distinct from classwork)[,] spontaneous work arising out of a project or activity being undertaken[,] and preparation reading or research done in advance of a lesson" (p.7). Additionally, Kumar (2006) indicates the existence of six types of homework. The first one is "practice type homework," which is "meant to reinforce learning and help the student master specific skills" (p.35). The second type, the "preparatory type homework," is used to "introduce material that will be presented in future lessons" (Kumar, 2006, p. 36). The third one is the "extension type homework," which serves as "long-term continuing parallel class work" (p. 36). The fourth category, "application type homework," lets the learners establish a connection between skills and concepts with new concrete and abstract situations (p.37). Then, the "creative type homework" gives the pupils the chance "to apply previously learned knowledge in a creative or imaginative manner" (p.37). The last one is called "cooperative type homework," which enables the students "to work and learn cooperatively" (p.37). One can see that MacBeath and Turner's (as cited in Hallam, 2004) as well as Kumar's (2006) classifications seemingly complement to the process of teaching and learning and they also seem to cater for the learners' needs.

### **Communicative Tasks**

The word communication derives from the verb "communicates", which means "to share information with others by speaking, writing, moving your body or using other signals" (Procter, 2005). In other words, there are written and oral forms to communicate with others. This is fundamental in our project because the tasks assigned will involve written and oral exercises to see if the pupils have a positive response compared to the one showed after doing workbook exercises. Communication can also take place in different settings and through different means as well. Harmer (1991) exemplifies the nature of communication in the following diagram:



Harmer, p. 48, 1991

It can be understood from Harmer's work that conveying and understanding meaning is essential for communication to take place. In fact, this is one of the premises of Communicative Language Teaching.

The Communicative Approach, popular since the 1980's, holds as its main goal effective communication; that is, it seeks that students learn how to respond to and understand others in different contexts and settings. In this sense, accuracy is not vital, unless it disrupts communication (Harmer, 2001 and Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, certain language difficulties due to students' lack of knowledge should not prevent their communication (Richards, 2001). Very similar to this approach, Task-Based Language Learning pursues a type of learning where activities are meaningful for learners and therefore prompt communication (Willis, 1996); this is why the two approaches are combined, and we often talk about "communicative tasks" instead of communicative exercises. Therefore, the word task will be defined to highlight its relevance in this project.

### Defining Tasks

Most authors agree that a task includes using the language to attain a result especially a communicative outcome. Willis (1996) states that tasks are always activities that use the target language "for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p.23). Crabbe (2007) points out that a task "is a unit of communicative activity designed to facilitate learning with a clear purpose." (p.119) For Mori (2002), tasks are today activities that facilitate language learning through purposeful language use and they constitute a central element of language pedagogy. However, there are other factors that should be taken into account whenever the instructor plans tasks.

### General Aspects about Tasks

In terms of purpose, Shehan (1998 mentioned in Murphy, 2003) distinguishes between the three goals of accuracy, fluency, and complexity as the purposes

for any task, and he adds that the learner cannot give full attention to these three goals; therefore, the task designer's role is to select the task according to the desired pedagogical outcome. For Murphy (2003) learning outcomes are a product of the three main factors: "the contribution of the individual learner, the task, and the situation in which the task is carried out;" (p.119) in this way, the task will change as the person interacts with it; this is the reason why sometimes the results may not be consistent with the objectives stated. Murphy (2003) also suggests that task designers should keep in mind four main aspects of tasks when planning: the objective, content, methodology, and context of tasks (p.353).

Crabbe (2007) agrees with Murphy and he considers that tasks are also a significant tool for providing communicative opportunities for the learners inside and outside the classroom, but in order to exploit tasks fully for learning the instructor should "engage the learners in understanding, identifying and taking up the learning opportunities" (p.124). Tasks can also focus on language forms or on the meanings that are communicated (Littlewood, 2004). These two aspects (form and meaning) can serve not only as major components of the methodology, but also as course organizers because they provide "a link between outside-classroom reality and inside classroom pedagogy" (p. 324).

According to Muranoi (2007) some scholars believe that output practice is essential to acquire a L2. This author concludes that "output practice (i.e., any activity designed to provide L2 learners with opportunities to produce output) is effective for developing L2 learner's well-balanced communicative competence" (ibid, p. 76), although the author only refers to language practice inside the classroom. In spite of this, Nunan (1991) does highlight an increase of autonomy in learners when they use their new knowledge outside the ESL classroom. He states that since students learn useful, real language for real purposes in the framework of communicative tasks, it is pertinent to set homework practices that follow this direction.

### **Definition of Communicative Tasks**

Although Lambert uses the term "communication tasks" instead communicative tasks, he defines them as pedagogic tasks which operate through a planned diversion in the information held by learners, and which usually approximate to some degree to a real- world task which learners may have to complete outside class (Lambert, 2004:18-27). This definition will be used for the present study.

### **Communicative Tasks as Homework**

In regard to setting communicative tasks as out of class assignments, no formal research has been carried out to our knowledge. Moreover, the books reviewed do not include any section about homework in the frame of the communicative approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan 1989,

1999, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996). For the purpose of this study, we designed and adapted communicative tasks meant to be used in the classroom in order to convert them to homework. About the types of communicative tasks, several authors present different classifications/examples. We have used for the present study Nunan's (1989), as cited in Richards & Rodgers (2001, p. 231). For him, communicative tasks refer to real world tasks and to pedagogical tasks. Along with Nunan's classification, we will also work with that of Richards (n.d.), in which communicative tasks include accuracy activities and fluency activities.

These two authors were selected because their typology permits to design homework assignments departing from tasks meant to be used in the classroom. This means that the tasks that they propose can be adapted to suit our research purposes. Classifications provided by other authors were not as suitable as the ones above to be turned into out-of-class activities.

### **Current Research on Homework Assignments**

In the literature reviewed, we found three projects in which teachers encouraged their students to practice oral skills outside the class. The first one was done by a university professor who shares his experience about assigning students homework in which they had to record themselves. Also, the teacher prepared follow-up activities to continue in the same line of the homework assigned, which made him realize that his pupils used again the knowledge gained from the assignment. As a result of this trial, the instructor claims that his classes "were more interlinked" (Stannard's, 2007, p.12), and he finally found a way to promote oral work outside the class.

Moreover, Rance-Roney (2008) used digital stories with his college students as the final project of the course. Learners were asked to write a script of the story, and after being checked by the instructor and recorded several times, they digitally animated the account using movie-oriented software.

The last one is a very current project named "talking heads." This plan seeks "to involve students in speaking activities outside the classroom" (Carralero, 2010, p.16). The main idea is that learners record themselves monthly performing a speaking activity that has been practiced during class time. The author mentions that learners began to reflect on their performance and started to try to overcome their weaknesses (ibid).

All these projects have in common the teachers' goal to try to maximize speaking practice outside the classroom using goal-oriented, reflection-promoting, and student-centered communicative tasks. These are also objectives of this research project aside from increasing the number of students who do homework especially because homework is an issue that concerns all teachers and because there is little research on the topic (North & Pillay, 2002, p.138). In this way, our research question is: How can communicative out-of-class tasks instead of homework assignments increase the percentage of students who actually do homework? Four sub-questions derive from this main question:



1. What was the difference in the return rate between communicative tasks and workbook exercises?
2. What are the main reasons why students do homework?
3. What are the reasons why students skip/do not do homework?
4. What is the difference of students' performance in communicative tasks and workbook exercises?

## **Intervention**

The researchers assigned two workbook exercises and two communicative tasks as homework. The teacher asked the students to complete a workbook exercise based on the subject matter, and then, the students had to complete a communicative task also taking into account the topics studied in class. The students first did a workbook exercise, which was followed by an oral task. These two assignments were based on the same topic. After these two interventions, the learners had to do another written communicative task followed by a workbook assignment. The order was inverted from the first two assignments to the last two assignments because of the limited time available to assign homework (they were about to finish the course and it was impossible to give them a communicative task after assigning an exercise from the workbook.) These two assignments were focused on a specific topic different from the one of the first two assignments previously mentioned.

The time given to the students to complete both types of assignments varied. The students were given either only two days to complete the assignments while they were given a week to do their homework or task. The idea was to consider time given by the teacher as a possible reason to do or not to do homework. Through these interventions, we expected to obtain a higher response rate when assigning out of class communicative tasks than when assigning workbook exercises. The next section will provide specific information of the exercises and tasks assigned for homework.

## **Description of the Assignments**

### **Assignment 1**

As the first strategy, the teacher assigned a workbook exercise based on unit #10 of the book *Skyline 4*. The students used different past modals to complete some exercises in the book speculating about past events or actions. In one of the exercises, the students were given some statements. Based on those statements, they had to write sentences with “should(n’t) have.” For the second exercise they had to use “could have” instead of “should(n’t) have” instead. The third exercise asked the students to compare two people by using “would have” and some words provided in parentheses. The last exercise was a matching of sentences: one

column included sentences describing a situation and the other column included sentences with past modals. The researchers made copies of the pages from the workbook given as homework to be able to collect and to check them.

### **Assignment 2**

For this communicative homework assignment, the students had to record themselves in order to give their opinions about a panhandler woman who describes her situation in a video from *Youtube*. They were asked to answer some questions by using the contracted form of modal auxiliaries in past tense, with the purpose of practicing the topic studied in class. The students talked about different aspects on the video that they considered relevant for the topic, and the recording had to last 1 to 2 minutes maximum. The teacher provided the students with the copy of the task's guidelines.

### **Assignment 3**

The third assignment was a communicative task in which the students had to write an e-mail as a response to a problem that a fictitious friend supposedly told each student. The learners had to select between two time tenses according to the type of actions: definite or incomplete. The teacher provided the students with the copy of the task's guidelines.

### **Assignment 4**

For the fourth strategy, the instructor assigned a workbook exercise based on unit #11. The students had to use the future progressive ( will be -ing) to complete some exercises talking about future events. In one exercise, the students had to use their imagination to write sentences based on the illustrations provided. In the following exercise, the learners had to write either affirmative or negative sentences using the correct form of the future progressive plus some phrases given in a chart. There were other exercises related to pronunciation and vocabulary included in the copies from the workbook that were assigned for homework. The researchers made copies of the pages from the workbook given as homework to be able to collect and to check them.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted with a group of 20 students, 6 men and 14 women, in the Conversation Courses at the University of Costa Rica (a program which



follows the communicative approach). Most of these students were working adults whose ages ranged from 20 to 45 years old. They were enrolled in a high intermediate level of English or level 8 out of 12 levels. These participants attended classes twice a week, 3 hours per day during ten weeks.

### Procedures

To collect the data, four instruments were designed:

The first instrument is the pre-intervention questionnaire, which includes multiple-choice items and Likert Scales to obtain information such as the students' previous experiences regarding homework, and their opinions about the usefulness of different types of homework (see Appendix 1).

The instrument for students who did their assignments consists of multiple choice items and a Likert Scale to collect information about main aspects such as the pupils' reason(s) to do the assignment, the degree of effort that they put to do their homework, their level of comprehensibility of the instructions and their opinions about the assignment (see Appendix 2).

The instrument for students who did not do their homework has the same format of the instrument previously described, but it refers to the pupils' reasons for not doing their assignment, their opinions about the instructions given in class before doing the assignment, and the possible reasons that would have led them to do the assignment (see Appendix 3).

Two tally lists were made in order to collect administrative data such as the number of students who hand in their homework and those who did not do it. One tally was designed for the workbook assignments. The other tally was designed for the communicative tasks.

The pre-intervention questionnaire was given to the students in the classroom before assigning homework. Once the participants had completed this instrument, the researchers started assigning homework to collect the data. To achieve this goal, the participants were given a copy from the workbook exercises assigned and the guidelines to develop the communicative tasks. Regarding the communicative tasks, the teacher collected the recordings in different ways: in a CD, in a cassette, by transferring the recording from the students' pen drive into her computer, or via e-mail. In the case of the second communicative task, the participants had to send an e-mail to the teacher's e-mail account, or they were also allowed to write the e-mail in a piece of paper that had to be delivered to the teacher.

The teacher in charge of the group collected the data from the tallying lists and the post-intervention questionnaires the day when the students had to hand in their homework. The first step—once the teacher had collected the assignments—was filling the tally list. Then, she gave the participants the post-intervention questionnaires depending on their situation (whether they had done their assignment or had not).

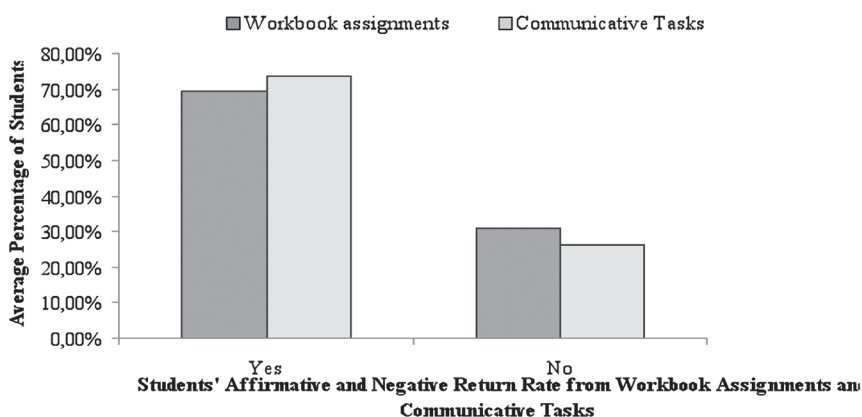
Both types of homework were checked by all the researchers. This information together with the data from the tallying lists and questionnaires were also classified and analyzed by the three investigators.

## Results and Discussion

### Results and discussion for sub-question 1

Even though there was a decline in the return rate from the first communicative out-of-class task to the second one, it is noticeable that the percentages for the return rate in communicative assignments are higher than the percentages that correspond to the workbook assignments. Figure 1 shows this in detail.

**Figure 1**  
**Percentage of students who did and did not do**  
**workbook assignments and communicative tasks 1 and 2**



This finding is in agreement with one of the conclusions stated in the review of the literature: Whenever students are assigned homework from the workbook, they end up complaining about the monotonous and boring nature of the exercises, and they ask for practice to improve their listening and oral skills in English. About this point, Kumar (2006) considers that when students are involved in the process of learning another language, they ask for complementary activities and extra practice so that they can develop more skills to use the language appropriately. In addition, Littlewood (2004) considers that because tasks provide “a link between outside-classroom reality and inside classroom pedagogy,” (p. 324) they help students to find more organization and sense on what they are learning. Therefore, based on the results, it can be assumed that the participants considered that the tasks assigned were more significant tools for providing communicative opportunities for them outside the classroom, and that is probably why the return rate for the communicative tasks in general was around 4% higher than the one for workbook assignments. Another relevant aspect is that before the intervention, one of the first questions that students were asked was how frequently they did homework. Table 1 shows that most learners said, in general terms, that they almost always do homework.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of frequency with which the participants do homework according to the pre-intervention questionnaire**

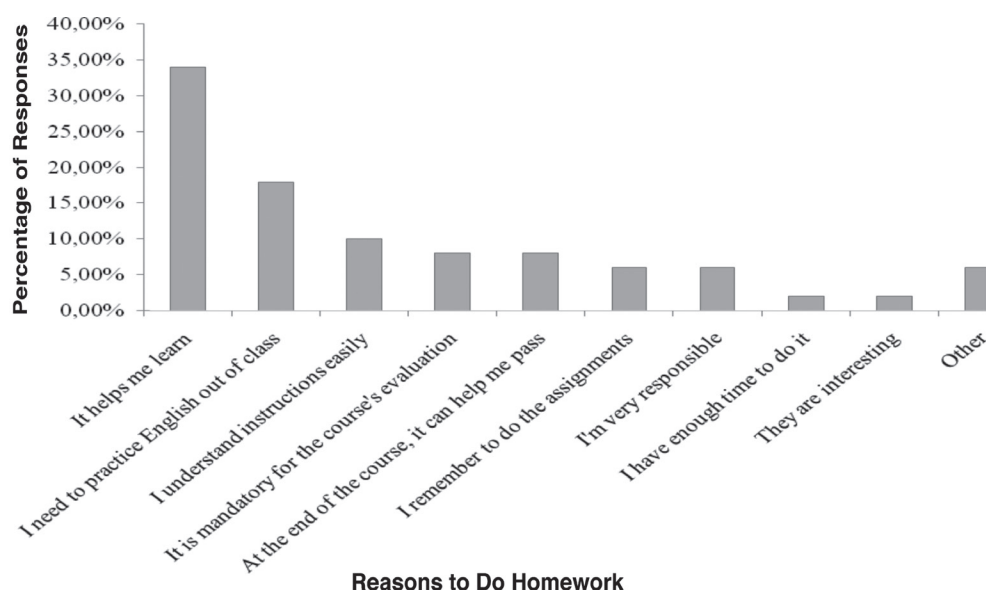
Frequency	Never	Almost never	Almost always	Always
Percentage of students	0%	20%	65%	15%

This finding is consistent with the results obtained after the post-interventions as Figure 1 indicates. Most participants did almost always both workbook assignments and tasks during the intervention. Hence, there is coherence among the data from the pre-intervention questionnaire and the post-intervention questionnaire.

### Results and discussion for sub-question 2

In order to determine the main reasons for students to do homework, data were obtained from the pre-intervention questionnaire and from the questionnaires that the participants answered after every assignment. The information was analyzed in the same order that the instruments were mentioned. Students were able to choose all the options that applied in the pre-intervention questionnaire as well as in the post-intervention questionnaire. Figure 2 shows these options in detail.

**Figure 2**  
**Students' reasons for doing homework in general terms according to the information provided in the pre-intervention questionnaire**



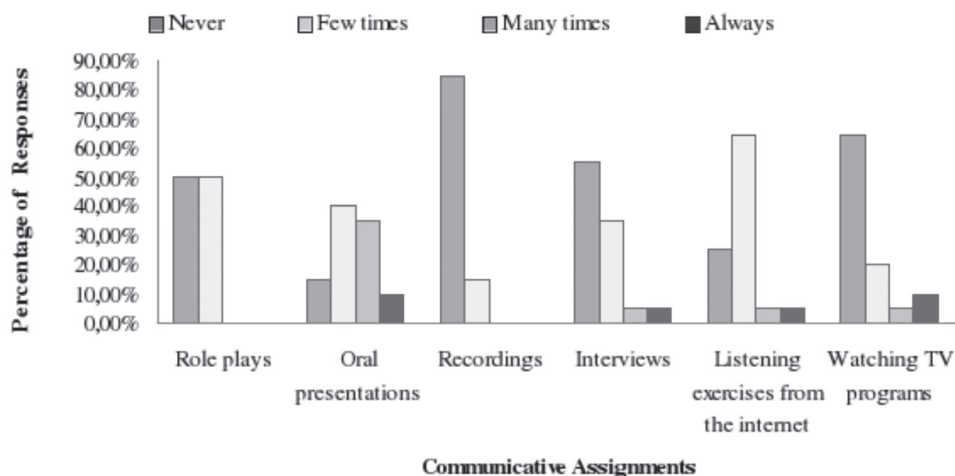
This fact shows that learners consider out of class practice important in the process of language learning. Similarly, Nunan (1991) believes that putting into practice what has been learned carries advantages for students. Understanding instructions is the last of the top three factors that prompts learners to do homework; for this reason, one may infer that if homework directions are complex or difficult to understand, pupils will be less likely to complete the assignment. In 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> place, 8% of the learners chose the fact that homework is mandatory for the course evaluation and at the end of the course it can help them pass. Indeed, according to Table 2, most students have taken from 4 to 7 levels at the Conversation Courses. Therefore, 70% of the participants know that there is a 5% value for homework and attendance together. This percentage can be decisive to pass or fail the course if they have not performed well in exams and/or quizzes.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of the number of courses that students have taken at UCR obtained from the pre-intervention questionnaire**

Number of courses	0	1	2-3	4-7
Percentage of students	0%	5%	25%	70%

As Figure 3 shows, tasks that suit communicative purposes are never or few times assigned to learners as homework. Oral presentations do not follow the same tendency that the rest of the alternatives, though.

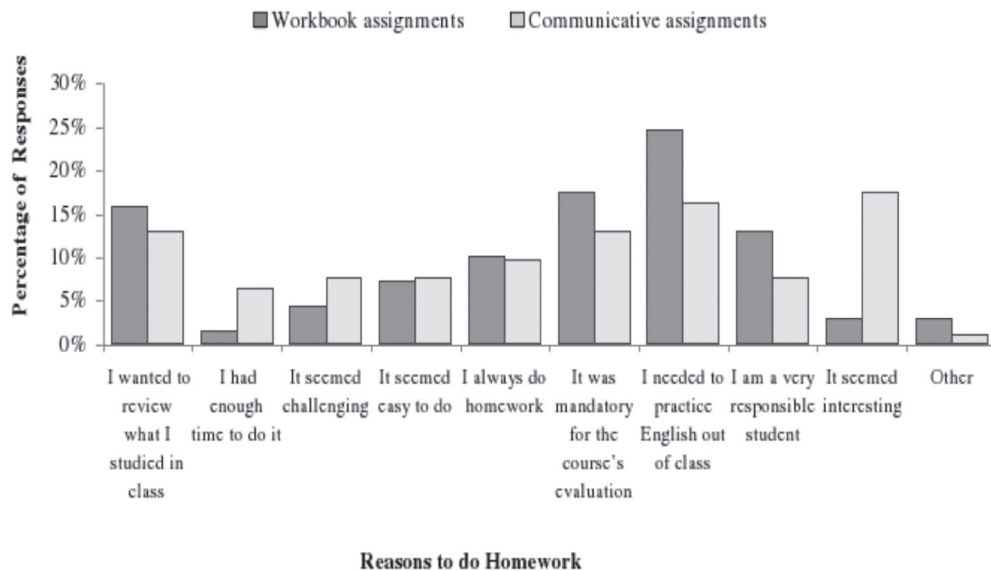
**Figure 3**  
**Frequency with which communicative-like tasks are assigned as homework in the conversation courses according to the participants' perception**



The reason behind these answers may be that one rubric of the evaluation of the courses is oral presentations and teachers can decide if students prepare their presentation out of class or if it is impromptu. As a conclusion from the data provided by the pre-intervention questionnaire, it can be stated that even though most homework assigned to the participants comes from the workbook, they do it because it helps them practice the target language and it is part of the course syllabus.

Regarding the post-intervention questionnaires, the analysis displays some similar results than the previous ones. As Figure 4 shows, the reasons for learners to do homework from the workbook and communicative assignments vary. For the former, the main reason—with almost 25% of the students agreeing on this fact—is the need to practice out of class. The second reason, which is supported by around 17% of the pupils, is the fact that doing homework is mandatory for the course evaluation, while the third one relates to 16% of the participants who highlighted their desire to review what was studied in class. It is important to stress the fact that the students were able to choose all the options that applied to what happened in reality.

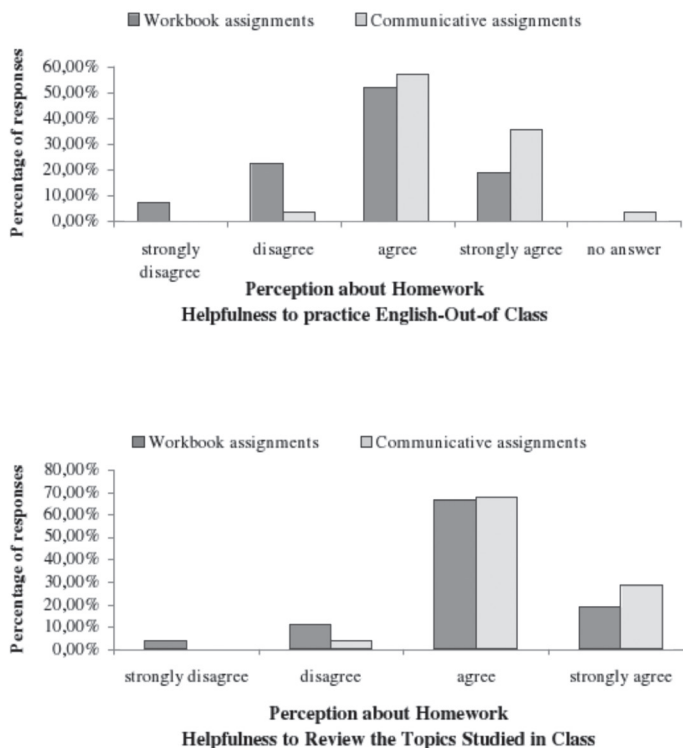
**Figure 4**  
Students' reasons for doing workbook assignments  
and communicative tasks according to the information  
provided in the post-intervention questionnaires



This outcome matches somehow students' responses when they were asked why they did homework in general terms (see Figure 2). Also, they emphasize that homework is part of the evaluation of the courses; therefore, they are obliged to do it.

A reason for doing communicative tasks is the need to practice out of class, and the third place is for two reasons: the desire to review what was studied in class and being mandatory for the course evaluation. The first two choices are supported by Figures 5 and 6 respectively.

**Figures 5 and 6**  
**Students' perception of homework helpfulness**

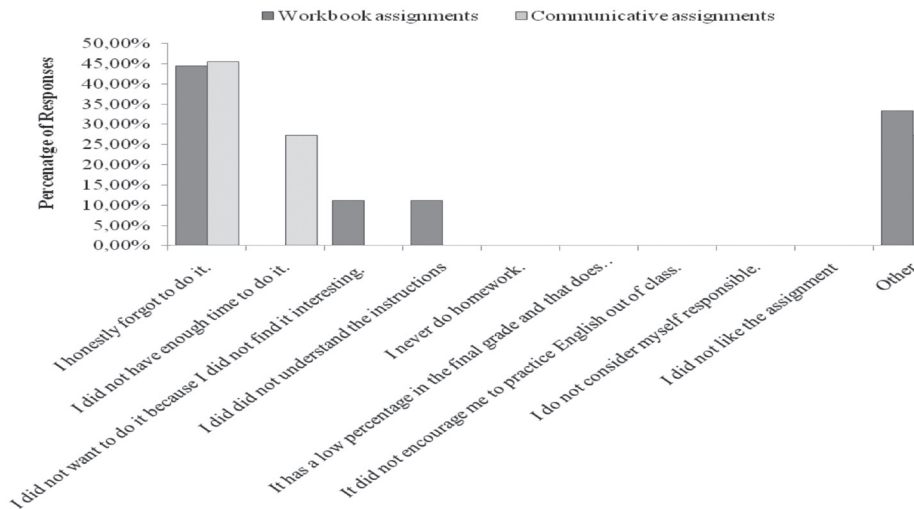


It is noticeable from Figures 5 and 6 that there is not a big difference between workbook and communicative assignments for the “agree” response. These results indicate that more learners believe that communicative assignments serve to practice English and what is studied in class than workbook exercises. Furthermore, from the options provided to students about the reason to do homework, having enough time to do the assignment is in the last place for both types of homework.

### Results and discussion for sub-question 3

Figure 7 shows in detail the different reasons that the students chose in order to indicate why they did not do homework; they chose all the options that applied to their situation.

**Figure 7**  
**Students' reasons for not doing communicative tasks and workbook exercises according to the information provided in the post-intervention questionnaires**



As Figure 7 shows, the first reason for not turning in their homework is oblivion since around 45% of the students indicated that they had forgotten to do either workbook assignments or communicative assignments. In this case, as well as it was suggested in the analysis of results for the pre-intervention questionnaire, if the students consider that homework assignments are irrelevant, boring or unappealing, they will be less likely to do them. Moreover, the second reason for not doing communicative tasks is that students did not have enough time. An interesting point is that the two main reasons reported in the post-intervention questionnaire are the same as in the pre-intervention questionnaire. However, the order is inverted, and the difference is small. Then, there is an agreement between students' responses in the two questionnaires. These facts agree with Gass, Mackey and Ross- Feldman (2005), when they state that "[the] type of tasks that learners carry out affects their interactions for negotiation of meaning especially in the context of meaningful communication." (p.597) Therefore, the teacher must be careful in order to choose the correct task to fit the course's and students' requirements and needs. In this case, students do not have enough time, so they need an adjustment based on their situation.

#### Results and discussion for sub-question 4

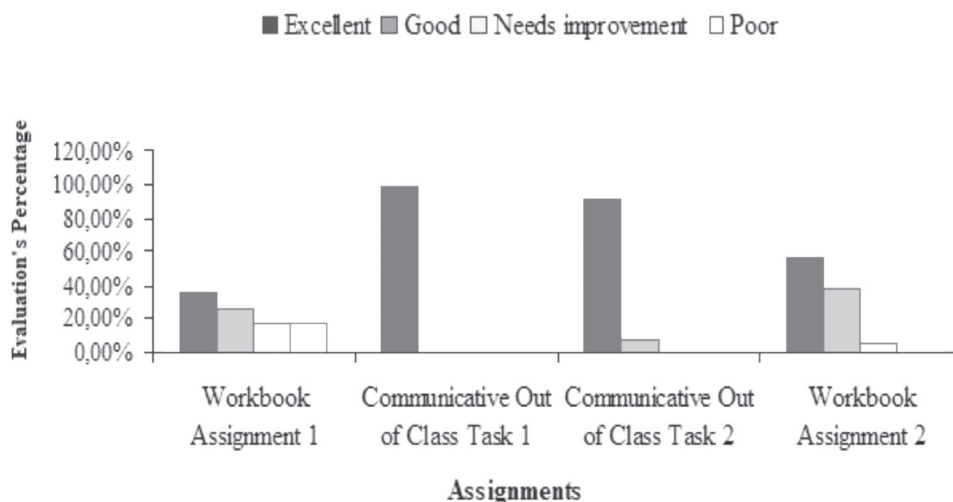
In order to determine how the students' performance in communicative tasks and workbook exercises was, two scales of evaluation were used. Both scales were adapted from the evaluation form used at the Conversation Courses.



These instruments include four descriptors (excellent, good, needs improvements and poor) which indicate the number of mistakes that the learners had to make in order to obtain a specific qualitative grade. Still, the scale for workbook assignments indicates that the mistakes taken into account were the ones related to the specific grammatical structures that should be practiced while the scale for communicative out of class assignments specifies that the types of mistakes made were the ones that hindered communication or may have caused misunderstandings. This specification was made because the aim of communicative tasks is that learners communicate effectively, not perfectly. (Harmer, 2001 and Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

As Figure 8 shows, the students' performance in communicative out of class tasks was much better than their performance in workbook assignments. In fact, 100% of the students received "excellent" as grade in the first communicative assignment and around 92% obtained "excellent" in the second communicative assignment while only around 36% of them received this result in the first workbook assignment and around 56% in the second workbook assignment. As Figure 8 shows, their grades ranged from "excellent" to "poor" in the first workbook assignment and from "excellent" to "needs improvement" in the second workbook assignment.

**Figure 8**  
**Students' performance in the workbook assignments**  
**and in the communicative out-of-class tasks**



As it was stated in the review of the literature, tasks are designed to achieve an outcome while using the target language (Willis, 1996), and they facilitate learning (Crabbe, 2007). This seems to be true since the participants in this study made fewer mistakes in communicative tasks than in the workbook exercises assigned for homework.

It is important to highlight that the contents assessed in the first workbook assignment and in the first communicative tasks were the same. Similarly, the topics evaluated in the second workbook assignment and in second communicative task were identical. If the results are compared, there is a difference in performance favoring the participants in communicative tasks.

At the beginning, it was thought that in the case of the first workbook assignment and the first communicative task, the learners may have had a better performance in the communicative task because the learners had the chance to practice the grammatical structures assessed by means of the workbook assignment and the activities developed in class. This seemed logical because Muranoi (2007) points out that “output practice (i.e., any activity designed to provide L2 learners with opportunities to produce output) is effective for developing L2 learner’s well-balanced communicative competence.” Nevertheless, once the students did the second communicative task and the second workbook assignment in this respective order, the previous explanation does not seem to be related to the improvement in performance from one type of homework to the other. It was evident that the students performed better in the communicative task than in the homework from the workbook. As it was stated in the review of the literature, tasks are always activities that use the target language “for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996, p.23). Therefore, students are able to use language in a meaningful way while they do the tasks assigned. In this case, since the participants in this study were able to use the language in a natural way, that is, in situations that are closely related to what they could do in real life, the nature of the assignment probably exerted an influence in their performance.

## Conclusions

The participants recognized the importance and need to practice English out of class. They were conscious that homework helped them to rehearse and review what they studied in class as well. That is, they knew that it was important for them to do homework. Moreover, they showed that communicative-like assignments were more useful to practice and to review the subject matter. This means that instructors at the Conversation Courses should try to adapt communicative tasks to turn them into homework in order to provide the learners with enriching and appealing assignments and to enhance students’ rate of response to do homework.

It was also noticed that the participants did not have plenty of time to do out-of-class work because of their condition of being working adults; therefore, short assignments seem to be more suitable for this population taking into account that homework constitutes a useful tool to complement the teaching and learning process. In addition, the study revealed that when most participants did not do homework, it was because they forgot to do it, or because they did not have time to do it.

Another aspect to emphasize is that although the difference was reduced, the return rate for the communicative tasks in general was higher than the one for the workbook assignments; therefore, the expected outcome of the project was reached, but more research should be carried out in order to be able to generalize that students' return rate is higher when they do communicative tasks instead of assignments from the workbook.

### Limitations

One of the limitations to develop this project was time. In fact, the researchers could carry out four interventions, but only two using communicative assignments. It would have been more enriching to have had the opportunity to design and assign more tasks in order to obtain more data. If other researchers attempted to do similar work, we recommend to employ more than two communicative assignments for analyzing how different types of tasks affect students' response rate as well.

Attendance and tardiness were issues as well. Several students arrived late to class; therefore, the instructor could not start the class by checking homework if she wanted to. Absent students, not all of them though, brought their homework next class or sent it through e-mail.

Another limitation was the individual nature of communicative assignments. It would be interesting to conduct research where learners really interact with other people and mostly with native speakers if possible. This could guarantee that communication occurs in its most natural context possible.

In addition, a real limitation and problem was that the sub-questions were stated after the instruments were prepared; therefore, some of the questions and information collected was not used in the results and discussion section. For future research stating the subquestions at the beginning of the project would be beneficial for the organization and analysis of the project. Besides that, in all questionnaires, some of the students did not answer the whole document; therefore, there were some data that could not be analyzed, and this represents a margin of error in all the results obtained from the questionnaires.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1

#### Questionnaire about the Assignment of Homework

Before you answer this questionnaire, we want to thank you for investing some minutes of your time to share with us some valuable information that will be useful for our study. Your answers to the questions below constitute part of statistic information that we will be using for investigative purposes, and this information will be totally anonymous and confidential.

Gender: M\_\_\_ F\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_

**I PART. Instructions:** Write an X in the option that corresponds to your previous experiences before enrolling in the level in which you are right now.

1. Where have you learned English?
- a. ( ) Conversation Courses at the University of Costa Rica
- b. ( ) Another institution
- Specify:
- 

2. How many courses or levels have you taken in the Conversation Courses Program at the University of Costa Rica?
- a. ( ) 0
- b. ( ) 1
- c. ( ) 2-3
- d. ( ) 4-7

**II PART. Instructions:** Write an X in the option(s) that correspond(s) to your previous experience(s) by doing homework.

1. The frequency with which I do assigned homework is \_\_\_\_\_. **(Choose only ONE option)**
- a. ( ) never
- b. ( ) almost never
- c. ( ) almost always
- d. ( ) always (go to question 3)

2. When I do not bring the assignments in, it is because \_\_\_\_\_. **(You can choose more than one option)**

- a.  they do not help me to learn
- b.  the teachers do not keep a record of students who do homework
- c.  they have a low percentage of the grade and it does not affect me
- d.  I do not deem them to practice English out of class
- e.  they are boring
- f.  I am not very responsible
- g.  I do not have time to do them
- h.  I do not understand the instructions
- i.  I forget to do them
- j.  I leave them at home
- k.  another/other reason(s)

Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**If you answered NEVER in question 1, go to question 4.**

3. I do out-of-class assignments because \_\_\_\_\_. **(You can choose more than one option)**

- a.  they help me to learn
- b.  they are mandatory for the course's evaluation
- c.  they can help me to pass at the end of the course
- d.  I need to practice English out of class
- e.  they seem interesting
- f.  I am very responsible
- g.  I have enough time to do them
- h.  I easily understand the instructions
- i.  I remember to do them
- j.  another/other reason(s)

Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

4. When I do not bring an out-of-class assignment in the due date indicated by the teacher, \_\_\_\_\_. **(Choose only ONE option)**

- a.  I do it to practice despite the fact that the teacher does not allow me to deliver it another day
- b.  I do it and I deliver it to my teacher so that she/he can realize how interested I am about the course. I do not care if she/he checks it or not
- c.  I do not do it because the teacher does not check it another day
- d.  I talk to my teacher to convince her/him to let me hand my homework in another day

5. In general, the out-of-class assignments' purpose is \_\_\_\_\_. **(You can choose more than one option)**

- a.  to practice what was studied in class
- b.  to finish something that was not fully developed in class
- c.  to study a topic that will be introduced in the following lesson
- d.  I do not know the exact purpose
- e.  another option: \_\_\_\_\_

6. I prefer out-of-class assignments in which I have to work\_\_\_\_\_. (**Choose only ONE option**)

- a. ( ) alone  
 b. ( ) in pairs  
 c. ( ) in groups

**III PART. Instructions:** There is a chart presented below that is divided into three parts. Based on the column that is in the middle: “ Type of homework assigned,” write an X to indicate the frequency with which it has been assigned (left column) and another X to indicate the degree with which each type of homework has helped you to practice English out of class (right column). Choose only **ONE** option in each case.

For example:

Frequency with which it has been assigned				Type of homework assigned	This type of homework helps me practice English out of class....			
Never	Few times	Many times	Always		Never	Few times	Many times	Always
	x			Dramatizations			x	

Frequency with which it has been assigned				Type of homework assigned	This type of homework helps me practice English out of class....			
Never	Few times	Many times	Always		Never	Few times	Many times	Always
				Dramatizations				
				Oral Presentations				
				Recording oneself				
				Interviews				
				Listening exercises on The Internet				
				Watching TV programs				
				Another/ Other option(s), specify:				



**IV PART. Instructions:** Some affirmations are presented below. Write an X in the column that corresponds to the frequency with which you have had these experiences exclusively in the conversation courses taught in the University of Costa Rica or another institution that teaches languages to adults. Choose only ONE option for each affirmation.

	Never	Few times	Many times	Always
The writing skill has been practiced in the English courses' out of class assignments.				
The reading skill has been practiced in the English courses' out of class assignments.				
The oral skill has been practiced in the English courses' out of class assignments.				
The listening skill has been practiced in the English courses' out of class assignments.				
In the English courses workbook exercises have been assigned for homework.				
The teachers checked my homework.				
The exercises from the workbook are enough to practice at home what is studied in class. Why? _____				

If you were the teacher of the course, what kind of homework would you assign to your students? Specify.

Type of Homework	Why?

End of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your help!

## Appendix 2

### Homework Questionnaire A

Before you answer this questionnaire, it is important to thank you for investing some minutes to give valuable information. All what you write in this document will be treated confidentially and anonymously and will be used only for investigative purposes.

Gender: M\_\_\_ F\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_

**Instructions:** Write an "X" in the option that corresponds to your experience by doing the homework assigned.

1- When did you do your assignment?

- a.  During class  
 b.  Some minutes before the class started  
 c.  In my free time at home  
 d.  At work

Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2- How much effort did you put to complete the assignment?

- a.  No effort (0%)  
 b.  Minimum effort (25%)  
 c.  Sufficient effort (50%)  
 d.  A lot of effort (75%)  
 e.  All the effort possible for the task (100%)

3- Were the instructions clear enough for you to do the assignment?

- a.  All of them  
 b.  Most of them  
 c.  Some of them  
 d.  None of them

4- What reasons made you do this assignment? (**Check all that apply**)

- a.  I wanted to review what I studied in class.  
 b.  I had enough time to do it.  
 c.  It seemed challenging.  
 d.  It seemed easy to do.  
 e.  I always do homework.  
 f.  It was mandatory for the course's evaluation.  
 g.  I needed to practice English out of class.  
 h.  I am a very responsible student.  
 i.  It seemed interesting.

Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_

5- I think the homework assignment \_\_\_\_\_.

	Strongly disagree	disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
was easy				
was difficult				
helped me to learn new things				
helped me to review the topics studied in class				
helped me to practice English out of class				
was not useful				
was enjoyable				
was boring				

End of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your help!

## Appendix 3

### Homework Questionnaire B

Before you answer this questionnaire, it is important to thank you for investing some minutes to give valuable information. All what you write in this document will be treated confidentially and anonymously and will be used only for investigative purposes.

Gender: M\_\_\_ F\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_

**Instructions:** Write an "X" in the option that corresponds to your experience by doing the homework assigned.

1- Why you did not hand your assignment in? (**Check all that apply**)

- a. ( ) I honestly forgot to do it.
- b. ( ) I did not have enough time to do it.
- c. ( ) I did not want to do it because I did not find it interesting.
- d. ( ) I did not understand the instructions.
- e. ( ) I never do homework.
- f. ( ) It has a low percentage in the final grade and that does not affect me to pass the course.
- g. ( ) It did not encourage me to practice English out of class.
- h. ( ) I do not consider myself responsible.
- i. ( ) I did not like the assignment.

Other; specify: \_\_\_\_\_

2- Were the instructions given in class to complete the assignment clear enough for you?

- a. ( ) all of them
- b. ( ) Most of them
- c. ( ) Some of them
- d. ( ) None of them

3- I think that I would have done the assignment if \_\_\_\_\_.

	Strongly disagree	disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
it had been more interesting				
it had been more challenging				
it had been easier				
it had included different activities				
it had been shorter				

End of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your help!

