Parental Involvement in English Homework Tasks: Bridging the Gap between School and Home*

La participación de los padres de familia en el desarrollo de tareas de inglés: creación de lazos entre la escuela y la casa

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This paper explores the concept of parental involvement in English homework tasks as a way to include parents in the educational community. This descriptive study was carried out in a female public school with 10 students from third and fourth grades and their parents. In order to obtain the information, different instruments were used: artifacts, interviews, questionnaires and observations. After analyzing the data, it was stated that parental involvement was seen as a means to bridge the gap between the school and home. The findings also showed the possibility of learning from each other and the importance of homework tasks as interactional and learning spaces among parents and children.

Key words: School and home connections, parental involvement in homework tasks

Este artículo explora el concepto de la participación de los padres de familia en el desarrollo de las tareas de inglés, como una forma de incluir a los padres de familia en la comunidad educativa. Este estudio descriptivo se realizó en un colegio público femenino, con diez estudiantes de tercero y cuarto de primaria y sus padres. Para la recolección de la información se utilizaron diferentes instrumentos: artefactos, entrevistas, cuestionarios y observaciones de clase. Después de analizar la información se encontró que la intervención de los padres de familia se percibió como un medio para crear lazos entre la casa y el colegio. Los resultados también mostraron la posibilidad del aprendizaje mutuo y la importancia de las tareas como espacios de interacción y aprendizaje entre padres e hijos.

Palabras clave: Conexiones entre la escuela y la familia, soporte de los padres de familia en las tareas escolares

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Introduction

Schoolwork can be taken as an opportunity to bring parents closer to school and at the same time create a positive learning environment to make learning more interesting. Teachers can attempt to promote that link by designing relaxed and meaningful tasks so that children and parents work together. This is the case of homework, which can be designed to encourage children and parents to share time, knowledge and common concerns to fulfill a goal. In doing so, teachers can promote collaborative learning. In addition, parents and children can exchange personal information and increase their knowledge. This way, involving parents allows them to be aware of their vital role in their child's education.

The Problem

All schools should make an effort to work collaboratively with parents to ultimately improve student achievement (Keane, 2007). Following this line of thought, this research emerged from the need to integrate parents in children's school life. The main objective of this study was to describe what happens when parents are involved in the development of their children's homework. It was also expected that the pedagogical design intended to explore such interaction would tell us about the role of parents' experiences and knowledge while working with their children to do English homework.

In order to do so, the researchers developed a series of tasks in which English homework assignments were sent home to be developed by both parents and students. The main question that was addressed in this research was: What is revealed about parental involvement in homework tasks? Another related question was: What is the role of tasks in children and parents' collaborative learning?

Theoretical Framework

Since this study was focused on parental involvement in English homework tasks, the following concepts were addressed: parental involvement in children's education and homework tasks, and ways to involve parents in students' learning process and collaborative learning.

Parental Involvement in Children's Education and Homework Tasks

Parental involvement means the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities such as the tasks we applied as a way to bring family closer to school (The No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Additionally, we cannot ignore that parental involvement seems to have positive effects on students' academic performance, and it is important to integrate parents into the school institution in order to share the responsibility of children's education. Furman & Buhmester (1985) mention that in spite of school life independence, the family continues to be important for children.

Escayola (1994) states that the first level of institutionalized education should be an instrument of collaboration with the family in children's education. For that reason, it is necessary to encourage a collaborative relationship which leads to a system of mutual help. Then, school-family teamwork is more likely to produce positive results than the schools systems and families working independently (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

This research was intended to apply homework tasks as a tool that promotes interaction among

parents and children and at the same time involves parents in their children's education. Homework in this research was defined as out-of-class tasks assigned to students in order to work collaboratively with parents. Walker et al (2004) affirm that homework can be a powerful tool for (a) letting parents and other adults know what the child is learning, (b) giving children and parents a reason to talk about the events that occur at school, and (c) giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about the children's learning.

As such, to involve parents in children's education, an effective school-family partnership that will benefit all involved school staff, parents, and students is necessary.

Research demonstrates that parental involvement can be an important contributor to student achievement. Effective school-family partnerships can have important benefits for parents as well, helping them to perceive their children's school in a more positive light, enhancing their sense of efficiency as parents and changing the perceptions of their children as learners (Ames, 1993; Epstein, 1991).

Ways to Involve Parents in Students' Learning

Quintero (2006) accounts for a series of ways used to involve parents in students' literacy learning. The author argues that Harding (1996) gives insights into how to involve parents in literacy activities by having children take books home from school and then creating their own stories based on the pictures. After that, parents were in charge of reading the actual story that was written in the book. Another way to involve parents is by encouraging them to listen to their children reading to them (Hannon, 1995). Quintero (2006) further mentions a research study developed by

Barillas (2000) in which children were encouraged to develop writing activities at home together with their parents and siblings. The homework tasks used as a way to involve parents in students' learning in this research were also aimed at having children work at home with their parents in different written activities.

Collaborative Learning

Another aspect we considered in our study was to involve parents in order to work as a team with students helping each other in their learning process. This is connected to collaborative learning, which is organized in a way that allows students to talk with each other (Golub, 1988). As the author asserts, it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs.

Collaborative learning aims at having students work with those students who have more knowledge to get guidance or orientation (Brown, 2001). In this research parental involvement is used in homework tasks as a collaborative effort between parents and children using their context and life's information. Collaborative learning has been supported by social constructivism. This teaching philosophy promotes individual as well as social growth. According to Vygotsky (1979), social constructivism emphasizes the critical importance of culture and the importance of the social context for cognitive development. According to him, the next four principles apply to social constructivism philosophy:

- Learning and development are social, collaborative activities.
- The zone of proximal development can serve as a guide for curricular and lesson planning.
- School learning should occur in a meaningful context and not be separated from learning

and knowledge that children develop in the "real world".

• Out - of- school experiences should be related to the child's school experiences.

Instructional Design

English classes were based on tasks. A task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form (Nunan, 1989). Open tasks were used in this study. Willis (1998) argues that open tasks are those activities that are loosely structured, with a less specific goal. For example, comparing memories of childhood journeys, or exchanging anecdotes on a theme. Inside these types of tasks the same author further adds there is a sub category that is based on sharing personal experiences. These tasks encourage learners to talk more freely about themselves and share their experiences with others.

The tasks were based on 9 topics that the children had already experienced in an attempt to develop meaningful learning. The themes were organized as shown in Figure 1:
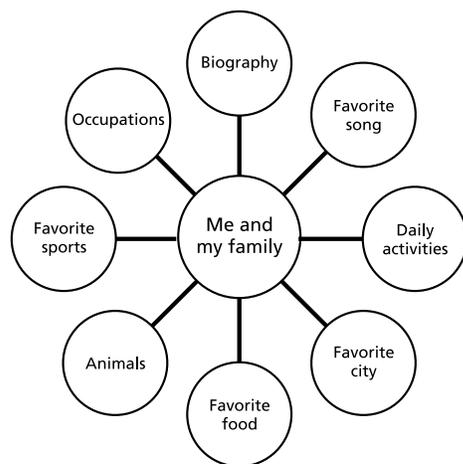

Figure 1. Topics for tasks

The themes presented were useful to inquire into the knowledge that children and parents had regarding general information about each other. Likewise, the activities were applied for children to acquire vocabulary and simple sentence structures that allowed them to describe people and real events they had experienced.

Every topic was partially developed through a pre- task that was carried out in the classroom. In the homework, which was the post-task, girls were asked to finish the task they began in the classroom. Usually they were asked to carry out a similar task as the one proposed in the classroom with their parents (See Appendix 1).

The students' role was that of mediators bridging the gap between parents and teachers by explaining the topics and the activities to their parents. Parents were active participants who developed, with the help of their children, different activities as part of the homework and according to the topics. Parents interacted with their kids at home offering help, giving them suggestions and providing them with feedback but, above all, sharing information.

The Study

Context and Participants

This study was carried out in a girls' school in Bogotá. This public Educational Institution aims to promote a holistic education involving all important aspects in life in order to educate women who can participate and contribute to the society they belong to.

The participants in this study were 10 girls (5 from third grade and 5 from fourth grade) and their parents. The 10 girls were chosen at random. All of them and their parents signed a consent form to take part in the development of our study. The girls' ages ranged from 8 to 10 years old. They

lived with their parents in various neighborhoods in Bogotá, Colombia.

On the other hand, 13 parents were involved in this study: 10 mothers and 3 fathers who had various occupations such as housewives, managers, independent workers, merchants, dressmakers, assistants, cashiers and teachers. These parents attended some informal meetings in which the teacher-researchers informed them about the English homework tasks that they were supposed to complete with their daughters. The topics of the tasks as well as their organization were shared with parents. Parents were given ample opportunity for questions about the homework assignments. Then, they were invited to be part of their children's educational process. The teacher-researchers provided parents with specific information regarding the importance of supporting students in homework assignments.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) mention that parents choose to become involved in homework because they believe they should do so and because they believe their involvement will make a positive difference in their children's learning. In this research parents who wanted to participate had the same feeling.

Type of Research

This descriptive research followed the principles of a qualitative case study. In connection to this, Merriam (1988) argues it is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group.

Data Collection Procedures

In order to collect data, the following instruments were used: Artifacts (from children and parents), observation notes, surveys and interviews.

Regarding artifacts, parents and students did all the activities of the pedagogical intervention in an individual notebook (See Appendix 1). Observations were also considered. Marshall & Rossman (1989) indicate that observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry. It is used to discover complex interaction in natural social settings. Observations were carried out in class every session. Students were observed while developing the pre task and the task in the classroom.

Surveys were also used. Nunan (1992) quotes that survey data are collected through questionnaires or interviews, or a combination of questionnaires and interviews. In this study questionnaires and interviews were used for collecting data since both were complementary. We used three questionnaires along the project; the first one came into use at the beginning of the research in order to get general information about parents' occupation, level of education, English level, and their willingness to participate in the project with their children. The second one was applied to the parents and children in the middle of the research process to identify what was happening with the interaction among parents and their children during the development of the different homework tasks as well as to collect their impressions, suggestions, expectations and comments about the project.

Finally, individual interviews with children and parents were applied. Girls were interviewed in the middle of the research and their parents at the end of it. Girls were interviewed in the classroom and parents were interviewed at their homes.

Findings

The information was collected during one academic year. Categories emerged after reading,

analyzing, and rereading the data gathered. First of all, common patterns were highlighted in each instrument, and classified using different colors. After that, they were named provisionally and finally categories emerged.

In order to answer our research question and the sub-question, we identified two categories and one subcategory. The categories as well as the sub-categories are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Categories derived from data analysis

Questions	Category
Main Question What is revealed about parental involvement in homework tasks?	Homework tasks: The pathway to learn from each other
Sub-question What is the role of tasks in children-parents' collaborative learning?	Developing strategies to promote interaction among parents and children

Homework Tasks: The Pathway to Learn from Each Other

In this research, parental involvement in homework tasks showed that parents and children were willing to listen to each other. Consequently, parental involvement in homework tasks was seen as a process in which participants could learn from each other.

In the following extract of an interview a mother mentions that during the homework tasks she could talk to her daughter about her and her husband's life experiences.

> 550. R: Did you know about the activities carried out during the class?
>
> 551. P: Off course, I did. It was at the beginning of the

> year.
>
> 552. R: How did you like them?
>
> 553. P: Well, doing the homework assignments was pretty beautiful.
>
> 554. P.   My daughter was laughing all the time because it was
>
> 555. P.   funny for her to know things about her
>
> 555. P: father and I. There were many things she did not know about our life. (T2, I2, Mother)

The homework tasks that parents and children carried out became an excuse and an opportunity to gain confidence and knowledge. It was also noticed that while students developed the activities assigned with their parents, they realized they did not know their parents' personalities. Similarly, when students were interviewed, they said that they got home and asked their parents what was asked of them.

In the following extract from field notes, taken during an activity where a student wrote in her notebook what her parents' favorite song was, the girl mentioned her concern for not being able to answer the question since she did not know what to write.

> The students wrote their parents' favorite song, the name of the singer, and where the singer was from in the notebook. At the beginning of the activity a student said *"Teacher what should I do? I do not know what my parents' favorite song is"*. The teacher answered: *"Try to remember a song they listen to a lot"*. *But she said "No, I do not know, we do not listen to music together"*. So, the teacher told the student that if she did not know her parents´ favorite song, she could write only the kind of music her parents preferred"* (Classroom 303: O.4, Oct. 5th).

The same issue was observed in an interview with one of the girls' fathers.

> 435. R: How did you feel carrying out the English tasks?
>
> 436. P: I felt pretty well because it was a lot fun.

437. P: I learned many things about my daughter. There were many aspects about her life at school

438. P: and at home that I did not know. One feels

439. P: really happy to know about ones daughter.

440. P: I have also told her many things about my own life. (T2, I2, Father)

It is evident the lack of seemingly simple knowledge that parents and children have about one another. It was found that the tasks gave parents as well as children the opportunity to get to know their likes, feelings, and personality. Through discussing the preferences in terms of foods, music, places, etc., children had the opportunity to know other facets of their parents who, in the same way, discovered in their children aspects they were not aware of until that moment.

As a consequence and as was mentioned previously, they had difficulties when giving some information about each other, showing that there was a lack of communication among them. In this regard Cohen (2000) affirms that through time, children have demonstrated that adults also have a lot to learn from their own world. The answers given in interviews, by some students and parents of both grades, to the questions related to the relationship among parents and children revealed that children learn from their parents through interacting with them.

On account of that, we looked for the factors that could and did affect interaction and communication. Thus, it was found that lack of time was the most common reason why parents and children did not interact, and we could see why time is an important factor that influences interaction between parents and children and, therefore, their collaborative work. This situation could reduce periods of interaction, so children and parents did not have the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas.

Nowadays, many parents have jobs with working days. Some of them have additional part time jobs. The current world offers us many distractions to make family interaction less frequent every day. Fernoso (1976) indicates that family socialization is often affected by a lack of organization and a search for entertainment, or other activities that the modern world offers us such as T.V.

Through this research, it was confirmed that parents' lack of time with their children was the main cause for their not interacting and sharing their experiences with their children.

Children have had to resign themselves to having part time parents who arrive tired at home with only the desire to rest. Therefore, parents' jobs become the main reason for them not be with their children. Quintanilla (1993) affirms that it demonstrates that work can cause the loss of parents' valuable time with their children. This issue was evidenced in the teacher's notes. A teacher-researcher wrote the following:

> The teacher wrote on the board the title of the activity, and then she told the children to do a cartoon related to "one day in their parents' life". During this activity, one student said "my mother wakes up very early in the morning, it is still dark" and another girl close to teacher claimed: "teacher, I do not know what to write because my parents work all day long" (Classroom 405: O.3, September 30th).

The next quotation taken from a survey given to parents shows how a father commented on his lack of time to do tasks with his daughter. Bearing in mind that homework was done by parents and children, we could see the difficulty in getting them together to do these exercises.

> Do you have any suggestion for the project?

… Well, sometimes there is not time to do the assigned tasks (S2, Q3. Parents).

The next extract is part of an English activity in which students wrote when they were happy, sad, worried, bored, etc. In this case, one student demonstrated that she was bored when her parents did not have time to play with her. Here, it is evident that parents had different things to do so they could not be with their daughter, which the girl disliked.
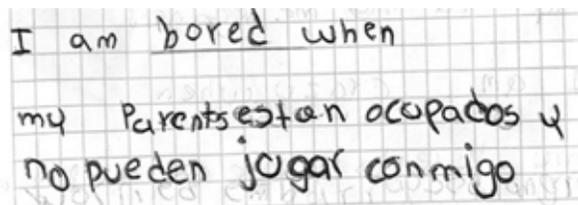

Figure 2. I am bored when my parents are busy because they cannot play with me.(Student's artifact)[1]

Some children spoke of their parents' lack of time, but they justified their actions because they were aware of the necessity the parents had to work, and the responsibility they have to the family. Time is definitely one of the factors that affected parents' as well as children's opportunities to interact.

Because of the previous issues, it was noticed that tasks were an excuse for students and parents to interact and, at the same time, an opportunity to have a space to share.

Developing Strategies to Promote Interaction among Parents and Children

English homework tasks were spaces in which the children could interact collaboratively with their parents and at the same time get help from them. In the following information taken from

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1   Translation of the artifact.

some parents' questionnaires when they were asked about the contribution that the project gave to the collaborative work with their daughters, it is clearly stated that while they developed the tasks with their daughter's help, an interaction space was opened up among them. In addition, they could share in a pleasant way.

> What impact do the homework tasks have on you?
> We share more (S.2, Q4. Mother 1)
> We have a lot of fun together (S.2, Q4. Mother 2)
> We talk more and I know who my daughter is (S.2, Q.4, Mother 3)
> We exchange ideas (S.2, Q.4, Mother 4)

The excerpt above indicates that interaction is an opportunity to get to know each other. The activities are carried out in a friendly environment. This, in turn, encourages confidence and allows them to talk about their lives.

In the following extract we can see how mother and daughter take advantage of the situation to work as a team. As can be read in lines 543-547, mother showed that thanks to the English homework tasks they had a moment to share, enjoy and be together.

> 543. R: Did you find any difficulty during the process?
> 544. P: Sometimes we had to look for books or dictionaries to understand.
> 545. P: However, I think that the most important aspect was the
> 546. P: time we dedicated to each other We
> 547. P: could be together and we helped each other (T2, I2, Mother).

In addition, through an artifact, a student demonstrated that she had a good time and was pleased with her parents while they did the English homework tasks. Here, we could find that the girl did the homework with her mother, which allowed them to establish dialogue and collaboration.

In the sample from an artifact, parents pointed out that they had a pleasant time with their daughters while carrying out the tasks. Consequently, during the interaction among parents and children doing the English homework tasks, a link was created to bridge the gap between parents and the school.
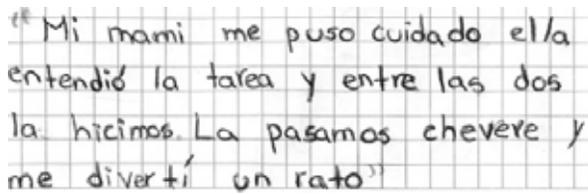
Figure 3. My mum paid attention to me. She understood the homework task and we could do the homework together. It was a lot of fun. (Student artifact)[2]

Conclusions

Through the development of this research, we could not agree more with Walker et al. (2004, p. 8) "because they [children] are at the center of the homework process, teachers play critical roles in helping parents become effectively involved in student homework. In sharing ideas for homework involvement with parents, school-age care professionals, and parent leaders, teachers increase community support for student learning". We realized that tasks play an important role and can be used as a way to involve parents in children´s education. As English teachers we sometimes underestimate the interest of parents in being involved in the education of their children, and the interest of children in completing successful academic activities with their parents.

Furthermore, while carrying out this research project, we evidenced some principles of critical pedagogy. Children, parents and the school

were considered equally important in the teaching and learning processes and in order to make this possible, we as teachers should create different strategies to link the principal actors in children's education and we can use different tools to generate spaces where children and parents can interact and learn together. In our case, parental involvement in homework tasks generated important and successful interaction. Then, we saw how aspects related to transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the wider community (McLaren, 1989) were tackled.

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2   Translation of the artifact.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix 1: Post Task Sample

Children's Artifact

I am _happy_ when my parents me felicitan
I am _sad_ when my parents me regañan.
I am _crazy_ when my parents me llevan al parque
I am _worried_ when my parents no llegan a la casa.
I am _embarrassed_ when my parents me abrasan frente mis compañeras.
I am _angry_ when my parents no me compran un helado.
I am _ill_ when my parents me llevan a natación.
I am _afraid_ when my parents me miran los cuadernos.

Parents' Artifact

1- Estoy _Happy_ Con el Rendimiento de mi Hijo.
2- Es _sad_ ver tantos niños que los maltratan.
3- Estoy _Sad_ porque mi hija, come mucho.
4- Estamos _Worried_ por que nos toca trabajar todo el tiempo y mi hija queda sola.
5- Soy _embarrassed_ cuando hablo en Público
6- Estoy _angry_ con el trabajo Esclavisante de la Empresa
7- Estoy _ill_ de la Espalda.
8- me pongo _afraid_ con las Películas de terror.
9- Estoy _bored_ con algunos vecinos