
**A Shift from Paper-and-Pencil Assignments to Online Homework in
Higher Education**

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Abstract

Shifting the focus from paper-and-pencil homework assignments to online homework assignments in English Language Teaching (ELT) in a Libyan Higher Education setting is a challenge, and it is the concern of this article. ELT Libyan students need to be capable enough to submit different types of assignments and to integrate technology in homework preparation and submission at the Department of English Language at the University of Benghazi Al. Marj Campus, the author –a teacher and educator- investigated 43 students (34 third-semester students and nine eighth-semester students) to know their feedback about the importance of homework, what types of homework they used to do, and the challenges they faced while preparing paper sheet homework and electronic file homework. Three data collection tools were used: online questionnaires, students' paper sheet assignments, and online homework assignments. Before distributing the questionnaire, the students were asked to prepare and submit two types of homework assignments (paper sheets and electronic files). The purpose of doing that was to make sure that students experienced the difference before answering the questionnaire items. It was concluded that the majority of students in the English department used to submit homework assignments on paper instead of in electronic files. A good number of the participants think that these two types of homework are required. They also expressed some challenges and problems that they encountered in homework submission. It is highlighted that the teacher's role has a big impact on the way homework is assigned and submitted. Therefore, it is recommended that homework must be treated as a tool for checking students' comprehension, not only as a way for students to earn higher scores. Teachers are responsible for gradually making students aware of online homework. They also need to develop their ways of assigning homework.

Keywords: ELT Libyan Higher Education Setting, Importance of Homework,

Homework Types, Paper-and-Pencil Homework, Online Homework, Problems and Challenges, Homework Submission

1.Introduction

Homework is a part of the educational process that accompanies the academic trajectory of students. This part is established by topic, expresses knowledge, represents skills, and propitiates a reference space that interacts with teaching-learning. In homework, students are faced with tasks to be performed, which leads them to understand and acquire the knowledge and skills of a specific area of specialization. Homework aims to provoke reflection based on theoretical foundations and participative reality to encourage research and interaction with other subjects and professionals in exercise, aiming to clarify the issues addressed. The involvement resulting from homework provides favorable conditions for development by giving greater support and information needed for good learning and academic evolution. The accompaniment and follow-up through educational actions that the homework proposes direct efforts to the full formation of individuals without distortion and abandonment. Its purpose is to stimulate critical and reflective practice, to provide opportunities to master the necessary knowledge, and, in cooperation, to display the pedagogical concepts practiced.

Today, learning has a more integrative structure that emphasizes learner independence and responsibility and is defined as an interaction process. As a part of the learning process, homework is any kind of activity that a teacher assigns to be done at students' homes and also any kind of application that the students do without the direct guidance of a teacher. A teacher cannot be in direct contact with students learning every detail about a specific activity because the teacher's role in the teaching/ learning process is messaging. Homework is then a part of this activity, which plays the role of exercise and feedback as students and teachers work continuously.

The reality of the lifestyle and environment of Higher Education is different from that of the school level. Disciplining oneself needs additional effort from the student's side. Students at the Higher Education level not only limit themselves to studying just their subjects of major but also want to pursue other social interests and extracurricular activities. This also includes commuting to the college with greater distances. Homework is a great experience that helps students to develop their skills and performances. When used effectively, students can acquire necessary data,

develop roles, apply critical thinking, and learn how to solve meaningful problems.

1.1. Research Questions

This article seeks to answer the following questions

- 1- What is the importance of homework assignments in higher education?
- 2- What are the types of homework assignments participants are used to?
- 3- What applications can facilitate doing and submitting homework assignments for Libyan university students?
- 4- What are the problems that Libyan university students face in doing paper-and-pencil assignments?
- 5- What are the challenges that Libyan university students face in preparing and submitting online homework?

2. Literature Review

Homework is an essential component of every higher education course. It enhances students' critical thinking and teaches them to solve problems. Homework develops time management, responsibility, and independence, which are necessary personal qualities for higher education. Along with teachers, it is most effective when students care about the result, develop a desire for concrete results, and understand the necessity of new information to complete complex homework faster. According to Deysolong (2023), It is essential to recognize that not all students have equal access to resources and support outside classrooms. Socioeconomic circumstances, different home environments, and access to technology can significantly influence a student's ability to complete homework. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may encounter challenges in completing assignments due to a lack of resources or competing responsibilities.

Educators need to recollect those elements even when assigning homework and offering extra guidance to college students. Teachers no longer most effectively assign homework; they also lay out homework. The homework process begins with teachers who choose the topics and contents of assignments to help students meet particular learning goals. Designing homework requires teachers to consider the purposes, format, and other elements of assignments that will engage students and help them succeed. (Epstien & Van Voorhis, 2001).

2.1. Advantages and disadvantages of homework assignments

In higher studies, homework would be of the best benefit to the student in both the short term and the long term. According to Ahmad et al (2022), homework plays a crucial role in improving students' performance, mental health, and knowledge

acquisition. The authors suggest a shift in focus towards quality homework assignments that promote deeper understanding and critical thinking rather than simply rote memorization or repetitive tasks. When used appropriately, homework can be an effective tool for reviewing and reinforcing concepts, encouraging skill development, fostering metacognitive skills, and promoting creativity (Masalimova et al., 2023). However, the following benefits can be gained through doing homework and submitting assignments:

- Reinforcing Learning
- Providing additional practice
- Developing Critical Thinking Skills
- Enhancing Time Management and Discipline
- Fostering Independent Learning
- Increasing students' personal responsibility
- Improving Academic Performance (Butler, 1987)

Cooper (1989) listed the following positive effects of homework:

- 1- Immediate achievement and learning
 - Better retention of factual knowledge
 - Increased understanding
 - Better critical thinking, concept formation, and information processing.
 - Curriculum Enrichment
- 2- Long-term academic
 - Encourage learning during leisure time
 - Improved attitude toward school
 - Better study habits and skills
- 3- Nonacademic
 - Great self-direction
 - Great self-discipline
 - Better time organization
 - More inquisitiveness
 - More independent problem-solving

Deysolong (2023) reports that the benefits of homework are contingent on various

factors. The quality and nature of the assignments play a crucial role in determining their effectiveness. Assignments that are meaningful, engaging, and appropriately challenging tend to yield better results (p:2).

In terms of shortcomings, homework can cause loss of interest in academic material, physical and emotional fatigue, denial of access to leisure time and community activities (pressure to complete and confusion of instructional techniques), and cheating (copying from other students) Cooper (1989). Additionally, the quantity of homework assigned has to be affordable and aligned with the developmental desires and capacities of students. Overwhelming students with excessive homework can lead to diminishing returns and negative consequences Deysolong (2023).

Eduwem Ezeonwumelu (2020) indicated that duplication of learning contents and academic overload have a significant relationship with the learning effectiveness of young learners. When curriculum developers try to incorporate various contents and learning experiences into the curriculum, they end up reproducing a repertoire of learning experiences already captured in the syllabus (p:73). According to the Global Organization for Stress, 75% of adults have been reported to suffer from moderate to high levels of stress, with these facts in hand, students are also a part of these statistics. It is stated that workloads (exams, assignments, deadlines, etc.) contribute to students' instructional stress.

Taking into consideration that higher education is genuine, it is about more than producing skilled workers; it is about democratic citizenship, which goes far beyond curricular development. (Kralovee & Buell, 2001).

2.2. Types of Homework

The constantly altered educational systems are the major determinant of the appearance of different types of homework, as each one of them mirrors a different world upon which every individual is supposed to find an appropriate integration. Traditional homework assignments create many shortcomings since they reproduce factual knowledge rather than introduce superior core skills. Learners are not involved in these types of activities, but rather, they are doing mechanical work. On the other hand, making types of homework more interactive and relevant to students' real-world interests is evident in encouraging the internalization of social interaction processes, which helps the learner progress from complex to conceptual thinking (Vegotsky, 2000).

Shifting from old-fashioned styles of homework (pen-and-paper homework) to

up-to-date ways of preparing and submitting assignments can play a major role in getting back students' passion for learning and offering several methods of conducting projects. One distinguished change is related to using personal and portable devices to do and exchange homework with teachers. The following are types of homework according to Shuster (2007):

1- Doing a worksheet

This type of homework is convenient for teachers to hand out and mark. For students, it can be completed quickly and easily when they are asked to repeat concepts from class or the textbook. Therefore, students without clear goals from teachers may be confused and consider it to be boring, busy work that doesn't help with deep thought or understanding.

2- Making a poster

It is a good project for group work, so students learn to work with others and use different kinds of skills, including art and design. Its deficiency lies in that it may not produce new insights about the material, it is difficult to organize with other classmates to meet outside, and it often requires buying new materials or equipment.

3- Writing an essay

Despite its disadvantages in terms of difficulty, exaggeration, long time, lack of resources (library, internet), and lack of supervision, this type helps students to develop essential writing skills, research skills, and organizational skills.

4- Independent reading

It is a challenge for teachers to evaluate and make sure that students read. Depending on the book, it can be interesting, informative, or boring. This method encourages students to learn to read on their own. Traditional homework assignments emphasize the memorization of knowledge rather than learning. In addition, students, especially language learners, need to practice linguistic content and participate in interactive activities to grasp knowledge deeply. Cooperation in doing and presenting assignments can affect students' performance and results.

2.3. Ways to facilitate and update homework assignments

All homework types mentioned in the previous section can be conducted in different ways. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in groups. Nowadays, it is more flexible to type research papers and other written assignments using smartphones since almost all educational computer programs have smartphone copies (applications). For teachers, it is no longer necessary to carry a large number of papers and files or maybe projects or to wait for the next class to collect students' work

because receiving homework online using applications that offer a type of safe sharing can play this role and shorten time and effort.

2.4. Applications that can be effective in doing and submitting homework assignments in Libyan higher education sitting

The selection of applications depends on student capabilities and teacher preference. In Libya university students are not always required to use devices and internet connection in education except in medical expertise. Therefore, teachers should gradually expose students to simple applications that can be used smoothly, then they can use more advanced applications that require the students to use educational, institutional, or personal emails to share files with teachers.

For instance, Microsoft Office provides a collection of applications (Word et al.) that can be used to design presentations, edit documents, and send files. Students do not need to be highly skilled to type using these apps, but they need practice. They may need to be skilled in searching online to collect information about a specific topic and then make a draft using pen and paper or copy and paste directly to a Word file. The next step is to share files with the teacher; for unskilled students, it is better to exchange files through social networking apps, such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, or Viber; they can save documents to their devices and resend them to teachers. Teachers can specify an email address for receiving homework and sending feedback, but in this case, students need to create Google accounts or Microsoft accounts and learn how to use emails to share files. Other applications such as PowerPoint, Google Slides, and Canva allow sharing files immediately; students select the option (share) and type the material email to send homework assignments to teachers. By using Google Slides, teachers would be able to check and evaluate presentations and directly send scores or other feedback to students by commenting on slides.

The goal of utilizing such applications is to let students cope with what is happening around the world, particularly students who are expected to be future instructors and who need to be given confidence, support and feedback. A variety of applications are available for lesson planning and design, presentations, and testing, to reduce time and effort, facilitate teachers' work, and enhance students' skills.

3. Methodology

This article addresses the issues of shifting from paper-and-pencil assignments to online assignments in Libyan higher education. Therefore, it seeks to answer the questions related to challenges and problems faced by Libyan university students in

preparing and submitting paper-and-pencil homework as well as online assignments.

3.1. The Study Sample and Design

The field study was carried out in the Department of English in Al. Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Benghazi University for three months. Three data collection tools were used: questionnaires, students' paper sheet assignments, and online homework assignments. The sample was selected from the English language department, and 43 students participated by answering online questionnaire forms related to homework and homework submission. Before distributing the questionnaire, 34 third-semester students were asked to prepare and submit two types of homework assignments, by using Word application and by writing paper sheets, while nine eighth-semester students were asked to plan and design lessons using Canva (an online graphic design platform) instead of the traditional way of lesson planning. The purpose of doing that is to make sure that students experience the difference before answering the questionnaire items. The questionnaire was shared online with students who submitted homework assignments (43 students) through two Telegram channels so that responses were smoothly and confidently collected. It was important to meet and contact students online to give them some instructions about editing, saving, and sharing files. Students of the 8th semester were taught how to plan and design lessons in an independent course called Technology and Language Learning. A descriptive research model was utilized to gather data related to what and how questions in an attempt to describe the current situation in the English language department at Al. Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences in terms of homework preparation and submission.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The main purpose of using the questionnaire in this study was to collect students' opinions about the importance of homework, the types of homework they used to do, and the problems they encountered when doing and submitting paper-and-pencil homework as well as online assignments. The questionnaire consisted of five closed multiple-choice questions with three choices for each. This questionnaire was created by the researcher and revised by faculty members from Benghazi University / Al. Marj Campus, and then modified in light of the feedback provided. Data were also collected by checking two types of students' assignments (paper sheets, Word/PDF files, and lesson designs).

The researcher depended on inductive content analysis to make categories from the raw data and create concepts. The technique involves reducing the raw data,

grouping similar relevant material under certain categories and then calculating the frequency of the students' responses. (Author, 2024, pp:15-16).

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study were divided into four main themes: the importance of homework for students, the types of homework students of the English department used to do, the challenges faced with them doing and submitting two types of homework (paper-and-pencil/ online homework) and finally students' homework analysis.

4.1. Importance of homework as a means of comprehension

From the students' responses to the question, "Do you think homework is important to ensure students' comprehension?" It was found that the majority of them (36 students) found homework important for absorbing information. 5 students refused this assumption; they underestimated the importance of homework in stabilizing information. Meanwhile, two students were not able to decide if homework is important or not; they selected the choice "I don't know."

Student's Opinion	Student' Number	Percentage
Yes	36	83.7 %
No	5	11.6 %
I don't know	2	4.7 %

Table (1): Importance of Homework in Comprehension

Data in the above table indicates students' attitudes toward doing and submitting homework as an important part of the educational process.

4.2. Types of homework assignments students are used to

Table (2) below answers the question about homework types students used to do; only (12.9 %) of the whole sample admitted that they prepare electronic files for doing homework assignments. Almost half of the sample used to submit pen-and-paper homework, and the rest of the students submitted two types of homework assignments.

Homework Type	Students' Number	Percentage
Paper-and-Pencil	19	44.2 %
PDF or Word files	6	14.9 %
Both of the above	18	41.9 %

Table (2): Homework Types Submitted by Libyan University Students

In addition, if we combine the number of students who used to submit paper

worksheets with the number of students who submitted two types of homework assignments, the result clarifies the actual number of students (37 / 86.0 %) who really experienced paper-and-pencil homework and this means that the majority of students in the English Department submit homework assignments in paper form instead of electronic files, although 6 of them chose the option "PDF or Word files which might indicate their random response to this question since the common way of requesting homework in this department is paper sheet. It is important to indicate the big role of teachers in determining this percentage since they are the ones who decide the type of homework students are required to submit.

4.3. Problems and challenges students encounter while doing two types of homework

4.3.1. Paper-and-Pencil Worksheets

In terms of paper-and-pencil homework, students' responses to the questionnaire addressed two main problems: lack of search skills and bad handwriting. Therefore, 21 students who encounter these problems have difficulty in preparing research papers, essays, and other written assignments; they might find it easier to conduct online assignments. They need to be oriented to different types of homework preparation and submission. Significantly, 22 students out of 43 stated that they have no problems in doing paper-and-pencil assignments. Therefore, they have the skills of searching and good to excellent handwriting.

Problem	Students' Number	Percentage
I have no problems	22	51.2 %
I have bad handwriting	13	30.2 %
I don't have the skills to search	8	18.6 %

Table (3): Students' Problems with Paper-and-Pen Homework

4.3.2. Online Homework

The other type of homework that was questioned is online homework. It is clear that students in this department face some challenges in terms of online homework submission. They were restricted to choosing from only three common options in order to specify a certain number of challenges that might be taken into consideration while finding solutions. The result showed some equality between the three options, as shown in table (4):

Problem	Students' Number	Percentage
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I don't have online search skills	16	37.2 %
I have a bad internet connection	15	34.9 %
I don't have the skills of typing and formatting	12	27.9 %

Table (4): Students' Problems with Online Homework Assignments

Data in Table (4) above present the real challenges that face English language department students in preparing online homework files, starting with a lack of typing and formatting skills to edit electronic files, documents, or presentations, passing by a lack of online search knowledge and practice, and ending with the strength and continuity of internet connections. All the previous problems might lead to not attempting to make a real shift from traditional to up-to-date ways of doing and submitting homework.

It is worth mentioning that only 3 (7.0 %) students think that paper-and-pencil homework is more practical than exchanging files online. On the other hand, 17 (39.5%) students ensure that both types of homework assignments are required, while the rest agree that submitting electronic files is more practical than submitting paperwork. Therefore, when combining the number of students who stressed that electronic file submission is more practical with the number of students who chose the option "I think both are required," the total indicates 40 students with the idea of online homework assignments (93.0 %).

4.3.3. Students' Homework Analysis

- **Paper sheets**

Students' sheets showed that they lack the skills of preparing and organizing assignments and research papers in general. It was also noticed that they have problems in writing, summarizing, and paraphrasing; they tend to copy all the content without focusing on the main idea. Students who have good handwriting tend to write a large number of papers with no clear organization. Some students hired specialists in research and printing to prepare their homework assignments. In brief, this type of assignment is desirable in this context because there are no standards that students must adhere to.

- **Electronic Files (Word/PDF/Presentation)**

Even this type lacks organization. For instance, almost all students' files don't contain the main components, like the interface page with the title and student's name,

and some of them write their names in Arabic at the end. No numbers or subtitles are included, and all content is consecutive without concentrating on punctuation. The copy and paste technique is clear all over the received 34 files; students didn't make efforts to change the original format, which leads to the case of one file that includes different fonts and font sizes. This finding ensures students' responses to the question related to problems in preparing electronic files since they admitted that they don't have typing and formatting skills. In some cases, students screenshot the search results and send them to teachers, while other students convert Word files into PDF and send file links. Students' presentations of lesson plans and designs looked more organized because students relied on filling out ready-made templates and projects.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Significantly, it was concluded that shifting from paper-and-pencil homework to online homework might influence students' educational experience and performance in general. This conclusion reports that doing and submitting homework assignments online offers opportunities for students to improve some important skills they need in education, work, and daily life. Sending and receiving files online is being more requested in teaching and learning, banking transactions, scientific research, and shopping. Therefore, it is essential for students as adults to be skilled in dealing with devices and applications in general.

In terms of comprehension and fixation of information, it was obvious that homework plays a major role in the educational process. During conducting this study, the students themselves acknowledged that homework is important. Types of homework in Higher Education can change depending on different circumstances. How well do students accept the idea of homework? What assignments do teachers request students to do? What skills do students need to acquire? How well do teachers help students in conducting homework assignments? By answering these questions, we can decide if homework is effective.

The main challenges faced by the students in paper sheets and online homework assignments are related to self-development. Skills like handwriting, searching, typing, formatting, and online searching need to be practiced by students in order to be acquired and improved. Teachers are also requested to design and assign homework according to specific standards that meet learning objectives, develop students' performance, and facilitate students' work.

Finally, it is recommended that doing and submitting different types of homework be treated as a tool for checking students' comprehension and not only as a way for

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students to earn higher scores. Teachers are responsible for gradually making students aware of online homework. They also need to develop their ways of assigning homework. Being fixed to traditions of doing paper-and-pencil homework can lead to delays in students' abilities and skills compared with other regions or countries. It is recommended that university students not overload homework, considering that they experience a new lifestyle in college that prepares them to be responsible adults with different missions and jobs.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Do you think homework is important to ensure students' comprehension?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) I don't know
2. What type of homework do you use to do?
 - a) Paper-and-pencil homework
 - b) PDF or Word files
 - c) Both of the above
3. What are the problems that face you while doing paper-and-pencil homework?
 - a) I have no problems
 - b) I have bad handwriting
 - c) I don't have the skills of search
4. What are the problems that you face while preparing electronic homework files?
 - a) I don't have online search skills
 - b) I have a bad internet connection

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- c) I don't have the skills of typing and formatting
5. Do you think that preparing and submitting homework files online is more practical than doing paper-and-pencil homework?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) I think both are required

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