

UNDERSTANDING UNDERPERFORMANCE IN EFL STUDENTS: FACTORS AFFECTING THE COMPREHENSION OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to effectively advancing the educational process by motivating students to become engaged with course material and exercise independent thought, assignments are essential. This paper focuses on how to help EFL students to read and understand correctly their academic assignments while emphasizing the importance of comprehension skills and critical thinking. The paper includes a structured approach that outlines a comprehensive framework for teaching EFL students how to read assignments effectively by integrating both theoretical insights and practical classroom applications. It also shows how correctly understanding an assignment facilitates students' success and motivation development. The discussion sparked in this paper is supported by both theoretical insights and some practical examples.

KEYWORDS: assignment understanding, comprehension strategies, critical analysis, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English Language Learning (ELL)

1. Introduction

In the field of EFL for higher education, assignments represent some of the fundamental tools for assessing both learning and student engagement, therefore the ability to correctly understand and respond to assignments is vital for the students' academic success. Assignments are not just tasks to be completed by the students; they usually go beyond rote learning and they are developed to ensure that students have thoroughly engaged with the course material, have been able to develop their own insights, and have expanded their skills of a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

However, many students face task comprehension challenges that hinder their academic performance. Anderson & Pearson

(1984, 255) pointed out the importance of understanding a text which, according to them, is based on activating previous schemata: *“To say that one has comprehended a text is to say that she has found a mental «home» for the information in the text, or else that she has modified existing mental home in order to accommodate that new information”*.

Oftentimes misinterpretation leads to inadequate responses which, in turn, result in poor academic performance. Assignments usually encourage students to immerse themselves deeper in course material and address questions that have not been treated at length in class. All teachers had to deal at some point in their careers with students who underperform because they do not understand

assignments correctly. Therefore, it is crucial to equip students with the skills that allow them to read and comprehend assignments accurately. This paper investigates some of the underlying reasons behind these challenges and the factors that have an impact on assignment understanding while at the same time providing strategies to mitigate these issues.

2. Theoretical Framework

Reading in a foreign language involves some intricate cognitive processes such as decoding, inference, or synthesis. The schema theory postulates that readers make sense of new material by drawing on their prior knowledge, therefore students' inadequate cultural and linguistic understanding can make it difficult for them to comprehend assignments and tasks in EFL environments. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, comprehension abilities in language learning can be enhanced through social interaction and scaffolding.

There are a few major theories that provide the theoretical framework for understanding how assignments function in education. First, the constructivist theory posits that students are able to build their own knowledge based on introspection and lived experience. According to its principles, assignments should be created to demand independent thinking from the students as well as to encourage them to actively reflect on what they have learned. Second, the theory of self-regulated learning entails the idea that learners should guide their own learning and education. Assignments that foster learning autonomy and self-control are encouraged as they require independent thinking and research in order to be completed.

Assignments play an important role in helping students immerse in course material because they encourage them to revisit the content that they have previously learned. This contributes to the reinforcement of learning, allowing students to solidify their understanding of the material taught in class;

at the same time, they provide opportunities for students to explore topics in-depth as classroom settings do not always allow for this. Assignments develop students' higher critical thinking skills because they usually require the integration of various pieces of information, which eventually leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

3. Factors Affecting Assignment Comprehension

Various factors may lead to students struggling with their understanding of assignments in EFL classes, such as (a) language proficiency, (b) cognitive challenges, (c) cultural and contextual differences, and even (d) instructional issues.

a) Oftentimes, language proficiency proves to be a barrier to understanding tasks and assignments. This includes vocabulary limitations which lead to difficulty in understanding academic terminology and complex instructions, challenges related to grammar and syntax, and students' reading fluency which can dictate a slower reading pace for some students and also difficulty in processing more dense assignments.

b) The main issue when addressing cognitive challenges is connected to students' capacity to plan, organize, and initiate the tasks that are required for assignment completion.

c) Nunan (1999) points out that background knowledge, and especially cultural knowledge, is important for L2 (second language) comprehension. Grabe & Stoller (2011) also suggest that the existing differences between L1 (first language) and L2 reading stem from three major types of differences: linguistic and processing differences, individual and experiential differences, and socio-cultural and institutional differences. Cultural and contextual differences play an important role in assignment comprehension especially because there are always differences between students' expectations in the target language as compared to their performance in the

native language. Sometimes cultural differences lead to misinterpretations of assignment requirements especially in the culture and civilization classes related to the target language.

d) Students' assignment comprehension can also be impacted by the lack of clarity in instructions, unclear assignment prompts and evaluation criteria, as well as insufficient scaffolding provided by the teacher to the EFL students to navigate the assignment requirements.

4. Challenges, Solutions, and Recommendations

One of the main challenges I have noticed while teaching English to university students is related to their lack of direction while reading and understanding the assignment. This is usually connected to issues related to time management as well as accessing the correct resources in order to complete the task. Teachers can help students overcome this hurdle by giving them precise directions, outlining the detailed assignment procedure, and making resources available.

Teachers, in turn, also experience a series of challenges related to designing the right assignments. Sometimes it might be difficult to create assignments that are challenging yet doable and to give prompt feedback. Zimmerman (2002) points out that few teachers give their students clear study techniques or encourage them to set goals for their academic assignments. Furthermore, it is also uncommon to ask students to assess their own work or level of competency for new assignments.

As an English teacher, I have witnessed first-hand the struggles that EFL students face when confronted with complex academic assignments. However, teaching EFL students how to read correctly and understand writing assignments goes beyond simply raising their grades and academic performance; it also gives them the self-assurance that they need to successfully handle academic challenges independently.

Some efficient strategies that could be used to correctly understand English language assignments could be:

➤ **Annotating** – which refers to teaching students how to find important information or keywords in the text of the assignment prompt that could lead them to providing the correct answer.

➤ **Chunking** – although this technique is usually used in reading comprehension activities, it can also prove efficient when understanding assignments, especially if these have a higher degree of complexity. Breaking the whole assignment into smaller, more manageable parts can aid students in correctly completing the whole task.

➤ **Questions** – while working in class, students can always address the teacher for clarifications.

EFL instructors use assignments to make sure that their students have thoroughly gone through the course material and that they have also been able to use their independent thinking since sometimes there are questions that are not covered in-depth in class. Teachers should use scaffolding in order to help their students understand their assignments, improve their overall academic performance and comprehension skills to interpret tasks, and perform better both in and outside of the classroom. There are a few directions that teachers should take into consideration when explaining assignments to their students.

First, teachers and language instructors must make sure that their students do not wander away from the actual assignment; students sometimes end up jumping from one topic to another literally getting lost in a maze of arguments and reasons, especially when they are writing essays. The task formulation is very important as at times students struggle with the words comprised in the actual prompt, such as *discuss* and *analyse*.

“Discuss” is a word usually related to spoken language, dialogue, and communication, thus making the term

prone to misunderstanding and leading to informal and even aimless language production on the part of the students. Therefore, the teacher must help students understand that, in the context of a written assignment, “discuss” refers to completing a well-structured and very specific task, i.e. creating a logical argumentation that implies thorough documentation on the topic and which takes into account and addresses a wide range of sources. The thesis statement in the case of a well-written discussion should go beyond just restating the assigned question. The teacher should help the students understand that it also entails using sources, evidence, and even comparing and contrasting.

“Analyse” or “analysis” are terms that refer to mental exercises that, in the case of foreign language assignments, indicate examining the structural elements of a specific topic concerning certain sources or analogues. In order to develop a correct analysis, students should be guided into creating a collection of observations based on their independent thinking while refraining from excessive listing or source summarizing.

Second, teachers should plan their class environment in such a way that would allow a lowering of the emotional barriers of their students so that they would not be afraid to approach the language instructor every time they feel they need clarification on the assignment. Thus, students can perform better if they know better what is expected of them.

Successful learning of a foreign language does not only mean acquiring grammar and vocabulary; it also comprises knowing how to read assignment prompts correctly since this will definitely provide solutions to a lot of the students’ uncertainties about the task. Teachers frequently must deal with students who request assistance with an assignment just because they have not even read the prompt, let alone read it correctly.

I always provide my students with the following guidelines for correctly reading an assignment prompt:

➤ Pay attention to the key verbs in the task:

● *information words* (require students to demonstrate what they have learned about a specific subject): *define, describe, explain, summarize*;

● *relation words* (ask students to show that they understand how certain things or events are connected): *compare, contrast, apply, relate*;

● *interpretation words* (are used to encourage students to defend their own ideas about a certain topic): *analyse, argue, assess, justify, synthesize, suggest*.

➤ Look for words such as *how, what, when, where, why*; these will always indicate what type of specific information should be included;

➤ Always think about who the audience is (pay attention to tone and the information that can be used) and what kind of writing style is acceptable for the paper (even though sometimes teachers welcome a light-hearted, even humorous tone in their students’ papers, the students have to always make sure that they have fulfilled the whole task correctly);

➤ Try not to be overly creative or imaginative when you answer the assignment prompt.

One classroom activity that I have found particularly helpful when it comes to assignment understanding is *Think-Pair-Share*. Although it might seem a bit time-consuming, it guarantees a successful understanding of the task/assignment by all students, even those with lower English language levels. In this activity, students first think about their responses to the assignment, then pair up to discuss their ideas. This stage of the activity ensures that the students have understood correctly what they need to do since they double-check with one of their colleagues. Finally, each student shares their insights with the class.

This activity not only ensures that the students understand the assignment correctly, but it also promotes critical thinking and collaborative learning among them.

There are also a series of strategies that teachers can use to help EFL students understand their assignments better. The most important is related to explicit language instruction which implies providing students with both grammatical rules and academic vocabulary that are pertinent to their assignment. Individualized help – based on students' cognitive and language skills – should also be provided by the teacher since each student has their own needs and pace of learning. Teachers should also make sure that the assignment prompts are understandable, concise, and appropriate for the students' language proficiency level.

5. Conclusions

This paper has outlined an approach that combines theoretical understanding with classroom applications to teach EFL students how to read assignments effectively. I have

included examples of personal experiences to offer a practical viewpoint and to demonstrate that these techniques can have profound effects on students' academic performance.

It can be said that a student's ability to succeed academically depends a great deal on how well they comprehend their assignments. Language instructors should improve their students' ability to tackle assignments and engage at a deeper level with their learning material. It is important to understand the reasons behind students' difficulties in comprehending assignments, so English teachers should develop effective teaching strategies to address not only language proficiency but also cultural and individual differences and the cognitive challenges that each student might face in order to assist students in overcoming the obstacles in foreign language learning and achieve academic performance. Critical readings of assignments facilitate proficiency both in reading and writing and will make students more adept at comprehending the overall objectives of their language class.

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