

# The Role of Homework in Foreign Language Learning

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to examine the role of homework in foreign language instruction and learning. The study was conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and quantitative analysis of the amount of homework that foreign language teachers assigned their students. Special attention was given to whether or not homework expectations varied according to the type of schedule that was used for instruction.*

*The study results indicated that foreign language teachers at all levels felt strongly that homework is essential to language teaching and learning. However, the quantity of homework expected in French I classes did not vary significantly according to the schedule used for instruction. Most teachers assigned homework as a means for students to practice material that had already been taught in class. Homework in lower-level classes consisted primarily of rote exercises, whereas homework assignments in upper-level classes allowed students to integrate and apply the language skills they were learning. However, few teachers did more than simply check that the homework was done, placing little emphasis on whether or not the homework had been completed correctly. There was little evidence to indicate that homework either contributed to or detracted from the language-learning process.*

## Introduction

In response to the question "How important is homework to student success in your class?" almost any foreign language teacher will reply that daily practice of the foreign language through homework is a vital component of success in language learning. Yet research reveals that the effectiveness of homework in any subject is questionable because there are so many contributing variables. During research conducted for a study on the impact of block scheduling on foreign language instruction, foreign language teachers expressed concern about the decreased amount of time available for homework on certain schedules (Wisconsin Association 1995). The concerns were two-fold. During instruction on a block schedule, classes generally met for half as many days as they did on a traditional daily schedule. Thus, teachers had fewer opportunities to assign homework and were often reluctant to require longer assignments to make up for lost time. Also, since class periods were longer on a block schedule, teachers in the Wisconsin report felt that in-class instructional time was threatened because teachers and students both had a difficult time maintaining momentum for 90 to 100 minutes, the average length of a class on a block schedule. The feeling was that a frequent solution to filling the time of these longer class periods was to allow students to do homework, thus decreasing the amount of time available for the introduction of new material (Wisconsin Association 1995).

Further research to address these concerns yielded little information on the role that homework actually played in foreign language learning. Consequently, a homework questionnaire became one component of the block scheduling research study that ultimately compared end-of-course performance of French I students who had been instructed on one of three different schedules: an alternating day block schedule, a 4 x 4 block schedule, or a 6- or 7-period day tra-

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ditional schedule (Wallinger 1998, 1999, 2000). This article details the results of that study and related research as they apply to the role of homework in foreign language learning. The results of the study indicated that foreign language teachers *do* feel that homework is essential to language teaching and learning but that the quantity of homework expected in French I classes did not vary significantly according to the schedule used for instruction. Also, there was no significant difference in student performance on end-of-course tests administered in the three schedules studied. Further analysis contributed to an understanding of why foreign language teachers assigned homework and how they intended it to be used to reinforce learning.

### **The Role of Homework in Extending Classroom Learning**

The effectiveness of homework as an instructional tool has been a topic of debate for decades. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have both positive and negative opinions about the frequency and length of homework assignments, the purpose of assignments, and whether or not homework should be assigned at all. One of the problems that has become apparent in reviewing homework studies is the difficulty in controlling or even documenting all the variables that affect the assigning and completion of homework (Cool and Keith 1991; Cooper 1994; Copple et al. 1992; Foyle and Bailey 1988; Keith 1982; Thomas 1992). In order to carry out a significant homework study, many teachers and students must be sampled. Homework studies generally rely on self-reports or surveys from these two groups, and this has led to questionable reliability and accuracy of the information that has been collected. Another problem of previous studies was the emphasis on the use of homework in the core courses of English, science, social studies, and especially mathematics. In the area of foreign language education, there were very little data available about the effects of homework on student learning (Kazmierzak 1994; Wallinger 1998).

The general finding from the review of many studies and meta-analyses was that the effectiveness of homework as an instructional tool was inconclusive. But while homework had varying impacts at different grade levels and with different subject areas, it was not harmful to student learning and achievement (Foyle and Bailey 1988). This finding, coupled with pressure and expectations from parents and the general public, has led teachers to continue assigning homework to their students. In fact, in two studies conducted by this author, 96% of foreign language teachers assigned homework on a regular basis (Wallinger 1997, 1998).

#### *What is Homework?*

Most researchers of homework generally agreed that homework was work assigned to students by teachers that was

intended to be done outside of school time (Cooper 1989, 1994; Kelley and Kahle 1995; Thomas 1992). However, this simple definition did not explain the many variations that could occur within homework assignments. Cooper (1994) defined the following distinctions within homework assignments: (1) amount, (2) purpose, (3) skill area used, (4) degree of individualization, (5) degree of student choice, (6) completion, and (7) social context.

#### **Amount of Homework**

The amount of homework assigned can be defined in two ways: (1) the frequency with which homework is assigned, and (2) the length of the assignments (Cooper 1994). Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg (1984) found that daily homework produced more effective results than homework that was assigned sporadically.

Homework was one of the areas in which American students have suffered in comparison with their international counterparts (Copple et al. 1992; Griffith et al. 1994; Paschal et al. 1984; Walberg et al. 1985). Walberg et al. (1985) found that the average American student spent 4 to 5 hours per week on homework compared with 28 hours watching television. In contrast, students in most other countries spent 8 to 9 hours per week doing homework.

Stiles (1992) also conducted a study in an international environment. While teaching in an international school in Bangkok, he noticed differences in test scores among American, European, and Asian students in his biology classes. In an American-style school where classes were conducted in English, the Asian and European students were outperforming the Americans. In a survey, he found "that Americans lagged behind the Asian students by 22 percent and behind the Europeans by 45 percent in time spent doing homework. The average time spent watching videos, TV, or listening to music was greater in each group than the time spent doing homework, but the difference was greatest among the Americans" (Stiles 1992, 62).

The greatest discrepancy occurred in the amount of time spent socially with families. The Europeans and Asians spent twice as much time with their families as the Americans. Stiles concluded that close family ties led the European and Asian students to take greater interest and pride in academic achievement. He suggested that "if Americans [were] truly interested in upgrading their schools, parents must begin by taking more (or at least *some*) responsibility for their children's success instead of expecting the schools to do it all" (Stiles 1992, 63).

#### **Purpose of Homework**

Homework can have both instructional and noninstructional purposes (Cooper 1994). Most teachers cited the following instructional reasons for assigning homework: (1) practice, (2) preparation, and (3) extension (Lee and Pruitt

1979; Palardy 1995). Lee and Pruitt (1979) also included integration, and Thomas (1992) added creative assignments to this taxonomy. Noninstructional purposes included: (1) parent-child communication, (2) fulfilling directives, (3) punishment, and (4) community relations (Lee and Pruitt 1979). Most homework served more than one of the purposes listed above (Cooper 1994).

Practice homework reinforced the learning of material that had already been presented in class. Preparation assignments introduced material to be presented in upcoming lessons. Extension homework required students to transfer knowledge or skills previously learned to new situations. In integration homework, the student applied many separately learned skills or concepts to produce a single product such as a book report or a project (Cooper 1994).

Wallinger conducted a qualitative foreign language homework study in 1997, during which questionnaires were distributed to nine modern language teachers representing levels I to V of French, German, Russian, and Spanish. All teachers stated that they felt that homework was essential to successful language learning, and all made regular homework assignments in their classes. During follow-up interviews, teachers had the opportunity to elaborate on their written questionnaire responses. These teachers felt that the most successful foreign language assignments varied according to the maturity of the students and the level of language study. Teachers felt that beginning foreign language students, who were presumably younger, did not have either the skills or the self-discipline to do long assignments that required them to process information. The teachers seemed content to assign short assignments that required students to practice what they had learned in class that day. The teachers were also aware that beginning students were more likely to complete such assignments, and this realization resulted in teacher satisfaction if the students returned to class the next day with a completed assignment.

Students in the intermediate classes were asked to complete assignments that required more creative use of the language. However, teachers still mentioned the need for practicing grammar structures and vocabulary.

Students in the advanced classes were given a much greater variety of homework assignments, which allowed them to use and practice their skills in many different ways, from written journals to speaking tapes as practice for Advanced Placement exams. There was still some mention of the importance of homework to practice grammar structures and vocabulary; however, this homework generally required students to manipulate the language in a much more sophisticated way than had been required in the lower levels (see Table 1).

### Skill Areas Used in Homework

Various homework assignments asked students to use different skill areas: reading, writing, memorization, rehearsal, and so on. (Cooper 1994). Often more than one skill was involved in an assignment. Alleman and Brophy (as cited in Kazmierzak 1994, 6) felt that "the most suitable assignments ... engaged students in higher-order thinking and allowed for individualism." Kazmierzak (1994) agreed that homework should involve higher-order thinking skills and be given in a variety of forms.

However, an Illinois survey of 92 high schools found that the most common types of homework were answering textbook questions (50%) and doing worksheets (25%). Assignments that required critical thinking skills were assigned infrequently (Murphy and Decker 1990).

In Wallinger's (1997) research study, it appeared that higher-level foreign language students did benefit from the kinds of homework recommended by Kazmierzak (1994) — assignments that required higher-order thinking, that were given in a variety of forms, and that allowed for individualism. Students in beginning-level foreign language classes, however, tended to be given assignments that required more rote practice and allowed for only limited creative use of the language. Grammar and vocabulary exercises prepared by the teacher or taken from textbooks and workbooks tended to dominate the homework assignments given to beginning students.

Most foreign language teachers surveyed (Wallinger 1997) felt that all four skills used in language learning — listening, speaking, reading, and writing — were called upon to complete homework assignments at all levels of language learning. However, these skills were not emphasized equally. Knowledge about the foreign culture, while not a skill, was also sometimes required in homework assignments. Based on word counts and references made to various kinds of required assignments, writing was three times more likely to be used in homework than reading, five times more likely to be used than speaking, and seventeen times more likely to be used than listening and culture (see Table 2).

Teachers generally felt that speaking and listening were emphasized in class, and homework was a good vehicle to practice the classroom-neglected skills of reading and writing. Also, it was more practical to make reading and writing homework assignments.

### Homework Completion

There was growing concern among teachers that even though they assigned homework, students did not complete it correctly or did not do it at all (Kelley and Kahle 1995; Levine and Anesko 1987). Kelley and Kahle (1995) acknowledged that homework researchers frequently neglected to evaluate whether students who received homework assignments actually attempted and/or completed

them. Some authors (Kazmierzak 1994; Kelley and Kahle 1995; Palardy 1995) felt that teachers should take ample time to explain the assignment at some point during the class. Assignments that were hastily made at the end of class led to a high probability that they would not be completed because students failed to write them down or did not understand how to do them.

All nine teachers involved in Wallinger's (1997) study stated that they checked homework daily, and that this was one way to ensure that students completed their homework. Teachers at all levels also specifically mentioned that they went over the correct answers in class so that students could correct their work.

All teachers who participated in this study (Wallinger 1997) factored a homework grade into the students' nine-week grades. The value of homework ranged from 10% to 15% and varied by individual teacher, not by language or by level of language. Teachers generally tried not to give too much weight to homework because they did not want to penalize students for errors made during practice. However, teachers also acknowledged that unless homework grades were given, students had little incentive to complete it.

### *The Effects of Homework*

Cooper (1994) grouped the effects of homework into positive and negative categories. Positive effects included:

1. Better retention of factual knowledge.
2. Increased understanding.
3. Better critical thinking, concept formation, and information processing.
4. Encouragement of learning during leisure time.
5. Improved attitude toward school.
6. Better study habits and skills.
7. Greater self-direction and self-discipline.
8. Better time management.
9. More inquisitiveness.
10. More independent problem solving.

Negative effects of homework included:

1. Physical and emotional fatigue.
2. Denial of access of leisure time activities.
3. Confusion over instructional techniques.
4. Copying from other students.
5. Repetition of errors.

### *Does Homework Really Improve Student Learning?*

After substantial research on the subject of homework effectiveness, the results were inconclusive (Thomas 1992). It was possible to find general research studies that both refuted and supported the effectiveness of homework on academic achievement. A study by Cool and Keith (1991) pointed out the difficulty of assessing the effective-

ness of homework because of other intervening variables. They found that student motivation had the strongest effect on homework, followed by academic course work, gender, and quality of instruction. Paschal et al. (1984) cited educators and lay writers who opposed homework on the grounds that it was unwholesome, professionally unsupervised, and allowed students to practice their mistakes.

Bents-Hill and others (as cited in Thomas 1992) found that as homework time increased, students' grades remained the same, and in some cases decreased. However, homework did appear to be more effective as the child grew older. They concluded that the amount of homework did not contribute significantly to a student's achievement test scores, competency test scores, or teacher-assigned grades. Based on this study, Thomas wondered if it was possible for homework to even be counterproductive beyond a certain point.

Other researchers, however, have documented that regular homework improved student achievement, especially if it was assigned on a regular basis and children were held accountable for doing it (Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1992). Most studies that have assigned students to groups with homework versus groups that received no homework have shown that the first group had better problem-solving and computation skills and better grades (Cooper 1994; Kelley and Kahle 1995).

In 1982, Keith conducted a study using a large sample of 20,364 high school seniors drawn from the 1980 National Center for Education Statistics' High School and Beyond longitudinal study. He used a path analysis to analyze data collected from the study. It confirmed that an increase in time spent on homework had a positive effect on student's grades in high school. His results refuted the argument that increased study time led to diminishing returns in achievement. There was a strong linear relationship between grades and homework time at all ability levels.

Chen and Ehrenberg (1993) felt that a distinction should be made on how student achievement was measured when considering the effect of homework. They felt that teacher grades were a better measure of achievement for these purposes than standardized tests. They concluded that regular preparation of homework was often a component of teacher grades and that teachers sometimes exaggerated the value of the effort of students. "Thus, a student who prepare[d] his or her homework deserve[d] a higher grade, even if his or her test results were not satisfactory. Similarly, a student who [knew] the material but [did not] do his or her homework deserve[d] a lower grade" (Chen and Ehrenberg 1993, 406). Keith (1982) noted this same phenomenon and expressed concern that it contributed to grade inflation that in turn "could be contributing to the erosion of confidence in the public schools" (Keith 1982,

**Table 1**

FREQUENCY COUNT OF KINDS OF MOST EFFECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS AS PERCEIVED BY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS (WALLINGER 1997)

Beginning (Levels 1 and 2)	Intermediate (Level 3)	Advanced (Levels 4 and 5)
12 Exercises	6 Creative writing	8 Compositions & writings
9 Grammar and structure	4 Grammar	6 Grammar
6 Vocabulary	3 Exercises	3 Skits
5 Workbook	2 Readings	3 Translation
5 Journals	2 Oral presentation	2 Journals
4 Fill in the blank	1 Translation	2 Readings
3 Reinforcement	1 Prepare for discussion	1 Prepare for discussion
3 Textbook	1 Answer questions	1 Review
2 Study	1 Outline	1 Teacher-generated worksheets
2 Readings	1 Teacher generated worksheets	1 English novel
1 Translation	1 Categorize	1 Culture
1 Flash cards	1 Study	1 Current Events
1 Memorization	1 Exercises from textbook	1 Technology
1 Lists	1 Write sentences	1 Study
	1 Read notes	
	1 Vocabulary	

**Table 2**

FREQUENCY COUNT OF SKILLS REQUIRED TO COMPLETE HOMEWORK AT ALL LEVELS (WALLINGER 1997)

Skill	Frequency
Writing	17
Reading	7
Speaking	3
Listening	1
Culture	1

252). Certainly, the results of Wallinger's (1997) study on foreign language homework, showing that teacher's nine-week grades generally included a homework completion component, support these concerns.

### Qualitative Research on the Impact of

### Homework on Foreign Language Learning

Few studies related directly to homework in foreign language classes were located during preparation for this study. Kazmierzak (1994) felt that language learning was most difficult at the second year level and that daily study and practice were necessary. She conducted a small study of only 13 students in a high school German II class. She compared the final grades from two marking periods, one where she checked homework daily and another where homework was assigned and discussed but not checked by the teacher. She found that when a grade for homework completion was a part of the final grade for the first marking period, those grades were higher. However, when the homework completion grade was removed, and the actual grades of the students were used as a measure, there was no significant difference in student performance. She concluded that the issue was not the time spent on homework or its completion but rather the type of homework assignment that she gave. A student survey indicated that the most helpful assignments were those in which they wrote paragraphs in German to express their own thoughts. Also, assignments where she had made written remarks were more beneficial because the com-

ments were individualized to the particular student. Students also stated that in making an assignment, the teacher should write it on the blackboard or overhead rather than giving it verbally.

Homework was also of concern to foreign language teachers who were teaching on various forms of a block schedule. A report by the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers (1995) acknowledged that homework on a block schedule was an unresolved issue. The pacing of instruction on the block might not provide enough time to allow an idea to mature and be clarified. Depending on how the course was structured, students might have less homework if time were permitted to complete the assign-

ments during the class period. On the other hand, in order to cover enough content, students might need to complete more homework on certain schedules because the number of clock hours per year in a block schedule was less than in a traditional schedule.

In a survey conducted by the Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools (1997), teachers as a whole reported that students instructed on a daily schedule with shorter periods were more likely to complete their homework than those on a block schedule. They also felt that students who met daily were better able to catch up on their school work after absences from class.

**Table 3**

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF NUMBER OF HOURS OF EXPECTED HOMEWORK OUTSIDE OF CLASS

Group	Count	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI for Mean
4 x 4	17	37.2794	10.3667	2.5143	31.9494 to 42.6095
AB	23	42.8804	19.3482	4.0344	34.5137 to 51.2472
Daily	20	51.0000	20.1540	4.5066	41.5676 to 60.4324
Total	60	44.0000	18.1563	2.3440	39.3097 to 48.6903
Group	Minimum	Maximum			
4 x 4	22.5000	67.5000			
AB	.0000	78.7500			
Daily	.0000	90.0000			
Total	.0000	90.0000			

4x4 = 4 x 4 semester block schedule;  
 AB = alternating block day schedule;  
 Daily = traditional schedule

**Table 4**

## ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF NUMBER OF HOURS OF EXPECTED OUTSIDE HOMEWORK

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	1776.6560	888.3280	2.8651	.0652
Within Groups	57	17672.7190	310.0477		
Total	59	19449.3750			

Levene Test for Homogeneity of Variances

Statistic	DF1	DF2	2-Tail Sig.
2.1183	2	57	.130

## Quantitative Research on Homework and Foreign Language Learning

Foreign language teachers have insisted that homework was an essential part of foreign language learning and have expressed concerns about the lack of opportunity to assign homework when they taught with various forms of block scheduling. However, it became increasingly clear that very little research on foreign language homework was available. As a result, this author included homework data collection as part of a study conducted on end-of-course performance by French I students who had been instructed on one of three schedules: an alternating day block schedule, a 4 x 4 semester block schedule, or a 6- or 7-period per day traditional schedule (Wallinger 1998, 1999, 2000).

### Research Questions

The study had five research questions that are stated below. The answers to the first two questions and the processes used to determine those answers follow each question. The answers to the last three research questions are outlined within this article.

1. Does the time allocated for learning French I vary according to the schedule on which students are instructed?

The answer to this question was determined by analyzing the data provided by teachers on the amount of time available for instruction on their various schedules. The study revealed that the students who were taught on the daily class schedule had significantly more time available for instruction ( $p < .05$ ) than those taught on either the 4 x 4 schedule or the alternating day schedule (Wallinger 1998, 1999, 2000). Complete information, including data analysis and tables, may be found in the previous references.

2. Does French I student performance vary according to the schedule on which students are instructed (4 x 4, alternating day, or daily schedule) as measured by scores on end-of-course tests in speaking, writing, listening, and reading?

This question was answered by interpreting data provided by scores from each of the skill area tests. The study found that there was not a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) in the performance of French I students in the skills of speaking, writing, listening, or reading as measured by end-of-course tests developed by the researcher (Wallinger 1998, 1999, 2000). Complete information, including data analysis and tables, may be found in the previous references.

3. Does the quantity of homework that teachers assign to their French I students vary according to the schedule used (4 x 4, alternating day, or daily schedule) as described in a self-report instrument from teachers?

4. Which kinds of homework do French I teachers favor — practice, preparation, extension, integrated, or creative?
5. How do French I teachers use the homework in class?

### Methodology

#### Sample

The researcher obtained from the Virginia Department of Education a list of public high schools in the state that offered a French I program in grade 9. A letter was sent to French teachers in each of these 276 public high schools advising them of the study and requesting them to participate. By May 1998, a total of 66 classes had committed to the study: 23 on the 4 x 4 block schedule, 23 on the alternating day schedule, and 20 on the 6- or 7-period day schedule. All classes completed the study with the exception of 6 classes on the 4 x 4 schedule where, at the last minute, the teachers felt that they did not have time to administer the necessary end-of-course tests.

#### Survey Instrument

Teachers of the participating classes were asked to complete a homework survey (Appendix A) prior to the administration of the end-of-course test. All teachers ( $n = 49$ ) completed the portion of the survey dealing with the amount of time they expected their French I students to spend on homework. (The number of teachers and the number of classes are not equal because some teachers had more than one class participating in the study.) Forty of the 49 teachers returned useable data regarding the kind of homework assignments they made and how they used the homework in class.

### Findings

#### Quantity of Homework

This study found that there was no significant difference in the quantity of homework that teachers assigned to their French I students based on the schedule that was used for instruction. Teachers participating in the study reported that they generally did expect their students to spend time on homework assignments, both in and out of class. These homework expectations varied widely according to the schedule that was used for instruction and also within each schedule.

#### Homework Outside of Class

Teachers reported that generally they did expect their students to spend time on homework assignments outside of class. These homework expectations varied widely according to the schedule that was used for instruction and also within each schedule. Teachers on the 4 x 4 semester schedule reported the least number of expected hours ( $M = 37.2794$ ,  $SD = 10.3667$ ) of outside homework annually,

with a range of 22.50 to 67.50 hours. Teachers on the daily schedule reported the greatest number of expected hours ( $M = 51.0000$ ,  $SD = 20.1540$ ) of outside homework annually, with a range of .00 to 90.00 hours. Teachers on the alternating day schedule reported a range of .00 to 78.75 hours ( $M = 42.8804$ ,  $SD = 19.3482$ ) of expected outside homework (see Table 3).

The researcher analyzed the number of hours of expected outside homework using a one-way analysis of variance, wherein the independent variable was type of schedule and the dependent variable was the number of hours of expected homework outside of class. The results indicated that

there was no significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) in the number of hours of expected homework outside of class between any of the three schedule groups (see Table 4).

Thus, students who were instructed on a 4 x 4 semester schedule were expected to do an average of 5.6 fewer hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on an alternating day schedule and an average of 13.7 fewer hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on a daily schedule. Students who were instructed on an alternating day schedule were expected to do an average of 5.6 more hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on a 4 x 4 semester schedule and an

**Table 5**

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF NUMBER OF HOURS OF HOMEWORK ALLOWED IN CLASS

Group	Count	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI for Mean
4 x 4	17	11.3471	12.9024	3.1293	4.7133 to 17.9808
AB	23	5.8696	13.2257	2.7578	.1503 to 11.5888
Daily	20	5.6250	9.3088	2.0815	1.2683 to 9.9817
Total	60	7.3400	12.0308	1.5532	4.2321 to 10.4479
Group	Minimum	Maximum			
4 x 4	.0000	37.5000			
AB	.0000	45.0000			
Daily	.0000	22.5000			
Total	.0000	45.0000			

4x4 = 4 x 4 semester block schedule;  
 AB = alternating block day schedule;  
 Daily = traditional schedule

**Table 6**

## ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF NUMBER OF HOURS OF ALLOWED IN-CLASS HOMEWORK

One Way Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	381.5155	190.7577	1.3328	.2718
Within Group	57	8158.2102	143.1265		
Total	59	8539.7257			
Levene Test for Homogeneity of Variances					
Statistic	DF1	DF2	2-Tail Sig.		
.4494	2	57	.640		



average of 8.1 fewer hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on a daily schedule. Students instructed on a daily schedule were expected to do an average of 13.7 more hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on a 4 x 4 schedule and an average of 8.1 more hours of outside homework per year than those instructed on an alternating day schedule.

Also, the variation in the hours of expected outside homework was very large in two of the groups. The alternating day classes had a range of 78.75 hours of expected outside homework (from .00 hours to 78.75 hours), and the classes that met daily had a range of 90.00 hours of expected outside homework (from .00 hours to 90.00 hours). The range for the 4 x 4 schedule classes was 45.00 (from 22.50 hours to 67.50 hours).

### Homework in Class

Teachers also reported that generally they did expect their students to spend time on homework assignments in class. These homework expectations varied according to the schedule that was used for instruction and also within each schedule. Teachers on the 4 x 4 semester schedule

reported the greatest number of hours of in-class homework time ( $M = 11.3471$  hours,  $SD = 12.9024$  hours) annually, with a range of .00 hours to 37.50 hours. Teachers on the alternating day schedule ( $M = 5.8696$  hours,  $SD = 13.2257$ ) and on the daily schedule ( $M = 5.6250$ ,  $SD = 9.3088$ ) reported a similar number of hours of in-class homework. The in-class hours of homework reports for the alternating day teachers ranged from .00 hours to 45.00 hours. The daily schedule teachers reported a range of .00 hours to 22.50 hours of in-class homework (see Table 5).

The researcher analyzed the number of hours of expected in-class homework using a one-way analysis of variance, wherein the independent variable was type of schedule and the dependent variable was the number of hours of expected homework in class. The results indicated that there was no significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) in the number of hours of expected homework outside of class between any of the three schedule groups (see Table 6)..

Thus, students who were instructed on a 4 x 4 semester schedule were expected to do an average of 5.5 more hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed

**Table 7**

#### FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF KINDS OF HOMEWORK TEACHERS PREFERRED TO ASSIGN TO THEIR FRENCH I STUDENTS

(Numbers after each category of homework indicate the number of responses. Teachers did not rate kinds of homework that they did not use.)

Schedule Type	4 x 4 Schedule (n = 15)	Alternating Day Schedule (n = 15)	6-/7-Period Daily Schedule (n = 10)	Total (n = 40)
First Choice	Practice - 14 Preparation - 1	Practice - 15	Practice - 10	Practice - 39 Preparation - 1
Second Choice	Extension - 8 Preparation - 3 Practice - 1	Extension - 10 Preparation - 3 Integration - 1	Extension - 8 Integration - 2	Extension - 26 Preparation - 6 Integration - 3 Practice - 1
Third Choice I	Integration - 10 Creative - 3 Extension - 2	Integration - 8 Preparation - 2	Integration - 6 Preparation - 1 Extension - 1 Creative - 1	Integration - 24 Creative - 3 Preparation - 3 Extension - 3 Creative - 1
Fourth Choice	Creative - 6 Preparation - 1 Extension - 1 Integration - 1	Creative - 3 Integration - 2 Preparation - 1	Creative - 4 Preparation - 1 Integration - 1	Creative - 13 Integration - 4 Preparation - 3 Extension - 1
Fifth Choice	Creative - 2	Preparation - 1 Creative - 1	Creative - 1	Creative - 4 Preparation - 1

Table 8

## FREQUENCY COUNT OF THE WAYS FRENCH I TEACHERS PREFERRED TO USE HOMEWORK IN CLASS

Schedule Type	4 x 4 Schedule (n = 15)	Alternating Day Schedule (n = 15)	6-7- Period Daily Schedule (n = 10)	Total (n = 40)
First Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion - 10</li> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 1</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion - 12</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 2</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion - 10</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion - 32</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 3</li> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 2</li> </ul>
Second Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 6</li> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 2</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 2</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 1</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 5</li> <li>• Graded it - 1</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 13</li> <li>• Graded it - 7</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 4</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 2</li> </ul>
Third Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 2</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 1</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 3</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 4</li> <li>• Checked for Correctness and Completion - 1</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 10</li> <li>• Checked for Completion and Correctness - 4</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 2</li> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 2</li> </ul>
Fourth Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 4</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded it - 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tested or quizzed it - 4</li> <li>• Checked for Completion - 1</li> <li>• Graded it - 1</li> </ul>

on an alternating day schedule and an average of 5.7 more hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed on a daily schedule. Students who were instructed on an alternating day schedule were expected to do an average of 5.5 fewer hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed on a 4 x 4 semester schedule and an average of .24 more hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed on a daily schedule. Students instructed on a daily schedule were expected to do an average of 5.7 fewer hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed on a 4 x 4 schedule and an average of .24 fewer hours of in-class homework per year than those instructed on an alternating day schedule.

### Kinds of Homework Assigned

Teachers were asked to indicate the kinds of homework they assigned to their French I students, using one of the following categories as suggested by Lee and Pruitt (1979), Thomas (1992), and Palardy (1995). They were also asked to indicate the kinds of homework they assigned most often, in order of preference. The researcher created the definitions assigned to each type.

**Practice homework:** reinforces the learning of material that has already been presented in class.

**Preparation homework:** introduces material to be presented in upcoming lessons.

**Extension homework:** requires students to transfer knowledge or skills previously learned to new situations.

**Integration homework:** requires students to apply many separately learned skills or concepts to produce a single product such as a book report, a skit, or a project.

**Creative homework:** provides students freedom of choice in content, format, and skill use to produce a final product.

Based on a frequency count from the responses, teachers using all three scheduling formats assigned practice homework most often in their French I classes. Thirty-nine of the 40 teachers who returned useable data indicated that prac-

tice homework was their number one choice. Extension homework was named as the second most popular kind of assignment, and integration homework was third. Teachers using the 4 x 4 schedule were twice as likely to use creative assignments as those on the other two schedules, although the use of these assignments ranked far behind the use of practice homework (see Table 7).

### Use of Homework in Class

Teachers were asked to indicate how they treated students' homework once it was returned to class using one of the following categories:

**Check it for completion only:** marked that it was done but did not note whether or not it was correct.

**Check it for both completion and correctness:** marked that it was done and penalized the students if answers were not correct.

**Grade it:** graded the paper and recorded a letter or number grade.

**Test/quiz it in class.**

**Do not use it at all.**

**Other.**

Based on a frequency count from the teacher responses, the most popular use of homework in French I classes was to check it for completion only. The second most popular use was to check it for both completion and correctness (see Table 8).

### Discussion

This study found that most teachers in all of the scheduling formats used homework in some manner in their French I classes, primarily for practice. Once back in class, they generally checked the homework for completion but not for correctness. While there was no *significant* difference in either the amount of in-class homework allowed by teachers nor the amount of out-of-class homework expected, students in all groups were generally expected to do some homework. There was, however, quite a range of responses among the teacher estimates for expected homework. For homework outside of class, there was a total range of 90 hours; for homework in class, the range was 45 hours. This may indicate varying teacher views either on the efficacy of homework or the willingness of students to do it. A teacher who used the alternating day schedule wrote: "I really don't give written homework unless the student does not complete an in-class written assignment. Then he has to finish it for homework. But the only homework I give is studying, not written." This comment seems to reflect one of the concerns voiced by the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers (1995) that students in many longer class blocks were allowed to do their homework in class. A teacher on the daily schedule who estimated that her students needed to do 15 minutes per

day of homework commented: "Some days I am lucky to have one-third of the students do an assignment that I may have spent one hour creating for them. However, I keep on trying!"

Given the information collected in this study and assuming a 180-day school year, which is typical in Virginia, students on the 4 x 4 schedule were expected to do an average of 12 minutes of homework per day (1 hour per week). The expectation for students on the alternating day schedule was 14 minutes per day (1 hour and 10 minutes per week); for those on a daily schedule, the average was 17 minutes per day (1 hour and 15 minutes per week). Even though classes in this study were not all meeting 5 days per week over a 180-day period, the numbers above have been converted to daily and weekly estimates for the purposes of comparison. However, due to the wide variation of responses in each category, the differences were not significant ( $p < .05$ ).

While it is impossible to estimate the amount of time expected of students for homework in other subjects, it would appear that given the typical minimum of 5 classes per day, students may be expected to do only 4 to 5 hours of homework *per week* rather than the 4 to 5 hours *per night* of homework suggested as appropriate by Walberg (1991). Depending on the number of classes a student takes and the rigor of those classes, students may be expected to do more homework. However, it would be difficult for the *average* number of hours of homework done by American students to approach the estimated 8 to 9 hours of homework that students in other countries do per week (Walberg 1991).

A second consideration related to the effectiveness of homework is whether or not students actually completed the homework assigned. This study did not collect data in that area. However, several researchers (Kelley and Kahle 1995; Levine and Anesko 1987) reported growing concerns among teachers that students either did not complete their homework or did not complete it correctly. Wallinger (1997) found that foreign language teachers typically checked their students' homework for completion but not for accuracy. Chen and Ehrenberg (1993), Kazmierzak (1994), and Keith (1982) found that giving grades for homework completion rather than correctness tended to inflate grades so that they did not truly reflect what a student knew. This would be another area for future research in the roles that both foreign language homework and homework in general play within the various scheduling formats.

A third area of interest is the kind of homework assignments that teachers make, that is, their purpose and the skill areas used in the assignments. Kazmierzak (1994) concluded that the issue was not the time spent on homework or its completion but rather the type of homework

assignments that the teacher gave. Wallinger (1997) found that the skills of reading and writing were reinforced far more than the skills of listening and speaking in homework that was assigned by foreign language teachers. The current study found that regardless of the schedule used, French I teachers favored practice homework by a large margin. In these assignments, students practiced what they had learned in class that day. The second most frequently used kind of homework was extension homework, wherein students transferred knowledge or skills previously learned to new situations. Teachers on the 4 x 4 schedule did use creative assignments more often than those on the other schedules. These assignments provided students freedom of choice in content, format, and skills used to produce the final product.

A surprising finding was related to the fact that students were allowed to do homework in class, although the variation in hours of in-class homework (range = 45 hours) was not so wide as that for out-of-class homework (range = 90 hours). This finding about in-class homework seemed to corroborate concerns expressed by the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers (1995), which reported that teachers on a block schedule appeared to give their students more time in class to begin their homework, thus subtracting even further from instructional time. Teachers in this study reported that students on the 4 x 4 schedule were allowed to work on homework in class more often ( $M = 11.35$  hours annually) than those on the alternating day schedule ( $M = 5.87$  hours annually) or the daily schedule ( $M = 5.63$  hours annually). However, the difference was not statistically significant.

It was difficult to determine if homework done in class was actually a part of the assignment that was intended as out-of-class work, or whether it was in addition to the out-of-class work. Several teachers indicated that they liked to allot time for their students to begin their homework in class to make sure that the students understood what to do. Others indications pointed to teachers of the longer class periods simply running out of things to do in class and turning to homework to fill the time. Either way, it would seem that this in-class homework would be taking time away from in-class instruction.

Finally, it is important to note that while the raw data do show a difference in the amount of time that students were expected to spend on foreign language homework, both in and out of class, these differences were not significant ( $p < .05$ ). Despite differences in both the amount of in-class time available for instruction and the amount of time expected for homework, there was no significant difference in the performance of students from any of the scheduling groups on the end-of-course test. This would seem to support findings by Kazmierzak (1994) that if student grades

were calculated based only on student-earned grades (not including a grade for homework completion), there was no significant difference in student end-of-course performance.

The results of this study may support findings by Bents-Hill and others (as cited in Thomas 1992) and Barber (1986) that the amount of homework did not contribute significantly to students' achievement test scores, competency test scores, or teacher-assigned grades. In fact, as homework time increased, students' grades remained the same, and in some cases decreased.

The results of this study challenge research by Cooper (1989) and Keith (1982), who concluded that increased time spent on homework had a positive effect on student grades. However, for these studies, student grades were used as the measure of performance, and it is unclear whether or not those grades may have been inflated by the inclusion of a grade for homework completion rather than for accuracy.

This study has confirmed findings by many other researchers (Cool and Keith 1991; Cooper 1994; Copple et al. 1992; Foyle and Bailey 1988; Keith 1982; Thomas 1992) that homework studies are hard to conduct with a high degree of reliability because of the difficulty in controlling or even documenting all the variables that impact the assigning and completion of homework. The problem is further compounded because researchers must rely so heavily on self-reports from teachers and students, thus leading to questionable accuracy about information reported. This proved true in the case of this study; there was no way to determine if teachers were being accurate in the information they reported in answers to a questionnaire.

## Conclusion

It was evident from the research that the amount of time students spent doing homework was relative to each student. Murphy and Decker (1990) pointed out that homework demands were inequitable. They found that 98% of teachers who taught advanced courses assigned homework. In contrast, only 77% of the students in vocational classes, 79% of special education students, and 83% of general education students received homework assignments. Most research pointed to the fact that "student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it. ... Well-designed homework assignments related directly to classwork and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed" (U.S. Department of Education 1987, 51-53). However, there was agreement that much of the homework research may not be totally credible because of reliance on surveys

and self-report and failure to consider other intervening variables (Cool and Keith 1991; Cooper 1994; Copple et al. 1992; Foyle and Bailey 1988; Keith 1982; Palardy 1995; Thomas 1992).

Despite the inconclusive nature of the research, the general expectations from students, parents, and the public support the continued use of homework (Cooper 1994; Foyle and Bailey 1988; Palardy 1988; Thomas 1992). Based on research conducted for this study, a case could be made either for or against homework assignments. However, given the current results from the research, whether or not homework affects a student's academic performance is a highly individual matter tied to his or her age, ability, motivation, and course load (Cool and Keith 1991; Cooper 1994). While there did seem to be a relationship between homework and academic achievement, it cannot be assumed that increased homework necessarily *caused* high achievement. It could be that high achievers were naturally assigned more homework due to the nature of the courses that they took and were naturally more motivated to do it (Cool and Keith 1991).

It is also important to consider the kind of learning that homework was being used to reinforce and the kinds of assignments that teachers were making. There was support that skill-based learning benefited from assignments that allowed students to practice skills until they became good habits (Cooper 1989, 1994; Copple et al. 1992; Earle 1992; Thomas 1992). Certainly, the questionnaire responses of French I teachers who participated in this study intended their homework assignments to be used as practice.

Since this research study was focused on foreign language learning that is based on the four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, a case could be made for homework assignments that extend class time when sufficient practice does not occur in class. However, teachers must monitor these assignments to limit the chance of incorrect practice, which might lead to bad habits becoming second nature. Other unresolved issues are the completion of homework (Kelley and Kahle 1995; Levine and Anesko 1987) and the use of class time for homework (Fairfax County 1997).

This use of homework could become especially important on certain schedules (particularly the alternating day block) where there is a time lapse between classes. Since students did not receive daily reinforcement for foreign language learning, well-designed homework assignments could help decrease the loss of learning that might occur.

Another consideration on the 4 x 4 block scheduling is the reasonableness of assigning the quantity of homework that might be expected to reinforce the new skills that are being learned rapidly in a compressed amount of

time. It is particularly important for teachers to assess their homework assignments to maximize the limited practice time that may occur on such a schedule.

Regardless of whether or not further research proves homework to be an effective tool in foreign language learning, it appears that it is here to stay. Foreign language teachers are clearly convinced that that it is an essential component of successful language learning. This observation, coupled with Foyle and Bailey's (1988) conclusion that homework is not harmful to students, more or less ensures the continued use of homework in foreign language classes. Finally, the general expectation of students, parents, and administrators that homework be assigned on a regular basis is perhaps the most important indicator that homework is likely to remain a part of foreign language instruction.

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## Appendix A

### *The Effects of Alternative Scheduling Practices on Student Performance in French I Homework Questionnaire*

This questionnaire seeks to collect data about homework that is assigned in French I classes. Please answer the questions from the general standpoint of what you require from your French I students.

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Schedule:        4 x 4                    Alternating Day                    Daily

1. As a rule, I allow students to work \_\_\_\_\_ minutes *in class* on their French I homework assignment for the next class meeting.
2. I expect students to spend approximately \_\_\_\_\_ minutes *outside of class* doing French I homework for every class/block period that I teach them.

#### OPTIONAL

The following information will not be used as part of the dissertation. However, I am interested in doing a further comparison of homework that is assigned on the various scheduling formats. If you have time and are interested, I would like to know your practices on the following issues:

3. As a rule, I use homework from the previous class in the following ways:  
(Please rank the strategies in order of how often you use them, with 1 representing the strategy most often used. Please do not put a number beside strategies that you do not use.)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Check it for completion only. I mark that it was done but do not attend to whether or not the answers were correct.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Check it for both completion *and* correctness. I mark that it was done and penalize the student if the answers are not correct.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Grade it. The paper is graded (either by students or myself) and returned to me to record a letter or a number grade.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Test/quiz it in class.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Do not use it at all.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_
4. As a rule, I make the following kinds of homework assignments to my French I students.  
(Please rank the kinds of assignments in order of how often you use them, with 1 representing the kind of assignment most often used. Please do not put a number beside strategies that you do not use.)
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Practice homework: reinforces the learning of material that has already been presented in class.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Preparation homework: introduces material to be presented in upcoming lessons
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Extension homework: requires students to transfer knowledge or skills previously learned to new situations.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Integration homework: requires students to apply many separately learned skills or concepts to produce a single product such as a book report, a skit, or a project
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Creative homework: provides students freedom of choice in content, format, and skill use to produce a final product

Please feel free to share any other information about homework that you assign to your French I students.

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Thank you for your thoughtful responses. Please return this questionnaire by [date] to my intermediary: Name, Street Address, City, State, Zip Code.