

Homework Correction Burden and Strategies for Junior High School English Teachers: An Interview Study

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Abstract

The burden of homework correction is a major stress factor for junior high school teachers and has received significant academic attention. This study aimed to understand the perspectives of junior high school English teachers on homework correction, the challenges they face, and strategies to address these challenges. Thirteen junior high school English teachers from Guangxi, China, were interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed that homework correction benefits teachers by enhancing their understanding of student learning, promoting student engagement, and facilitating classroom management. It also discovered drawbacks such as inefficient or hurried homework correction, and students' dependence on teachers as well. Time constraints and limited energy emerge as primary difficulties junior high school English teachers face. Participants recommended utilization of intelligent assignment management platforms and zero correction practices to alleviate the burden. Additionally, school supports in professional and personal life contribute to teachers' well-being. These findings provide valuable insights and practical strategies for educational management departments to mitigate the homework correction burden experienced by junior high school English teachers.

Keywords: junior high school English teachers, homework correction, burden, strategies, interview

1. Introduction

Work stress among teachers is widespread (Bottiani et al., 2019). In China, teachers are experiencing increasing occupational stress, resulting in adverse stress reactions (Yao et al., 2018). This high level of work stress often contributes to physical and mental health problems for teachers (Madigan et al., 2023), undermines their professional identity (Wiltshire, 2023), reduces job satisfaction (Liang et al., 2022), and ultimately affects the stability and growth of the teaching profession. One of the main contributors to the high stress level is workload (Kotowski et al., 2022; Zang et al., 2022). Teacher workload encompasses instructional tasks such as lesson preparation, teaching, homework correction, and non-instructional responsibilities like meetings, paperwork, and administrative duties assigned by government departments (Tao & Wang, 2023). The burden of homework correction has become increasingly significant among these instructional tasks.

In developed regions of China, homework correction accounts for a more significant portion of primary and secondary school teachers' workload than lesson preparation and teaching (Zhou, 2023). In Western China, primary and secondary school teachers bear heavy workloads primarily due to lesson preparation, teaching, and homework correction (Zhou, 2023). In fact, according to a survey by the OECD, the workload attributed to homework correction surpasses that of lesson preparation and teaching (OECD, 2018). It shows that research on the burden of homework correction for teachers still needs to be completed, and there is a need to explore its characteristics and coping strategies to alleviate teacher workload.

The prevailing practice in primary and secondary schools in China is for teachers to entirely or partially correct homework. These approaches allow teachers to gain comprehensive insight into students' understanding of the subject matter and ease administrative management. However, many students focus solely on their scores rather than reading the teacher's comments or deeply reflecting on their weaknesses. Consequently, teachers' homework

correction efficiency is relatively low (Feng, 2021). In addition, homework correction is time-consuming, and time is a critical indicator when measuring teacher workload (Qin et al., 2017). Teachers must adhere to the allocated time for lesson preparation, teaching, and other mandatory and time-sensitive non-teaching tasks. Reforming homework correction is indispensable for reducing teacher workload. Therefore, it is essential to explore methods and strategies to alleviate the burden of homework correction.

While academia has shown an increasing interest in the burden of homework correction (Xie & Qian, 2022), more research is needed to understand the current state of homework correction and find effective strategies to alleviate heavy workload. This study focuses on exploring the challenges faced by junior high school English teachers in correcting assignments, as English is a language-focused subject with various types of assignments such as written exercises for knowledge consolidation (word copying, blank-filling, reading comprehension, and writing), non-written exercises for skill development (listening, speaking, and reading), as well as projects aimed at enhancing abilities and cultivating cultural literacy. English teachers often spend a substantial amount of time correcting written assignments. Thus, this study aims to investigate the difficulties or challenges junior high school English teachers face from their perspectives, and propose strategies to address these challenges, providing theoretical and empirical support for reducing the workload of junior high school English teachers.

2. Methods

2.1 Interview Guide

An interview guide was designed based on the research objectives. Three senior English teachers with more than five years of teaching experience in junior high school reviewed the interview guide to ensure content validity. Once the content validity was confirmed, formal interviews were conducted with the following questions:

1. Could you share your perspectives on homework correction for junior high school English teachers?
2. What are the main difficulties or challenges faced in homework correction for junior high school English teachers? Why do you think so?
3. Regarding maintaining teaching quality, what effective strategies do you suggest for junior high school teachers to reduce the burden of homework correction?

2.2 Interview Implementation

The interviews were conducted from March 10, 2022, to May 17, 2022. Tencent Meeting, an online platform, was utilized for voice interviews recorded for coding and analysis purposes. Informed consent forms and the interview guide were sent to the interviewees one day before each interview, and the interviewees provided their consent by electronically signing the informed consent form.

2.3 Participants

Participants were selected from junior high school English teachers in a city in Guangxi Province. This city was chosen due to its location in China's western region, where primary and secondary school teachers face heavy workloads and significant stress. Moreover, the researchers' affiliated university has established teaching practice bases for English teacher education in this city, facilitating interviews with junior high school English teachers. Conversations with these teachers indicated their high work pressure, with homework correction being a significant source of stress. They expressed strong motivation to participate in the interview research and find ways to alleviate their workload.

Determining the appropriate number of participants for qualitative research is challenging before conducting interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, it is necessary to plan the number of participants before starting interviews (Xie & Chen, 2021). Guest et al. (2006) suggested that when participants are relatively homogeneous, around 94% of common themes emerge within the first six interviews and 97% within the first twelve interviews. Therefore, conducting twelve interviews is typically sufficient (Ando et al., 2014). In this study, thirteen junior high school teachers, four males, and nine females, participated in the interviews. Their ages ranged from 25 to 36 years old. Among them, six held entry-level titles, four held intermediate-level titles, and three held senior-level titles. Eight were unmarried, while five were married. For ease of reporting, participants were coded based on gender (M for male; F for female) followed by their interview order (01, 02, 03, and so on.).

2.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible and efficient method for analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The

thematic analysis includes data collection, coding, organizing codes into themes, refining and defining themes, mapping themes, and writing the research report.

2.5 Trustworthiness Analysis in Qualitative Research

For qualitative research to be valid and reliable, five factors should be considered: methodological consistency, sample appropriateness, simultaneous data collection and analysis, ideal thinking, and refined theoretical development. These aspects should be examined interactively (Morse et al., 2002). This study strictly adhered to the recommendations of Morse et al. (2002) to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative research conducted.

3. Results

The interview lasted 20-30 minutes per participant, and 1457 words were transcribed from the recordings. From the transcription, 98 raw concepts were identified and categorized into 11 sub-themes, further consolidated into four main themes. The details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Table of Thematic Analysis Results

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency
Advantages of Homework Correction	Understanding students' learning situation	11
	Students value homework	9
	Convenient for management	6
Disadvantages of Homework Correction	Inefficient	8
	Student Dependency on Teachers	6
	Teachers cannot take homework correction seriously.	5
Difficulties in Homework Correction	Time constraints	13
	Limited energy	10
Strategies for Dealing with Homework Correction Difficulties	Introducing intelligent homework management platforms	9
	Achieving zero homework correction	11
	Providing school support	10
Total		98

3.1 Perspectives on Homework Correction

Junior high school English teachers hold various perspectives on homework correction, highlighting its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages can be categorized into three aspects: understanding students' learning progress, fostering appreciation for homework, and facilitating school management. Conversely, the disadvantages of homework correction can also be grouped into three aspects: inefficiency, the dependence of students on teachers, and the challenges teachers face in managing correction tasks. Let us explore each aspect further.

Advantage 1: Understanding students' learning progress

Homework correction, when conducted comprehensively, aids teachers in assessing students' comprehension of English knowledge to some extent. It allows for the identification of common issues among students, as well as individualized guidance for specific problems.

"I believe that the primary advantage of homework correction lies in my ability to gauge students' mastery of English knowledge and their application of that knowledge. By analyzing the results of homework correction, I can engage in class discussions or provide personalized guidance to individual students." (Participant F01)

Advantage 2: Fostering students' appreciation for homework

Due to careful correction and detailed teacher feedback, students tend to take written homework more seriously than self-study assignments. Teachers' comprehensive corrections and specific comments encourage students to pay greater attention to their written work.

"I've noticed that students tend to complete written assignments, such as copying English words and grammar exercises, with more dedication. However, for self-study tasks like listening to dialogues or reciting text, students don't put in as much effort if the teacher doesn't check them." (Participant M08)

Advantage 3: Facilitating school management

All middle schools in the city require teachers to design homework thoughtfully, with teachers themselves correcting all written assignments without any involvement from students or parents. The volume of homework correction serves as an indicator for end-of-term performance evaluations, simplifying quantification and management.

"The school mandates us to comprehensively correct written assignments and conduct thorough checks for non-written assignments. The number of corrected assignments by teachers is linked to end-of-term performance evaluation and salary considerations. This makes it easier for the management to assess teachers, as they only have to keep track of the number of assignments corrected by each teacher." (Participant F04)

Disadvantage 1: Inefficiency

Junior high school English teachers dedicate significant time to correcting homework every day. However, many students merely look at their grades and neglect the comments provided. They fail to reflect on their mistakes or take appropriate measures for improvement. With multiple subjects to study, students have limited time for self-reflection, diminishing homework correction effectiveness and reducing teaching efficiency.

"I teach two classes of English with nearly 100 students. Correcting written assignments, like sentence construction exercises, takes me more than 2 hours, with approximately 1 minute spent on each assignment. For students who require guidance, I need to write comments and offer suggestions for improvement. However, I find that the issues identified in homework often persist in exams because students rarely read my comments. I feel that my efforts go unrewarded, making homework correction an inefficient use of time." (Participant F05)

Disadvantage 2: Dependence of students on teachers

Comprehensive homework correction may hinder the cultivation of students' self-directed learning abilities. Students become excessively reliant on teacher feedback and need more capability for self-assessment or cultivating self-improvement habits.

"One drawback of comprehensive homework correction is that it inhibits the development of students' self-learning abilities. Many of my students do not review their completed homework and solely rely on me to identify mistakes so they can make adjustments. These students lack the skills required for self-assessment." (Participant F07)

Disadvantage 3: Challenges faced by teachers in managing correction tasks

When teachers face heavy work pressure, such as administrative duties, serving as class advisors, form filling, and attending meetings in addition to regular teaching tasks, their approach to homework correction may become superficial. The challenge hampers teachers' ability to gain a genuine understanding of students' learning progress.

"Correcting homework consumes more than 2 hours of my daily time. I need at least two class sessions for lesson preparation to be adequately prepared for the next day. As a class advisor, I must be present during morning and evening self-study periods and fulfill other school-assigned duties, such as form filling. Sometimes, I can only rush through the homework correction without paying careful attention to writing comments or thoroughly analyzing students' learning progress." (Participant F09)

3.2 Homework Correction Challenges

Junior high school English teachers face several challenges regarding homework correction. These challenges include time constraints and limited energy. Let us explore each challenge further.

Challenge 1: Time Constraints

Teachers often need help with time constraints due to their heavy workload. They must dedicate significant time to lesson preparation, teaching, and administrative tasks, leaving limited time for homework correction. As a result, they may feel rushed and need help to ensure the quality of their corrections.

"For me, one of the major challenges in homework correction is the lack of time. I have multiple classes to teach, and there are so many other tasks that need my attention, such as preparing lessons and attending meetings. With all these responsibilities, finding enough time to correct every student's homework thoroughly becomes a real challenge." (Participant F10)

Challenge 2: Limited Energy

Teachers also need more energy due to their demanding workload and personal life events. The daily pressures they experience, both physical and mental, can result in fatigue and make it difficult for them to maintain the desired standard of homework correction.

"As a teacher, I constantly find myself tired and stressed. My workload is overwhelming, and I rarely have time to take care of myself or spend quality time with my family. This physical exhaustion and mental stress can take a toll on the quality of my homework correction." (Participant M11)

3.3 Strategies to Address Homework Correction Challenges

To address the difficulties faced in homework correction, junior high school English teachers suggest implementing strategies that help alleviate time constraints and provide support. These strategies include the introduction of intelligent homework management platforms, the practice of zero correction, and receiving support from the school.

Strategy 1: Intelligent Homework Management Platforms

Teachers propose the adoption of intelligent homework management platforms where the system can automatically correct assignments related to knowledge consolidation and skill reinforcement. The platforms would allow teachers to focus more on reviewing the results and providing targeted feedback, reducing the time spent on subjective homework correction.

"I believe that integrating intelligent homework management platforms into our teaching system could be highly beneficial. These platforms can help us correct assignments related to spelling, grammar, and other areas where the correction process is more objective. As teachers, we can then focus on reviewing the results, analyzing common errors, and offering personalized feedback to students." (Participant F12)

Strategy 2: Zero homework Correction

Teachers also suggest moving away from solely relying on teachers for homework correction and exploring alternative methods such as zero correction. This approach involves assigning students to evaluate their work or engage in peer assessments under the teacher's guidance. Not only would this lighten the workload for teachers, but it also promotes students' sense of responsibility and independent learning skills.

"One method I have experimented with is zero correction, where students assess their own work or evaluate their peers' work in class. This not only saves me time but also encourages students to take ownership of their learning and develop critical evaluation skills. By shifting the responsibility to students, we can foster a more independent and self-reflective approach to homework." (Participant F13)

Strategy 3: School Support

Teachers emphasize the need for support from the school to address homework correction challenges. The supports include reasonable allocation of non-teaching tasks, assistance with personal life matters such as housing and child-rearing, opportunities for professional development, and prioritizing teachers' physical and mental well-being.

"I believe schools can play a crucial role in supporting teachers. This can include better organization of non-teaching tasks, ensuring convenient housing options, providing assistance in child-rearing, offering opportunities for professional development, and establishing dedicated time for physical exercise and mental health services. By easing some of these external pressures, teachers can devote more energy to homework correction and ensure its quality." (Participant F01)

4. Discussion

4.1 Pros and Cons of Homework Correction

Homework correction is shared among middle school English teachers and offers several advantages. However, when faced with time constraints, the traditional method of fully correcting every homework assignment becomes inefficient and may hinder students' independent learning abilities. This perspective aligns with existing research findings that highlight the primary purpose of homework correction as a means for teachers to understand students' learning progress and provide feedback or guidance (Xie & Qian, 2022). Nevertheless, heavy workloads often demand teachers to prioritize lesson preparation, class tasks, and administrative work, making it challenging to ensure thorough homework correction and achieve its intended purpose of identifying students' areas of improvement. Furthermore, research suggests that students tend to rely on more than teacher corrections, resulting in reduced

efficiency and a limitation on their development of independent learning abilities (Feng, 2011).

4.2 Main Challenges Faced by Middle School English Teachers in Homework Correction

Middle school English teachers face significant homework correction challenges due to time constraints and limited energy. These teachers' demanding teaching and non-teaching tasks occupy a substantial portion of their working hours (Qin, 2017), leaving inadequate time for effective homework correction and sometimes leading to superficial assessments. Research indicates that primary and secondary school teachers are burdened with excessive workloads that constantly increase, contributing to various sources of stress (Yao & Yang, 2018). As a result, middle school English teachers may experience difficulties in achieving a work-life balance, leading to increased stress levels, occupational burnout, physical health issues, anxiety, and depression.

4.3 Strategies for Addressing the Challenges Faced by Middle School English Teachers in Homework Correction

Intelligent homework management platforms can reduce homework correction's mechanical and repetitive aspects, freeing teachers' time (Qian, 2022). However, subjective assignments such as English essay writing and creative projects still require teacher evaluation, which can be time-consuming.

In line with the concept of "zero homework correction" advocated by scholars, some teachers suggest shifting the focus of homework correction to the classroom (Feng, 2011). This approach involves organizing students to evaluate and discuss each other's work under the guidance and supervision of the teacher. Such an approach has demonstrated positive teaching outcomes, alleviates the burden on teachers, fosters students' independent learning abilities, enhances their sense of personal responsibility, and effectively improves their academic performance.

Moreover, organizational support through appropriate work arrangements, assistance in daily life matters, opportunities for personal development, and guidance for mental well-being can significantly alleviate the negative impact of work-related stress. The support, in turn, ensures that teachers have the necessary energy to enjoy their work and personal lives with fulfillment and happiness (Zang et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

Homework correction in middle school English education is considered time-consuming and inefficient to manage homework. Teachers' primary challenges in this regard are time constraints and limited energy. It is recommended to integrate intelligent homework management platforms and promote zero homework correction practices to reduce the workload on teachers fundamentally. Additionally, school support in professional and personal life can contribute to teacher well-being. These findings provide valuable insights and practical strategies for educational management departments to mitigate the homework correction burden experienced by junior high school English teachers.

6. Practical Recommendations

Based on the study findings, several practical recommendations can be made to alleviate the burden of homework correction on teachers. Firstly, schools should exclude homework correction from performance evaluations and grant teachers autonomy. Schools would encourage teachers to implement zero homework correction practices and significantly reduce their workload.

Furthermore, the introduction of intelligent homework management platforms can automate mechanical and repetitive aspects of homework correction, allowing teachers to focus more on developing students' comprehensive abilities and qualities. Schools should also design work tasks and allocate them reasonably to balance work and personal life for teachers. Additionally, support should be provided for teachers' personal development and their physical and mental well-being.

7. Research Limitations and Outlook

While this study sheds light on the current status, challenges, and solutions regarding homework correction in middle school English education, future research should address some limitations. Primarily, this study focused only on middle school English teachers and did not consider the perspectives of teachers of other subjects. Including teachers from different subjects, such as Chinese and mathematics, would provide a broader understanding of homework correction challenges. Future research could interview teachers from various subjects to gain a comprehensive view.

Secondly, the practical implementation and effectiveness of the proposed zero homework correction approach require

further empirical research. Piloting this approach in selected schools and analyzing its impact would provide concrete evidence to support its effectiveness. Lessons learned from successful experiences and areas for improvement could then be identified, leading to broader implementation across educational institutions.

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