

“Is Homework Still Attractive? Undergraduate Student’s Perception of Out-of-class Second Language Learning

Anca PECICAN¹

Abstract

The present study aims to explore university students’ preferences with regard to homework and out-of-class L2 learning. The analysis was conducted on Romanian undergraduates studying Spanish at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in their third year. Research chiefly focuses on interpreting data collected by means of a questionnaire handed to the mentioned respondents and correlated with the teacher’s observations. The main purpose is to seek answers related to students’ perceptions as to motivation and consistency in out-of-class study, homework length and the risk of overload, and types of preferred tasks. The findings point out the need for L2 teaching to rely less on teacher/workbook generated homework and provide students with the opportunity to learn through informal activities they enjoy doing, practicing exposure to authentic L2 input.

Keywords: *teaching Spanish L2, homework, out-of-class language learning, students’ perceptions*

1. Introduction

Many teachers rely on homework as a complement to the content given in class, especially on account of time limitations and group inconveniences such as large amounts of students.

Normally, the main purposes of assigning individual work to be carried out beyond classrooms is to provide learners with the opportunity to study the content taught in class at their own pace and consolidate it by practicing. However, the effectiveness of setting homework is more than often not the one expected. Both school teachers and university professors’ complaints of students not doing their homework are well documented (North and Pillay, 2002: 138; Painter, 2003: 6; Marceau, 2017: 2). For instance, Painter (2003: 11) and Marceau (2017: 9) point out that long assignments requiring large amounts of time more than often become

¹ Anca Pecican, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania,
anca.pecican@rei.ase.ro

demotivating. On the other hand, Amiryousefi (2016: 47) reports English L2 learners' assessment of homework as "mostly mechanical and boring", "not based on students' needs and interests". Moreover, this study led to the conclusion that most tasks assigned for learning beyond the classroom rarely involved meaningful communication that focuses learners' attention on the negotiation of meaning and interactional modifications (Amiryousefi, 2016: 48). Nowadays, students seem to have lost intrinsic motivation to regularly comply with the learning path chosen by their instructor and/or course materials. Surveys conducted on university students report their disapproval of the course book (Pătru & Stanciu-Capotă, this volume) and curriculum (Șerban & Șerban, this volume).

Furthermore, exposure to authentic L2 use in a variety of attractive contexts has become astonishingly handy primarily as a result of the modern technology which young learners frequently use in their everyday life. Applying technology based methods to L2 teaching should not be a result of the futile desire to be in trend, but, as scholars point out, it should be employed in order to extend and enrich learning opportunities that until recently were fairly limited (Nunan 2014: 2). On the other hand, young adults' passion for ICT appears to be noteworthy, and making them use technology for learning purposes can increase learning motivation. Nevertheless, research on the use of blended learning in homework design has been limited, focusing more on in-class activities.

The present study focuses on third year undergraduate students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies studying Spanish as a compulsory subject. The research aims to analyze students' perceptions and preferences regarding homework and compare them with their teacher's perspective.

2. Approaches to homework

Homework as a teaching and learning tool has been approached from two different scientific perspectives, namely, the educational psychology one (Núñez et al. 2017; Hong, Milgram and Rowell 2004) which tends to focus largely on the learner, on his/her attitudes, motivation, individual preferences, academic achievement, etc.; and the subject teachers one, in this particular case, foreign languages (Painter 2003, Nunan 2014, Marceau 2017, Fathali and Okada 2016). As expected, the latter is more applied to the specific field of study. Nevertheless, a constant interplay

between these two originally different approaches can be observed in the published literature. Citing previous research on the topic, psychology researchers Chang et al. (2014: 1) start from the premise that foreign language learning has its own specificity, which can negatively affect the relation between assigning homework in the same way as in other “core” subjects (Maths, Science) and learner achievement. Thus, the researchers accuse educational investigation on homework of having been biased for not taking into account the discipline uniqueness in examining student achievement and therefore aim to fill that gap.

A great part of the published research on homework in second language learning has traditionally focused on primary and secondary school learners and teachers. The issues that have currently drawn researchers’ attention have been the relation between individual study and academic achievement; parents’ involvement; workload in relation to the time needed to complete the assigned tasks; and motivation. For instance, Wallinger (2000) conducted a study on French L2 high-school teachers in the US regarding homework assigning practices. The most striking finding was the lack of correlation between the amount of time spent on doing homework and student end-of-course performance. North and Pillay’s survey (2002) on Malaysian secondary school L2 teachers suggests the need for a re-evaluation of homework policies as the workload generated can seldom become very time consuming both for teachers and students. Hong, Milgram and Rowell (2004) argue in favor of teachers’ and parents’ gaining awareness of the variety of individual learning preferences which would narrow the gap between expectations and achievement. These insights and other similar ones could also benefit research on adult L2 learners.

2.1. Homework and out-of-class learning

Most of the studied dimensions of homework in the case of school learners are to be found in the research dedicated to adult learners. However, the mainstream current literature and especially the one on L2 university students places a special emphasis on autonomy enhancement through learning beyond the classroom shadowing to a certain extent even the academic achievement facet. Before examining the key aspects highlighted by research in the case of adult learners, a terminological aspect should be clarified. Concretely, the conventional term “homework” has been gradually replaced by a more recent one, namely “out-of-class

language learning” (hence, OCLL). This is mostly a consequence of a meaning extension from the traditional one of fulfilling teacher-designed tasks in a different setting than the usual classroom, with the aim of reinforcing the content presented in class.

Starting from the last ten to fifteen years, with the advent of technology and the boom of virtual environments and communities, the expectancy for students to regularly complete only workbook homework and enjoy doing it has great chances of becoming obsolete. For this purpose, scholars coined the term “out-of-class language learning”, whose meaning is intended to go beyond mere instructed grammar, vocabulary and skills practice to more informal practice, and even to fully unstructured second language learning entirely matching learner’s personal preferences. Thus, OCLL more than often includes watching television, films, listening to music or radio programs, reading, taking part in online communities’ activities, tandem communication with L1 speakers, studying abroad, etc.

Several researchers engaged in the task of systematically describing the OCLL environment highlighting the increasing need for further experimental research in the field, especially in nowadays technology-based realities of informal learning and use (Cole and Vanderplank 2016: 32). Nunan (2014: 2-3, 7-8) depicts the concept of OCLL by opposing it to traditional in-class learning and firmly argues in favor of combining both ways in order to achieve the best results. According to Nunan, OCLL departs from the learner’s designing his/her own personalized environment which includes accessing sources of authentic input s/he chooses according to personal tastes, interests or needs. Even though the initiative came from the instructor, it is paramount to let the student decide what film to watch, which music to listen to or which on-line community to follow. Apart from increasing motivation which effectively supports learning, the OCLL is also intended to foster student’s autonomy. Additionally, enhancing exposure to authentic input inevitably creates the need to produce as similar as possible L2 output, in this way preparing the learner for the “risky business of authentic interaction” (Nunan 2014: 2) typical of the real world communication.

By contrast, the conventional term “homework” seems to place more emphasis on learning understood as effort with no necessary personal

implication, relying more on intrinsic motivation if the student owns it². If not, motivation can be external, either the desire to get a better grade or score high in an L2 test or exam. Moreover, traditionally assigned homework is to a high extent structured by the teacher or, as it comes in course workbooks, implies the need to follow a set of rules or criteria. Accordingly, conventional homework focusing on grammar and vocabulary and skills practice is closer to the formal in-class learning environment. L2 teachers' complaints of their students not complying with doing such regularly assigned tasks are well documented and have already been mentioned.

As for the teacher's role in OCLL, this may range from no involvement at all to a highly demanding concern for assuring quality and effectiveness. Cole and Vanderplank (2016) suggest that completely uninstructed L2 learners who make use of their freely chosen informal learning activities can achieve better results than the instructed ones. According to the two researchers, the former group's intrinsic motivation of fully mastering L2 should also be taken into consideration as a key feature of the learning context (Cole and Vanderplank 2016: 41). Consequently, it appears that in similar situations the teacher's role may become superfluous. On the other hand, other OCLL students (Fathali and Okada 2016: 82) emphasized the importance of their instructor's guidance and support in achieving their learning goals. In this case, teachers were in charge of designing the web-portfolio, the main learning tool; explaining procedures of use; selecting the wide range of input sources; and providing feedback among other responsibilities. Nunan (2014: 9) also stresses the importance of the preparation and follow-up stages in OCLL which are habitually led by teachers.

One of the major drawbacks of either homework or OCLL is its relation to time. Students usually have various schedules of time-consuming activities, tasks or interests in which they must also slip L2 learning. In order to set worthwhile OCLL tasks teachers should also bear in mind the need for them to be manageable in terms of time (Painter 2003: 11). Published empirical research documents students' assessment of OCLL

² However, certain researchers (Painter 2003, Marceau 2017) use the term *homework* to refer to learning activities recently included in the conceptual frame of OCLL. This is most probably due to the intention of reconsidering and extending the role of conventional structured homework and the way it is set in order to produce effective outcomes in present-day students.

activities as “time-consuming” (Nunan 2014: 8, Fathali and Okada 2016: 82) triggering the need for student engagement. Research on homework time consuming facet reports two types of contradictory results. On the one hand, certain studies focused on students learning L2 beyond the classroom by means of conventional teacher/workbook designed tasks. These analyses revealed the fact that there is no correlation between the amount of time spent on doing homework and learners’ L2 scores (Wallinger, 2000: 494) or, even more surprisingly, an association of more time spent on homework with poorer outcomes (Chang et al., 2014: 13/1062). On the other hand, experimental research provided evidence that the larger the amount of time spent on practicing L2 out-of-class, the more proficient students would be (Sundqvist, 2011: 117). In similar situations, activities beyond school time involved unconventional naturalistic learning such as listening to music, watching films, surfing the internet, videogames, novel reading, etc. Likewise, Wong and Nunan (2011: 154) point out that more effective learners are less teacher dependent and devote significantly more time to out-of-class practicing L2. Nunan (2014: 8) seizes the positive side of spending larger amounts of time in customized OCLL environments, in that the more time spent immersed in authentic L2 the more successful students become in L2 learning. Furthermore, Chang et al. (2014: 13/1062) account for their surprising research finding stating, among other arguments, that externally generated traditional homework hinder the opportunity learners have of “engaging in tailored and/or self-regulated study activities that may provide greater benefit to students’ performance”. Consequently, teaching an L2 mixed level group of learners would be more successful through facilitating students’ personal designing of the learning environment including exposure to authentic L2 input.

The present research seeks to analyze students’ perceptions on previously assigned homework, the degree of motivation in completing the tasks, as well as their preferences regarding other types of potential work beyond the class. The targeted learners had to carry out both conventional fully structured exercises focusing on grammar practice, vocabulary, reading and writing, as well as a series of semi-structured tasks leaving more space for personal election, decision-making and creativity. Additionally, they were also exposed to authentic input through a video watching based assignment. The present research focuses neither on students’ academic achievement, nor on whether work beyond regular class contributed to L2 learning.

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- a) What is students' feedback as to previously assigned various types of homework? Does their perspective match the teacher's?
- b) What are L2 university students' preferences regarding homework? Would they prefer other types of assignments than the ones they had to complete?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The present study was conducted on a group of 18 undergraduate students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) attending Spanish as a second foreign language on a regular basis in the academic year 2018 - 2019. At the time when they took part in the research they had been studying Spanish for five semesters, being in their third and final year of the International Business and Economics degree program. The participants own certain experience in L2 learning, as the study of two foreign languages is mandatory according to the university curriculum. As regards their level of competence in Spanish, this ranges from A2 to B2, mainly on account of previous Spanish classes they took in secondary education. Roughly speaking, according to the curriculum, by the end of the mentioned academic year they are supposed to reach B1 level of competence.

The other participant in the research is the sample students' teacher who is writing the present article and who set and assigned several types of homework activities throughout the five semesters. Teacher's feedback and evaluation of students' OCLL is intended to act as a qualitative correlation reference with regard to students' expressed perceptions.

3.2. Research context

As a direct consequence of the Bologna system implementation into the BUES academic curriculum, homework has become part of the formative evaluation process. For instance, it is a common practice to grade students' projects, usually assigned during the seminar but prepared out of

class and consider the score as a percentage of the final grade. According to curricular documents, Spanish discipline is assigned 3 ECTS credits, which is the equivalent of 75 study hours per semester, out of which 28 are in-class learning seminars. The rest of 47 hours is set for “individual study” as follows: study by textbook and course materials and notes taken in class; additional documentation in the library and on specialized online platforms; preparation of seminars, assignments, portfolios and essays; tutorials; examinations; and other activities. Taking into account the 14 weeks duration of one semester, the student is supposed to study an average of 3 hours per week beyond the seminar learning context.

3.3 Types of assigned homework

A research carried out by Wallinger (2000: 485) pointed out that successful homework among other requirements should also depend on the learner L2 level of competence. Accordingly, while beginners are more prone to benefit from short tasks designed for the practice of the content taught in class, students in intermediate classes will feel motivated by assignments involving more creative uses of language. Accordingly, advanced learners should be given a much greater variety of tasks for OCLL which allows them to practice their skills in many ways. Nunan (2014: 7) also stresses the fact that in the early stages of L2 learning the focus on formulaic utterances and prefabricated input / output is an important step in the acquisition process, which necessarily must be completed by exposure to authentic and meaningful L2 use in upper levels in order to achieve successful outcomes.

The targeted group was assigned a wide variety of homework tasks covering grammar and vocabulary as well as skill development, writing, listening with or without video support. In the early stages of Spanish learning, homework focused more on fill-in, multiple choice, reading comprehension exercises aimed at reinforcing the content given in class. When a fairly basic Spanish level was attained (A1+), students were required to choose an existing company and present it, and later on, to present a personal business idea and plan. For the latter task they also had the possibility to opt for working in groups. In the fifth semester, when A2+ level was reached students had to watch a certain Spanish film and complete a series of teacher structured vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension tasks as well as essay writing. Grammar and vocabulary

tasks were also set as homework on a regular basis. For all these activities, students were asked to provide feedback and mention preferences of other types of assignments that had not been given. Their perceptions and preferences are compared to the teacher's report on their performance and involvement.

3.3. Instruments

The analysis presented below arose from the teacher's identifying a difference in response to homework and OCLL assignments. While the film watching package had great success, generating creative uses of language and in some students a high degree of implication, in the case of grammar practice, for example, interest decreased, although learners were well aware of the important place grammar has in the end-of-semester test.

For the quantitative phase of the research, students were asked to fill a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire³ in Spanish verging on homework related issues such as: workload and amount of time spent on completing tasks; preferences regarding types of homework; learning styles: in groups or individually; feedback and grading; as well as a series of feedback statements related to the video watching assignment. Following this stage, students' responses are compared to the teacher's perspective on the same topics included in the questionnaire, with a view to avoiding misinterpretation and obtaining a clarifying picture of learners' behavior in OCLL environments.

4. Findings

4.1. Consistency and motivation

According to the data collected by means of the questionnaire handed to the sample group and presented in Table 1, most students state that they regularly complete the assigned homework, particularly the one considered for the formative evaluation grade. They all agree that practice beyond the regular seminar enhances better understanding and support of the content taught in class and eventually a higher score at the end of term test. A closer

³ The points were coded as follows: 1 - I totally disagree, 2 - I disagree, 3 - I agree, 4 - I totally agree

look at the percentage distribution regarding agreement with items 2 and 3, reveals a slightly higher motivation to do homework on account of learning for the sake of understanding and acquiring the language as opposed to scoring high in the final test. However, according to statements 3 and 4, evaluation results count as a solid motivating factor of doing homework.

Table 1: Questionnaire results: Agreement with statements 1-4 on consistency and motivating factors of completing the assigned homework in Spanish L2 undergraduates

	I strongly disa- gree	I disa- agree	I agree	I strongly agree
1. I usually do my homework for the Spanish class.			72. 2% (13)*	27 .8% (5)
2. I do my homework because it helps me understand and consolidate the content taught in class.			61. 1% (11)	38 .9% (7)
3. I do my homework because it helps me to better prepare for the final test.			72. 2% (13)	27 .8% (5)
4. I always do the assignments whose grade is part of the final grade.		5 .5% (1)	38. 8% (7)	55 .5% (10)

**Number of respondents is shown between brackets*

Nevertheless, as a teacher of the sample group, I have to confess that the students' degree of consistency in completing homework does not fully match the one mentioned in responses to item 1. More than often the tasks are done by a much smaller group of learners that also regularly attend class and actively take part in the seminar. Furthermore, the end of term final scores of the 18 respondents do not necessarily indicate a steady and solid learning in and out of class, as they cover a wide range of marks. Indeed, most of them strive to fulfill the tasks included in the continuous evaluation grading.

4.2. Workload and time

As regards the variables “amount of work assigned for out of the seminar learning” and “time allotted to complete the assignments”, according to the collected data showed in Table 2, students consider these do not exceed preferences and expectations. As a teacher, I admit I would have preferred them to work more than two hours a week for the Spanish class, since just three hours per week of both face-to-face and out-of-class learning are not enough to achieve a solid level of competence. Nonetheless, all the attempts to raise the length of homework led to failure, in the sense that even those students who regularly completed the tasks could not cover the entire amount of exercises. Therefore, in the fifth semester of studying Spanish L2, a compromise had already been reached between students and teacher namely, an average time of one hour per week of OCLL, which most respondents (61.1%) consider reasonable from their point of view. It is also worth mentioning that the distribution of this time is not equal, since occasional more elaborate tasks which they usually complete in order to obtain a high mark, imply that at times OCLL exceeds one or two hours a week. Consequently, other weeks during the semester no OCLL takes place at all. Additionally, the amount of time spent on individual study as confessed in the survey contradicts the 3 hours per week average specified in the university curriculum, as has been mentioned previously.

Table 2: Questionnaire results: Agreement with statements 5-6 on workload and time in doing homework in the case of Spanish L2 undergraduates

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I agree	I strongly agree	
5. I think that we have too much homework to do for Spanish.	5.5% (1)	61.1% (11)	16.6% (3)	11.1% (2)	
	a. 0 h/week	b. 0 - 1 h/week	c. 1 - 2 h/week	d. more than 2 h/week	No answer

Pourquoi...

6. I usually study for Spanish at home ...	-	55.5%	33.3%	5.5%	5.5%
		(10)	(6)	(1)	(1)

4.3. Preferences regarding types of out-of-class assignments

Questionnaire item number 7 puts forward several types of assignments that had been students' homework previously and others which were not used. Participants in the survey were asked to express their personal preference for each of them. Out of the seven items included in the list, except for extensive reading (7. d), translation (7. g) and intensive listening (7. b), all of them have been previously assigned throughout the five semesters of Spanish study.

Table 3: Homework related preferences in the case of Spanish L2 undergraduates

7. As out-of-class work I generally prefer...	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
a. grammar and vocabulary workbook exercises	11.1 % (2)	22.2 % (4)	44.4 % (8)	2.2% (4)
b. listening tasks	11.1 % (2)	44.4 % (8)	27.7 % (5)	2.2% (4)
c. writing tasks (essay / e-mail /etc.)	11.1 % (2)	11.1 % (2)	66.6 % (12)	1.1% (2)
d. reading tasks (short stories, adapted novels, online resources, etc.)	-	38.8 % (7)	38.8 % (7)	2.2% (4)
e. project work (<i>design your own business plan; Spanish company presentation; Spanish business person presentation; Latin-American economy presentation; etc.</i>)	5.5% (1)	38.8 % (7)	33.3 % (6)	2.2% (4)
f. film based package	-	22.2 % (4)	38.8 % (7)	8.8% (7)
g. translation	5.5% (1)	27.7 % (5)	38.8 % (7)	7.7% (5)
h. other (<i>please, mention</i>)		vocabulary, football		

As presented in Table 3, up to 66% of the targeted learners wish to develop language related basic aspects, namely vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, a significant percentage (61%) manifests interest in learning via translation from/into L1, a tool whose effectiveness in successful L2 learning had been questioned. A great part of the learners expresses preference for writing assignments, while interest in reading is split between those who would do it and those who would not, with a slight upward difference in the former case. Almost similarly, working for projects such as presentations involving more elaborate and active contributions and organization does not seem as attractive as expected by the teacher. Almost half of the group (44.1%) confessed dislike of such assignments. On the contrary, film watching as OCLL activity seems to raise the highest interest among students, 77.6% agree and strongly agree with completing tasks based on film watching. The last item on the list was intended to provide the respondents with the possibility to express personal interests that had not been mentioned. However, one learner felt the need to stress his/her desire to work more on vocabulary, while a different informant expressed interest in a content topic, namely football.

4.4. Film watching based assignment

The last item was included into the questionnaire with a view to receiving students' feedback concerning a previously assigned out-of-class activity. Students had to watch the Spanish film *El Olivo* (Spain, 2016) and complete a teacher-designed package of tasks on vocabulary practice, listening, reading and essay writing. The film had not been broadcast in Romania at the time when the assignment was set, therefore a script translation into L1 was not available. I suggested them to watch it with subtitles in Spanish in order to overcome potential listening difficulties.

Table 4: Feedback on film watching based out-of-class assignment
in the case of Spanish L2 undergraduates

8. As to the assignment on film <i>El Olivo</i> , do you agree or not?	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I agree	I strongly agree
a. Spanish was advanced compared to my level.	27.7% (5)	38.8% (7)	16.6% (3)	16.6% (3)
b. I could not understand what the actors were saying.	27.7% (5)	61.1% (11)	11.1% (2)	-
c. The tasks I had to do were difficult.	50% (9)	44.4% (8)	5.5% (1)	-
d. The assignment was very large, there were too many exercises.	22.2% (4)	50% (9)	27.7% (5)	-
e. It took me a long time to do this assignment.	-	44.4% (8)	27.7% (5)	5.5% (1)
f. I enjoyed the film.	-	16.6% (3)	27.7% (5)	55.5% (10)
g. I think the assignment helped me to learn more Spanish.	5.5% (1)	11.1% (2)	55.5% (10)	27.7% (5)
h. Thanks to watching the film I learnt things about Spanish culture.	-	22.2% (4)	50% (9)	27.7% (5)

Despite the average A2+ level of competence reached by students, exposure to authentic L2 input did not seem to hinder comprehension. A minor percentage of the informants (11.1%) admits having had problems in understanding whereas a slightly higher part of them (33.2%) assessed the L2 input as more advanced than theirs. The designed tasks were reported as having had a low degree of difficulty. Although the film lasts approximately 90 minutes, most students overlooked the significant amount of time they took to carry out the tasks, especially compared to the confessed weekly study 1 hour average. More than 80% enjoyed the film, which must have been a motivating factor for completing the assignment. It should also be mentioned that the achieved score was taken into account in the final evaluation grade. In terms of benefits, most respondents displayed positive perceptions as regards language learning as well as cultural competence development.

The teacher's perception of students' performance in the same OCLL assignment differs only in detail from the learners'. For instance, although in students' eyes the exercises were considered simple, occasional mistakes were found in the comprehension tasks in almost each student's work. However, what I consider to bear much relevance is that in certain cases, the film represented a boost for learners' using the language in a highly creative way expressing personal opinions, beliefs and imagination. More advanced learners used metaphors in order to express their ideas while certain students provided unexpectedly ingenious answers to a question aiming to stimulate visual metaphor interpretation. A number of students was able to understand and express cultural inferences present in the film. All in all, despite students' upper beginner to low intermediate L2 level of competence and the time-consuming side of this activity, it was successful to a relatively large extent, mainly on account of turning L2 learning into a fun and beneficial work at the same time.

5. Discussion

The present research sets out to discover a group of 18 Spanish L2 university learners' perceptions concerning assignments for study beyond the regular seminar. The analysis covers several homework related aspects as follows: consistency and motivation; workload and time; preferences for various types of homework; and feed-back on a certain previously assigned video watching package. Following the data collection stage, the students' responses were compared to their instructor's perspective on the same issues.

According to the survey results, most students show a positive attitude towards homework. They declare themselves to be well aware of the benefits of individual work both in the long run, for L2 acquisition purposes, and, temporarily, in order to achieve a better grade at the end of semester. Thus, on account of their answers and on teacher's perception too, achieving superior academic results is a strongly motivating factor of L2 studying outside the classroom. However, the disparity between the instructor's and learners' opinion in relation to consistency in doing all homework tasks, not just the ones taken into account for the final mark, casts certain doubts on the respondents' reliability. A solution to this inconvenience would have been a more qualitatively oriented approach. Face-to-face interview or a signed up questionnaire would have provided

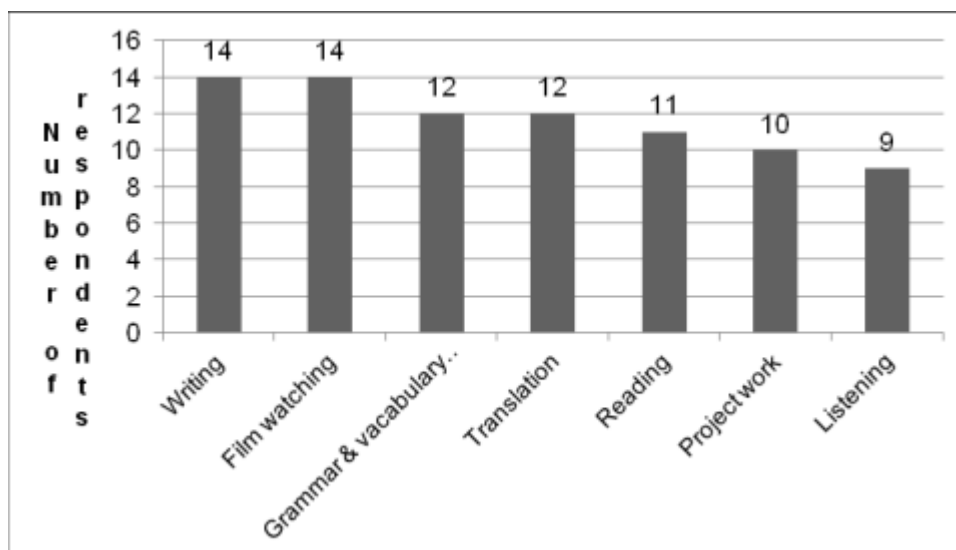
the possibility to correlate the respondent's perceptions to the teacher's in each student's case as well as to his/her academic achievement. In any case, this study represents a pilot stage of an extended research that needs to weigh various methodological approaches and successfully combine them in order to obtain accurate and reliable results.

The results obtained via questionnaire are in line with other researchers' observations (Amiryousefi, 2016: 47; Marceau, 2017: 9) displaying a contrast between teacher's expectations and students' preference regarding the amount of time the latter are willing to spend on OCLL. Furthermore, the difference between the learners' preferred 1 hour/week and the 3 hours/week self-study regulated through the university curriculum is even more striking. Nevertheless, the feed-back regarding the film based assignment suggests that there is a potential willingness to spend more time on OCLL in the case of more enjoying assignments. This I consider to be a valuable finding, since the sample group learning context does not prompt students to conscientiously strive and work hard towards achieving an advanced language level in a determinate amount of time. The learners in focus are neither preparing to take a major exam in Spanish nor to study or work in Spanish in the near future. Their main L2 objective is to comply with the evaluation criteria and acquire the contents specified in the syllabus in order to get the desired score. Consequently, in a similar university graduation oriented L2 learning contexts, teaching should orientate towards creating more attractive and motivating OCLL environments, encouraging students to spend more time on learning Spanish in naturalistic informal contexts. Marceau (2017) conducted a research on students in a similar graduation oriented L2 learning context reaching more or less the same conclusion regarding the low amount of time students spend on homework. As a solution he suggests several interesting teaching tasks involving a direct "connection between what is learned in class and the world outside of school" such as less teacher-dictated activities and research projects related to students' life (Marceau 2017: 9-10).

With respect to students' choice among several types of OCLL tasks, the most popular preferences seem to be writing and film watching. The graph below (Figure 1) summarizes the learners' positive reactions to the items included in the assignment type list – that is, only the answers stating agreement ("I agree") and strong agreement ("I strongly agree"). I consider the learners' reactions to be encouraging, in the sense that they reveal

predilection for a productive skill which also implies creativity and personal manifestation. On the other hand, watching films also counts among their favorite spare time activities. Teaching could take advantage of this preference and combine it with productive tasks such as writing and speaking.

Figure1. Preferences regarding types of out-of-class assignments in the case of Spanish L2 undergraduates



A quite striking finding relates to learners' preference for focusing on language isolated from natural contexts of use through grammar and vocabulary workbook exercises. This fact goes in line with similar conclusions reached by another study on Romanian undergraduates learning English and French (Şerban & Şerban, this volume). In my students' case, firstly, I consider this to be a result of their awareness of the upper beginner or low intermediate level of competence in communication in Spanish L2, which they consider that still needs the support of drills and prefabricated uses of language. Furthermore, one student felt the need to express his/her specific interest in practicing vocabulary more, separating it from grammar (see Table 1). Secondly, workbook exercises, if assigned in reasonable amount, as it usually happens in this particular case, take less time to be completed while also providing the advantage of steadily

preparing for the end of term test. This one contains the content topics taught in class and practiced throughout the semester. Thirdly, I also consider that my learners' positive attitude towards using grammar and vocabulary workbook exercises and even translation as L2 learning tools is also influenced by previous L2 learning experiences when these proved helpful. I can therefore assume, as real data do not exist, that in secondary school or in other contexts, my students heavily relied on teacher/workbook fully directed exercises in order to learn foreign languages, while exposure to naturalistic language use in out-of-class environments barely existed.

As an overall observation of the answers referring to the types of OCLL assignments, it is worth mentioning that a certain choice variety has been revealed, in the sense that just some learners enjoy extensive reading while others prefer working in projects, few of them would opt for listening with no image support while most of them enjoy L2 informal learning through films. Many other choices could have been added like listening to music and playing video games or participating in L2 communities, for example. Furthermore, the questionnaire did not touch content topics, in which case, variation would have been even wider. This finding supports similar conclusions highlighted in the published research literature on the topic. Accordingly, providing students with freedom of choice regarding the way they prefer to learn can represent an effective starting point in enhancing motivation and personal implication in the learning process.

The present study is however limited, one of its major drawbacks being the small number of participants in the survey. In the near future research can extend to multiple directions, especially to that of out-of-class fully unstructured student learning, which is not represented in this analysis. Furthermore, topic related preferences also deserve a special attention, especially in the case of L2 for specific purposes learners. Additionally, qualitative methodology should also be employed in approaching students' perception. Face-to-face interviews or signed up questionnaires would allow for a more accurate correlation with each learner's degree of engagement and achievements as assessed by the teacher.

Conclusions

This research study aimed to analyze Spanish L2 university learners' perceptions regarding homework and OCLL via student questionnaire and teacher's observations on the respondents' out-of-class learning performance. In the light of the results obtained, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the learning context should be taken into account when designing and setting homework. In a graduation oriented L2 learning context not marked by any clearly defined L2 goals, teaching should focus on supporting out of seminar study through assignments allowing for learners expressing and developing personal interests in the target language. Furthermore, in this particular case, of young adult learners, fostering autonomy is paramount, as it concerns not only L2 learning strategy development but, as a transferable skill, lifelong personal growth as well.

Secondly, the results pointed out that, despite learners' positive attitude towards homework and its benefits, they show themselves unwilling to spend more than 1 hour/week on average on doing out of class assignments. This is a very low time volume as compared to teacher and university expectations. However, the positive reaction to a previously given film based assignment package, which involved between 2 to 3 hours continuous work, suggests that more enjoying tasks could lead students to allocate more time to L2 learning immersed in authentic L2 input and thus, as it has been proved, trigger successful learning outcomes. In any case, besides the learning context, time also represents a key element in setting OCLL assignments. It needs to be considered in order to generate students' positive attitudes towards L2 learning.

In the third place, the variety in the preferred types of OCLL assignments, suggests that a combination of different multiple types of tasks would generate a higher degree of motivation and thus successful long term results. Previous literature on homework also considers variety in setting up homework as a motivating factor (Painter, 2003: 17). Based on this particular case of low intermediate Spanish level of competence learners, out of seminar learning should include both teacher/workbook fully directed exercises along with semi-directed tasks and other completely freely designed activities. As the survey results revealed, exposure to authentic input did not prove to hinder learning and turn it into a burden, but on the contrary, was considered a positive learning

experience both by students and teacher. It is also worth mentioning that successful dealing with authentic L2 uses also boosts learner's confidence in his/her L2 abilities.

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