

Homework in an Immersion Classroom: Parental Friend or Foe?

The ACIE Newsletter, December 1999, Vol. 3, No. 1, Dr. Lezley C. Lewis, Author

HOMEWORK IS NEVER NEW LEARNING

The intent of homework is to provide the practice to strengthen and reinforce the learning begun in the classroom. In an immersion classroom, homework provides an excellent opportunity for the parent to support and participate in the second language acquisition process.

Myth # 1 - "My child doesn't understand what the homework says." The child understands the cognitive concept but is working through the transfer process. If she is not proficient in reading or completing the homework, that doesn't mean that she doesn't understand. Be sure your child has the cognitive understanding of the concept in the first language.

Myth #2 - "Having homework assigned in the second language is too hard. We are expecting too much from this child." Homework, in any language, is an extension of what the child has learned in class. If he understands the concepts, then the issue is how to appropriately transfer the knowledge. It isn't about unrealistic expectations, it is about using information and knowledge at an early age. Keep in mind that the child has learned the concepts in the second language. Having homework in the second language is important to the immersion experience.

Myth #3 - "Don't worry about [the target language]. Just translate everything." Translating is a tool. If you begin with the translation, then the ability of the student to use all her tools/strategies for learning is circumvented. Besides, translation is difficult - languages don't function on the basis of word-to-word correspondences.

APPROPRIATE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- **Listen, listen listen.** It's important not to interrupt the learning process. Allow your child to work through the transfer of language without guidance from you.
- **Assist the transfer process.** Allow the child to explain the concept in the native language and then support him in the transfer to the second language. Use the first language in a comparative way, not to translate. For example, identify words that are cognates (similar to words in the native language): "There is a word in English ...". Talk about word structure: "In English, I say that this way...". Discuss pronunciation: "That sounds like...". Compare meaning: "In English, that would be used like this...".

- **Use a dictionary, a thesaurus, and books to demonstrate appropriate research skills.** Use the following prompts: "What does this word mean in English? Let's look it up in a dictionary. If this means ..., then this must mean ..."
- **Have your child call a friend for peer help.**
- **Encourage, praise, and never use intent-defeating language.** For example, instead of telling your child that something is "too hard," use the word "challenging." When your child complains about not being able to do the work, talk to her about the high expectations you and the teacher have. If you feel that it is unrealistic for the teachers to expect your child "to do this in Spanish (or other language)," remind yourself instead how the homework is meant to be a natural extension of classroom learning. Ask your child, "How do you do this in class?"
- **Use tones of voice that are soothing, interested, and sincere.**
- **Provide enough time to work with other issues that are homework related.**
- **Write a note to the teacher** and then schedule a parent conference if negative behavior around homework issues persists.
- **Be patient, patient, patient.**

The process of learning through a second language is challenging and can sometimes be frustrating. But the benefits and rewards are very real! Creating a learning environment at home where homework acts as friend instead of foe is an integral part of the process.