Getting More Classroom Participation Using Extra Homework

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Having taught in many different universities, a common thread can be observed. Rarely does one get a class where every student knows how to behave themselves in class. This problem is inherited by the universities from the high schools. Many government high school teachers are struggling to cope with large classes of students who have little or no interest in their own education. The students interested in learning sit in the front and learn, while the students at the back do as they wish. Those students with concerned parents go to ‘Jukus’ after school to catch up on the studying they should have done in class. Most university students report that their parents encouraged them to study hard to get into a good or famous university. However once they enter university there is no pressure to study and learn. Some students feel that this is a time to focus on their interests and social life.

What behavioural issues arise?

There are two types of problems that impede learning. The first type is simply poor behaviour. Typical problems include students talking with their friends while the teacher is explaining something, using their mobile phones, reading manga, putting on make up, staring out of the window, ignoring the teacher’s instructions, and speaking in Japanese in an ‘all English class.’ These problems arise because students have not learned how to properly control themselves. The direct result of these problems is that the students do not learn and may disturb other students that are interested in learning.

The second problem is an inefficient approach to learning. Teachers in general and particularly English teachers often have the reoccurring issue of getting students to participate in class. Participation means speaking in English, paying attention, asking questions, and taking notes. In other words, the students are active learners and interact with the teacher and other students. Students are strongly conditioned towards learning passively. While this is a common occurrence, it is a more challenging problem and takes longer to overcome than the first type.

The classroom has to be an environment conducive to learning. This requires that students manage themselves effectively during a lesson. This article is
not presenting a quick solution or panacea for all classroom issues. Instead, it offers an additional tool to supplement whatever other strategies teachers are using in managing their classroom. This additional tool is called extra homework.

What is Extra homework?

Extra homework is additional work that students have to complete outside class or at home. The usual deadline is the next class. In the author’s English classes, students choose a source of English for example a magazine, the internet, a newspaper, music lyrics, a book or their vocabulary list. Then they copy from the source onto an A4 paper in small handwriting in pencil. This normally takes about 45–75 minutes. In other classes, different material can be used. A single sheet of A4 takes long enough to encourage students to reflect on their behaviour and the consequences. Interestingly, some teachers who grew up in English speaking countries may have experienced getting ‘lines’ from their teachers. If you got lines, it meant that you had to write a page or more of the same line, for example ‘I will do my homework’ or ‘I will not speak in class.’ Extra homework is a similar concept.

When is extra homework assigned?

Extra homework is assigned for speaking Japanese in class, using a phone in class, talking when the teacher is explaining something and other disruptive behaviours. Once the students understand this and have become accustomed to it, extra homework can be stepped up and used to encourage active learning. This means it is assigned to students who are not paying attention, but pretend that they understand. If they are unable to do or choose not do the assignment the teacher has explained, they will get extra homework. As a result, little by little the bar is raised on acceptable behaviour.

How is it applied?

Extra Homework is an attempt to encourage students to pay attention to speak English, and to learn in class. The way it works is when a student speaks Japanese in class they get extra homework. Their friend(s) who were listening also get extra homework because they were also involved. This is an important part of it. Why? Students do not like to get their friends in trouble, and most disruptions involve more than one student. Students can block extra homework by telling their friend to speak in English. In this case, only the student who was speaking Japanese has to do extra homework. The rational behind these ideas is to use peer pressure to modify behaviour.

What to do when a student fails to hand in Extra homework?

If a student fails to hand in extra homework it doubles. So they get second chance to hand it in, but they have to do more. If the student does not hand in the extra homework for a second time, the teacher should meet them and ask them to explain. 95% of the time the reason is “I forgot.” If the reason is something else, it is important to make sure the students understand, why they got extra homework. (In fact students should understand why they got extra homework before they leave a class in which they received it.) At this point, they get a written warning to which they must respond in writing, and they must hand in the extra homework along with their response.
by the next class. In four years of using the extra homework tactic, few students have gotten this far, and none have gone beyond. However you could add on the proper procedures for dealing with such situations at your university or school. By the way, the record for extra homework is six pages. The student completed them satisfactorily.

The Benefits of Extra Homework

For the teacher:
1. Reduces or eliminates speaking in Japanese.
2. Reduces stress for the teacher.
3. Puts the control of the class in the teacher’s hands.
4. Allows the teacher to define the boundaries of appropriate behaviour.

For the students:
1. Students speak to each other in English, and not Japanese most of the time.
2. Students have better control of themselves in class.
3. Students are more responsive to instructions, and they learn more.
4. Peer pressure works positively.
5. Students can reflect on their behaviour as they complete the assignment.
6. Boundaries of appropriate behaviour are reinforced.
7. Strangely, students enjoy seeing other people getting extra homework.

Summary of important ideas:
1. Students need to understand why they get extra homework, and how to do it before it is applied.
2. The content of the extra homework must be related to the subject the students are doing.
3. Assigned extra homework needs to be followed up on, to make sure that students complete it satisfactorily. Unsatisfactory extra homework must be done again properly.
4. Failure to complete extra homework must have consequences.
5. It is not fun and is time consuming for the students. Time they want to use pursuing interests and socializing. This makes extra homework effective.
6. Extra homework needs to be applied consistently especially at the beginning of the semester.
7. It is not the answer to everything but another class management tool.
8. 99% of the students will comply however 1% will question it.
9. Extra homework is always given with a smile.

Questions About Extra Homework
1. Will extra homework cause students to stop speaking in class completely?
This seems likely but in practice it doesn’t happen. Students want to talk during class so they will just do it in English to avoid extra homework. Some students may at times whisper in Japanese, when the other students can’t understand their point. This is fine because it does not disturb the other students and tends to be very brief. Teachers who have taught next to my class will tell you that it is noisy but it is constructive noise.

2. Will students think that the teacher is mean?
This is a legitimate concern because teachers do not want to alienate their students. However if extra
homework is balanced with positive reinforcement then this is not a problem. Extra homework is not a popular activity and students don’t like it, but they come to understand the purpose of it and they do it. In fact extra homework is effective because it is not fun.

3. What if the whole class is speaking Japanese?

Then all of them will get extra homework. This has not happened at Tama but it has happened at other universities. The students need to understand that there is no safety in numbers.

Conclusion

In the English shower program, teachers rotate classes every semester. As such other teachers have taught classes that have had the extra homework tool applied in them. These teachers have commented on how well behaved and cooperative the students have been. Extra homework may not be the solution to all classroom management issues, but it is a worthwhile tool. Implementing Extra homework will take time and effort, but it will yield surprising results.