

## Students' Attitudes towards Cambridge Unlock Workbook: English Intermediate I Level at Birzeit University

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of English Intermediate I students at Birzeit University (BZU) towards Cambridge Unlock online homework. It also aims at evaluating the effectiveness of the online activities, from the students' perspective, in regard to their in-class language learning skills; reading, writing, listening, speaking, and vocabulary building. The sample for this study is 200 undergraduate students at BZU who were placed at English Intermediate I level. A questionnaire was given to the students during the second month of their second semester. The overall results of the students' responses showed inconclusive attitude towards online homework. Only 22.5% of the students thought it was more helpful than traditional homework. While an average of 66% of students' responses showed that the online homework was beneficial to their in-class language skills activities; reading, vocabulary, and listening; an average of 48% only stated that it was effective in improving their writing skills. In addition, the written comments on the online program provided by a total of 141 students showed a negative attitude towards the online homework program with only 20% who stated that it was beneficial to their language learning.

*Key words:* attitudes, Cambridge Learning Management System, Cambridge Unlock online workbooks, language learning, online homework

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## 1. Introduction

Birzeit University has adopted Cambridge Unlock English teaching program for the academic year 2016/ 2017. The decision was based on the assumption that upon the completion of the required courses, exiting students would be able to meet the standards required for the job market and/ or further studies.

The Cambridge Unlock English program has four levels: Remedial (A1), Intermediate I (A2), Intermediate II (BI), and Advanced (B2). Freshman students who enter BZU take a placement test and are placed in the appropriate level based on their score. Students who enter at a level lower than English communication Intermediate I (1201/1202), which is the focus of this study, must complete the Remedial (A1) English communication course as a prerequisite. To advance from one level to another, students at BZU are required to complete a minimum of 150 to 180 instructional hours spread over two semesters.

## 2. English 1201/1202 A2 Course Description:

The Unlock Cambridge courses are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which divides language activities into four kinds: reception (listening and reading), production (spoken and written), interaction (spoken and written), and mediation (translating and interpreting).

ENG1201/ 1202 is a two- credit hour courses that integrate the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing which help students do the following:

1. Understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (basic personal and family information, local geography, employment).
2. Communicate in basic and routine tasks requiring simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.
3. Describe background immediate environment, interests or activities.
4. Read short simple texts, including short, simple personal letters and emails; find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables.
5. Write short simple notes, messages, and emails relating to matters in areas of immediate need; write a simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something (A2 Cambridge Course Mapping).

The Unlock Cambridge Online workbook works hand in hand with the main course book. The A2 Level course books are divided into ten themed-based Units: Places, Festivals and Celebrations, School and Education, The Internet and Technology, Language and Communication, Weather and Climate, Sports and Competition, Business, People and Space and the Universe (A2 Cambridge student textbook).

The online workbook provides a structured approach to learning that builds on the language and critical skills covered in the classroom through fun, engaging, and interactive reading, writing, speaking, listening and language development activities with easy to use multiple choice questions, drag and drop, and unscrambling words. In addition, the online workbook includes high interest

documentary style video from Discovery Education and fun games like Sentence Stacker and Speak or Swim (Cambridge LMS Video).

### 3. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the students' attitude towards Cambridge Unlock online workbook?
2. Do the students believe that the online workbook practice is an effective tool that enhances their face-to-face in-class language learning?
3. Compared to traditional homework, do the students believe that online homework is more effective in their language learning?

### 4. Significance of the study

Cambridge Unlock online workbook is a supplement to the in-class face-to-face language instruction. The implementation of this program at BZU was an attempt to provide our English as a foreign language (EFL) students with extra exposure to activities through online learning environment in the hope of meeting language standards required for their studies and future jobs. The purpose of this study was to analyze the attitudes of the targeted population 1201/1202 (A2 level) students in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of enhancing their language learning skills and achieving the course objectives.

### 5. Literature Review

Homework is an essential component of course works at many educational institutes. It is a wide spread educational activity that has been long viewed as an important part of the teaching and learning process (Xu, & Wu, 2013). Cooper (2011), an expert in homework and achievement defines homework as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-instructional time" (as cited in Bembenutty, 2011, p.185).

Homework can be assigned for many different reasons. It can reinforce the material that has already been presented in class (National Education Association 2008). It also fosters students' initiative independence (Horowitz, 2005). In addition, it helps students develop positive attitudes towards learning and personal responsibility (Cooper, 2007).

At the language Department of BZU, EFL students are assigned homework to develop, review, and reinforce specific reading and writing skills that has been taught in class and to prepare them for up-coming materials that will be presented in class. Traditional pen-pencil homework and online home work are assigned as supplements to face-to-face in-class instruction. Hence online homework is an extrinsic motivational tool to encourage students to practice their language learning skills. To ensure that students complete their assignments, online homework is a required part of the course work representing 20% of the students' total course grade.

#### 5.1 What role can homework play in EFL language learning?

Homework is essential for language learning for students who live in places where English is not the dominant language of teaching, and is therefore taught as a foreign language. EFL learners need to practice the four skills; reading, listening, speaking, and writing to develop their skills in that language (Yabarra & Green, 2003).

With only two to three hours of in-class instruction a week, students at BZU as EFL learners, including the sample students of this study, are given homework to increase their exposure to the English language, to encourage them to use their English knowledge and to continue learning outside the classroom. With the implementation of the Cambridge Unlock program, the students are also required to complete work on Cambridge Online workbook that has been included in the syllabus in order to provide them with a chance to learn independently, to be responsible of their own learning, and above all to become autonomous learners.

Within the context of cognitive theories of second language acquisition, language learning is perceived as a conscious, thinking process that internalizes the processes that can contribute to language development and the activities that help stimulate these processes (Lamy & Hampel, 2007). Accordingly, homework assignments that are given to students at BZU, whether traditional, or online work, can be classified as activities that contribute to students' language learning.

Krashen's input hypothesis (1981, 1985), which had a profound effect on cognitive theories of second language acquisition, asserts that humans can acquire second language by receiving "comprehensible input". In regard to classroom learning, Krashen states that "the major function of the second language learning classroom is to provide intake for acquisition" (1981, p101). This can be realized through meaningful and communicative activities, and through exposure to language in a particular context (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

With the development in technology, nowadays, most educational institutes around the world, including BZU, employ online learning environment and use computers and the internet as tools in learning. As more computer assisted-learning programs and software applications such as Learning Management System (LMS) have become widely used in educational settings, several studies and researches were conducted to study their application in the field of education. Many of these studies confirm the effectiveness of their use in EFL learning by improving the students' language skills (e.g. Eggers & Wooten, 2011; Socket & Toffoli, 2012; Okada, Sakamoto, & Sugiura, 2014; Amiryousefi, 2016). With the widespread use of technology in classrooms, learners are not only provided with "comprehensible input" but also with a platform for interaction where they can work with, negotiate meaning with peers as well as their instructors (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

The Cambridge Unlock LMS which is implemented at BZU provides the instructor with tools, such as Forums, Blogs and Wikis to help manage classes and provide additional opportunities for communicative activities. Students can submit written responses to the task and attach files containing documents, slide show presentations, spreadsheets audio and images. By using the tools of the Cambridge LMS, students are provided with opportunities for communication that are extended outside of the classroom. Learners can make use of these tools to share their work with the teacher or with the class as a whole. The instructor can post a topic at the Forums that can be used for class discussions; blogs can be used for extended writing practice where the class can comment on each other's writing; and Wiki allows the learners to work together on different class projects (Teacher's Guide to the Unlock Online Workbooks and the Cambridge Learning Management System, 2014).

### ***5.2 Drawbacks of online homework***

In a study that was conducted by Wooten and Dillard- Eggers (2013), the researchers came up with generally favorable results regarding online homework, however, they conclude that among high intrinsic motivated students, online homework did not make a significant difference in their grade improvement. These students will do well using both the traditional pen–pencil homework and the online homework systems. Online homework will unlikely increase these students' motivation, to the contrary, it might inhibit these students from being pushed to their full potential. The researchers also conclude that benefits from online home work were more evident among low–performing students in their grading scores (Wooten & Eggers, 2013).

In a paper that discusses the pros and cons of online homework, Penner, Kreuze, Langsam, & Kreuze (2016) infer that research is not clear on the possible benefits of online homework. They state that just like any learning tool, online homework has both advantages and disadvantages. Their conclusions were based on several studies on online homework they present in their paper. However, none of these studies were language learning related. Penner et al. (2016) classify these studies based on three main categories regarding the effectiveness of online homework; favorable results, (Wooten & Eggers, 2008, 2013); inconclusive results (Basile, 2001); (Gaffney, Ryan & Wurst, 2010); (Fatemi, Marquis & Wasan, 2014); and unfavorable results (Hahn, Fairchild & Dowis, 2013). Penner et al. specify some disadvantages of online homework system. They state that instructors may not be aware of learning difficulties among individual students, as they are not personally grading the homework. In addition, multiple submissions of answers by students may encourage lazy habits among students and professors. They also refer to frustrations encountered by students using the online homework system either with the inability to log on or with errors and inconsistencies in the solution. They further add that the use of technology to learn should not only be used to satisfy course requirements, but rather it should be perceived by students as an essential component for learning and academic growth (Penner & et al., 2016).

Based on our personal experience with online homework in the Language Department at BZU, some of the above-mentioned concerns hold true. Several of our EFL students encounter technical problems logging on into their accounts especially for their first time. Students also complain about technical problems while working on their activities. On several occasions, the system has rejected correct answers and failed to save some of the students' work. Furthermore, the multiple attempts feature to submit the answer is also a major concern to some instructors since it allows the students to guess the answers without giving it a deep thought. In addition, some students, who are not highly motivated, omit ungraded activities or complete the task without exerting serious effort especially when it comes to some of the writing tasks.

### ***5.3 What role does the student's attitude play in language learning?***

Attitudes towards the learning situation can be defined as “the individual's reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which language is taught,” (Gardener & Masgoret, 2003, p.172). In Gardner's psychological theory of second language learning, learners' attitudes towards language learning play an essential role in language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) consider that the learner's motivation for language learning would be determined by his attitudes and by the orientation to the whole process of learning a foreign language. According to Gardner (1985), attitudes and motivation are just as important as aptitude for predicting second language learning. Gardner and his associates investigated the relationship of second language learning achievement to the five attitudes and motivation variables from Gardner's socioeducational

model: integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation. The results of their study show that all five variables have a positive relationship to achievement in second language learning (Gardener & Masgoret, 2003).

From our personal experience as educators, we share the same belief that favorable attitudes towards online homework can motivate our EFL learners to take advantage of the extra practice provided by online homework to improve their language skills and their in-class face to face language learning.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Student sample

The study sample consisted of 200 regular students that were randomly picked out of the 901 students at BZU of the English 1201/1202 (A2) course classes. The 200 participants, who are from different faculties at BZU, were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed by the researchers. Seven sections were randomly selected to participate in the survey at the second semester of the academic year 2016/2017. Each section was taught by a different instructor. The participants in the study were placed in the A2 level (1201/1202) based on their score in the placement test to meet the university requirement courses for EFL.

**Table 1: Distribution of students according to their gender**

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	female	136	68.0	68.3	68.3
	male	64	32	31.7	100.0
	Total	200	200	100.0	

**Table 2: Distribution of students according to their academic year**

Academic year		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	first year (freshman)	196	98.0	99.0	99.0
	second year (sophomore)	2	1	.5	99.5
	fourth (senior)	2	1	.5	100.0
	Total	200	100	100.0	

**Table 3: Distribution of students according to their major**

Students' major		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	college of Arts	38	19.0	19.0	19.0
	College of Science	9	4.5	4.5	23.5
	College of Business and Commerce	71	35.5	35.5	59.0
	College of Engineering and IT	36	18.0	18.0	77.0
	College of Law and Public Administration	28	14.0	14.0	91.0
	College of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Medical Careers	13	6.5	6.5	97.5
	education	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

## 6.2 Instrument

Quantitative research methodology was utilized to carry out this study. The researchers employed a survey methodology to collect and analyze the data. The survey contained Likert-type scale. The questionnaire was administered by several course instructors in class during the second semester of 2016/2017. The quantitative data was prepared for analysis using the statistical package for research software program SPSS. In addition, the researchers used the qualitative method by including one open-ended question to generate additional comments on the students' own experiences and personal view on Cambridge Unlock online homework.

## 7. Results and discussion

The questionnaire given to the students was divided into four major domains. The first is in regard to general information about the participants; gender, year at the university, and the intended major (questions 1-3). The second domain is related to students' evaluation of the effectiveness of online homework. It answers the study question: Do the students believe that the online workbook practice is an effective tool that enhances their face-to-face in class language learning? (questions 4-13). The third domain is related to students' attitudes towards online homework and how do these students feel about online homework compared to traditional pencil homework. It answers the study question: Compared to traditional homework, do students believe that online homework is more effective in their language learning? (questions 14-17). In addition, the students were asked general questions about their experience working with online homework, their approach when they attempt to work on the activities, and the number of hours they spend working online per week (see appendix B).

### 7.1 General questions domain

In regard to students' experience working with online homework, students' responses indicated that only 40% of the students have had good working experience skills with online homework. However, the majority had limited, very limited, to no experience at all.

Based on students' responses on how they complete their online activities, almost 53% of the students stated that they work independently, while 29% ask others for help. In addition, 11%

of the students check the correct answer before doing the activities. Finally, 7.5 % of the students said that they make guesses.

By analyzing the students' responses to the time they spend working online, the responses showed that there is big discrepancy between the time allocated by female students to online work and male students. While 69% of female students reported that they spend 1-5 hours a week working on line, only 29% of male students stated that they spend the same number of hours working online (see appendix B for general questions domain).

### ***7.2 The second domain: Students' evaluation of the effectiveness of online homework in regard to their language learning***

The overall percentage of students' responses showed a high percentage of students who agreed that the online homework was effective with their in class language learning skills (see appendix A). Analysis of the survey revealed the following:

1. Seventy three percent agreed that it was helpful with their in-class reading passages.
2. Sixty eight percent agreed that it was helpful with understanding in-class activities and exercises.
3. Eighty two percent agreed that it was helpful with learning the targeted vocabulary for each unit.
4. Fifty nine percent agreed that the online workbook practice helped them in writing complete and grammatically correct sentences.
5. Seventy three percent agreed that it prepared them for their in-class tests and quizzes.
6. Sixty seven percent agreed that it was helpful in pronouncing difficult words.
7. Sixty four percent agreed that it improved their in-class oral communications.
8. Sixty nine percent agreed that the online homework helped them in understanding the in-class listening activities.
9. Forty four percent agreed that the online workbook practice helped them in writing a well-structured and coherent paragraph.

Even though 59% of the students agreed that the online homework practice helped them in writing complete and grammatically correct sentences, only 44% believed that online homework helped them in writing a well structured and a coherent paragraph. Even though the two tasks are related, the divisiveness in opinion could be explained by the fact that the majority of the in-class writing tasks are at a paragraph level. So even if the students were able to write grammatically correct and complete sentences, they still need other skills to enable them to write a well structured and organized paragraph.

### ***7.3 The third domain: Students' attitudes towards online homework***

By studying the responses to these questions, we noticed that even though only 31% of the students said that they prefer traditional homework, the students' responses did not show any significance difference in preference to the type of homework. None of the mentioned features of online- homework received a high percentage of choice. Only 15% of the students thought that online- homework was engaging, 42% preferred online homework for providing extra practice, and 40% thought that the immediate feedback of online homework is a preferred feature. Based

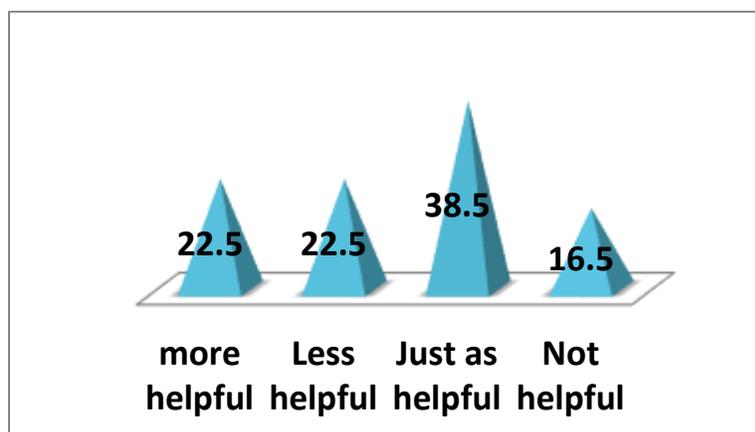
on these responses, there is no significant indicator of a favorable attitude toward the two types of homework among these students.

**Table 4: Preference of the type of homework**

	Choices	frequency	%
15) I prefer online homework	It gives immediate feedback	80	40
	I have more time to complete my work	61	30.5
	It provides more practice	85	42.5
	It is more engaging	30	15
16) I prefer traditional homework	Choices	frequency	%
	It takes less time	80	40
	I prefer my instructor's feedback	46	23
	It is easier	65	32.5
	I prefer working with a pen and paper	62	31

#### 7.4 Online homework versus traditional homework

When students were asked to evaluate how helpful the online homework was compared to traditional homework given by their instructor, only 22.5% responded that online homework was more helpful. With a 39% combination of those who said it was less helpful and not helpful, the response to this question can be interpreted in more than one way. If we consider the “just as helpful” neutral, then we can come to the conclusion that the majority of the students believe that online homework is not a helpful tool and therefore is not needed, but if we count that percentage as “just as helpful”, then that could mean that majority of students see no difference between traditional homework and online homework.



**Figure 1: Overall comparison between online and traditional homework**

### 7.5 Qualitative open ended question analysis

In the survey, students were also asked to add any additional comments on Cambridge Unlock online homework. The students' responded with comments on time on task, program evaluation, experience, effectiveness of the program to their learning, recommendations, technical problems etc. Based on the students' comments, the researchers grouped these responses into seven major items. The online workbook activities were: a) time consuming, b) not beneficial and a waste of time, c) beneficial to language learning, d) difficult, e) boring, f) with technical problems, and g) should be cancelled.

A summary of the major findings are listed in the following table

**Table 5: Students' written comments**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	time consuming	21	10.5	14.9	14.9
	not beneficial and a waste of time	22	11.0	15.6	30.5
	beneficial to their language learning	40	20.0	28.4	58.9
	boring	14	7.0	9.9	68.8
	difficult	16	8.0	11.3	80.1
	with technical problems	18	9.0	12.8	92.9
	should be cancelled	10	5.0	7.1	100.0
	Total	141	70.5	100.0	
Missing	System	59	29.5		
Total		200	100.0		

1. In regard to their language learning; 40 students, (20%) commented in favor of online homework indicating that it was beneficial to their language learning and helped them improve their language learning. However, 12 of these 40 added that even though it was beneficial to their learning, online work was still time consuming.
2. The majority commented on the time on task. Twenty-one students (10%) thought that online work was time consuming. It takes too much of their studying time.
3. The third highest comment indicated negative attitude towards online homework; 22, (11%) of students wrote that online work was a waste of time and not beneficial to their learning.
4. Another negative comment was in regard to how boring the activities were; 14 students (7%) wrote that the online work was boring.
5. Eighteen students (9%) referred to technical problems and the unavailability of internet access outside the campus.
6. Sixteen students (8%) mentioned that the activities were difficult.

7. Ten students (5%) stated that they were better off with the traditional homework and recommended that the online homework should be deleted.

8.

### **7.6 Variables**

Correlations were computed among hours spent on the online homework activities, gender, majors and students' attitudes. About 69% of female students spent 1-5 hours a week working online homework, whereas 29% of male students spent the same amount of time working on their online homework. We believe that this difference in percentage could be attributed to several factors. Based on our experience working with our EFL students, female students tend to be more responsible towards their studies especially in completing homework assignments. The second reason might be related to students' schedule. Several of our male students have part time jobs to help with their tuitions and daily life expenses. Between attending classes on campus and reporting to their jobs, their schedule does not provide them with as much time as female students to spend on online homework.

A high percentage of students from the different faculties commented on time on task. About 44% of the students of the different colleges especially from the Arts and the Business and Commerce Colleges believed that the online homework is time consuming and a waste of time. About 30% of the Business and Commerce College and 20% of the Arts College went even further and recommended to cancel the program as a whole. A reasonable justification for this attitude is that students believe that the online homework is taking the time away from studying for other subjects.

### **9. Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the role of online homework as a language learning tool that is utilized by EFL language learners. It attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of this tool through analyzing the attitudes of ENGC 1201/1202 (A2) EFL students towards Cambridge Unlock online homework at BZU that adopted this program. The overall results of the students' responses show an inconclusive attitude towards online homework. While a significant percentage of the sample students stated that the online homework helped them in their in-class language skills activities; reading, vocabulary, and listening; a low percentage stated that it was effective in improving their writing skills. In addition, students did not show major significant preference to online homework. Only 22.5% of the students thought it was more helpful than traditional homework. The overall program evaluation expressed in the students' written comments received relatively lower favorable percentages. Only 20% of the students provided positive comments on the online homework.

To conclude, no one language learning tool can be the sole "fix it all" for all language learners. What is certain in the field of EFL language learning and teaching is that every learning tool, including the online homework, can have its own advantages and disadvantages and the effectiveness of any method varies from one learner to another.

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#### **Appendixes:**

#### **Appendix A: Students' evaluation of the effectiveness of online homework in regard to their language learning**

		Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree
3-	Questions from 3-13 The online workbook practice improved my understanding of the in-class reading passages	6.5%	66.0%	8.5%	19.0%
4-	The online workbook activities improved my understanding of the in-class exercises and activities	9.5%	68.0%	6.0%	16.5%
5-	The online workbook practice helped me in learning the vocabulary from each unit.	18.0%	63.5%	3.5%	15.0%
6-	The online workbook practice helped me in improving my writing skills	6.0%	36.5%	11.0%	46.5%
7-	The online workbook practice helped me in writing complete and grammatically correct sentences	8.0%	50.8%	8.5%	32.7%
8-	The online workbook practice helped me in writing a well-structured and coherent paragraph	4.5%	39.5%	12.0%	44.0%
9-	The online workbook practice helped me in completing my in-class writing task effectively	6.5%	42.5%	12.5%	38.5%

10-	The online work line practice helped me improving my in-class oral communication skills	8.5%	55.0%	29.5%	7.0%
11-	The online workbook practice helped me in pronouncing difficult words correctly	10.0%	56.5%	9.5%	24.0%
12-	The online workbook practice helped me in understanding the in-class listening material	13.0%	56.0%	8.0%	23.0%
13-	The online workbook practice prepared me for in-class tests and quizzes	18.0%	55.0%	7.0%	20.0%

**Appendix B: General questions domain**

		While working on the online workbook activities				Total
		Work independently	Ask others for help	Make guesses	Check the correct answer first	
Gender	female	75	38	9	14	136
	male	30	20	5	8	63
Total		105	58	14	22	199

		Prior to this course my working experience with online homework was:				Total
		Null (had no experience)	Very limited	Limited	Good	
Gender	female	34	15	36	51	136
	male	11	13	12	27	63
Total		45	28	48	78	199

Hours per week spent working on online homework			Count
hours	1	female	23
		male	8
	2	female	30
		male	13
	3	female	26
		male	15
	4	female	7
		male	1
	5	female	3
		male	1