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# The Problems in Rural English Teaching and the Optimization Path: A Study Based on the Chinese General Social Survey Data

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**Abstract** The new curriculum, new ideas and new requirements concerning English teaching have made the rural English teaching face unprecedented challenges. There are many problems contributing to the poor effect of rural English teaching, such as outdated teaching equipment, unreasonable curriculum design, insufficient teaching staff, asymmetrical teaching content, family education and students' personal problems. Based on the Chinese General Social Survey data, it is found that in terms of English reading, English speaking or English writing, the current English level of China's rural residents is lagging behind. From the average, the reading level of rural residents is better than the speaking and writing level, but the paired T-test results show that there are no significant differences between them, suggesting that under the current system of rural English teaching, the English level of rural residents is constrained to a low level. To improve the rural English teaching in the future, it is necessary to pay close attention to the following aspects: stabilizing the investment in rural education; optimizing the English teaching content; converting the philosophy of education; increasing teacher training; establishing the new linkage system.

**Key words** Rural English teaching, Chinese General Social Survey, Optimization path

## 1 Introduction

With the deepening international cooperation and exchanges, English teaching has captured unprecedented attention at home, and the popularization of English education has long been a trend. In urban areas, schools and parents strive to create a good English learning environment for the children so that they are exposed to English environment from infancy in order to strengthen the English language foundation.

However, in underdeveloped rural areas, due to various reasons, English teaching is facing considerable challenges. Rural students generally believe that the English learning difficulties are concentrated in the word pronunciation, sentence reading and oral communication.

The bottlenecks restricting rural English education are largely related to the current system of rural English teaching. In terms of school conditions and teacher resources, the majority of rural schools can not compete with their urban counterpart. The new curriculum, new ideas and new requirements concerning English learning has brought unprecedented challenges to rural English teaching.

## 2 The problems in rural English teaching

**2.1 Outdated teaching equipment** As a language class subject, English requires more hardware facilities including language lab, multimedia, multi-channel TV, etc. to provide multichannel means of teaching. Few rural schools have all these equipments, and even the rural schools with better conditions only have the obsolescent equipments (Su Qianhua, 2014).

In addition, the learning materials and journals for improving the skills and updating knowledge are few and far between, and even the basic teaching dictionaries, teaching reference books and course materials are difficult to be fully provided, resulting in long-term backward rural English teaching.

**2.2 Unreasonable curriculum design** Although the popularization of English education has attracted close attention of the society, there is the phenomenon that English subject is still neglected in rural areas. The English education time of primary school in rural areas is difficult to be guaranteed; when in junior high school education, the English subject is often pushed to the edge of the morning or afternoon time, so that the students' learning effect is difficult to be guaranteed.

In addition, in the design of English courses, it often lays great emphasis on the students' written exam and focuses on the reading, but ignores the students' listening and speaking skills, leading to a serious lack of English communicative competence.

**2.3 Insufficient teaching staff** This is first reflected in insufficient number of rural English teachers, and due to the shortage of teachers, every teacher is often responsible for multiple classes. Even in remote areas, the school's English teaching tasks are undertaken by only one teacher. So, the teaching hours are long, the teaching task is heavy, and they sometimes have to cope with the huge pressure of students to enter a higher school.

For those part-time teachers engaged in English teaching, they not only study the English language teaching, but also have to work in the original area of expertise due to evaluation of professional titles and other reasons. All these have caused heavy burden on them, and if not handled properly, it will affect the actual teaching effect of English (Cheng Zhenglong, 2014).

In addition, the pronunciation and intonation of English teacher in rural schools are not up to the standard, and their oral

English is also not good. And there are also some problems such as unsystematic professional knowledge, and misalignment between teaching methods and teaching materials.

This often causes them to target the knowledge points and examination requirements in the teaching materials and position the teaching focus on the textbook knowledge while ignoring the practical application.

**2.4 Asymmetrical teaching content** From the current English teaching materials, the content is mostly in the context of urban life, and it involves a lot of avant-garde concepts and dilutes the consciousness of local color, so it can hardly be understood by the rural children. Affected by economic conditions, most rural children have a narrow range of knowledge, and such teaching content undoubtedly increases the difficulty of teaching, and has a negative impact on their English learning.

**2.5 Family education and students' personal problems** Like the learning of other courses, family education can provide a good complement to English learning. Modern educational theory also suggests that parents' assistance has a more and more obvious impact on the education for children. But the quality of the child's parents in rural areas is lower than in urban areas, and especially the English tutoring and communication are almost impossible to carry out for a child. Although a few parents use a variety of ways such as hiring a tutor to make up for a deficiency, the effect is not as good as the parents' personal tutoring.

Furthermore, compared to urban children, most rural students do not want to speak English and lack self-confidence due to the late start in English. In the process of learning English, they often just learn by rote, and fail to make "listening, speaking, reading and writing" supplement each other (Tang Xingping, 2013; Yang Yong, 2014).

3 Survey and analysis of English level of rural residents

3.1 The basic situation of English level of rural residents

There are many problems in rural English teaching, causing the relatively backward English level of rural residents. Now we will use the survey data to reflect. Our data come from Chinese Gener-

al Social Survey (CGSS), and this survey is China's first national, comprehensive and continuous large-scale social survey project.

This study uses the survey data of this project in 2008. Based on random sampling method, CGSS (2008) conducts sampling in 28 provinces nationwide, and selects one person from the household samples as the object of survey. CGSS (2008) is particularly concerned about the current situation of rural residents' learning and living in China, which meets the objective of this study.

Based on CGSS (2008) questionnaire survey, we select the individuals in rural areas as the object of survey, delete the object of survey with missing data, and obtain a total of 1058 samples. According to the relevant survey information provided by CGSS (2008), we examine the problems that this study is concerned about.

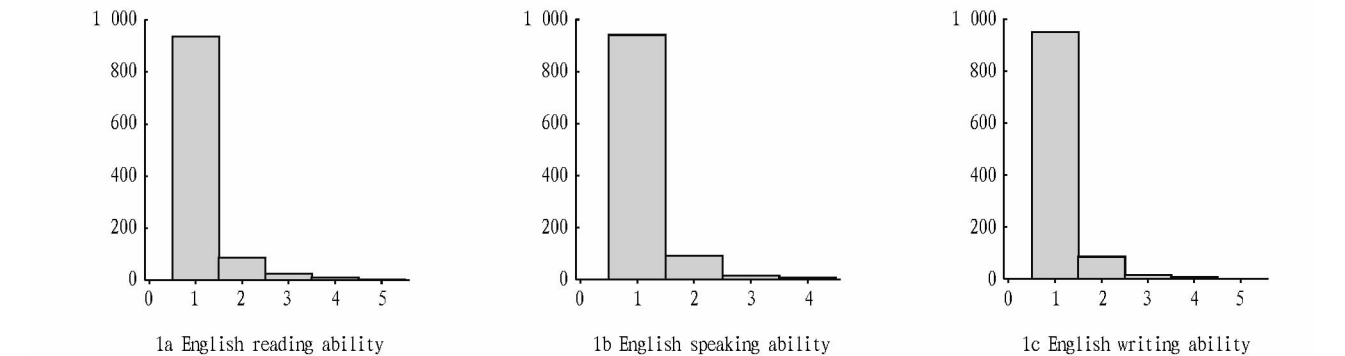
To fully reflect the status of English teaching in rural areas, this study attempts to reveal from English reading, English speaking and English writing.

According to the question in CGSS "How do you find your ability to read English passage?", the respondents' answers of "very bad", "bad", "normal", "good" and "very good" are assigned with 1 - 5 integer value, respectively, in order to reflect the respondents' English reading ability.

For respondents' spoken English level, according to the question "How do you find your ability to chat in English?", the respondents' answers of "very bad", "bad", "normal", "good" and "very good" are assigned with 1 - 5 integer value, respectively.

The English writing ability is depicted in a similar manner. According to the question in CGSS "How do you find your ability to write a letter in English?", the respondents' answers of "very bad", "bad", "normal", "good" and "very good" are assigned with 1 - 5 integer value, respectively.

Fig. 1 visually displays the current English level of Chinese rural residents. As can be seen in Fig. 1, in terms of English reading, English speaking and English writing, the current English level of rural residents in China lags behind, and the majority of rural residents feel that their level of English is very bad.

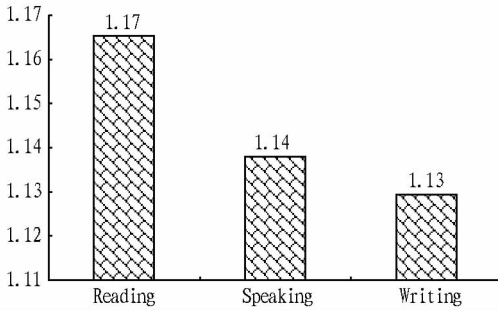


Note: 1a English reading ability 1b English speaking ability 1c English writing ability

Fig. 1 The English reading, speaking and writing ability of the respondents

**3.2 Testing of differences in the English reading, speaking and writing level of rural residents** To reflect the causes of the current low English level of rural residents in detail, we further compare the rural residents' English reading, speaking and writing skills. Fig. 2 reflects the average reading, speaking and writing level of rural residents based on the answers of respondents.

It can be found from Fig. 2 that in the existing rural English teaching system, the reading level of rural residents is better than the speaking and writing level of rural residents. This reflects the phenomenon of focusing on "examination" but neglecting "application" in the process of the current rural English teaching.



**Fig. 2 The average reading, speaking and writing level of respondents**

The simple comparison of the average above is difficult to reveal the true differences among the reading, speaking and writing skills of rural residents. In order to further reveal the problems in rural English teaching, we will use paired samples t-test to study whether there are significant differences among the reading, speaking and writing skills of rural residents.

Paired samples t-tests are often referred to as "dependent samples t-tests". Paired samples t-tests typically consist of a sample of matched pairs of similar units, or one group of units that has been tested twice. A paired samples t-test based on a "matched - pairs sample" results from an unpaired sample that is subsequently used to form a paired sample, by using additional variables that were measured along with the variable of interest.

The matching is carried out by identifying pairs of values consisting of one observation from each of the two samples, where the pair is similar in terms of other measured variables. This approach is sometimes used in observational studies to reduce or eliminate the effects of confounding factors.

Assuming population  $X_1$  follows a normal distribution  $N(\mu_1, \sigma_1^2)$ , and population  $X_2$  follows a normal distribution  $N(\mu_2, \sigma_2^2)$ . The samples  $(x_{11}, x_{12}, \dots, x_{1n})$  and  $(x_{21}, x_{22}, \dots, x_{2n})$  are extracted from the two populations, and the two samples are paired with each other. To test whether there is a significant difference between  $X_1$  and  $X_2$ , we first need to introduce a new random variable  $Y = X_1 - X_2$ . The sample value that  $Y$  corresponds to is  $(y_1, y_2, \dots, y_n)$ , where  $y_i = x_{1i} - x_{2i}$ ,  $(i = 1, 2, \dots, n)$ .

By this conversion, the testing problem is converted into single sample t-test problem, that is, it is converted into the testing of whether there is a significant difference between  $Y$  and 0. We

further establish the null hypothesis  $H_0: \mu_Y = 0$ , and construct  $t$  statistic for testing the null hypothesis. The  $t$  statistic is constructed as follows:

$$t = \frac{\bar{y}}{S_y / \sqrt{n-1}}: t(n-1), S_y = \sqrt{\frac{\sum y^2 - (\sum y)^2}{n-1}} \quad (1)$$

Table 1 shows the paired samples t-test results. In can be found from Table 1 that although in terms of the average, the reading level of rural residents is better than the speaking and writing level of rural residents, but the level of all the three is low, so t-test results show no significant differences, suggesting that under the existing system of rural education, the English level of rural residents is constrained at a low level.

**Table 1 Paired samples t-test**

Reading	Speaking	$T=0.583\ 8, P=0.559\ 4$
Speaking	Writing	$T=0.197\ 4, P=0.843\ 5$
Reading	Writing	$T=0.861\ 1, P=0.389\ 3$

## 4 The path to optimization of rural English teaching

Acquiring the basic knowledge of English and English communicative proficiency is an important goal of English teaching. The latest English syllabus emphasizes the communicative nature of language teaching and cultivation of the ability to use language, which is a breakthrough in the English teaching idea. The cultivation of communicative ability is an important manifestation of quality education, so it deserves wider attention.

In English teaching, it is necessary to lay great emphasis on the cultivation of the ability to use language for communication, in order to promote all-around development of the individual and exert the potential of the individual. Based on the current problems in rural English teaching and English proficiency status of rural residents, it is necessary to pay attention to the following aspects for the improvement of rural English teaching.

**4.1 Stabilizing the investment in rural education** Governments at all levels and departments in charge of education shall ensure that the funds are used for the input to teaching equipments and teaching materials in rural schools. Through the rural financial support, it is necessary to constantly enrich rural English teaching resources, and strive to improve teaching facilities.

Moreover, there is a need to establish the institutionalized education finance investment programs in order to better promote the rural residents to have equal access to education, which is the basis for the improvement of rural English teaching.

**4.2 Optimizing the English teaching content** Currently the English textbooks are designed and compiled generally taking the road of urbanization, and the content of English teaching materials mostly regards the urban life as the background, which is to a large extent different from the real life of rural students, so the rural students are relatively unfamiliar with this, causing obstacles to learning.

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Thus, rural teachers should strive to make teaching and learning activities close to the life, so that these activities can fully reflect the daily life of rural students. Only when what they have learned is applied to their familiar life can their interest in learning English be cultivated.

For example, when illustrating something or performing situational teaching, the teachers can make it related to the rural life and the students are always more interested in what they are familiar with, thus the classroom atmosphere can be enlivened. In addition, the selection and compilation of the rural English textbooks should be distinguished from that of the urban English textbooks, and when conditions permit, it is necessary to appropriately supplement it with local materials.

**4.3 Converting the philosophy of education** Education authorities have to effectively change the philosophy of education, and provide opportunities for teachers to implement teaching reform. Education authorities should also urge school to increase more individual ability factors involved in the teaching assessment mechanism so that the teaching is no longer simply assessed by the scores.

In addition, the evaluation system for current rural English teaching is often limited to the teachers' evaluation of students, and it is mostly written exam.

Under the new situation, it is necessary to advocate diversified assessment system, and focus on the combination of formative assessment and summative assessment. For the rural English teaching, there is a need to establish the assessment system in line with reality, including the assessment object, assessment methods, assessment mode, etc.

When conditions permit, the schools can create a file for each student's development, to record the students' usual performance in the schools.

**4.4 Increasing teacher training** Government should increase support for rural teacher training, and offer effective training based on the rural teachers' weaknesses in voice and intonation, not just theoretical learning. Education authorities should formulate strict training system to systematically and purposefully instill new teaching concept into rural English teachers, in order to improve the professional level of rural English teachers.

**4.5 Establishing the new linkage system** Currently as the rural labor forces choose to work outside the home, a large number of students become left-behind children in rural areas, and it lacks stable environment and security for the English learning. This requires schools to establish a new linkage system, and adopt the ways of scenario simulation and fun teaching to enliven the atmosphere for English learning from the inside to the outside of the school.

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