

# An Analysis of the Causes and Countermeasures of English Reading Difficulties Among Students in Rural Areas

Ximei Hu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Language School, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: 342587@whut.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

Students in rural schools constitute a major source of future labour; thus, it is of significance to analyse their learning predicaments and put forward suggestions. The aim of this paper is to delve into the causes of rural children's difficulties in English reading and propose countermeasures. This paper contends that low reading proficiency and low motivation are the principal aspects of reading difficulties. In the aspect of cause analysis, this paper centers on students' reading strategies and teachers' teaching approaches, holding the view that the reading predicaments should be ascribed to inefficient reading strategies and inappropriate teaching paths. Subsequently, five suggestions based on the existing academic research are presented: leveraging picture books in English, enlarging students' vocabulary, establishing positive assessment methods, extending the read-aloud period, and providing adequate reading resources.

**Keywords:** Rural areas, Education, English reading, Rural students, Reading difficulties.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China has issued various documents to address the gap between urban and rural development, and is committed to promoting the equal level of urban and rural compulsory education. However, in rural areas, the reform of reading education in rural areas has not kept up with the pace of educational reform, and there is a huge gap between rural children and their urban peers in reading ability [1]. English is an important language tool today, and students in rural schools will be an important source of supply for the future labour market. This paper aims to analyse the causes of rural children's English reading difficulties, and put forward some feasible suggestions based on the existing academic research.

## 2. RURAL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN ENGLISH READING

Low reading ability and low motivation are the two conspicuous dimensions of the problem. The

English reading of most rural children is characterized by a blind, chaotic, and inefficient negative state, with a low level of reading proficiency and ability at the heart of the issue [2]. Additionally, traditional teaching methods prevalent in rural English instruction often fail to ignite students' passion and engagement, leading to a general disinterest in English reading among rural students [3].

## 3. CAUSES OF ENGLISH READING DIFFICULTIES

### 3.1 Teaching Method

Teachers' teaching methods and teaching paths must be taken into account since they are the direct influences of students. In the introduction phase, the question chains designed by some teachers fail to stimulate students' reading thinking and mobilize their reading emotions, resulting in low enthusiasm for reading texts [3]. In the subsequent text-reading phase, vocabulary and grammar are the foundations for reading comprehension. However, some reading instruction tends toward superficiality and

standardization by focusing on shallow textual processing while neglecting deeper comprehension, and thus students find it difficult to understand the gist or analyze the author's value, and influence their reading efficiency [4]. This further dampens students' confidence in English reading. In addition, some teachers hold a firmly belief that they are the authority, and students must passively accept their teaching content, resulting in a lack of teacher-student interaction.

### **3.2 Reading Anxiety**

Reading anxiety is an adverse emotional response stemming from the various challenges encountered during the reading process. Some scholars have explored the relationship between reading anxiety and the use of reading strategies, and the results show that people with low anxiety have a stronger ability to flexibly use various reading strategies [5]. In fact, Chinese students in rural schools do suffer from poor English reading strategies. Many rural students, with limited vocabulary, prefer to depend on their sense during reading and will just skip those unfamiliar or incomprehensible parts of a text, leading to partial understanding during examinations [6]. Some students choose to translate the article word for words, which results in a low reading efficiency. Improper reading strategies, tough reading situations and reading anxiety will eventually form a vicious circle, seriously affecting students' enthusiasm for reading.

## **4. SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS THE ENGLISH READING DIFFICULTIES OF STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS**

### **4.1 Leveraging Picture Books in English**

Picture books in English, featuring its colourful paintings, can be perfectly integrated with the process of English reading teaching. Teachers should build a combination of "picture book-textbook" teaching mode, ensuring that the values and contents of picture books serve the text of the English textbook [7]. Besides, teachers should also pay attention to guiding students to logically connect those vivid pictures with the learned passages.

Besides, the teaching method utilizing picture books needs to fully respect students' learning subjectivity and self-efficacy. Students' decoding

ability will be improved due to the large number of pictures in picture books [8]. Therefore, before students read, teachers can guide students to predict the contents according to the basic information such as the cover and title of picture books, and then give them enough time to verify their ideas by reading the text so that both their thinking modes and passion will be highly activated.

The independent output of what students have learned is also an essential part of consolidating what they have learned. One of the feeble ideas is to encourage children to reproduce the contents of the picture book by independently drawing mind maps. This process can be regarded as the process of re-processing and output of input English knowledge, which can directly train students' logical thinking in reading. Moreover, if children are not interested in drawing mind map, inspiring them to make their own picture books or performing a drama based on the learned text from picture books are good choices too [9]. During these two activities, students are always allowed to enrich the plot or content based on their comprehension on the theme of the learned text, so as to sharpen their English skills.

When choosing picture books, teachers should take into account the following principles: First, try to choose original texts so that students can learn more authentic English expressions. Secondly, the content and difficulty of the selected English picture books should be in line with students' cognitive characteristics and abilities. Third, the content of the picture book should be related to the textbook text in order to deepen students' understanding of the article. Finally, teachers choose picture books with different genres as much as possible to assist students adapt to the writing styles of various texts [7].

### **4.2 Enlarging Students' Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is the foundation of reading comprehension. Without a sufficient vocabulary, understanding the meaning of an article is impossible. The most accessible resources for rural students are the word lists in textbooks, which they are often required to memorize. The problem is that the list of words in the textbook is very limited, which is not enough to meet the requirements of students to understand those reading texts. Teachers should appropriately add some extra-curricular vocabulary to students. The supplement vocabulary should involve a wide range in order to stimulate students' interest in reciting words. These words are

preferable to be frequently used in daily life so that students can use them during the oral-English practice [10]. Compared with urban students, rural students' weak vocabulary is not only reflected in the small number, but also in the narrow breadth. With the continuous advancement of education reform, rich cultural background knowledge, especially culture-loaded words, is very important for students to read cultural texts [11]. Therefore, teachers need to supplement the cultural vocabulary that may be involved in English reading teaching to students, and introduce relevant background knowledge to them. The accumulation of words is a long-term process, and there is a high probability that new words still exist in the text, so teachers should pay attention to telling students how to use the context to infer the meaning of new words.

Some rural students are not good at memorizing words, so some special methods need to be used to help them solve this problem. With the development of science and technology, AV (audio-visual) has become an important tool in English teaching, which allows students to simultaneously “hear the sound” and “see the spelling (see the object)” [12]. Clearly, video fits that description. Teachers can look for online videos based on students' cognitive level, such as historical documentaries, famous speeches, and even animations, to help students memorize new words. For some rural schools, their infrastructure is incomplete due to the limitation of funds. In this case, by making word cards with pictures and downloading the accompanying word audio, rural schools can also achieve the effect of mobilizing both auditory and visual effects for better word memory, laying the foundation for the improvement of reading comprehension. Conducting vocabulary quiz competitions is another feasible method, which can effectively consolidate and enlarge students' vocabulary to some extent.

### ***4.3 Establishing Positive Assessment Methods***

Multidimensional evaluation can often make students have a clearer self-cognition and stimulate their learning potential. Compared with their peers, rural children's self-perception is more susceptible to external influences. Therefore, it is vital to establish a positive evaluation system to enhance rural children's confidence in English reading. Teachers in rural schools need to realize that their students have been maintaining a positive learning attitude and hope to gain recognition. Therefore, in

English reading teaching, they should acknowledge students' progress in time and maintain an encouraging attitude towards their mistakes, so as to strengthen their reading enthusiasm and weaken their inner sense of inferiority [13]. What is worth noticing is that teachers are no longer the only source of education evaluation. Under the multiple assessment methodology, both teachers and students are their subjects: teachers make comprehensive evaluation of students' academic performance, and then give suggestions or encouragement to students, while students reflect on their shortcomings through self-evaluation or peer evaluation.

To establish positive assessment methods is not only required to implement the encouragement-oriented policy, but also to shift the teaching goals. Research shows that mastery goals have a positive relation with reading comprehension outcome while the performance approach goals show a contrast, with latter goals in Asian countries mainly being demonstrated by the form of exam-oriented principles [14]. Thus, in order to enhance the students' reading comprehension competence, teachers must shift their teaching aims from assisting students to get higher scores in the tests to cultivate their better usage of learned English knowledge and set it as the point to design their teaching context.

### ***4.4 Extending the Read-aloud Period***

English learning is a fine combination of listening, speaking, reading and writing and thus it is impossible to make progress in a single aspect without mobilizing others. Some scholars have found that the teacher-student shared reading mode can significantly improve the reading level of students: the teacher's reading aloud helps students better memorize vocabulary and understand the text; The students' autonomous reading aloud process is seen as an effective way to promote their attentional skills, which is crucial in speed reading [15]. Moreover, recent studies have shown that oral fluency directly affects reading comprehension [14]. Therefore, it is necessary for rural students to increase the time they spend reading English texts aloud. In rural areas, schools can flexibly schedule morning and evening reading sessions. Morning reading can focus on text previews, helping students understand the reading materials ahead of class. Evening reading allows students to consolidate what they've learned during the day, encouraging independent thinking and conducting

knowledge integration. These practices not only improve learning efficiency but also help students develop good study habits.

#### **4.5 Providing Adequate English Reading Resources**

Reading English literature has a positive effect on students' reading, writing and vocabulary. As a matter of fact, when students read extra-curricular texts in English, they can learn about foreign cultures and societies from them, which is very important for them to cross cultural gaps and empathize with the texts [11]. Beyond that, studies have proved that reading extracurricular English books can improve students' reading efficacy and thus stimulate their curiosity for reading [16]. But children in rural areas are likely to be limited by their family's economic situation to have access to a wide variety of English books. Therefore, based on the goal of solving rural students' English reading difficulties, the library, as the best place to supplement the amount of reading, should shoulder its due responsibility.

Since most rural students are suffering from low reading cognition, community libraries need to provide book recommendation services to rural children who come to borrow books in addition to holding publicity activities to attract readers. There are two principles of book recommendation: first, recommend books that meet the cognitive characteristics of children of different ages; Second, the recommended books must have a positive effect on their value building [2]. Appropriate reading strategies help students understand the logical relationship between paragraphs and summarize the main idea of the article, so as to achieve good reading results [11]. Therefore, the reading level of library staff also needs to be improved, because only in this way can they give timely help and guidance to those children who show obvious reading anxiety or reading difficulties.

The geographical and economic conditions of some rural areas in China may not support the operation of community libraries. "Peer effect" plays an important stimulating role in children's reading, especially in rural areas. It has been shown that when children read text together, their motivation and enthusiasm for learning develop in a positive direction, and appropriate interaction can alleviate some children's anxiety caused by reading problems [5]. Under such circumstances, classroom libraries are another good option [17]. To make it work as it should, schools can implement incentive

mechanisms to help foster children's independent reading habits but they also should manage the level of incentives to avoid causing unhealthy competition among students.

Besides, some studies have found that experienced adults are the guides for children's reading, so libraries need to focus on the cultivation of reading literacy among adults in close contact with rural children [16]. The main feasible way is to mobilize teachers, parents and some social personnel in rural areas to participate in reading activities, become reading promoters, and train them through reading sharing meetings, lectures and other forms.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The primary causes of English reading difficulties among students in rural places can be explored by two major factors: students' reading strategies and teacher's teaching methods. Assisting rural students to overcome English reading difficulties needs multiple promotions from rural schools, teachers, parents and even society. This paper proposes five feasible solutions: leveraging picture books in English, enlarging students' vocabulary, establishing positive assessment methods, extending the read-aloud period, and providing adequate reading resources. By implementing these solutions, countryside school students' enthusiasm for English reading can be effectively stimulated, their learning methods improved, and their language skills, particularly in speaking, cultivated positively. These measures will not only enhance their academic performance but also contribute to their holistic development in English learning.

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