

Present Situation of and Development Strategies for Extracurricular English Reading in China's Rural Junior High Schools

Meng, Xihua¹, Cai, Shuang²

¹School of Foreign Languages, Shangqiu Normal University, Shangqiu, Henan, China

²Huaibin No. 2 Junior High School, Xinyang, Henan, China



Article History

Received :06/05/2022

Accepted : 09/05/2022

Published : 12/05/2022

Corresponding author:

Meng, Xihua

Abstract

The survey and interview of 12 English teachers and 210 students from rural junior high schools in H County in central China shows that, the present situation of students' extracurricular English reading is: Firstly, rural junior high school students spend less time on extracurricular English reading; secondly, most students have limited choices of extracurricular English reading materials; thirdly, students' interest and enthusiasm in extracurricular English reading are not strong. The main reasons for these situations are: for students, their English reading skills are not good enough, and they ignore the importance of English reading; for teachers and schools, dated English teaching methods block the connections between English learning and real life, and books for English reading are in shortage. The above reasons led to the low interest in English learning of rural junior high school students and will further undermine the quality of rural junior high school English teaching and affect students' learning and development. Therefore, this study attempts to give suggestions from the perspectives of students, schools and society, in order to improve the extracurricular reading level of rural junior high school students.

Key words: rural junior high school; extracurricular English reading; current situation; reasons; suggestions

Funding: 2021 Henan Provincial Project of Reform in Teacher Education Courses: Construction and Practice of a U-G-S Coordinated Development Mode of School English Teachers from the Perspective of Community (Project No.: 2021-JSJYYB-049).

Background of the Survey

As China's new English curriculum reform deepens, students' innovative thinking, cooperative consciousness, and inquiry ability have been drawing growing attention. At the same time, under the background of economic globalization, the demand for cross-cultural communication is gradually increasing. Therefore, extracurricular English reading has become an indispensable part of students' learning for it not only extends and supplements students' English classroom learning, but also broadens their horizons and improves their overall quality. However, in many rural areas of China, most of the students' extracurricular English reading level seems to be relatively low, so this survey takes rural junior high schools in H County in central China as samples to

investigate the situation of students' extracurricular English reading.

Survey Design

Contents of the Survey

This survey mainly investigates and analyzes the situation of rural junior high school students' extracurricular English reading and the main reasons for students' less time, poor level, and low interest in extracurricular English reading, and puts forward some suggestions for improvement.

Purposes of the Survey

Taking rural junior high schools in H County as a representative, this study will investigate the current situation of extracurricular English reading of junior high school students in rural areas, find

out the specific reasons for these problems, and put forward reasonable suggestions to improve students' English reading level and cross-cultural communication ability.

Methods of the Survey

In order to get the most accurate survey results, 12 English teachers and 215 students of different grades from rural junior high schools were randomly surveyed online. Finally, 12 valid questionnaires from English teachers and 210 questionnaires from students of different grades were obtained, totaling 222 valid questionnaires. At the same time, the survey combines the auxiliary form of offline interview and communication and gets the objective data of students' English reading by viewing the records of book borrowing.

Data Analysis

The online questionnaire is divided into students' versions and teachers' versions, and the collected data will be carefully analyzed and checked one by one. Finally, through the collation and analysis of the survey materials, there are three characteristics of the present situation of junior high school students' extracurricular English reading.

Less Time for Extracurricular English Reading

The survey shows that students spend little time on extracurricular English reading. It can be seen from Table 11 in Appendix II that the frequency of students' autonomous extracurricular English reading every week is mostly at a very low level, and the reading time is not long. English learning ability and intercultural communication ability can be significantly improved through a lot of English reading, which has been recognized and confirmed by many experts. (Krashen, 2004) It can be seen that increasing the amount of English reading is very important for students to improve their English in the future. However, under the influence of exam-oriented education, English teaching in China emphasizes classroom reading, attaches importance to textbook and discourse learning, and neglects extracurricular reading. (Wang & He, 2001: 11-18) As some people have put forward, after the new curriculum reform, China has put forward higher requirements for junior high school students' English reading, and also thinks that English reading is very important, but still puts more emphasis on the examination-oriented teaching. (Zhang, 2012: 3) The same is true of teachers in these schools. When they accept the questionnaire, they all say that they know the importance of extracurricular English reading to students' English learning. But in fact, they still only focus on teaching students how to answer the questions on the test paper and do not consider the self-schedule and interests of students at all. For example, in class, the teacher will orally suggest students read more, but in fact, it is mandatory for students to spend an hour every day reciting English words instead of reading books on English-related topics. In this regard, some students said that they were just ready to start reading a book, but when it came to the next exam or endorsement, they had to stop to review and recite the textbook and had no time to read extracurricular books.

Limited Extracurricular Reading Material

Most students have a single choice of extracurricular English reading materials. The choice of reading materials plays an

important role in students' English reading, so the extracurricular reading materials for students to choose from are the key factors for students to read. Therefore, the suitability of reading materials affects whether students can insist on reading. If the English reading materials provided by the school are rich and interesting, which are suitable for the psychological development level and English learning level of junior high school students, the probability that students can insist on reading will be greater. However, according to the data of the questionnaire survey, most of the reading materials available for students in rural areas are paper books, and most of them are old books published around the year 2000, which are not updated in time. There are a few new types of materials that are more in line with modern biographies, cultural magazines, English newspapers, and periodicals.

Moreover, according to the interviews with individual students, the school teachers rarely recommend some books to them. More importantly, they let the students read the topics on the test paper. The reading materials are rather boring classroom content. Many students who like reading newspapers or biographies find it difficult to understand English knowledge other than the test paper.

Low Interest and Enthusiasm in Reading Among Students

In addition, Nuttall (1996) suggests that "the best way to improve your foreign language proficiency is to spend time with native speakers of the language, followed by extensive reading." (128) However, Students do not like English reading. Even if they recognize the importance of extracurricular English reading for English learning, their interest and enthusiasm for English reading are still in the doldrums. For example, some young teachers try to set up an English reading corner to help students improve their reading level, but few students go to it every week. When the teacher asked a classmate why he didn't take part in the activity, the student's answer was "Not interested" or "Taking part in the English reading corner can't improve the score." There is also an old teacher who takes the English books he has read to the class for sharing, and few students will take the initiative to borrow them. The reading atmosphere in the class is very low. In the long run, there are fewer and fewer students who independently read after class, and the students' interest is also getting lower and lower.

Analysis of Reasons

With the reform of the new curriculum, junior high school students in China are required to read more English, but the specific implementation status varies in different regions. Especially in rural areas, English teaching has been in an unqualified state, which makes it more difficult to improve students' English reading levels under the requirements of the new curriculum reform. In the survey, we find that students have less time, fewer materials, and low interest in extracurricular reading. Our investigation also finds out the reasons for this situation from the perspective of students, teachers, and schools.

Reasons of Students

Uneven English Reading Levels

Students' English reading level is uneven, which makes it difficult to carry out unified extracurricular reading activities in the class. It can be seen from the survey table that 91.43% of the students

surveyed are from rural areas, where English education resources are scarce and teaching quality is extremely poor. First of all, some students even began to contact English learning from junior high school, so these students put more emphasis on the basis of supplements in their three-year English learning time in junior high school, such as reciting primary and secondary school words and practicing some daily conversations and simple words, while ignoring the reserve of English thinking knowledge, and they have no time to read extracurricular English books to improve themselves. In addition, in the classroom, nearly half of the students are difficult to understand a basic essay, which leads to the teacher's inability to lead or guide the students to read unified English books in-class time, so that the students can only read independently and randomly, and the polarization is more serious. Moreover, due to the lack of teacher resources in rural areas, a teacher usually has to teach many students, and it is impossible to achieve individual guidance. Students with poor English levels are hard to have opportunities even if they want to improve. In the long run, their interest and enthusiasm for English reading are naturally low.

Neglect of Extracurricular English Reading

Most of the students are too young to realize the importance of extracurricular English reading. Nearly 78.57% of the students think that it is not important to improve the level of extracurricular English reading or hold an attitude of indifference. "No matter in the exam or in real life, there are higher requirements for students' English reading ability, which is also the highest requirement of the new English goal for teaching and the comprehensive embodiment of students' English ability. Limited by the objective conditions of rural schools and students' own quality, rural children's reading habits have not been effectively cultivated, and they do not pay enough attention to English." (Dai, 2018: 130) Students with such attitudes are not uncommon in rural areas. In the case that the school and teachers do not pay attention to it, it is difficult for students to have the autonomy of reading, and they are not willing to spend time on extracurricular English reading, which leads to the phenomenon of "No time to read."

Reasons of Teachers and Schools

Antiquated Teaching Methods

In rural areas, most of the old teachers' English teaching methods are out of date, and the young teachers do not have the ability to lead the classroom teaching reform. From the survey results (see Appendix D), it can be seen that most English teachers in rural areas are old teachers. Although they have rich working experience, their teaching methods have not been updated in time. On the one hand, there is no way to improve themselves. On the other hand, the school does not regularly organize teachers to observe and learn advanced teaching concepts and models. Through the interview, we can know that the improvement of teachers in rural areas is mainly through the open observation classes in rural schools, which can only improve teaching skills in a small range, and it is difficult to absorb advanced teaching ideas in real-time.

In addition, in the process of English teaching, for students with a poor foundation, teachers focus on rote learning and do not pay attention to heuristic teaching and innovative teaching. For

example, when students encounter unknown words in the process of reading, the teacher will only tell them to look up the words, and will not guide them to learn a series of related words or read articles on related topics to help students understand.

Low Relevance in Learning and Life

The study of English reading in class is separated from real life. In the process of classroom teaching, because there are only 40 minutes in each class, and there are not many English courses every week, it is difficult for teachers to use the classroom time to guide students to carry out English reading, which has become the most important way to improve students' reading. However, under the pressure of school performance, most teachers still spend a lot of time on improving students' test-taking ability, requiring students to read only the materials on the test paper, and paying little attention to the cultivation of students' English thinking and the accumulation of extracurricular English reading.

Shortage in Extracurricular English Reading Materials

According to the survey, the types and ways of extracurricular English reading materials that students can receive are insufficient. The books related to extracurricular English reading put in the library are in shortage. At the same time, there are few ways for students to get extracurricular English reading. In pedagogy, many scholars have confirmed that each student's psychological development characteristics are different, so schools should update books according to the grade characteristics of students' development levels. However, although the state has issued new curriculum reform requirements and proposed to increase students' extracurricular English reading, it has not put forward corresponding solutions. The inclination of educational resources for rural areas is still insufficient, and it is difficult for school libraries to update books that students are interested in and fit the times.

Besides the library, it is also difficult for students to obtain reading materials from other sources. There are thousands of students in the whole school, but the number of teachers is only more than 20. The insufficient teachers can not meet the needs of making targeted recommendations to thousands of students in the whole school. And the students in rural areas lack the experience and ability of online learning in the Internet era, so the reading materials are insufficient.

Suggestions

The survey shows that junior high school students have less time, less interest, and fewer resources to take part in extracurricular English reading. However, schools and teachers are still using old teaching methods, and they do not pay enough attention to students' extracurricular reading ability; students ignore the importance of English reading. These phenomena will seriously hinder the development of students' English level and the improvement of their intercultural communication ability in the future. In view of this situation, this paper puts forward some suggestions to students, teachers and schools, and society.

Suggestions for Students

Enhance the Awareness of Extracurricular English Reading

Students should pay attention to extracurricular English reading in daily learning. English learning is not just memorizing words and mastering grammar in textbooks, but English is a language like Chinese, which is an important tool for human communication and learning. extracurricular English reading is just an important way for us to understand and master the language. Only through a lot of reading can we really use the language.

Therefore, students should use psychological suggestions and other methods to make themselves pay attention to and fall in love with English reading, and be willing to spend time for extracurricular English reading. For example, students can take the initiative to choose their favorite cartoons, movie materials, and novels, and focus on feeling the charm of the English language. With the purpose of cultivating interest, they can read step by step, so that quantitative change can achieve qualitative change.

Learn to Use Online English Reading Resources

In the era of rapid development of the Internet, online learning has become a mainstream way of learning, learning to use convenient online resources has become an essential way to improve. Especially in rural areas with backward English resources, students should grasp the convenience of the Internet.

Min Jun (2016) has verified in his paper that the network platform can provide students with timely feedback and evaluation, which is helpful for improving students' ability to use English. Junior high school students in rural areas can try to search some electronic books on the Internet or read some English news magazines from foreign websites. Reading English articles updated online can not only improve students' vocabulary and reading ability, but also enrich students' scientific and cultural knowledge.

At the same time, online English courses have developed rapidly in recent years. Especially since the epidemic in 2020, the online course system has developed more mature. Qualified students can take the online course as a continuation of the school English course, choose better reading courses online for tutoring, and learn more English cultural knowledge and English reading skills.

Suggestions for Teachers and Schools

Establish English Reading Corner with Reward Mechanism

Sun Hongyan (2018) pointed out that teachers should pay attention to students to develop good English reading habits. (164) In the face of students with low interest and enthusiasm in extracurricular English reading, teachers should organize some reading activities with an incentive mechanism to stimulate students' interest in reading, such as an English reading corner. When teachers set up such an English reading corner with a reward mechanism, students will participate out of various motives and come into contact with the charm of English reading. Naturally, their interest in extracurricular English reading will increase.

Optimize English Teaching Methods

Optimizing the level of English teaching is also one of the ways to improve the level of students. Teachers should learn advanced teaching ideas and methods in various ways and can participate in some online or offline teacher training activities every semester. Schools should also pay attention to the improvement of teachers'

professional ability, and give teachers some encouragement and rewards to optimize teaching methods.

At present, the improvement of rural teachers' professional ability mainly depends on the observation of open courses in rural areas. Teachers and schools may as well broaden their horizons, such as the excellent teachers in the first-tier cities learning teaching methods, and combining with the actual situation of local students to develop "advanced teaching methods" suitable for rural areas. For example, when teaching the text with animals as the theme, the teacher can also guide the students to use the method of brainstorming about the animals they have seen so as to activate the students' thinking. It not only helps students to understand the article but also helps students to have emotional resonance, so that students change passivity to the initiative, actively read and analyze the article, so as to achieve the purpose of improving students' English reading comprehension ability and comprehensive application ability. (Wang, 2017: 188)

Strengthen the Construction of Campus of Nationwide Reading

The school curriculum not only has an explicit curriculum but also contains many hidden curricula which we can not see directly on the campus. In order to comprehensively improve the students' extracurricular English reading level, the campus culture construction of national reading must be strengthened. For example, the school can set up some billboards on English reading on campus, recommend some extracurricular English books for junior high school students every week, or provide some websites and software related to English articles to help students enrich the ways of extracurricular English reading. Moreover, students' low interest in reading is not only related to their poor English level and self-efficacy, but also to the low reading atmosphere. The school needs to strengthen the organization of campus English reading activities, carry out more English recitation competitions and other activities, mobilize the enthusiasm of students, and create a good campus English reading atmosphere.

Suggestions for Society

The investment in English education resources in rural areas must be increased. First of all, in terms of teacher resources, more English majors should be trained, and young English majors should be encouraged to return to their hometowns to carry out education by improving the welfare policy, salary, training opportunities, and other forms of English teachers. Only when the teacher team is more professional, can students receive more professional teaching methods in the classroom.

Secondly, we should help school libraries in rural areas to update their English books in time.

In addition, English reading exchange meetings can be set up in different schools, so that qualified urban teachers and foreign teachers can come to rural areas to exchange and learn with local teachers and students, and promote cultural progress.

Conclusion

To sum up, the improvement of junior high school students' extracurricular English reading levels in rural areas is a long

process, which needs the cooperation of all walks of life. On the basis of a comprehensive investigation, this report introduces the current situation of junior high school students' extracurricular English reading, the reasons, and the corresponding effective suggestions. At the same time, we should also join hands with students, teachers, schools, and society to help students read English better, and improve their English reading level.

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