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Deficiencies in Teaching English in Rural Schools: Approaches to Close the Urban-Rural Divide

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Abstract

The urban-rural divide has been a frequently discussed subject by scholars since the Chinese government's agenda aims to bring an equal quality of life to all regions of the people. Although many papers have identified the problem of regional inequality in China, which has been exacerbated by the Gaokao system, only some of them offer policy suggestions with empirical research. This study, therefore, acts as a complement to the present literature by first summarizing the significance of the Gaokao for rural high school students. Then, the study selects one of the test components- English, and investigates its deficiency in class design, resource quality, and the teacher's teaching method in rural high schools. Lastly, the study suggests an English reading approach to improve English proficiency among rural high school students with theoretical analysis and empirical application in a Yanshi (a county in the northern province of Henan) high school. Some other policies are also suggested based on its successful application in the foreign countries.

Introduction

The Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to Universities and Colleges, often known as Gaokao, is a universal college admission test for high school students or people with the same level of diploma. After rounds of evolution, the Gaokao examination is now composed of three compulsory subjects (Chinese, Math, and English), a choice between History and Physics, and another two subjects among Chemistry, Biology, Law and Merit, and Geography (China education ministry, 2016).

Many students, especially those with low-income family backgrounds, see Gaokao as the 'only' way to leap from lower class to middle class, thereby becoming the first-generation elite. By obtaining a higher diploma, which directly increases the opportunity of entering a well-known company with a decent salary, they are much more likely to escape from the poverty trap (Li, 2019).

Admittedly, the difficulty of the exam is an enormous challenge for many students. The students have to sit an exam that lasted for three days, amounting to nine hours. The test for each subject would be composed of knowledge learned in three years, some being asked in an unseen style. Moreover, the challenge is presented in the declining likelihood of students entering the prestigious university, known as 'C9' (the top 9 universities),

'985'(the program initiated in May 1998 to select 39 universities that has the potential to compete globally), and '211'(a program that selected 100 well-known universities in the 21st century). This is mainly because the number of contestants is growing: about 12 million in 2022, but only 7.7% of them can get into the first-tier university due to a slower rate of expansion in the admission capacity.

Mounting evidence suggests that Gaokao failed to empower poorer students. First, are the geographical restraints. China has its unique Hukou or household registration policy to prevent the rural population from flooding into the urban areas. As only the local registered students could apply for the corresponding high school, this undermines the chance for rural students to get into a more qualified high school in the city to prepare for Gaokao. Although the content of the test is universal across the nation, each province has a specific admission number allocated by the universities: universities would assign more seats to the local province. As a result, Hukou also disproportionately benefits students in Beijing, and Tianjin, where universities are the most concentrated: students in these areas have 30 times more likely to enter a C9 university because of a more lenient admission process reflected in the aspect of taking an easier regional peculiar test, and having more admission number (Hamnett,2019).

In an empirical survey by Liu and Helwig (2020), urban and rural students recognize the presence of inequality within the educational system. Secondly, the income factor plays a critical role in a student's grade. This is when the household in a higher social tier could transfer their influence and financial capability into a better education (Treiman and Yip, 1989), such as hiring prestigious private tutors or purchasing a spot in a top high school where the teaching resources and the teachers would be better than the average school.

There is urgent need to improve teaching English in rural areas of China, and this can be done but it may take time to train teachers and to mobilize resources to rural school. However, in the short term, perhaps the weighing allocation for English should be adjusted to close the score gap between rural and urban students in the Gaokao. Thus, composing 20% of the overall score, English has the same weight as Chinese, however, due to inadequate resources (there is a barrier for a Chinese school to access websites such as Google or YouTube for free learning materials), and difficulty in employing foreign teachers, the English teachers in the rural area could only use test paper as a major teaching resource in an attempt to create an immersive learning experience for their students. This leads to a stagnant learning among students, due to boredom and a lack of opportunity to learn and/or to apply their newly acquired knowledge, despite investing a considerable amount of time and vigor in studying this subject (Zhang et al., 2021). Here we investigated the link between English resource allocation teacher guidance, and student performance, in rural schools hoping to help develop a framework not only to increase English literacy in rural/deprived, but to drive a subject that no longer drags students' overall score down, this will also improve their Gaokao performance and create greater opportunities for rural students to obtain places in higher education institutions or better jobs.

Methods

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the role of increasing the number of reading resources could enhance

the English grade within the context of rural high school students in China. The purpose of the study is to provide ideas on how to engage, motivate and encourage self-directed learning for students in low develop schools to improve English language proficiency.

Objectives

1. To review and analyze potential deficiencies in the current English-language teaching system in rural or deprived schools.
2. To review and analyze the relationship between reading and improving vocabulary acquisition in rural high school students.
3. To Empirically assess the relationship between reading and improving language skills.

The principal research question is to what extent would more English reading material improve student's grade. The research focused on the frequency of high school students' reading, the correlation between the high school student's English grades and their use of reading materials.

Participants

Two groups of high school students from two different rural high schools are selected. One group composes of 90 junior-level students, and another is composed of 80 senior-level students.

Survey Generation and Submission

First, to find out more information about students' thoughts on English learning, we designed a survey to determine what kinds of difficulties the students currently encounter while studying English. The survey was sent online; all attendees were told that there was no right or wrong answer for each question and that their answers would be recorded anonymously. Therefore, they could right their actual thought without worry.

Rather than giving out English novels that could be too challenging for the rural high school students, I chose to use graded English books. They are chosen by the English teacher at each high school based on their student's English ability, which ensures the difficulty level would not be too easy and boring nor too hard and discouraging. Finally, I distribute 400 books to the two schools and construct a sample table that guides the student to record some keywords and sentences while reading. I further highlight the usefulness of recording their reading progress on an online webinar that I have held for each school to provide some advice and instruction on how to use the book effectively.

After a three-month trial, I distributed another survey to collect the final results. But because the time of the survey coincided with a covid outbreak in Guangxi where most of the teachers and students were ill, there were only responses from the students in Yanshi.

Results and Discussion

The Deficiency of the Current English Teaching System

The way of learning, the design of the textbook, and the teacher's classes are the three aspects that contribute to an inefficient English learning environment in the rural high school.

English immersive learning, in which all students would only use English to push themselves to practice, could create an atmosphere of speaking a second language to help students internalize the knowledge, and thus is a valid way of improving student's secondary language skills (Makransky, G. and Petersen, G.B., 2021). However, the English classes for Chinese rural students involve countless test papers: they practice thousands of exam questions, learn, and summarize their mistakes from wrong questions.

The textbook, the rural high school heavily relies on, has limited content. Although there are eight compulsory books for high school students to learn within three years, each book has a similar structure: texts of around 400-500 words and the associated glossary table and, thus could easily arouse boredom among the students. Moreover, short extracts only provide limited exposure for the English learner (Ghasemzadeh, 2008), hampering students' ability to grasp the skill of skim reading and collecting a series of vocabulary related to one topic.

In addition, the way of teacher teaches English class in Chinese: instead of using a foreign language throughout the class, most Chinese English teachers would be prone to use Chinese as the main explanatory language and continuously translate the English sentence during the lesson to make sure clarity of the class content. We asked one of the schools in Yanshi, a rural part of Henan, to share their online class recording during the covid lockdown. Using AI to extract the transcript of the whole class, the result shows that out of 9127 words, only 386 are said in English, which constitutes a meager 4% of the overall content. This way of teaching is not only counterproductive but also misguided: it cultivates the bad habit of the student reading in English, thinking in Chinese, and then translating back to English. In six interviews that I conducted with random students in the rural high school, they expressed their challenge in finishing the exam within the appointed time. This is a concerning trend, as there have been scholars, for example, Khedir A. Almoayidi who stressed the harmfulness of over-relying on the translation when studying a new language: it hinders students from exposing to the secondary language environment (2018) and suggested that creating an English learning environment by implementing the English only policy increases the teaching efficacy.

Reading is one of the critical aspects the English native-speaking country focuses on to build up their student's reading skills (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Multiple studies have been done to investigate the effect of reading on a group of students. Elley and colleagues (2014) tested the effect of reading on introducing unfamiliar terminology to fifth and sixth-grade students, and they ultimately discovered it to be effective in both reading familiar and unfamiliar texts. Some studies show the provision of storybooks could double the rate of progress in reading comprehension skills among Fijian students. There are also studies that indirectly indicate the efficiency of our reading approach, as this is a way to provide more study resources and knowledge inputs for students. A more comprehensive investigation on the effect of better classroom resources and teacher experience highlights

the benefits of having more books in the student's study across two African countries. (Zakharov et al., 2016). Thus, we investigated the effectiveness of establishing a robust reading approach to level up students' English scores while reducing their overall gap with city students and fulfilling their dream of becoming a college student.

Correlation between Instilling a Robust Reading Approach and English Proficiency in Rural Schools

Reading books could mainly improve rural high school students' English scores by boosting their vocabulary accumulation, reading comprehension, and writing ability, which are all tested in their final Gaokao exam. For our investigation, we selected books and mailed two hundred books to each of the schools, with different language level to enable students to find the most suitable. The books included a variety of topics, including sciences, humanities, and story books, which should help teach students to learn how to think in English (Neyman, 2002). In our online seminar with the high school in Yanshi, students repeatedly asked about the ways to remember unfamiliar vocabulary: they felt frustrated by simply remembering the vocabulary through repeatedly reading the word in English and then its Chinese translation. Simply memorizing through repetition, they would easily forget them the next day. Moreover, they could not apply the word in their actual writing because they did not understand the mechanism and collocation of each new vocabulary. Students can be confused by seemingly alike words, such as 'upset' and 'disturb', which has the same Chinese translation. They resist to read the proper English definition which reflects the nuance between the meaning of words.

We suggest that reading different books alleviates the stress of remembering simple words: it offers the context of using words and embeds the word into a complete sentence. This allows the student to imitate the way the author uses them. Moreover, any book by itself provides higher-level vocabulary, so that the student can practice interpreting the meaning of the vocabulary with the clue given by the context.

After consulting each school's English teacher about the level of books in English they used, the most commonly selected level is 'Q' (the level ranged from 'A' - the easiest, to 'Z' - the hardest), which is equivalent to a third-grade level in the United States. A standard Q-level book is often composed of 1200 words while a reading passage, in the Gaokao exam, has three times that length. Thus, throughout the academic year, students could cultivate the habit of reading books in English with longer content to increase their English language proficiency, eventually facilitating their performance in the actual exam conditions.

Writing and English grammar is the most challenging component for students, according to the first survey. This is understandable since the grammatical structure in English, which involves different tenses and sentence structure, for example, the use of clauses, confuses students while using them in their writing and picking the right phrase and tense for the grammar multiple choice and cloze test in the Gaokao English paper. A way to understand how to use grammar and construct sentences in the right way is by reading how native speakers express their ideas. In one of the webinars, I demonstrated to the students how I would annotate and learn from one of the books I donated while reading the opening sentence of the book " ' if you were to travel..., you would come to Asia' perfectly demonstrates how to write in a subjunctive mode. Once I notice this unfamiliar structure, I would note it down and create my sentence using the same sentence structure..." In order to produce fluent writing, students

need to have their own bank that contains various sentence types and vocabularies so that they can output the things they want to express onto the paper.

The Impact of Reading Higher English Vocabulary Books on Language Proficiency

We designed two questioners to assess the impact of reading higher vocabulary books on language attainment. The first questionnaire, data shown in Table 1, ask questions about the challenges and status of their English learning as shown in table one.

Table 1. Response to Questions about the Challenges and Status of Students English Learning

Question	Type of question	Percentile of responses
question 1	grade	grade 10: 33%, grade 11: 0% grade 12: 67%
question 2	gender	girls: 51%, boys: 49%
question 3	level of difficulty of English compares to Mathematics and Chinese	Hardest: 16%, medium: 46%, lowest: 38%
question 4	hardest section in an English exam	reading: 55%, writing: 79%, grammar: 68%
question 5	range of the English grade (out of 150)	over 130: 2%, 110-130:27%, 90-109:48%, 60-90:21%, fewer than 60: 1%
question 6	reason for having a high grade (only for students who select a grade higher than 110)	Most common answer is vocabulary (10 students)
question 7	hinders on their way of studying English	most common answer is vocabulary (70 students)
question 8	study material that students used apart from the textbook	Xiaogan': 25, 'Youhua design': 13
question 9	if the student has reached a plateau (no improvement when practicing more questions)	yes: 76%, no: 24%
question 10	ways that student think could be effective in improving their English grade	most common answer is to memorize word (80 students)

In total, there are 170 responses. While 16% of the students regard English as the hardest subject, only 4/170 students could achieve a grade above 86%, which shows a significant gap with the city high school where the average grade is 83%. Also, students in the survey shows they only use practice books and buy past paper collections ('Xiaogan' and 'Youhua design') to improve their grades. This is a well-known way of learning in China, often regarded as the 'drill and practice' method. Theoretically, it could facilitate students to memorize information through repetitive practice (Chen, 2003). However, these practice paper shows their limitation when 76% of the students felt the time and energy, they invested in studying English has a diminishing return on their

grade. In the question that asks about student's opinion on possible ways to improve their English, the most common perception which 80 students agree with is through extending their vocabulary (which could be achieved through reading more English literature); the next comes to reading with 11 students thinking it is a good way.

The second survey, results shown in table 2, is composed of 84 responses, which are all from a high school in the remote part of Henan, Luoyang. The survey reveals that 82% of the students effectively participated by reading more than one book. Among them, 12 students have completed more than five books within three months.

In the group of students who have read several books in the three months trial, 82% of them felt that reading English books has made English subject more intriguing, and 70% further acknowledge the fact that English reading lowers their stress in finishing the English test, especially the reading section as well as the writing section. In total, 49 students received a higher grade in their latest English week test: while half of them had an increase within the span of 1-5 marks, nearly 40% of their scores saw an increase in the category of 5-10 marks, and five students even had 10-15 marks increase within the three months English reading activity.

Table 2. Response to Questions on English Attainment after Reading Higher-level Vocabulary Books

Question	Type of question	Percentile of responses
question 1	grade	grade 10:100%
question 2	number of English books students has finished	0: 3%, 1-5:82%, over 5: 14%
question 3	frequency of reading	over 1 book a week: 10%, 1 book per 2 weeks: 21%, 1 book per 3 weeks: 26%, less than 1 book per 3 weeks: 41%
question 4	whether reading the given resources increases their interests in studying English	yes: 80%, no:20%
question 5	if reading alleviate the stress in learning English	yes:68%, no: 32%
question 6	aspect that has improve because of the reading program	grammar: 6%, reading: 86%, writing: 8%
question 7	if the student's score improves	yes: 59%, no: 41%
question 8	the approximate score improvement (if students choose yes in question 7)	1-5 marks: 51%, 6-10: 39%, 10-15 marks:10.2%

Because of the heavy workload coupled with the repeated disruption by the spread of the covid infection in the Yanshi region, many students might lack the motivation to put more effort into the reading activity. However, the results from 12 students who finished more than 5 books during the trial period had a very positive response to the effect of reading English books on improving their English proficiency. 11 out of 12 students who had an improvement (8 of them received 5-15 marks higher) in their English grade think reading is a plausible method in assisting their English learning.

Conclusion

Overall, there has been consent from students in the final survey that reading could alleviate the pressure and anxiety in studying English, allowing them to be more analytical when seeing unknown vocabulary. Although this investigation is a case study, with limited number of participants, it strongly agrees that the English reading approach enhances students' proficiency. Thus, providing valuable implications for the rural high school, which is eager to close the difference with the urban schools, and even the future Chinese curriculum design.

The institutional inequality within the Gaokao system hinders the country from being highly inclusive, yet it might take decades, sacrificing another generation until the system is further improved. The unequal quality of education across different regions of the country makes the urban-rural divide a continuous problem. Thus, this paper suggests a way to permanently reduce the academic gap between rural and urban high school students: increase their English grades by providing more English reading resources so that it would not be a typical weak subject only for students in the less advanced region. The reading material cost in this investigation cost, on average, half sterling per student, so a school would only need to spend 500 pounds to support the reading program. This would be a much more economical way of improving students' English on a broad scale, making it affordable for most rural high schools where no student would have the money to hire a private English tutor for 20 pounds an hour. Evaluating a macro picture, the section on the deficiency of the English system analyzed how the use of excessive assignment tactics would not only overwhelm students and eventually cripple their confidence in language learning but also lack the premise of building the fundamental knowledge for the student. To solve this problem, the educational bureau could incorporate longer text in the English textbook to build up students' English reading scale and the variety of vocabulary. Teachers should also be entitled and encouraged to base their classes on learning a piece of literature instead of allocating most of the class time to doing past paper questions and explaining them in the native language. The process could start with some simple stories that might only be primary level for the native speaker, but the immersive learning experience and completeness could boost students' willingness to learn the second language.

In conclusion, this paper investigates firstly look at the inequality within the Gaokao system and the deficiency within the rural English classes that widens the difference between the urban and rural students. Under this context which Gaokao puts those rural students who need to grasp the opportunity of entering a decent university at a disadvantage position, this paper offers a low-cost solution: provide English reading materials to alleviate the inequality of the education system, mainly because English is a prominent area where rural students fell behind. Theoretical analysis suggests that reading could improve student's English proficiency in general, as grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing aspects are all covered in the reading book. In a three-month investigation with two classes of Yanshi students, the results shows that reading could bring positive effects to students' English grades, through reading received positive feedback from the perspective of attitude and the actual grade.

Further Recommendations

Apart from reading, which is an attempt to facilitate English learning in rural high schools by internal reform,

schools can use the cooperative learning approach to improve students' motivation in English learning. This approach is based on cognitive science and aimed at maximizing the student's participation in class by emphasizing the assistant role of students in small groups- they could help peers with unfamiliar academic content (Slavin, 1980). The key advantages of this method are to improve student's English grade by reforming the way of classes: the traditional Chinese classroom would be students sitting separately in rows and columns to reduce the interaction between students that might distract them during the class, thereby leaving the teacher as the dominant speaker in the class. With the use of cooperative learning through grouping students, there would be an increase in the interaction in English, ultimately leading to more frequent and various language practices. Furthermore, it entitles students to output their knowledge to their desk mates, which grants them a more active role in English study (McGroarty, 1989). However, Chinese researcher Tan who attempted this learning approach in a rural middle school in China, noticed a lack of interest among the middle school student to participate in the group discussion coupled and awareness among the English teachers in terms of its meaning, not to mention its essence (2015). Another channel that could be taken into consideration is the external assistance, namely the exchange program: encouraging the graduated student from a prestigious university to hand help to the rural school through part-time offline teaching, bringing in some new approach to teaching, and also setting a model for the local students who crave to go global.


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Appendix 1. Survey One

1. What is your grade?

- ☐ 10
- ☐ 11
- ☐ 12

2. What is your gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

3. Please rank the difficulty of English among Chinese and Mathematics

- ☐ Most difficult
- ☐ medium difficult
- ☐ least difficult

4. Which section do you think is the hardest in the Gaokao English paper?

- ☐ Reading
- ☐ Writing
- ☐ Grammar & cloze test

5. Please select an approximate range of your score (out of 150) *

- ☐ More than 130
- ☐ 110-130 marks
- ☐ 90-109 marks
- ☐ 60-90 marks
- ☐ Lower than 60 marks

6. What do you think are the factors that lead to a high English grade?

This question would pop up if participants select the first or the second choice

7. What factors do you think are impeding your achievement in English

This question would pop up if participants select the third, fourth or fifth choice

8. Please list some English material you have used to study English

9. Do you think your score has plateau (meaning the marginal return of practice is minimal

☐ Yes

☐ No

10. What ways do you think can help your English grade?

Appendix 2. Survey Two

1. What is your grade?
 - ☐ 10
 - ☐ 11
 - ☐ 12
2. How many books have you read in three months?
 - ☐ 0 book
 - ☐ 1-5 books
 - ☐ more than 5 books
3. How frequently would you read an extra-curricular book
 - ☐ more than one book per week
 - ☐ one book every two weeks
 - ☐ one book every three weeks
 - ☐ less than one book every three weeks
4. Do you think Raz-kids make English learning more interesting?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
5. Do you agree that reading English books can alleviate your stress in studying English
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
6. Which aspects do you think have improved as a result of reading
 - ☐ grammar
 - ☐ reading
 - ☐ writing
7. Do you think your score has improved because of reading
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
8. How much has your score increased (appears when the candidate chooses Yes in question 7)
 - ☐ 1-5 marks
 - ☐ 5-10 marks

- 10-15 marks
- more than 15 marks