

English Education in Rural Secondary Schools in Southwest China: Problems and Countermeasures under the Rural Vitalization Strategy

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Abstract

The Chinese government has proposed the rural vitalization strategy in its poverty reduction, aiming at narrowing the discrepancies in economic levels between urban and rural areas. Under this development blueprint, poverty alleviation through education, one of the imperative approaches mentioned in this overarching strategy, has attracted attention from all sectors of Chinese society. In Southwest China, however, the urban-rural gap in compulsory education is still concerning, especially in English teaching and learning. This has lowered the overall quality of English education in these areas, whereas only a few studies have looked into this issue. Therefore, under the guidance of the rural vitalization strategy, the present study intends to offer a response by calling for more attention on the problems in rural English teaching in various aspects. Furthermore, this study explores the corresponding strategies adopted to solve these problems and discusses their effectiveness of English teaching. It is hoped that the study can develop a theoretical framework about the current issues of English teaching in rural areas under the rural vitalization and can provide practical suggestions for policymakers and educational practitioners.

Keywords: rural vitalization, English teaching, rural secondary schools, Southwest China

1. Introduction

The rural vitalization strategy, a major strategy first put forward by the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, highlights China's resolution to make rural vitalization an important mandate in fulfilling the great national renewal, noting its ability to accelerate the modernization of agriculture and the countryside with the effort of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese people.

One of the essential steps in rural vitalization is improving the quality of education. On January 2, 2018, the CPC and the State Council promulgated a succession of policies to provide an overarching layout of the rural vitalization strategy. One important guideline included in these policies is to prioritize the well-rounded development of education in rural areas. After this, on September 26, 2018, Xinhua News Agency released the National Rural Vitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022), making particular reference to the integrated urban-rural development in the field of education. To this end, an increasing amount of efforts should be put into the education in rural areas, such as promoting the development of compulsory education and moral education, improving educational equality, and turning the new generation into responsible and competitive citizens that show balanced and full-scale development in the field of moral, intelligent, physical, and aesthetic education. So far, this strategy has helped rural areas, especially those remote and less developed ones, to reach an equal distribution of high-quality educational resources.

Despite the sound progress following the rural vitalization strategy, the education gap remains between the more developed urban areas and the less developed rural ones. This problem is particularly serious in English education. As one of the poverty-stricken areas, Southwest China has long struggled with inadequate infrastructure and relatively lagging social development, and thus faces a huge challenge in improving its educational quality (Huang, 2021). Also, the new English Curriculum Standard (2017) has come up with new standards in English teaching, in terms of cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), optimizing modern teaching

technology, and making rational use of teaching resources, etc., further placing a higher demand on English teaching in rural schools in Southwest China.

So far, whilst some studies have explored the difficulties in teaching English and provided relevant suggestions for policy-making, only a few studies focused on the challenges in teaching English in rural middle schools under the rural vitalization. Thus, with a mix-method combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the present study probes into the existing problems of English education in the rural communities of Southwest China, from aspects of teaching resources, teachers' professionalization, and the attention paid to English teaching. On this ground, this study then explores the local measures taken to improve rural education and the progress they have made in English teaching. As such, the research aim is to provide a general picture of English teaching in rural areas within the context of rural vitalization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Related Studies on Rural English Teaching in China

As an important part of compulsory education, English has become a compulsory subject at all educational levels in China and, consequently, English education at the secondary school level has experienced solid improvement over the years. It is against this backdrop that a number of studies about English teaching in rural areas have been conducted, by in-service teachers, research institutions, and local education authorities. These studies have made great contributions to establish theoretical bases that can guide and improve English teaching in rural secondary schools.

Based on the theory of second language acquisition, Yang studied the environment of English learning among rural students. In this regard, he recommended the use of the Immersion Approach and the Full-environment Teaching to optimize the learning environment (Yang, 2010). Afterward, Zhang and Zou emphasized the need for sufficient educational resources in rural English teaching and suggested more inclusion of both explicit teaching resources, (e.g., textbooks), and implicit teaching resources (e.g., teachers' quality and students' learning attitudes) in rural English teaching (Zhang & Zou, 2011). Later in the same year, as for grammar teaching in rural schools, Jing indicated several obstacles such as unclear teaching objectives, the preference of acquiring knowledge over gaining ability, and a dull classroom atmosphere (Jing, 2011). Besides, from a cross-cultural perspective, Fu pointed out that rural students often make mistakes in communicating due to a lack of understanding of foreign cultures. This problem, as Fu himself asserted, can be solved by two approaches. The first is to design exercises that contain contextual dialogues, while the second is to set up activities which include cultural communications yet are close to students' daily life (Fu, 2012). After this, the subsequent study conducted by Wang introduced the "polarization phenomenon" in rural English teaching, which was classified into two types, namely, the polarization of teachers' "teaching" and the polarization of students' "learning" (Wang, 2017). Additionally, to examine the causes of rural students' anxiety in learning foreign languages, Zhao researched by looking into students' motivation as well as their personalities, based on which he proposed corresponding solutions for teachers, students, parents, and schools, respectively (Zhao, 2019). Moreover, two teachers, Zheng and Zhang, who investigated English teaching in some rural high schools under the new curriculum reform, discovered that in many places, both students and teachers found it difficult to adapt to the reform. This could be attributable to the unfavorable learning environment caused by regional restrictions, while another plausible reason was teachers' incompetence in fully understanding the requirements suggested by the reform (Zheng & Zhang, 2020).

2.2 Related Studies on Rural English Teaching Abroad

In developed countries, a multitude of studies conducted have discussed the issue of teaching English as a second language (ESL) in rural communities. Take America as an example. Carol Kreck, a researcher working at the Education Commission of the United States, paid particular attention to ESL in rural America. Based on intensive field investigations and published statistics, she noted that the level of English education in rural areas failed to catch up with the exponential growth rate of average ESL learners since the migrant flows in the 1990s. To address this bottleneck, various measures have been taken at the state level. The Common Core State Standards outlined a higher level of knowledge and skills in English and, emphasized more inclusion of thought-provoking instruction. Besides, a standardized Home Language Survey was recommended to better identify rural students who needed language-support services. In addition, it was suggested that it would be better to cluster ESL students in mainstream classrooms than separating them across several classes, as a more homogeneous classroom environment may ensure a closer relationship between teachers and students (Kreck, 2014). Furthermore, Coady highlighted the necessity of a

national research agenda with a new focus on ESL students in rural America, where topics such as the characteristics and demographics of rural English learners, programmatic language education approaches, and hiring and retaining ESL teachers were discussed (Coady, 2020).

Likewise, in developing countries, ESL is also taken as a crucial topic and attracts considerable attention. Take Colombia as an example. As World Bank suggested that rural education in Colombia is marginalized, Colombian researchers have explored sociocultural factors that may harm the quality of English education in rural Colombia with questionnaires and semi-structured interviewers. (Bonilla Medina & Cruz Arcila, 2013). Findings indicated that one of the main challenges for English teaching in Colombia was the poor infrastructure (Holguín & Morales, 2016). To solve this problem, a series of programs have been carried out by the Colombian government. To be specific, the large-scale national program “Computers for Education” was launched in 2000 by the Ministry of TIC’s in rural Colombia. By then, the Internet penetration was rather low, with on average only three computers available in one school. In addition to short-term policy, long-term plan such as Plan Decenal de Educacion Rural en Colombia 2006-2016 has also been implemented for better infrastructure. Moreover, based on the National Bilingual Program (NBP), the Colombian government has implemented the ECO program (2011), aiming at improving the learning of English as a foreign language at various levels of schooling. From 2014, the Ministry of National Education in Colombia started evaluating the materials developed for the ECO program.

2.3 Summary of Previous Researches on Rural English Teaching

To summarize, there is a consensus among most researchers, both Chinese and international, that compared with urban communities, the quality of English education in rural areas is relatively poor, be it in teaching philosophies, teaching methods, policy assistance, or infrastructure development, etc. Furthermore, previous studies have explored ESL from different perspectives (e.g., the problems in ESL and the causes, and the solutions to improve ESL), thus providing a comprehensive framework to further study ESL in rural areas. Yet, the process of urbanization, along with the implementation of English curriculum reform in China, has changed the requirements for rural English teaching. As such, whether results and findings from previous studies can be generalized and applied to the new situation remains unknown. Thus, more research focusing on the current situation of rural English education in China seems to be needed accordingly.

More importantly, as a new policy launched within five years, rural vitalization strategy is thus still in its infancy with a limited number of studies related to this specific topic. This makes it even more imperative to conduct research about ESL under the rural vitalization so that suggestions can be provided for future policy-making to help the better implementation of this strategy.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Methods

To have a comprehensive yet in-depth understanding of rural English teaching in China, this study was underpinned by a mixed method combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research instruments employed in this study included observation checklists, interviews, questionnaires, and statistical data. The qualitative method was adopted to acquire various information on teaching practice through classroom observations and interviews. The quantitative method, on the other hand, was used to capture a more objective overview of the practical implementation of the rural vitalization strategy through questionnaires and statistical data.

3.2 Research Questions

To reach the research aim, the following research questions were raised.

- 1) What are the current problems in English education in rural secondary schools?
- 2) Under the guidance of the rural vitalization strategy, what measures can be considered as effective to help improve English education in rural secondary schools?
- 3) What progress has been made in rural English education under the rural revitalization?

3.3 Participants

Teachers and students in two rural high schools in Sichuan Province participated in the present study, who due to their firsthand experience were invited to share their feelings about English education, to express understanding and opinions about the rural vitalization strategy, and to give insights into English education in rural schools.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews. First, observation checklists were designed to monitor the teaching process and evaluate the teaching quality in English classes. Second, questionnaires were respectively handed out to both teachers and students. Each questionnaire contains nine items asking whether the participants enter the belief that the English education they give/receive can meet the demand suggested by the rural vitalization strategy, the five choices of which were arranged in the following way: A = always; B = usually; C = sometimes; D = seldom; E = never. Third, two open-ended interviews were also conducted in the target school. The interviews were done either via phone or face-to-face communication within 35 minutes. Besides, the main focus of the interviews lied in the participants' personal feelings about the current teaching status and the actual implementation of the rural vitalization strategy. Ultimately, to gain a better understanding of the blueprint of this strategy and related measures, we also reviewed governmental documents about rural vitalization strategy, such as the National Rural Vitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 The Main Difficulties in English Education in Rural Middle Schools

4.1.1 Insufficient English Teaching Resources and Channels

According to the New English Curriculum Standards (2017), rich and diverse curriculum resources, such as audio-visual aids, radio, television, books, newspapers, magazines, and Internet information, are essential for English learning. In recent years, government and educational departments have made every effort to equip middle schools with better teaching resources, especially to the poorly resourced schools in remote areas.

Nevertheless, classroom observations showed that few classrooms met the requirements advocated by the standard. The failure in the active use of multimedia, for example, can be seen as a prominent problem. Most English teachers have difficulties in giving full play of the multimedia in their teaching practice, often resulting in the inability to effectively use multimedia to help improve the teaching quality. On the face of it, students seemed to show strong interest in the courseware. In poorly designed classes, however, the inclusion of multimedia resources such as pictures and videos, in effect, attracted students' attention away from language practice, inevitably leading to limited transmission of information. Besides, it was also found from the observations that even with the help of multimedia equipment, English teachers were still highly dependent on other teaching resources, such as word cards and graphic organizers. That is to say, information diversification has not yet been achieved in terms of most rural English teachers.

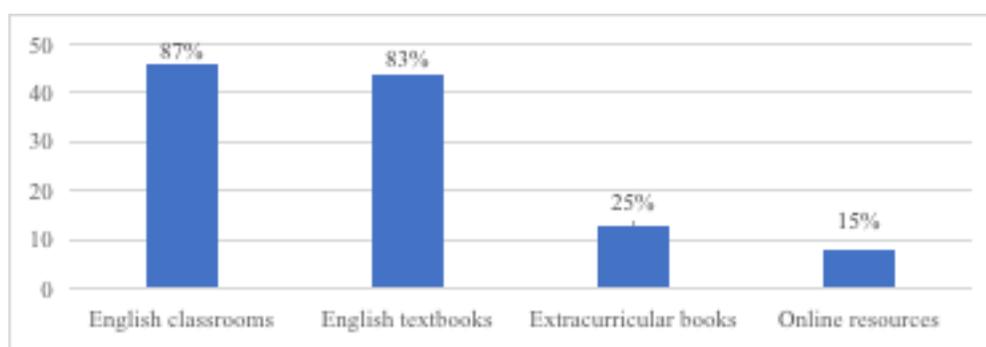


Figure 1. The Ways How the Target Students Learn English

Moreover, as Figure 1 presents, learning English in classrooms was most preferred by the majority of the rural students (87% of the student participants), closely followed by learning English via English textbooks (83%). Besides, a small percentage of students chose to study English from extracurricular books (25%) and online resources (15%). Namely, rural students also have difficulties accessing diverse resources in learning English, in that their access to acquire English proved traditional and limited.

4.1.2 The Lack of Teachers' Professionalism

Due to the shortage of funds and the unsatisfying teaching environment, rural schools had to lower the recruitment threshold for English teachers to ensure the daily English teaching, which in the long run, led to the lack of professionalized teachers in rural English education. At the same time, the losing of a mass exodus of high-quality teachers also increased the instability in rural teacher teams, damaging the long-term development of rural education. The lack of teachers' professionalism is mainly reflected in the following two aspects.

First, many rural English teachers hold an exam-oriented teaching philosophy, an entrenched perception which to some extent, neglects the importance of improving students' comprehensive ability. The overemphasis on the memorization of vocabulary or grammar, coupled with the neglect of students' oral skills and sense of language, has resulted in a relatively low level of linguistic competence among rural students. In the long run, students are prone to have "a high score with low ability" and turn "English in life" into "English on paper" (Kirkpatrick R, 2011).

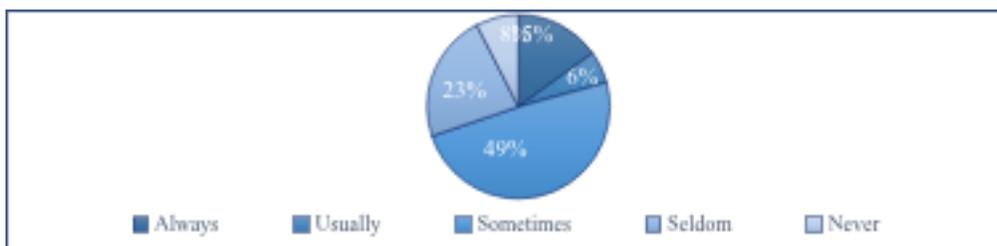


Figure 2. The Frequency of English Teachers Using Multimedia

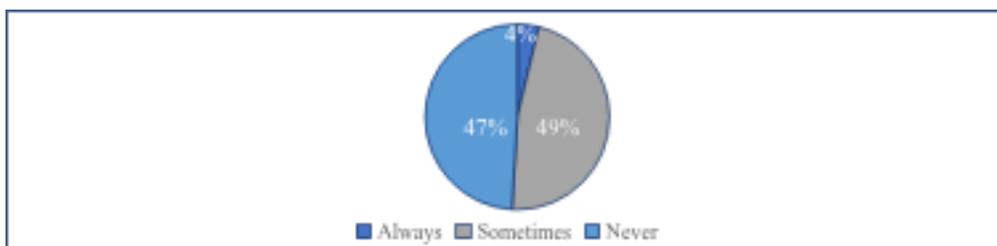


Figure 3. Whether English Teachers Feel Confident in Using Multimedia

Second, as to teaching methods, there still seemed to be a massive space for rural English teachers to improve. One of the biggest challenges for rural English teachers was to constantly innovate the way of teaching with multimedia. From the statistics results of Figure 2, only 21% of English teachers in rural middle schools actively applied computer-aided teaching, whereas in general their ability to use multimedia resources to support their teaching was poor. Only 4% of the teachers were skilled users of multimedia, according to Figure 3. In addition, also included are the formulation of teaching objectives, teaching skills, and the classroom management ability. Classroom observations suggested that in most English classes, it was the language knowledge that received the most attention, rather than the active integration of language knowledge and practice. This evidently fails to meet the new curriculum standards, which attaches great importance to integrating "language skills, language knowledge, affective attitudes, learning strategies and cultural awareness" altogether. Moreover, questions from English teachers appeared to be less flexible and insightful, mainly targeting attesting knowledge such as the meaning of a word or a sentence. Furthermore, teachers' evaluation on students was always simple, improperly occupied by general comments that did not specifically point to students' performance.

4.1.3 The Absence of Attention Given to English Education

Concerning the schedule of English classes, an English teacher responded as follows.

There were too few English lessons scheduled! Generally speaking, a Module lesson needs at least three sessions, with two sessions for new lessons and one for exercises. But if we only follow the teaching schedule, we cannot finish the teaching task on time. Finally, we have to use students' self-study time for English lessons.

Worse still, results from the questionnaires of 53 students were not promising either. In response to item 1 about “English Activities on Campus”, most students (24 seldom, 16 never) claimed that they hardly ever participated in activities about English held by their schools. In answering item 2 about “My concern for English”, only 15 students (28%) clearly indicated that they have attached enough importance to English learning. Furthermore, when it comes to item 3 about “parents’ concern for English”, only 22% of the students’ parents (6 always, 6 usually) have emphasized English learning, while other parents admitted that they just emphasized it “sometimes” (N=26), “seldom” (N = 12), or “never” emphasized it at all (N=3).

Thus, according to the interview and questionnaire data, it can be concluded that there is an overall lack of attention to English education in rural areas.

4.2 Measures to Improve Education in Rural Areas under the Rural Vitalization

4.2.1 To Consolidate and Expand the Results of Compulsory Education for Equal Learning Access

China has launched a series of high-priority policies to foster the smooth progress of compulsory education—all in an effort to guarantee the equal learning access for children. Among those, one request is to continuously reduce school dropouts to ensure the compulsory education is accessible to every child, regardless of their age or social-economic status.

Second, it is also vital to improve the schooling conditions of compulsory education. According to the Government’s Work Report (2021), only when the schools are in good shape can the students be in good shape. Public education at the county level is expected to support the sustainable development of education equity, which is in line with the strategic blueprint of educational development in China. As a result, educational authorities should strengthen the construction of public high schools in counties, including those in less developed areas.

Eventually, considerable efforts should also be put into the informatization of education. The No. 1 Central Document, issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, emphasized the necessity to accelerate the development of online education in rural areas by making full use of the “Internet+” platform, so that rural students can receive high-quality educational resources as their urban peers do. In addition, several other important initiatives were also suggested in this document, for instance, educational practitioners are expected to further deepen the popularization of the “dual-teacher classrooms” and promote the “high-quality schools drive weak schools; excellent teachers drive average teachers” with information technology.

4.2.2 To Build a Strong and Professional Team of Rural Teachers for Better Teaching Quality

Given the importance of the teachers’ professionalism, it is imperative to closely follow the Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Six Other Departments on Strengthening the Rural Teacher Corps in the New Era (2020).

Specifically speaking, educational practitioners are suggested to carry out a living allowance policy for rural teachers and prioritize the need for high-quality teachers emerging from poverty. Additionally, a series of national government-supported programs can be carried out as well. Among them, especially worthy of mentioning is one initiative, that rural schools may receive extra support to openly recruit a professional pool of retired principals, teachers, and researchers, which, hopefully, will enhance the overall quality of the rural teacher corps. Meanwhile, it is also necessary to attract more college students to apply for the publicly funded teacher training programs that cultivate future teachers for rural areas. As such, additional support should be provided for normal universities and colleges (i.e., higher education for teacher training) at both the ministry level and provincial level for a group of competent teachers.

4.2.3 To Make Good Use of Counterpart Assistance to Support Rural Education

Universities should be further encouraged to help assigned areas. Universities and colleges, undoubtedly, hold abundant resources such as researchers and experts specializing in the field of quality education. Therefore, assigning universities to help certain areas may give a full play to these resources in supporting rural English education. Specifically, the government can match higher education institutes such as universities and colleges with certain rural areas in need, and regularly evaluates the effectiveness of this counterpart assistance mechanism. At the same time, higher education institutes may also benefit from such counterpart relationships, since they can take the initiative to closely integrate research results with practice and, eventually, gain a deeper understanding of the rural revitalization strategy.

Related to the mentioned measures above, also noteworthy is the solid implementation of the East-West collaboration action plan about vocational education. Vocational schools in eastern areas are supposed to provide twinning support for those in western regions. Effective measures may include the exchange of teachers, the construction of a

professional and practical training base, as well as the sharing of teaching resources.

4.3 Progress Made in Rural English Teaching Under Rural Revitalization

4.3.1 Better Hardware and Software Facilities

Currently, efforts are under way to facilitate the development of quality education, and thus the government has allocated special funds for educational facilities while the non-governmental welfare organizations offered great support likewise. Consequently, the hardware facilities in rural areas have been significantly improved. Numerous middle schools in rural areas have built rubber running tracks, music classrooms, and language laboratories that serve as carriers for rural aesthetic education altogether. This can be testified by the survey data of the Southern Weekend Rural Education Observation Report in 2020-2021, that 64.84% of rural elementary schools were equipped with wooden and metal Figures and chairs, 79.69% owned multimedia classrooms, and 78.13% had one or more multimedia classrooms (2021).

In addition, Song, who has been teaching for ten years, gave an intuitive overview of the progress achieved in teaching hardware based on her personal experience.

The teaching equipment we used has experienced three significant stages of change. First, we used traditional chalk and blackboard, and then we shifted to the second stage of using projectors and slides, and finally to the third of using electronic whiteboards. Such a huge change was accomplished in less than a decade.

Teaching software, on the other hand, also experienced stunning advances with electronic and information technology involved increasingly. As for teaching aids, physical objects were more often used in the past, whereas the coming of the information age hugely increased the utilization of electronic and informational teaching aids, which has exerted positive effects on rural education through maximizing the efficiency and quality of teaching.

With the building of digital teaching platforms, some new teaching models have emerged as well, such as the “special delivery classroom” of XIVO and the “dual-teacher classroom” of New Oriental, which has achieved real-time interaction across space. During the classroom observation, for example, some classes of Qingxi High School have already cooperated with Chengdu Seventh Middle School, the top middle school in Sichuan Province, to achieve real-time live streaming in classrooms by adopting the live cloud platform.

4.3.2 An Ever-Optimized Group of Rural Teachers

The Ministry of Education (2020) promulgated the Opinions on Strengthening the Rural Teacher Corps in the New Era, emphasizing the essentiality of exemplary leadership of new rural teachers, cultivating rural educational sentiments, creating a new era of civilized countryside, and promoting the revitalization of rural culture. In this case, in addition to the traditional role of teaching, rural teachers today are endowed with a heavy responsibility of being the guides of the construction of modern rural education.

To reach this goal, the government and society have provided vigorous support for teachers. Through this way, rural English teachers hereby become more academically competent, and because of this, the rural teacher faculty also becomes increasingly active and progressive with the continuous increase in the number of young teachers. In February 2019, the Ministry of Education mentioned that there were more than 2.9 million rural teachers in China, with nearly 2.5 million teachers in primary and secondary schools. Among them, 1.7 million were young teachers under the age of 40, accounting for 58.3% of the total number of teaching staff. Moreover, in 2017, more than 100,000 students enrolled in the government-supported teacher training program, ending up with about 90 percent of these new teachers dedicating to central and western regions. Given the considerable success, the program was replicated by 28 provincial-level regions. Each year, more than 40,000 new graduates devoted themselves to the rural compulsory education system, which has enriched the teacher teams in rural areas significantly (Hu, 2018). In this regard, this program largely improved the professionalism of the rural teachers and helped children from deprived families to realize their dreams of receiving a quality education.

Moreover, rural teachers also have exerted themselves for professional development. It is engrossing to find that teachers are continuously diversifying their learning channels via resource sharing. One interesting case is the “dual-teacher classroom” launched by New Oriental, which eliminates the boundaries of time and space to provide fresh energy for rural teachers. A “dual-teacher classroom” indicates a new teaching model where two teachers cooperate in a class, one works as the major lecturer, the other as a teaching assistant. The “dual-teacher classroom” empowers rural education and creates a new approach to teaching. Specifically, rural students are able to benefit from high-level teaching resources as urban students do. Rural teachers, meanwhile, can develop their professional

capabilities in the interactive and immersive teaching environment. In addition, the exchange of teachers between urban and rural areas may also contribute to the growth of teaching forces in rural areas, with excellent teachers from urban schools sent to rural schools, accompanied by advanced teaching philosophy, teaching methods, and teaching approaches.

4.3.3 More Equity Promoted by the Attention of Society

Education subsidy, a supplement to education policy that has facilitated the sharing of educational resources and provided disaster relief and assistance to the needy, counts vitally for promoting educational equity.

At present, many rural schools can more or less receive attention and assistance from social welfare groups or individuals in such diverse ways as charity funds, teaching and learning materials, reading rooms, and music rooms. These kind attempts have enriched the educational resources in rural schools, profoundly and thoroughly. A case in point is the Jack Ma Foundation, which has continued to train rural education talents and has improved campus infrastructure. In the past five years, Ma's Rural Education Program has directly sponsored and trained 500 award-winning teachers, 60 selected principals, and 200 selected teacher trainees. Also, nine boarding schools have been piloted, where 390 teachers, 60 principals, and 220 teacher trainees were hired to educate nearly 110,000 students. Similarly, to promote education equity with public welfare and innovative technology, the Beijing New Oriental Public Welfare Foundation launched a series of programs such as the "Star of Student Empowerment" and "Candlelight Action", promoting education reform and innovation in a rather successful way.

5. Conclusion

Language learning can change students' mindsets and enlarge their outlooks. For rural students, high-level English education and a good connection with the outside world can provide them with better opportunities for a decent life. Nevertheless, given the limited resources available in rural areas, for a long time, English education in rural areas has been linked with "lack of educational resources", "lack of teachers", "left-behind teaching methods", and "low English proficiency learners". This makes it even more urgent to guarantee rural students with high-quality English education.

Based on previous research, this study focuses on two rural secondary schools with both qualitative and quantitative approaches including classroom observation, questionnaire, and interview methods. The main problems found in rural English teaching involve the shortage of sufficient English teaching resources, the limited number of professionalized English teachers, and the neglect of English education. In addition, this study also explores the guidelines and the countermeasures used in rural revitalization strategy to solve the above-mentioned problems, and discusses the progress made in improving rural English education. Yet, as only two schools are included in the present study, cautions should be warranted when generalizing the findings to a larger population. Therefore, future research is suggested to have a more comprehensive sample to deepen further understandings of English education in rural areas of China.

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