

A Study on Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Rural High Schools from the Perspective of Core Literacy

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Abstract: In 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education revised the English curriculum standards for general high schools, and the spoken English in language ability, which is one of the core literacy, is often neglected in some schools, especially in rural areas where students' speaking skills are weaker. This project is based on the English curriculum standards for general high schools, and through a study of the current development of English teaching in some rural areas in China, it focuses on the speaking part, investigates the reasons behind it by subject, and proposes corresponding strategies and methods to improve the speaking skills of high school students in rural areas and develop their intercultural communication skills.

Keywords: Spoken English; Core Literacy; Rural Areas; Rural High School Students

1. Introduction

The core literacy of student development refers to the necessary character and key abilities that students should possess to adapt to the needs of lifelong development and social development. The study of developing students' core literacy is an important initiative to implement the fundamental task of establishing moral education and is also an urgent need to adapt to the development trend of global education reform and enhance the international competitiveness of China's education.

Core literacy embodied in English includes language ability, cultural awareness, ideological quality and learning ability. Some people only see the value of English as a language, but not the nurturing value of English as a subject. In rural areas of China, there is a poor environment for teaching English, limited teacher development and poor teaching methods. The implementation of spoken English teaching in rural areas is not in line with the General High School Curriculum Standards, Core Literacy - Language Skills.

2. The Current Situation and Dynamics of Theoretical Development of Oral English Teaching in the Context of Core Literacy at Home and Abroad

2.1 The current status and dynamics of the development of core literacy in China

The General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised 2020) suggest that language ability refers to the capacity to understand and express meaning in social contexts by listening, speaking, reading, watching and writing, as well as the language awareness and sense of language developed in the process of learning and using language. English language ability forms a fundamental element of the core literacy of the English language subject. The improvement of English language ability implies an increase in cultural awareness, quality of thinking and learning ability, which helps students to expand their international perspective and way of thinking and to develop cross-cultural communication. In terms of language use, language competence refers to the skill and level of using language, that is, the learner's ability to understand and express language, but the language has to be used in a certain social context in order to convey information; away from a specific social context, the most advanced language is just a symbol and does not have any meaning. While the acquisition and synthesis of information is essential to comprehension and expression, more is needed to use language for a variety of communicative activities. The effectiveness of acquiring and transmitting information will ultimately be expressed on a cultural level, whether it is consistent with worldviews and values going forward. As Mr Xia Gu Ming mentions in his dissertation, "English is a foreign language subject, and behind a language is a culture and a way of thinking." In the process of learning English, students must not only master the foreign language itself but also understand the culture and way of thinking behind it.

Cultural awareness refers to the understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and the identification with outstanding cultures and is the cross-cultural cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral orientation that students display in the context of globalization. Cultural awareness reflects the values of the core literacy of the English subject. The cultivation of cultural awareness helps students to strengthen their national identity and family sentiments, assert their cultural confidence, establish a community of human destiny, learn to behave and

grow into civilized and socially responsible people. Professor Edmund Mei has suggested that "a language carries the cultural traditions of a country and the way of thinking of a nation, and the cultural charm of a country and the cohesion of a nation are expressed and transmitted mainly through the language used." It helps to develop students' patriotism, international perspective, global awareness, cross-cultural comparative awareness and awareness of mutual appreciation of civilizations. The process of learning English cultivates students' Chinese sentiments and cultural confidence, enabling them to spread Chinese culture and tell brilliant Chinese stories while participating in international affairs in the future.

2.2 Current status and developments in theoretical development of core literacy issues abroad - the EU as an example

In the context of globalization, international cooperation and exchange have become closer. Language is not only a bridge between different countries, but also a means of transmitting the culture of each country. As a result, the importance of English language learning has become more apparent, and the role of spoken English in particular cannot be ignored.

In the context of educational reform, the reform of core literacy is a topic that is hotly debated in every country. For instance, the European Union's eight core literacy frameworks, officially published in 2006, define and describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes that each literacy encompasses. Two of these are listed: "Communication in a Foreign Language" and "Cultural Awareness and Expression". "Communication in a Foreign Language" requires the ability to understand, communicate and coordinate across cultures and to understand, express and interpret in appropriate contexts; "Cultural Awareness and Expression" requires the ability to think, experience and express emotions creatively through music appreciation, literature and performance, and to understand cultural diversity at an intellectual level through localized knowledge. This is linked to the communicative role of language and the transmission of culture.

3. The Current Situation and Dynamics of the Development of English Speaking Teaching in Rural High Schools in China

3.1 The current situation of English teaching environment in rural high schools

3.1.1 Time taken away from teaching spoken English in a test-based education environment

Although the new curriculum directs teachers to pay attention to the teaching of spoken English, as the Gao Kao mainly examines students' listening, reading and writing skills, the oral English test has not yet been included in the total score of the Gao Kao, so teachers in rural areas do not attach enough importance to the teaching of spoken English and the teaching of phonetic symbols which are closely related to spoken English. The teachers' neglect of phonetic symbols has led to students learning English by imitating the sounds made by the teacher and not recognizing the phonetic symbols to pronounce the words themselves, which greatly affects their oral expression. Due to the lack of proper guidance and training for oral expression, the phenomenon of "dumb English" has existed in rural high schools for a long time.

3.1.2 Lack of authentic English language environment in rural high schools

Owing to the lack of attention given to spoken-English teaching, students have limited chances to practise speaking English in the classroom. Moreover, the teaching content is not in line with rural life and rural students are rarely confronted with communication scenarios in which spoken English is actually involved. In the contrast, the routine speaking exercises are pre-programmed and scripted which is rigid, not flexible. To make matters worse, rural high school students are so busy with exams that they have little interest in speaking English and rarely take the initiative to use English to communicate with others after class.

Besides, rural high school students are immersed in mother tongue environment and have poor understanding of English culture. Therefore, the low level of knowledge base of language prevents them from thinking and communicating from the perspective of English, so the phenomenon of "Chinglish" is quite common.

3.1.3 Poor conditions of teaching spoken English in rural high schools

Because of the relatively disadvantaged economic conditions and the poor hardware facilities in rural high schools, multimedia and multimodal teaching seems hard to implement, thus failing to motivate rural high school students to learn the oral language actively and making teaching and learning less satisfactory.

Some rural high schools are relatively remote and have unstable network conditions. With a lack of speaking communication partners around high school students and without the support of an online communication platform, communication opportunities in

English are even more inadequate.

With less equipment for original materials and electronic teaching materials in rural areas, high school students are rarely able to receive scientific teaching and training in speaking in the classroom and after school, thus their speaking skills cannot be improved well. Some of the existing materials contain corpus that is not in line with rural reality, resulting in rural high school students not being familiar enough with these corpora, which affects the effectiveness of spoken-English teaching.

3.2 Current status of English teacher development in rural high schools

3.2.1 The teaching staff of English teachers in rural high schools is unstable and unreasonably structured

Salaries and subsidies for rural teachers have improved in recent years but are still inadequate and poorly implemented to attract and keep rural teachers, especially young rural English teachers, in place for long periods of time. And under the predominantly county-based rural education management system, a large number of young teachers tend to gravitate towards teaching in county high schools rather than stay in rural high schools when faced with transfer or promotion opportunities.

In addition, low salaries and poor living conditions are two of the main factors preventing young teachers from taking up rural employment. The lower salaries do not meet the psychological expectations of young teachers and are not sufficient to support the formation of a family or family expenses, given the social pressures and demands of life; The poorer living conditions are also a disincentive for young teachers, who are often discouraged by the poor living conditions and the unstable or even shortage of water and electricity networks. As a result, a large amount of fresh blood flows into the county and the city.

The structure of the English teaching force in rural high schools is not well configured. The ageing of the teaching staff in rural high schools is serious - the median age of teachers is around fifty, and middle-aged and older teachers are still the mainstay of rural high school education. In many provinces, the proportion of young teachers in rural high schools, i.e. those aged between 26 and 35 years, is below 50 percent. The structural allocation ratio of older teachers to new teachers shows a serious incongruity. (Zeng Xiaodong and Yu Xia, Report on the Development of Primary and Secondary School Teachers in China, Social Science Literature Press).

3.2.2 English teachers in rural high schools do not have a high level of professionalism themselves

According to the "14th Five-Year Plan for Promoting Agricultural and Rural Modernization" issued by the State Council, its main indicators for agricultural and rural modernization are By 2025, the proportion of full-time teachers with a bachelor's degree or above in rural compulsory education schools will increase from 60.4% in 2020 to 62%, and the proportion of teachers with a bachelor's degree or above in junior high schools in rural areas will increase from 85.4% in 2020 to 88%. Currently, the vast majority of teachers in rural high schools have a bachelor's degree, while some veteran teachers are stuck with a college degree. They have even been transferred from private substitute teachers. The low rate of master's degrees in rural high schools is an undeniable fact which can't satisfy the needs of English teaching.

The teacher's own voice intonation is not standard and there is a strong accent in English. Most of the English teachers in rural high schools have not received good and systematic training in spoken English during their own studies. They have a poor grasp of English phonetics and intonation and often mispronounce phonemes and even words. Also, they have a bad command of sound quality, intonation, rhythm, pause, stress, intonation, alliteration, rising and falling intonation, and have a vague idea of meaning groups and tone groups.

The teachers themselves lack a certain degree of professionalism in psychology and education and are unable to address some of the problems faced by the students. Many rural high school English teachers are not teacher trainees and have not systematically studied pedagogy and psychology at the undergraduate level, and their learning is limited to English major knowledge. They only recite exam-related pedagogical and psychological knowledge when taking exams, but do not achieve integration and only stay at a superficial level of knowledge. The lack of psychology-related knowledge brings about a lack of professionalism in their own teacher training, and they are not able to judge some of the students' psychological activities well, nor are they able to solve them in a professional way or by professional means, and sometimes they even ignore the subtle changes in the students' psychology. The lack of knowledge in pedagogy leads to a weak ability to construct a classroom, and the lack of structure and professionalism in the curriculum makes it difficult to stimulate students' interest in learning.

3.2.3 Rural high school English teachers' teaching methods and assessments are relatively backward

The assessment of English in the National Unified Examination for Higher Education Admissions does not compulsorily include spoken English, but focuses mainly on listening, reading, grammar and writing. The immediate impact of this is that training in rural English classes or after school often disregards oral English training, over-emphasizes the body and structure of knowledge in test-based English, and sticks to traditional classroom teaching methods. In the daily design of the curriculum, the main content of teaching is composed of grammar, vocabulary and reading, and modeled and formatted questions flood the English language after school. Although the teaching ideas represented by core literacy have been repeatedly advocated after the curriculum reform, they have also stimulated the traditional teaching ideas of rural high school English teachers, who have tried to apply these new methods to adapt their own teaching methods. However, due to various practical constraints, the consequences have been very different from what was envisaged.

The current evaluation of English teachers in rural high schools fails to meet the requirements of The General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised 2020). It is still very common to unilaterally pursue the promotion rate and neglect the cultivation of students' core literacy; the phenomena of "intellectual education over moral education", "knowledge over ability" and "dominant over subject" in teaching evaluation are very serious and deviate from the requirements of curriculum standards. Qualitative evaluation is a value judgement that does not use mathematical methods, but is based on the evaluator's observation and analysis of the evaluation subject's usual performance, reality and state or documentation, and directly makes qualitative conclusions about the evaluation subject; quantitative evaluation, on the other hand, emphasizes quantitative calculation and is based on educational measurement, which has distinctive features such as objectivity, standardization, precision, quantification and simplicity. The evaluation method of classroom teaching that has been used in China for a long time is often a qualitative evaluation in which the teacher listening to the lesson elaborates his or her own ideas and eventually the teaching team leader or leader synthesizes them and draws a conclusion. There is often a certain formality and redundancy in which teachers perform too intensively, just for the sake of having a good open class.

The incompatible ratio of formative and summative assessment. A common problem with English classroom assessment in rural high schools is the emphasis on results rather than process. Most teachers focus only on the results of teaching and learning, which are crudely characterized by a focus on students' mid-term and final English exam results, while ignoring the value of students' performance and creativity in the classroom. Moreover, rural high school English teachers over-emphasize changes in students' learning domains at the expense of changes in students' own emotional and cultural domains.

The teacher-led, learner-centred teaching philosophy is poorly implemented. During the English classes in rural high schools, it is the teachers who often explain the knowledge constantly at the podium and instilling it into the students' minds. Due to the limitations of the teaching schedule and classroom content, a variety of teaching methods, such as contextualised teaching, two-way interactive models do not work well, and group work is not completed to a certain extent. The students' subject position is gradually dissolved, their enthusiasm, initiative and participation are undermined, and they are not able to express their personal views and ideas well. The "fill-in" and "indoctrination" style of teaching further strengthens the dominant position of the teacher and enhances the "authority" of the teacher. The relationship between teachers and students in the English classroom is not "equal" and communication is ineffective, with most students taking the teacher's words as "golden words".

3.3 Current situation of English learning among rural high school students

3.3.1 Rural high school students' poor English foundation

Most rural areas lack a systematic, holistic and hierarchical approach when it comes to teaching English in compulsory education. Language learning is closely linked to the hierarchy of teaching, from primary to lower secondary and then to upper secondary levels, where the most noticeable change is an incremental increase in the amount of learning content, leading to a gradual qualitative leap. Compared to the time when English was introduced in primary schools in developed cities, it was generally introduced late in rural areas, and in some areas it did not even meet the minimum standards for teaching English in the third year of primary school, resulting in a late start and weak foundation for English learning for rural students, which in turn affects the learning of English from junior to senior secondary school.

In accordance with the specific requirements of the new curriculum for the 'oral expression' component of language proficiency, the study of phonological intonation should be carried out before junior secondary school. The Ministry of Education is further revising the study of English at the senior secondary level in anticipation of students' basic mastery of phonetic symbols. However, the vast majority

of rural students do not receive systematic phonetic learning at all before they enter high school, or even have the concept of phonetic symbols, which greatly hinders the teaching of spoken English at the high school level. Specifically, this requires the teacher to demonstrate to the students one word after another and repeat it several times during the word learning process, while the students will have the ability to spell on their own after acquiring the knowledge of phonetic symbols. The knowledge of phonological intonation is also not well mastered by rural high school students, as evidenced by their inability to judge word stress, recognize alliteration, lack of rhythm and a range of other problems.

3.3.2 Rural high school students' spoken English is limited by their individual psychological state and personality characteristics

Many rural high school students are anxious about expressing themselves in English owing to their low English vocabulary, inflexible use of sentence patterns and non-standard pronunciation of words. In the classroom, most rural high school students lack the courage and motivation to express themselves in English because they are worried that their incoherence and deviation from the standard pronunciation of words will cause them to be laughed at by their classmates. Some rural high school students are forced to become left-behind children for family reasons. Intergenerational parenting brings many problems, resulting in rural high school students being more sensitive, lacking a sufficient sense of security and trust, and being more introverted and closed-minded. This makes them not courageous enough to express themselves in English and communicate with others. Their own psychological state and personality traits limit the ability of rural high school students to express themselves in English.

3.3.3 Rural high school students have certain problems with their attitudes towards learning spoken English

Influenced by English learning environment and the atmosphere of the exam-oriented education in rural areas, rural high school students over-focus on grammar training, discourse reading training and other traditional English problem-solving skills required for exams. The national examinations for admission to higher education are the biggest baton, and the idea conveyed to students from local education boards to school leaders to subject teachers is to strengthen test-taking skills in English. Subconsciously, rural high school students naturally disregard spoken English training because it is not required for examinations and teachers do not place special emphasis on it, so they take it for granted that it is optional, thus creating a biased attitude towards their learning.

4. Specific Suggestions for Teaching Spoken English in Rural Areas

4.1 Proposals for the development of a general environment for the teaching of spoken English in rural high schools

Schools need to shift their attitudes, recognize the importance of oral English expression skills to the development of students' overall literacy, and pay due attention to the teaching of spoken English. Schools should strive to create an authentic English language environment, with experts developing spoken-English materials that are relevant to the actual situation in rural areas and creating an online independent learning platform. The local government is expected to increase its financial support for rural education, continuously improve rural infrastructure and introduce a large number of advanced electrification teaching equipment. It is advised that local governments sign cooperation agreements with the teacher training colleges deployed by the Ministry of Education, arrange for places to be allocated to individual rural high schools, and consider rural teacher trainees in three main forms: interviews, examinations and rural internships.

4.2 Suggestions for teaching spoken English to rural high school English teachers

Teachers should improve their personal professionalism, especially their ability to express themselves in spoken English, in order to guide students scientifically and rationally in oral communication. Teachers should guide students to further experience, perceive and imitate the pronunciation of English by designing various forms of practical English speaking activities, with particular emphasis on pauses, legato, blasts and rhythm, in order to help students develop good phonetic intonation and a certain sense of speech. Teachers should provide plenty of practical activities in spoken English so that students learn to gradually draw on their knowledge of the language to effectively understand the speaker's attitudes, intentions and emotions while expressing the semantic meaning, intentions and attitudes they wish to convey. Teachers should make full use of online and offline resources and take advantage of online learning and communication platforms to integrate blended learning before, during and after lessons in oral English teaching. Teachers should enhance pragmatic awareness in the teaching of spoken English by making efforts to create communicative contexts close to the real world when

designing oral communication activities, clarifying the communicative occasion, the identity of the participants and the relationship between them, and helping students to recognize that the choice of language form is influenced by the specific communicative situation. Teachers should enhance cultural awareness in teaching spoken English and explore the cultural background behind the corpus so that students have a deeper knowledge of Chinese and Western cultures, thus helping them to think in English for spoken expression.

4.3 Recommendations for the improvement of spoken English for rural high school students

Students are supposed to be fully aware of the importance of oral communication skills, and pay sufficient attention to them and actively participate in oral practice activities. Students need to confront their fears about speaking English and be brave enough to express them. Students are expected to state events, convey information, express personal opinions and feelings, and reflect intentions, attitudes and values in an accurate, appropriate and skilful manner. Students should have cross-cultural awareness and be able to adapt communication strategies and construct appropriate communicative roles and interpersonal relationships in a manner that respects cultural diversity. Students should have strong cultural confidence and be able to use their knowledge of English to tell Chinese stories, describe and interpret cultural phenomena in China and abroad, and spread Chinese culture.

4.4 Suggestions for the evaluation of spoken English teaching in rural areas

4.4.1 Combination of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment

The three types of assessment evaluate teachers, students and teaching content at three stages: before, during and after teaching. The combination of the three provides a more comprehensive insight into the continuous development and improvement of teaching and learning. The diagnostic assessment analyses the English speaking level and interest and attitude of rural high school students before teaching and provides a reference for the design of teaching activities. The formative assessment evaluates the results of the teaching of spoken English at the stage and the progress of students' academic learning, so that teachers can adjust and improve their teaching in time. The summative assessment evaluates the final effect of teaching and learning of spoken English in rural high schools through a thematic activity development report, supplemented by assessment and examination methods.

4.4.2 Combination of qualitative and quantitative evaluations

Qualitative and quantitative evaluations provide directed and objective assistance in the reflection and development of rural high school oral teaching and learning from the perspectives of nature and quantity respectively. Qualitative evaluation provides a qualitative analysis of the more typical cases of teaching spoken English in rural high schools, a dynamic analysis of the interrelationship of factors in teaching activities, and an evaluation analysis of the outcomes of teaching and learning. Quantitative evaluation analyses the results of teaching spoken English in rural high schools from a quantitative perspective, which can be achieved in the form of examinations and questionnaires.

4.4.3 Combination of teacher-led and student-led

The evaluation of spoken English teaching in rural high schools is teacher-led, with teachers analyzing teaching strategies and methods, teaching content, etc., to grasp the direction of teaching. The assessment of spoken English teaching in rural areas needs to take students as the main body, and pay attention to the actual situation of each student, so as to form an objective and fair assessment and stimulate students' learning potential; the selection of teaching contents through the assessment of students' personality characteristics and interests can stimulate students' interest in learning spoken English; the main position of students is highlighted through students' mutual assessment and self-assessment within the group, and students are guided to self-reflection.

5. Innovation in Teaching Activities

5.1 Activity-based teaching method based on General High School English curriculum standards

According to the General Senior Secondary English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised 2020) the classroom is designed using the Activity-based teaching method, which should point to the development of core literacy in the English subject. Led by the theme and based on the discourse, language knowledge learning, cultural understanding, language skill development and learning strategy application are integrated into three interrelated categories of language and activity thinking, which include learning to understand, applying practice and transferring innovation.

Students are placed in situations with a specific theme and asked to think about how they would solve the problem; then, relying on

the discourse, students sort and integrate information and, with the teacher's guidance, outline structured knowledge that linguistically, culturally and cognitively builds a foundation for further discussion of the meaning of the theme; students then try to use and internalize the language and information they have learned to deepen their understanding of the meaning of the theme. Finally, there are transfer and creative activities in which students express their views and attitudes rationally through pluralistic and critical thinking in relation to situations they may face in their lives, and form new knowledge about thematic-related content through their learning.

Each of these activities integrates language knowledge, language skills, learning strategies, thinking skills and cultural awareness, helping students to actively participate in learning activities that explore the meaning of the topic, learn to use the language they have learnt to analyse and solve problems, and achieve the curriculum objectives of developing core literacy in English.

5.2 Theme-based practical spoken English activities that meet rural realities

Rural areas differ significantly from urban economies in many ways, including geographical features, cultural customs and living habits, and the choice of spoken English corpus can be equally distinctive and reflective. The introduction of vibrant farmland, cooking and eating scenes characteristic of home and distinctive local festivals into the spoken English classroom allows for a variety of thematic spoken English practice activities and the building of a local spoken English corpus. This is a great way to arouse the emotional resonance of rural high school students and to stimulate their interest in learning. It is also important for students to participate in the activities and to become the main subject of the activities, so that they can improve their core English literacy in the independent English speaking practice activities.

Take wheat, a common grain crop in rural areas of China, as an example. Teachers can study in depth the cycle of wheat cultivation, the growing environment required, the cultivation process and the harvesting process, and introduce them into the classroom in the form of a project study or role-play dialogue to create a speaking situation with rural characteristics; they can even take students into the farmland and use real-life scenarios to stimulate their interest in English speaking dialogue and increase their motivation. You can also compare and contrast soybeans, a cash crop from South American countries, and explain the cultivation method used - the no-till method for large areas, the planting machine: the spot seeder and the special herbicide: glyphosate herbicide. In a comparative study, the differences between rural scenes in China and abroad are experienced. This will be extended to expand the corpus of spoken language from rural areas with local characteristics and to build up a more complete corpus of spoken language.

In addition, in the oral practice activities of thematic comparative learning, students improve their intercultural communication skills, expand their oral materials and build up their cultural identity and cultural confidence, so that they are better able to tell distinctive and unique Chinese stories in their future communication.

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