A Comparative Study on the Use of English Reading Learning Strategies in Urban and Rural Middle School Students

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Abstract: English reading ability, as one of the fundamental skills in English learning, is closely related to students' use of reading strategies. However, during junior high school English instruction, teachers often observe that there are great differences in students' reading ability. This research employs methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and comparative analysis to explore the overall usage and specific differences in English reading strategies between urban and rural junior high school students. The findings reveal noticeable disparities in the selection and application of reading strategies between urban and rural students. Consequently, targeted teaching strategies and improvement suggestions are proposed to provide educators with practical experience and theoretical support, so as to enhance the quality of English teaching, improve students' reading ability and promote balanced development in English education.

1.Research Background

Junior high school English learning represents a new phase in students' English education, which is a crucial period for developing English proficiency. As one of the core skills in English learning, reading plays a vital role in enhancing students' language abilities and core competences. There is a close relationship between students' English reading abilities and reading strategies they employ. Using effective reading strategies can improve reading efficiency and quality, thereby enhancing students' reading abilities and achieving better learning outcomes and comprehensive development. The *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standard* (2022 Edition) emphasizes English courses should play a leading role in core competences, and learning strategies are important means to promote English subject competences. Proficient readers often utilize a variety of reading strategies flexibly, leading to significant achievements in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and language expression (Hua Yan, 2021).

Under the compulsory education curriculum reform, although English education has made great strides, there are still significant differences between urban and rural areas in terms of educational resources, learning environments, and student backgrounds. These differences inevitably impact students' reading learning strategies and their effectiveness. For example, urban students usually have access to richer learning resources and higher family support, enabling them to adopt more diverse learning strategies. In contrast, due to resource limitations, rural schools often focus on vocabulary and grammar instruction in English reading, while neglecting the cultivation of reading strategies and guidance for deep learning, which hinders the development of independent reading skills and critical thinking.

Therefore, studying the overall situation and differences in the use of English reading learning strategies between urban and rural junior high school students not only deepens the understanding of English reading strategies, but also provides theoretical support and practical guidance for improving English reading instruction. While scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted researches on differences in reading strategy use, most studies focus on high-achieving and low-achieving students, and are concentrated on elementary or high school stages, with relatively few studies on the junior high stage. There is a lack of in-depth exploration of differences in reading strategies between urban and rural junior high students and specific actionable improvements. Therefore, this study focuses on junior high school students, concentrating on research at the foundational stage of foreign language education. Conducting a comparative study on the use of reading strategies among junior high school students in

rural and urban areas is of significant research value. It holds important implications for promoting educational equity and improving the overall English proficiency of junior high school students in China.

2.Literature Review

Learning strategies are strategies which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable (Qxford, 1989), so as to improve reading comprehension and memory.

English reading learning strategies refer to the series of methods and techniques that students use while reading English materials to enhance reading comprehension and speed. Learning strategies can be classified into cognitive strategies, such as predicting, skimming, and inferring, metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and regulating, and social strategies, such as cooperating, seeking help, and self-motivating (O'Malley& Chamot). These strategies play a crucial role in English reading learning, helping students improve learning efficiency, facilitate knowledge comprehension, and strengthen memory and application skills. The combination among these four strategies contributes to better learning efficiency and overall quality.

3.Research Design

The study employs a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis approach, aiming to explore the overall use of reading learning strategies among rural and urban junior high school students, as well as to investigate the differences in their use of learning strategies.

The study selected two junior high schools from both urban and rural areas in Sichuan, randomly sampling 80 students from each school, totaling 160 junior high students. This study employs questionnaires and interviews as research tools to investigate 160 students in urban and rural areas. It aims to address three main questions: firstly, what is the overall use of reading learning strategies among urban and rural junior high school students? Secondly, what are the differences in the use of English reading learning strategies? Lastly, how can students effectively utilize reading strategies to enhance their English reading skills?

Finally, statistical software was used to analyze the collected data, compare the overall use and differences in reading learning strategies between urban and rural middle school students, and then draw research conclusions.

4.Results and Discussion

By comparing and analyzing relevant data, the research reveals the current situation and differences in the use of English reading learning strategies among urban and rural middle school students, which aims to provide valuable enlightenment for improving English reading teaching.

4.1 Analysis of Overall Application in Reading Learning Strategies

Based on the questionnaire results, a general descriptive analysis of reading strategy usage among students was first conducted, with the distribution presented in Table 1.

Strategies	Urban students (Mean/SD)		Rural students (Mean/SD)		T-test
Cognitive	4.02	.867	3.32	.564	3.148
Meta-cognitive	4.01	.765	3.12	.765	4.596
Affective	3.96	.867	3.01	.1023	4.241
Resource	4.01	.654	3.16	.876	3.171

Table 1 Overall Reading Strategies Use Between Urban and Rural Students

It can be seen clearly from Table 1 that both urban and rural students use reading learning strategies to some extent, with mean 3.58. Among urban students, the most frequently used strategies are cognitive strategies (mean 4.02), followed by metacognitive strategies (mean 4.01), then by resource strategies (mean 4.01) , and the least used

strategies are affective strategies (mean 3.96). Among rural students, the most frequently used strategies are cognitive strategies (mean 3.32), followed by resource strategies (mean 3.16), then by metacognitive strategies (mean 3.12) , and the least used strategies are affective strategies (mean 3.01). Urban students generally exhibit higher usage of these strategies, while rural students are relatively low in the use of them.

Specifically, the survey results (Table 1) show cognitive strategies are the most frequently used by both rural and urban students. This indicates students are somewhat capable of applying relevant cognitive strategies, such as prediction, skimming, scanning, inferring, and summarizing information. For example, students might guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from the content and context and use logical reasoning to understand implicit information of the text.

Next are metacognitive strategies and resource strategies. This also indicates both urban and rural students are capable of self-monitoring, self-management, and self-evaluation to some extent. For example, they can set clear reading goals, monitor their understanding, and adjust their reading strategies as needed. Additionally, both urban and rural students can employ resource strategies during reading, such as using dictionaries or translation software, consulting teachers or classmates, and utilizing online resources to help comprehend, though the overall level of use is not high.

Finally, social-affective strategies are used least frequently. This is related to the language environment, where a focus on exam-oriented education has long prevailed, with English teaching emphasizing knowledge and ability acquisition rather than emotional education (Xu Jinfeng, 2024). Besides formal classroom learning, students have scarce opportunities for learning English in natural communicative environment. Moreover, students often suffer from various emotional situations during their learning process, such as a lack of confidence and motivation. Self-motivating to maintain reading motivation, and using emotional expression to aid comprehension become crucial components of reading learning strategies.

4.2 Analysis of Differences in Reading Learning Strategies

The study employed an independent samples t-test to analyze the differences. The results are presented in Table 1. There are significant differences between urban and rural students across all four categories of reading strategies, with each comparison detailed as follows for each strategy category.

4.2.1 Cognitive Strategies Use

Firstly, the T-test results (Table 1) show that the t-value is 3.148, with a sig value of 0.000 (sig<0.05), indicating a significant difference in the use of cognitive strategies. Urban students have demonstrated a markedly superior application of these strategies compared to rural students.

Urban students show a higher level and frequency of using cognitive strategies. They exhibit relatively high performance in predicting content, understanding new words, using context to infer meanings and implied information, summarizing main themes and points, and relating text to personal experience. For instance, in terms of predicting the content of the texts, urban students have a mean score of 3.79 and a standard deviation of 0.753, suggesting they frequently use prediction strategies in the process of reading. In contrast, rural students show significant deficiencies in this regard. Taking content prediction as an example, rural students have a mean score of 3.14 and a standard deviation of 0.623, indicating their ability to predict content is significantly lower than that of urban students. In other aspects, many rural students rely on word-for-word translation to comprehend the text instead of using context and key words to infer implicit information and words meanings, which leads them often to give up the understanding of the whole text when encountering unfamiliar words.

4.2.2 Meta-cognitive Strategies Use

Secondly, the T-test results show the t-value is 4.596, with a sig value of 0.000 (sig<0.05), indicating a significant difference in the use of metacognitive strategies. Urban students demonstrate a markedly superior use of

metacognitive strategies compared to rural students.

Urban students outperform rural students in setting clear reading goals and plans, self-monitoring reading process, summarizing and reflecting, and continually adjusting reading strategies. For example, in terms of self-monitoring the reading process, urban students frequently use self-monitoring and attentiveness to understand and reflect on their learning progress and shortcomings. In contrast, rural students show weak performances in this regard. Their mean score for self-monitoring is only 3.12 with a standard deviation of 0.756, which is significantly lower than that of urban students. In other aspects, the average scores for rural students are below 3.6, indicating they are incapable of timely summarizing, reflecting, and continuously adjusting reading strategies to improve reading efficiency and quality.

4.2.3 Resource Strategies Use

Thirdly, the T-test results show the t-value is 3.171, with a sig value of 0.000 (sig<0.05), indicating a significant difference in the use of resource strategies. Urban students demonstrate a notably superior use of these strategies compared to rural students.

Urban students exhibit a higher level of proficiency in employing resource strategies, such as using dictionaries or translation software, seeking relevant materials, consulting teachers or classmates, and attempting to use other external resources to help their understanding of texts. For instance, they have mean scores of 4.32 and 4.23 for seeking relevant materials and trying other external resources respectively, indicating their greater ability to utilize learning resources like audiovisual materials to enrich their learning. In contrast, rural students show significant deficiencies in this regard, with mean scores below 3.3, reflecting a notable gap in their resource strategy use. Particularly in the area of trying other external resources, due to limited resources and conditions, rural students have a mean score of only 2.78, which is significantly lower than that of urban students.

Therefore, teachers need to pay attention to training students' ability to use resource strategies helps them to make better use of external resources to improve their reading effect.

4.2.4 Affective Strategies Use

Lastly, the T-test results (Table 2) show that the t-value is 4.241, with a sig value of 0.000 (sig<0.05), indicating a significant difference in the use of affective strategies. Urban students demonstrate a notably superior use of these strategies compared to rural students.

Urban students show higher abilities in emotion regulation during reading, with an average score of 3.75 and a standard deviation of 0.978. They are more adept at utilizing cooperative learning and seeking help, possessing better emotional management skills, and using emotional expression to aid their understanding of texts and to consider the author's attitudes. In contrast, rural students show significant deficiencies in applying affective strategies. For example, their average score for emotion regulation is 3.21 with a standard deviation of 0.321, which is noticeably lower than that of urban students. Many rural students struggle to seek help from teachers or classmates when encountering learning problems and are more susceptible to negative emotions.

5.Teaching Implications

Due to the comprehensive effects of factors such as educational resources, teaching environments, and student backgrounds between urban and rural areas, the effectiveness of reading strategy is quite different among students. In addition to increasing investment in rural education, enhancing teacher quality and improving teaching facilities, to reduce the urban-rural education gap, the following teaching suggestions are provided.

Firstly, awareness training in reading strategies should be introduced in rural English teaching, incorporating a diverse range of reading strategies. This will enable students to further understand and master these strategies, recognize the internal connections, and flexibly apply and integrate them to achieve higher learning outcomes and comprehensive development, thereby improving reading effectiveness.

Secondly, teachers should pay attention to students' foundational knowledge by providing a variety of reading materials related to their life experiences, allowing students to learn English texts within specific contexts. Teachers can assist students in activating and integrating their background knowledge through questioning, discussion, or prediction, so as to enhance their reading motivation and engagement, thus improving learning efficiency.

Thirdly, promoting communication and collaboration among students is essential. Teachers should use various teaching methods and aids, e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic resources, and encourage students to participate actively in group discussions and collaborative reading activities to solve challenges collectively, thus improving reading comprehension and strategy application skills.

Lastly, continually developing students' autonomous learning abilities and awareness is crucial. Teachers should encourage students to select and comprehend reading materials independently, cultivate self-regulation, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation skills. Besides, teachers should pay attention to the individual differences and needs in the process of reading, provide them with more personalized learning guidance, and adjust their reading strategies. Students should choose appropriate reading strategies based on their reading goals and task requirements. For example, students may need to use more cognitive strategies, such as summarizing, generalizing, and inferring when dealing with more challenging texts, whereas metacognitive strategies may be more applicable when engaging with familiar topics.

6.Conclusion

This research conducts a comparative analysis of English reading strategies use among urban and rural junior high school students in a certain region of Sichuan. It aims to reveal the current situation of strategy use in English reading, highlighting specific differences in the types, frequency, effectiveness of strategies between urban and rural students.

The findings indicate urban students significantly exhibit a higher level and frequency of using cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and resource strategies compared to rural students. Based on these findings, targeted teaching strategies and improvement suggestions are proposed. However, this research's sample size is limited, selected from junior high schools within the same region, which may not fully represent students from other areas and schools. Additionally, due to time and resource constraints, the study primarily relies on surveys, without employing diverse data collection methods such as observations or experiments. The generalizability of the results to broader contexts in junior high school English education requires further practical validation in the future.

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