

The Changes of English Education in Rural Middle Schools in China Since the Reform and Opening up at the Level of Policy and Teachers (1978-Present)

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Abstract: Since the reform and opening up, China's rural middle school English education has undergone profound changes. On the basis of combing the development process of rural English education from 1978 to more than 40 years, this paper divides the evolution of rural English education into four stages: recovery and exploration, standardization and development, new curriculum reform and deepening, tackling and innovation, and systematically examines its changes in the two dimensions of education policy and teacher level. The study found that national policies have a significant guiding role in the development of rural English education, and in terms of teachers, rural areas have long faced structural challenges such as insufficient professional ability and team stability. Although the 'special post plan', 'rural teacher support plan' and other policies have alleviated the shortage of teachers to a certain extent, the gap between urban and rural areas still exists. In the context of the new era, digital technology and artificial intelligence bring new opportunities to rural English education, and also aggravate the complexity of educational equity. The purpose of this study is to provide a reference for promoting the balanced development of rural English education in China through historical review and multi-dimensional analysis.

Keywords: Reform and opening up; rural middle school; English education; education change

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

The establishment of the Imperial College in 1862 officially marked the beginning of English teaching in China. In the past 160 years, the development of English teaching has undergone various changes. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's social unrest and the scarcity of talents proficient in English made the development of English education in China slow. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's foreign language teaching was subject to political reasons, and there was a tendency to be 'one-sided'. The upsurge of learning Russian swept away, and English education could only be barely maintained. During the period of the Cultural Revolution, the whole foreign language teaching went to a historical trough, and the students' English level was greatly reduced. After the reform and opening up, China's foreign exchange opportunities have gradually increased. In order to meet the needs of the times, education pilots have also been gradually introduced. Foreign language education has shown a trend of 'leapfrog development'. As an international common language, English education has received unprecedented attention. However, in the nationwide 'English education reform at all levels', English education in cities, as the first player in the early stage of reform and opening up, has been qualitatively improved, but it has also objectively caused the imbalance and disharmony of urban and rural development in China, and English education in rural areas is particularly prominent on this issue.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to sort out the changing track of English education in rural middle schools after the reform and opening up, and to provide new thinking for promoting the balanced development of English education in the new era from multiple dimensions such as education policy and teacher qualification.

2. Historical Changes of Middle School English Education Since the Reform and Opening up

2.1 Recovery and Exploration Period (1978-early 1990s)

In 1977, the college entrance examination education system was restored. In 1978, the Ministry of Education held a national education symposium, which proposed to strengthen foreign language teaching and strive to change

the backward status of foreign language education within three or five years. However, in the specific outline and implementation process, it is found that there are many reasons for the low level of teachers in China, the difficulty of teaching content, the phenomenon of ‘dumb English’ and the poor teaching conditions, which lead to great resistance to the implementation of foreign language teaching. Therefore, at this stage, the Ministry of Education has stabilized the teaching order and laid a solid foundation for the later English teaching by formulating teaching plans, changing the academic system, compiling textbooks, implementing complete syllabus and other measures.

2.2 Norms and Development Period (1990-2003)

The English syllabus puts forward quality education on the basis of the first stage, which marks the transformation of foreign language teaching from a single subject education to education. At the same time, in order to meet the international needs, the syllabus also absorbs the idea of communicative teaching and encourages students to use foreign languages for daily communication.

2.3 New Curriculum Reform and Deepening Period (2004-2010)

In 2004, the promulgation of the ‘English Curriculum Standards’ emphasized the comprehensive language use ability. As a result, a variety of teaching methods have emerged, from the traditional grammar translation method to the communicative teaching method. Kumaravadivelu (2006) divides the endless stream of English teaching methods into three categories: Language-centered methods, Learner-centered methods, and Learning-centered methods. At the same time, multimedia and early network resources have also begun to be gradually applied in the field of teaching, and the gap between urban and rural areas has become prominent.

2.4 Breakthrough and Innovation Period (2010-present)

After entering the 21st century, the teaching concept of quality education has become a subject value-based transformation oriented by core literacy. The new concept is more in line with the needs of the development of the times, which reflects that the researchers of middle school English education have a further understanding of the laws of students' physical and mental development and language. At this stage, the development of multimedia and artificial intelligence has brought new opportunities and digital divide challenges to English education.

3.A Multi-dimensional Analysis of the Changes of English Education in Rural Middle Schools

3.1 Policy Orientation Level

3.1.1 The First Stage of the Recovery and Exploration Period (1978-early 1990s)

In the early stage of reform and opening up, the ‘Full-time Ten-year Primary and Secondary School English Teaching Syllabus (Trial Draft)’ was promulgated. Its core idea is to clarify the status of English education, that is, to serve politics and cultivate talents who are proficient in foreign languages to achieve the ‘four modernizations’. This highlights the instrumental and intellectual value of English. In the subsequent programs, middle school English teaching aims to serve China's ‘four modernizations’, and build China into a highly civilized and highly democratic socialist modern country.

With the focus of economic system reform shifting from rural areas to cities, China's foreign language education has gradually begun to be promoted in coastal and more developed cities, which has led to the lack and lag of secondary education in rural areas.

3.1.2 The Second Stage of the Norm and Development period (1990-2003)

The promulgation of ‘Full-time Compulsory Education Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (Experimental Draft)’ in 2001 creatively put forward that the overall goal of English curriculum in basic education stage is to cultivate students' comprehensive language application ability. The formation of comprehensive language application ability is based on the overall development of students' language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness. The policy orientation of this period has made the nature of English education move towards the transition of ‘instrumental and humanistic unity’, from ‘knowledge-based’ to

‘ability-based’ and ‘student-based’.

Before this period, compulsory education has entered a period of deepening. Compulsory education has been popularized in economically developed areas of coastal provinces and some developed inland provinces. Until around 1990, the government issued documents (such as China 's education reform and development program), to strengthen rural education, improve the quality of rural education, universal education quality put forward clear requirements, urban and rural areas have basically achieved the goal of ‘learning’.

3.1.3 The Third Stage of the New Curriculum Reform and Deepening Period (2004-2010)

During this period, the state is actively and steadily implementing the 2001 ‘English Curriculum Standards for Full-time Compulsory Education in Senior High Schools (Experimental Draft)’ and the 2003 ‘English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (Experimental)’. This period is a period of problem exposure and change. In some middle schools in developed cities, the evaluation methods of the senior high school entrance examination have also changed. For example, Weifang City has replaced the original score evaluation system with the grade system, and has carried out the integrity recommendation admission, allowing junior high school teachers with integrity qualifications to jointly recommend students with potential for development directly to senior high schools.

At this time, in order to promote the balanced development of education, the state is implementing a series of education policies in rural middle schools. For example, in 2003, the modern distance education project for rural primary and secondary schools (‘rural distance project’) was launched, which equipped rural primary and secondary schools with teaching disc playback points, computer classrooms, etc.

3.1.4 The Fourth Stage of the Tough and Innovative Period (2010-present)

The ‘English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools’ issued in 2017 clearly put forward the goal system of ‘core competence’, which includes language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. This deepens the goal of English education to ‘what kind of person to become through English learning’, and its value lies in promoting people's inner growth and all-round development.

In order to break through a series of problems such as teachers and funds of rural education, the state is also constantly adjusting policies and bringing forth new ideas. In 2019, ‘China Education Modernization 2035’ defined the development goal of rural education, focusing on narrowing the gap between education equity and urban and rural areas. In 2020, the construction of teachers' team should strengthen the guarantee of rural teachers from the aspects of treatment and training; in 2021, the ‘Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Rural Revitalization’ clarified the government's responsibility and escorted the balance of urban and rural education...

3.2 Faculty Level

According to Bourdieu (1977), capital is not only reflected in economy, but also includes cultural capital, such as citizens ' knowledge, taste and language ability. As a Chinese student, English language ability is an extremely important ‘cultural capital’. Because of geographical advantages and family background, urban students can make better use of educational resources to obtain this ‘cultural capital’. However, rural students are at a congenital disadvantage in the accumulation of ‘cultural capital’, which leads to the continuous highlighting of the educational gap.

In order to narrow the gap as much as possible, teacher qualification, as one of the direct factors affecting cultural capital, should bridge the gap between urban and rural teachers as much as possible and enhance the country 's cultural capital.

3.2.1 The First Stage of the Recovery and Exploration Period (1978-early 1990s)

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the influence of national policy guidelines and trends, China's foreign language education is mainly Russian learning. In the early days of reform and opening up, English education ushered in a new spring.

However, the quality of English teachers in this period is uneven. Due to the turmoil of the country in the first half century, the mass education advocated by the state has enabled private teachers to gradually develop. In rural middle schools, these teachers have become the main body of English education. They are 'both farmers and teachers', maintaining the cornerstone of rural education. Although they have a large population, their professional basic knowledge is weak. At the same time, there are many teachers who have been transferred from Russian to English. In order to resume their education as soon as possible, they only 'catch the ducks' after short-term training.

Since then, the Ministry of Education has successively issued some opinions on the adjustment of the teaching staff. The first national education work conference was held for the first time in 1985. This is the first education work conference held in China since the reform and opening up. This conference reformed the education system and determined the major decision of nine-year compulsory education, emphasizing that teachers should be vigorously developed in quantity and the construction of teachers in China should be restored as soon as possible. The 'Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System' adopted after the meeting also proposed to 'establish a sufficient number of qualified and stable teaching staff'.

Some private teachers have been turned into public ones, and private teachers are recruited by normal universities to cultivate more excellent and qualified teachers. At that time, the students who graduated from normal universities were assigned to the countryside. They quickly became the backbone, but the number was scarce. For the huge rural population, it was just a drop in the bucket.

3.2.2 The Second Stage of the Norm and Development Period (1990-2003)

The process of private-to-public is gradually developing. Private teachers entering normal universities have passed assessment and training, and have become formal public teachers, which has greatly improved the stability and professionalism of teachers. The English normal graduates trained at all levels and regions have become the main channel to supplement the source of rural teachers, which has improved the academic qualifications of teachers to a certain extent and laid the foundation for the development of foreign language undertakings in China.

At the end of the 19th century, the world's economy and science and technology were advancing by leaps and bounds. It was against the background of China's implementation of the 'three-step' strategy that the Party Central Committee resolutely proposed the strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education, and shifted the focus of economic construction to rely on scientific and technological progress to improve the quality of workers. Since then, local governments have responded to the party's call and began to propose measures such as the appointment of rural teachers and the management of establishments in rural areas to attract major teachers, so as to ensure that high-quality teachers can go down in the countryside.

However, the problem of excessive rural population makes some non-English major teachers also teach English, which cannot guarantee the quality of teaching. Coupled with the rapid development of urban English education, backward rural middle school teachers have gradually opened the gap with urban teachers in terms of teaching concepts and professional qualities.

3.2.3 The Third Stage of the New Curriculum Reform and Deepening Period (2004-2010)

In 2006, China's 'special post plan' began to implement. The 'special post plan' is a major measure to innovate the supplementary mechanism of rural school teachers and attract highly educated talents to engage in rural compulsory education. It is also a practical action to guide and encourage college graduates to work in remote areas such as the west. Its implementation has supplemented a large number of young and dynamic undergraduate graduates for backward rural education, and also guaranteed the quality of education and teaching needs in remote areas to a certain extent. In addition, in order to reduce the gap between urban and rural teachers, the Ministry of Education began to launch the 'National Training Program for Primary and Secondary School Teachers' (i.e., the 'National Training Program') in 2010. It focuses on rural teachers and organizes large-scale teacher training in classification, stratification, post division and subject division, which gives English teachers in rural middle schools

the first opportunity to systematically receive the training of the new curriculum concept.

However, due to the implementation of the policy and the limitation of their own growth experience and teaching environment, many teachers, despite receiving training, are confused and confused about the prevailing 'Task-based Language Teaching Method' at that time, which makes the new teaching concept cannot be introduced into the countryside in time, widening the gap between urban and rural education.

Fortunately, the appointment of 'special post teachers' has brought new hope to rural English education. According to the data of the Ministry of Education, the retention rate of the first batch of 'special post teachers' is as high as 88.7% after the expiration of three years of service. Among them, the retention rate of teachers in Guangxi and Ningxia Autonomous Region reaches 99%. Four years have proved that the 'special post plan' is a popular measure.

3.2.4 The Fourth Stage of the Tough and Innovative Period (2010-present)

In 2015, the State Council formally promulgated the 'Rural Teacher Support Program.' By improving the allocation of rural teacher resources and improving the reasonable treatment of teachers in all aspects, the aim is to form an educational situation of 'going down, staying and teaching well,' and strive to build a high-quality, dedicated and rooted rural teacher team for rural schools.

In 2021, the 'Special Plan for Excellent Teachers' will be formally implemented. This is another important policy to promote the balanced development of regional education in China after the 'Special Post Plan', the 'Public-funded Education Policy for Normal Students' and the 'Rural Teacher Support Plan'.

In recent years, the rise of the Internet and artificial intelligence has broken the barriers between urban and rural areas and English education at home and abroad. By using the network platform, rural teachers can carry out online teaching and research, and understand some advanced concepts of urban middle schools; use AI to carry out voice practice to make up for the lack of their own oral level.

4. Conclusion

In summary, since the reform and opening up more than 40 years ago, China's rural English education has overcome one difficulty after another. The macro-control of national policy has pointed out the direction for English education in rural middle school. The continuous evolution of the teaching staff has achieved a historic leap from 'quantity shortage' to 'initial scale', but it has always been struggling with the two major problems of 'professional quality improvement' and 'team stability'. Therefore, this requires teachers to keep up with the new era, actively respond to the national education policy, and improve the quality of rural English education in China.

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