

Assessing the Effectiveness of Current Mainstream English Teaching Methods in Economically Disadvantaged Regions of China

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Abstract: While extensive research has explored English teaching methods in urban China, their applicability and effectiveness in rural areas remain underexamined. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the challenges and effectiveness of mainstream methods such as Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in economically disadvantaged regions. The research utilizes theoretical analysis, drawing on secondary data from prior studies and applying frameworks like Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. It examines rural students' learning environments, including resource deficiencies, underqualified teachers, and limited English exposure. The findings indicate that while GTM is effective for improving grammar and reading, it fails to build communicative competence or sustain student motivation. CLT and TBLT show potential but are constrained by resource and expertise deficiencies prevalent in rural settings. The study concludes that integrating online technology, enhancing teacher training, and fostering community-based initiatives could improve the efficacy of English teaching in rural China, bridging the educational gap between urban and rural areas.

Keywords: TESOL, Rural teaching, Urban-rural disparity, Teaching methods

1. Introduction

The importance of English in China has grown significantly with globalization, making proficiency a critical asset for higher education and career advancement. While urban schools often benefit from better-trained teachers, access to resources, and opportunities for authentic language exposure, rural schools face significant challenges, including insufficient teaching materials, underqualified teachers, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. As a result, applying mainstream teaching methods like the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is particularly difficult in rural areas [1,2]. Despite some research on these methods, their effectiveness in disadvantaged rural settings remains underexplored.

This paper aims to address the question: How effective are current English teaching methods in rural China, and what improvements can be suggested? This study evaluates the performance of

GTM, CLT, and TBLT in rural schools and identifies practical ways to address existing challenges by using theoretical analysis.

Improving English education in rural areas is critical for bridging the gap between urban and rural schools. Improved access to quality English instruction can open up opportunities for students in disadvantaged regions, enhance their future prospects, and contribute to reducing social and economic inequalities. By focusing on the specific needs of rural learners, this research hopes to offer insights into how teaching methods can be better adapted for these settings.

2. Overview

Effective English language education in China has historically relied on a few established methods, each with distinct goals and approaches. In economically disadvantaged rural areas, three primary methods—Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)—are commonly employed. Each method has different strengths and challenges, particularly in the context of limited resources and underqualified teaching staff often found in rural regions. This section explores these methods, their applicability, and their limitations in rural Chinese schools.

2.1. Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is one of the most traditional and widely used approaches in English language teaching, especially in rural China. In this method, students learn English by translating texts between English and their native language, emphasizing grammar rules, vocabulary, and written comprehension. GTM is particularly popular in rural schools due to its straightforward structure and compatibility with exam-oriented educational goals [1].

GTM's strengths lie in its alignment with standardized testing, which often prioritizes grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension over oral proficiency. In economically disadvantaged areas, where resources for language learning are limited, GTM is often the preferred approach, as it does not require extensive instructional materials or multimedia support [3]. Additionally, it is easier for underqualified teachers, who may not be trained in modern pedagogical methods, to implement since it requires less specialized training than approaches focused on oral and interactive skills [1].

However, GTM has notable limitations, particularly in fostering communicative competence. Research indicates that while GTM may improve students' grammatical knowledge and translation abilities, it does little to enhance their speaking or listening skills, which are crucial for practical language use [4]. As a result, students trained primarily through GTM may struggle to apply their English skills in real-world contexts, leading to lower motivation and engagement, especially if they see limited practical value in learning English solely for exam purposes. This gap in communicative competence highlights a key challenge in using GTM as a comprehensive method in rural settings where exposure to English outside the classroom is already minimal.

2.2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a learner-centered approach that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the goal of language learning. CLT focuses on developing students' communicative competence, encouraging them to use English meaningfully through discussions, role-plays, and other interactive activities. This method is rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which underscores the importance of social interaction for language development [5].

In theory, CLT aligns well with modern language acquisition goals and is widely promoted as an effective way to develop practical language skills. However, implementing CLT in rural Chinese schools presents significant challenges. Unlike GTM, CLT requires not only a well-trained teacher

who can facilitate interactive activities but also a classroom environment conducive to communication, both of which are often lacking in economically disadvantaged areas [2]. Many rural teachers lack the pedagogical training required for CLT and may struggle to create interactive, communicative lessons without appropriate resources, such as audio-visual aids and sufficient space for group work [6].

Moreover, the limited exposure to English outside the classroom further restricts the effectiveness of CLT. In urban areas, students may have access to English media, extracurricular programs, or native speakers, which reinforce the communicative skills developed in class. In contrast, rural students often lack these opportunities, which diminishes the real-world application of CLT [4]. Consequently, while CLT theoretically fosters better communication skills, its impact in rural areas is constrained by environmental and resource limitations.

2.3. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes language learning through meaningful tasks that simulate real-life situations. TBLT encourages students to use English actively to complete tasks, such as solving problems, discussing topics, or planning activities. This method builds on Krashen's Input Hypothesis, suggesting that language is best acquired through comprehensible input in context, making it an effective approach for retention and practical language use [7].

TBLT has been shown to improve language acquisition by engaging students in purposeful communication. However, like CLT, TBLT faces substantial obstacles in rural Chinese schools. Implementing task-based activities requires specific resources, such as projectors, access to multimedia, and well-designed task materials, which are often unavailable in economically disadvantaged areas [8]. Additionally, TBLT requires teachers to possess advanced skills in task facilitation, student progress monitoring, and providing constructive feedback, which many rural teachers may lack due to limited training opportunities [9].

Another limitation of TBLT in rural China is the cultural and educational focus on examination success, which does not always align with the task-based approach. TBLT's emphasis on practical language skills may be perceived as secondary to the grammar and vocabulary skills needed for exams, making it less attractive to teachers and administrators focused on standardized testing results [2]. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities for English interaction outside the classroom limits the real-world application of TBLT, as students may struggle to see the relevance of task-based activities when English is rarely used in their daily lives.

In summary, each of these methods offers unique strengths and limitations for English language teaching in rural China. GTM aligns well with the exam-oriented educational system and resource constraints but fails to develop communicative competence. CLT has the potential to foster interaction and practical language use but requires resources and teacher training that are often lacking in rural areas. TBLT, while engaging and beneficial for language retention, demands a level of infrastructure and expertise rarely available in economically disadvantaged settings. Together, these challenges illustrate the complex educational environment in rural China, underscoring the need for adaptable and context-sensitive approaches to English language teaching that account for the specific needs and constraints of rural schools.

3. Analysis of the Learning Environment in Rural China

The effectiveness of English teaching methods is influenced significantly by the learning environment in which they are applied. In rural China, economically disadvantaged regions face distinct educational challenges that impact language acquisition. Limited access to resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, and restricted exposure to English outside the classroom create barriers to the

successful implementation of communicative and task-based teaching methods. This section explores these key challenges, emphasizing how they shape the learning environment and limit the effectiveness of English instruction in rural Chinese schools.

3.1. Resource Deficiency

One of the most pressing issues in rural Chinese education is the lack of access to basic teaching resources. Many rural schools struggle with outdated textbooks, limited digital resources, and inadequate infrastructure, such as multimedia tools or even basic classroom supplies. This scarcity of resources is a critical factor that hinders the implementation of interactive and communicative teaching methods, such as CLT and TBLT, which rely on tools like projectors, audio-visual aids, and digital materials to support language acquisition [6].

According to Hu, the Chinese government has made efforts to reduce educational inequality through various policies aimed at resource distribution[2]. However, the urban-rural gap in resource availability remains substantial, with rural schools often receiving insufficient support compared to their urban counterparts. As a result, teachers in rural areas are frequently forced to rely on the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), which requires minimal resources and focuses on rote memorization rather than interactive learning. This reliance on GTM is particularly prevalent in resource-constrained settings, as it aligns with exam-based educational goals with no need for additional instructional materials [3]. The lack of resources not only limits teaching methods but also affects students' motivation and engagement, as they may find language learning uninspiring without interactive or technologically enhanced materials.

3.2. Underqualified Teachers

Teacher qualification is another significant factor influencing the effectiveness of English education in rural China. Rural schools often face a shortage of well-trained English teachers, with many instructors lacking formal training in communicative teaching methods. Research shows that although most rural teachers are familiar with traditional methods like GTM, which they can implement with limited training, they may lack the expertise needed to use more interactive approaches, such as CLT and TBLT, effectively [1].

The disparity in teacher training between urban and rural areas is influenced by both economic and structural factors. Butler notes that teachers in urban regions often have access to continuous professional development programs [6], workshops, and exposure to new pedagogical techniques, whereas rural teachers have fewer opportunities for such training. Additionally, teacher retention is a persistent challenge in rural areas, where many qualified teachers are reluctant to work due to limited career advancement prospects and lower salaries compared to urban positions [10]. This shortage of qualified teachers leads to a reliance on rote-based instruction, as underqualified teachers may feel unequipped to manage more complex and communicative teaching styles effectively.

Volunteer programs and online training initiatives have begun to address these issues, providing rural teachers with new opportunities to learn communicative teaching techniques. However, these efforts are limited in scope and do not reach all rural schools [3]. Without sufficient training in communicative and task-based approaches, rural teachers are unlikely to shift away from GTM, reinforcing the disparity between urban and rural educational quality and limiting students' ability to develop practical language skills.

3.3. Limited Exposure to English

Outside of the classroom, rural students in China typically have limited exposure to English, which further impacts their language acquisition. In urban areas, students may access English media,

participate in extracurricular language programs, or encounter English in everyday contexts, all of which reinforce classroom learning and help develop language proficiency. In contrast, students in rural areas rarely have such opportunities, making it challenging to acquire the communicative skills needed for real-life use of English [5].

The limited exposure to English in rural settings is not only a result of geographical isolation but also stems from socio-economic and cultural factors. Ma et al. suggest that rural students often view English as less relevant to their lives and future goals compared to urban students, who may have a stronger perception of the practical value of English in their career aspirations[4]. This lack of perceived relevance, combined with limited opportunities for practical application, reduces students' motivation to engage with English beyond the classroom.

Without exposure to authentic language use, rural students miss out on opportunities to practice conversational skills, hear native accents, or understand cultural nuances associated with the language. Communicative approaches like CLT and TBLT are particularly affected by this limitation, as these methods rely on consistent and meaningful use of English in various contexts. As noted by Fang, communicative competence develops through regular interaction, but in rural Chinese schools, English is rarely used outside formal learning environments, which restricts the effectiveness of interaction-based teaching methods [5]. Consequently, the limited English exposure in rural areas reinforces students' dependence on traditional methods like GTM, which focus on translation and grammatical accuracy rather than practical language use.

In summary, the rural learning environment in China presents several challenges that impact the application and effectiveness of mainstream English teaching methods. Resource deficiencies restrict access to interactive teaching aids, leading to an overreliance on GTM. The lack of qualified teachers reduces the likelihood of implementing communicative and task-based methods, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom hinders the development of communicative competence. These environmental factors underscore the need for adaptive strategies that consider the unique context of rural Chinese education, particularly when aiming to enhance students' motivation and practical language skills.

4. Discussion

Improving English education in economically disadvantaged rural areas in China requires strategies that address the unique challenges of limited resources, underqualified teachers, and restricted English exposure outside of the classroom. This section discusses three potential methods for improvements: the integration of online technology, the implementation of teacher training programs, and the development of community-based learning initiatives. Each approach aims to bridge the urban-rural educational gap, promoting a more effective and motivating English learning experience for rural students.

4.1. Integration of Online Technology and Resources

The integration of online technology presents a practical solution to the resource deficiencies faced by rural schools. Mobile apps, online courses, and digital learning platforms can provide students with access to language materials and activities that support vocabulary, grammar, and communicative skills. Unlike traditional classroom resources, digital tools are relatively low-cost and can reach a wider range of students regardless of their location. Qi [9] emphasizes the value of digital resources in enhancing language learning, particularly for students who lack access to in-person instruction or supplementary materials.

For example, apps such as Duolingo, HelloTalk, and Quizlet offer interactive exercises, language games, and opportunities for real-time language practice. By incorporating these tools into the

classroom, teachers can create a more engaging and interactive learning environment without relying on expensive multimedia equipment. Additionally, online resources can support individualized learning by allowing students to progress at their own pace, revisiting concepts they find challenging [8]. Although internet access can be limited in some rural areas, expanding connectivity and providing schools with basic digital infrastructure would make online learning more feasible.

Moreover, online platforms can help rural students build communicative competence, a skill often neglected in resource-poor settings dominated by the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). Through video-based learning and online conversation practice, students gain exposure to authentic language use, allowing them to develop listening and speaking skills that complement their classroom learning. Online technology thus serves as a valuable tool in promoting both language retention and practical application in rural English education.

4.2. Teacher Training Programs

Investing in teacher training programs is essential for improving the quality of English instruction in rural schools. Well-trained teachers can implement diverse teaching methods, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), to develop students' communicative skills and engage them in meaningful language use. However, as noted by Butler [6], many rural teachers in China lack formal training in these methods and rely heavily on GTM due to its familiarity and simplicity.

Teacher training programs can address this gap by equipping teachers with the skills needed to facilitate interactive and student-centered learning experiences. Such programs could include workshops, online training courses, and mentorship arrangements that introduce rural teachers to CLT and TBLT, along with practical strategies for adapting these methods to resource-limited environments [1]. For instance, training sessions could emphasize low-cost ways to implement communicative activities, such as using role-plays and group discussions that do not require extensive multimedia resources.

Moreover, continuous professional development is critical to ensuring that teachers can adapt to new teaching trends and technologies. Access to online professional development platforms, such as TESOL International and Coursera, allows rural teachers to learn from experts, exchange ideas, and enhance their skills even in remote settings [6]. By enhancing teacher qualifications and confidence, training programs make it more feasible for rural educators to implement methods beyond GTM, thus fostering a more communicative and engaging learning environment.

4.3. Community-Based Learning Initiatives

Community-based learning initiatives can provide rural students with additional opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, addressing the challenge of limited exposure to English in everyday contexts. Such initiatives include English clubs, language exchange programs, and after-school activities that encourage students to use English in social settings. Hansen suggests that extracurricular language programs are effective in increasing student engagement and motivation, especially when supported by local communities and families [10].

In rural areas, where students often view English as less relevant to their daily lives, community-based programs can help students see the practical value of language learning [4]. For example, English clubs can organize cultural exchange events, discussion groups, or movie screenings that expose students to English-speaking cultures and foster a sense of enjoyment in language learning. Local volunteers, parents, or even older students with some English proficiency can lead these activities, making them sustainable and accessible even in resource-limited communities.

Furthermore, online platforms can support community-based learning by connecting rural students with peers or language partners from other regions. Platforms like HelloTalk and Tandem offer virtual language exchange, where students can practice conversational skills with native speakers or fellow learners worldwide. These digital community-based activities enable rural students to practice English regularly, even if in-person opportunities are limited. As Wu and Tarc note, developing cultural capital is crucial for rural students, as it helps them build the skills and confidence needed to pursue educational and professional opportunities beyond their immediate environment[11].

By integrating online technology, enhancing teacher training, and fostering community-based learning initiatives, rural Chinese schools can create more dynamic and effective English learning environments. Online resources address the challenge of limited materials, teacher training programs equip educators with modern teaching methods, and community initiatives provide students with real-world language practice. Together, these strategies offer a path toward reducing the educational disparity between urban and rural areas, fostering English proficiency in economically disadvantaged regions, and supporting students' academic and career aspirations.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the effectiveness of mainstream English teaching methods — Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)—in economically disadvantaged regions of China. The findings reveal significant challenges in these settings, including limited resources, underqualified teachers, and minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. GTM, while useful for grammar and exam preparation, fails to promote communicative competence and student motivation. CLT and TBLT offer the potential for more interactive and meaningful language learning but face obstacles in implementation due to resource and training gaps in rural schools. Addressing these challenges requires context-sensitive adaptations of teaching methods to meet the specific needs of rural learners.

Although this study provides valuable insights, it relies on theoretical analysis and secondary sources, which limit the depth of its findings. Empirical research, such as classroom observations or interviews with rural teachers and students, could offer a clearer understanding of the unique conditions in these schools. Additionally, this study does not fully account for regional differences among rural areas, which may vary significantly in terms of resources and infrastructure.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of adapted teaching methods and the role of emerging digital tools in improving rural English education. Comparative studies between urban and rural schools could further highlight disparities and inform tailored solutions. Furthermore, action-based research into community-based learning programs, such as English clubs and language exchanges, could shed light on their effectiveness in fostering motivation and practical language skills among rural students.

Improving English education in rural China requires a comprehensive approach that integrates technology, enhances teacher training, and builds supportive learning communities. These strategies can help bridge the urban-rural gap in education, offering students in disadvantaged areas better opportunities for academic success and future growth. Addressing these disparities is essential for promoting equity and social mobility in China's rapidly evolving society.

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