

Original Article

# A Survey of English Underachievers in Rural Junior Middle Schools

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**Abstract** - With the advent of the era of reform and opening up and economic globalization, English plays an increasingly important role in world communication and international cooperation. However, in the vast rural areas, there are a large number of "underachievers" in English teaching in junior middle schools. Without much attention, it perhaps slows down the process of realizing the strategic goals of quality education and the comprehensive development of students. In order to probe the internal and external causes of the rural English underachievers, this research adopts the questionnaire to survey the rural underachievers' learning motivations, learning methods, self-attributions, impacting factors on English learning in ZK Middle School in Zibo City, Shandong Province. This research perhaps provides educational implications and strategies for rural English underachievers in rural junior middle schools.

**Keywords** - Rural Junior Middle School, English Underachievers, Investigation and research.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

China is a developing country with a large population and a relatively high proportion of the rural population. According to relevant data, "there are currently 220 million primary and secondary school students in the country, and 160 million are in rural areas" (Xu, 2004). The proportion of primary and secondary schools in rural areas is as high as 73%, accounting for the vast majority of the country's primary and secondary school students. To a certain extent, the English proficiency of rural junior middle school students can truly reflect the overall English proficiency of our country's basic education stage.

However, due to the lack of teaching resources in rural areas and the limitations of regional culture and other factors, some English learning problems have arisen in rural middle schools. The phenomenon of "English underachievers" has appeared. "English underachievers" affects teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and directly affect students' English learning quality in junior middle school. It is one of the main obstacles for us to improve the quality of basic education on a large scale. In this context, how to transform these rural "English underachievers" has long been an urgent and important task in our country's current education.

### 1.2. Research Significance

First, transforming the rural English underachievers meets the requirements of new curriculum standards. The 2022 edition of English curriculum standards clearly states that English teachers should "adhere to face all students, fully respect every student, have reasonable expectations for students, so that they can obtain positive learning experience,

feel the fun of learning and the trust of teachers, and grow up healthily, confidently and sunshine." Obviously, the new curriculum reform attaches great importance to teaching for all students. Therefore, English teachers must face the English underachievers in vast rural junior high schools.

Moreover, transforming the rural English underachievers meets the requirements to change the current situation of English Teaching in rural junior middle schools. According to the requirements of English education for the development of basic education in China, the research and transformation of students with English underachievers should not be ignored to improve English education and the teaching level of rural junior high schools. Only by educating these students can it be possible to improve the actual level of English Teaching in rural junior middle schools and change the current situation of English Teaching in rural junior middle schools.

Finally, transforming the rural English underachievers meets students' all-around development needs. Teenagers are the hope of the country and the future of the nation. Whether teenagers can get comprehensive development is related to the country's and nation's rejuvenation and prosperity.

### 1.3. Research Purpose

After studying the requirements for students in the 2022 edition of the English Curriculum Standards, this study firstly clarifies the goals students should achieve in English learning. Then, a questionnaire survey will be conducted among the second-year students of ZK middle school in ZB City, Shandong Province, to find out the current situation of their English underachievers and the reasons for their English



difficulties. Based on that, this study puts forward corresponding educational countermeasures and takes targeted measures to improve the quality of teachers, strive to stimulate the interest of underachievers in learning English, and gradually improve the learning quality of English underachievers through the guidance of learning methods and the cultivation of learning habits, to make their learning motivation develop in a good way and lay a good foundation for their lifelong learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of the English Underachievers

The English Underachievers refer to those students with normal intellectual development levels, have knowledge gaps, have poor learning effects in the normal English education environment, and fail to meet the basic requirements of school education due to physiological, psychological, behavioral, environmental, and educational reasons. (Li, 2004).

Zou and Huang (2005) think that English underachievers are "students who have structural defects deviating from the normal in knowledge foundation, learning habits, learning methods, learning ability, psychological morality, etc., and whose intelligence cannot be normally developed, and whose ability objectives and knowledge objectives cannot meet the basic requirements of the English syllabus or curriculum standards, and need to be compensated and corrected through targeted education and teaching."

Based on the above viewpoints, this study agrees that "English underachievers" are caused by non-intellectual factors.

### 2.2. Researches on Underachievers Abroad

Foreign researchers have experienced three stages of evolution, from physiological medications to education and teaching and then to social and family multi-dimensional research.

In 1963, Samuel Kirk, an American educator, first regarded English underachievers as obstacles in language expression, reading, and communication skills at the perceptual disability foundation, which is called "learning disability".

The former Soviet educationists Zankov (1980) and Babanski (1984) have made great breakthroughs in theory and practice in their research on English underachievers. It is one of the principles of the teaching experiment summarized by Zankov (1980) to make all the students in the class (including the worst students) get general development. He emphasizes that the personality of English underachievers should be respected, and attention should be paid not only to their activity results but also to their inner world and feelings in learning. Babanski (1984) believes that in the process of

education for English underachievers, it is necessary to find out the causes of individual students' poor learning and poor behavior, determine the methods to eliminate those causes with common strength, and at the same time, optimize the teaching content according to the teaching syllabus, and distinguish the content key points to ensure that underachievers and excellent students are treated differently.

Bloom (1986) points out that "many students fail to achieve excellent results in their studies. The main problem is not the lack of wisdom of students, but the lack of appropriate teaching conditions and reasonable help". He believes that under appropriate conditions, those relatively backward students can achieve good results. Bloom's research points out the feasibility of the transformation of underachievers, which undoubtedly adds the brightest colors to the solution to the educational problems of underachievers. Moreover, bloom (1986) also points out in the theory of mastery learning: that as long as the three independent variables (cognitive readiness, emotional readiness, and teaching quality) are properly paid attention to, it is possible to make the majority of students' learning reach the mastery level. The theory has been effective in correcting students with learning disabilities.

In 1988, the United States established the Federal Commission on learning difficulties and defined learning difficulties. The underachievers, expressed as various heterologous disorders, manifest as obvious obstacles in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and mathematical skills.

In 1896, a British doctor discovered the phenomenon of word blindness by observing and studying a boy who had lost his reading ability and dealt with learning difficulties from a medical perspective.

To sum up, researchers in foreign countries have a guiding role in researching the causes and solutions of English underachievers. At the same time, this research provides us with many educational ideas for the education of English underachievers.

### 2.3. Researches on Underachievers at Home

Since the mid-1980s, there have been substantial explorations on the study of "the underachievers" in the foreign language teaching of basic education in China. Liu Jinghai (2001), former president of Shanghai Zhabei No. 8 middle school, carefully analyzed and studied the basic trends and common puzzles in the development of education at home and abroad according to various problems existing in the school at that time and put forward the concept of "successful education" based on the specific analysis and research on "underachievers" by educators at home and abroad.

Based on the theory and practice achievements of foreign underachievers' research, Zhong (1994) make a comprehensive investigation of the problems of English underachievers from the perspective of cause diagnosis, treatment, teaching theory, characteristic analysis, and preventive education, revealing the connotation of the concept of modern underachievers, and put forward corresponding teaching methods and strategies.

Zhang (1999) has constantly explored and innovated in teaching practice, put forward the "psychological superiority theory" and summarizes the 16-character foreign language teaching method of "appropriate concentration, repeated circulation, reading the original works and teaching students according to their aptitude", which plays a key role in improving the quality of English teaching and promoting students at different levels to learn English. Moreover, "teaching students according to their aptitude" somewhat reflects the concern for English underachievers.

Meng (2012) believes that there are three major reasons for the formation of English underachievers in rural junior middle school students: "teachers, students, and schools". In the transformation strategy of English underachievers in the rural junior middle school, it is proposed to "establish a harmonious teacher-student relationship and stimulate the learning interest of English underachievers"; "Create classroom performance opportunities for English underachievers"; "adopt the method of helping the English underachievers with the best", provide timely guidance and make common progress"; "Improve English teaching methods and adopt layered teaching"; "Let English underachievers enjoy more love and respect".

To sum up, modern scholars have systematically discussed the causes and transformation strategies of English underachievers, enriching the theory in this respect, having theoretical and practical value, and providing a theoretical basis for the writing of this paper.

**2.4. Limitations of Current Research**

Looking at the above research results, it can be found that the English underachievers have received active attention from researchers, but there are also some shortcomings in the current research as follows:

Firstly, regarding the research contents, most scholars generally study more on senior high school students, less on junior middle school students and rural junior middle school students. In this way, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding and grasp of the relevant information for English underachievers in rural junior middle schools.

Secondly, in terms of research methods, many studies on English underachievers in rural junior middle schools

only stay at the stage of experience summary and concept clarification. There are few empirical studies and less use of case studies, questionnaires, interviews, and other methods.

Thirdly, most of the research is general analysis and investigation, and few specific investigations are carried out for a certain school in a certain area.

**3. Research Design**

**3.1. Research Contents**

- Through a questionnaire survey, this paper aims to understand the current situation and causes of English underachievers of second-grade students in ZK middle school in ZB City, Shandong Province.
- Through the research, this paper explores an effective teaching strategy for transforming rural junior middle school students into English underachievers and changing students' learning methods, and giving play to their learning subjectivity, promoting the improvement of the comprehensive quality of English underachievers and laying a foundation for lifelong learning.

**3.2. Research Questions**

According to the purpose and focus of the research, combined with the 2022 edition of English curriculum standards, the basic problems of this research are determined as follows:

What is the current situation of English underachievers in the second-grade junior middle school in rural areas?

What effective measures should be taken to transform English underachievers?

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	14	47%
	Female	16	53%
English level	A (90-100)	0	0
	B (70-80)	2	7%
	C (60-70)	8	27%
	D (<60)	20	66%

**3.3. Research Participants**

Table 1. Analysis of the basic situation of the research object

According to table 1, a total of 30 subjects (14 boys and 16 girls) were selected from 150 students in the second year of ZK middle school in the first semester. Two students' English scores are between 70 and 80 (the full score is 150); eight students' scores lie between 60 and 70; Twenty students' is less than 60.

**3.4. Research Tool**

**Table 2. Dimension of the survey of English learning situation of English underachievers**

Dimensions (4)	Number of items (30)
Learning motivation	5
Learning methods	5
self-attribution	10
impacting factors	10

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the preface and the main body of the questionnaire. The content of the questionnaire includes basic information about English underachievers. Moreover, the main body of the questionnaire consists of the relevant theories of pedagogy and psychology and the relevant questionnaires in the "research on learning attitude and learning strategies of junior middle school students with English underachievers" by sun Jinlian (Sun, 2012), combining the aspects of students' learning motivation, learning methods, students' self-attribution, impacting factors. Finally, the average value of the data is counted and analyzed by using Excel software and spss25 software. The specific information is shown in Table 2.

**3.5. Research Procedure**

**Table 3. Reliability and validity analysis of the questionnaire**

Reliability Statistics		KMO and Bartlett's	
Cronbach's Alpha	Items	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.812
0.667	10		

For the scale questions, we first analyze the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, in which the Cronbach reliability coefficient is 0.667, the kmo sampling appropriateness scale is 0.812, and the reliability and validity are greater than 0.8 (as shown in Table 3). It can be seen that the questionnaire has high reliability and can be used for further investigation and research. Based on the above analysis, the survey adopted the form of offline distribution of paper questionnaires. A total of 30 English underachievers participated in the online questionnaire survey, of which 30 are valid, with an effective rate of 100%. The data in the valid questionnaire are complete without missing values. The survey data are analyzed by SPSS25 software. Finally, through data analysis, this paper expounds on the current situation of English underachievers in the second grade of ZK middle school in ZB City, Shandong Province. Then it

puts forward transformation education strategies for the current situation and its influencing factors.

**4. Results and Discussions**

**4.1. Results and Discussions of the Learning Motivation**

**Table 4. Analysis of the current situation of learning motivation**

Variable	Option	Percentage
Are you an only child?	Yes	63%
	No	37%
Which of the following is your family?	Normal	44%
	Single-parent family	27%
	Parents split up	17%
	Newly blended family	12%
What do your parents expect of you?	Unable to achieve	52%
	Normal	26%
	NO expectation	22%
What is your parents' attitude when you do poorly in an exam?	Severe criticism	44%
	Ignore and make no comments	40%
	Talk and communicate	16%
Do your parents help you with your homework?	Often	13%
	Sometimes	24%
	Never	63%
Variable	Option	Percentage
Are you an only child?	Yes	63%

As seen from table 4, the main motivation for English underachievers to learn English comes from the need to cope with examinations and the pressure of parents and teachers for further education. Most of the students master the knowledge of phonetic symbols, words and grammar. 35% of the students could not use phonetic symbols to read and memorize words. In the classroom participation situation, 30% of students feel that they are in a forgotten group, and their participation in the classroom is very low. As for a reason for not wanting to speak in class, 50% of the students said they were not interested in the topic, resulting in extremely low-class efficiency.

**4.2. Results and Discussions of the Learning Methods**

**Table 5. Analysis of the current situation of learning methods**

Variable	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
1. Do you have learning goals and plans?	11%	23%	41%	25%
2. Will you preview the text and find out the difficult problems before the new class?	10%	24%	25%	41%
3. Do you take notes in class?	5%	27%	45%	23%
4. Will you finish your English homework regularly after class?	24%	40%	28%	8%
5. Can you summarize the English mistakes in-class exercises and test papers and review them in time after class?	4%	11%	32%	53%

From the data in Table 5, it can be seen that in the survey of English learning methods for English underachievers, only 11% have learning goals and plans, and more than 60% of the students cannot do English learning in a planned way. The situation is not very optimistic for preparing English texts, and more than 85% of students hardly or never preview. For taking notes in class, most students hardly or never take notes. Students did a good job of completing their homework, with only 8% failing to complete their homework. At the same time, students' after-class review sessions are not targeted. Only nearly 4% of students can summarize their mistakes, and more than 50% of students will not review.

**4.3. Results and Discussions of the Self Attribution**

In order to understand the self-attribution of English underachievers, a 10-question questionnaire is designed according to Weiner's attribution theory. From the data in Table 4, it can be seen that in the survey of self-attribution of English learning of English underachievers, they scored higher on learning interest, self-confidence, their own efforts and learning methods, which is 0.64 points, 0.61 points, 1.39

points and 1.34 points respectively, indicating they believe that the above four aspects are the main factors affecting their current performance. At the same time, some students believe that poor grades are related to the teacher's teaching effect (low teaching level), their ability, learning environment and the difficulty of teaching materials, which is -0.16 points, -0.38 points, -0.30 points and -0.76 points respectively. The vast majority of students believe that their grades have nothing to do with their luck, which is -1.11 points.

**Table 6. Analysis of self-attribution of students with English underachievers**

Variable	Average
Related to whether you are interested in English learning	0.64
Related to confidence in English learning	0.61
Related to the degree of effort in learning	1.39
Related to English learning methods	1.24
Related to one's learning ability	-0.38
Related to teacher evaluation	-1.04
Related to the difficulty of teaching materials	-0.76
Related to the English learning environment	-0.30
Related to the luck	-1.11
Related to teacher teaching	-0.16

**4.4. Results and Discussions of the impacting factors**

**Table 7. Analysis of teachers' influence on English underachievers**

Variable	Option	Percentage
1. Do you like your English teacher?	Like	45%
	Middle	30%
	Dislike	20%
2. In class, will the teacher ask you questions according to your knowledge points?	Often	32%
	Sometimes	25%
	Never	43%
3. What do you think of the teacher's class management?	Strict	75%
	Normal	16%
	Poor	9%
4. Can you feel the teacher's questions, praise, or encouraging comments?	Often	40%
	Sometimes	34%
	Never	26%
5. How does the teacher tutor individual students?	Often	54%
	Sometimes	21%
	Never	25%

It can be seen from the data in Table 7 that in the survey of teachers' influence on English learning of English underachievers, it is found that 45% of the students like their English teacher, and 20% of the students do not like their English teacher. In the eyes of some students, the teacher will consciously ask themselves questions, but 43% of the teachers do not ask questions. In the eyes of most students, the teacher's class management ability is strict and well-organized, and 40% of the students feel the teacher's praise. 26% of the students do not feel the teacher's praise and encouragement. Only about 54% of the students often tutored the students, and nearly a quarter of them never tutored. The teachers completely abandon these students.

**Table 8. Analysis of parents' influence on English underachievers**

Variable	Option	Percentage
Are you an only child?	Yes	63%
	No	37%
Which of the following is your family?	Normal	44%
	Single-parent family	27%
	Parents split up	17%
	Newly blended family	12%
What do your parents expect of you?	Unable to achieve	52%
	Normal	26%
	NO expectation	22%
What is your parents' attitude when you do poorly in the exam?	Severe criticism	44%
	Ignore and make no comments	40%
	Talk and communicate	16%
Do your parents help you with your homework?	Often	13%
	Sometimes	24%
	Never	63%

It can be seen from the data in Table 8 that in the investigation of parents' influence on English learning of English underachievers, it is found that most of the students are from one-child families, accounting for 63%. Unexpected changes have led to more than 55% of single-parent families and reorganized families. This just proves that there is always a problematic family behind a problem student. A child who lost a warm family in junior middle school will undoubtedly suffer. Psychological development is affected. This is also one of the reasons for students with learning disabilities. Half of the parent's expectations for their children are general and

have little expectations. When the test results are unsatisfactory, parents criticize and warn them to work harder next time. Only 16% of the parents could talk, communicate, and influence their children. Parents rarely help their children with homework at home, but 63% never do. In conclusion, parents' education affects students' learning to a large extent.

### 5. Conclusion

Through the survey, this paper draws the following tentative conclusions:

- The internal causes of the formation of English underachievers include students' lacking of motivation for learning, poor learning methods and improper self-attribution.
- The external causes of the formation of English underachievers include the disharmonious relationship between teachers and students and intermittent family education.

Therefore, this paper makes the following suggestions for teachers, parents and students.

- A harmonious teacher-student relationship should be established. Teachers should change their concepts, think differently, understand the difficulties of students with learning difficulties, and not blindly criticize and accuse them. Teachers should understand their deficiencies and give them more guidance so that they can grow up gradually. Teachers should respect every student, not satirize their words, and should pay attention to the combination of equality and democracy when managing the class. When dealing with English achievers in class, teachers should pay more attention to them and talk to them more.
- Parents should master correct educational thought and educational methods. Family education is indispensable education for the healthy growth of children. Middle school students are still in the juvenile stage physiologically and often lack self-control in learning, which requires parents to cooperate with schools and teachers to supervise students. At the same time, Parents should care about and respect the growth of their children, communicate with them in a timely manner, and create a democratic family atmosphere.
- The learning interest of students should be stimulated and developed. As a teacher, you should be good at introducing some ancient and modern Chinese and foreign English history or interesting English knowledge in combination with the textbook's content to stimulate students' enterprising spirit and thirst for knowledge. In the classroom, we must give full play to the dominant position of students and give students more opportunities to show. Ask as many students as possible for those relatively simple questions and help them answer them together. When they answer, do not correct

or interrupt immediately if they are wrong, and make a prompt motivational evaluation when they answer correctly.

This research is mainly to investigate the current situation of ZK middle school English students with learning difficulties. However, due to the limitation of academic level and resource information, the research participants are only 30 people, and the sample size is not very large. Whether the designed questionnaire is scientific and whether it can

effectively reflect the real situation of English underachievers needs further research.

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