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Differences in English Learning Motivation Between Urban and Rural Students

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Abstract: With the continuous acceleration of urbanization, the differences between urban and rural areas in various aspects are gradually increasing. In terms of education, represented by English education, there are also significant differences in students' academic performance. Students' academic performance is related to their learning motivation, so this paper focuses on the differences in English learning motivation between urban and rural students. This paper will discuss the reasons for the differences in learning motivation among middle school students in non-English speaking countries and the corresponding solutions. When analyzing the reasons for the differences in motivation, the researchers divide the factors into personal factors and environmental factors, and find that individual factors are to some extent caused by environmental factors. If solutions are sought from these reasons for the differences in motivation, it will, to some extent, promote educational equity and social mobility. Future research should focus on this area, providing more evidence and direction for our educational methods and policies.

Keywords: English education, Rural-urban differences, Motivation

1. Introduction

Educational equity between urban and rural areas is vital to global economic development and social justice. Educational equity is a key factor in reducing the wealth gap and promoting social mobility, which helps to build a more inclusive and stable society. International research shows that enhancing educational equity can significantly improve a country's overall human capital level, promoting economic growth and social development. From a global perspective, educational equity between urban and rural areas is a meaningful way to alleviate social inequality. Providing equal educational opportunities, especially for children in rural and marginalized communities, can effectively break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and promote social equity. International experience shows that educational equity policies can significantly reduce income inequality and social stratification.

Among the numerous educational subjects, English is one of the indispensable ones. Compared with the knowledge itself, English is more of a way to acquire knowledge. In the era of information and technology, English is the primary language for scientific research, technological innovation, and academic collaboration. The majority of scientific literature, technical patents, and online resources are presented in English. English education is vital to students and researchers as it enables them to access the latest knowledge, participate in international research projects, and contribute to global technological development. English education not only imparts language skills but also promotes

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cultural understanding and the cultivation of global citizenship. By learning English, students are exposed to diverse cultures, perspectives, and ways of thinking, enhancing their cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication skills. English education facilitates cultural exchange, mutual respect, and inclusiveness, values that are crucial for building a harmonious and interconnected global society.

Among the educational disparities between urban and rural areas, the differences in English teaching are a particularly prominent manifestation. Urban schools, equipped with abundant educational resources, a high-caliber teaching staff, and advanced teaching facilities, offer students diverse learning platforms and frequent opportunities for English practice. In rural areas, due to the scarcity of resources, weak teaching staff, and outdated teaching facilities, there exists a significant gap in English learning among students, such as reading and writing skills, participation, test scores, etc. This disparity is not only reflected in the mastery of language skills but also stems from differences in the learning environment and motivation. Research consistently demonstrates a strong positive correlation between learning motivation and academic performance. Students who are highly motivated to learn and succeed tend to put in more effort, stay engaged with the material, and exhibit higher levels of persistence, all of which contribute to better academic outcomes. Students from economically disadvantaged rural areas exhibit significantly lower examination scores than those from urban communities with higher socioeconomic status. This manifests the differences in English learning motivation between urban and rural students.

Based on multiple language acquisition theories, the current research systematically analyzes the influencing factors behind the differences in English learning motivation between urban and rural areas. Furthermore, several scholarly publications have provided empirical data documenting these motivational differences in various urban-rural contexts. However, these materials exhibit a degree of fragmentation in conclusions, with certain underlying causal factors demonstrating overlapping characteristics. This study aims to synthesize these factors and identify potential correlations among them.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of motivation

In the Oxford English Dictionary, "motivation" refers to conscious or unconscious stimuli that drive people to take action to achieve expected goals. In a broader contemporary context, it denotes the underlying reasons that prompt an individual to act in a specific manner.

Motivation represents an individual's voluntary manifestation of diverse attitudes in pursuit of specific objectives and influence on behavior, characterized by physiological states, interests, attitudes, and desires.

2.2. Motivation in second language acquisition

Motivation has been empirically validated as one of the primary individual difference variables that significantly impacts language learning success, fostering learners' determination to persist in their learning endeavors. This is more like a reason for learning English. Everything has a certain cause-and-effect relationship. The difference in causes will inevitably affect the difference in results. The difference in the motivation for learning English will inevitably affect learning English.

2.3. The process of language acquisition

Learning a language is not carried out in a vacuum but a social process. Identity formation is deeply influenced by the sociocultural context in which individuals grow up. Urban and rural environments

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provide distinct social, cultural, and economic landscapes that shape students' self-perceptions, aspirations, and motivation to learn English.

Some teaching strategies influence the motivation for learning English. Scaffolding and task dependency teaching breaks down complex tasks, provides necessary support and guidance, reduces learning difficulty, and lessens students' frustration during the learning process, thereby maintaining and enhancing their enthusiasm for learning. Scaffolding refers to the principle that learners should not be exposed to unfamiliar linguistic elements or materials without appropriate support. Task dependency, on the other hand, emphasizes that subsequent tasks should be systematically built upon the foundation of previously completed tasks.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) shares conceptual parallels with scaffolding and task dependency. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the gap between a child's or learner's actual and potential development levels. The actual development level indicates the ability level demonstrated by the learner when solving problems or completing tasks independently. The potential development level refers to the problem-solving ability level the learner can achieve with the guidance or support of more capable others, such as teachers, parents, or peers. The gap between these two levels is the ZPD, representing the potential space for improvement that the learner can achieve through guidance and interaction. This includes expert guidance, community culture, and social modeling. These three elements collectively emphasize establishing tasks and familiarity with the existing knowledge structure [1].

3. Reasons

A Global Introduction holds that the emergence of social phenomena results from the combined effect of multiple factors, including personal factors such as psychological and physiological characteristics, and environmental factors such as social structure, cultural background, and economic conditions [2]. This theoretical framework provides a perspective for analyzing the differences in students' motivation for learning English. The reasons for the differences in English learning motivations between urban and rural areas are divided into two significant parts mentioned above.

3.1. Personal factors

Personal reasons can be analyzed from the following theoretical perspectives: Ideal L2 self in L2 Motivational Self System, Cognition and Aspiration, Achievement Goal Orientation.

3.1.1. Ideal self in L2 motivational self system

Regarding personal factors, the L2 ideal self plays an indispensable role. The L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) is a theoretical framework for elucidating and guiding motivational processes in second language (L2) acquisition. It comprises three distinct hierarchical levels: Ideal L2 self, Ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience.

Among these, the ideal L2 self is intrinsically linked to individual factors, and thus will be the primary focus of this discussion. It represents learners' aspirations for a future idealized self-image, particularly in terms of self-identification upon mastering the target language; it constitutes a crucial component of intrinsic motivation, driving learners to exert diligent efforts toward realizing their ideal self [3].

A notable discrepancy often exists between the ideal self who speaks English fluently and the learner's current self, a key motivational force driving language learning behavior. To narrow this gap, students strive to improve themselves. Therefore, focusing on the disparities in L2 ideal selves between urban and rural students can uncover one of the underlying factors contributing to the

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differences in their English learning motivation. The following sentences illustrate the disparities in L2 ideal selves between urban and rural students.

Urban students tend to have higher aspirations, with their ideal L2 self often linked to international careers, academic achievements, and global cultural exchanges. Intrinsic interests and career development need more to drive their motivations. However, rural students may exhibit lower aspirations, with their ideal L2 self more focused on improving living conditions or gaining better employment opportunities through language learning. Motivations are more influenced by external factors such as family economic status and societal expectations.

Furthermore, urban students have more opportunities to engage with foreign cultures and participate in international exchanges, facilitated by their geographical location and resource advantages. This helps them form a more evident, positive L2 self. Rural students have limited cultural exposure, fewer opportunities for international exchanges, and less understanding and experience of the target language culture, which may affect the formation and development of their ideal L2 self. Forming an ideal self in a second language (L2) requires seeing what accurate role models are like, rather than imagining them out of thin air. Accessing resources, such as English libraries and English speech contests, is more convenient in cities. These all help to see role models in English learning and develop an L2 ideal self. Unfortunately, such resources are still lacking in rural areas. Students may be unable to imagine what it is like to speak English fluently. Even if they have such an imagination, it is limited only to external achievements. This also explains why urban students are more motivated to learn English than rural students [4].

3.1.2. Cognition and aspiration

Learning motivation includes the perception of one's ability and the desire for success. Perception of ability refers to the extent to which students feel they can learn the content of a subject and complete the given tasks. Desire for success refers to the tendency of students to believe that they will perform well in class or on tasks. Both are influenced by past and present successes and failures in school in specific learning areas.

The recognition of one's abilities includes self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is students' belief in their ability to complete specific learning tasksto complete specific learning tasks successfully. Students with high self-efficacy are likelier to choose challenging tasks, invest more effort, and persevere in facing difficulties [5]. This is also related to the environmental factors mentioned below. The education students receive and the environment's influence on their responses affect their self-efficacy. Families of urban students usually can offer more educational support. Their parents have a higher educational level and are more likely to participate in their children's English learning, providing necessary guidance and encouragement, which helps to enhance children's self-efficacy. Also, due to their relatively abundant learning resources, urban students usually hold a more positive attitude towards English learning, have stronger self-confidence, and are more willing to face challenges. This is conducive to maintaining and enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. In contrast, families of rural students may be unable to provide effective English learning support due to the limited educational level of their parents. They may even have a negative attitude towards their children's learning, affecting their self-efficacy. Furthermore, the families of rural students may be unable to offer effective support for English learning due to the limited educational attainment of their parents. In some cases, they may even hold a negative attitude towards their children's studies, which can affect the children's sense of self-efficacy.

When individuals believe they can achieve their goals, their desire for success strengthens. For instance, Bandura's research indicates that people with high self-efficacy are likelier to set challenging goals and put in more effort to achieve them. When individuals underestimate their abilities, they may consider success unattainable and thus reduce their desire for it. Schunk found that students with low

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self-efficacy often lack motivation to learn and have no strong desire to achieve good grades. Therefore, it can be concluded that one's perception of their abilities is closely related to their desire for success. Rural students have a relatively lower sense of self-efficacy compared to urban students, and they also have a lower desire for success. Moreover, rural students are more likely than urban students to scale back their academic and career aspirations. Therefore, urban students have a high sense of self-efficacy and a strong desire for success in terms of English learning.

As a result, they invest more in their English studies and eventually acquire good English proficiency. Rural students, on the contrary, are the opposite. Thus, their English proficiency is not as strong as that of urban students.

3.1.3. Motivation and goal orientation

Motivation and goal orientation are closely related. Ames classified goal orientation into two types: mastery goal orientation and performance goal orientation. Mastery goal orientation is why learners engage in activities based on their personal and intrinsic desires to understand, comprehend, and master information and skills. The performance goal orientation refers to an individual's focus on demonstrating their abilities and achievements to gain recognition and evaluation from others. This can also be divided into performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals. Performance-approach goals tend to involve comparisons and standing out in competition. Performance-avoidant goals tend to set lower goals or choose simple tasks to ensure not to fail [6].

Urban schools usually have advanced teaching facilities, abundant learning materials, and high-quality teaching staff, which provide students with more learning opportunities and resources and are conducive to cultivating their goal-oriented mastery [7]. In addition, urban families generally invest more in education. Parents are more likely to provide additional English learning resources, such as hiring tutors or enrolling their children in after-school tutoring classes. Such support helps students develop a learning attitude aimed at acquiring knowledge [8].

However, rural schools often encounter problems such as backward teaching facilities and insufficient teaching staff, which limit students' learning opportunities and resources and are not conducive to cultivating their mastery goal orientation. Moreover, the economic conditions of rural families and their emphasis on education may be relatively low, making it difficult for parents to provide additional English learning resources. This affects students' learning attitudes and sets their learning goals.

Urban students aim for performance close to the target while learning English. They are usually in a highly competitive learning environment, where they are more inclined to pursue high grades to gain recognition and an edge. This environment prompts them to develop a performance-approach goal orientation, that is, to demonstrate their abilities by achieving good grades [9].

Rural students are more inclined to adopt an avoidance performance goal. Rural schools often encounter the problem of scarce educational resources, including insufficient teaching staff and limited learning materials. This may lead students to lack confidence and be more inclined to avoid failure, thus developing a performance-avoidant goal orientation [10]. Due to the lack of rich learning experiences and external incentives, the intrinsic learning motivation of rural students may be relatively weak, and they are more concerned with avoiding failure than pursuing outstanding grades.

3.2. Environmental factors

The research findings indicate a significant correlation between personal factors and environmental elements while analyzing personal attributes. The genesis of students' intrinsic motivation predominantly stems from the influence of external environmental factors. Therefore, analyzing the

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differences in the English learning environment between urban and rural students is necessary to understand the differences in their motivation for learning English. The English learning environment is divided into the classroom and the outside of the classroom (that is, the social environment). This article will analyze the classroom environment and social environment.

3.2.1. Classroom environment

In an English class, the teacher and students are the main subjects of the surrounding environment. Both of these affect English learners.

Teachers can enhance students' self-confidence and interest in learning through positive feedback and encouragement, stimulating their intrinsic motivation. Deci & Ryan pointed out that autonomous support and positive feedback are conducive to meeting students' need for autonomy and enhancing their intrinsic motivation. Moreover, an intimate and trusting teacher-student relationship makes students more willing to participate in learning activities and enhances their learning motivation [11]. Wentzel found that the quality of the teacher-student relationship directly affects students' learning motivation and level of engagement. Teachers help students set specific and measurable learning goals, giving them a clear direction for their studies and enhancing their motivation [12]. The goal-setting theory by Locke & Latham emphasizes that clear goals can improve performance and motivation. Moreover, they provide timely and specific feedback to help students understand their learning progress, adjust their learning strategies, and maintain motivation [13]. The research by Hattie & Timperley indicates that effective feedback can significantly enhance students' learning motivation and academic performance [14].

The differences between urban and rural teachers can also affect students' English learning discrepancies. Urban teachers usually receive more professional training and adopt more diverse and innovative teaching methods, such as interactive and task-based teaching, which can better stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning. Dornyei's research indicates that effective teaching methods and strategies can significantly enhance students' learning motivation. Moreover, they are better at using abundant teaching resources, such as multimedia and online resources, while rural teachers may be restricted by insufficient resources, which affects the quality of teaching and students' learning motivation. The richness of teaching resources directly influences students' learning experience and motivation. In terms of classroom atmosphere, urban teachers may pay more attention to classroom interaction and student participation, creating a positive classroom atmosphere. In contrast, rural teachers may be limited by the number of students and teaching conditions, which affect classroom interaction and learning motivation. Guilloteaux and Dornyei 's research indicates that a positive classroom atmosphere can significantly enhance students' learning motivation. However, this depends on the specific circumstances of each country [15]. In a country like China, where exam-oriented education prevails, the classroom atmosphere in middle school is dominated by imparting knowledge and preparing for exams, which means it is unlikely to be as lively as in other countries. Therefore, Chinese teachers need to find other ways to motivate students.

Apart from the influence of teachers, peer feedback also plays a significant role in motivating students in English learning. Peer feedback encourages students to actively participate in the learning process, think independently, and make improvements, thereby enhancing their autonomous learning ability. Through peer feedback, students are more willing to express their views and exchange ideas in class, increasing their participation and interaction.

Gielen et al. pointed out that peer feedback promotes student interaction and cooperation. Peer feedback prompts students to actively participate in the learning process, think independently, and make improvements, thereby enhancing their autonomous learning ability. Pan's research indicates peer feedback can significantly improve students' autonomous learning ability.

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Through peer feedback, students are more willing to express their viewpoints and exchange ideas in class, enhancing their participation and interaction. In cities, urban students usually have a better foundation in English and more learning resources. Peer feedback may be more accurate and detailed, which is conducive to improving learning outcomes and motivation. Min pointed out high-quality peer feedback can significantly enhance students' writing skills and learning motivation [16]. The English proficiency of rural students may be relatively weak, and the accuracy and depth of peer feedback may be limited, which affects the feedback effect and learning motivation. Regarding the closeness of peer relationships and the quality of interaction, the peer relationships among urban students may be more diverse and open, with higher interaction quality. Peer feedback is more likely to be accepted and adopted, enhancing learning motivation. Guilloteaux and Dornyei found that positive peer interaction can boost students' learning motivation. For rural students, peer relationships may be closer and more traditional, with more conservative interaction styles. The acceptance and influence of peer feedback may be limited, affecting learning motivation. Topping pointed out that peer relationships and interaction quality influence the effectiveness of peer feedback [17].

3.2.2. Social environmental factors

The cultural background and values in the social environment profoundly influence students' motivation for learning English. Different cultures have varying views on the importance of learning English, the occasions for using it, and its purposes, all of which can affect students' learning motivation. The support and expectations provided by schools, communities, and other social environments significantly impact students' motivation to learn English. In cities, schools, and the social environment have higher expectations for students' English proficiency, as they recognize the importance of English. However, in rural areas, schools and communities do not have such high expectations for students to speak English and do not attach as much importance to it as in cities. When students feel encouraged and supported by their families and communities, they are more likely to maintain a positive learning attitude and high motivation to learn.

Parents' expectations and support for their children's education are important factors in stimulating students' learning motivation. High expectations and positive support can enhance students' learning drive and self-confidence. Family support, including emotional support and the provision of learning resources, positively impacts language learning motivation.

Urban parents generally have a higher level of education and place greater emphasis on English education. They can provide practical learning guidance and resource support for their children. Moreover, urban parents have higher expectations for their children's English learning and encourage them to pursue a higher level of language proficiency.

However, rural parents typically have a lower level of education and may lack the ability to emphasize and guide their children's English learning. Some rural parents have lower expectations for their children's English learning and believe mastering the local language and culture is more important.

Researchers have also found that when the focus is placed on a more macroscopic environment, it can be discovered that the community environment is related to the motivation for learning English.

In terms of the frequency of English usage, in communities where English is frequently used, learners have more opportunities to come into contact with and use English, which can enhance their language practice ability and learning motivation. In communities where English is used less frequently, learners lack a language practice environment, which may weaken their learning motivation. Deci and Ryan's research indicates that when individuals feel autonomous and competent, their intrinsic motivation is enhanced. Frequent language use can help students experience the joy of success, thereby boosting their intrinsic motivation [18]. Dörnyei, Z. pointed out that the community language environment significantly impacts learners' language learning motivation [19]. High-

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frequency language contact and the role model effect can enhance learning motivation. Urban communities usually have more scenarios where English is used, such as international schools, foreign-funded enterprises, and English corners. Students have more opportunities to come into contact with and use English, which can stimulate their interest and motivation in learning [20]. The usage scenarios of English in rural communities are relatively few, and students lack practical opportunities, which may weaken their learning motivation.

The community's acceptance of English culture affects learners' motivation. Learners are more willing to learn English if the community identifies with English culture. In communities with a strong sense of globalization, learners recognize the importance of English as an international communication tool, which will stimulate their learning motivation. Gardner, R. C. research shows that community cultural values significantly impact learners' language learning motivation, especially their perception of the importance of language and global awareness [21]. Noels, K. A., points out that community cultural identity and global awareness can influence learners' language learning motivation, particularly in multicultural environments [22]. In other words, the community's international orientation significantly influences the students' international orientation. There is an uneven structural distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, meaning that there are significant differences in educational, economic, social, and other aspects between urban and rural areas. Economic resources and social resources influence the distribution of educational resources. Urban areas have a more developed economy and a higher social openness, allowing English learners to access richer and more authentic English learning resources. In contrast, rural areas are relatively less economically developed and more socially closed, and the educational resources available to English learners are relatively backward compared to those in urban areas. Urban communities usually have more international exchange activities, such as international conferences and cultural exchange programs. Students in such communities are more likely to come into contact with international affairs, which can stimulate their interest and motivation in learning English [23]. International exchange opportunities in rural communities are relatively scarce, and students lack practical experiences and exposure to international affairs, which may dampen their motivation to learn English. In addition, urban communities are more diverse and international, making it easier for students to come into contact with people from different cultural backgrounds. This helps cultivate their global awareness and cross-cultural communication skills, enhancing their motivation to learn English. The cultural environment in rural communities is relatively monotonous, and students have fewer opportunities to come into contact with different cultures. This may limit their global perspective and motivation for learning English.

3.3. Solutions

Reducing the disparity in English learning motivation between urban and rural students significantly promotes educational equity and enhances social mobility. It also enhances the overall quality of education, promoting the all-around development of students and the long-term development of society. High learning motivation is usually accompanied by higher learning efficiency and better learning outcomes. Reducing the gap in learning motivation between urban and rural students can enhance students' overall English proficiency and improve the quality of education. In light of the differences in English learning motivations between urban and rural students mentioned above, this article will propose feasible solutions. As environmental factors partly influence students' factors, the section proposes adjustments.

How to adjust the learning environment for English among urban and rural students.

Firstly, a rich language environment can be created to provide diverse learning resources. For instance, using multimedia and the Internet, abundant English learning resources such as English songs, movies, and news can be offered to rural students to stimulate their interest in learning. These

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English resources are relatively daily and life-oriented, which will overlap with some of the students' interests. This helps stimulate their interest in learning English and can eventually be transformed into intrinsic motivation. In addition, English corners, drama performances, cultural exchanges, and other activities should also be organized regularly to enable students to use English in real situations, enhancing the practicality and interest of learning. Furthermore, it is also necessary to provide personalized learning guidance and assistance based on the individual differences of rural students, helping them overcome learning difficulties and improve learning outcomes.

At the social level, it is necessary to increase financial support for rural schools, improve teaching facilities, and provide modern teaching equipment such as multimedia classrooms, computers, and internet access. Moreover, it is necessary to provide rural students with English learning materials, online courses, and educational software on par with those available to urban students, ensuring they can access high-quality educational content. Teachers' pedagogical knowledge cannot be ignored either. Therefore, it is necessary to provide regular professional training for rural English teachers to enhance their teaching proficiency and methods, especially by introducing advanced educational concepts and technologies. People can transform the entire community into an extensive learning environment by regularly organizing large-scale English proficiency competitions, such as reading contests and public speaking events. This initiative aims to enhance societal acceptance and emphasis on the English language, ultimately influencing students' intrinsic motivation for English language acquisition.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the variations in English learning motivation between middle school students residing in urban and rural locales within non-English speaking nations. Its objective is to pinpoint and recommend solutions to fortify rural English foundational education and cultivate equitable progress in educational systems across urban and rural landscapes. Through scrutinizing these differences, the research sheds light on rural students' distinct hurdles in their quest for English language competence.

Nevertheless, it is vital to recognize that the present inquiry possesses certain constraints. There exist facets that remain uncharted, specifically concerning the root causes of the disparities in English learning motivation between urban and rural scholars. A more profound comprehension of these elements is imperative for formulating more focused and efficacious tactics. Moreover, pursuing additional viable solutions endures, as it is crucial to ascertain practical means to tackle the prevailing inequalities.

It is sincerely hoped that forthcoming studies will draw upon these revelations, channel greater resources, and focus on this pivotal domain of investigation. By doing so, we can strive to establish a more inclusive and just educational milieu for every student, irrespective of their geographic location. Through more profound research and understanding, we can unearth practical and feasible methods to address these differences, further advancing rural English basic education and achieving fair development in urban and rural education. Future investigations should emphasize this aspect, furnishing more robust support and guidance for our educational policies and practices.

Let researchers unite to forge a more embracing and equitable educational environment for all students, enabling them to access quality English education regardless of location. This will unlock broader horizons for their future development and empower them to reach their full potential.

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