Improving Rural Primary English Education in Minxi, China: A Mixed-Methods Study under the Rural Revitalization Initiative

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Abstract: This study examines the developmental gaps and contextual factors influencing English education in rural and urban primary schools in Minxi, Western Fujian, China. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative analysis of student achievement data with qualitative insights from teacher and parent interviews, as well as classroom observations. The findings reveal significant differences in teacher qualifications, access to instructional resources, student self-efficacy, and community support, all contributing to the widening achievement gap. Based on the theories of unbalanced regional development and institutional capacity-building, the study introduces a University–Government–School (U–G–S) collaborative model as a strategic response. This model proposes aligning higher education expertise, policy support, and localized implementation to strengthen rural English education. The paper concludes by providing recommendations and emphasizes the need for sustainable, context-sensitive reform to enhance learning opportunities and instructional capacity in rural regions with limited resources.

1. Introduction

In response to China's Rural Revitalization Strategy [1] and the Outline of Education Modernization 2035[2], education is recognized as increasingly important to rural development and talent cultivation. Within this framework, English education plays a vital role—not only as an academic subject but also as a tool for enhancing global competence and narrowing rural-urban opportunity gaps.

Minxi, situated in the mountainous region of Western Fujian, exemplifies the challenges facing rural education. Despite improvements in infrastructure and access, rural English education remains constrained because of inadequate qualified teachers, outdated resources, limited parental support, and low student confidence in communicative skills.

Given English's role in academic advancement and socio-economic mobility, enhancing rural English education is both an educational and developmental imperative. This study investigates the English education ecosystem in Minxi's rural primary schools, examining differences with urban

primary schools and exploring methos for long-term improvement.

Special attention is given to the University–Government–School (U–G–S) model, which aims to align higher education expertise, government policy makers, and schools toimprove teacher training, instructional resources, and community engagement. By situating Minxi's case in a broader context, the study aims to contribute to sustainable education reform in rural regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English Education and Rural imbalance

The implementation of English education in China has undergone rapid expansion since the early 2000s. The Ministry of Education's 2001 policy mandating English instruction in primary schools marked a significant milestone in national curriculum reform (MOE, 2001) [3]. However, this top-down policy diffusion also exposed underlying structural imbalances, particularly in rural and remote areas. Studies by Zhang (2015) [4] and Yu & Song (2019) [5] show that rural schools often lag behind their urban counterparts in terms of teaching quality, teacher qualifications, and availability of instructional materials.

Research has also shown that policy intentions alone are not enough without localized implementation. Fu (2019) [6] points out that although the English curriculum aims to cultivate students' comprehensive communicative competence, many rural teachers still face challenges, including limited access to relevant training, peer learning opportunities, and updated teaching methods. These persistent gaps not only prevent the achievement of curriculum goals but also widen learning gap between the rural and urban areas, especially in speaking and listening proficiency.

Moreover, these differences in learning conditions often lead to reduced language exposure, lowered self-efficacy, and limited motivation among rural students, which may affect their academic growth and long-term development. Therefore, bridging these gaps requires not only investments in resources but also collaboration among institutions. This study aims to tackle this challenge by evaluating the feasibility of the University-Government-School (U-G-S) collaborative model, fostering balanced development of English education in rural China.

2.2 Global Insights into Rural English Education

Globally, rural education faces challenges similar to those in Minxi, though with varied policy contexts. Rafique et al. (2018) [7], in their study of rural schools in Pakistan, discuss the negative effects of untrained English teachers and inconsistent policy implementation on learning outcomes. Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Chisholm (2017) [8] argues that using English as a medium of instruction is often implemented without sufficient teacher preparation, which results in student disengagement and high failure rates. In rural Latin America, Contreras and González (2020) [9] point out how economic limitations and low parental literacy restrict children's access to quality English learning.

Even in developed countries, disparities in education between rural and urban areas continue to exist. In Australia, Roberts and Green (2013) [10] find that rural students consistently lag behind urban peers in literacy and language skills, partly due to limited access to specialized English teachers and professional development resources. They argue that national education policies often overlook the "geographic disadvantage" faced by small schools in expansive regions.

In the United States, Showalter et al. (2019) [11] reveal that rural districts face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified language teachers, particularly for English Language Arts (ELA) and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. These challenges are worsen by limited budget, digital infrastructure gaps, and teacher isolation, all of which reduce the effectiveness of English programs in rural areas.

In Japan, Agnello et al. (2019) [12] describe a successful intervention that combines English and

programming education in rural areas, using partnerships with universities to provide targeted instruction. Their findings indicate that when rural families understand the importance of English for modern skills such as coding and digital literacy, both student motivation and performance improve considerably.

These global examples offer valuable insights for understanding the situation in Minxi. They emphasize that English education in rural areas is commonly associated with rural environments, regardless of the country's level of economic development. More importantly, they demonstrate the importance of context-sensitive strategies and institutional collaboration, especially university involvement, as crucial drivers for fostering sustainable development and enhancing capacity in rural education systems.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks: Regional Development and Resource Capacity

This study is based on two interconnected perspectives: unbalanced regional development in education and institutional capacity-building. Rather than focusing on theoretical interpretations, it highlights the structural and geographic factors which lead to differences in educational resource distribution between urban and rural areas.

The first perspective examines how economic and spatial development patterns affect the quality of education. In many countries, including China, uneven development across regions creates notable differences in infrastructure, human resources, and policy implementation in schools. Rural schools, especially those in mountainous or remote areas, often face challenges that urban schools do not, such as difficulty attracting qualified teachers, limited access to updated resources, and reduced professional networks. These differences lead to an educational achievement gap, not soly due to policy neglect, but because of long-term structural disparities in resource availability.

The second theoretical foundation, capacity-building (Fullan, 2006) [13], focus on strengthening the internal capacity of schools and local education systems. Instead of relying on top-down directives, capacity-building requires improving teacher professionalism, fostering local leadership, and encouraging collaboration among institutions. These approaches are especially vital in regions like Minxi, where long-term progress depends on consistent support, rather than just financial resources or external mandates.

By combining these frameworks, this study explores how institutional partnerships, particularly through the University-Government-School (U-G-S) model, can address the practical implications of unbalanced development and promote scalable, locally adapted solutions.

3. Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of the gaps and development needs in English education in rural Minxi, this study employed a mixed-methods design. By combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study captures not only the measurable differences in student outcomes but also the contextual and human factors that influence English teaching and learning in rural areas.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, as outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) [14], to examine the current status and development pathways of English education in rural primary schools in Minxi. In the first (quantitative) phase, standardized English test data were collected from Grades 3–6 across both rural and urban schools. In the second (qualitative) phase, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used to provide deeper insights into instructional practices and stakeholder experiences. This two-phase design allows the researchers to establish the magnitude of rural-urban gaps and contextualize those findings through qualitative exploration.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were drawn from 24 public primary schools in one county of Minxi: 16 rural schools and 8 urban schools. A total of 1,200 students from Grades 3 to 6 were included in the quantitative phase. Stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation of urban and rural demographics.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select 12 English teachers (6 from rural and 6 from urban schools) and 12 parents (6 from each group) for in-depth interviews. Teachers were chosen based on teaching experience and school representativeness, while parents were selected to ensure variation in socioeconomic background and educational support practices.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

This study employed four instruments: (1) Standardized English Achievement Tests, administered by the county education bureau, assessing listening, vocabulary, reading, and sentence writing. (2) Teacher Interview Protocol, which explored qualifications, instructional practices, professional development, and perspectives on the 2022 curriculum standards. (3) Parent Interview Protocol, focusing on home language environment, parental involvement, and educational aspirations. (4) Classroom Observation Checklist, used to record teaching practices, student engagement, use of instructional materials, and availability of multimedia resources.

Data were collected from March to July 2023. After securing ethical approval and informed consent, test scores were retrieved from the county database. Interviews were conducted in person or via phone and audio-recorded with permission. Classroom observations were arranged during regular English lessons.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were calculated for test scores, and independent sample t-tests were used to examine rural-urban differences.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 12. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring codes and categories such as instructional constraints, family involvement, and curriculum relevance. Observation notes were coded to triangulate interview findings and identify patterns in classroom delivery styles.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participants were informed of the research purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data usage. Written consent was obtained from school principals, teachers, parents, and students. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting to ensure anonymity. Data were securely stored and accessed only by authorized researchers.

4. Results

This section presents key findings from the quantitative analysis of standardized English test scores and qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations. These results reveal the extent of regional disparities in English education between rural and urban primary schools in Minxi.

4.1 English Achievement Scores by Grade

English Achievement Scores by Grade Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to compare English test scores across Grades 3 to 6. Students from urban schools scored significantly higher

than their rural counterparts across all grades.

Table 1 Comparison of Mean Scores by Grade

Grade	Urban Mean (SD)	Rural Mean (SD)	t(df)	p-value
Grade 3	82.6 (6.48)	67.28 (6.84)	t = 4.734 (20)	$p < 0.001$
Grade 4	86.03 (4.22)	79.27 (6.91)	t = 2.225 (20)	$p < 0.05$
Grade 5	80.5 (6.27)	71.32 (8.26)	t = 2.454 (20)	$p < 0.05$
Grade 6	78.46 (4.53)	72.21 (6.60)	t = 2.121 (20)	p < 0.05

As shown in Table 1, these results reveal a statistically significant and persistent urban–rural achievement gap, especially prominent in early primary grades. The findings suggest that such disparities may compound over time due to cumulative differences in learning environments and instruction quality.

4.2 Perceived Language Learning Challenges (Qualitative Insights)

Observations from Stakeholders Interview insights revealed considerable differences in learner engagement and confidence between rural and urban contexts. Teachers in rural schools often described students as reluctant to participate in English classes, with common attributions including limited exposure to spoken English and minimal family support. Urban teachers noted more frequent student interaction and willingness to speak English in class.

Parents in rural areas frequently cited difficulty assisting with homework due to their own limited English skills, while urban parents reported using online resources and tutoring to support language development. These observations underscore how students' academic confidence is shaped not only by instruction but also by home environments.

4.3 Thematic Findings from Interviews

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 English teachers and 12 parents revealed several recurrent challenges affecting rural English education in Minxi:

(1) Lack of Specialized Training

Many rural English teachers were generalists, often responsible for teaching multiple subjects without specialized English language education backgrounds.

"*I teach English, math, and music. There's no way to focus deeply on one subject.*" — Rural teacher

(2) Limited Utilization of Learning Resources

Although many rural classrooms are equipped with multimedia tools, their consistent integration into English teaching remains limited. More importantly, rural students—many of whom are left-behind children—have few opportunities to engage with English learning beyond the classroom. At home, they often lack access to mobile phones, computers, or internet-enabled devices. Even when such devices are available, the absence of adult supervision means students are unlikely to use them for educational purposes.

"*Our students rarely hear spoken English. Even if there is a speaker in class, it's seldom used effectively. And at home, they don't have phones or anyone to guide them in learning.*" — Rural English teacher

(3) Parental Support Limitations

Many rural parents expressed difficulty supporting their children's English learning, not only because of limited English proficiency or lower educational backgrounds, but also due to long-term migration for work. As many parents leave for cities to earn a living, their children are left in the care of grandparents or other relatives, resulting in reduced supervision and emotional support for learning. This left-behind status often exacerbates rural students' challenges in forming consistent study habits or seeking help with homework.

"*We can't help at home. I never learned English myself, and I'm working in another city most of*

the year." — Rural parent

(4) Motivational Barriers

Rural students often perceived English as irrelevant to their daily lives and future aspirations.

"*Why should we learn English if we never leave the village?*" — Student comment, cited by a teacher

These themes align with and add depth to the quantitative findings, illustrating how a combination of systemic, instructional, and sociocultural barriers affects rural English education.

4.4 Classroom Observation Highlights

A total of ten classroom sessions were observed—five in urban schools and five in rural schools. The observations revealed distinct differences across several key areas:

Instructional Style: In urban schools, teachers often used interactive methods such as pair work and dialogues, whereas rural teachers mainly relied on traditional lectures.

Use of Materials: Urban schools often used advanced digital tools like projectors and electronic whiteboards, while rural classrooms, though equipped with similar technology, still relied more on traditional materials.

Language Exposure: Urban students were exposed to authentic audio and teacher-led dialogues. Despite increasing internet access, rural schools struggled to integrate digital audio effectively, limiting students' exposure to natural spoken English.

Student Engagement: Urban students showed higher levels of participation, confidence in answering questions, and involvement in peer activities compared to rural students.

These classroom observations confirm the findings from the interviews and emphasize the need for improved infrastructure, teacher training, and culturally relevant teaching strategies to bridge the urban-rural divide in English education.

5. Discussion

This study reveals persistent and multi-dimensional differences in primary school English education between rural and urban areas in Minxi, Western Fujian. The findings emphasize both structural challenges, such as variations in teacher qualifications, resource availability, and learning environments, and perceptual barriers, including students' low confidence in using English and limited parental involvement in rural areas.

Guided by the frameworks of unbalanced regional development (OECD, 2012) [15] and capacity-building in education (Fullan, 2006) [13], this section interprets the results across four interconnected dimensions: (1) teacher quality, (2) instructional and resource conditions, (3) learner and community perceptions, and (4) collaborative intervention strategies. Together, these dimensions help explain the urban-rural divide and inform sustainable pathways for improving rural English education.

5.1 Teacher Quality and Professional Development

Interviews and classroom observations revealed a significant gap in teacher specialization. In urban schools, English teachers typically had specialized training and access to continuous professional development. In contrast, rural teachers often worked as generalists with limited formal training in English instruction.

These patterns point to systemic imbalances in teacher distribution and development opportunities. Closing these gaps requires targeted, context-sensitive professional development, such as mentorship programs, short-term certifications, and partnerships with universities, to help rural teachers enhance their language instruction within local constraints.

5.2 Learning Resources and Environments

Classroom observations and interview data indicate that, although most rural schools now possess basic multimedia hardware, these tools are not consistently incorporated into day-to-day English instruction. The constraint becomes more pronounced once students leave campus. Many rural pupils—particularly left-behind children whose parents migrate to cities for work—return to homes that lack internet connectivity or personal digital devices. Even where a smartphone or tablet is present, the absence of adult guidance means the technology is seldom directed toward learning. In contrast, urban learners routinely access online videos, language apps, and after-school tutoring, extending their exposure to authentic English beyond the classroom.

These findings suggest that future interventions should move beyond simply supplying hardware. Priority should be given to (1) practical teacher training on integrating multimedia into short, low-bandwidth activities; (2) community learning hubs that offer supervised, device-supported study after school; and (3) easily downloadable audio-visual resources that can be used offline on low-spec devices.

5.3 Learner Perceptions and Community Support

Rural students frequently exhibit low self-confidence in speaking and listening, a pattern linked to infrequent exposure and limited feedback opportunities. Interviews revealed that many parents feel ill-equipped to assist with English homework due to their own limited schooling. The challenge is compounded by labor migration: with caregivers working in distant cities, left-behind children often rely on grandparents who may not prioritize or understand English learning. This lack of informed supervision reinforces a cycle in which students view English as peripheral to their daily lives and future plans.

Addressing these attitudes requires a multi-pronged approach. Schools can embed culturally relevant topics—such as local agriculture or regional crafts—into English tasks to demonstrate immediate relevance. Peer-mentoring clubs and recorded speaking challenges can provide practice without demanding high-bandwidth infrastructure. At the community level, periodic family workshops—scheduled during the agricultural off-season when migrant parents return—could equip caregivers with simple strategies to encourage English practice, even in resource-limited households.

To improve outcomes, efforts must extend beyond the classroom. Introducing culturally relevant content, promoting peer interaction, and organizing community-based English activities could gradually build both confidence and value recognition among rural learners and their families.

5.4 A Path Forward: The University–Government–School (U–G–S) Model

In response to these interlinked challenges, this study proposes a University–Government–School (U–G–S) collaboration model. Under this framework, universities serve as hubs of expertise and teacher training; governments provide supportive policy and funding mechanisms; and schools act as implementers tailored to local contexts.

This tripartite approach—adapted from successful international models—offers a structured way to scale capacity-building efforts. Universities can lead curriculum development and in-service training; governments can streamline resource allocation; and schools can integrate context-sensitive teaching practices. Such a coordinated strategy promotes sustainable improvement in rural English education aligned with broader goals of enhancing learning opportunities and instructional capacity in diverse settings.

6. Conclusion

This research examined the state of English education in rural primary schools in Minxi,

exposing ongoing disparities compared to urban schools. The findings highlight systemic challenges, such us limited access to qualified teachers, insufficient resources in classrooms, and community perceptions that hinder students' confidence and engagement in learning English.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combined quantitative data on student performance with qualitative insights from teachers, parents, and classroom observations. This approach provided a comprehensive view, uncovering both the structural causes of the urban-rural divide and the perceptual and sociocultural factors that sustain it.

The proposed University–Government–School (U–G–S) model offers a promising framework to tackle these interconnected issues. Rooted in capacity-building theory, the model emphasizes collaboration, localized professional development, and policy alignment to foster sustainable improvements in rural English education.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and participatory approaches to evaluate the long-term impact of such collaborative interventions. Incorporating student voices and broader community perspectives will be crucial for designing reforms that are both effective and contextually relevant, ensuring they are locally owned.

Acknowledgement

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