

# Comparative Study of Vocabulary Learning Difficulties Experienced by Urban and Rural Middle School Students

—A Case Study of Xiyanfang Middle School and Middle School Attached to XATU

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**Abstract:** It is greatly significant for middle school students to learn vocabulary in English learning. However, there are many barriers while mastering vocabulary. By comparing the current situation of vocabulary learning between urban and rural middle school students, the paper tries to find out the specific aspects of backwardness in vocabulary learning of rural middle school students. Reasons which cause the difficulties will be investigated and then corresponding solutions will be put forward to narrow the gap between urban and rural middle school students in vocabulary learning.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning; Difficulties; Learning strategies; Learning attitude

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## 1 Research background

Vocabulary learning is a key in English learning, and the size of vocabulary directly affects the development of students' language skills. The vocabulary shortage will lead to certain restrictions on the practical use of language. For middle school students, influenced by various factors, vocabulary learning becomes time-consuming and inefficient. Poor learning effect will make students lack confidence and interest in English learning, thus hindering their accumulation and mastery of English vocabulary. The differences between urban and rural students' living environment, educational resources allocation, individual ideas

and other factors are bound to have an impact on students' learning. Therefore, this study will select two middle school students as the object, carry out questionnaires, interviews and tests to investigate the current situation of urban and rural junior high school students' vocabulary learning, find the gap, and put forward suggestions<sup>[1-5]</sup>.

## 2 Research design

### 2.1 Research objects

This paper selects 50 students of Grade 8 from Xiyanfang Middle School (hereinafter referred to as XYFS) in Zhouzhi County and Middle School Attached to XATU (hereinafter referred to as XATUS) in Beilin District respectively to conduct a questionnaire survey and vocabulary test. In addition, it interviews the leaders of the English teaching and research groups of the two schools and the students in the sample class. All the sampled schools are in the average level in the districts and counties, and all the students have set up English courses for more than five years, with a certain English learning background.

### 2.2 Research issues

This study focuses on the following three issues:

- (1) What's the current situation of vocabulary learning in XATUS and XYFS?
- (2) Are the students of XATUS better than those of XYFS in vocabulary learning? If so, what is the reason for the gap?
- (3) What measures should be taken to narrow the gap between the two schools?

### 2.3 Research methods

This study mainly adopts vocabulary test, questionnaire survey, observation and individual interview to enhance the scientific research. The vocabulary test is designed according to the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standard (2020 Edition) which involves phonetic test, writing words according to the Chinese and initials, writing the Chinese meaning of the given words, identifying synonyms, identifying words in similar forms, filling in the blanks with the appropriate form of the given

words and cloze.

## 3 Research analysis

### 3.1 A comprehensive analysis of vocabulary learning

The vocabulary test is divided into seven parts with a total score of 100. The test is a closed-book examination and it is supervised by two their English teachers, with a duration of 60 minutes. Table 1 Shows the comparison of vocabulary test scores between the two sample classes.

**Table 1.** Results of comprehensive vocabulary test

			XATUS	XYFS	Gap
Total Score			69.96	57.12	12.84
Section 1	Phonetic Test (20 points)		15.12	10.08	5.04
Section 2&3	Mastery of Word Meaning (10 points)		6.89	6.49	0.4
Average Score	Section 4	Analysis of synonyms (10 points)	8.36	6.42	1.94
	Section 5	Discrimination of Words in Similar Forms (10 points)	6.7	6.6	0.1
	Section 6	Word Appropriate Form Filling(20 points)	12.44	11.24	1.2
	Section 7	Cloze (20 points)	13.36	9.8	3.56

Table 1 shows the present situation of vocabulary learning of two sample classes. The total average score of XATUS is 69.96, and that of XYFS is 57.12. The gap between two schools was 12.84 points. Obviously, the current situation of vocabulary learning in XATUS is better than that of XYFS which reflects the gap of vocabulary learning between schools in urban and rural areas .

In the phonetic test, the urban sample school XATUS scored 15.12 points, which was higher than that of the rural sample one XYFS by 5.04 points, indicating that the students of XYFS were inferior to those of XATUS. According to the test results, 82% of the students in XYFS can't write more than five words according to the phonetic prompts. But in the part of word meaning mastery, the difference between the two schools is only 0.4 points, which shows that the students of the two schools have nearly the same performance in this aspect. In terms of synonym discrimination, XATUS scored 8.36 points, which was higher than that of XYFS by 1.94 points. Therefore, the students of the urban sample school did better than those of the rural sample school in terms of synonym discrimination. And as the results showed, most of the students in both schools had trouble in making distinction between "look", "see", "look at" and "watch". In the part of discrimination of words in similar forms, XATUS is only 0.1 points

higher than XYFS, the two schools are almost at the same level, and students of both schools have difficulties in distinguishing "later" & "latter" and "police" & "policy".

While learning vocabulary, it is a necessity for students to master the grammatical use of words. According to the test results, the gap between XATUS and XYFS is 1.2 points, so the students of the urban sample school might master the grammar knowledge better than the students of the rural sample school. For the performance on cloze, there was a gap of 3.76 points between Middle XATUS and XYFS which indicated that the students in Middle School Attached to XATU could apply vocabulary knowledge more comprehensively. After a comprehensive analysis of the vocabulary test results, it is found that students in rural sample school XYFS have more difficulties in vocabulary learning, and the current situation of vocabulary learning is worse than that of XATUS the urban sample school.

### 3.2 Analysis of interview results

In order to further explore the reasons for the vocabulary learning gap between urban and rural middle school students, this study conducted interviews with two sample classes of students and their English teachers to understand the students' living environment, English learning habits, vocabulary strategy application ability and the

allocation of educational resources.

According to the interview, the students in XATUS all expressed that their parents can supervise their learning. And they all set up English courses from the third grade of primary school, and reported for English extracurricular guidance. In the interview, all the students thought the ways of the vocabulary teaching helped them a lot. Also, they said their teachers had introduced them some effective strategies to learn vocabulary like associative method, using picture, and using affix and root etc. which made word learning easier for them. However, less than 40% of the students in XYFS are supervised by their parents in their study. Due to the limited literacy of their parents, they can not help students in English learning. According to the interviewees of XYFS, even though English courses have been offered since grade 3, only 53% of the students have received formal English classroom education and 10% of the students have received extra-curricular English guidance due to the lack of teachers. Therefore, their English learning lags behind. As for the vocabulary strategies taught by teachers, most students said that they could not use them freely, so they prefer to

memorize them mechanically.

According to the teachers of XATUS, there are totally six English teachers in this school, one of whom is a special grade teacher. Each teacher takes two classes. And according to the teachers of XYFS, there are eight English teachers in total, each with two classes. However, only two of them majored in English and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. The rest of the teachers are in other majors like computer science, and two of them only obtained the associate degree. She said that the loss of teachers was extremely serious in the school because of low income and underdeveloped infrastructure.

### 3.3 Questionnaire analysis

The questionnaire consists of 30 questions which adopts five point scale marking . Among them, 1 symbolizes "never or almost never consistent with me", 2 means "usually not consistent with me", 3 indicates "sometimes consistent with me", 4 symbolizes "usually consistent with me" and 5 means "always or almost always consistent with me". In this survey, 50 questionnaires were issued, and all of which were collected and the data were valid.

**Table 2.** Reliability and validity of the questionnaire

XYFS	Total Reliability	Attitude Towards Vocabulary Learning	Vocabulary Learning Difficulties	Vocabulary Learning Strategies
Cronbach a	0.996	0.973	0.990	0.995
Numbers	30	5	6	19
KMO measure of sampling adequacy: 0.928				
XATUS	Total Reliability	Attitude Towards Vocabulary Learning	Vocabulary Learning Difficulties	Vocabulary Learning Strategies
Cronbach a	0.991	0.940	0.990	0.981
Numbers	30	5	6	19
KMO measure of sampling adequacy: 0.934				

Table 2 shows the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. SPSS analysis shows that the Cronbach a of each dimension of the questionnaire of both sample school is higher than 0.9, so the questionnaire is highly reliable. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy of the two middle schools are both more than 0.9 and less than 1, so the data collected by the questionnaire are suitable for analysis.

The results of the questionnaire show that most of the students in XATUS have a positive attitude towards vocabulary learning, while the students in XAFS have a relatively negative attitude. For example, 60% of the students in the urban sample school are confident in their English learning, while

only 20% of the students in the rural sample School have confidence in English learning. Even though more than 80% of the students in the two middle schools can realize the importance of vocabulary learning, most of the students in the rural sample school do not attach enough importance to it. And more than 50% of the students in XYFS lack persistence in vocabulary learning and they do not want to learn English well just because they think it is a time-consuming task.

In the process of vocabulary learning, students in XYFS encounter more difficulties than students in XATUS. For example, 40% of the students in XYFS said they had difficulties in phonetic alphabet

learning, while only 16% of the students in XATUS had difficulties in this aspect. 40% of the students in the rural sample school thought it was difficult to distinguish part of speech and memorize long words, while only 18% of the students in the urban sample school said they needed help in this aspect.

In the mastery of vocabulary strategy, The results show that the students of XATUS have a good command of vocabulary learning strategies, and most of them can use vocabulary learning skills and methods more flexibly, so as to improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning. For example, 56% of the students in XYFS mark phonetic symbols with Chinese character to aid their memory, while only 16% of the students in XATUS use this method. This method is a stereotype which is not scientific and efficient in recent days. In classroom learning, more than 50% of the students of XATUS preview in advance and take notes, but in XYFS, only 36% of the students preview the content and 38% of the students make notes. At the same time, compared with the sample school in rural areas, more students of XATUS can use pictures, actions, objects and other means to assist vocabulary learning and memory.

After the analysis of the questionnaire data, it is found that the students in XATUS hold a more positive attitude towards vocabulary learning than those of XYFS. The students in XYFS face more difficulties in vocabulary learning than those of XATUS. The students in the urban sample school master more scientific and efficient vocabulary learning strategies than those of the sample school on rural area.

#### **4 Conclusion and implication**

According to the results of vocabulary test, the students of XATUS have a better performance in vocabulary learning than those of XYFS who are

encountered with more difficulties in vocabulary learning. For instance, the students in the rural sample school have a poor mastery of phonetic symbols and comprehensive adoption of vocabulary. Based on the results of questionnaire and interview, besides some objective factors, the reasons for the gap also include the difference of students' attitude towards vocabulary learning and the gap of their ability in adopting vocabulary learning strategies.

It is not difficult to find that even now the government are emphasizing the overall allocation of urban and rural education resources, there is still a gap between urban and rural English education, which is obvious in vocabulary teaching and learning. In order to narrow the gap, in addition to enhancing the hardware, rural middle schools should pay more attention to students' learning and mastering of international phonetic symbols, guide students to develop a positive attitude towards vocabulary learning, help students establish learning confidence, and cultivate students' ability to use vocabulary learning strategies.

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