

A Comparative Study on the Relationship Between Learned Helplessness and Academic Performance in English Classes in Urban and Rural Junior High Schools

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Abstract

This study selected a total of 441 second-grade students from urban and rural schools in the same city in Guangdong Province as research subjects to explore the relationship between learned helplessness and academic performance in junior middle school English classes and compare the research results of the two schools. The results of the study found that the level of learned helplessness among rural junior high school students was significantly higher than that among urban junior high school students (The average level of learned helplessness among rural students is 3.87/5, while that among urban students is 3.54/5.). The average English score of rural junior high school students was significantly lower than that of urban junior high school students, with an average score difference of 9.35 points. Regardless of whether junior high school students were from urban or rural schools, learned helplessness in English classes had a significant negative impact on English test scores. Additionally, there was a causal relationship between the two, meaning that the level of learned helplessness would affect students' test scores.

Keywords

junior high school english class; learned helplessness, academic performance, urban-rural differences

1. Introduction

As psychology has entered the field of second language acquisition research, scholars have gradually realized the diversity and importance of language learners' emotional experiences (Dewaele & Li, 2020). In terms of research topics, existing research on emotions in second language acquisition focuses on the impact of anxiety, fear, boredom, pleasure and other emotions on language learning (Li & Wei, 2023). However, compared with many studies on anxiety and pleasure, research on “learned helplessness” is slightly insufficient, and many issues need further research. In terms of research groups, existing research is consistent with the overall trend of second language learning psychology research, often focusing on college students, while ignoring foreign language learners in other stages, especially primary and junior high school foreign language learners in basic education (Shu, 2021).

According to the “Opinions on Building a High-quality and Balanced Basic Public Education Service System” issued by The General Office of the CPC Central Committee and The General Office of the State Council (2023) should focus on promoting the integration of urban and rural education and accelerate the narrowing of the gap between urban and rural education in the county. Since rural students generally face

difficulties such as limited family conditions and English teaching conditions, their psychological and academic development is more difficult than that of urban students (Zhao & Jia, 2018). Therefore, conducting second language acquisition research from the perspective of urban and rural differences in basic education has important theoretical and practical significance. Based on the above, this study will examine the impact of the level of learned helplessness on academic performance in English classes in urban and rural junior high schools, and compare the level differences in learned helplessness between junior high school and rural students, in order to promote the parallel development of urban and rural basic English education research and English learning emotion research, and promote innovation in English teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

“Learned helplessness” was proposed by American psychologists Overmier and Seligman (1967). Seligman's experimental results on animals showed that past failure experiences would have an impact on the behavior of animals. In particular, when animals fail after trying hard, they will not make any attempts when faced with similar situations again, but passively accept the arrangements. Seligman called this phenomenon “Learned Helplessness”.

Based on Seligman's experiments on animals, some studies have also proved that learned helplessness also exists in humans. Hiroto (1974) 96 college students as research subjects to explore with perceived and instructed locus of control Ss in a learned-helplessness paradigm. After using noise as an uncontrollable stimulus variable, it was found that they experienced learned helplessness. Dweck (1986) used children as research subjects. In the study of “Learned Helplessness, Anxiety and Achievement Motivation”, it was found that children with the same abilities would have completely different performances when facing the same challenge. One type actively thinks, while the other type passively completes the task. Children with learned helplessness cannot adjust their thinking and behavior when faced with failure, and in order to avoid failure again, they will give up tasks that they could have completed. However, motivated children will focus on their own abilities and development and use the skills they have learned to solve problems (Dweck, 1986). Raufelder and Kulakow (2022) explored the effects of the school social environment (school belonging, school exclusion and teacher-student relationship) on learned helplessness in adolescent students. The study showed that adolescent students are affected by school belonging and school exclusion in the development of learned helplessness. Seyri and Rezaee (2024) conducted a survey on the learned helplessness experienced by 84 college students in an online EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course and found that 60 students were identified as having LH characteristics. After the researchers designed an autonomous intervention teaching plan, the results showed that the number of LH in the students was significantly reduced after the intervention.

The first study on learned helplessness was introduced by Zhou (1994). Some studies have pointed out that the main manifestation of learned helplessness in English learning is that individuals have the ability to learn English, but due to the lack of effective English learning strategies, they have always failed, so that individuals believe that they do not have the ability to learn English well. In addition, an intervention study was conducted on the gender and grade differences in learned helplessness in English learning among junior high school students, and a measurement tool for learned helplessness in English learning among junior high school students was compiled (Peng, 2007). Yang used high school students in ethnic minority areas as the research subjects to explore the relationship between learned helplessness in English learning and English classroom anxiety (Yang, 2020). Zhao (2010) explored the relationship between learned helplessness and self-efficacy and parenting style among middle school students. Chen (2012) used children in the upper grades of primary schools as the research subjects to explore the relationship between children's introversion or extroversion, parent-child attachment and learned helplessness. Yu (2022) used students from secondary vocational and technical schools as the research subjects to explore the impact of achievement motivation on learned helplessness in learning. Tan et al. explored the impact of cumulative ecological risk on the learned helplessness of rural junior high school students in English. The study selected 750 students in rural junior high schools for investigation and found that there were significant gender differences in the learned helplessness of rural junior high school students in English learning, and boys had higher learned helplessness in English learning than girls. There were significant grade differences in the cumulative ecological risk and learned helplessness of rural junior high school students in English learning. In addition, the researchers also pointed out that the learning resources, teachers and teaching equipment in rural areas

are limited, which has added obstacles for rural junior high school students to learn English. If rural junior high school students lack effective English learning support for a long time, they will experience symptoms such as cognitive helplessness, motivational helplessness and emotional helplessness, forming learned helplessness. It can be seen that the learned helplessness caused by unsatisfactory academic performance will reduce the individual's internal learning motivation and lead to the loss of learning initiative (Tan et al., 2024).

In summary, learned helplessness is closely related to learning motivation, which in turn affects academic performance. In the past, there were few comparative studies on the relationship between learned helplessness and academic performance in urban and rural junior high school English classes. Therefore, this study will explore this topic.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Subjects

This study selected two junior high schools in the same city of Guangdong Province as survey schools. One middle school is located in the city center (hereinafter referred to as school "A"), and the other is located in the suburbs (hereinafter referred to as school "B"). After obtaining the consent of the leaders of the two schools, 223 students from 5 natural classes in the second grade of junior high school in School A (students' abilities are at the same level) and 244 students from 5 natural classes in the second grade of junior high school in School B were selected as the survey subjects of this study, and questionnaires were distributed to them. Finally, 441 valid samples were obtained, with a recovery rate of 94.43%, of which 218 valid questionnaires were recovered from School A, including 102 boys and 116 girls. 223 valid questionnaires were recovered from School B, including 131 boys and 92 girls. The two schools are about 50 kilometers apart and use the same version of English textbooks. The curriculum standards are uniformly set by the city's education bureau.

3.2 Research Tools

This study used the "Junior High School Students' Learned Helplessness Scale for English Learning" compiled by Peng Yajing for questionnaire survey (Peng, 2007). The questionnaire contains 17 items, including three dimensions: attributional helplessness, strategic helplessness, and motivational helplessness. The Likert 5-point scoring method is used. The higher the score, the stronger the student's learned helplessness in English learning. The Cronbach coefficient of this scale in this study is 0.71.

3.3 Data Analysis

First, the author digitized the data obtained in this study, and then used SPSS 29 to analyze the data of each variable.

4. Results

After entering the questionnaire of rural schools into SPSS 29 for reliability and validity testing, the reported Cronbach's coefficient was 0.79, and the KMO and Bartlett test values were 0.81. The Cronbach's coefficient reported for the reliability test of urban schools was 0.82, and the KMO and Bartlett test values were 0.86, which met the requirements of measurement.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistical results of rural and urban schools.

Table 1: Statistics of learned helplessness and English scores of rural school students

Variables	Sample source	Score range	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value
Level of learned helplessness	Rural schools	1-5	3.1	4.71	3.87
	Urban schools	1-5	2.81	4.19	3.54
English scores	Rural schools	0-120	39	140	98.30
	Urban schools	0-120	58	140	107.65

Table 2 shows the correlation analysis between the mean scores of the 21 items in the rural school learned helplessness questionnaire and English scores

Table 2: Correlation analysis between the mean scores of the rural school learned helplessness questionnaire and English scores

Correlation analysis			
		Mean	Average English final exam score
Average of the learned helplessness questionnaire	Pearson correlation	1	-.215**
	Significance (two-tailed)		.001
	Number of cases	223	223
English final exam scores	Pearson correlation	-.215**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	.001	
	Number of cases	223	223

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3 shows the regression analysis of the mean scores of the 21 items in the rural school learned helplessness questionnaire and English scores.

Table 3: Regression analysis of the mean scores of the rural school learned helplessness questionnaire and English scores

Coefficient a						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Significance
		B	standard error	Beta		
1	Constant	149.708	15.715		9.526	<.001
	Average	-13.290	4.051	-.215	-3.281	.001

a. Dependent variable: English final exam score.

Table 4 shows the correlation analysis between the mean scores of the 21 items in the learned helplessness questionnaire in urban schools and English scores

Table 4: Correlation analysis between the mean scores of the learned helplessness questionnaire in urban schools and English scores

Correlation analysis			
		Mean	Average English final exam score
Average of the learned helplessness questionnaire	Pearson correlation	1	-.410**
	Significance (two-tailed)		.001
	Number of cases	218	218
English final exam scores	Pearson correlation	-.410**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	.001	
	Number of cases	218	218

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 5 shows the regression analysis of the mean scores of the 21 items in the learned helplessness questionnaire of urban schools and English scores.

Table 5: Regression analysis of the mean scores of the learned helplessness questionnaire of urban schools and English scores

Coefficient a						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Significance
		B	standard error	Beta		
1	Constant	179.430	10.898		16.464	<.001
	Average	-20.253	3.064	-.410	-6.609	<.001

a. Dependent variable: English final exam score

5. Discussion

According to Table 1, it can be seen that the level of learned helplessness of rural junior high school students is significantly higher than that of urban junior high school students, and the average score of rural

junior high school students is significantly lower than that of urban junior high school students. The average score difference between the two is 9.35 points. This also reveals from the side why the total number of students in rural schools is on a downward trend, and more and more rural parents are willing to send their children to the city to receive a better education, rather than looking far away. Regardless of whether junior high school students in urban schools or rural schools, learned helplessness in English classes has a significant negative effect on English performance. Based on the above results, the author believes that reducing students' learned helplessness is crucial to English teaching, and is even more necessary in rural schools.

As can be seen from Table 2, a correlation analysis between the average level of acquired helplessness in rural schools and the English final exam scores of rural school students found that the two were significantly negatively correlated, which means that when rural students acquire The higher the level of sexual helplessness, the lower their English test scores. As can be seen from Table 4, after correlation analysis was conducted between the average level of learned helplessness of urban school students and their final exam scores, the two also showed a significant negative correlation, which shows that the urban students' learned helplessness Scores also affect their test scores. It is consistent with previous related research results (Firmin et al., 2004). Subsequently, as can be seen from Table 3, after performing a regression analysis between the level of learned helplessness of rural school students and their final exam scores, it was found that the P value between the two was 0.001, showing a significant correlation.

At the same time, as can be seen from Table 5, after performing the same regression analysis between the level of learned helplessness of urban school students and their final exam scores, it was found that $P < 0.001$ between the two was significantly correlated, which shows that learned helplessness There was a causal relationship between levels of sexual helplessness and English performance in both schools. Students' level of learned helplessness affects test performance.

6. Conclusion

This study takes foreign language emotions and foreign language learning effectiveness as the starting point. By examining the relationship between the level of learned helplessness and English language scores of 441 second-year junior high school students and conducting a comparative study between urban and rural areas, it is found that the level of learned helplessness of rural school students is significantly higher than that of urban school students. And whether in urban junior high schools or rural junior high schools, the level of learned helplessness of students is correlated with their scores, and there is a causal relationship between the two.

Therefore, the results of this study enrich the previous research on the differences in urban and rural foreign language teaching, expand the comparative dimension of urban and rural foreign language learners, and add the emotional dimension of learned helplessness in foreign language classrooms. At the same time, this study has certain enlightenment significance. The author calls on the education sector and all sectors of society to pay more attention to basic English education in rural areas, especially the psychological state of students. In the teaching process, students with higher learned helplessness should be given more attention so that they can also experience learning success.

And there are also certain defects in this study. This study was only conducted in two schools in the same city, and the sample size of the study was too small. In future studies, urban and rural schools in different cities should be selected for comparison. In addition, this study did not include a mediation model. In future studies, self-efficacy, teacher intervention, and positive psychology can be used as mediation models to explore the relationship between learned helplessness and academic performance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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