

Rural Parents' Exploration and Reflection on Junior High School English Homework Under the "Double Reduction" Policy



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Abstract: As an integral component of teaching, homework plays a pivotal role in consolidating students' knowledge and cultivating their ability. Situated within the context of China's "Double Reduction" policy, this paper focuses on English assignments for junior high school students in rural areas. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study explores parents' perceptions, behaviors, and their cognitive levels regarding smart technologies in relation to junior high school students' English homework. Furthermore, the study analyzes the effects of homework volume, homework expectations, home-school communication, and homework effectiveness on academic achievement. This paper administers questionnaires to parents of junior high school students in three rural areas, analyzes the data using SPSS and AMOS, and supplements the questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews with frontline English teachers. The findings reveal that parental involvement in students' English homework is low, with insufficient daily accompaniment; awareness of home-school collaboration is weak; parents hold positive attitudes toward smart technologies but lack sufficient understanding; homework volume has a negative predictive effect on course grades, while home-school communication exerts the greatest influence on homework effectiveness. Based on these findings, this paper recommends establishing shared information channels to strengthen home-school collaborative mechanisms, enhancing parental literacy through targeted digital skills training, and increasing parental involvement. These measures are proposed to facilitate the effective implementation of the "Double Reduction" policy in English education within rural areas.

Keywords: "Double Reduction" Policy; Rural Areas; Junior High School English Homework

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1 Introduction

As a core subject during compulsory education, English has drawn significant attention to its educational development. Middle school English learning serves as a bridge between elementary and senior secondary education, representing a key period for students to master the language.

Within this process, English homework is an essential feedback mechanism, playing an irreplaceable role in language acquisition. In response to pressing contemporary demands and to safeguard the physical and mental health of adolescents, the State Council of China issued the "*Opinions on*

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Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students Undergoing Compulsory Education” (“The Double Reduction policy”) in July 2021 [1], aiming to achieve the goal of “reducing the burden and enhancing efficiency” for students. Subsequently, on January 19, 2025, “*Outline of the Plan for Building A Leading Country in Education (2024-2035)*”, which further integrated the coordinated advancement of the “Double Reduction” initiative and the enhancement of education quality into the national strategy [2]. Regarding homework, the outline proposes reducing repetitive assignments and improving the quality of after-school services. Furthermore, it emphasizes the leading role of school education, strengthens digital management, and progressively enhances students’ learning outcomes. However, within the context of the urban-rural dichotomy, educational challenges in certain rural areas are particularly pronounced. This is especially true for English education, where instruction heavily relies on teacher resources and the language environment. This further emphasizes disparities among students in their starting points for learning English and their access to resources. In this context, due to factors such as weaker teaching staff and limited educational resources, English homework often faces a “high quantity, low quality” dilemma. This situation has attracted widespread attention in academic circles. Keane and Heinz [3] suggested that differentiated assignment design, by offering tiered task options aligned with students’ varying abilities, significantly boosts learner engagement and completion rates, providing empirical support for diversified assignment practices. Under the “Double Reduction” policy, Guo and Tuo [4] examined how to optimize junior high school English homework through unit-based holistic teaching, using interviews and case studies. They proposed a three-stage hierarchical homework model consisting of foundational consolidation, skill enhancement, and application expansion. Xie [5] grounded in multiple intelligences theory, advocated moving beyond traditional single-format homework under the “Double Reduction” policy. By clarifying homework goals, linking tasks to real-life experiences, incorporating interdisciplinary knowledge, and diversifying homework types and assessment methods, this approach encourages balanced development of students’ multiple intelligences. Furthermore, the advancement of digital technology has created new opportunities for homework improvement. Current research indicates that intelligent homework systems can deliver precise and tiered homework assignments

through error analysis and personalized resource recommendations, thus promoting the sharing of high-quality educational resources [6]. Using intelligent platforms to address resource shortages is a key way to reduce rural disparities and promote educational equity. In summary, existing domestic and international research mainly focused on homework design, while empirical studies on English homework for rural junior high students remained limited, especially lacking systematic research involving parents. Therefore, this paper aims to explore rural parents’ perceptions, behaviors, and cognitive levels regarding English homework for junior high students, analyze how homework volume, homework expectations, home-school communication, and homework effectiveness influence course grades, and offer practical recommendations.

2 Theoretical Foundation

The Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory, proposed by American scholar Epstein [7], is grounded in ecosystem theory and social capital theory. Developed through research on the relationships among schools, families, and communities in American elementary and secondary schools during the late 20th century, this theory constructs an educational framework emphasizing tripartite collaboration. Epstein [7] posited that families, schools, and communities exert the most significant influence on student development. The theory asserts that family education plays an irreplaceable role in students’ growth and development from early childhood through compulsory education, and that schools, families, and communities should establish interactive partnerships. Teachers and parents should maintain regular communication through multiple channels to promote the integration and complementarity of educational philosophies and practices, collectively building an educational collaboration system that supports students’ healthy development. Building upon this theoretical framework, numerous scholars have recently conducted in-depth explorations in various educational settings. Ndwandwe [8] applied the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory to parental involvement in secondary education and found that home-school communication and parents’ confidence in homework support influence their participation. Dieneske et al. [9] examined parental involvement in interactive homework and found that short-term interventions did not significantly improve perceived parental support or parental self-efficacy. Walker [10], in a study focusing on ELL fam-

ilies, discovered that schools can effectively promote parental involvement through diverse communication channels and an inclusive culture, confirming the critical role of school guidance and organization within the partnerships. Addi-Raccah [11] found that parents' digital resources and digital competence are closely related to their involvement in their children's learning. Building upon this foundation, subsequent research has further refined the theory. Epstein *et al.* [12] found that enhancing parental educational awareness, diversifying communication channels, broadening communication content, strengthening teacher initiative, and establishing evaluation mechanisms can effectively improve home-school communication in rural junior high schools and optimize partnership effectiveness. Anazia *et al.* [13] found that shared responsibility, communication, and joint efforts to address student behavior are central to home-school partnerships in rural secondary schools. Liang [14], using the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory, examined how home-school cooperation affects adolescents' academic achievement and mental health. The study found that parent-child communication partially mediates the link between home-school collaboration and academic performance. Overall, the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory offers a strong conceptual and analytical framework for understanding home-school collaboration and building an educational community.

3 Methods

3.1 Participants

This paper employed a mixed-methods approach. An online questionnaire was administered to 539 parents of students across three grade levels from three junior secondary schools in a county within Xinxiang City. Additionally, six frontline junior high school English teachers were randomly selected for 30-minute semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Instrument

Data were obtained through the Parent Questionnaire on the Current Situation of Junior Secondary Students' English Homework, developed by Wang [15]. The instrument comprised two sections: the first collected participants' demographic information (covering parents' attitudes towards educational resources and their behaviors related to students' homework). while the second contained validated scales assessing key constructs, including homework vol-

ume, home-school communication, homework expectations, and homework effectiveness. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A total of 539 valid questionnaires were returned, yielding an effective response rate of 98.8%. The instrument demonstrated high reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients and KMO values all exceeding 0.7, and Bartlett's test of sphericity reaching significance ($p < .001$).

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Quantitative Data

The Quantitative data analysis was carried out in four stages. First, descriptive analyses for all variables were conducted in SPSS 29.0. Second, Pearson correlational analyses were conducted in SPSS 29.0 to examine the relationships among homework volume, homework expectations, home-school communication, and homework effectiveness. Third, SEM was constructed in AMOS 28.0 to assess the measurement model. Fourth, path analysis was performed in AMOS 28.0 to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs.

This approach aims to analyze the effects of rural parents' perceptions, behaviors, and their cognitive levels of smart technologies on students' academic achievement, within the specific context of junior high school English homework under the "Double Reduction" policy.

3.3.2 Qualitative Data

To gain a deeper understanding of the existing problems and reasons concerning the current state of junior high school English homework in rural areas, thematic analysis was conducted on the semi-structured interview transcripts from the six frontline English teachers. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for detailed textual analysis.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for parental involvement, home-school collaboration, technology acceptance, and educational conceptions within this rural

sample. Regarding parental involvement, 36.4% of respondents reported being unable to accompany the student due to work commitments, and only 24.5% indicated that they provide patient, one-on-one tutoring themselves. These findings suggested a low level of parental involvement awareness, which may be attributable to a combination of factors prevalent in rural areas, including heavy family economic burdens limiting available time, and parents' insufficient knowledge levels to provide effective tutoring. Regarding home-school collaboration, 80.9% of parents allow students to study diligently on their own at school. This indicated parental recognition of the school as the primary educational institution while also reflecting that over half of parents place all expectations solely on the school. In terms of AI acceptance, 78.8% of parents were willing to cooperate with schools to actively improve re-

sources. This indicated that a segment of parents recognized the potential of technology to enhance learning. It also reflected that parents in rural areas were more eager to leverage advanced resources and collaborate with schools to elevate educational quality. However, data also revealed a gap: only 45.3% of parents supported students using smart devices for learning, whereas 57.0% still preferred purchasing paper-based materials. This discrepancy may stem from the scarcity of smart devices in rural areas, leading to parents' limited awareness and utilization of digital resources to some extent. Finally, regarding parental educational perspectives, the data revealed that 61.6% neglect students' emotional needs, and 56.8% place excessive pressure on their children. This indicates weak educational awareness among parents, an overreliance on traditional pressure-based education, and a lack of scientific guidance capabilities.

Table 1 Demographic information of parents

Variables	Items	N	%
Strategies for Enhancing Students' Learning	Enroll children in tutoring classes	192	35.6%
	Encourage children to study diligently at school	436	80.9%
	Provide patient one-on-one tutoring themselves	132	24.5%
	Unable due to work commitments	95	17.6%
Difficulties Encountered When Tutoring	Lack of time to accompany children	196	36.4%
	Difficulty communicating with children	165	30.6%
	Curriculum/reform misalignment with teaching methods	221	41.0%
	Insufficient subject knowledge itself	447	82.9%
Inappropriate Parental Practices	Other (please specify)	29	5.4%
	Placing excessive pressure/high expectations on children	306	56.8%
	Neglecting children's emotional needs/getting angry	333	61.6%
	Directly providing correct answers without guidance	50	9.3%
Attitudes Toward Educational Resources	Lacking patience and encouragement	321	59.6%
	Other (please specify)	59	10.9%
	Actively cooperate with schools to improve resources	425	78.8%
	Donate resources to the school	104	19.3%
	Allow children to use smart devices for self-study	244	45.3%
	Purchase paper-based learning materials for children	307	57.0%
	Other (please specify)	23	4.3%

4.2 Results of Correlation Analysis

Table 2 Results of correlation analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4
Homework volume	1			
Homework expectations	.319**	1		
Home-School communication	.249**	.402**	1	
Homework effectiveness	.419**	.392**	.602**	1

** $p < 0.01$

Table 2 presents the correlation analysis for the four dimensions of the junior high school English homework context as perceived by parents. Statistically significant positive correlations were observed among all four variables at

the 0.01 level. Notably, the strongest correlation emerged between home-school communication and homework effectiveness ($r = .602$, $p < .01$), suggesting that greater parental concern for students and more frequent communication

with teachers can effectively assist students in overcoming homework difficulties and improve the quality of completed assignments. A moderate correlation was identified between home-school communication and homework expectations ($r=.402$, $p<.01$), suggesting that parents also highly value home-school collaboration and hope to optimize students' homework completion and English learning outcomes through joint efforts with teachers. In contrast, the weakest correlation was found between home-school collaboration and homework volume ($r=.249$, $p<.01$). In summary, homework expectations, homework volume, home-school communication, and homework effectiveness were all significantly and positively intercorrelated.

4.3 Path Analysis of the Structural Equation Model

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted in AMOS 28.0 to examine the relationships among the four variables: homework volume (comprising Q11-Q14), homework expectations (Q15-Q18), home-school communication (Q19-Q23), and homework effectiveness (Q24-Q28). Initial analysis revealed that item Q15 was highly correlated with the predictor variable home-school communication, while items Q25 and Q26 demonstrated strong correlations with homework volume. Consequently, the model was revised by sequentially removing these three items, and the structural model was re-estimated. The final modified structural equation model is presented in Figure 1.

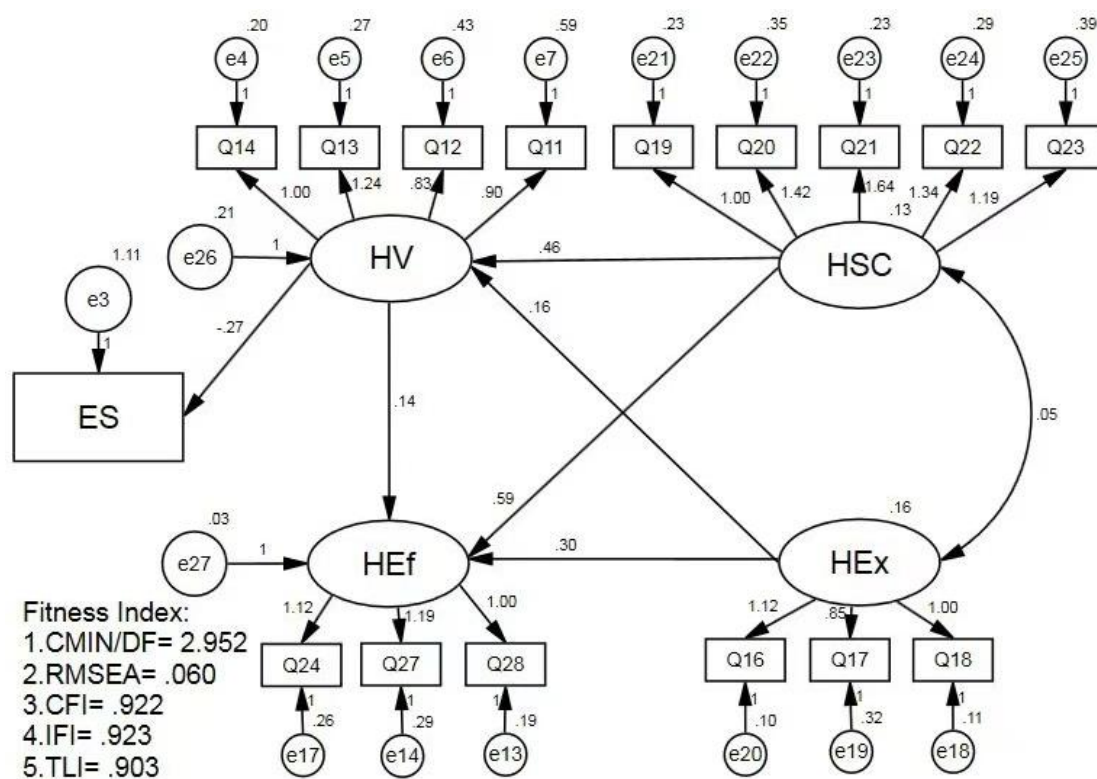


Figure 1 SEM results

ES: English scores, HV: Homework volume, HSC: Home-School communication, HEx: Homework expectations, HEf: Homework effectiveness

As shown in Table 3, the modified model demonstrated acceptable fit (CMIN/DF = 2.952, RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.922, IFI = 0.923, TLI = 0.903).

Table 3 Model Fit Evaluation for the Modified Model

Fit Index	Recommended Criterion	Model Result	Fit Evaluation
CMIN/DF	1–3	2.952	Good
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.060	Good

Fit Index	Recommended Criterion	Model Result	Fit Evaluation
CFI	> 0.90	0.922	Acceptable
IFI	> 0.90	0.923	Good
TLI	> 0.90	0.903	Good

As shown in Figure 1, homework volume was negatively associated with academic achievement ($\beta=-0.27$), suggesting that increased homework volume may inhibit academic performance. Home-school communication demonstrated a stronger effect on homework volume ($\beta=0.46$) than did homework expectations ($\beta=0.16$), indicating that home-school communication has a stronger impact on homework volume. Regarding homework effectiveness, home-school communication again exerted the most substantial influence ($\beta=0.59$), markedly exceeding the effects of homework expectations ($\beta=0.30$) and homework volume ($\beta=0.14$). Overall, home-school communication exerted the most significant influence on both homework volume and effectiveness. It not only moderated homework volume but also served as a key driver of homework outcomes.

4.4 Results of the Interviews

Interview data obtained from six frontline English teachers (T1-T6) yielded several key insights. First, variations were observed in the management of homework volume. For instance, T1 employed implementing a “reduce quantity, enhance quality” strategy to diversify homework formats (e.g., task-based assignments, fragmented reading exercises). However, other teachers, constrained by curriculum density and exam pressures, continued to adhere to traditional homework models, such as “I have not reduced the amount of homework.” Second, regarding home-school collaboration, teachers generally attached considerable importance to it. T1, for example, had established a model characterized by “attending to student mental health through regular two-way communication,” while T3 utilized the DingTalk platform to provide visual feedback on homework grading. Finally, teachers expressed generally positive attitudes toward technology-enabled instruction, acknowledging the potential of AI for personalized feedback and its efficiency and convenience. Nevertheless, in rural areas, constrained by hardware infrastructure and teachers’ digital literacy-still rely primarily on supplementary teaching materials. Some teachers also emphasized the need for judicious AI use to prevent students from developing excessive dependence on technology.

Integrating the quantitative data with the interview findings, this paper reveals several synthesized observations.

Regarding homework volume, a reduction in quantity leading to an increase in quality benefits student progress. Furthermore, AMOS analysis indicates that homework volume exhibits a reverse predictive effect on academic performance. In terms of home-school communication, the results indicated that parents exhibit relatively weak awareness of communication. Meanwhile, the interview data revealed that teachers have proactively adopted various strategies to strengthen home-school collaboration. Therefore, parents should proactively cooperate to jointly promote student progress. Finally, regarding technological empowerment, both teachers and parents exhibited positive attitudes toward it. However, the lack of smart devices in rural areas results in a certain degree of weak digital literacy among parents and teachers.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Strengthen Awareness of Home-School Partnership

The study found that parents show limited initiative in communicating with teachers about students’ English homework. In some rural areas, home-school collaboration remains weak, and parents often do not prioritize students’ English learning. This creates challenges for building a strong educational community. Some parents also place full responsibility for education on schools, believing that teachers alone should handle knowledge transmission. This misconception weakens the role of family education and limits the benefits of home-school collaboration for student development. Parents are essential communicators between teachers and students and play a key role in student growth. To fulfill this role, parents should reflect on whether they are proactive or reactive and consider how to improve family education through effective communication and partnership with schools.

The “Family Education Promotion Law”, enacted in 2022, highlights parents’ role as their children’s primary teachers and emphasizes the importance of open communication channels between schools and families. This promotes a shared effort in education, combining school and family efforts. Parents should recognize the need for active

participation in home-school cooperation, learn effective ways to collaborate, and proactively share information with teachers and schools. Methods include using communication platforms, parent committees, or email to enhance family education guidance. Parents need to regularly monitor their children's learning progress, focusing on efficient homework completion through tiered task lists, setting specific goals, and nurturing good study habits. These steps support a science-based, collaborative home-school model and help overcome previous barriers like reluctance to communicate and lack of exchange. Over time, this builds mutual trust and establishes a truly effective, two-way, interactive partnership between families and schools.

5.2 Enhancing Parents' Digital Literacy

Currently, in some rural areas of China, constrained by relatively scarce educational resources and lagging infrastructure, junior high school students' English homework largely relies on traditional paper-based practice methods. While this model can, to some extent, consolidate students' memorization of vocabulary and basic grammar through mechanical repetitive drills, its inherent shortcomings are also readily apparent: students find it difficult to obtain timely and precise feedback and analysis after completing exercises. Uncertainties and weaknesses within the learning process are often not identified or addressed promptly, which ultimately constrains learning efficiency. Personalized, targeted tutoring becomes virtually unattainable under such circumstances. Notably, the empirical findings of this paper reveal that parents in certain rural areas demonstrate a strong willingness to actively collaborate with schools in improving students' learning conditions. To more effectively assist students in enhancing their English proficiency, parents, as crucial educational collaborators, can adopt more proactive strategies. First, it is essential for parents to actively acquaint themselves with emerging educational technologies, thereby enhancing their awareness of educational technology development. By proactively utilizing various public welfare resources—such as MOOCs on the official website of the Ministry of Education and live lectures from authoritative educational public accounts—parents can continuously improve their digital literacy, which may, in turn, subtly foster students' habits of digital application. Particularly important is for parents to recognize the potential value of technology in the homework process, understanding that these tools are not intended to replace traditional learning but rather to serve as powerful supplementary resources.

Concurrently, parents can guide students in integrating traditional learning materials with intelligent learning tools. They can utilize intelligent homework design and assessment tools to optimize the homework management processes, enabling personalized assignment distribution, automated grading, and diagnostic feedback. For example, guiding students to use intelligent tools for listening and reading practice, or oral imitation exercises. Alternatively, after completing paper-based homework, students could use apps with features like photo grading and automatic collection to screen for weak knowledge points. This transforms smart devices into a valuable extension of traditional learning methods, serving to "fill in the blanks" and enhance practice efficiency. Furthermore, interview results indicated that teachers hold positive attitudes toward technology-enabled homework feedback. Therefore, parents should actively maintain close communication with teachers to jointly explore how to leverage existing resources to enhance students' homework effectiveness. In daily life, parents need to focus on cultivating students' ability to complete homework autonomously, guiding them to develop independent thinking and self-management skills while using smart devices, thereby avoiding excessive reliance on such technology.

5.3 Increase the Level of Parental Involvement

Based on the empirical survey results, the overall level of parental involvement in students' English homework is significantly low in some rural areas. This phenomenon can be attributed to several objective factors, including limited time for parental companionship resulting from household financial pressures and insufficient tutoring capacity caused by parents' limited knowledge and educational resources. Nevertheless, it is important to note that junior high school represents a critical developmental stage of adolescence, generally spanning the ages of 11 to 15. During this period, students' metacognitive abilities and self-discipline have not yet fully matured, and they remain highly susceptible to peer influence and the external environment. This developmental characteristic highlights the necessity of reconstructing the parental role in homework participation. As supervisors of students' homework, parents are advised to establish standardized homework completion routines so as to reinforce students' effective homework habits. In addition, parents can serve as providers of emotional

support by offering appropriate guidance and encouragement when students encounter cognitive difficulties. To a certain extent, parents also assume the role of learning environment constructors. Within the family context, parents can foster students' sense of self-efficacy by creating a relaxed and supportive psychological atmosphere, providing opportunities for autonomous decision-making, and consciously designing appropriately challenging tasks that correspond to students' developmental levels. These practices can ultimately lay a solid foundation for the continuous improvement of students' homework quality.

5.4 Transforming Parents' Educational Perspectives

Structural equation modeling analysis indicates that homework volume exerts an inverse predictive effect on English performance. This finding corroborates the core principle of the current "Double Reduction" policy—reducing academic burdens while enhancing learning efficiency. However, many parents, harboring aspirations for their children to achieve great success, feel deeply uneasy about schools' efforts to reduce or even eliminate homework assignments. Therefore, educating parents on knowledge related to student development not only helps prevent them from being misled by unscrupulous training institutions' inappropriate advice (such as accelerated learning, using overly difficult textbooks, and excessive interference in students' independent learning) [16], but also prompts parents to transform their traditional perceptions and deeply reflect on whether their educational beliefs genuinely benefit student development. This ultimately shifts the focus of education from pursuing the quantity of homework to enhancing its quality.

Specifically, the practice can follow a progressive path of "stimulating interest, cultivating habits, advancing abilities": First, parents can begin by sparking students' interest in learning to cultivate their intrinsic motivation. Second, when assisting with English homework, parents should adhere to the dual principles of scheduled routines and autonomy. Regarding time management, establish a fixed daily homework period with students to gradually cultivate the habit of "prioritizing tasks" (such as completing homework immediately after school). In terms of competency development, tiered guidance is provided based on problem difficulty: For foundational questions, students are encouraged to first engage in independent thinking, consult

reference materials, or attempt to organize their error logs. If they still cannot resolve the issue, they are guided to utilize AI learning tools to obtain hints that prompt their thinking, then independently complete similar problem types through transfer learning. The use of AI can also effectively prevent situations where parents are unable to assist with their children's homework due to insufficient capabilities. More importantly, parents should prioritize emotional support. When students encounter difficulties with homework, avoid giving them the correct answers directly. Instead, guide them through positive encouragement to think independently. Refrain from criticism like "How could you not know this?" and opt for growth-oriented language: "The method you summarized for the last reading comprehension was really effective. Why not try it again this time?" Finally, it is recommended that parents proactively communicate with teachers about the rationale behind homework assignments and jointly develop personalized learning strategies. By adopting efficient methods to enhance student learning while reducing the time spent, they can truly achieve a virtuous cycle where "less homework does not mean lower quality."

6 Conclusion

This paper employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the perceptions, behaviors, and levels of cognitive levels regarding smart technologies among parents of junior secondary students in rural areas in the context of English homework. It further analyzed the influence of homework volume, homework expectations, home-school communication, and homework effectiveness on students' academic achievement. The findings revealed that a reduction in homework volume is conducive to student learning and that home-school communication plays a pivotal role in determining homework effectiveness. Consequently, in students' future learning processes, it is imperative for parents to continuously adjust their perspectives, proactively cooperate with schools, and jointly promote student progress. Furthermore, in the contemporary era of artificial intelligence, parents must also enhance their own understanding of how AI can empower student homework. This paper is not without limitations. For instance, the sample was geographically restricted, encompassing only three rural schools within a single county in Henan Province. Future research could conduct cross-regional comparative studies to provide more effective strategies for addressing educa-

tional equity within the broader context of rural revitalization.

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