English Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Based on Aesthetic Choices

Tong Liu[1] & Jiehui Ding[1]

[1] School of International Education, Ganan Normal University, Ganzhou Jiangxi, China

Correspondence: Tong Liu, School of International Education, Ganan Normal University, Ganzhou Jiangxi, China.

Abstract

Under the background of quality education reform in China, aesthetic education, as a crucial part of people's all-round development, has its unique value. Thus, aesthetic education has become more important and should be integrated into teaching fully. In English teaching, helping students experience the beauty of speech is one of the ways to achieve it. Meanwhile, relevant requirements have been stipulated in *Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 edition 2020 revision)*. Vocabulary teaching strategies are systematic behaviors that seek to maximize vocabulary teaching effectiveness under the guidance of teachers' cognition of certain teaching philosophies and teaching situations. It is so crucial for vocabulary teaching that aesthetic education should be integrated into it. Therefore, this research attempts to propose vocabulary teaching strategies based on aesthetic choices. These strategies include: connecting the vowels closely to teach the pronunciation and spelling of vocabulary based on the spelling rules; using phonetic rhetoric in sentence construction to make it more readable and rhythmic; using figures of speech in sentence construction to give learners a deeper impression; making example sentence symmetric, succinct, and simple; and make vocabulary teaching a logical and systematic whole.

Keywords: english vocabulary teaching, quality education, aesthetic education, aesthetic choices

1. Aesthetic Choices

Aesthetic choices is a notion originating from aesthetic linguistics, which is a subject penetrating both linguistics and aesthetics (Luo, 1995: 73-79). This subject focuses on the perception, appreciation, and creation of beauty of speech (Xu, 1995: 1-8). It studies how people as a whole construct language systems and how individual people construct their speech according to the laws of beauty (Qian, 2004: 13) as the process of language use is a process of making two kinds of choices, adaptive choices and aesthetic choices (Qian, 2004: 12). So, making aesthetic choices aims at constructing aesthetic utterance or speech, which is to create the beauty of speech in communications.

Proposed by Qian, aesthetic choices have two connotations. On the one hand, in all speech events and speech acts, people always choose the utterance forms that can cater to the needs of a dynamic balance of their lives and generate comfortable and pleasing aesthetic concepts (Qian, 2004: 66). That is to say, the choice of the utterance forms is based on aesthetic purpose. On the other hand, language's structures and levels are constructed by people according to the laws of beauty and intention (Qian, 2004: 66). People always start from aesthetic intention and choose an aesthetic frame, i.e., laws of beauty, to construct the utterance forms. So, according to these two connotations, it can be inferred that the result of making aesthetic choices is the realization of the beauty of speech. It can impress listeners, have a positive affective influence, and bring them comfortable and pleasing aesthetic perception. To make it clearer, in this research, aesthetic choices are the behavior of constructing utterances based on the laws of beauty to attract learners' attention to language and provide them with a pleasing aesthetic experience.

Qian (2004: 66-154) has explored how language structures and levels can be constructed according to the laws of beauty, i.e., the aesthetic choices at each language level. Language levels include sign, channel, speech variety, style, communication type, speech act, sound, word, sentence, and discourse. *Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standards* (*OHSECS*) issued by the Chinese government (2020: 21) has stipulated the content of vocabulary teaching, including its sound, pronunciation, meaning, and usage. So, given the purpose of this research, it will primarily investigate the aesthetic choices at the language level of sound, word, sentence, and discourse. Based on their property, their relation can be summarized as follows (see

Figure 1). Moreover, Qian (2004: 132-151) has generalized the laws of beauty to make aesthetic choices at these four levels, respectively.
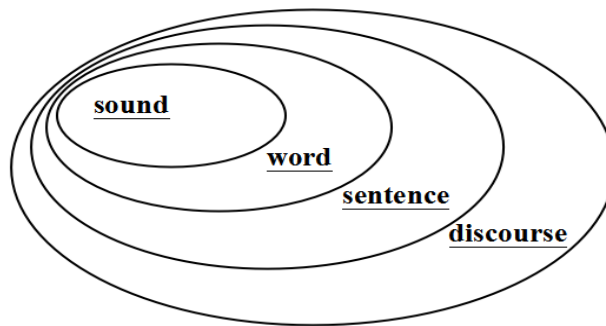
Figure 1. Four levels' relationship

At the sound level, firstly, speakers speak most fluently and comfortably (Qian, 2004: 132-134). Speakers regularly make the airflow according to a particular law and stress to make a rhythmic and harmonious sound. Secondly, speakers attach importance to the vowel. The most salient feature of vowels is that they can be prolonged and loud, which impress listeners the most. Thirdly, speakers apply the laws of form beauty in writing to that in speaking, like making sentence patterns neat, adjusting speech rhythms to make balance, and making speech rhyming. Finally, speakers develop a habit to produce sound beauty consciously and then make it into a law to guide or confine the way to speak or pronounce. Generally, people would tend to make their speeches convenient and pleasing.

Regarding the word level, it is necessary to note that there are two aesthetic choices on this level. The first aesthetic choices happen when encountering it. The word that our brains choose to store is different, which may be related to their career, personality, interest, attitude, aesthetic concept, and so forth. Here only the aesthetic concept, interest, and attitude relevant to this topic will be focused on. Before entering our minds, words will be judged by our aesthetic concepts. Learners will remember the ones they are interested in while the others are not. The second aesthetic choices happen in output. For external causes, what is spoken will be related to social and personal acceptability. It may be concerned with the elements mentioned above for internal reasons. As regards aesthetic concepts, different speakers output their words consciously or unconsciously with their aesthetic standard, although the latter one is much more common.

Concerning the sentence level, aesthetic choices in this level has two meanings (Qian, 2004: 143-150). The first is that the sentence structure itself conforms to some characters of form beauty. The second is that for aesthetic mentality, individuals have preferences in it. The first is affected by the whole nation, as the subjects of aesthetic choices, permeating the nation's aesthetic mentality, like variety, simplicity, order, symmetry, and so on. The principal aesthetic mentality that affects sentence structure is the pursuit of order. It also requires both variety and variability in unity and integrality. For the English language's form beauty, it has its own way of explaining it. For simple sentences, there are six key types. "SV" structure is a "1+1" balanced structure. They are the same with "V" as the axis for the rest. They all are balanced in both time and space. There are "coherent conjunction" and "single conjunction" for compounded sentences. An example for the former is "not only...but also...". The latter is "SVO+While+SVO". While for the seemingly imbalanced one, like the conjunction's change of stance, speakers can use a "compensatory device" to balance it in time. The second subject is the individual language user. Speaking is a kind of creation as no language is set. As no leaves are the same, it is hard to study an individual's aesthetic preference for sentence patterns. Its study requires further discussion.

According to Qian (2004: 151), "aesthetic choices at discourse level is underpinned by the aesthetic choices at the above three levels and the character of form beauty at these three levels will be reflected in discourse". These are the minor parts of the aesthetic choices at the discourse level. The macro part contains two aspects. On the one hand, it emphasizes three principles, including clarity, economy, and expressivity principle, which are the minimized requirements (Qian, 2004: 151). The clarity principle requires speakers to make sentences' meaning clear. The economy principle believes that the less word it uses, the better it is. The expressivity principle suggests making sentences vivid. On the other hand, it highlights the logical beauty of the layout (Qian, 2004: 151). To make the discourse transitional and logical, speakers need to pay more attention to the connectivity between sentences, phrases, and paragraphs.

Researching the study of aesthetic choices in the field of English teaching, some researches can be found. Li (2017: 1-7) explored the strategies of making aesthetic choices in discourse teaching. He revealed the content of aesthetic

choices at the sound, word, sentence, paragraph, and discourse level and explored the strategies of appreciating the beauty of discourse. Jin (2018: 89-93) is concerned about the aesthetic aspect of word selection in English writing teaching. She believed that writing is a process of making aesthetic choices. The improvement of writing ability is closely related to the cultivation of aesthetic awareness, which reflects the selection of words. She concluded the implication of teaching from rhythm, cultural mentality, and mindset.

Through literature review, it can be concluded that in the field of English teaching, its function is neglected by researchers. Few scholars have paid attention to the role of aesthetic choices, let alone its application in vocabulary teaching. But its application in word selection in writing teaching and discourse teaching may provide reference for this research.

2. Aesthetic Education in English Vocabulary Teaching

The implementation of aesthetic education in English vocabulary teaching is a necessary part of English curriculum objectives and an objective need to enrich teachers' vocabulary teaching strategies. The requirement has been stipulated in *OHSECS* to develop learners' healthy aesthetic taste and ability to appreciate. Furthermore, the research's topic is matched with the requirement of one of the six elements of English curriculum content, cultural knowledge. According to *OHSECS*, it is stipulated that in grade one of high school, teachers should try to develop learners' language sense through listening practice, imitation, and reading to promote their confidence and fluency in expression, so as to construct phonological awareness and ability. In optional compulsory courses, learners are required to discover and appreciate the rhythm and rhyme of literature. Learners are also required to create English poetry in line with rhythm and rhyme in the optional course (advanced). These requirements correspond to the research topic. With aesthetic choices, learners will be more willing to imitate, speak and express. It is easier to meet the demands with a positive motivating drive. Furthermore, for cultural knowledge, in compulsory courses, learners should perceive and experience the beauty of English language beauty in learning activities. In optional compulsory courses, learners need to understand and enjoy the beauty of English language expression form, like rhythm. Then in optional courses (advanced), learners observe and appreciate the aesthetic components in discourse, like form and content, to have aesthetic experience so as to develop aesthetic perception ability. From "perceive and experience", to "understand and enjoy", then to "observe and appreciate", higher demand can be seen apparently, and the application of aesthetic choices can help to achieve it.

Only few researches that concern the connection between aesthetic choices and foreign language teaching can be found. For example, Li (2017: 1-7) had ever tried to interpret the basic strategies of aesthetic choices at the discourse level by analyzing the ways to construct speech beauty from the level of sound, word, sentence, paragraph, and discourse, aiming at implementing aesthetic education in discourse teaching. Jin (2018: 89-93) explored the ways to improve learners' word selection in writing based on aesthetic choices.

Concerning aesthetic choices and vocabulary teaching, it is important to figure out how the aesthetic choices can be integrated into vocabulary teaching theoretically. Therefore, the compatibility of aesthetic choices and vocabulary knowledge is the top seed. As we know, vocabulary knowledge can be divided into four dimensions, i.e., pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and use. The four language levels of aesthetic choices are sound, word, sentence, and discourse. Concerned with their definitions and properties, their relationship is shown as follows (see Figure 2).
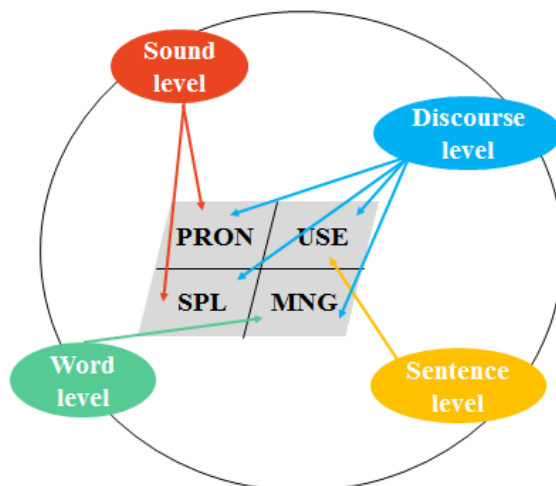

Figure 2. Relationship between aesthetic choices and vocabulary

The aesthetic choices at sound level are beneficial to the teaching of vocabulary pronunciation and spelling. The implicit feature makes both teacher and learners easy to articulate as the language is more likely to be rhythmic in many cases. This drives learners to read and remember the targeted sentences more easily. Moreover, this law of beauty at the sound level highlights the role of vowels to make the utterances resounding. Meanwhile, *Book for Senior High School English Teachers* published by China's People's Education Press (Zhang, 2019: 13) emphasizes teaching spelling rules in vocabulary teaching as one of the necessary vocabulary learning strategies to learn in senior high school. Learning strategies refer to "the special thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (J. Michael, O'Malley & Chamot, 1990: 1). Research indicates that "appropriate use of language learning strategies improved L2 proficiency overall, or in specific language skill areas" (Oxford, 2002: 126). Also, the use of strategies promotes the development of autonomy within learners (Brown, 2007: 130). Therefore, as an important role in dividing syllables, which is the basis of teaching spelling rules, vowel's emphasis is conducive to vocabulary learning and teaching, especially to its pronunciation and spelling.

According to the aesthetic choices at the word level, language learners tend to absorb and output the words that conform to their own aesthetic perception. Concerning elements related to aesthetic perception, it is necessary for teachers to provide learners with what they are interested in, what can impress them, and what can get into their minds. This property is in correspondence with learners' learning process. From the view of cognitive psychology, Gass put forward a theoretical framework of second language acquisition. Gass (1997) used five stages (see Figure 1) to explain the language transformation process from input to output, including apperception, comprehended input, intake, integration, and output (qtd. Chen, 2006: 88).
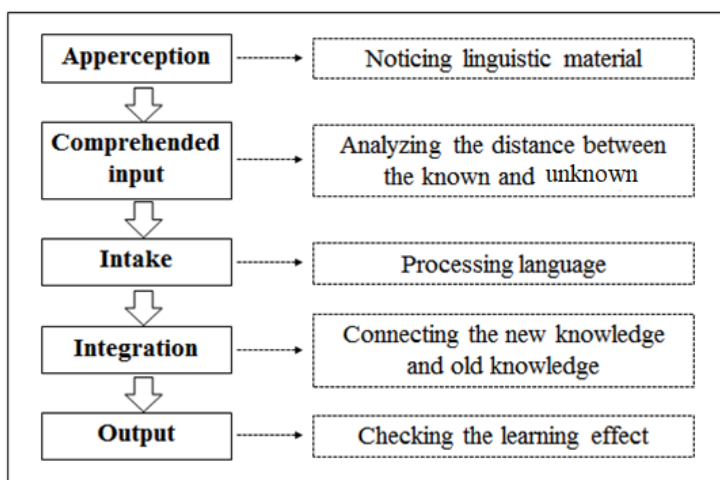

Figure 1. Foreign language learning process

Apperception is the first stage of the language acquisition process. It is the process of noticing the linguistic material, which the aesthetic choices try to achieve. With the aesthetic choices, learners are more likely to get into the apperception stage so as to promote the following learning stages. Also, it is the priming for learners to tell what learners need to learn, understanding the distance between the known and unknown (qtd. Chen, 2006: 88). It drives learners to put their attention on vocabularies' meaning. Besides, learners may be more willing to output the preferable, engaging, and aesthetic linguistic material in the output stage. Thus, considering the properties of aesthetic choices, it implies its close relation with the teaching of the meaning.

Similar to the word level, the sentence level has much to do with individual aesthetic perception, but the common nature of human's preference for symmetric, succinct, and simple sentences gives insights into this research. Constructing these kinds of sentences in vocabulary teaching is recommended to improve the first and the last stage of the foreign language learning process. A symmetric sentence may give learners visual and psychological comfort. Succinct and simple sentences may lower the bar for learners to read and understand and draw learners' attention more to the vocabulary itself. Therefore, coming to the aesthetic choices at the sentence level, it may point to the teaching of vocabulary's use to a larger extent.

According to Qian (2004: 151), aesthetic choices at the discourse level reflect the ones at the other three levels. Thus, theoretically, its application may be conducive to all four aspects of vocabulary teaching. Besides, its emphasis on the logic of discourse gives another insight. It is suggested that teachers pay more attention to the

framework and structure of the lecture and the vocabulary knowledge itself. This advocates the emphasis on systematic teaching. Making the lecture logical and systematic can make the class a whole and give learners a more profound impression. The vocabulary itself has its system. Making this system logical and having a clear idea of its relation is helpful for teachers to explain the knowledge. Furthermore, it conforms to the foreign language teaching principle proposed by Shu. Given the nature of language and features of foreign language teaching and learning, Shu (1996: 118) put forward five principles that the foreign language teaching generally adheres to, including systematic, communicative, cultural, cognitive, and affective principle. With various subsystems, language is a system that reflects the working results of the subsystems. Vocabulary system is one of them. Naturally, its teaching should take it as a whole and teach it systematically. It also inspires that the aesthetic choices at these four levels should be systematic and interactive as a whole. So these four levels are connected by a circle in Figure 2.

3. Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Based on Aesthetic Choices

Therefore, based on the previous studies and the study of the theoretical attempt of implementing aesthetic education in vocabulary teaching, some tentative vocabulary teaching strategies based on aesthetic choices are put forward. All of them are closely connected with the thematic context.

Strategy one: Connecting the vowels closely to teach the pronunciation and spelling of vocabulary based on the spelling rules

Teaching spelling rules is significantly conducive to teaching vocabulary pronunciation and spelling. As the basis of applying the spelling rule, syllable division is closely related to the vowels. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the vowels in vocabulary teaching and learning. Besides the explicit way, teachers can use the teaching tools to achieve the purpose physically. For example, in blackboard or PowerPoint, teachers can over-strike and color the vowels to attract learners' attention to it.

Strategy two: Using phonetic rhetoric devices in sentence construction to make it more readable and rhythmic

Using phonetic rhetoric devices such as alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia in a sentence can give readers a sense of rhythm, fluency, and pleasure which may lower the mental threshold for readers to repeat and may be easier for them to read and memorize. There are four kinds of it, including alliteration, consonance, assonance, and onomatopoeia.It should be noticed that it would be better if phonetic rhetoric was used in the target words. Also, it would be better if it was closely related to its other essential knowledge points.

Strategy three: Using figures of speech in sentence construction to give learners a deeper impression

There are two basic aspects in English rhetoric, i.e., figures of speech, including communicative rhetoric and aesthetic rhetoric. In general, communicative rhetoric stresses, logical thinking and accurate narration, aiming at effectively playing language's communicative function (Fan, 1992: 1). While using logical thinking, aesthetic rhetoric evokes vivid images through figures of speech to make the language alive and achieve artistic expression effects, focusing on being corresponding with context and situation as well as using imagination and association (Fan, 1992: 1). They are different but interrelated. In *OHSECS*, it is stated that the commonly used rhetorical devices include figure of speech, personification, emphasis, irony, hyperbole, antithesis, and so forth. They point at the content beauty of language.

Strategy four: Making example sentence symmetric, succinct, and simple

In vocabulary teaching, example sentence is commonly used in explanation and exercise. It is an example to show how the word is used. Therefore, to get to the point, no extract attention should be wasted. To make the sentence symmetric, succinct, and simple not only can improve effectiveness for learners to learn but also is a way to process the language deeper and make the thought clearer. What's more, some essential sentence patterns and lexical chunks can be connected with it to improve teaching effectiveness.

Strategy five: Making vocabulary teaching a logical and systematic whole

Instead of rote memorization, it is essential for teachers to make their vocabulary teaching logical, systematic, and associative. For one thing, this step guarantees that teachers can truly and fully grasp the knowledge. For another, it helps learners to have a clear understanding of the structure and framework of vocabulary knowledge which can improve learners' associative memory. This can apply to the teaching of vocabulary knowledge and the design of the whole class, the whole unit, and even the whole semester, which is especially beneficial to the general review.

4. Conclusion

Vocabulary teaching strategies are systematic behaviors that seek to maximize vocabulary teaching effectiveness under the guidance of teachers' cognition of certain teaching philosophies and teaching situations. It is so crucial for vocabulary teaching that aesthetic education should be integrated into it. The following can be inspired by the research: Firstly, teachers are suggested to highlight the teaching of words' pronunciation, combining with the spelling rules; secondly, teachers are advocated to emphasize the use of phonetic rhetoric devices; thirdly, teachers are supposed to construct a simple sentence with a clear structure; and fourthly, it is suggested that the significance of the systematic and logical way of teaching should never be neglected.

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