

On Aesthetic Education in College General English Class

Xiaoli Zhang

Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of aesthetic education and shares some ways to implement it in college general English class, aiming to invite more fellow teachers to engage in the exploration of this field.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic education; Aesthetic elements; College general English class

1 The Importance and Necessity of Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education is important, as almost all experienced learners can feel. Through perception, appreciation, and emotional resonance of beautiful things, people are inspired to have rich imagination and profound understanding. This is a process that harmonizes sense and sensibility, helping individuals build a rich emotional world and delicate perceptual capacity, which is crucial to both physical and mental health as well as the perfection of personality. Throughout history and across cultures, the significance of aesthetic education has been emphasized by many educators. Confucius once said: "One is inspired by *the Book of Songs*, established by the rites, and perfected by music." Cai Yuanpei, the father of Chinese modern education, believed that aesthetic education could cultivate emotions and elevate the spirit, possessing universality and transcendence, and in an age of scientific prosperity, it could replace religion as a means of fostering sound personality. The German philosopher Hegel wrote in his book *Lectures on Aesthetics* (Vol. 1): "Aesthetic apprehension carries with it the character of liberation: it lets the object stand in its freedom and infinity, instead of reducing it to an instrument of finite needs and intentions to be possessed and utilized."

In today's world, aesthetic education is especially necessary. On the one hand, modern society is increasingly competitive, with an overwhelming emphasis on efficiency. As a result, people are generally anxious and unable to slow down, and university students cannot remain unaffected by this atmosphere. On the other hand, algorithmic recommendations and fast-food culture are becoming ever more prevalent. With the rise of short-form video and social media, people's attention is increasingly fragmented, making it difficult to focus on any one thing for long. Against this backdrop, if college English classes are to capture students' attention and be worth their time and attention, its teaching content must be enriched and enhanced. Incorporating high-quality aesthetic elements in general English class can not only enrich classroom content and prevent it from becoming monotonous and boring but also nourish students' spiritual world, inspiring them toward ever broader horizons of the mind.

2 Aesthetic Elements That Can Be Integrated into College English Classes

Aesthetic contents that can enrich and enhance college English classes take various forms, such as music, film, poetry, drama, musical, photography, etc. Teachers have to choose the most appropriate to suit their class. In my teaching practice, two criteria are considered in selecting the appropriate content: first, it should facilitate the understanding and extension of textbook content; second, it should interest students with aesthetic edification. The following are some examples of aesthetic elements that I have used with good results.

2.1 English Songs

Generally speaking, English songs are a commonly used form of aesthetic materials. Their advantages lie in appropriate length, direct aesthetic appeal, and moderate level of appreciation difficulty. For example, when teaching Unit2TextA *The Gratitude We Need* in *21st Century College English (Reading&Writing Course, Special Edition, Book 4)*, I chose the classic song *Amazing Grace* to echo the theme of this article. The following are its lyrics:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.
 When we've been there ten thousand years,
 Bright shining as the sun,
 We've no less days to sing God's praise
 Than when we'd first begun.

The song is about four minutes long. During the first listening, students were required to focus on the listening and fill in the missing words in the lyrics without being shown the MTV video. The blanks for the missing words were designed to fall on the rhyming words (i.e. the underlined words in the lyrics above). After the blanks were filled, I briefly explained the general meaning of the lyrics, then guided students to discover its rhyming pattern, thus helping them understand the rules of English poetry composition and gain some insight into the source of the song's emotional power. It must be pointed out that teacher's guidance here is important—for without the teacher's prompting, most students would remain unaware of these rules or patterns. Once the general meaning was understood and the rhyming patterns were explained clear, students listened to the song a second time. During this time, no task was assigned; students simply listened to the song while watching the MTV video, immersing themselves fully in the appreciation of the music.

2.2 Video Clips

Today, video resources are extremely abundant. Video clips can be excerpted from TV programs, films, speeches, variety shows, etc. However, this does not mean that finding perfectly suitable material is easy—actually it requires a combination of various fortuitous circumstances.

When studying Unit3TextA *Stevie Wonder: Sunshine in the Shadow of 21st Century College English (Reading& Writing Course, 3rd Edition, Book 1)*, we came across a sentence: "Other toy sets followed; then an uncle added a toy harmonica, and Stevie learned to play it so quickly that everyone was amazed." I paused to ask: "what does harmonica playing sound like?" While some students would try to recall and describe the sound of harmonica, most students looked quite unsure. I went on to play a video clip taken from *The Oprah Show*. This clip was recorded in 2004 and lasts about four minutes. It mainly features Jake Simpson singing Stevie Wonder's song *Isn't She Lovely*. Before Jake came to the front stage to meet the audience, Oprah introduced some information about him to the audience: Jake was the champion of the *Search Star* program, where he had proclaimed that he was a big fan of Stevie Wonder and that Stevie Wonder had had a tremendous influence on his life; Jake actually thought he was to talk about his big win on *Search Star* and had no idea at all about the secret arrangements the *Oprah Show* production team had made. All the while, Jake was placed in another soundproof room backstage, knowing nothing about what was going on on the front stage. After the introduction, Jake came on stage in high spirit. Before he began singing, Oprah purposefully asked about Stevie Wonder's influence on him. Standing on stage, Jake sincerely told the audience: "He is the coolest guy, he is so into being a real person, he is such a great writer, he is so spiritual and everything..." Then music started and Jake began to sing. The climax occurred at about 40 seconds into the song, when the harmonica melody—distinct, strong, and moving—was added to the musical accompaniment. At the same time, the background doors behind Jake slowly slid open to the left and right, revealing Stevie Wonder standing inside, engrossed in playing the harmonica to accompany him. The audience, who could see everything happening behind Jake, immediately burst into cheers and rose to applaud. Jake, facing the audience, had no idea what was happening and continued singing. A moment later, when he turned slightly and caught a glimpse of Stevie Wonder playing the harmonica, he actually jumped in the air, obviously taken aback and unable to believe his own eyes. Overwhelmed with excitement, Jake could barely go on singing, when Stevie Wonder loudly encouraged him: "Sing it, Jake!" Jake immediately resumed singing and walked over to his idol. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they brilliantly finished the rest of the song together.

Every time I share this video in class, students are captivated and left with a deep impression of Stevie Wonder and wanting to know more about Jake Simpson. What touches them most, beyond the heartfelt music, the beautiful voice, and the outstanding musician, I believe, is the sincere loving interaction between people and the production team's ingenious arrangements. In the face of sincerity, beauty and ingenuity, one can only be moved and inspired, overwhelmed by a sense of purification and elevation. Aesthetic content adds a bright touch to class when used appropriately—it carries energy and vitality. My experiences of being moved and inspired together with students have also convinced me that collective aesthetic experiences can transcend many barriers to build emotional resonance.

2.3 Poems

Once during class, while discussing this example sentence—"The entomologist was amazed by the patterns on the butterfly's wings under the microscope"—a little poem suddenly flew into my mind. So I wrote it on the blackboard and read it aloud with my students, savoring its beauty together. Here is its full text (It is the first stanza of *Auguries of Innocence*, a poem written by William Blake):

To see a world in a grain of sand
 And a heaven in a wild flower,
 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
 And eternity in an hour.

I asked the students to reflect: "What is the intrinsic connection between this example sentence and the poem?" One

student said that the poem, in its poetic language, explained superbly why the entomologist was stunned by the patterns on the butterfly's wings under the microscope—because through them, he sensed the infinite wonder of the world. Another student said that both the sentence and the poem were about discovering the breathtaking beauty of the universe through seemingly insignificant things...By pausing to savor a short poem, the students could gain fresh insights unwittingly. Though it may have seemed like a brief digression, it somehow made this English class different and imaginative.

2.4 The Beauty in Translation

When teaching Unit1Text A *Who Is Great? in 21st Century College English (Reading&Writing Course, Special Edition, Book 4)*, I shared with my students that one of the great figures in my mind is the translator Mr. Xu Yuanchong. I cited a short excerpt from his English translation of Li Qingzhao's *Sheng Sheng Man* (Slow, Slow Tune) to demonstrate how exquisite his translation is:

I look for what I miss,
I know not what it is,
I feel so sad, so drear,
So lonely, without cheer.

In just four short lines, there is both end rhyme and alliteration. It not only lives up to the conventional translation standards "faithfulness, elegance, and expressiveness," but also embodies Mr. Xu's "Three Beauties" translation theory—"beauty in meaning, beauty in sound, and beauty in form." Poetry is language in its most condensed form; writing a poem in one's native tongue is already no easy feat, let alone translating it into English? Let alone doing so with such aptness and grace—isn't that truly great?

There is yet another kind of beauty in translation—the beauty of seeking truth from facts, of rigor and meticulousness. Reading Mr. Chen Dezhang's book *Translation Errors Analyzed*, I have been deeply impressed by the author's craftsman's spirit that "reveals itself in the finest details." In class, I would inadvertently mention Mr. Chen and cite some examples from his book, and I found that these, too, could serve as an aesthetic edification for the students. For example, the English proverb "There is no fire without smoke", which if you look up online, the Chinese explanation for it is "无风不起浪" or "事出有因". However, as early as in 2007, Mr. Chen Dezhang had explicitly pointed out that this was an error in translation. The accurate meaning of this proverb is "凡事有利必有弊" (there is no advantage without disadvantage). Clearly, in this proverb, "fire" stands for advantage and "smoke" for disadvantage; what the proverb emphasizes is the inseparable relationship between benefit and harm. At the same time, Mr. Chen recommended another English proverb which does mean "无风不起浪"(no wind, no waves) or "事出有因" (there is a reason for everything), and the proverb is "There is no smoke without fire", which emphasizes the causal relationship between fire and smoke. Mr. Chen also noted that this proverb is often used to mean that "rumors usually have some basis and are not groundless," and is rarely applied in other contexts. The students was puzzled at first, but after detailed explanation, they finally understood and often felt a sense of awe by the subtleties in translation.

Excellent, responsible translation is no easy job—just like any work of art that possesses aesthetic value.

2.5 Chinese Calligraphy

Once in preparing for a listening class, I encountered an audio material about a Chinese woman describing how practicing Chinese calligraphy had brought about positive changes in her body and mind. I deeply resonated with this, as I myself have been practicing calligraphy in recent years and have benefited tremendously from it. I wanted to take this opportunity to help students learn a bit more about calligraphy and ignite their curiosity and interest in it. So I gathered some calligraphy-related material and prepared carefully for the lesson. In the class, after finishing the listening exercise, I displayed the following calligraphy work on the screen and asked the students about their feelings upon viewing it.

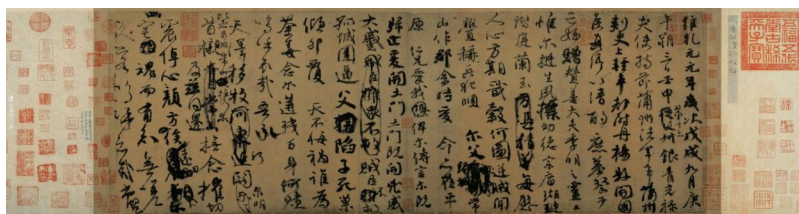


Figure 1 Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew (Ji Zhi Gao) by Yan Zhenqing

Some students looked confused. Some said, "I don't feel anything special," while others remarked, "It seems written in a hurry, because there are too many corrections," or "I can't understand the Chinese characters on it, but I feel the brush writing is good." I proceeded to tell them that this piece of writing was Yan Zhenqing's *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew (Ji Zhi Gao)*, renowned as the "Second Best Running Script In the World." Next, I played a video clip featuring the famous host Dou Wentao's heartfelt tribute to the art of calligraphy on his talk show program *Round Table (Season 4)*. In the video, Mr. Dou said he particularly loved appreciating Chinese calligraphy, and whenever he encountered a work he admired, he would feel his "spirit was captivated." A few years ago, there was a calligraphy exhibition in Japan displaying the authentic

work of Yan Zhenqing's *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew*, quite a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. Despite the expensive airfare, Mr. Dou flew thousands of miles to see it. When he arrived at the exhibition, the queue in front of this particular work was extraordinarily long; after waiting for over half an hour, he could only view it a few seconds, which he felt was far from enough. He decided to line up again to see it for the second time, and for the second time and in those few seconds, he found himself all in tears before the work and was finally pulled away by force by the police (or security personnel) from the work. When Mr. Dou spoke of calligraphy, his eyes sparkled with passion and conviction — only true love can produce such expression. I raised questions for students to ponder: "Why would this piece of running script make Mr. Dou fly thousands of miles to Japan?" "Why was Mr. Dou all in tears before this work—what did he see?" "Why is our response so different from Mr. Dou's?" For these questions, I did not provide immediate answers; instead, I invited the students to contemplate and search for answers on their own after class. Hopefully, this hurried glimpse of the calligraphy work and these questions plant a seed that will blossom into something far greater in the future.

3 Factors to Be Considered in Selecting Aesthetic content

Given the limited class time and the required tasks inherent to the curriculum, the following are the factors teachers usually need to consider when selecting aesthetic content:

3.1 Natural Integration

Aesthetic content should be relevant with the class theme, complementing it rather than competing with it. Aesthetic content should never be forced into the lesson merely for their own sake. Natural integration is in itself an art, offering a smooth and pleasant experience.

3.2 Appropriate Duration

Aesthetic elements, if too long, risk overshadowing or diverting from the main subject. That said, homework assignments can accommodate more extensive aesthetic content. For instance, I once assigned an oral task requiring students to select their favorite piece from thirty specified classic English essays, then to select one part from their favorite piece that gave them the greatest expressive pleasure, and then to read it aloud and record it as the oral submission. Obviously, after-class work takes much more time.

3.3 Moderate Level of Appreciation Difficulty

Whether poetry, lyrics, or calligraphy, the threshold for appreciation should not be set too high from the outset. Excessive difficulty may intimidate students, causing them to keep their distance from these great works rather than embrace them.

3.4 Timely Guidance from the Teacher

Teachers need not be experts in art but should have genuine awe for and proper understanding of the aesthetic content. When students overlook something significant, timely guidance from the teacher can make the focus differently and understand better, thus opening the channel which aesthetic energy goes through to nourish them.

3.5 Be Prepared or Spontaneous

Admittedly, most aesthetic content requires careful preparation. However, occasionally, spontaneous material proves equally effective—much like that excerpt from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* or examples from Professor Chen Dezhang's books.

4 Conclusion

In an era dominated by technological rationality, aesthetic education guards sensibility, intuition, and the sense of meaning, enabling the individual to become a complete human being. Therefore, aesthetic education should not be confined to art classrooms alone; it should break down disciplinary barriers and permeate naturally into the teaching of all subjects. College general English classes should not be merely about vocabulary and grammar. Its goal should not be simply to pass exams such as CET-4 or CET-6. If these were its only goals, the college English classes would have difficulty engaging students. Advanced English learning should be like taking care of a beautiful garden. Though effort is required to take care of the garden soil, pest control, etc. there are sweet spiritual rewards that follow labor, like appreciating all kinds of flowers in different seasons, listening to birds singing in its fresh air. Nourished by vibrant elements of beauty, students would want to revisit this garden again and again and take it as an energy booster in their life.

About the Author

Xiaoli Zhang, M.A., lecturer, research fields are college English teaching, translation, second language acquisition.

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