

A Study on Chinese EFL Learning of English Pronunciation from the Perspective of Aesthetic Linguistics*

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Abstract—English phonetic learning, as the beginning of learning a foreign language, is of great importance in EFL learning. However, the present Chinese EFL learners' phonetic learning is not satisfactory. Based on theories of aesthetic linguistics, this paper analyzes the aesthetic attributes of English pronunciation and intonation, including the beauty of sonority, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, and succession. And then pedagogical implications are proposed about how to raise EFL learners' aesthetic consciousness and creation of English pronunciation.

Index Terms—aesthetic attributes, aesthetic awareness, English pronunciation, beauty, speech sounds

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to speak a language, people need to master one hundred percent of phonetic knowledge, fifty to ninety percent of grammar knowledge and ten percent of vocabulary (Gimson, 1980). Hence, learning pronunciation is extraordinary important in learning a foreign language. Meanwhile, teaching pronunciation is an important and difficult part in teaching a foreign language.

In China, although EFL pronunciation teaching has attracted great attention of many EFL researchers, and EFL teachers have made their great efforts to teach English pronunciation, effectiveness of teaching English pronunciation is not guaranteed. A large majority of Chinese EFL learners pronounce with strong accent, significantly different from the English native speakers (Gao, 2006).

During traditional English pronunciation teaching process, listening and imitating are regarded as two important links. In recent studies, some pronunciation software like Praat is adopted to help English pronunciation teaching (Meng, 2014; Kong & Yue, 2014), and contributes a little to English pronunciation teaching. However, in four years of learning English, Chinese EFL learners don't obviously meliorate their English rhythm with the improvement of their English proficiency (Chen, 2013). That is to say, generally speaking, there is not an effective way to improve Chinese EFL learners' English pronunciation and intonation.

On the basis of analyzing the current phonetic acquisition status in China, the paper will adopt concepts and theories of aesthetic linguistics, analyze aesthetic characteristics of English pronunciation and intonation, and finally propose some suggestions about English phonetic teaching.

II. PHONETIC ACQUISITION STATUS IN CHINA

Chinese researchers and teachers of English have proposed many ways to teach English pronunciation. For example, based on audio-lingual method, English phonetic teaching mainly adopts ways of correction, imitation and comparison to cultivate the habit of pronouncing English words and sentences; with communicative approach, teachers began to play stress on teaching suprasegments of English (Gao, 2011). All in all, researchers and teachers made great efforts in order to improve Chinese EFL learners' phonetic proficiency. However, according to the study of Hu (2013), EFL learners in China still speak English with strong Chinese accent, even dialectal accent. The present status of English phonetic learning can be summed as follows.

1. Weak in English rhythm

First, the common problem of Chinese EFL learners with English rhythm is that they don't distinguish the stressed syllable and unstressed syllable. The result is that they pronounce every syllable with the same force. In fact, this is the result of transfer of Chinese rhythm. The beauty of English rhythm is destroyed.

2. Monotonous and strange intonation

Generally speaking, students tend to adopt falling intonation to read every declarative sentence, and rising intonation

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to interrogative sentences. Flat intonation and rising intonation within a sentence are seldom adopted. Such makes their intonation is dull, lacking in change of intonation. Some students don't even follow the rules of English intonation, uttering sentences in a free intonation.

3. Lack of linking

One important phonetic phenomenon of English pronunciation in a fluent speech is that some speech sounds will be changed according to its phonetic context. So linking, loss of plosion, assimilation, and reduction are very common in fluent English speech. Chinese EFL learners seldom use these rules of sound change. As a result, they clearly and completely pronounce every phone and word, which bring about difficulties in understanding for the English native speakers.

All in all, Chinese EFL learners haven't mastered the natural and standard English pronunciation and intonation. The present teaching and learning status is not satisfactory.

III. AESTHETIC LINGUISTICS AND PHONETIC LEARNING

Aesthetics is a scientific study of aesthetic relationship between human beings and reality. Aesthetics mainly studies the laws of aesthetic activity and rules of beauty creation and appreciation, while language is an important social phenomenon in human society. From the perspective of communicative function, language is a tool for communication. From the perspective of ideational function, language is a special psychological behavior. From the perspective of information function, language is a system of auditory symbols. And from the perspective of aesthetics, language is the aesthetic object, because language has the aesthetic features which can arouse aesthetic sense.

Aesthetic linguistics is the study of aesthetic attributes of language and of properties and laws of daily speech events and speech acts which serve as communicative activities as well as aesthetic objects (Qian, 2004). In this chapter, the theoretical foundation for learning English pronunciation will be introduced.

A. *Aesthetic Attributes of Speech Sounds*

Pronunciation possesses its natural attributes and social attribute, of which the latter is represented by national or regional features of pronunciation. Vocal sounds, as the tool for communication, can express meanings and attitudes according to convention. However, this convention is the result of aesthetic choice. Language is the carriers of both culture and beauty.

Language has not only the function of communication, but also aesthetic value. Qian (2004) believes that language has aesthetic attributes which can arouse sense of beauty.

B. *Aesthetic Psychology and Preference of Human Beings*

According to Gardner (2011), human beings have eight intelligences, among which musical intelligence is the ability of perceive, identify, change and express music, and also it is the sensitiveness to rhythm, intonation, prosody or timbre. Aesthetic psychology and preference is universality of mankind. In a sense, the process of learning a foreign language pronunciation is one of learning how to appreciate vocal beauty of that language.

C. *Learning Pronunciation as an Psychological Process*

The process of oral language communication can be divided into three periods: pronunciation, transmission and perception. In the first period, the brain of the speaker guides speech organs to utter sounds, which is a process of change psychological phenomenon into physiological phenomenon. In the second period, sound is transmitted into the ears of the listeners, which is a physical process. In the third process, speech sounds are perceived by the brain of the listeners through the auditory organs (Lin & Wang, 2013). Both the first process and third process involve the psychological phenomenon. Therefore, the process of learning pronunciation of intonation of a language is a psychological process, in which perception of speech sounds is one important link.

D. *Aesthetic Process of Pronunciation*

Aesthetic process is a psychological practice, which includes aesthetic experience and aesthetic cognition and aesthetic perception. From Plato's era, visual sense and auditory sense are recognized as windows for entering aesthetic experience. Based on theories of aesthetic linguistics, learning pronunciation can be seen as a process of aesthetic process of the sound system of a language, in which the learners experience and perceive the beauty of the speech sounds of the language.

All in all, speech sounds has aesthetic attributes themselves; human beings have aesthetic preferences and psychology; leaning speech sounds is a psychological process; and aesthetic process of pronunciation is a psychological practice, in which aesthetic subjects perceive, identify, and evaluate aesthetic object—speech sounds.

IV. ANALYSIS ON AESTHETIC ATTRIBUTES OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

Sound world has its charm. However, not all sounds can create charm. Only if the sounds possess some attributes will they have charm—pleasing the ears or forming the aesthetic pleasure. Then, what kind of attributes sounds have can arouse aesthetic pleasure? Qian (2004) believes that only sounds that have rhythm, prosody and rhyme—musical

sounds—are melodious. Speech sounds have intrinsic attributes of forming rhythm, prosody and rhyme. Hence, speech sounds produced by human being are musical sounds. That people can recite poems, sing songs and operas is the very strong proof that speech sounds are musical sounds. What's more, speech sounds under normal condition can also form the attributes of musical sounds. In a word, phonological system has something similar to musical system in that speech sounds have two musical elements—prosody and rhythm.

Every language is an art for collective expression, in which aesthetic factors such as pronunciation, rhythm, and symbolism are not shared with other languages. That is to say, every language has its own aesthetic attributes. In this chapter, aesthetic features of English pronunciation will be explored in terms of beauty of sonority, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, and succession.

A. *Beauty of Sonority*

English speech sounds can be divided into two kinds—consonants and vowels. Consonants refer to those sounds that are produced with airstream meeting with some obstruction this way or that way while vowels refer to those sounds that are produced without airstream meeting with any obstruction. Vowels are important because they form the core of a syllable. The most obvious feature of vowels is that they are very sonorous and also they can be prolonged. Sonority of vowels makes them become musical sounds. The beautiful aria of Chinese Peking opera just depends on the lengthening of vowels.

To sum up, vowels are a kind of musical sounds, and the tonal quality is one of important factors that generate beauty of sonority. English has twenty vowels, so there are abundant resources for generating musical sounds in English speech sounds. Besides, English has twenty-four consonants. Various consonants plus sonorous vowels forms plenty of clusters of sounds. Beauty of English is reflected completely.

B. *Beauty of Rhyme*

A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds (or the same sound) in two or more words. From the perspective of place of rhyme, rhyme can be divided into alliteration, end rhyme and internal rhyme. Alliteration refers to rhyme formed because of the sameness among the beginning consonants of several words. End rhyme consists of perfect rhyme and imperfect rhyme. In the perfect rhyme, consonants and vowels are the same, while in imperfect rhyme, vowels are the same but consonants are not, which is known as assonance; consonants are the same but vowels are not, which is recognized as consonance. Now, let's appreciate the beauty of English rhymes.

For example, there is a poem entitled song written by Christina Rossetti.

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no rose at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree;
Be the green grass above me,
With showers and dew drops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

In this poem, “dead” and “dearest” in the first line alliterate, so do “sing” and “songs” in the second line, and “green” and “grass” in the fifth line and “with” and “wet” in the sixth line. Alliteration brings about impressive beauty of echoing each other in front and back.

End rhyme refers to the situation in which the rhymed words at the end of the line are the same in stressed vowels and the following consonant. For example, here is a poem written by Joaquin Miller.

Above you gleaming skies of gold
One lone imperial peak is seen;
While gathered at his feet in green
Ten thousand foresters are told.
And all so still! So still the air
That duty drops the web of care.

In this poem, “gold” in the first line rhymes with “told” in the fourth line, so does “seen” in the second line and “green” in the third line, and “air” in the fifth line and “care” in the sixth line.

Internal rhyme refers to the situation in which a word in a line rhymes the last word in the same line or a word in another line. For instance, here is part of the poem entitled the cloud written by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noon-day dreams.

...

In this poem, “showers” rhymes “flowers”, so does “shade” and “laid”.

From above, we can see that English poems are beautiful partly because of the rhymes. It's really difficult to express the beautiful meaning or images created by the beautiful English rhymes. The best way to experience the beauty of

English poems is to read it and enjoy it carefully. Listening to the English poems is also a better way to perceive and appreciate beauty of English pronunciation.

C. *Beauty of Rhythm*

English is a stressed-timed language, namely, intervals between two stressed syllables are equal (Zhou, 2005). Variation of words or syllables that have strong stress with those that have weaker or reduced stress is typical and contributes to the rhythm of English (Wang, 2005). That is to say, rhythm of English speech is formed by the recurrence of stressed syllables at more or less regular intervals of time and by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Beauty of rhythm refers to the beauty formed by comparison between rapidness and slowness of the sound, and stress and weakness of sounds. For example:

3-1 I THINK¹ he WANTS to GO.

3-2 I THINK that he WANTS to GO.

3-3 I THINK it was an EXcellent aFFAIR.

The rhythm patterns of the above sentences are shown one by one as follows.

3-4 • O • O • O

3-5 • O • • O • • O

3-6 • O • • • O • • • O

The symbol “•” represent an unstressed syllable, while the symbol “O” represents a stressed syllable. Although the length of the utterances is of difference, it takes almost the same time to utter them, because they all have three stressed syllables.

The te-tum te-tum rhythm of English creates beauty of sounds. Learners can enjoy the beauty of English rhythm when reading them with the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables and rapidness and slowness. Moreover, learners can perceive the beauty of English rhythm when they listen to English sentences.

D. *Beauty of Intonation*

English is a typical intonation language. Intonation refers to the total pattern of pitch changes, i.e. the rising and falling of the voice when a person is speaking, within in an utterance (Wang, 2005). English has two basic intonation patterns: rising and falling. When they go together, they can make a falling-rising tone. Sometime, there is flat tone in English speech. For example:

3-4 –Is ²John in?

--No, \John's ³not in.

English has its own intonation beauty. The wave of English intonation can bring about great aesthetic enjoyment. In order to show the beauty of English intonation, we use two lines to represent the pitch range of intonation. The lower line represents lower intonation, and the closer to the higher line, the higher the intonation is. Let's now use these symbols to show the beauty of English intonation. For example:

3-5 Do you prefer tea or coffee?

3-6 Swimming, which is a good sport, makes people strong.

Intonations of sentence 3-5 and sentence 3-6 are shown in Fig. 1.

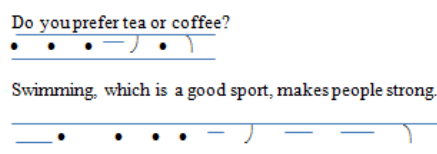


Figure 1. Intonation of sentence 3-5 and sentence 3-6

The beauty of English intonation is displayed in the process of alternating high and low pitch, and high, low or flat intonation.

E. *Beauty of Succession*

When speakers of a language utter, they don't produce the speech sounds one by one. Instead, they link the sounds of the words together, forming successive speech sounds. The beauty of successive speech sounds is displayed in the dynamic process of producing sounds.

English form flow of speech through liaison, assimilation, loss of plosion and reduction. Here is this paper, only liaison is analyzed. For example:

3-7 Look⁴at the one⁴ on the corner⁴ of the street.

¹ Capitalized letters (except “I” at the beginning of the sentences) represent stressed syllables.

² The symbol “²” represents rising intonation.

³ The symbol “\” represents falling intonation.

⁴ The symbol “⁴” represents linking between two words.

In the above sentence, there are three linking when people utter it. Words of the sentence flow out of the mouth, just like singing a song.

Based on what is discussed above, we are confirmed that English speech sounds are beautiful and they can create beauty. English pronunciation has the aesthetic value. And the beauty of English pronunciation represent in its sonority, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, and succession.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the discussion above, some suggestions are proposed in order to improve Chinese EFL learners' aesthetic ability of English pronunciation and intonation. According to Yang and Li (2004), cultivating aesthetic ability aims to improving aesthetic ability of perception, appreciation and creation. So, in this part, some pedagogical suggestions will be put forward about how to improve students' aesthetic ability of English speech.

A. *Improving Aesthetic Awareness of English Pronunciation and Intonation*

As is elaborated above, English sounds possess aesthetic attributes. Only if Chinese EFL learners are aware of the beauty of English sounds, can they become interested into it. Interest is the best teacher, and it is also the internal motivation for learning a foreign language.

Hence, at the beginning of teaching English pronunciation and intonation, the teachers can provide students some beautiful English poems, English songs, and so on. Once the aesthetic awareness of English is raised, learners can perceive and enjoy the beauty of English, and it will be effective to learn English pronunciation and intonation.

B. *Perceiving Beauty of English Pronunciation Instead of Correcting Pronunciation Mistakes*

One the one hand, in traditional English pronunciation teaching class, teachers keep focusing on teaching English segment. Namely, single speech sound, especially the one which is different from Chinese pronunciation, will be received great attention. Teachers spend plenty of time correcting the pronunciation of speech sounds. Students are very nervous, anxious and embarrassed when learning pronunciation, because their pronunciation will be corrected again and again. They feel frustrated during process of learning English pronunciation and intonation. And finally, they gradually lose interest in learning English pronunciation.

On the other hand, stress, rhythm and intonation of English are not paid sufficient attention in teaching pronunciation. Rhythm formed by alternation between stressed syllables and unstressed syllables and waving intonation are exactly the beauty of English pronunciation. Teachers should spend more time immersing students into the beauty of English rhythm and intonation, which lead students to perceive the beauty of English pronunciation.

In summary, the process of teaching English pronunciation is not the process of correcting mistakes, but the process of perceive and enjoy the beauty of English pronunciation.

C. *Meticulously Choosing Teaching Materials*

In traditional English pronunciation teaching class, it's very common for teachers to choose words and sentences as teaching materials. There is no context for reading these words and sentences. They are just isolated words or sentences. So, it's difficult for students to perceive the beauty of English pronunciation and the relationship between sound and meaning.

English poems, songs, and actors' lines can effectively reflect the beauty of English rhymes, rhythm, and intonation. Beauty of English poems shows itself in its rhymes and rhythm. Teachers can guide students to enjoy the beauty of alliteration, end rhyme and internal rhyme, and experience the artist images created by English sounds. Some of the English songs, such as country music and Rhythm and Blues, are melodious. It is easier for students to deeply be drunk in the beauty of the English songs. Even as for the rap in western songs, it shows the strong rhythm of English. In addition, actors' lines are often full of emotions, and they reflect the beauty of language by uttering sounds under a certain situation. Excellent actors have strong line skills, making listeners or audiences immersing quickly in the atmosphere through sonorous and forceful sounds or slow and expressive speech sounds.

In a word, English poems, songs, and actors' lines can help students perceive the beauty of sounds in expressing meaning. So, they should be chosen to enjoy the beauty of English during teaching Chinese EFL learners.

D. *Creating Beauty of English Pronunciation*

Awareness of the beauty of English pronunciation, enjoyment the beauty of it, and creation of beauty should be the three objectives of English pronunciation teaching. Of the three objectives, creating beauty is the most important, because the purpose of awareness and enjoyment of beauty of English pronunciation is to create it.

First, students listen to the chosen English poems, songs and actors' lines, and then teachers can guide them to discuss about the beauty of them. After perceiving and enjoying the beauty of rhymes, rhythm, and intonation several times, student can imitate them. During imitation, students should experience the beauty of English sounds and be immersed in it. The delight of aesthetic process is achieved, and students could be satisfied in reading or speaking beautiful English.

VI. CONCLUSION

Phonetic learning is the beginning of learning a foreign language. Phonological acquisition is based on language speech perception (Chen, 2013). English speech sounds are perceived as beautiful because of its sonority, rhyme, rhythm, intonation, and succession. Perception and enjoyment of English speech beauty can, on the one hand, arouse EFL learners' interest in learning it; on the other hand, create accurate, natural and beautiful English speech. Hence, in the process of teaching English speech sounds, EFL teachers can play emphasis on train learners' sense of perceiving beauty of English pronunciation and intonation, raise their aesthetic awareness, and improve their English phonetic proficiency through enjoying the beauty of English speech sounds. In a word, learners should discover beauty, experience beauty and create beauty in the process of learning English phonetics (Wu & Ding, 2011).

Nevertheless, suggestions about how to raise EFL learners' aesthetic awareness and creative ability of English speech sounds should be limited to what is discussed in the paper. Hopefully, on the one hand, some experimental research will be carried out to testify the effectiveness of English phonetic teaching based on aesthetic linguistics. On the other hand, other ideas and methods will be sought and applied in the future teaching of English pronunciation and intonation.

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