



# Foreign Language Teaching under the Guidance of Horace's *Art of Poetry*

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**Abstract:** *Art of Poetry*, also known as *Letter to the Pisos*, was a collection of Horace's response to Piso's request of poetry teaching to his son. A literary criticism work as it was, *Art of Poetry* was also a legacy of education. Horace put forward "combination of pleasure and usefulness" in *Art of Poetry*, which has great influence on literature creation and art value exploration in western world. From the perspective of foreign language teaching in China, the English teachers are supposed to be inspired by returning to the context in *Art of Poetry* and pay due attention to both pleasure and usefulness of language teaching.

**Keywords:** combination of pleasure and usefulness, form and content, foreign language teaching, content-based teaching, class games

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## 1. "Combination of pleasure and usefulness" in *Art of Poetry*

*Art of Poetry* by Horace is the main source for the principles of the creation of Roman literature, and a valuable reference to learn ancient Greek literature. It is a regular correspondence between Horace and the Pisos. Although the letter is casual in form, it is highly logic in content. *Art of Poetry* speaks well for Horace's opinion on the unhealthy academic atmosphere of Roman literature world. (Xinguo Ma, 2008)

As it had been widely discussed, the letter can be divided into three parts: the first part goes for a statement about principles of writing by and large; the second part is on the classifications and rules of poetry with a focus on plays and tragedy specially; the third part is devoted to the function of poetry, the genius of poets and the significance of criticism.

"Combining pleasure and usefulness", one of the main points proposed by Horace in *Art of Poetry*, suggesting that the function of poets is not only to bring pleasure and benefits to readers but also to impart knowledge and provide guidance. Horace said that a poet should possess beauty and charm. The idea of mixing teaching with pleasure generated great influence on classical literary as well as artistic theories and creation in the 18th century. As a matter of fact, this idea is one of the criteria to value the artistic work till today. (Mingbo W, 2022)

By "teaching", Horace meant not only the instruction of social morals but also the spreading of knowledge. In terms of the function of poets, it should be aimed at the cultivation of respect towards high moral standards, simplicity, justice, order and laws; it should inspire people to accept culture, draw a demarcation line between Gods and man and set up laws and etiquette for couples. (Davis G, 2010) The goal of "teaching" must be realized by means of pleasure. The function of teaching poets should stay in close connection with the specific symbolization which amuse people, for the viewers can only be cultivated and illuminated while he or she is appreciating beauty.

The pleasure of poets does not equal the pleasure of readers. Hence, to transmit their pleasure, poets need to use some specific forms or structures, such as language styles, popular tastes in fashion and so on. Only in this way is it possible for the public to accept their notion of pleasure and happiness. While the pleasure of poets is transmitted through artistic works, the teaching of the poets could be received by readers. It is proper to draw a conclusion that pleasure and teaching is an unified entity in the mind of poets, which should be transmitted in forms and content well-accepted by readers or viewers, and the process is the pleasure of readers. This kind of "pleasure", on the one hand, is the prerequisite for the resurface of the "pleasure of poets", on the other hand, a necessity for the "teaching of poets" to influence readers. Otherwise, neither the teaching nor the pleasure of poets will meet its end.

## 2. Illumination Drawn from *Art of Poetry*: Equal Priority on Form and Content in Foreign Language Teaching

For many foreign language learners, to learn a new language is to memorize books of new words and to crack difficult grammar chunks into pieces, which takes lots of time and effort. In this case, foreign language teachers who can combine pleasure with usefulness would make the learning process forward smoothly. In other words, to make the teaching more

effective among learners, a scientific teaching method should be a good combination of content and form, as Horace had shown us in *Art of Poetry*. In order to evaluate a foreign language teaching method, it is necessary to make a bird view of its counterparts in the past. Following is a brief conclusion of teaching methods used in the forgoing foreign language teaching activities:

## 2.1 Grammar-translation Method

"The most traditional approach is to treat second, or foreign, language learning on a par with any other academic subject. Long lists of words and a set of grammatical rules have to be memorized, and the written language rather than the spoken language is emphasized." (George Y, 2000:193)

It is reported that learners leaving school and having achieved high grades in French class via this method, typically find themselves at a loss when confronted by the way the French in France actually use their language. This language teaching method used to be popular in each language learning levels in China till the last decade.

## 2.2 Audiolingual Method

"A very different approach, emphasizing the spoken language, became popular in the 1950s. This involved a systematic presentation of the structures of the second language, moving from the simple to the more complex, often in the form of drills which the student had to repeat." (George Y, 2000:193)

Much of this practice involved hours spent in a language laboratory repeating oral drills. However, the isolated practice in drilling language patterns bears no resemblance to the international nature of actual language use. Moreover, it can be incredibly boring.

## 2.3 Communicative Approaches

More recent reversions of the second language experience can best be described as communicative approaches. They are practically a reaction against the artificiality of the "pattern-practice" and also against the belief that consciously learning the grammar will necessarily result in ability to use the language.

Although there are different versions of how to create "communicative" experiences in the second language classroom, they are all based on a emphasized on meaning rather than the forms of languages (i.e. correct grammatical or phonological structure). Lessons are likely to be organized around concepts such as "asking for things" in different social contexts, rather than "the forms of the past tense" in different sentences.

## 3. Games in English Classes — Representation of the Content-based Method

The content-based method, a current popular trend, is obviously a relatively successful combination of form and content. In regard to English teaching in classrooms, English teaching games set examples to follow. To drive the point of the practice of "combination of pleasure and usefulness" home, it is necessary to investigate some typical games in classroom.

The word relay race. In this game, students are divided into two groups, the first students from each group choose a word and write it on the blackboard. Then the second students from each group write the seconds words and the first letter of their words should be identical with the last letter of the first words chosen by their group members. The team which finishes their lists with more words within limited time wins the game.

The race of consulting dictionary. It is suggested that the words to be located in this game should be new words that students are going to learn. In this way, this game can serve as a warm-up for new lessons. Scores of students are measured by the teacher, who read a new word several times for students and after the teacher's reading, students should consult their dictionaries to find out the meaning and the first category of this word. The fastest student in consulting dictionary will be the champion.

The guess game. The object to be guessed can be a thing, a person, an animal or a kind of plant. This game is designed at improving students' skills in using a foreign language to ask questions and solving problems. Mistakes of students in speaking should not be corrected on the spot, rather they are encouraged to ignore mistakes and move on their expression.

To conclude this part, games have been playing a positive role in foreign language teaching. They provide students knowledge as well as pleasure. Teachers make their point better received through spreading and creating pleasure in classroom. What's more, as in the case of other teaching method in language teaching mentioned above, the ignorance of a combination of content and forms finally resulted in futile efforts to some extent.

## 4. Conclusion

In *Art of Poetry*, Horace elaborated the educational function as well as the recreational function of artistic works, and he

put equal emphasis on these two respects of art. In a more general sense, "teaching" should include a comprehension of social and individual mentality. Poem, the appreciation of beauty, the spreading and medium of realization of this beauty, is the fruit of poet's mind and emotion. This is to say, the teaching of pleasure. In this sense, when a poem reappears in the appreciation of its readers', the teaching of pleasure, namely, the value of poet is finally transmitted to its readers'.

The enlightenment we get from Horace is that the realization of beauty and the transmission of its value depend to a large degree on the form through which its beauty is presented. Therefore, in the field of foreign language teaching, a kind of art to impart information or knowledge to people, it is significant for us to realize that the achievement of teaching is closely connected with a relatively appropriate combination of content and form. As to language teaching, "forms" can be viewed as teaching methods, materials and the ways to conduct teaching activities. Classroom games adopted in middle school or high school English classes suggest inclination of teachers to pay attention to the importance of forms. However, the successful foreign language teaching and learning is a combination of multiple factors. To improve the efficiency in learning and teaching, the combination of pleasure and usefulness is a necessary respect to dig into.

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