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Oral Proficiency in *English for Scientific and Professional Purposes* (ESPP): new paradigms in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to Italian Professionals

Abstract

The teaching and learning of oral English to adults who require excellent fluency for professional or study purposes deserve special, ever-increasing attention in consideration of the use of this language on a global scale within the domains of work and research, as well as in everyday practice.

The contribution endeavours to provide a concise yet sufficiently comprehensive and exhaustive synopsis of some of the most scientifically established theories and practices on the subject of teaching oral English to non-native adults. The study of the segmental and suprasegmental features of the language, presented in an English-Italian contrastive perspective, as well as the practice of public speaking, aims to outline the distinctive characteristics of a "grammar of oral" that is founded on an in-depth analysis of the soundscape of the language investigated.

Keywords

ESPP, Oral English, English Phonetics, English Pronunciation, English Prosody, Public Speaking

1. *Introducing ESPP*

Acronyms such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes), ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes), ESP (English for Special Purposes), and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) are widely recognized within the field of applied linguistics, particularly among scholars engaged in the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign languages. However, there are more and more compelling arguments for the introduction of a new framework: ESPP (English for Scientific and Professional Purposes), advocating a full integration both of pedagogical practices and a significant area of academic inquiry (Zanola 2023).

The conceptualization of ESPP arises from the need to enhance adult learners' proficiency in English, not only in terms of linguistic competence but also pragmatic functionality. This is particularly critical in the context of today's increasingly globalized, multilingual, and multicultural professional environments (Lockwood

2019). Unlike younger learners, adult professionals – whether in the theoretical, or natural or social sciences or the humanities – are often required to engage in high-level discussions, present complex arguments, and share their expertise with colleagues, clients, or specialized audiences. Consequently, the primary challenges for these learners lie in ensuring the quality of their communication, understanding the communicative context, and selecting the appropriate register. Furthermore, when making decisions regarding lexico-grammatical choices, they must account for factors such as communicative intent, audience, and the specific context of their interactions. It is common for learners to be acutely aware that their linguistic abilities can have direct implications for their professional performance and, by extension, their career trajectories.

Based on the above, ESPP is posited as an emerging field within English language and linguistics, with a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency with which both native and non-native speakers use English in professional settings. In the following paragraphs, the development of this research area is advocated, both within academic circles and beyond, with particular attention to an audience of Italian adult learners, focused on their future professional achievements.

It is suggested that this development could serve as a corrective to the long-standing widespread tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The necessity for updating and strengthening the ESP tradition is twofold: firstly, to facilitate learners' linguistic development, and secondly, to facilitate their personal and professional growth. Despite the considerable demand for English proficiency across a variety of professional domains, and the existence of a substantial body of academic literature on the subject, there remains a distinct lack of comprehensive answers to the specific communicative needs – both written and oral – that arise in professional contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language. In the following pages, the oral skills required for ESPP will be described, beginning with the foundational concepts of phonetics and phonology. The complexities involved in teaching and learning pronunciation and prosody will be also explored. The contribution will conclude by providing an analysis of public speaking within both academic and professional settings, emphasizing the intercultural, personal, and contextual elements that can impact the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of presenting in English, extensively drawn on deep expertise and practical experience in the areas of oral communication and public speaking in professional environments.

2. *Oral proficiency in ESPP*

It is an established fact that oral communication has become a significant aspect of scientific and professional activities, both in person (e.g. conferences, debates, meetings) and remotely, thanks to the numerous tools available to the public in today's digital age. It is a less commonly acknowledged fact, even among language teachers, that oral proficiency displays distinctive characteristics that distinctly differentiate it from written text proficiency. In numerous instances, the 'grammar of

oral English' has been contrasted with the 'grammar of written English' (Balboni 1998; Freddi 1994).

The distinguishing features of this phenomenon are evident in two key aspects: firstly, in the more evident facets of orality, such as the pronunciation of phonemes and prosody (rhythm, accent, intonation); and secondly, in the domain of textuality. Oral professional communication in English is widespread throughout the international community and characterised by a significant variety in users and speakers. In the future, it seems that both native and non-native English speakers will pursue clear, comprehensible and effective communication in the scientific field of their studies and research. Such occasions will address just as many native and non-native English speakers who will be strongly motivated to receive and assimilate clear, comprehensible and effective content. After all, nowadays it would be anachronistic for a professional using English to wonder whether the British or American English pronunciation would be relevant for their performance (Jenkins 2003, 125).

In other words, the matter of the effectiveness of oral communication requires a preliminary assessment of what could be considered 'clear, comprehensible and effective' for a generally international audience. Such an audience also extends to the public of recipients of much of the current international scientific and/or professional communication in English.

2.1 Listening and speaking in ESPP

Oral communication in English within international professional contexts lends itself to many theoretical and applicative considerations in the intersecting area between research in and teaching both specialised languages and applied phonetics and phonology.

Decades have passed since the journal *System* forcefully sustained how important pronunciation should be in language training in general. In particular, Taylor (1991, 425), in his contribution to a special issue dedicated to this topic, asked important questions on the purpose of teaching the pronunciation of English as a means of global communication. The implicit presupposition of teaching has always been that learners should be 'intelligible'. Nevertheless, Taylor was the first to ask to whom they should be intelligible and if that means that there are criteria of universal intelligibility. Most of the work that has been carried out to date in foreign and/or second language teaching assumed that such intelligibility was in reference to a native speaker. However, if English no longer belongs to native speakers, and if the latter are no longer involved in many transactions in English, perhaps such an assumption is no longer valid. In a similar context, it could be useful to teach native speakers how to understand non-native speakers.

The paradox outlined by Taylor revealed to be true in certain cases. Indeed, understanding non-native speakers seems to be problematic even for native speakers, as testified by Lindsey's work (2019), which is dedicated to the most recent trends in terms of *received pronunciation*. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the aim of teaching and learning how to speak well is not just that of merely to make it easier

for a future communicator to be understood. Therefore, non-native speakers must continue to understand native speakers. An important step in this direction consists in 'tuning into' the sounds and rhythms of a language that has been so hastily exploited, used and abused whereas it should be listened to, loved and treated with patience, concentration and true awareness of its surprising internationality.

For a long time, the literature on EFL has repeatedly insisted on carefully planned oral training. Textbooks have dedicated increasingly rich and varied sections to enhancing oral comprehension and productions skills. In the late 1990's, Italian textbooks attempted to give form to *oral grammar* (revised in the 2000s in Huart 2010), as opposed to written grammar (Balboni 1998; Freddi 1994). Despite this enforcement of oral skills in English language courses, the practice and study of pronunciation remain marginal, as if they were an afterthought of language training that were limited to drills, minimal pairs and repetition exercises. It also seems that, in honing one's learning of oral language, the phonetic and phonological elements of a foreign language do not require the same slow and laboured acquisition process that is involved in mastering morphology, syntax, vocabulary, language functions and communicative acts. In contrast, linguists have been underlining for a long time that oral skills must be the priority in planning the annual teaching programme, for 'it is fundamental to start from speaking. It is necessary to teach proper pronunciation – in particular, the student must be accustomed to recognising and reproducing intonation and rhythm' (translated from Gobber 2011, 63).

Teaching and learning pronunciation present their own peculiar difficulties. As opposed to syntactic structures, which may be reordered and taught/learned in progression ranging from simple to complex, and vocabulary, which may be categorised based on thematic areas, frequency lists, and areas of interest, the phonetic and phonological aspects of a language cannot be grouped according to any of the above criteria. All such criteria could potentially be present starting from the first lesson without any of them having any priority over the others. It is the responsibility of the instructor to systematically address phonetic reflections (at the segmental and suprasegmental levels) in relation to linguistic considerations throughout the standard training curriculum. The acquisition of pronunciation must invariably be pursued at two distinct levels:

1. at a segmental level, by practicing vowels, diphthongs, triphthongs and consonants, while paying special attention to oppositions that are significant in English but probably absent in the foreign language;
2. at a suprasegmental level, by noting: *a*) the typical phenomena of *continuous speech* in English (assimilations, deletions, weakening, etc.). They often interfere with the sound chain according to codified rules and 'coordinate' single phonemes during the creation of the soundscape of this language[1]; *b*)

[1] We hereby translate the expression 'soundscape' from the French *paysage sonore* to refer to the mental representation that each person has of a language. The expression was imported by Lhote (1995, 21) from *The New Soundscape* by the Canadian Schafer who, in a publication dated 1979, presented a reflection on the role assumed by people within the sound environment that surrounds them.

the specific role of intonation in oral production in English; *c*) the peculiarity of stress rhythms of English compared to other languages.

It is therefore urgent to take stock of the main difficulties that a non-native speaker or listener will encounter in areas connected to international oral communication (lessons, conferences, debates, dialogues and meetings in academic or professional contexts). The persistent weaknesses in the apparatus of oral English training in multiple international professional areas have often been highlighted by those who, even after years of continuous language studies, complain of failures in their performance.

2.2 The success factors of a performance

There are numerous factors that contribute to the success of a performance in oral English. Among the best known, at least six may be indicated (German 2017; Grice *et al.* 2019; Osborn and Osborn 2006; Osborn *et al.* 2007):

1. The ability to use a direct style with the interlocutor;
2. The speaker's adjustment to the audience's behavioural and socio-cultural habits;
3. The degree of effectiveness of the start of an oral communicative act (be it a trivial conversation or a presentation in public), or the positive impact of the speaker on the listener;
4. The strong contents and excellent quality of the performance;
5. The gestural element;
6. The perfect balance between *verbal delivery* and *verbal style,* or in other words the harmony between a correct and cohesive performance and a clear and effective expository style.

Our considerations will start from this last factor and will focus on a non-native speaker's conditions when they will have to use English in front of an international audience. Indeed, for a non-native speaker, four elements are pivotal in determining a successful performance:

a) *a high degree of motivation.* A speaker's strong motivation to fully understand and make a native English interlocutor completely understand their communicative intensions and thoughts could lead the speaker to gradually and naturally assimilate the native's model.
b) *experience in using the non-native language for professional communication.* A consistent number of stimuli, contexts and diverse communicative situations in a speaker's professional environment enhances their familiarity with a language whose sounds are unfamiliar.
c) the subject's strong natural disposition. Regardless of the speaker's communicative experience, age and level of schooling and/or education, there are ways and times for personal reactions to the assimilation of new notions and adaption to the new sounds and melodies of spoken language.

d) *the subject's 'selective' exposure to the target language.* In addition to motivation and experience, the quality of communicative experiences in extra-professional contexts may also reveal itself as a conditioning element in the search of a satisfactory pronunciation model. Those who have personally experienced the failure of a communicative interaction due to 'bad pronunciation' or lack of reception of unfamiliar sounds and intonations are now compelled to gain awareness of the importance and urgency of approaching a suitable model.

In conclusion, while a non-native English speaker can successfully communicate by maintaining the sound habits of their language, their communicative intentions will be frustrated if their speech is interrupted by another speaker with a different linguistic background who uses the English sound system. In most cases, the non-native speaker's lack of knowledge of English sounds will result in the exchange's success only if the context helps the interlocutors.

2.3 The failure factors of a performance

In international professional contexts, the non-native speaker sometimes complains of a performance's failure due to difficulties in understanding the interlocutor. Suffice it to think, of the awkwardness that occurs during a conference when the question of a native speaker in the audience is not fully understood by the non-native presenter. Such inconveniences in listening comprehension may be determined by an unfamiliar linguistic variant, the speed of the speech, or lack of familiarity with the accentual, rather than a syllabic, rhythm that characterises the English language. When reflecting on these factors, it is important to remember that there are always:

a) phonemes that are present in one language and absent in another;
b) phonetic oppositions that are phonologically/functionally relevant in one language and redundant (phonologically/functionally not relevant) in another.

As a result, a non-native speaker using the English language will use phonemes that are unfamiliar because they are rare or totally absent in their native language. Therefore, even a non-native English speaker with a high level of proficiency in the language may still encounter difficulties when it comes to the sounds of English for at least three reasons. Firstly, the communicative effectiveness of the speakers has never been compromised despite errors in pronunciation. Consequently, the speakers' interest in or willingness to include unfamiliar English sounds and rhythms into their speech has never been triggered. Secondly, due to the extensive experience in written English and the ability to visualise certain words, as opposed to hearing or uttering them, the speaker tends to read and pronounce the word in accordance with the automatisms in oral production that are characteristic of their native language. Thirdly, despite the acquisition of phonetic theory, the speaker may experi-

ence a sense of foolishness or a lack of spontaneity if they were to genuinely implement the model of the native speaker.

None of these reasons are so serious as to constitute a true obstacle in optimising a spoken communicative exchange in English. Once again, the combination of theory and practice is the best solution. The mere imitation of any model is not a guarantee of lasting results. The phonemes and intonation units that are typically considered to be the most challenging are often less frequently encountered in both use and perception. Indeed, a sound that is perceived as anomalous or unusual may be consciously refused or misinterpreted to a lesser or greater extent. The training of 'sound imagery' (Lhote 1995, 33; Zanola 1999, 18) to new phonemes and phonological oppositions necessitates a considerable investment of time and remains a gradual and delicate process.

2.4 The limit of acceptability

Regarding oral production, there are limits to the extent to which the performance in English of a non-native speaker may be considered more or less acceptable. In accordance with the parameters outlined by Gimson (1978, elaborated by Cruttenden 1994), the minimum degree of acceptability at which a non-native speaker is able to comprehend a given text is as follows:

a) understand a native speaker in any authentic communicative context;
b) communicate with a native speaker in a manner that is both appropriate and accurate.

For this to occur, it is necessary for the non-native speaker to dispose of:

1. the twenty vocoids (twelve monophthongs and eight diphthongs) present in standard English;
2. clarity regarding the distinction between minimal oppositions that are significant in the English language (primarily the long-short vowel opposition).
3. twenty-four contoids, some of which may be acoustically similar, but not identical, to their non-native counterparts (for example, /p/, /t/, /k/ sounds that are aspirated in accented syllables; /t/, /d/ as alveolar rather than dental sounds; post-alveolar /r/);
4. familiarity with common phenomena of elision and assimilation;
5. familiarity with the accents, pauses and intonation of spontaneous spoken language.

2.5 Model and models of pronunciation

Non-native speakers of English are aware that their pronunciation tends to imitate an established model. In the context of international communication, such a model should be as 'careful and colloquial' (as phrased in Cruttenden 1994, 271) as possible. Non-native speakers are advised to aspire to precise and comprehensive oral production, with a focus on the full range of possible variants, particularly those that are characteristic of everyday conversation.

The existence of a universally applicable English language that encompasses the numerous variants spoken around the world is both unrealistic and unfeasible. After all, it is highly improbable that any English speaker would acknowledge a variant that only partially recalls their own (Crystal 1997; McArthur 1998). For many years, the teaching of oral English has been anchored to one of the many extant models that most closely represented the British or American pronunciation. In principle, such a model was required to:

a) achieve maximum geographical and social spread;
b) be readily and comprehensively intelligible to all individuals;
c) serve as the most accessible point of reference for any student in all textbooks;
d) be reproduced and achieved in the majority of texts intended for listening, or for the process of reproduction.

For years, the undisputed ideal candidate for this sort of model has been the British *Received Pronunciation* (RP), followed by *BBC English* and *General English* (Zanola 2000, 5). However, it seems that these models are no longer valid, as English is no longer a foreign language (FL) but rather a common Second Language (L2), especially for professional and academic purposes (Vinogradova and Shin 2021). This is particularly true for RP considering that the native speakers of such a variation make up for less than 3% of the British population (Trudgill 2001).

In view of the increasing spread of global and international English (Zanola 2012), the RP variant seems to be one of the most complicated for native speakers for various reasons (Jenkins 2003, 125): the significant number of diphthongs, the non-rhotic 'r', the complex rules on accent, the extensive use of weak forms. Further factors on an international level include the widespread of American models of pronunciation and many speakers' attachment to the accent of their native language precisely to distinguish themselves from native speakers.

2.6 A proposal for an EIL pronunciation

Three alternatives to the combination of *Received Pronunciation* and *General American* have been devised, in the following order: the approach of phonetician Gimson; the system developed by pronunciation expert Jenner; and the method devised by linguist Jenkins.

1. *Gimson's proposal*: An article dated 1978, *Towards an international pronunciation of English*, theorised an artificial phonological model capable of reducing the number of phonemes of the English language from 44 to 29. A *Rudimentary International Pronunciation (RIP)* was conceived for the category of *English as an International Language* (EIL) speakers of the time who needed to speak English in relatively predictable and circumscribed professional situations.
2. *Jenner's proposal*: The hypothesis presented by Jenner in the 1997 article *International English: an alternative view* was the only alternative to Gibson's

twenty years later. Jenner's hypothesis was based on the idea that there is one shared phonological system among all the speakers of English in the world. International English is therefore simply the common ground of the phonological elements found in all variants of pronunciation. Such an approach has the advantage of representing almost all variants without identifying its origin but it also presents significant disadvantages, first and foremost that of needing an imposing corpus of data and the enormous difficulty of identifying suitable criteria for analysing this corpus.

3. *Jenkins' proposal* (2002; 2003): In her *Lingua Franca Core (LFC)* model, the Londoner scholar considered the possible combination of an artificial approach like Gibson's and an empirical approach like Jenner's. It therefore represented a taxonomy of fundamental or, vice versa, accessory elements, to ensure the mutual comprehension of two speakers of international English. Whilst the study is undoubtedly interesting and useful, the inclusion of data such as rhythm, accents and weak forms among the non-core features is not considered to be a viable proposition. Indeed, research has demonstrated that while such prosodic elements may be considered secondary in ensuring the effectiveness of oral production, they are often essential for oral comprehension.

Despite the partial validity of each of the three models, knowledge of the segmental and suprasegmental elements of the English language is the *conditio sine qua non* of a conscious development of oral comprehension skills. The following paragraphs will thus centre on the fundamental components of theoretical and applied phonetics of the English language, as perceived from the contrastive perspective of a non-native English speaker, specifically Italian.

2.6.1 Segmental features

Regardless of the approach that is adopted for the study and practice of pronunciation, it is essential to be aware of the sound system that characterises it. Every language is made up of a limited number of phonemes that native speakers are able to identify with ease upon hearing and reproduce with minimal difficulty. However, different languages are distinguished by the number and nature of single phonemes. Consequently, the following possibilities may emerge:

a) phonemes are present in one language but absent in another;
b) phonetic oppositions that hold significance in one language are not significant in another.

The training and practice of oral English must include considerations about phonetics in relation to both aspects starting from the first lessons. A non-native speaker who seeks to learn English must be aware that there are 'new' phonemes that have never been used in the sound system of their native language. Therefore, they must be highlighted with care from the very beginning and practiced until they become familiar.

Today it seems there are no longer any 'absolute' or 'real beginners' of English because anyone can claim to have even a minimum knowledge of English. After all, many anglicisms have entered other languages and the teaching of English has spread enormously. Moreover, in teaching practice even an 'advanced student of English' (where 'advanced' refers to a student who is well versed in morphology, syntax and vocabulary) may be considered a beginner in a course in English phonetics. As previously mentioned, there are several underlying causes of this phenomenon. The following are some of the main reasons, which will now be outlined in more detail:

a) the communication of a learner in this situation has never been compromised up until now despite their errors in pronunciation; as a result, the interest in or desire to insert unfamiliar English sounds into their repertoire has never been triggered;
b) in the study curriculum of an English learner, writing has had a prominent role. It has been demonstrated that most errors in pronunciation occur after the learner has seen the word in writing (Al-Nabhani and Ranjbaran Madiseh 2025). That leads them to read, and therefore to pronounce the word in accordance with the automatisms of their oral production;
c) although the learner has a passive knowledge of English phonemes, they refuse to apply such knowledge because they believe it would be unnatural or ridiculous;
d) there are physiological-articulatory problems that impede the learner from pronouncing certain sounds (this rarely occurs and has usually already been reported in their native language).

2.6.2 'New' phonemes

There are numerous sources that provide definitions on the segmental features of the English language and range from handbooks on general phonetics (Canepari 1979; Malmberg 1974), to those on English phonetics (Gagliardi 1991; Porcelli and Hotimsky 2001), to dictionaries of applied linguistics (Bright 1992; Crystal 2010). For learners, the following elements are of particular importance:

a) Descriptions;
b) Initiating the learning process with their current level of proficiency, with a focus on the specific phonemes of the English language that are not yet familiar and therefore appear novel.

Good performance cannot be achieved through imitation alone. It must accompany the descriptive phase, as one supports the other. Mere imitation cannot ensure lasting results because the learner must understand *how* the production of a new sound occurs; realise that the apparent novelty of the sound is due to the fact that their phonatory apparatus has had to reproduce other sounds but not that one; become aware of the mobility of their apparatus and its extraor-

dinary ability to adapt to all phonemes like a musical instrument that adapts to any note.

Each time, it will be the trainer's task to point out to the non-native speakers which English phonemes they may not be familiar with. This must be accompanied with examples of common monosyllabic vowels, such as:

a) *cat /kæt/* often incorrectly reduced to the /**ɛ**/ of *bène;*
b) *big /bɪg/,* which tends to be pronounced with the /i/ of *vino;*
c) *pub/pʌb/,* commonly pronounced with the /a/ of *casa;*
d) *look /lʊk/,* conveyed with the /u/ of *uva,*

or in the case of common diphthongs like:

a) the diphthong /əu/ of *no, don't, won't,* too often assimilated with the open phoneme /o/ of *porta* or the diphthong /ou/;
b) the diphthong /eə/ of *chair,* reduced to the single phoneme /ɛ/ of the Italian *bène,*

or, finally, with consonant sounds that are frequent in English but not in Italian like those which correspond to the underlined graphemes of *think*, *that*, *road*, *hotel.*

It is also necessary to underline that the sounds that are supposedly 'difficult' for an Italian/non-native speaker include not only those that are completely 'new', but also those that are perceived as closer to familiar sounds. The most obvious example is that of the diphthong /əu/: Italian speakers often struggle to realise that the grapheme <o> of words like *so, home, go, don't* or even simple the exclamation *oh!* is related to a diphthong.

2.6.3 Relevant oppositions

From the very beginning, English teaching must dedicate time to identifying phonological oppositions that are in the target language but absent in the learner's native language. A Japanese learner, as opposed to an Italian learner for instance, does not distinguish the lateral /l/ from the vibrating /r/, nor do they recognise the voiceless consonants /p/ of the voiced plosive /b/. This is so problematic for them that the well-known and almost globally used *I love you* could be pronounced as *I rub you*.

The English language presents significant oppositions that an Italian/non-native speaker cannot decode as such. However, if the learner is not aware of the opposition that distinguishes the lexemes *law* and *low*, or *meal* and *mill,* or even *marry* and *merry,* it will be difficult for them to perform such sounds correctly. Practising phonetic oppositions is important, and trainers can easily encourage them in learners by starting with oral drills and then moving on to transitioning from oral to written production. Italian learners often struggle to distinguish the following oppositions when completing dictation or listening comprehension exercises (adapted from O'Connor and Fletcher, 1989):

a) /æ/ ~ /e/ opposition
   You have been using my pan/pen, haven't you?
   He lost his bat/bet.
   We heard the cattle/kettle from a long way away.

b) /iː/ ~ /ɪ/ opposition
The peach/pitch was bad.
The children were badly beaten/bitten.
Did you feel/fill it?

c) /ɒ/ ~ /ɔː/ opposition
They couldn't find the fox/forks.
The cod/cord isn't very good. The pot/port was very old.

d) /ɔː/~/əʊ/ opposition
The hole/hall is enormous.
I think your bowl/ball is in the kitchen.
We're going to the show/shore next week.

e) /s/ ~ /z/ opposition
The price/prize was wonderful.
Be careful, don't sip/zip too fast.
He only has a few pence/pens left.

f) /n/ ~ /ŋ/ opposition
She's a terrible sinner/singer.
He ran/rang home.
I think they will ban/bang it.

Listening skills are the fundamental means of honing the learner's sensitivity to such oppositions. Through careful listening, learners can:

a) hear the differences between individual phonemes first, and then those between English and Italian phonemes;
b) recall sounds of the English language that have been heard but not yet assimilated;
c) compare the use of the same phonemes within multiple words they have heard.

We have already underlined how the phonemes that are identified as 'most difficult' are very often simply those that seem to be less familiar for the learner's listening and use. Learners' mistakes reveal that there is no easier labial sound than a velar sound, not a more difficult long vowel than a short vowel, or a consonant that is easier to pronounce than a vowel. The true problem is that speakers generally do not want to change their 'phonetic habits'. A sound that is perceived as anomalous or unusual could be rejected or misunderstood.

To avoid this, after practising listening comprehension, it is important to spend time working on reproducing sounds slowly and patiently. At the beginning, the learner may not be able to reproduce the sound perfectly because the centre of phonetic control, which is responsible for the movements of the phonetic apparatus,

is subjected to new stimuli and must therefore activate unfamiliar mechanisms. Making one's soundscape accustomed to new phonemes and phonological oppositions is a gradual, delicate process that certainly cannot be underestimated.

3. *The pronunciation course*

Any 'poor pronunciation' of English is due to a deviation from the standard pronunciation. This deviation contains information about the speaker's native language and their phonetic habits. This is particularly evident when pronouncing proper and place names, which speakers tend to pronounce in a way that is closest to the soundscape of their native language. An example of this is the Spanish name *Juan*. The entry of *Juan* in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* of Jones (1991) reports as follows: «Juan /hwɑːn/, as if Spanish /dʒuːən/, US /hwæn/». The dictionary entry points out the fact that, while recognising the correct pronunciation of the name *Juan*, a speaker of English will tend to avoid pronouncing the unfamiliar velar /χ/ and substitute it with the aspirated /h/ or the fricative /ʤ/ that they are used to. The same name may therefore lead to the variations /ʒuan/ in French, /ʤuan/ in Italian, /ʸuan/ in Swedish, just to name a few.

In order to plan the teaching of spoken English to foreigners, it is necessary to have a preliminary understanding of the phonetics and phonology of the foreign. Rather than offering a course in English pronunciation, it would be more appropriate to offer a course in English pronunciation for native speakers of a certain language. These courses should include:

a) a list of sounds that will be identified as 'new';
b) a list of phonological oppositions in English;
c) support in the form of registered, transcribed or printed material created specifically for the course, or carefully selected from existing handbooks, to practise listening to and producing 'new' sounds and significant oppositions.

3.1 Suprasegmental traits

The theoretical study of English intonation has endured very intense development in history. From the end of the XVI century to the present day the literature on the topic has multiplied and created the premises, and often the basis, for the most recent studies on phonetics and applied linguistics (Zanola 2002; 2004). Now, we can sustain that research on the acquisition of intonation in language learning and on intonation as a universal linguistic feature, along with the volume of studies carried out on all levels by the various schools of theoretical and applied linguistics, have enormously contributed to improving knowledge on intonation in general and on English in particular. It is only thanks to gathering 'exact' data that studies on intonation have been able to progress. Despite this, problems in theoretical research have emerged for various reasons: because previous studies have not always stemmed from a quantitatively and qualitatively valid corpus; because some theories

were devised and built on subjective bases; because terminology is still an 'anarchic' field (Bright 1992; Crystal 2010, see the entry for *intonation)*.

Nevertheless, intonation has always occupied a marginal role in teaching and learning a foreign language from a pedagogical perspective. Prosodic components in general have often been neglected, treated in a chaotic manner or presented as an appendix in the handbooks and lessons of English courses. At the beginning of the 1950's there was already a perceived urgency to go beyond merely teaching segmental and favour suprasegmental components. At the end of the same decade Kingdon (1958) reported that English phonetists were compelled to admit that the progress of their students in intonation was disappointing compared to learning the sounds of the language. Such disparity seemed to be a result of the fact that phonetics was taught on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of isolated sounds before combining them in words and sentences, while intonation was taught after a superficial description of contrasting intonations by reading a large number of sentences. These sentences were usually classified based on their tunes in the hope that this repetition would enable students to master and correctly apply them (Kingdon 1958, XV).

Kingdon's observation still stands true, as the teaching of English phonetics is all too frequently limited to the correct articulation of phonetic segments. The element of intonation has been underestimated for too long because it was believed that it could be acquired by simply listening and repeating, and therefore imitating, models of reference. MacCarthy (1978, 47) reasoned along these lines of thought in the 1970's, for instance, when claiming that intonation was still too hard to define in order to be somewhat relevant for native English speakers. The direct imitation of a good model was therefore more than sufficient and adequate repetition and imitation of the teacher were important.

Having experienced the problems associated with teaching a language, phonetists themselves recalled the importance of prosodic elements in the teaching context. This is what Léon and Martin (1972) sustained in those same years when pointing out that intonation is apparently the most difficult element when learning a foreign language. There are, in fact, good chances that faulty intonation will never be corrected regardless of the used methods (1972, 141).

3.2 Intonation and oral communication

Any haphazard approach to teaching intonation could compromise the achievement of the entire communicative process. Pike (1945) has taught us that intonation has a strong semantic component: the speaker tends to react more to the meaning that is conveyed through vocabulary because they perceive intonation as the means of the interlocutor's most authentic intentions. We report an excerpt from one of Pike's most famous passages (1945, 22):

> If someone says, «Is breakfast ready yet?» the sentence is either innocuous or an insult according to whether it is spoken nicely or nastily – and if the insult is resented, the speaker defends himself by saying, «I just asked if breakfast was ready, and she flew into a rage». This illustrates the fact that the intonation contours, though fluc-

> tuating like the speaker's attitude, are as strong in their implications as the attitudes which they represent; in actual speech, the hearer is frequently more interested in the speaker's attitude than in his words – that is, whether a sentence is 'spoken with a smile' or with a sneer.

If a non-English speaker does not even know the basic notions of English prosody, they risk not only being misunderstood when speaking in a foreign language, but even not understanding their English interlocutor. An error in pronouncing a sound does not necessarily hinder communication because a possible ambiguity may often be solved within the context of communication itself or through further information provided by the speaker. On the contrary, misplaced intonation may result in the interlocutor's interpretation diverging from that desired by the speaker (Hewings 1995).

Such a consideration further enforces the idea that, when teaching English, intonation should not be underestimated even in school textbooks, where it is often confined in brief appendixes. As a matter of fact, repeating aloud is the only technique of learning the most common intonational contours of the English language that is proposed in most of the available workbooks and schoolbooks.

3.3 Psycholinguistic considerations

Research on language acquisition in children confirms the fact that intonation plays a fundamental role in communication processes. According to these studies, children activate an imitative mechanism starting from their fifteenth or sixteenth month. They begin by imitating animals, cars and the sounds that are most familiar (doorbells, telephones, etc.). In this respect, the observations of Fronzaroli (1957, 53) are of particular interest:

> Certain examples lead to think of the imitation of musical intonation. Frontali remembers that his daughter Nora repeated the alarm from a nearby factory with an *uuu* sound, and therefore a musical note, while the other daughter, upon hearing the call *Nora!* divided into two notes, where the first was higher than the second and the third an interval, tried to repeat the vowels and two notes together, thus uttering two consonants that were undefined and difficult to reproduce *(Our translation from the Italian original version).*

Through imitation, the child would supposedly achieve more articulate and dense forms of communication thanks to the support of suprasegmental, rather than segmental elements. According to Lewis (1936, 115) the period for imitation starts around the seventh month. Soler (1978), instead, argues that such a period starts at the ninth month. From the ninth month onwards, there is a decline in the child's babbling, accompanied by an increase in the production of sounds that more closely resemble those used by adults in sentence structure.

The immediacy with which a child approaches intonation is out of the question. The English phonetician Roach sustains that the only truly efficient way to learn the intonation of a language lies in the way a child acquires intonation of their first

language. Training in oral English should help adult learners acquire English intonation in a similar (though much slower) way (Roach 1989, 115).

Crystal (1975, 125-158) points out that children who are unable to speak are still able to react to vocal intonation. In addition, they are able grasp and reproduce certain intonational patterns way before resorting to any grammar construction. This implies that grammatical elements are particularly significant in oral comprehension and production and that they are deeply rooted and innate in the mind of any child or adult speaker. Research in neurolinguistics also underline the importance of a language's suprasegmental aspects (Lenneberg 1967; Lyons 1970, 53-75; Danesi 1988).

As far as English intonation is concerned, it is important to heed the O'Connor's warning, as he exhorts teaching and learning it by forgetting, if possible, the intonation of one's native language. He claims in fact that English intonation *is* English, as it is not comparable to that of any other language. He mentions the example of *Thank you*, which may be uttered in two ways: starting with a high tone and ending low to show real gratitude, or starting low and ending high, which 'shows rather casual acknowledgement of something not very important' (O'Connor 1967, 137). In other words, if an English friend invites you to spend a weekend at their house and you respond with this second *thank you*, your friend would probably be offended because you seem rather ungrateful, if not downright impolite.

The incorrect use of intonation could lead to two results. In the first, in the best-case scenario, the speaker who uses unsuitable intonation is simply recognised as a non-native speaker by the native speakers. In the second case, which is unfortunately the most frequent case, the mistaken choice in intonation (which often occurs due to analogy with the speaker's native language) causes misunderstandings. An example in case is that of Agard and Di Pietro (1965, 59) centred on an Italian speaker who is trying to speak in English:

> if a person says *Buongiorno* with the intonation which may accompany a cheerful *Good morning* in English, he risks conveying the additional meaning of: *Well, at long last! You're finally up.*

After all, lack of knowledge of the intonation of a foreign language may complicate oral comprehension in two ways: the listening does not understand the message, or they interpret it in the wrong way.

Teaching English intonation is therefore more urgent than ever. There is no reason why it should be overshadowed in advance because it seems to be impossible to teach it in a systematic manner, as occurs instead in English morphology, syntax or vocabulary. Understanding an English native speaker who is speaking to us means to grasp their underlying real communicative goals through their choice in rhythms, melodies and pauses. Intonation structures the statement from a holistic perspective, conveys the speaker's state of mind, translates their most hidden thoughts and reveals their hidden ambiguities and unexpressed will, guides the interpretation of the interlocutor, suggests preferential manners of understanding and interpreting an oral text by claiming much of what is said, but also not said. It is fundamental

to understand all this if one wants to speak and understand a foreign language and thus enter its 'soundscape'.

3.4 Sounds and prosody in ESPP

During their studies, a non-native English speaker will have to overcome the obstacle of pronunciation sooner or later. Jones (1972, 2-9) lists at least five types of inevitable difficulties for such students:

a) the recognition of sounds and the ability to remember their acoustic qualities;
b) the reproduction of sounds;
c) the correct use of learned sounds;
d) the distinction between long and short vowels, as well as stresses within a word;
e) the sequence of phonemes in continuous oral speech that is as spontaneous as possible.

In particular, as far as the first difficulty is concerned, it is important to train and hone one's listening skills through systematic practice in listening to sounds, both isolated and within a context, because it enforces the memory of unfamiliar sounds and therefore enables one to:

a) discriminate sounds among themselves, especially if they are similar;
b) distinguish the acoustic qualities of 'new' sounds;
c) easily recognise sounds of the English language.

As far as the second difficulty is concerned, we insist on the fact that learning English sounds, especially if they are 'new' for the learner, requires 'exercising' the phonatory apparatus. The learner must become aware of how lips, teeth and vowel tracts intervene in the process of phonation, thus making the shaping of a sound possible, especially if such a sound has never been produced by vocal organs.

In teaching and learning pronunciation nothing must be left to chance, let alone to improvisation. Every sound is *voluntarily* reproduced by a phonatory apparatus whose organs take on well-defined positions and execute extremely precise movements. Each phoneme is therefore perfectly reproducible by anyone in any foreign language. Both the trainer and the learner must be perfectly aware and, when necessary, trace back the path of sound production without fearing preliminary – and occasionally unpleasant – theoretical work.

4. *Knowing how to speak in public*

In starting with segmental and moving to suprasegmental aspects, our attention has hitherto focused on the role of the speaker's phonetic and phonological competence and paid special attention to contrastive non-English vs. English aspects. It is important to deal with these aspects before training in the art of holding the floor in public, or speaking in public, which is commonly referred to as *public speaking* (PS).

PS is a specific area in training English for scientific and professional purposes. By nature, it is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, and it is an ability that is at the base of oral communication in a broad sense. Significant application of speaking in public is experienced on an everyday basis by entrepreneurs, doctors, experts in the legal field, as well as researchers and scholars in general, who all often feel the challenging relation between effectiveness in speaking and the social construction of the messages they convey (Verderber, Verderber and Sellnow 2008; Ward 2004). Based on these premises, we believe it is essential to reflect on the awareness of the impact of oratory skills in professional contexts.

PS as a skill that is required by the job market has been a common topic in many blogs and websites over the past years (Zanola 2011). Nothing scientifically relevant emerges from these websites beyond general descriptions of the emotions and fears of orators when speaking in public (Bodie 2010; Egloff, Weck and Schmukle 2008; Hofmann and Di Bartolo 2000; Osório *et al*. 2013). Although the matter of speaking in public has been extensively dealt with from rhetorical, political and judicial points of view (Coopman and Lull 2008; Esenwein and Carnegie 1915; Kumar 2005; Lucas 1998; Strike 1994) or from the perspective of conversational analysis (Atkinson 1985; Hammond 1993; Nielsen 2004), this topic has received limited attention in relation to English for Specific Purposes (for more regarding the business context, see Crosling and Ward 2002; Freihat and Machzoomi 2012; for legal contexts, see Charnock 2002). The adjacent areas that have been explored over the past decades include the genres of 'conference presentations' (Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet 2003; Webber 1997) and 'presidential debates' (Bendinelli 2011).

4.1 Towards a definition of public speaking

In the professional field, speaking well in public not only brings personal value but it also means suitably representing a company, an institution, an organisation or another person. Therefore, success is fundamental not only for oneself, but also – and especially – for those who are represented by the orator. It is also proportionate to the ability of being effective and efficient in presenting content that must be correctly interpreted and elaborated by the public (Cavalieri and Zanola 2020). The cornerstones of effective and efficient communication in public have been the subject of systematic studies in English studies for over a century, and we have defined them as 'elements of effective communication' elsewhere (Zanola 2011, 83-84). On that occasion, we referred to international business contexts in particular, where speeches address a culturally heterogeneous audience that uses English as a *lingua franca*.

The essential elements of oral communication in public in English have been extensively discussed in all the literature dedicated to PS, from the first theories in the Anglo-saxon area at the end of the seventeenth century (Barber 1830; Benhke 1898; Bell 1859; Comstock 1837 and 1844), to the first popularising publications in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century (Carnegie 1913; Esenwein 1902; Esenwein and Carnegie 1915), up to studies specialised in busi-

ness communication starting from the 1950's (Atkinson 1985; Aurner 1958; Kenny 1982; Lucas 1998; Strike 1994), and the increasingly frequent publications on the topic all around the world starting from the twenty first century in view of global English (Anderson 2016; Beebe and Beebe 2003; Bodie 2010; Coopman and Lull 2008; Grice and Skinner 2007; Fujishin 2018; Gallo 2014; Gartland 2007; Huang 2010; Osborn and Osborn 2006; Osborn *et al*. 2007; Patience *et al.* 2015; Zanola 2019). All this extensive bibliography repeatedly highlights that PS is effective if the speaker can:

a) be memorable;
b) be persuasive;
c) be familiar with rhetorical figures (asyndeton, anaphora, rhetorical questions, hyperboles, repetitions, etc.);
d) be able to manage eye contact in oral communication in general, and in a formal presentation in particular;
e) be expert in body language and non-verbal communication;
f) be able to suitably manage and use one's voice.

In the English-speaking area, specifically considering the importance of enhancing the oral skills for powerful communication, PS has been the object of study since the end of the sixteenth century. Some English treatises on punctuation dating back then (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589) first stepped towards the definition of the written transcription of an oral text. In the seventeenth century, the study of English intonation and rhythm was purposefully strengthened to demonstrate the excellence of the English language (Butler 1634). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries testified to the proliferation of treatises on the art of speaking in public in English all over Europe due to the rapid development of opportunities in contexts related to politics, economics, law, and theatre where the demand to speak in English was increasing (Oliver 1964). The nineteenth century was the golden age of the development of studies on intonation and gestures: in the second half of the century the first imposing study by Joshua Steele (1775) on English intonation made its way on the scene. This work opened a series of important frontiers on the prosodic features of the English language (Zanola 2002, 2004). It was followed, in turn, by *The Melody of Speaking* by Walker (1787), a markedly didactic treatise, and the Methodist Anglican Wesley's *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture* (1770). Through the following centuries, manuals were developed for professionals like doctors and lawyers, and PS became embedded in university curricula. However, popular PS books, especially from the US, have often simplified the discipline in ways that may not reflect academic depth, though they have spread globally. In truth though, the issue is not new within the history of contemporary rhetorics, if we retrace the rich literature that was produced between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century thanks to the American elocutionists (Barber 1830; Behnke 1898; Bell 1859; Bernstein 1974; Burgh 1761; Chapman 1821; Comstock 1837, 1844; Mason 1748; Rush 1893).

At the present time, what characterises today's professional compared to speakers in the past is the increasingly complex competences and intercultural background that are required of them. Speaking in public in the job market implies:

a) competence (the audience wants to feel that it is in good hands),
b) interpersonal skills (the speaker must identify with the values and experiences of its audience and convey this connection),
c) effectiveness (the communicative act must inspire trust, commitment and enthusiasm), and
d) credibility (by means of proof and reasoning).

Moreover, emotion seems to have become an increasingly critical element of the persuasive act that is ingrained in oral performance. This has been demonstrated by recent studies on the way entrepreneurs speak in English (Zanola and Palermo 2013). That being the case, the conscious use of arguments and emotional language is a rather new challenge for the entrepreneurs that are active in international business contexts using English as the only lingua franca.

4.2 Public speaking and the job market

The strategic importance of oral communication skills in the job market has been extensively documented in the literature on organisational leadership (Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer 1990). It has been demonstrated that successful oral communication reflects a company's specific internal and external sources of influence. Within a company, in particular, communication is based on the understanding of the nature of the activities, aims, structures and manners in which they influence the decision-making process. This is something that graduates may not be aware of, as communication practices in the workplace are 'more censured'[2] than in academia. It is in this sense that a certain 'detachment' between the business world and academia in terms of future employees' acquiring professionally useful skills has long been observed.

In university courses or training for various professions (e.g., schools of specialisation, master classes, first and second-degree master's degrees, training courses), one of the main objectives should be that of illustrating the real communicative requirements and demands of the future workplace to learners. Carl Van Horn (1995), in summarising the results of a survey carried out on a sample of New Jersey graduate employees, recounts how oral communication is considered of vital importance to employers but how, strangely, it is also an area in which graduates lack preparation. Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, 78 and 84) report data on the type of PS training of more than 200 graduates in economics in Great Britain in the 2008-2010 period. For the most part, this category of young employees displays informal, improvised oral communication skills, which appears to strongly contrast the general requirement to work by objectives that is typical of the business world.

[2] This expression was coined by Crosling and Ward (2002, 43).

Based on these considerations, the real challenge is to define the demands of oral communication in the job market. Such requirements are imposed everywhere and on all levels but are conditioned by factors inside and outside of the workplace, which influence the management approaches towards communication and the procedures underlying the organisation of communication processes (Chaney and Martin 2000, 6). Within companies, institutions, departments and workplaces in a broad sense, oral communication is influenced by the status of the parties, the purpose of communication and the means of communication. Successful communication also depends on the fact that the parties share basic knowledge and presuppositions, as well as on their linguistic and cultural identities (Hofstede 1984; 1991; Hofstede and Minkov 2012; Moran, Harris and Moran 2010; Bowe, Martin and Manns 2014).

5. *Conclusion*

The great evolution that all English language courses in academic institutions worldwide has undergone has received great attention both in the theory and the implementation of planning, completing and teaching (both in presence and remotely) syllabi in English for Specific Purposes (Bhatia and Bremner 2012). Nevertheless, in the case of English as the global language of the professions, it has been observed that multinational companies, for example, increasingly need to ensure that their requests to communicate efficiently in English in non-English contexts are satisfied (Hamp-Lyons and Lockwood 2009, 150). Moreover, according to Bhatia and Bremner (2012, 419), undergraduate and post-graduate students also often report being unsatisfied with their oral language preparation for work purposes, as most of them need assistance in managing professional interactions, some of which are academic and others connected to extra-corporate contexts. The perception of instructors in professional related areas generally enforce and complete such a claim. Such considerations enforce the opinion according to which EFL teaching needs to create suitable conditions to satisfy both the needs of the interdisciplinary demands of discourse analysis that are required of new students in academia and those of the workforce community aiming at multidisciplinary communicative expertise (Bazermann and Paradis 1991). This detachment between the professional world and the classroom needs to be handled more realistically and effectively (Bhatia and Bremner 2012; Zanola 2023).

As far as teaching programmes are concerned, the challenge lies in managing the tension between the demands of the job market and the teaching modules that are typical of academic training. A study by Crosling and Ward (2002, 53) has acknowledged the ability to deliver a presentation in public as one of the most common forms of oral communication that future graduates aspire to by decisively underlining how more research is necessary to determine the optimal balance between the responsibility of the university and that of the prospective company. Universities should extend generic skills acquired at school to skills, such as those required by

group presentations and discussions, individual presentations, the ability to critically approach an issue and hold one's ground in discussion, and to be assertive when presenting one's views (Crosling and Ward 2002, 54).

As Lucas (1998, 75) has underlined, the art of PS has represented the foundations of many university curricula in the United States over the past decades, and for good reason. According to a survey involving almost 500 companies and public organisations, PS has been classified as one of the most important qualities that are sought out by employers (Lucas 1998, 5). Such premises have led to including formal presentations in overseas university curricula (Kimberley and Crosling 2012) as a requirement in assessing for a work position. This has yielded excellent results in the oral performances of both native and non-native students during their studies and in the course of their later professional experience (Crosling 2000). Training and experience in PS have demonstrated having three benefits for students: they learn to prepare a presentation that is presumably organised according to a specific logic/reasoning; they explore keeping the audience's attention for a certain amount of time and how to argument a specific topic in an organic manner; they are compelled to work on honing clear eloquence about well-structured topic, on taking on proper body language and facial expressions and on their self-confidence.

Nevertheless, before achieving the overarching goal of attaining proficiency in public speaking in English, it is imperative for non-native speakers to undertake the steps outlined above, namely the study and practice of both segmental and suprasegmental features. The process of acquiring a second language necessarily involves time, concentration, and a gradual process of adaptation to the sounds and prosody of a language that is not the speaker's native language. It is crucial to note that no element is improvised, nor is it the result of the imitation of the moment. As adults, we have accumulated a lifetime of exposure to the sounds and rhythms of one or more languages that have punctuated our existence. Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect to become accustomed to one specific language in a few hours of a language course, however extraordinary that course may be, without first acquiring the patience to understand what is happening to us.

It is to be hoped that, in the future, the teaching of EFL to adults will place greater emphasis on the phonetic and phonological aspects of the language as fundamental elements for the authentic development of high-performance and broadly satisfying communicative skills, both personally and professionally.

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