Speaking about Speaking. Historical Foundations of Oral Communication Studies

Annalisa Zanola

Abstract
Over the centuries, and increasingly in recent decades, oral communication has been the subject of a myriad of studies in different scientific-disciplinary areas. Several methodologies have often dealt with the same object using different, though similar, terms. In other words, for centuries we have been talking about speaking with different terms that sometimes cover overlapping areas.
The main goal here is to establish the state of the art by describing the terms and studying the approaches that have been adopted through the centuries to describe oral communication: from the terms *delivery* to *elocution* up to *pronunciation*, from the British and American elocutionists' theories to the most recent trends in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and learning, the boundaries of oral communication are very difficult to define. This contribution will narrow the historical meaning of all these tentative approaches and their areas of application, in a double way: on the one hand the numerous terms and approaches will be clarified, on the other hand the long history underlying this rich field of research will be emphasised.

Key-words: history of oral communication, pronunciation, elocution, delivery, public speaking.

1. Introduction

A key feature of oral communication studies is the multiplicity of disciplines and areas involved in it. From syntax to semantic choices, from the pragmatics of communication to the sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic aspects of any oral communicative act, up to the more subtle psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic aspects underlying any oral communicative situation, not to mention the phonetic and phonological peculiarities of language and the dynamics of speech

ISSN 1824-3967

and conversation analysis: the levels of approach in both the study and the teaching of oral communication are so articulated as to make a systematic treatment almost impossible (Howell 1954; Howell 1971; Oliver 1965).

This contribution finds its first inspiration in Howatt and Smith's overview (2014) on the historical developments in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching methodology (1750- today), based on four periods,

> characterized by main concerns and overall approaches, revealing greater continuity and overlap among teaching theories and practices than in accounts which accept discrete, bounded 'methods' as the primary unit of organization (Howatt and Smith 2014: 75).

The four periods the Authors described are as follows: the *Classical Period* (1750-1880, when emulating the teaching of classical languages was the main concern), the *Reform Period* (1880-1920, when the teaching of the spoken language became a priority), the *Scientific Period* (1920-70, so-called because the scientific basis for teaching was founded), and the *Communicative Period* (1970-2000+, aiming at 'real-life communication'). It is possible to identify an evolution in the study of oral communication for each of these periods, which goes hand in hand with the progress of the EFL teaching methodology. Indeed, this progress appears to result from the evolution of the concept of oral communication[1].

Although it is almost impossible to talk about oral communication in English without placing its definition and description in an English language teaching context, the subject should undoubtedly be contextualised in the broader perspective of oral communication in any foreign language. In this regard, the long rhetorical tradition

[1] With regard to choosing 1750 as the turning point and the start of the analysis, Howatt and Smith's approach has been adopted, as follows: "Caveat needs to be noted regarding the decision to fix the starting point as the mid-eighteenth century, when modern foreign language teaching began to appear in the schools". As the two authors underline, the learning of modern European languages began very much earlier than this, of course, but "much of the work was autodidactic in nature" (Howatt and Smith 2014: 92). We should therefore consider 1750 as the threshold of the systematic and institutional beginning of the teaching of oral communication (Howatt 1984).

of public speaking training in classical languages is fundamental. Indeed, it is inside this framework that oral communication in English has found and still finds both theoretical and practical training models, valuable to both native and non-native speakers of English.

Far from being exhaustive, this contribution has a limited objective indeed, namely that of tracking the main terms and the educational approaches used for 'speaking about speaking' from 1750 to now in order to identify the priorities in research and study with respect to such a vast and articulated field of inquiry. The approach to the topic in this contribution takes the diachronic dimension as a means of tracing the origins and foundations of contemporary oral communication studies in English. More specifically, the concern here is to review the basic terminology adopted with reference to oral communication in English language speech studies and research through the centuries. In line with this premise, this contribution will start with a presentation of the most common terms imported into English from classical oratory and rhetoric and will then proceed by describing the major works on the subject produced since the mid-18th century in both the UK and the US. The final objective is to go beyond the countless, yet partially valid, definitions of oral communication, in order to focus on the most meaningful nuances that this concept has assumed over the centuries in the English-speaking world. English has borrowed words and concepts from classical Greek and Latin sources to refer to oral communication, sometimes losing the authentic value of the original terms, which will be described in the following paragraphs.

2. Speaking about speaking: borrowings from classical oratory and rhetoric

Attitudes towards the spoken form of language and its position in the curriculum have varied considerably through time. Since the earliest times, the ephemeral and transient nature of speech production has contributed to the flourishing of a very rich literature addressing oral communication. In their brilliant volume on *Teaching and Researching Speaking*, Hugues and Szczepek Reed (2017: 18-26) shed light on the origins of this field of research, from ancient Egypt to the Roman era, highlighting the fundamental contribution of the

Greek world. Howell (1954: 3-9) also describes in detail the classical foundation of modern and contemporary English rhetoric and communication studies. For practical reasons, these classical authors cannot be dwelt on here, although the content of some famous Latin writings will be highlighted that contained the foundations on which some theoretical reflections on oral communication in English are based. Indeed, it is assumed that from the Sophists to Aristotle, from Cicero to Quintilian, classical rhetoric is rich in reflections on oral communication which, revisited at various times in the history of English language studies and enriched from the 18th century to the present day, are the bases of valid and successful approaches to the research and teaching of oral English.

2.1. Delivery

The human voice produces waves of sounds, supported by the intermingling of sounds and by gestures. Oral communication can be interpreted as a form of rhetoric: in fact, it uses the five traditional rhetorical canons to get a point across to the audience effectively. Invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery (in Latin, *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio*) are fundamental keys to speech[2]. The last one, *delivery*, particularly influences the effectiveness and efficiency of any oral performance (Kegan and Laskow Lahey 2000). The businessperson, the lawyer, the politician, the teacher – as well as the actor or the minister of the church – have always all been concerned with the manner of speaking (Platz 1935).

Quintilian recommended that the perfect orator should be educated to delivery from the earliest childhood. His *Institutio Oratoria*, in twelve books, is the first treatise on educational theory in history. Its aim is to take up Cicero's legacy: a stylistic legacy

[2] The Latin words are taken from: M. Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione*, book 1, section 9:*... eae, quas plerique dixerunt, inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio, inventio est excogitatio rerum verarum aut veri similium, quae... firma animi rerum ac verborum ad inventionem perceptio; pronuntiatio est ex rerum et verborum dignitate vocis et corporis.* Both the Latin text and its translated versions can be found at Perseus Digital Library (Eduard Stroebel, Ed.), downloadable here: https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0683%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D9, last accessed 17 January 2022.

(summed up in the concept of *concinnitas*, harmony and balance) but also a political one (Cicero as the extreme defender of republican freedom). Quintilian (*Books I and II*) pursues a 'healthy' style that at the same time ensures the soundness of customs. According to him, cultural primacy is to be attributed to rhetoric and literary culture. The orator has a civil mission.

In Quintilian's view, rhetorical training has a key function in a child's overall education. Oral communication and morality are so inseparable that we could talk of a moral dimension of oral communication: those who speak to others, especially in public contexts, are morally obliged to speak well and to speak of good and beautiful things. The speaker (or the 'orator', in Quintilian's words) is endowed with huge power, which goes far beyond the act of pure oral communication, as it is produced by the enchanting mixture of voice and body language. This is the way he described oral communication:

> Delivery is often styled action. (…) the first name is derived from the voice, the second from the gesture. (…) the thing itself has an extraordinarily powerful effect in oratory. For the nature of the speech that we have composed within our minds is not so important as the manner in which we produce it, since the emotion of each member of our audience will depend on the impression made upon his hearing. Consequently, no proof, at least if it be one devised by the orator himself, will ever be so secure as not to lose its force if the speaker fails to produce it in tones that drive it home. All emotional appeals will inevitably fall flat, unless they are given the fire that voice, look, and the whole carriage of the body can give them. For when we have done all this, we may still account ourselves only too fortunate if we have succeeded in communicating the fire of our passion. A proof of this is given by actors in the theatre (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book XI, II. 50-111: 243).

The undeniable power of delivery is huge and undoubtedly beyond description. The voice is a very powerful tool for conveying meaning. Quintilian refers to it as *vis orandi*, the power of speech, which we can implement *legendo atque audiendo*, by reading and listening, on a daily basis. The listening component is so important in the development of oral communicative competence that it can affect the development of a child's entire linguistic competence:

infantes a mutis nutricibus (…) in solitudine educati, (…) loquendi facultate caruerunt (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book X, I)[3].

at unus certe sit adsiduus *loquendi non imperitus*[4], qui, si qua erunt ab iis praesente alumno dicta victiose, corriga protinus, nec insidere illi sinat…[5] (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book I, 1).

Quintilian's taste for measure and correctness made him a reference point in the following ages, up to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance[6].

2.2. Eloquence and elocution

Eloquence is commonly used as a synonym of proficiency in using rhetorical figures. This is the way the word is used in some popular books on eloquence, such as *The Elements of Eloquence* by Mark Forsyth, author of the *Sunday Times* bestseller *The Etymologicon*: his book is aimed at explaining how to use figures of rhetoric in order to make any speech memorable.

---

[3] "Those children who were brought up in isolation by nurses who did not speak (...) were deprived of the skill of speaking" (my translation).

[4] The expression recalls the professional profile of the language trainer or language expert (*loquendi non imperitus*, that is 'not unaccustomed to speaking').

[5] "But there should at least be an experienced trainer next to him at all times, not unaccustomed to speaking, who, if incorrect expressions are said by the person in the room, corrects them immediately before they settle down...." (my translation).

[6] In recent times this dimension has been replaced with the social one: the way someone speaks shows the social status of both the speaker and the listener and this status-related dimension is called 'style'. Following Corder, "A speaker behaves as he does because his audience is as it is. We cannot hope to explain what happens in a conversation without taking into account the characteristics and behaviour of the hearer as well as the speaker. After all, both are 'performing' linguistically. (…) If people want to play a game together they have to agree on the rules. If communication is to take place, the participants must share the same conventions". There is also a second dimension of oral communication that Corder calls 'the medium role': "(…) in writing we cannot make use of the information carried by features of the voice such as intonation, rhythm and stress or voice quality. (…) we use written language in different situations from speaking; for example, we do not have a 'hearer' present in time and place, indeed we have a specific hearer or group of hearers in mind as we must do in a speech situation" (Corder 1973: 62-63).

The word derives from Old French *eloquence* (12c.), from Latin *eloquentia*, which in turn comes from the Latin *eloqui,* or 'speak out'. The root is the same for *Elocution*,

> mid-15c., *elocucioun*, "oratorical or literary style," from Late Latin *elocutionem* (nominative *elocutio*) "voice production, a speaking out, utterance, manner of expression," in classical Latin especially "rhetorical utterance, oratorical expression," noun of action from past-participle stem of *eloqui* "to speak out" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. elocution).

In ancient Greek, λέξις (*lexis*), later on translated in *elocutio*, was the word used to describe the verbal style, including ὑπόκρισις (*ypokrisis*, that is, delivery), and τάξις (*taxis*, that is, order and disposition), together with the ordinary topics of the several divisions of the speech. Thomas Sheridan (1762: 158), a major proponent of the elocution movement, simplified this concept in defining elocution as "a graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture". The word was common usage throughout the 18th century, as will be shown in the next few paragraphs.

2.3. Pronunciation

To the author's knowledge, the first usage of the word *pronunciation* in its current meaning should be ascribed to Quintilian again, who considered it as a fundamental component of speech training, as from the following quotation:

> Let him *(the teacher)* … correct faults of pronunciation, … so that the words of the learner may be fully expressed and that every letter may be uttered with its proper sound. For we find inconvenience from the too great fullness of the sound of some letters (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria,* in Hugues and Szczepek Reed 2017: 20).

In English, *pronunciation* had been established since the early 16th century as the technical term for the oral delivery of discourse (Zanola 2002: 317). Robinson (1617, in Dobson 1968: 200-214) wrote a treatise on phonetics *ante litteram*, describing in detail the 'elements and parts of the voice' and the main problems of spelling and pronunciation: unfortunately, this book was considered a work on elocution for years, because at the time the art of pronunciation

usually referred to the art of delivering a speech. Only when the science of phonetics began to emerge did the term acquire its new technical meaning.

3. Studying speaking: from the origins to the 19th century

In this contribution, the study of English oral communication is considered from 1750 onwards, through the manuals of pronunciation, elocution and EFL teaching.

Interestingly, the writings on the English language through the centuries seem to demonstrate that a 'model' that is good for oral communication in English has always been considered possible. In fact, the first steps towards the definition of a written 'transcription' of an oral text stem from the 16th-century English treatises on punctuation (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589); in the 17th century, the study of English intonation and rhythm improves with the specific aim of demonstrating the 'Excellency' of the English language; the 18th and 19th centuries see the flourishing of 'delivery' all over Europe because speaking opportunities were developing rapidly in parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation, and the demand for expressing ideas in oral English increased. In the next paragraphs, the main trends in the field will be summarised by using the words *delivery, elocution* and *pronunciation* as key terms of this research.

3.1. The social status of 'speaking well'

During the 18th century, studies on oral communication proliferated. In 1775 the first impressive comments on English prosody by Joshua Steele appeared (Zanola 1996): this work pioneered some important frontiers in the subject of effective oral performances. It was followed by John Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical treatise aimed at providing a guide to those who wanted to read and speak well. In the same period, Thomas Sheridan's works developed three main areas: education, pronunciation, and elocution. In *A Discourse being Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Elocution and the English Language* (1759 cit. in Zanola 2002: 318) Sheridan recommended the study of the spoken language and the principles and rules of elocution. He

insisted on these subjects also in *Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762): in this series of seven lectures he provided the definition of elocution, established his philosophy, and discussed articulation, pronunciation, accent, emphasis, tones (or notes) of the speaking voice, pauses or stops, key or pitch, management of the voice and gesture. The central proposition of Sheridan's works is that properly taught oratory can eliminate disorders in the English language: in his view, the usage of words is strictly dependent on correct pronunciation, because a speaker's good pronunciation guarantees the listener's perfect understanding. In this sense, communication cannot take place without good elocution[7].

Apart from Sheridan, other elocutionists kept to the traditions established by early English grammarians (Barber 1830; Bell 1859; Burgh 1761; Comstock 1837; Mason 1748; Wesley 1770). To all of them, speaking well became a tool for social emancipation. As from DeWispelare's insightful analysis,

> language was a public spectacle that immediately identified one's class origins, vocational potential, and social standing, not to mention one's national, regional, and ethnic derivation. *Spoken language*, they argued, *was a profoundly evocative social signifier, one that articulated a great deal about a person irrespective of what the speaker was actually saying.* Dismayed by nonstandard language's ability to foster all occupational and social advancement, these writers popularized the discipline of *elocution*, which *was framed as an educational regiment that would allow speakers to hide linguistic traits wrongly associated with ignorance, ill-breeding, and even criminality* (2012: 858. My italics).

This was not the case in the US, where elocution took on the new meaning of 'science of speech'.

---

[7] Sheridan's theory includes two *kinds of language,* namely *the language of ideas* and *the language of passions, or emotions:* "The one is, the language of ideas; by which the thoughts which pass in a man's mind, are manifested to others; and this language is composed chiefly of words properly ranged, and divided into sentences. The other, is the language of emotions; by which the effects that those thoughts have upon the mind of the speaker, in exciting the passions, affections, and all manner of feelings, are not only made known, but communicated to others; and this language is composed of tones, looks, and gesture" (Sheridan 1762: 132-133). For a detailed and comprehensive description and analysis of Sheridan's thought, see Wade (2001; 2017).

3.2. The 'science of speech'

The work of British rhetoricians and elocutionists was eagerly accepted in America, where the demand for elocution was even greater than in England at that time and the writings and essays on this topic developed even more assiduously in the same century (see Behnke 1898; Fenno 1878; Raymond 1879; Russell 1851 and 1853, to quote only a few). The Americans republished British authors, copied them, sometimes modified and adapted their teachings to their own situations. They finally created an American movement which possessed attributes of independence as well as adaptation (Wallace 1954: 100). Many people, often trained for professions such as medicine or the theatre, became 'teachers of elocution' in response to a growing demand for training in this field; their personal background was often vital to the scientific knowledge of the vocal system, and of the most suitable teaching methods, as a consequence. One of the greatest US elocutionists of the 19th century, James Rush, was a doctor; Jonathan Barber worked as a physician while teaching elocution at Harvard and Yale; Andrew Comstock did the same.

Rush (1893) made a very detailed analysis of human vocal expression, based on philosophical and scientific enquiry. His study was divided into fifty-one 'sections' devoted to the English sounds (description and production), the melody of speech (intonation, tones, rhythm, accent, stress, emphasis, pause), and elocutionary practice (with particular attention to time, force, pitch, cadence and monotony). Rush became a recognised authority in the discipline of elocution: influential teachers of preachers, doctors, actors, together with all specialists in speech therapy, phonetics and voice training were attracted to what may arguably be defined his masterpiece. He experimented his theories with his own voice and narrated the process of his evolving ideas: his method demonstrated that it was time physiology took the study of the human voice out of the hands of rhetoricians and grammarians. His way of describing and teaching elocution not only signalled the end of the British elocutionary practice, but also stimulated many American teachers to produce their own textbooks.

James Murdoch extended Rush's system by his lectures and public reading entertainments (Bernstein 1974: 12). In 1850, the

theatre circuit, from Boston to New Orleans and to California, with more than fifty companies scattered throughout the US, produced programmes of readings in schools and universities which were useful to most of the actors of the time. Among the clergy too, we find some elocutionists who made history (Chapman 1821; Bryant, in Bernstein 1974: 5; Porter, in Wallace 1954: 181).

As in England a century earlier, the production of the elocutionists' treatises, manuals or textbooks was enormous and had wide circulation up until the end of the 19th century. Successively, they would be criticised as 'unscientific', 'over-simplifying', and only of historical interest.

Nevertheless, a first attempt was made in these writings to develop a science of speech: the manuals published during that period are an endless mine of information about reading and speaking skills, speech sounds (isolated or in context), prosodic features, speech defects and speech correction. Their aim and sincere desire was to improve the American people's speaking and reading skills; their common interest was to study vocal mechanism and prosodic features – combined with body movements –, as one of the cues to effectiveness in oral communication in general, or to public speaking in particular. Unfortunately, their followers sometimes brought discredit upon their scholars, with their misinterpretation and lack of serious study and appreciation. Nevertheless, thanks to all the American scholars, teachers, and rhetoricians of the 18th and 19th centuries, the study of oral communication became an important part of the educational plan of any American student: the subject matter and purposes of communication courses nowadays present a heritage in U.S. universities as classical as that of literature.

4. Teaching and learning how to speak: the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, teaching oral communication was often confused with 'making conversation in English': this was the case of some popular volumes destined to teaching oral English to non-native speakers (Gualtieri n.d.; Carmelynck-Guernier and Carmelynck 1928), whose title (in both volumes, *English Spoken*) was misleading with respect to the wide range of contents and methods developed in the field of spoken English. The great majority of

the writings of that time confined the treatment of oral language to inaccurate generalisations on the motivational power of words though concentrating on the relationship between language, voice and gesture (this is the case of Behnke 1898; Esenwein and Dale 1915).

Nevertheless, between the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, Henry Sweet, Harold Palmer and Daniel Jones became fully aware of all the prosodic effects and voice qualities of the English speaker and developed a systematic phonetic approach to the study of oral English: an awareness of the importance of effective and efficient oral communication, especially in the context of language teaching, began to be developed. The need to provide materials that would be both useful to teachers and adequate guides to prosodic features led some phoneticians to write descriptive and teaching manuals of oral English.

The earliest work in this field was that of Henry Sweet. Sweet's general phonetic training made him fully aware of prosodic effects and voice qualities in English (breath, voice, whisper, glottal stop, stage whisper or wheeze among the throat sounds; clearness, dullness, nasality, wheeziness, gutturality among the voice qualities). Developments in transcriptions came early: Paul Passy first used a system of lines and curves, whereas Daniel Jones continued to use a musical notation in his *Intonation Curves* (1909). A system of notation was devised by Harold Palmer: he stressed the need to distinguish the functional units of intonation, called *head, nucleus* and *tail*.

The pedagogical intent was very strong in Palmer's work. His writings on English intonation were, in fact, "especially designed for the use of foreign students of spoken English" (Palmer 1922: 5). The student who wishes to use the English language 'in the manner of English speakers' cannot ignore the phenomena of its intonation and pronunciation. The two things, pronunciation and intonation, are so bound with one another that it is useless to teach or to learn one without the other.

The theoretical part of the same volume is entirely devoted to training teachers. They should be teachers of oral English, and perfectly know the segmental and prosodic foundations of the English language:

A teacher of pronunciation cannot do efficient work if he is ignorant of the nature (nay, of the very existence) of the sounds of the language he is teaching; but to teach foreigners to pronounce English without teaching them to intone is an unbalanced procedure. And yet a teacher of intonation cannot do efficient work if he is ignorant of the nature (nay, of the very existence) of the tones of the language he is teaching (Palmer 1922: VI).

The teacher is a sort of informant that the students will then imitate. Imitation is the starting point in the process of language learning. The foreign students will be taught to discover the tones that are unfamiliar to them, because they are not used in their own language.

Sweet's main concern throughout all his intonational research was pedagogic. Since he was both phonetician and teacher of English as a foreign language, he described the study of phonetics as the indispensable foundation of language. Thus did he write in 1877:

Without a knowledge of the laws of sound change scientific philology – whether comparative or historical – is impossible, and without phonetics their study degenerates into a mere mechanical enumeration of letter changes (Sweet 1877: III).

In the first half of the 20th century the work of these scholars was decisive in forming a theoretical perspective and a methodology for further study. However, after this early activity, there was a pause in the production of new textbooks and approaches to the subject: the 'new' ideas took time to be assimilated, and the Second World War had a general stultifying effect[8]. Only after the war did the 'industry of teaching English' develop and this required new teaching materials and new data of a more conversational kind.

5. The skill of speaking: the new millennium and beyond

World War II marked a major turning point in the methods and techniques of teaching and learning English. The largest initiative ever recorded in language teaching was the Army Specialised Training Program (ASTP) promoted by the American government for a purely strategic purpose: training as many people as possible in English in the shortest possible time. The courses started in

[8] The expression is used by Crystal (1969: 37).

spring 1943 and were aimed at 15,000 soldiers who, in small groups (maximum twelve students) and an intensive mode (25 hours per week with a mother tongue teacher and 10 hours of seminars with native trainers) were guided through an inductive learning of the oral language (Angiolillo 1947). The method, which was strongly oriented towards the strengthening of oral communication and apparently very essential in its structure, actually had very solid scientific foundations, represented by a theoretical handbook that was the basis of modern language teaching, *The Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages* by Leonard Bloomfield (1942). In his masterpiece, Bloomfield emphasised that language is, by its nature, an oral fact, requiring habits of behaviour and practice:

> The command of a language is not a matter of knowledge: the speakers are quite unable to describe the habits which make up their language. The command of a language is a matter of practice. (…) LANGUAGE LEARNING IS OVERLEARNING; ANYTHING LESS IS OF NO USE (Bloomfield 1942: 12).

In the 1950s, Charles Fries and Robert Lado perfected this model by proposing the so-called *Oral Approach* (Howatt and Smith 2014: 87). In the following decades, EFL teaching saw an increasing proliferation of methods aimed at enhancing and strengthening oral communication, from the Situational Approach, or 'Situational language teaching' (Freddi 1994: 181-182), to the Audiolingual and Audio-Visual Methods (Titone 1993: 92), up to the well-known Communicative Language Teaching approaches developed from the 1970s on (Freddi 1994: 183-193). As clearly stated by Peter Roberts:

> Whatever the general trend in teaching methods and techniques adopted over the decades, the ultimate aim of EFL was increasingly focused on successful linguistic interaction in English in the 'real world'. Effective communication experiences in oral English are needed in order to guarantee real communicative competence (Roberts 1918: 98).

Nowadays, it has almost become customary that workplace English requires a capacity to apply English oral skills in a variety of activities, including familiarity with public speaking professional settings (Sherman *et al.* 2020: 60; Xie 2016: 8). While some authors of manuals for teaching English give priority to practising writing skills,

the great majority devotes pages to spoken skills for the workplace and consider public speaking as a special topic (Zanola 2019). The 21st century skills framework envisages English oral communication as a priority in language educational programmes around the world: communicative events such as informal discussions and meetings, oral presentations, networking, negotiating, team-working, conversing informally and formally, teleconferencing and telephoning, to name only a few (see Banzina 2021; Kassim and Alì 2010: 177; Crosling and Ward 2002: 42 for an exhaustive list), are becoming essential oral communicative skills to be taught and learned.

The boundaries of spoken English practice and research are becoming more and more difficult to define. Following Hugues and Szczepek Reed (2017: 199),

> Any unified theory of speaking would need to both bring together and demarcate itself clearly from a number of interrelated academic disciplines, from pragmatics to corpus linguistics, from psycholinguistics to phonetics. All of these are well known and flourishing areas in linguistics, and each (…) has something to say about speaking, even if they cannot provide a unified theory of spoken discourse in all contexts and domains. We do not have such a theory.

This consideration brings us back to the beginning of this contribution.

6. Oral communication teaching and research: a multi-layered field

As from above, one of the main issues emerging in the study of oral communication is that it involves and enacts a large number of different areas of expertise and disciplines. Hugues and Szczepek Reed (2017: 4) raise an interesting list of questions on this issue, namely:

> How far (…) is the structure of conversation culturally determined? (…) How far is the grammar and vocabulary of speech different from other sorts of grammar? (…) How is language represented and processed in the brain, and how does this make human production possible?

The above questions could be destined to a wide range of research in different areas, such as pragmatics and ethnography (as for the

conversational area), or syntax and semantics (as for grammar and vocabulary of speech), or neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics (as for mental mechanisms), not to mention the numerous issues related to phonetics and phonology (as for both the physical nature of sound production and the way it relates to meaning) and to (spoken) discourse analysis.

To further complicate the already complex nature of this field of study, it should be considered that attitudes to research studies in the field of spoken English and its position in language education have varied considerably through time and in different cultures. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the foundations of this debate can be traced back to classical rhetoric and the way ancient rhetoricians approached both the theoretical description and the practical teaching of the skill of speaking in the curriculum. The keywords of Latin origin described in the previous paragraphs have re-emerged in the history of oral communication studies since 1750 throughout all the writings quoted in this contribution. Bearing this in mind, the next paragraph will outline the main strands that should characterise 'the' ideal course in English oral communication.

7. Modern and contemporary research paradigms

As this brief historical overview has shown, the research space in the field of oral English may be empirically or theoretically based. The empirical approach deals with real-world data that are aimed at investigating "a central research question (…) and are used as the basis of either a quantitative (…) or qualitative analysis" (Hugues and Szczepek Reed 2017: 26); the theoretical approach focuses on theories, models, high-level concepts. Both approaches are the frameworks for both researchers and teachers of oral English: all studies orient towards data or towards a theory, but the balance between these differs according to the tradition in which researchers and teachers are working.

Nowadays, research aimed at creating a well-balanced English language course should take some fundamental issues into consideration.

1. The *intelligibility principle* (Derwing and Munro 2015): second language users need to be intelligible rather than 'native-like' in their accent.

2. The *oral performance assessment parameters* need considerable revision. As from Sato and McNamara (2019: 894): "Ultimate arbiters of L2 speakers' performance are not trained language professionals. (…) even where speakers' linguistic errors were acknowledged, message conveyance and comprehensibility of the message contributed to their judgement". This has strong implications for language testing and the development of tests reflecting the construct of English as a lingua franca.
3. The *learner centeredness* principle. Oral language learning is a dynamic activity that is particularly effective and productive when the speakers are actively engaged in authentic tasks, "conducted in a natural and spontaneous manner to enable learners to gain a total psycho-socio-cultural-linguistic experience. Learner-centeredness is a universal theme and the teacher-learner relationship is a cooperative and collaborative partnership for relevant and functional language competence" (Samifanni 2020: 101).
4. *The new boundaries of effectiveness and efficiency in oral communication*. Widanski (2020: 3608) seems to demonstrate that targeted interventions are urgently needed on issues such as the ability to describe a research project and fluency with scientific terminology. As clearly stated by Newton and Nation (2021) and Yates (2017), speakers of EFL can gain knowledge of the foreign language through context clues and background knowledge they are already familiar with and accelerate their efficient and effective English oral communication by means of the language tools they had *before starting* the learning process.

8. Conclusions: the oral communication 'research space'

Oral communication is a vast enterprise that includes a host of considerations from message design and delivery to much more, all reflecting the rhetorical tradition from the ancient to modern times. In fact, 'rhetoric' was an essential element in the curriculum of most universities worldwide, from the advent of the university (in Europe in the 11th century; in Egypt, Morocco, and Iran centuries earlier; but even earlier in China, India, and Africa) throughout the Middle Ages and even extending to the first universities established in the United States (Goldstein 2018: 8).

Historically, English oral communication as a topic of study has lent itself to interdisciplinary inquiry, with pragmatics of communication,

sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, phonetics and phonology entering the fabric as a more recent but fundamental stakeholder. Although interdisciplinarity is routinely seen as the foundational basis for describing oral communication, in the absence of any consensus regarding the boundaries of the topic, the challenges surrounding the interpretation of the area are nuanced and difficult to define (Gaudy-Campbell and Mauroux 2021). At its core, interdisciplinarity presumes a deep embedding in one's own discipline prior to crossing such boundaries. Paradoxically, the more one is embedded in one's discipline and inhabits a specific disciplinary mentality the more the discipline mutates and tries to adapt to another methodological approach. In this 'accelerated excursion' through the field, some sorts of collaborative interdisciplinary endeavours have been recognised as a fundamental tool for approaching oral communication studies through the centuries.

Different terms might be used to refer to this phenomenon, as our voyage through the centuries has tried to show, which take us beyond any standardised parameters but where the researcher's concern about oral communication remains the focal concern. The complex interdisciplinary nature of the field makes it important to take into consideration the importance of forging 'communities of interests' in the field as a fundamental baseline for mitigating the epistemological divides that are characteristic of any specific communities of practice.

References

Angiolillo, Paul F., 1947, *Armed Forces' Foreign Language Teaching: Critical Evaluation and Implications,* Vanni, New York.

Banzina, Elina, 2021, "Exploring phonetic cues to persuasive oral presentation: a study with British English speakers and English L2 learners", *Language Teaching Research*, August, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/13621688211037610, last accessed March 10, 2022.

Barber, Jonathan, 1830, *A Grammar of Elocution, Containing the Principles of the Arts of Reading and Speaking*, A. H. Maltby, New Haven.

Behnke, Kate, 1898, *The Speaking Voice, its Development and Preservation*, Curwen & Sons, London.

Bell, Alexander Melville, 1859, *The Elocutionary Manual,* Hamilton, Adams & Co., London.

BERNSTEIN M. (ed.), 1974, *The Collected Works of James Rush*, 4 voll., M & S Press, Weston.

BLOOMFIELD, LEONARD, 1942, *The Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Language*s, Linguistic Society of America, Baltimore.

BURGH, JAMES, [1761] 1953, *The Art of Speaking*, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor (MI).

CAMERLYNCK-GUERNIER (NO NAME) and CAMERLYNCK G.H., 1928, *English Spoken,* Didier Editeur, Paris.

CHAPMAN, JOHN, [1821] 1976, *The Original Rhythmical Grammar of the English Language: or, The Art of Reading and Speaking, on the Principles of the Music of Speech,* Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim-New York.

COMSTOCK, ANDREW, 1837, *Practical Elocution or a System of Vocal Gymnastics, Comprising Diagrams, Illustrative of the Subject*, Kay & Brothers, Philadelphia.

GOLDSTEIN, GERALD, 2018, *Public Speaking. A Meta-Communicative Approach,* Routledge, New York.

CORDER, PIT STEPHEN, 1973, *Introducing Applied Linguistics,* Penguin, London.

CROSLING, GLENDA and WARD, IAN, 2002, "Oral communication: the workplace needs and uses of business graduate employees", *English for Specific Purposes* 21, pp. 41-57.

CRYSTAL, DAVID, 1969, *Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English*, C.U.P., Cambridge.

DEWISPELARE, DANIEL JOHN, 2012, "Spectacular speech: Performing language in the late eighteenth century", *Journal of British Studies* 51 (4), pp. 858-882.

DERWING, TRACEY M., and MUNRO, MURRAY J., 2015, *Pronunciation Fundamentals. Evidence-Based Perspectives for L2 Teaching and Research,* Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam-Philadelphia.

DOBSON E. J., 1968 (2nd ed.), *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

ESENWEIN, JOSEPH BERG and DALE, CARNEGIE, 1915, *The Art of Public Speaking*, Home Correspondence School, Springfield (MA).

FENNO, FRANK, 1878, *The Science and Art of Elocution; or, How to Read and Speak*, Books for Libraries Press, New York.

FORSYTH, MARK, 2013, *The Elements of Eloquence*, Icon Books, London.

FREDDI, GIOVANNI, 1994, *Glottodidattica. Fondamenti, Metodi e Tecniche,* Liviana, Padova.

GAUDY-CAMPBELL, ISABELLE and MAUROUX, SUSAN MOORE, 2021, *Anglais oral: enjeux théoriques et pratique(s) authentique(s), Recherche et Pratiques pédagogiques en langues de spécialité – Cahiers de l'APLIUT*, Volume 40 n°1. https://journals.openedition.org/apliut/7030, last accessed January 17, 2022.

GUALTIERI, F.M., n.d., *English Spoken. Manuale di Conversazione e di Fonetica* (6th ed.), La Prora, Milan.

HART, JOHN, [1569] 1969, *An Orthographie, Conteyning the Due Order and Reason, How to Write or Paint thimage of Mannes Voice, Most Like to the Life of Nature*, The Scolar Press Limited, Menston.

HOWATT A. P. R., 1984, *A History of English Language Teaching,* O.U.P., Oxford.

HOWATT A. P. R. and SMITH, RICHARD, 2014, "The history of teaching English as a foreign language, from a British and European perspective", *Language and History* 57 (1), pp. 75-95.

HOWELL, WILBUR SAMUEL, 1954, "English backgrounds in rhetoric", in Wallace, Karl R. (ed.), *History of Speech Education in America,* Appleton-Century-Croft, New York, pp. 3-47.

HOWELL, WILBUR SAMUEL, 1971, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric,* P.U.P., Princeton.

HUGUES, REBECCA and REED, BEATRICE SZCZEPEK, 2017 (3rd ed.), *Teaching and Researching Speaking,* Routledge, New York.

JONES, DANIEL, 1909, *Intonation Curves. A Collection of Phonetic Texts, in which Intonation is Marked throughout by Means of Curved Lines on a Musical Stave,* Pranava Books, Wimbledon.

KASSIM, HAFIZOAH and ALI, FATIMAH, 2010, "English communicative events and skills needed at the workplace: feedback from the industry", *English for Specific Purposes* 29, pp. 168-182.

KEGAN, ROBERT and LAHEY, LISA LASKOW, 2000, *How the Way You Talk Can Change the Way we Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

MASON, JOHN, [1748] 1968, *An Essay on Elocution, or Pronunciation,* The Scolar Press, Menston.

NEWTON, JONATHAN M. and I.S.P. NEWTON, 2021 (2nd ed.), *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking,* Routledge, New York-London.

OLIVER, ROBERT T., 1965, *History of Public Speaking in America*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.

ONLINE ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY (n.d.), https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=elocution, last accessed April 4, 2022.

PLATZ, MABEL, 1935, *The History of Public Speaking: A Comparative Study of World Oratory*, Noble & Noble, New York.

PALMER, HAROLD E., 1922, *English Intonation with Systematic Exercises*, Heffer, Cambridge.

PUTTENHAM, GEORGE, [1589] 1895, *The Arte of Englishe Poesie*, E. Arber, Westminster.

QUINTILIAN, 1922, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian, with an English* translation by Butler H.E., vol. IV, Harvard U.P., Cambridge (MA).

RAYMOND, GEORGE L., 1879, *The Orator's Manual*, G.P. Putnam's Sons/The Knickerbocker Press, New York-London.

ROBERTS, PETER, 1918, *English for Coming Americans,* Association Press, New York.

RUSSELL,WILLIAM, 1851, *The American Elocutionist*, Jenks, Palmer & Company, Boston.

RUSSELL,WILLIAM, 1853, *Pulpit Elocution*, W.F. Draper and Bro., Andover.

RUSH, JAMES, 1893 (7th ed.), *The Philosophy of the Human Voice, Embracing its Physiological History, Together with a System of Principles by Which Criticism in the Art of Elocution May Be Rendered Intelligible, and Instruction, Definite and Comprehensive, to Which is Added a Brief Analysis of Song and Recitative*, Grigg and Elliott, Philadelphia.

SAMIFANNI, FARAMAZ, 2020, "The Fluency Way: A functional method for oral communication", *English Language Teaching* 13 (3), pp. 100-114.

SATO, TAKANORI, and MCNAMARA, TIM, 2019, "What counts in second language oral communication ability? The perspective of linguistic laypersons", *Applied Linguistics* 40 (6), pp- 894-916.

SHERIDAN, THOMAS, [1762] 1970, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution: Together with Two Dissertations on Language*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim-New York.

SHERMAN, DEREK, PARUPUDI, TEJASVI, MENTZER, NATHAN, CHESLEY, AMELIA, LAUX, DAWN and BANIYA, SWETA, 2020, "Oral Communication in an integrated STEM and Humanities First-Year Experience", *Journal of Technology Education* 32 (1), pp. 50-64.

STEELE, JOSHUA, [1775] 1969, *An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech, to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols*, The Scolar Press Limited, Menston.

SWEET, HENRY, 1877, *A Handbook of Phonetics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

SZPYRA-KOZŁOWSKA, JOLANTA, 2015, *Pronunciation in EFL Instruction. A Resesearch-Based Approach,* Multilingual Matters, Bristol.

TITONE, RENZO, 1993, *Psicopedagogia e glottodidattica,* Liviana, Padova.

WADE, MAHON M., 2001, "The rhetorical value of reading aloud in Thomas Sheridan's Theory of Elocution", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31 (4), pp. 67-88.

WADE, MAHON M., 2017, "Making the green one red: Elocution, emotion, and the impact of print literacy", *The Eighteenth Century. Special issue on: Emotion, Affect, and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (3), University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 321-335.

WALKER, JOHN, [1787] 1970, *The Melody of Speaking Delineated; or, Elocution Taught like Music*, The Scolar Press Limited, Menston.

WALLACE, K.R. (ed.), 1954, *History of Speech Education in America*, AppletonCentury-Crofts Inc., New York.

WESLEY, JOHN, 1770, *Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture*, printed by William Pine, Bristol.

WIDANSKI, BOZENA, 2020, "Improving students' oral scientific communication skills through targeted instruction in organic chemistry lab", *Journal of Chemical Education* 97 (10), pp. 3603-3608.

XIE, QING, 2016, *English Language Training in the Workplace*, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland-Hong Kong.

YATES, LYNDA, 2017, "Learning how to speak: Pronunciation, pragmatics and practicalities in the classroom and beyond", *Language Teaching* 50 (2), pp. 227-246.

ZANOLA, ANNALISA, 1996, "La melodia della parola secondo Joshua Steele", *L'analisi linguistica e letteraria* 1, pp. 173-203.

ZANOLA, ANNALISA, 2002, "The Economy of Voice and Gesture in English Oral Communication: The American Elocutionary Movement", in G. Iamartino, M. Bignami and C. Pagetti (eds), *The Economy Principle in English: linguistic, literary, and cultural perspectives. Proceedings of the XIX Conference of the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica (Milan, 21-23 October 1999),* Unicopli, Milano, pp. 316-324.

ZANOLA, ANNALISA, 2019, "Public Speaking in Business English academic courses. From university requirements to workplace needs", *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* 1, pp. 181-196.