

Why English is fundamental in an increasingly interconnected world

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Abstract. In the last few years, the advances in technological progress have been amazing. Given the importance of English as the main means of communication in our increasingly interconnected world, it is a pity that schools, and to a lesser degree universities, do not put more emphasis on the acquisition of listening and speaking skills since, when it comes to speaking English, Italian students do not fare brilliantly compared to those in the rest of Europe. Of the 4 medical schools viewed in Italy, Parma gives the least importance to learning Medical English. When comparing universities in Europe, the French come out on top, putting a lot of emphasis on learning Medical English. (www.actabiomedica.it)

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Introduction

It's amazing how technology has progressed in the last 20 years or so. We now live in a world where we can communicate instantaneously with an Australian friend or a relative living in the U.S. In this new era of globalization, on the spot bank transactions, low cost phone calls and low air tariffs are just some of the factors that have prompted instant global communication. And it is thanks to the internet that much of this is possible. People can 'chat' from one end of the globe to the other, buy and sell goods, conclude business deals, book their flights and find out information which only a decade ago would have been unthinkable.

Transglobal communication is mainly in English due, principally, to the U.S.'s economic power and influence in this domain which means that you need a decent knowledge of the English language to benefit from this technological advance. Using the internet is straightforward if you understand English and people from all over the world expect to be able to communicate with you in English. From this perspective one could quite rightly affirm that English and globaliza-

tion go hand in hand since English tends to be the modern "lingua franca".

The European Union, the Euro, business and communications, the emphasis on 'Europeanization': - the bringing together of European nations to create political and economic strength and stability, are all factors which call for a common means of communication.

The disadvantages of not speaking English

English. The language that everybody would like to be able to, or feels that they ought to speak. Children are sent to Britain or the U.S. on expensive language courses by parents eager to give them this opportunity. Language courses in Italy charge a fortune for the English courses they provide (a lady I met in a shop recently confided that she was paying €45 per hourly lesson for individual tuition for her child at a Language School in Parma). Companies arrange for English lessons for their staff during the lunch break or outside working hours. Go for a job interview and say

you can't speak English – the chances are you won't get the job. An Albanian friend currently working in Italy went for a job interview along with two Italian colleagues. They had applied to be waiters on a five-month-long cruise in the Caribbean. His Italian colleagues didn't get through the interview. He did because his English was reasonably good.

If you take part in a European or International Medical Congress you will be expected to have a good knowledge of English. Papers are in English as are debates and discussions. If a foreign doctor, professor or health professional is invited to Italy he will expect to address you in English. Simultaneous translators are not always provided. If you are competent, in an increasingly competent world, you will not require one. Such a vast range of important scientific, medical, economic and technical textbooks and journals are in English, for those able to appreciate them. In short, if you do not know the language you will find yourself at a disadvantage because those who do will benefit from opportunities that will not be open to you.

Who speaks English?

Native speakers apart or those whose second language is English, who CAN speak English? The Dutch and Scandinavians all speak excellent English, one of the main reasons being that their TV programmes are mainly in English with subtitles in their own language. This means that from a very early age they have benefited from hearing and learning words pronounced in English. It is not difficult to pick up a language this way and English automatically becomes a second language. It also means that children grow up with the knowledge that another important language exists apart from their own. It is a pity that this system is not used in Italy, but then, I have been told, the Italians are excellent voice dubbers, amongst the best in the world. I recently watched a popular American Soap in England which I had previously seen on Italian television. The actors and actresses' natural voices (especially the female ones) were much harsher and unfeminine compared to their Italian dubbed voices which tended to be sweet-sounding and enticing. Having associated a person with a particular voice it came as qui-

te a shock and a disappointment – the beautiful, harsh-sounding actresses had lost most of their charm. The richness of the language, the colloquial expressions, the different accents (from North to South) are all lost through dubbing.

The Germans also speak excellent English. Partly, I assume, because their language has roots which are, to some extent, similar to English and partly because strong emphasis is put on them, from childhood onwards, on the importance of speaking English. A young 13-year-old German boy I met in a hotel on the Italian Riviera last summer told me he had read two Harry Potter books in English. He 'chatted' on the internet with an American pen friend and was very surprised that the Italian boys of his age he had met at the hotel were unable to speak English apart from the odd word. He had started learning English at school at the age of 8 and from the age of 10 onwards English classes were conducted entirely in English.

An English friend, a computer programmer, has just spent 3 years working in Belgium. English was the language they used at work and he assured me that all his Belgian colleagues spoke excellent English. In his 3-year-experience he had found that amongst the well-educated everyone spoke excellent English but even the less-educated could get by and that he had only come across a few cases of people who weren't able to speak at all. I was chatting to a Belgian girl in her 20s I met in Italy last summer. She was surprised that none of the TV programmes on Italian television were in English since, in Belgium, at least some are with subtitles in French or Flemish. Her spoken English was good even though it was her third language after Dutch and German. She had just finished a 4 year degree course in Economics and had had to take an English exam at the end of each of the four years. (At the Faculty of Economics in Parma there is just one general English exam on a pass or fail basis – 'idoneità').

Erasmus students

A few years ago at the Faculty of Economics here in Parma when oral exams were still part of the syllabus, I remember being surprised at how much better the Erasmus students were compared to their Italian

peers. Many of the Italian students struggled through their orals which made it a pleasure to hear the Erasmus students speak with such ease. It no longer surprises me – it is just a fact that ‘the others’ speak better English. Students studying in Italy from ex communist bloc countries speak good English. I have met students from Albania, Bulgaria and Hungary who all speak English quite well. Two Erasmus students from the Czech Republic who attend my English classes at the Faculty of Economics told me that the Italian students are reluctant to talk to them in English. They also said that a lot of emphasis is put on spoken English at school in their country. When I complimented a first year Dentistry student from Nazareth on his excellent spoken Italian (his English is even better) he replied that he had had to learn fast because the Italian students he was sharing a flat with found speaking English too trying. In Albania too, friends have told me, strong emphasis is put on learning English from Primary School onwards, especially spoken English. In the last few years I have noticed a growing number of students from Israel who have come to Parma to study medicine. They all speak excellent English and have a very extensive vocabulary.

English in Italian schools

So, what goes wrong in Italy? In recent years more and more emphasis has been put on learning English in Italian schools. In some cases children start as early as 4-5 years when they are at Nursery School. English is then studied at Primary, Middle and Secondary School and yet, at the end of all this, most students are neither able to speak reasonably fluently nor understand a native speaker speaking at slow to normal speed. Admittedly, English is not a very easy language to pronounce, especially for people from Latin language countries, the structure of the language and pronunciation being so different from their own; but I think that the main reason is that a lot of teachers of English do not pronounce words correctly themselves, are reluctant to speak English in the classroom (apart from the odd question about one’s family, hobbies and daily routine), and base their lessons on grammar, reading and writing skills and literature. Pupils are bound to

pick up the wrong pronunciation this way. In fact, friends of mine whose children are lucky enough to have private tuition with a native speaker have told me more than once that their child says that their English teacher at school pronounces words differently to the native speaker! Another possible snag is that many of the older teachers do not have the opportunity to go to Britain or the States to keep up their spoken English because of family and other commitments. Speaking a language is like playing a musical instrument or playing sport – if you don’t practice, you get rusty.

Pronunciation problems

Yet pronunciation I feel is a key issue when learning English and perhaps one of the most difficult. It also affects your ability to listen and understand. If your pronunciation is incorrect how are you going to recognize a word pronounced correctly? To quote an example. The other day in my 2nd year Dentistry class (the general level of English is high amongst Dentistry students but pronunciation remains a key difficulty, especially vowel sounds). I mentioned the word ‘heel’ and asked the class if they knew what it meant since it is pronounced exactly the same as the verb ‘to heal’ which we had just come across. The students answered “collina” – hill! When I ask students to read a medical, scientific or economics passage in English, even the advanced students have trouble pronouncing words they are not familiar with or for instance, medical terms they are familiar with in that they are similar to the Italian like ‘tonsillitis’ but pronounced differently in English. The English language has such a variety of vowel sounds, far more complex and so different from Italian. Mispronounce a word and it may well become an entirely different word so that the baffled Englishman will not be able to understand you. Other examples are : ‘shade’ and ‘shed’, so totally different to the native speaker but words I have heard Italians pronounce identically. An Italian friend said he had been to the ‘bitch’ instead of the beach (which had English friends in hoots of laughter). I once had trouble understanding an Italian girl who told me she loved English padding.(imbottitura). I was trying desperately hard to think of what she meant. Anoraks? Beds? Sleeping

bags? It was only when she linked the word to a food context that I realized she meant pudding! Many an Italian has complained to me that the English pretend not to understand them when they ask for directions or for information of some sort. I sincerely feel that the problem is just one of bad pronunciation.

No one can beat the Italians when it comes to using skill and imagination for getting round problems created by bureaucracy – they simply use their own devices when the State fails to satisfy their needs. Most people prefer private dentists (going to a NHS dentist is almost unheard of if you can afford not to) or opt for private medical care when waiting lists are long or because they want to see a particular specialist. The same thing goes for learning English. The few who can afford it or choose it as a priority, do not rely on schooling alone to teach their children English. Private tuition, au pairs, language schools, at home or abroad, are just a few of the means used to help make their children fluent. Most children, however, are not so lucky and reach university with little or no oral practice whatsoever.

Parma University and the Faculty of Medicine

Learning English at university here in Parma is a curious business. In recent years lessons and exams have gone from quite difficult to relatively easy. Courses and exams based on translations with scientific, medical or economic terminology have been replaced by a general English standardized exam in most faculties which is computerized and saves time and money. At the Faculty of Medicine things have changed too. Up to a few years ago students in their second year were required to translate a medical passage from English to Italian, be familiar with medical terminology and have an intermediate knowledge of grammar. Exam marks were out of 30 ('profitto'), and lessons were well attended. Now 1st year students have no exam whatsoever and are only required to attend a 20 hour course (which many do not attend even though they are supposed to). This is followed by a two year break and then Medical students have to attend another 20 hour course in their 4th year. Here again, there is no exam – you can make the lessons as interesting or stimulating as you

like but no exam means no or very little motivation, and only about 20% turn up.

English at other Medical Schools in Italy

Surprisingly enough, not all universities follow suit when it comes to learning English. At Milan University, for instance, Medics have a medical-scientific based course in their second year with both a written and oral exam with marks out of 30 (profitto) at the end of it and a total of 5 credits (1). In Bologna students take two exams: English 1, for which they have 4 credits and English II, for which they have 2 credits. The exams are based on the students' receptive ability when dealing with both oral and written texts (2). At the Medical Faculty at Rome La Sapienza I, a lot of emphasis is placed on learning medical English. The English course is distributed over 5 years and worth 12 credits in total with a final exam in 30/30 (3). The course is oriented towards retrieving and evaluating medical evidence and clinical teachers are also involved in the planning and sharing of resources. Assessment includes : effectiveness in group work, project work on medical cases, seminar presentations and the reading of a clinical paper. Since assessment of students is strongly integrated with clinical subjects in the course, clinicians are called to help in the assessment process. This means that English overlaps into other teaching areas and is thus part of a multidisciplinary approach.

English at Medical School at other European Universities

It would be interesting to take a look at the situation at Medical Schools at other European Universities to see if and how English is taught, how much time is dedicated to studying English, whether there are exams, written or oral and whether courses are optional or compulsory.

Having searched University web pages for Medical School programmes and sent e-mails to various Medical Schools in European countries asking for information about English courses in their faculties, I

have found out that, as in Italy, the situation varies greatly from University to University and from one country to another.

French university Medical Schools give a tremendous importance to learning medical English and English is studied for a minimum of two years with exams at the end of each year. At the Parisian University Pitié Salpêtrière, the Faculty of Medicine has its own Department of Medical English(4) and a very extensive web page (which includes a list of very useful medical websites)(5). Students have English lessons for the first three years of their degree course and exams at the end of their 2nd and 3rd year. The sample English exam paper displayed on the faculty web page (6) consists of exercises based on terminology; students also have to describe the type of pain you feel with a migraine, write a case report using given medical prompts and write a dialogue between doctor and patient using specific terminology. All in all it is very impressive.

The Medical School at Bourgogne University has a very efficient and highly competent Department of English as well (7). Students are expected to do 125 hours of compulsory English which are divided up into 25 hour courses for each of the 5 years of their degree course. Emphasis is put on both oral (including the use of videos and simulated dialogues between doctor and patient) and written(including research articles and editorials) English. The aim, at the end of the five years, is for students to have progressed from 'English for Medicine' to 'Medicine in English'. Exams are at the end of their 4th and 5th year.

An acquaintance currently studying Medicine in Tirana, Albania, had to choose to study either English or French. She opted for English which is studied for the first two years with an exam at the end of each year.

In Spain, for example, there appears to be no English or any other foreign language on medical syllabuses (this was confirmed by an e-mail from Cadiz University).

Those countries where English is almost a second language like in Scandinavia, Holland and Germany do not appear to have, or maybe need, courses in English. At Mainz University, Germany, the university provides optional terminology classes in English which students are encouraged to attend (8). In Holland, at some universities such as Maastricht, students have

the option to attend certain courses which are actually taught in English. Masters are often in English too (9).

Undergraduate courses at Lund University in Sweden are all conducted in Swedish - this appears to be the trend in all Swedish Universities (probably due to the fact that students can all speak English, anyway). However, international Masters programmes are in English and entrance requirements include internationally recognised certificates such as TOEFL and Cambridge with high grades.

Conclusion

For Italian students' listening, speaking and pronunciation to improve, a radical upheaval of the State schooling system is necessary when it comes to learning English.

Ironically, in recent years, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of hours dedicated to learning English at both Primary and Middle school and yet students are little, if no better off than they were in the past. One of the main reasons lies in the extraordinary fact that teachers of English tend to be under qualified. The headmaster of a Primary and Middle school here in Parma pointed out to me that it is not necessary to have a degree in languages or any specific linguistic qualification or internationally recognized certificate in order to teach English at Primary school level. Those teachers interested in teaching English just take a short exam to assess their English. If they pass, they can teach.

Even if English is not the main language they have studied, people with a degree in languages are entitled to teach English at Primary School provided that they have a teachers' training qualification. A person like myself, a native speaker with teaching experience (years of teaching at university level) would not be allowed to teach at Primary or Middle school since I do not own a State secondary school teachers' training diploma (da maestra). I could only be hired as a support teacher (the 'proper' teacher would always have to be in the room with me) at an extra cost to the school.

As a result, a wide range of teachers whose main subjects are not English are out there giving a mediocre imprint to young children who are at a very recep-

tive age and who would undoubtedly benefit from a competent teacher of English.

Given the importance of English and the fact that Italian students do not fare brilliantly compared to those in the rest of Europe, it is a pity that schools and universities do not put more emphasis on listening and speaking skills. Instead of a standardized general English written exam students from the various faculties would find courses and exams based on their area of study far more interesting and motivating. At the Faculty of Medicine in Parma, where there is no exam at all, improvements could be made. Optional courses could also be taken into consideration as long as they are backed by exams and a certain number of credits. Large student numbers are a drawback but since numbers drop after the first two or three years, dedicating time to targeted written and oral work would be feasible.

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