

RAISING AWARENESS IN TEACHING PHONETICS IN ITALIAN SL THROUGH THE MARSS METHOD

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Abstract

In Second Language teaching, the phonetic and phonological aspects are quite often avoided. The grammatical and translation methods left a considerable print, also in modern language teaching. Although the Communicative Method and the CEFR propose concentrating on the efficacy of communication, we still behave as if teaching a language primarily involves grammar and vocabulary. Pronunciation, instead, is related to every aspect of the language, from vocabulary to grammar, from morphosyntax to pragmatics. Building a clear and precise pronunciation helps in comprehension and production and, above all, to become aware of and effective in communication. The MARSS method was born to introduce didactic techniques into phonetics teaching practices, raise learners' awareness, and involve them in stimulating lessons. The phonetic workshop aims to teach segmental and suprasegmental aspects related to communicative functions, readings, and pragmatics. Helping students with specific activities and techniques can acknowledge and raise their motivation to reach fluency and precision.

Keywords: PHONETICS, PHONOLOGY, WORKSHOP, AWARENESS, FOREIGN LANGUAGES, SECOND LANGUAGES

Abstract

În predarea limbilor străine, aspectele fonetice și fonologice sunt adesea evitate. Metodele gramaticale și de traducere au lăsat o amprentă considerabilă, chiar și în predarea limbilor străine moderne. Deși Metoda Comunicativă și CECR propun concentrarea pe eficacitatea comunicării, ne comportăm în continuare ca și cum predarea unei limbi implică în primul rând gramatică și vocabular. Pronunția, în schimb, este legată de fiecare aspect al limbii, de la vocabular la gramatică, de la morfosintaxă la pragmatică. Construirea unei pronunții clare și precise ajută la înțelegere și producție și, mai presus de toate, la conștientizarea și eficiența comunicării. Metoda MARSS s-a născut pentru a introduce tehnici didactice în practicile de predare a foneticii, pentru a crește gradul de conștientizare a cursanților și pentru a-i implica în lecții stimulative. Atelierul fonetic își propune să predea aspecte segmentale și suprasegmentale legate de funcțiile comunicative, lecturi și pragmatică. Ajutarea elevilor cu activități și tehnici specifice poate recunoaște și crește motivația lor de a atinge fluența și precizia.

Cuvinte cheie: FONETICĂ, FONOLOGIE, ATELIER, CONȘTIENTIZARE, LIMBI STRĂINE, LIMBI SECUNDARE

1. The Phonetics Workshop: What It Is And What Its Objectives Are

Phonetic-phonological aspects in foreign language teaching, and in particular in Italian L2, are often neglected because they are considered secondary to the teaching/learning of vocabulary and grammar. Another reason why there is a tendency to avoid their teaching practice is given by the fact that in the training field (from masters to refresher and specialist courses) little space is dedicated to theories and techniques to stimulate learners to develop this skill that is as difficult (the more one goes towards adulthood, the more the distinctive traits are difficult to perceive and reproduce) as it is necessary to obtain a better understanding and production of the L2/LS. Furthermore, online training modules cannot cover what would be learned in person, as teachers need to be made aware of the perceptual and productive difficulties of learners depending on their L1 origin, and to become familiar with phonetic transcriptions to motivate them in learning.

The phonetics workshop is intended as a practical teaching activity as an alternative or with laboratory activities, where the latter is physically present. In this paragraph, we want to highlight the difference between a workshop and a language laboratory. The former takes place in the classroom, in a relaxed and informal environment, and encourages the learners' arrangements in a horseshoe shape, in groups, if necessary, also sitting on the floor. The latter, on the other hand, limits the movement and displacement of learners, as it is conceived and designed to focus on listening activities and, possibly, repetition. To carry out a phonetics workshop, two extra hours per week are needed within a language and culture course to carry out activities that, based on the characteristics of the students' L1, aim to reduce negative transfer in Italian L2/LS both concerning segmental traits (perception and articulation of phonemes and syllabic structure) and suprasegmental ones (accent, rhythm and intonation).

The types of practical phonetics activities proposed in a workshop can be summarized in the acronym MARSS: Multimodality (it. *Multimodalità*), Collaborative Learning (it. *Apprendimento Cooperativo e Collaborativo*), Reflection (it. *Riflessione*), Discovery (it. *Scoperta*), and Sensibilization to become aware (it. *Sensibilizzazione per rendere consapevoli*). Multimodality, as the term itself states, refers to the variety of ways to teach, specifically body movement, music, and the five senses, but also to web and mobile applications, in addition to the glottodidactic techniques promoted by various theoretical and didactic manuals. Collaborative learning, a practice known to all and now abundantly consolidated in general and language teaching, involves group activities that, starting from individual sounds, passing through the lexicon to reach sentences, stimulate learners to discover new sounds and tones not previously perceived and to reflect on the production of the phonetic-phonological traits of L2 sounds.

The set of activities carried out in pairs, groups, and in plenum, with the systematization by the teacher about what has been done, is part of a dense work of awareness to increase students' awareness towards what was not perceived as important

and consequently neglected. Increasing awareness is nothing more than a first step in learning a language in order to stimulate students to the phonetic-phonological differences between L1 and L2. We are well aware that numerous variables come into play, including linguistic proximity or distance, the age of the learner, the individual's natural predisposition, and that mnemonic learning is not always sufficient, as it can be complemented by other methods, such as vocabulary acquisition (Costamagna, 2000, 2010). But making learners aware of how much improvement is needed to better comprehend and, above all, to be understood allows them to notice previously unknown or ignored aspects and to dedicate greater attention and effort both in the listening and production phases, which can gradually lead to a path of self-correction.

Some of the activities proposed below were carried out during two 10-hour phonetics workshops, one for 8 A1-level Chinese students, and another one for 8 A2-level Portuguese speakers from Brazil who had never been involved in any phonetic-phonological activity. These can be easily used and adapted for learners of other L1s as they concern the perception and production of Italian sounds.

2. Practical activities to learn Italian sounds

2.1. Perception and articulation

Both groups of students have been trained through a variety of activities that have helped them to learn to perceive and produce sounds. In *Table 1*, the activities are presented:

Table 1: *Types of activities done with Portuguese (left column) and Chinese (right column) learners of Italian L2 (self-produced table).*

	Types of activities for A2-level Portuguese speakers of Italian L2	Types of activities for A1-level Chinese learners of Italian L2
a	Listen to songs	Build the vocal tract with magnets
b	Listen to songs in groups to discover geminates	Discover how to pronounce the sounds
c	Fill in the gaps in the lyrics	Discover and understand how to pronounce sounds
d	Find the corresponding images (cards) to the words heard in the song and put them in the right order	Facial expressions, intonation, body movement and geminates
e	Put in the right order the sentences of the lyrics (cards)	Put in the right order the sentences in comics
f	Listen to non-words	Italian map and flash cards with sounds to learn how to pronounce plosives and affricates
g	Team games with geminates	"The bomb" game, together with memory cards
h	Sounds bingo	Sounds and words matching through flash cards
i	Tonguetwister	Sentences' intonation using hands for phonosyntax
j	Sound intonation and interpretation	Syllable stress and duration + body movement
k	Phonetic transcriptions with flash cards	
l	Syllable stress and duration + body movement	
m	Body movement to learn geminates	

A first activity to familiarize students with vowels consists of having them stand in a semicircle, creating an informal and relaxed environment. Show an image of the fingers of the hand on which facial expressions are drawn with some stylised emoticons and the vowel (Calabrò, 2015). Even if the vowels from a phonemic point of view are seven and not five, at this first stage, we do not want to highlight the difference between open and closed vowels (also because the contexts in which they represent a distinctive feature are very few [Canepari, 1999; Costamagna, 2000]). We proceed with the expressive pronunciation by the teacher and the imitative phase by the students.

In the second activity, like the first, an image of Mafalda is projected on which the elongated vowels are written with some expressions that Italians usually say at certain moments of the day such as looking at themselves in the mirror or yawning (e.g. it. “Ahhh! La mia schiena!!” eng. “Hoh! My back!!!). It is an icebreaker activity, students immediately begin to familiarize themselves with the gestures, facial expressions, and expressiveness of Italian. The teacher first pronounces the vowels and sentences with expressive intonation appropriate to the context, also proposing gestures and facial expressions (for example, putting your hands behind your back and making a painful face). This is followed by an imitative phase acted by students in pairs. Student A, as the mirror, must faithfully reproduce B's movements. The total time expected for carrying out the two activities is a maximum of 15 minutes (Calabrò, 2015).

The third activity requires the use of proprioception, a technique used in teaching English phonetics that consists of the “own” + “perception” that one has of what the muscles of the mouth are doing when each sound is produced. This perception occurs not only through hearing, but also and above all through knowledge of the muscle buttons, that is, the main muscles involved, and their movements in the production of sounds: 1) the tongue (it moves forward and backward); 2) the lips (stretched and rounded); 3) jaw + tongue (which moves up and down); 4) sonority (vibration present or absent of the vocal cords) (Underhill, 2005). Proposing this type of activity to students allows them to discover first and then reflect on the articulatory movements of L2 sounds (Table 2).

A good way to propose proprioception is to have the students stand in a semicircle around the desk on which some colored cards have been placed containing the parts of the oral cavity to be matched with the respective name (e.g., colored image of the lips/word to match “lips”). Once the matches are complete, proceed with the positioning of the cards on the board with magnets, where the stylised drawing of the oral cavity is already present.

Once the students are clear about the places of articulation, we proceed to discover the manner of articulation. The teacher pronounces the first vowel (e.g. [aaaaa]) and asks the students to say where and how the tongue is positioned inside the oral cavity and what the position of the lips is. This requires the learners to focus on the position of the

tongue and lips. Once the students have expressed themselves and are all in agreement on the realization of the sound, the teacher asks the students where to place the vowel inside the oral cavity (on the board) (Calabrò, 2015). The same work is done for all the vowels. Once the work is completed, the teacher, pointing the finger at the single vowel, pronounces it and has the students repeat it. Then he moves the finger from one vowel to the other, alternately stimulating the muscular exercise and also making them produce diphthongs. In this way, it is possible to propose the phonemic table for the vowels and make them understand how the lips are positioned and where the back of the tongue moves for the required articulation to occur. As you move from left to right, the position of the lips gradually changes (this is why the vowel quadrilateral is not proposed to the students but the phonemic table, which is more intuitive from a graphic point of view). Similarly, the same activity can continue by taking into consideration all the consonant sounds, above all those that do not exist in the students' L1 or have a different place or manner of articulation. For example, Chinese speakers find it difficult to pronounce [t] and [d], as Chinese dental plosives have a production between a voiced and a voiceless sound. So, a well-trained practice could help them perceive the difference in producing through perception first, and listening then.

Table 2: *The vocal tract and the phonemes. Examples from classroom activities. (images selfproduced).*

<p>a. The vocal tract with the phonemic table inside (PowerPoint shown in class).</p>	<p>b. lips, teeth, tongue, and phonemes within the vocal tract flashcards and magnets</p>																																
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<p>c. Phonemic table for Italian vowels (adapted from Underhill, 2005:7)</p>	<p>c. Phonemic table for Italian plosives and affricates (adapted from Underhill, 2005:7).</p>																																

The phonemic table is designed to be displayed in the classroom so that it can be referred to at any time during the lesson and for various purposes (for example: presenting and practicing the perception of sounds, reshaping sounds, learning vocabulary, etc.). This methodology is not used to learn the symbol but to experience the sound of which the symbol is nothing but the graphic representation. Therefore, the main purpose of this approach is to experience sounds and sequences of sounds in a personal, physical, and muscular way. Gradually, we will move from single sounds to single words and finally to the flow of speech (Underhill, 2005).

2. *Phonetic transcriptions and vowel duration in stressed syllables.*

When you think about phonetic transcriptions, you have the idea of something difficult that should be avoided. However, introducing foreign learners to the use and reading of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA, in English) will make them more independent in using a dictionary (both paper and online) and more attentive and aware of the distinctive features of the language. An important feature concerns, for example, the vowel duration in the stressed syllable which, in Italian, is always longer than the vowels in the unstressed syllable and is what gives rhythm to words and sentences and makes the language musical as foreigners perceive it without, however, understanding why; or rather, they don't realize it until the teacher makes them aware and helps them, also through rhythmic solfeggio, without resorting to known words, to hear longer or shorter sounds (e.g. taa / tataata / tatataata) where the short sounds are represented by a 1/4 sound and the long ones by a 2/4 sound.

The activity on phonetic transcriptions, made with Brazilian learners, can be divided into two different lessons if you want to dedicate one lesson to introducing consonant phonemes and one to vowel phonemes. For the work presented here, the learners have already encountered the symbols of consonants and have already practiced transcriptions once.

First of all, it is necessary to divide the students into pairs and give each pair an A3 sheet containing a table for vowel phonemes and a series of cards containing different words. Each card presents a word where the vowel corresponding to the phoneme is inserted (Calabrò, 2012:7). Once all the cards have been inserted into the table, a plenary review and reflection on the vowels is carried out. At this point, the table of consonant phonemes (Calabrò, 2012:7-8) (used in the previous lesson) can be given to the pairs of learners together with another bundle of cards containing the phonetic symbols needed to transcribe 6 words: *mangio*, *lento*, *seno*, *canto*, *tanto*, *panica* (Table 3).

Table 3: Spare flashcards to put together and form a transcription (self-produced activity⁴).

['m a ŋ : ɔ̃ a]	['k a n : t o]
['l e n : t o]	['t a n : t o]
['s ε n : t o]	['p a ŋ : ʃ a]

Since the activity is designed for Portuguese-speaking students from Brazil, these words have the vowel of the stressed syllable followed by a nasal consonant (for example: mangio, canto). In Portuguese, in the Brazilian variant, the vowel is a nasal vowel that, to the perception of an Italian, would seem not to be pronounced.

As the learners prepare to complete the activity, discussing and reflecting on the AFI symbols, but also on the square brackets and the word accent, they will find themselves not knowing how to place the chrono that indicates the vowel duration [:] and will need to consult with the teacher who will have observed them during the activity and will have offered his help, if requested by the learners themselves. This is the moment to introduce the reflection on the vowel duration in the stressed syllable by stimulating the opening of the jaw to articulate the sound in a way that is as close as possible to Italian and so that the duration is longer than that of the vowels in the unstressed syllable.

Since it is not a given that the learners will immediately succeed in producing the required sound, the teacher writes on the board the same words that the learners have transcribed with the cards and focuses on the vowels followed by nasal consonants. The first type of repetition by imitation that he asks them to do is to pronounce each vowel sound followed by the nasal (e.g.: “an”, “on”, “un”, etc.) and, subsequently, the individual words to which the learners must pay particular attention because they will have to follow the teacher when he opens and closes his hand. The opening corresponds to the vowel followed by the nasal consonant in a stressed syllable, while the closing represents the vowel in an unstressed syllable. At the same time, the opening of the hand serves to make the students understand that they must open their mouths well to articulate the vowel followed by the nasal according to the characteristics of the L2. Another type of activity, which is at the same time a physical exercise, consists of having the learners stand in a semicircle and repeat the words, having to bend their legs only

⁴ The word “lento” (ing. “slow”) actually needs an open “e”, so it is [ɛ]. It has been used to correct the mistake training the hearing.

when they pronounce the stressed syllable. In this way, a series of movements from the upright position to the kneeling position and vice versa will follow, which will give a sense and rhythm of the syllabic duration. The learners will thus have a perceptual experience of an auditory and articulatory, musical, manual, and physical-motor type. The total time to develop the activity presented is about 30/40 minutes.

3. *Songs: perception, comprehension, and production.*

Working with songs has been one of the most challenging activities. From listening to speaking, many activities have been presented to students. To involve the students from the very beginning, they have been asked to divide the text of the lyrics into strips of sentences and images (depending on the topic and the vocabulary). While listening to the song, the students, divided into groups, had to order the sentences or the images. To accomplish the task, much listening was needed. In the meantime, they memorised and understood the content of the song. After a plenary feedback with the teacher about the content and the aim of the song, the class was divided into two teams. If the song contained specific sounds such as geminates, minimal pairs, or difficult sounds because of the phonetic or orthographic differences, the teams were asked to run to the board when they heard the sound and write the word on the board. Movement and perception improved comprehension and production. After some training on specific sounds, learners were asked to perform short dialogues using paraphonic intonation, with a pragmatic aim, or tongue twisters. This was the case of “Bella”, “La paranza”, and “Sapore di sale” songs (Calabrò, online⁵).

4. *The appreciation of the activities*

Through workshop evaluation questionnaires, it is possible to understand if the activities have been pleasant for them. Even if only a few answers are given, the opinion of students is relevant because is strictly connected to motivation and to the perception of utility and learning. In Calabrò (2016) the answers to the first six questions of the questionnaire proposed to Chinese students showed that the phonetic workshop is pleasant, interesting, captivating, and stimulating. The students’ perception is that it helps them to become aware of Italian sound perception and production and to improve their pronunciation. The multi-modal approach has been notably appreciated as it involves learners in every learning phase.

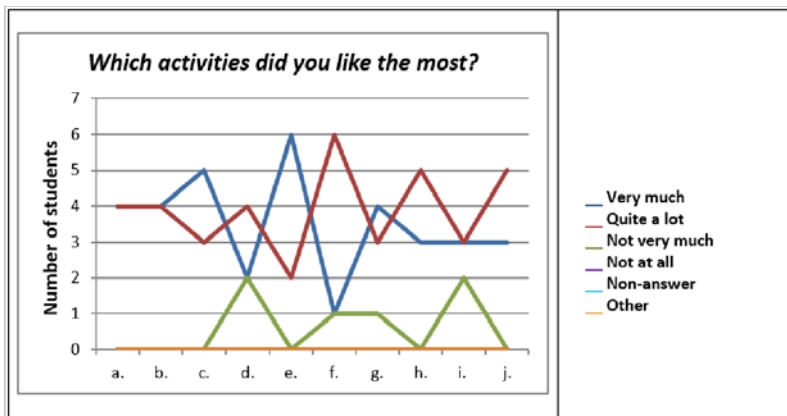
In this paper, we want to show whether the two groups of learners appreciated the different types of activities.

As we can see in graph 1, related to Chinese learners, 6/8 students liked the activity “e” very much (blue line) and 2/8 “quite a lot” (red line) (see *Table 1* for the description of activities). For the activity “f”, 6/8 compilers replied “quite a lot” and 1/8 “very

⁵ The activities are published on the website languages by songs. See the references for the right link.

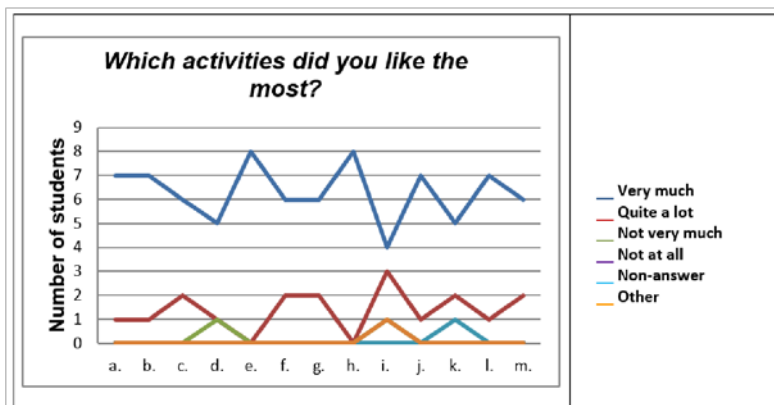
much”. One or two students didn’t appreciate the workshop in general, as they answered “not very much” for activities “d”, “f”, “g”, and “i”. Most of them have appreciated the activities, as the graph shows.

Graph 1: *The activities Chinese students liked the most. The names of the activities corresponding to the letters in the graph can be read in Table 1, par. 1 (graph self-produced).*



In graph 2, Brazilian learners liked “very much” (blue line) in a range from 4 to 8 students, and “quite a lot” (red line) in a range from 0 to 2 students for most of the activities. The Brazilian learners' answers are more symmetric than those of Chinese students. This could be related to cultural and teaching aspects, as the Asians weren’t used to active learning activities. It could also be related to the typological distance between L1 and L2. Brazilian people are culturally close to Italian culture, and Portuguese shares some of the characteristics of Romance languages. This could help raise the awareness level and the perception of improvement.

Graph 2: *The activities Brazilian students liked the most. The names of the activities corresponding to the letters in the graph can be read in Table 1, par. 1.*



5. Concluding Remarks

To develop phonetic-phonological competence and perceptive and productive abilities in the L2, the learner must modify "the parameters that the auditory system has established for the sounds and prosodic elements of the L1" and acquire "new articulatory-intonative habits" (Costamagna, 2010:75). Managing phonetic-phonological learning requires a great effort on the part of the sensorimotor component. However, if we consider that pronunciation, as a physical aspect of a language, involves the body, breathing, muscles, harmony, and acoustic vibrations, we can assume that the person's involvement in their entire being makes the learning process pleasant, stimulating, and even funny. Learners feel personally involved in "doing with the language" and it is an "experiential doing" of a physical, tactile, visual, auditory, spatial, affective, cognitive, collaborative, reflective, discovery, sensitization and awareness type that will lead them in the long term to improve their competence to reduce the foreign accent.

The students observed during the proposed activities showed great enthusiasm in participating in the new activities. Although different from the traditional language lessons, they were still connected and appropriate to the lexical and syntactic contents of the same level of linguistic competence. Dedicating time to phonetic-phonological competence is not only desirable but also necessary to facilitate comprehension and linguistic production and to reduce cases of misunderstanding between interlocutors. However, teachers must first become aware of the fact that this competence actively intervenes in the development of the different abilities and that it is not additional to lexical and morphosyntactic competence but is rather transversal.

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Teaching materials

Languages & integration through singing. Karaoke and esercizi section. URL: www.languagesbysongs.eu (June 15, 2025)