UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The pronunciation of English as an International Language (EIL) from the perspective of Spanish and Italian speakers

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Junio, 2019

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Resumen: Este trabajo trata sobre la Fonología del inglés internacional desde la perspectiva de los hablantes españoles e italianos. Se tratan los problemas a los que se enfrentan aprendiendo el idioma, siempre desde el punto de vista de la inteligibilidad, que es el objetivo del inglés internacional. Contiene un apartado teórico explicativo y un apartado experimental, en el que se han analizado varias muestras de audio y comprobado los rasgos fonológicos explicados en el apartado teórico.

Palabras clave: Inteligibilidad, Inglés Internacional, Pronunciación del inglés, Hispanoparlantes, Italoparlantes.

Abstract: This work deals with the phonology of international English from the perspective of Spanish and Italian speakers. The problems they face when learning the language are dealt with, always from the point of view of intelligibility, which is the aim of international English. It contains an explanatory theoretical section and an experimental section, in which several audio samples have been analysed and the phonological features explained in the theoretical section have been checked.

Key words: Intelligibility, International English, Pronunciation of English, Spanish speakers, Italian speakers.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will have as its main goal dealing with the phonology of International English from the perspectives of native speakers of Spanish and of Italian. In total, forty-one audio samples have been collected to make a research on them, although only two samples from each country will be used to exemplify the features that have been found.

The range of samples is that of an intermediate level (between B1 and B2 of the *CEFRL*), from university students between twenty and thirty years of age.

The aim is to make a research on mainly the intelligibility of those speakers, but in order to achieve that, we need first to explain and discuss some theoretical terms such as Standard English (SE) and Received Pronunciation (RP), English as International Language (EIL) and its purpose, what is understood by "intelligibility"; and then, we will focus on a more practical and pragmatic approach, so we will consider the factors that affect pronunciation learning, the main aspects of pronunciation, of speaking with a foreign accent, typical problems affecting intelligibility, and their application to the collected samples.

2.   ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: EVOLUTION AND INTELLIGIBILITY

Since its beginnings, the way English has been taught has been the same: the ones in power would teach their variety, which would be the good and accepted one, and the rest would not be well-seen. This "variety" was the so-called Standard English.

2.1.   SE and RP, a brief introduction to historical background and shift

In this block we will be seeing the way English teaching has evolved throughout the years, from the prescriptive approaches (in which the learners were told which variety they *had* to learn) to the descriptive ones, in which all varieties are accepted as long as communication is not affected.

2.1.1. Definitions of SE

Standard English (SE), according to Trudgill and Hannah (1982: 1), "often refers to grammar and vocabulary (*dialect*) but not to pronunciation (*accent*)".

In the same line, according to David Crystal's article "What is Standard English" (1994):

> "SE is a variety of English – a distinctive combination of linguistic features with a particular role to play. Some people call it a 'dialect' of English – and so it is, but of a rather special kind, for it has no local base. There is nothing in the grammar and vocabulary of a piece of SE to tell us which part of a country it comes from".

Thus, as the current essay focuses in phonology and pronunciation (accents) rather than grammar and vocabulary (dialects) – because the *dialect* or variety of English chosen is International English – we can conclude that this matter is not fully relevant for the object of study.

What is relevant here then is that SE is the variety often taught to foreigners and, normally, the pronunciation taught together with SE is that called *Received Pronunciation* (RP); which, in fact, is not widely spoken by native speakers, but by from three to five percent of the current population of England (Trudgill, 2002). Then why is this variety taught? It has to do with prestige: this particular accent is associated to the upper classes as well as to the mass media, so it is seen as the prestigious variety.

#### 2.1.2. From Standard English to International English: Kachru's circles

Until recently, this special variety was not only taught, some universities demanded it of their students. Nowadays this freedom of choice, which forms the path to English as an International Language (from now onwards EIL), is purchased. But what is EIL? We have to come to the agreement that English does not belong to native speakers anymore, as

Jennifer Jenkins states in her book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000: 6-7); because there has been a historical shift. David Crystal also quotes Braj Kachru's ideas of the spreading of English in his book *English as a Global Language*. Kachru suggested that we think of three concentring circles representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used (Crystal, 1997: 60). The following broad definition of Kachru's model is taken from David Crystal's *English as a Global Language* (1997: 60):

"The *inner circle* refers to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language: it includes the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The *outer* or *extended circle* involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country's chief institutions, and plays an important 'second language' role in a multilingual setting: it includes Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories.

The *expanding* or *extending circle* involves those nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status. It includes China, Japan, Greece, Poland and (as the name of this circle suggests) a steadily increasing number of other states. In these areas, English is taught as a foreign language. (The term 'expanding' reflects its origins in the 1980s: today, with English recognized virtually everywhere, a change to 'expanded' circle instead would better reflect the contemporary scene)".
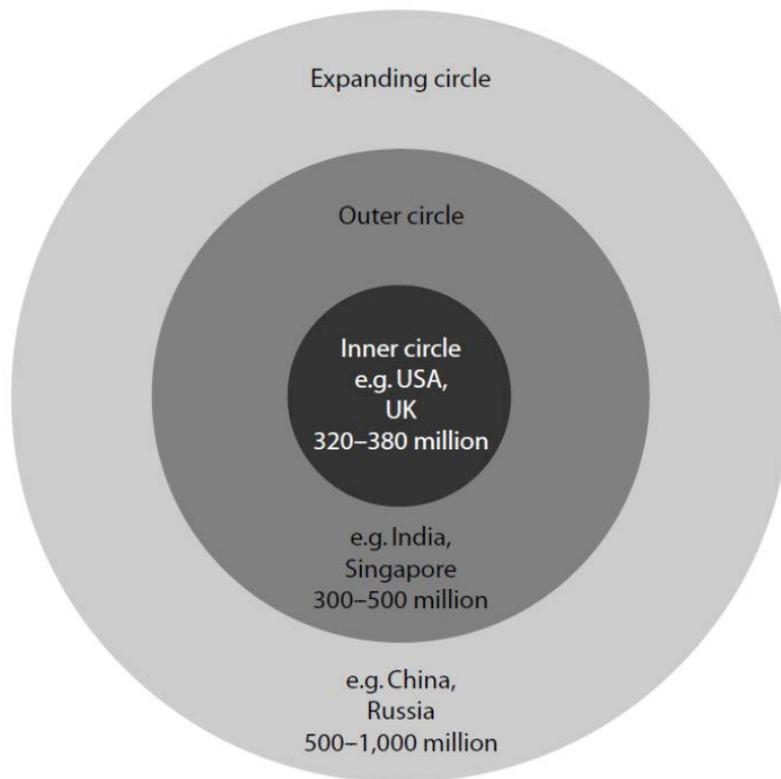
The three 'circles' of English

Figure 1. D. Crystal (1997: 61): The three circles of English

As we can see, the number of speakers in the expanding circle is by far bigger than the ones in the inner circle. The former ones have overcome the latter.

With the previous explanation, we have seen how English has evolved throughout the years. Thanks to being in the right place at the right time, it has also become a global language; but not only that, it is used as a lingua franca in many contexts and countries, one example that comes to my mind is the Erasmus program: while on Erasmus, students from all over Europe use English to communicate.

In these terms, it would be interesting to see the different points of view concerning English as an International Language, and for this purpose I will adhere to the definitions given in the book *World Englishes* by Jennifer Jenkins.

2.1.3. Definitions of International English

"According to Anna Szabo, President of the Brazilian English language organisation Braz-TESOL, […] in future 'language learners will look for efficient schools that can teach them clear, understandable and communicative language

without demanding either specifically American or British versions'" (*EL Gazette* 201, October 1996, quoted by Jenkins, 2003: 125).

Drawing from the premise that RP and GA (General American) may not provide the best goals for L2 learners, core approaches to the pronunciation of English as an International Language have taken three main directions:

> **"1. A contrived core: Gimson's rudimentary international pronunciation**
>
> [...] Gimson devised an artificial phonological core by simplifying the existing inventory of RP sounds and reducing the number of phonemes from 44 to 29. [...]
>
> *2. An empirical core: Jenner's 'International English'*
>
> The second approach is to try to identify what all L2 varieties of English *already* have in common and to establish the shared component as an 'International English'. Scholars arguing along these lines [...] believe that there is a single phonological system shared by all speakers of English around the world, regardless of whether their English is a first, second or subsequent language. [...]
>
> *3. An empirical and contrived core: Jenkins' 'Lingua Franca Core'*
>
> [...A] combination of empirical and artificial approaches. **The Lingua Franca Core** (LFC) is the most fully researched and detailed attempt that has as yet been made to provide EIL speakers with a core intended to guarantee the mutual intelligibility of their accents" (Jenkins, 2003: 125-126).

2.2.   Intelligibility

The previous paragraphs on the different approaches to EIL pronunciation lead us to wonder what the real importance of using English is. In my opinion it is not the perfect native-like pronunciation that matters, but rather being able to communicate, in other words intelligibility, and I will be basing this project on the third approach as the model to follow regarding intelligibility. As stated in *Teaching English Pronunciation,* by Joanne Kenworthy (1987: 13), "it is generally accepted that intelligibility is the most accepted goal. But what is meant by intelligibility? Here is her definition: 'Intelligibility is being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation'. So, it's the same as 'understandability'."

> This may not be much clarifying, so let's try with another definition:
>
> "'The more words a listener is able to identify accurately when said by a particular speaker, the more intelligible that speaker is'. [...] If the foreign speaker substitutes one sound or feature of pronunciation for another, and the result is that the listener hears a different word or phrase from the one the speaker was aiming to say, we say that the

foreigner's speech is unintelligible. […What] matters is 'counts of sameness'" (Kenworthy, 1987: 13).

"Count of sameness" refers to the fact that even though the speaker does not produce the exact sound or gives the sentence the adequate intonation or stress, the listener could still associate the sound heard to the one a native speaker would produce without a huge difficulty.

Once we are aware of what intelligibility is, it would be a good idea to focus first on the speaker's part, and then, on the listener's. For that purpose it is a good idea to have a look on the factors affecting English pronunciation learning.

2.2.1. Factors affecting English pronunciation learning

J. Kenworthy presents in *Teaching English Pronunciation* (1987) the following factors: the native language, the age factor, the amount of exposure, the phonetic ability, attitude and identity, and the motivation and concern for good pronunciation. Let's see what she says one by one and her conclusions:

2.2.1.1. The native language

"[The] more differences there are, the more difficulties the learner will have in pronouncing English. […There] are 'more favoured' and 'less favoured' languages. […People] from many different language backgrounds can and do acquire a near-native pronunciation in English" (Kenworthy, 1987: 4). I agree with this statement, because it is clear that the phonological tools and resources will vary depending on the mother tongue of every speaker. So, according to her – and if I have understood her well – the native language *is* a factor that affects pronunciation learning, but it is not an obstacle in itself. Let me explain it in other words with an example: a native speaker of German and a native speaker of Chinese will be both able to achieve a native-like accent in English, although it would be easier for the German, as it is a Germanic language – as English is – than it would be for the Chinese, whose mother tongue is one far different from English, even intonation and rhythm play a crucial role in Chinese.

2.2.1.2. The age factor

She mentions the false belief that "the younger a learner is, the better he/she will acquire a native-like accent", as well as a few studies on this topic presented by S. Oyama. In the first study mentioned (made upon 60 Italian persons who moved to the USA without speaking English), it seems that the younger the speaker was when he or she started learning the language, the more native-like accent they had.

The second study's results exposed something similar, that age was a crucial factor when determining how accurate the learner's pronunciation could be.

On the other hand, the third appointed study's results were different. They selected two groups of people, and made them repeat some words in another language. The older group scored the best. The second part of this study was done with people aged from 3 to 60 years old, they made them repeat some words after a native speaker, and then without the support of the native speaker. The results were that the older speakers seemed to be better at the beginning, but after four to five months that initial advantage disappeared, and at the end of the year the young group was better than the old group in some sounds, although there was not any clear difference.

Some other studies have concluded that age is not a crucial factor, and, of course, not the only one for pronunciation, some say that there might be a crucial "sensitive" period for language learning, but there no clear evidence has been given establishing a direct connection between age and pronouncing a new language accurately yet (Kenworthy, 1987: 4-5).

In order to avoid the problem mentioned above – that there is no agreement on terms of age influencing pronunciation – the samples that have been selected for this study are from university students ranged between twenty and thirty years of age.

2.2.1.3. The amount of exposure

"It is tempting to view this simply as a matter of whether the learner is living in an English-speaking country or not. […] But it is obvious that we cannot talk simply in terms of residency. Many learners live in an English-speaking country, but spend much of their time in a non-English-speaking environment […]. Conversely, many people live in non-English-speaking countries but use English in many areas of their lives […]. In such complex bilingual and multilingual situations it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how much exposure to English a learner has received, and of what kind. In addition, it is not *merely* exposure that matters, but how the learner responds to the opportunities to listen to and use English" (Kenworthy, 1987: 6).

To clarify the situations previously exposed, we just need to think of, for example, a family of Spanish people who moves to London, the mother being a housewife, living in a Spanish neighbourhood, having little contact with the rest of the British population. Compare that with a Spanish person whose work at university demands to be the international link between his/her university and universities from all around Europe, using English as a lingua franca and, besides, receiving all the incoming foreign students. Taking

into account that the Spanish full-time job model is of eight hours, working five days a week, this person will be in full contact with English around forty hours a week, 160 hours a month approximately. Or, taking another example, the Spanish student who lives with two or three Erasmus students whose mother tongue is English, or even German, Polish… but not a Romance language; at the beginning they will have to communicate in English, and it would be almost 24 hours, 7 days a week speaking English. Comparing these examples – that might be extremes –, we realise that it is almost impossible to measure this factor.

2.2.1.4. The phonetic ability

"It is a common view that some people have a 'better ear' for foreign languages than others. This skill has been variously termed 'aptitude for oral mimicry', 'phonetic coding ability' or 'auditory discrimination ability'. Researchers have designed tests which measure this ability and have demonstrated that some people are able to discriminate between two sounds better than others, and/or are able to mimic sounds more accurately" (Kenworthy, 1987: 6-7).

From this, we can make a division between good discriminators and poor discriminators. There are some types of training which seems to help people from the first group (pronunciation drills), but none have been clearly found for the latter.

In my opinion, this factor is one of the most important for pronunciation learning, I would even say vital to achieve a native-like pronunciation; but at the same time it would be unfair, since it is something that belongs to every individual's inner nature. Besides, to communicate there is no need to pronounce English like a native speaker, but making oneself understood. That, in my opinion, is the main aim of International English (EIL).

2.2.1.5. Attitude and identity

Regarding this factor, and according to Kenworthy (1987: 7-8), speakers seem to vary greatly, for example, when we imitate our friend's way of speaking there is a positive feeling towards that person, we "adopt" his or her accent because we in some way admire him or her, and the manifestation of that comes with the imitation; it is like telling her or him "I am glad to know you and to be talking with you". Additionally, "[length] of time spent in the new place is certainly a factor. Whether the person intends to return to the part of the country and how much the person continues to associate with people from 'back home' also seem to be important" (Kenworthy, 1987: 8).

I kind of agree but at the same time disagree with Kenworthy's reflections on this issue. Let me explain myself, I am going to talk about my own experiences with another language first, and then with English itself.

The first experience concerns Italian. I speak fluent Italian, and I do have a regional accent, which is Sicilian. I went on Erasmus there for five months, so I acquired the accent, but I met all kind of people, some became really good friends that I admire, some others I did not get along with, so if that statement was totally true, my Italian would be neutral; instead, I consider it more a matter of the preceding point – the phonetic ability – than of this point. On the other hand, I have met Italian people from all over the country, but strangely, I have not changed my accent. Although we became really close to each other, and the length of their stay was longer – about nine to ten months –, my pronunciation did not change, not even a little.

On the other hand, regarding English I have had several experiences with native speakers from the UK and the US. My accent could be tagged as a mixture of both RP and GA, but my friends do not have those accents. The one and most recent friend – when I say "recent" I mean the one I talk to more assiduously recently – is Scottish, his accent is quite strong, and yet it has not influenced my English accent, as far as I am aware.

So, from my personal point of view, thinking of my vital experiences, I cannot totally agree with this point.

2.2.1.6. The motivation and concern for good pronunciation

"Some learners seem to be more concerned about their pronunciation than others. […] The desire to do well is a kind of 'achievement motivation'. Conversely, if you don't care about a particular task or don't see the value of it, you won't be motivated to do well" (Kenworthy, 1987: 8). I consider this extract, which belongs to Kenworthy's study of motivation, quite important, I would even say one of the most important factors, if not the most important one, because if a person is not motivated to make themselves understood, they will never acquire a good pronunciation in terms of intelligibility, simply because they do not care. Take this example: a secondary school student who attends English lessons at high school and is told that, in order to move on to the next course, he or she needs to study English and pass that subject. Obviously, the way in which the subject is going to be seen is a pejorative one. It is going to be seen as an obligation, as an obstacle. If, instead of telling this student this, he or she is told about how important it is to speak a foreign language for his or her future, it might completely change his or her vision of the subject.

The student's motivation will be positive and, consequently, his or her results in pronunciation will improve.

"Learners may also be unconcerned because they simply are not aware that the way they speak is resulting in difficulty, irritation or misunderstanding for the listener" (Kenworthy, 1987: 8). This other statement, which I would say has to do with the concern for a good pronunciation, is in my opinion quite debatable. The speaker may be unaware of the difficulties his or her speech entails for the listener, because normally they will be told how difficult it is to understand them long after the first time. If the speaker does not react after this first time then it will be his or her fault. I mean, this would be a lack of interest in making himself or herself understood.

2.2.1.7. Conclusions

We can take the following excerpts as the most relevant of her conclusions: "[Teaching] could directly affect the identity and attitudinal factors, […] if, through their learning experiences, learners become interested in the speakers of the language and their customs and culture. […] Intelligibility and communicative efficiency are the only realistic goals" (Kenworthy, 1987: 8-9).

The first part of this conclusion belongs to pedagogical aspects, and therefore, I do not contemplate it is necessary to comment on it right now, whereas the second sentence is of vital importance to the subject matter of this work. As mentioned before, intelligibility is the main aim of EIL.

2.2.2. Speaking with a foreign accent

Once we have dealt with the factors affecting English pronunciation learning, we will continue with the speaker's part, this time the issue discussed will be "speaking with a foreign accent". We need to take into account that every non-native's accent is a sign of their origin. Some think that it is good to be immediately identified as a foreigner, because the listener will pay more attention to the foreigners' discourse, as well as trying to speak clearly and maybe even more slowly, in order to help and make the conversation much easier; also, they would be aware of possible misunderstandings regarding mispronunciation. It is also said that a perfect accent or pronunciation would be seen suspiciously, and treated with scorn by the native speakers (Kenworthy, 1987: 11-12).

Personally, I still have not found the last attitude towards correctness, in fact, what I have experienced is totally the opposite: surprise and flattery, and in some cases, the native speaker's interest in helping me to pronounce the word as a native speaker, because, as said in our study of attitude and identity, imitation is the most flattering way of admiration.

The most remarkable aspect on this matter is, again, understandability; and as is said by Joanne Kenworthy, "[speaking] with a foreign accent is only a 'problem' if it leads to a breakdown in communication" (1987: 12).

2.2.3. Factors affecting intelligibility

Not only do "counts of sameness" affect intelligibility, there are also other factors, such as self-corrections, hesitations, grammatical restructurings, lack of confidence, and the speed (when a speaker talks too quickly). There might be a relation between a lack of confidence regarding pronunciation and intelligibility in which the more pauses and hesitations a speaker does while talking, the more difficult it is to understand him/her, although this does not always happen. If we look at the speed of speech, Kenworthy (1987: 14) states that it is not a vital factor in intelligibility, what seems to be happening is that we cannot identify the vital or crucial parts of the discourse to follow it. In other words, to follow a conversation we do not need to understand every single word but just a few, in order to have a general picture (of what the conversation is about) in our minds. Take the following sentence as an example: "Mary would like to go to the supermarket to buy some apples". If the speaker talks too fast, the listener may not understand every word in the sentence, but if he or she is able to pick up the key words, the general content of the sentence, then the communication will not be broken and the conversation will continue. When it is not clear, the key words would be the following:

***Mary** would like to **go** to the **supermarket** to **buy** some **apples**.*

The listener just needs to "catch" five words out of twelve in order to understand, but what if the listener understands only four key words? Let's see what would happen in each and every possible case:

- Case 1: ***Mary***, ***go***, ***supermarket*** and ***buy***: in this case, we still understand that Mary is going to the supermarket to buy, although we do not know what she intends to buy.
- Case 2: ***Mary***, ***go***, ***supermarket*** and ***apples***: this case may be one of the two in which we get the overall meaning, Mary is going to the supermarket, and even though the verb is omitted, we guess that she is going to buy some apples. It would very unlikely that she is going to return the apples that she bought because they were rotten.
- Case 3: ***Mary***, ***go***, ***buy*** and ***apples***: in this case we do not know the place where she intends to buy the apples, it might be in a greengrocer's that is next to her place, or in some other shop which sells fruit as well as other food products.

- Case 4: *Mary*, *supermarket*, *buy* and *apples*: this case would be the other one in which we also get the overall meaning. We see that Mary needs to go to the supermarket to get some apples, we do not know when, but it is not really vital information, in my opinion.
- Case 5: *go*, *supermarket*, *buy* and *apples*: in this one it is clear what needs to be done, but we do not know who the one in charge of performing the action is. It could be practically anyone.

With this example and all the analysed cases we can conclude that even if we do not understand the whole sentence nor all the key words, in some cases we will still be able to understand the overall meaning, what is more, the example used was just a sentence, but there always has to be a context, and if in that context *Mary* has been mentioned before, case 5 would be solved. If, on the contrary, the conversation was about apple pies and they realised they have run out of them, case 1 would be the one solved.

2.2.4. Sources of intelligibility problems

According to Joanne Kenworthy (1987: 16-20), there are seven different sources which are identified with learning pronunciation strategies a learner of English uses: sound substitutions, sound deletions, sound insertions, links between words, the use of stress, the use of rhythm, and the use of intonation.

2.2.4.1. Sound substitutions

As the title itself says, this happens when a speaker substitutes one phoneme for another, because he or she might have learnt that two different sounds are pronounced the same, and so, with some words it can be an understandable mistake in which the listener can infer what the speaker means, but in other cases it is a significant sound in English. For example, a speaker whose native language does not have the "th" sound as in "thick" will substitute the sound /s/ as in "sick" for it. So the two words "sick" and "thick" will be pronounced exactly the same. The only things that could help are that the listener guessing by the context, or that the feature of the non-native speech is familiar to him/her (Kenworthy, 1987: 17).

For Spanish people, for example, a problem would be differentiating between /b/ and /v/, because in Spanish only one phoneme is used for both graphemes, this situation in which two words differentiate one from another in only one phone is called "minimal pairs". For example, for Spanish speakers the words "berry" and "very" would be both pronounced /ˈbɛri/. This is not the only example that comes to my mind, there are also "ban" and "van" /ˈbæn/; "bat" and "vat" /ˈbæt/; boat and vote /ˈboʊt/; bet and vet /ˈbɛt/;

bow and vow /ˈbaʊ/; bane and vein /ˈbeɪn/; rebel (noun) and revel /ˈrɛbəl/. And the list could continue, I just took a few examples from https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs-b-v.htm.

2.2.4.2. Sound deletions

The speaker leaves out a sound. In the case of consonants, it may occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a word; or even one of two consonants in a group or consonant cluster. One example for the first case mentioned would be the word "hold", in which the final "d" is omitted, resulting in the word "hole" to the listener's ears (Kenworthy, 1987: 17).

For Spanish and Italian people, final consonant clusters are normally difficult to pronounce, as in the case of "crisps", "prompts" or "attempt", even though it usually does not affect intelligibility because the listener gets what the speaker is trying to say.

2.2.4.3. Sound insertions

"Non-native speakers may add sounds" (Kenworthy, 1987: 17). This may be the case of Spanish speakers, whose language does not have words starting by a consonant cluster beginning in "s", so they usually say /ɛsˈtjuːdənt/ instead of /ˈstjuːdənt/ for the word "student". In this particular case intelligibility is not affected either.

2.2.4.4. Links between words

"In English, word boundaries are 'negotiated' in certain ways: sometimes a linking sound is used, sometimes one sound merges with another, and sometimes a composite sound is used" (Kenworthy, 1987: 17). Then, Kenworthy goes on to suggest the following:

- A linking sound:

"When saying 'go in', speakers add the consonant /w/ as in '*w*ill'. It sounds like 'go win'" (Kenworthy, 1987: 17).

In these terms, this phonetic peculiarity plays an important role concerning intelligibility. As always, context can help, but what if both options could fit in the context? Another example would be the case of "get in", which pronounced fast may result in confusing it with the gerund form in some accent variants, such as American English, it would sound like *gettin'*. Something similar happens with the phrases "I scream" and "ice-cream"; or "an aim" and "a name", without a context they sound exactly the same, and their meanings are different. So this type is relevant for intelligibility.

- A sound merger:

"When saying 'nice shoe' the final consonant of 'nice' merges with the first consonant of 'shoe'. The result sounds like 'ny shoe'" (Kenworthy, 1987: 17).

Little can be added to this quotation, it would be difficult to misunderstand and not get the meaning by the context, because even if we think of "ny" as NY (New York) the combination of "New York" and "shoe" would be, at least, weird.

- A composite sound:

"When saying 'this year' English speakers may use the consonant /ʃ/ as in '*sh*oe' at the border between the two words. They will not pronounce the 's' followed by /j/ as in 'yes' but use this 'composite' sound. The phrase will sound quite like 'the shear'" (Kenworthy, 1987: 18). This author goes on to suggest that also, depending on how the speakers make the transition from one word to the next, this might make the speech artificial or not. For example Chinese people normally cannot do it properly, so their English sounds staccato and jerky. Other speakers tend to insert short sounds between words. For example, Italian speakers might say "It's a big-a one" instead of "It's a big one"; so the listener might hear "It's a bigger one".

It can be that the case of Italian speakers affects intelligibility, but as far as I am concerned, this is not a vital factor, although it is a remarkable feature among Italian speakers.

2.2.4.5.   The use of stress

In English, the use of the stress is very important:

"[In] an English word of two or more syllables, one of these will have 'prominence' or 'stress'. That syllable is perceived as more prominent because of a complex of features such as loudness, length of vowel, etc. If the learner doesn't stress one syllable more than another, or stresses the wrong syllable, it may be very difficult for the listener to identify the word. This is because the stress pattern of a word is an important part of its identity for the native speaker" (Kenworhty, 1987: 18).

Here is an example of what Jenkins suggests next:

"'Comfortable' was pronounced with stress on 'com-' and on '-ta-'. The listener heard this as 'come for a table'. [… In all the] cases, the sounds used by the speaker were for the most part accurate. But despite this, the listeners were thrown by the incorrect stress pattern. […] Many other cases of misunderstanding reveal upon analysis that the listener is paying as much attention to stress pattern as to the individual sounds" (Kenworthy, 1987: 18-19).

Thus, this feature will be one of the most important ones to bear in mind when looking at the intelligibility of the samples, opposed to what I initially thought at the beginning of the research.

2.2.4.6. The use of rhythm

"English has a characteristic rhythm and listeners *expect* to hear all speakers use this rhythm" (Kenworthy, 1987: 19). It is as if English was a melody, a very well-known melody, and the non-native speakers have to "sing" it accurately, in order for the native speakers to recognise it. The rhythm goes hand-in-hand with the use of stress, because it is highly improbable to find two consecutive stressed syllables, or three unstressed syllables together.

Also, the time a speaker spends pronouncing an unstressed syllable will be less than when pronouncing a stressed one, because the latter is more prominent – again, we see this is connected with stress – than the others. How to recognise an unstressed syllable? It is simple: the vowel that is normally used is a schwa /ə/ or an "i" /ɪ/. We can conclude that this feature is also important for assessing intelligibility.

Stress and rhythm would also go up and down when speaking, this third feature is the next point, and it is called intonation.

2.2.4.7. The use of intonation

"[There] is the matter of pitch variation and 'tunes' in English. Listeners get certain information from the pitch of the voice and speakers send information using pitch variation. Intonation is important for intelligibility, because it is used to express intentions. […] Only those who take an extremely narrow view of intelligibility can disregard the importance of intonation. Furthermore, the effect of intonation can be *cumulative*; the misunderstandings may be minor, but if they occur constantly then they may result in judgements about the attitudes, character, ways of behaving, etc. of a particular speaker. For example, if a foreign speaker always uses very low pitch, without much variation in the melody of the voice, listeners may get the impression that they are 'bored' or 'uninterested' when this is really not the case" (Kenworthy, 1987: 19-20).

As Joanne Kenworthy stated and I myself had guessed before I read her commentary, this feature is really important for intelligibility. I will add another example to hers, this time exemplifying it with Spanish people as the non-native speakers of English. We are famous for sounding really loud and high pitched in our mother tongue, but what would happen if we "transferred" the distinctive features of Spanish to English? The result is simple: we would sound rude, aggressive, and even angry to native speakers. And that is why it is so necessary to learn intonation too when we are learning any language which is not our native one.

2.2.4.8. Conclusions

So we can assert that the last three features form a group. It is highly probable that if a speaker fails accomplishing one of the three, they will probably fail as well in the other two.

So, we can conclude that the most important features regarding intelligibility in general are sound substitutions, links between the words and the uses of stress, rhythm and intonation; however, for this study, as the results of the analysis have shown – they are explained in the experimental part – and as it is based on reading aloud a tale, they would be the following:

- In the case of Spanish speakers: sound substitutions, the use of stress and the use of rhythm.

- In the case of Italian speakers: sound substitutions, links between the words (the case of composite sounds), the use of stress and the use of rhythm.

Intonation has been left out of the equation because what the samples contain is the recordings of various English and Spanish native speakers reading aloud a short story, so the intonation here would only assess how good or bad they are at reading a text.

2.2.5. Assessing intelligibility

"The easiest way to assess the intelligibility of particular speakers is simply to ask someone to listen to them speak and say how difficult or easy they are to understand. Such impressionistic or 'subjective' assessments are both accurate and dependable. There have been several studies in which both subjective and other 'objective' assessments (based on carefully designed procedures and statistical analysis) have been carried out on the same speakers. The results of the two types of assessment tend to agree. Listeners are also able to rank a group of speakers in order of intelligibility and these impressionistic rankings also tend to agree with the results of other objective ranking techniques" (Kenworthy, 1987: 20).

So, is everyone a competent or suitable judge of intelligibility? Unfortunately not. As Joanne Kenworthy also says, there are some listeners who would not be valid for this purpose, for example teachers, because they are familiar with all their students' accents, mistakes and errors when speaking, so they would not be able to tell so easily. Furthermore, they tend to be exposed to a great deal of non-native accents, so they kind of "develop" special listening skills. The same happens with listeners who are familiar with, for example, Chinese people speaking English, or German people; because as you are familiar, you know which kind of mistakes these speakers usually make. The ideal judges

would be those people who have not had any contact before either with non-native speaker accents or with the person they are about to listen to.

In this case, this initial "disadvantage" – I am used to both nationalities, Spanish and Italian, speaking English – will be turned out into an advantage, because I know which common mistakes I need to be looking for in order to assess intelligibility.

3.   EXPERIMENTAL PART

For this part I have compiled a set of recorded audios – the total amount is 41, but in the end I will be using two of each nationality, one that is, in my tutor's and my own opinion, the least intelligible; and the other that would be the clearest and most accurate, in terms, always, of intelligibility.

The samples collected are gathered from university students between twenty and thirty years of age, and whose English level is between B1 and B2, in terms of the *CEFRL*. The students are from all over Spain and all over Italy (their islands included), so that I could have a wider and more objective point of view, and not a regional one. Even though I will be focusing on only four audios, I will also comment on some of the common features that I have found.

I will be talking first about the Italian speakers, their similitudes and differences between them; then, I will do the same with the Spanish speakers, and finally I will be contrasting both nationalities.

But first of all, I would like to comment on the text that I have chosen and explain the criteria by which I have guided myself. I have consulted the book *Teaching English Pronunciation* by Joanne Kenworthy, which has a second part in which the most general and common problems faced by both speakers (Spanish and Italian) talking in English are explained.

In order to understand her methodology, Joanne Kenworthy explains at the beginning of part two (1987: 123) the priority classification of problems that English learners may have to face, classifying them by nationalities. *High Priority* problems (HP) are those whose mistake is crucial for intelligibility, *Low Priority* problems (LP) would be those which would not affect intelligibility, because it has to do with sounds which are rarely found in English words, the third option she gives is that of *Optional Attention* problems (OA), and in this case the problems that these entail are the ones that contribute to make the foreign accent noticeable, but that normally will not lead to any kind of intelligibility problems. I will be focusing mainly in HP problems.

The text found below has been taken from the *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association: A Guide to the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet*, it is a short tale or fable. As it was selected and has been used by the International Phonetic Association (IPA) in this and other publications and experiments, my tutor recommended it to me, because it has some interesting phonological features which could be used to "test" the students.

> "The North Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger, when a traveller came along wrapped in a warm cloak. They agreed that the one who first succeeded in making the traveller take his cloak off should be considered stronger than the other. Then the North Wind blew as hard as he could, but the more he blew the more closely did the traveller fold his cloak around him; and at last the North Wind gave up the attempt. Then the Sun shined out warmly, and immediately the traveller took off his cloak. And so the North Wind was obliged to confess that the Sun was the stronger of the two" (International Phonetic Association, 1999: 39).

In order to assess intelligibility, Kenworthy (1987: 21) recommends taking a person randomly and asking him or her to listen to the speakers and tell how difficult it is to understand them. She also says that having samples will help to accomplish the assessment of intelligibility. But what kind of samples? Reading aloud or spontaneous speech? According to her, spontaneous speech is better and preferable to a read-aloud sample, for two main reasons: the first one, because speakers tend to get nervous and anxious when reading aloud; and the second one, because that is something that they are supposed to do in their daily life, to talk to other people and not read them a prepared text or speech.

It is highly recommendable that even though the spontaneous speech is the chosen one, the topic of the samples is the same. That would make the samples similar, but not identical. My problem was that I needed them to be identical, as I would need to compare the phonemes and sounds produced, so they had to be reading-aloud samples.

Why was it better if the samples were on the same topic but of spontaneous speech? Because for the listener, when he or she (in this case myself) had listened to the 10th recording I would know the text by heart. But as I said, the purpose was to have the same words so I could compare them properly.

The "anxiety" problem that is mentioned by Kenworthy has not occurred in this specific case, as the participants in the experiment did not know about the "examination part". I asked them to fill in a document in which they agreed to help me with my final

degree essay, just by recording an audio message reading aloud the text, so they did not have the pressure of me looking at them while reading every word in the text.

Now that the procedures have been explained, I would like to start with the analysis itself.

3.1. Italian speakers

First, I would like to comment that I will be taking little extracts from *Teaching English Pronunciation* by Joanne Kenworthy about Italian people speaking English, adding examples of my own and commenting on them while comparing with what I have found in my research.

3.1.1. Consonant problems

Regarding consonants (Kenworthy, 1987: 143-144), there would be "new" sounds that Italian itself does not have:

/θ/ as in "*th*ick", "*th*ing" and "*th*ink".

/ð/ as in "*th*at", "*th*e" and "*th*is".

/ʒ/ as in "rou*g*e", "vi*s*ion" and "u*s*ually".

/ŋ/ as in "si*ng*", "cli*ng*" and all the endings of the gerund tense verb.

The HP problems when it comes to pronouncing some words would be the following (within consonants):

1) Sounds substituting /θ/:

/f/ as in "<u>f</u>un".

/s/ as in "<u>s</u>un".

/t/ as in "<u>t</u>on".

The first two mistakes or confusions are more important than the third, since there are some varieties of English of the outer circle which have those characteristics, Indian English for example, in which to pronounce "thing" they will say /tiŋ/ instead of /θiŋ/.

This particular problem was not found in the research, the speakers sometimes simply omitted the sound, but they did not change it (a word containing this sound was *North*).

2) Sounds substituting /ð/:

/v/ as in "<u>v</u>an".

/z/ as in "<u>z</u>oo".

/d/ as in "<u>d</u>o".

Again, the first two substitutions are worse than the third, and therefore, more important, so we need to pay special attention to them, because they will interfere in terms

of intelligibility. If the third case occurs, it will not be such a big deal, as both sounds are very similar, and the word will be still understandable.

In the text we have a few words containing this phoneme, but the mistakes made are those of the third type, so I consider them to be insignificant mistakes (always in terms of intelligibility).

Another problem that Italian people have is that in their native language, words hardly ever end in a consonant, all words end in a vowel, since they construct the plural changing the vowels. A singular masculine word will end in "-o" (sometimes in "-e") and so the plural is changed by ending the word in "-i". The same will happen with the singular feminine words ending in "-a", to form the plural they change the "-a" for "-e". Here I present the example with "boy" and "boys" in the masculine, and "girl" and "girls" in the feminine: "Boy" is *ragazzo* and "boys" would be *ragazzi*; meanwhile "girl" is *ragazza* and "girls" is *ragazze*.

As they are not used to ending words in a consonant they tend to add a sound similar to a schwa at the end of all the words. As already said before, this would happen with the case of the word "big", which would be pronounced as if they were saying "bigger", causing some confusion. The biggest confusion may be between comparative adjectives and their base forms (when they are formed by adding the suffix "-er"), or with the nouns which are formed by adding a suffix "-er" to a base verb form (such as "build" and "builder", or "grab" and "grabber").

In this case we do have clear examples of this feature in some of the samples, even though, to my understanding, the recording was intelligible enough. You can easily follow what the speaker is saying, the only remarkable thing is that he has a marked Italian accent which, as already stated before, in terms of intelligibility does not matter as long as you can understand what has been said.

3.1.2. Vowel problems

There are four "High Priority" problems concerning vowels for Italian learners of English (Kenworthy, 1987: 144-146), all of them because they do not exist or occur in Italian:

1) /ɪ/ as in "f<u>i</u>t"

   I do not consider this one especially relevant in our text, or for intelligibility in general, because they just substitute that sound for /i/, which is still somehow close to the original sound.

2) /æ/ as in "m<u>a</u>t"

This case may create confusion, since they normally substitute this sound for the /ɛ/ in "b_ed", so "bad" and "bed" will sound exactly the same, as well as "man" and "men"; or "and" and "end".

In the samples, although there are words containing these phonemes in the text, this problem does not occur.

3) /ə/ as in "_about"

The schwa seems to be difficult for Italians for two reasons. The first one is that they do not have weak vowels when it comes to unstressed syllables; and the second one is that they tend to pronounce the vowel as the graphical symbol is written, they are quite "phonetic" in that aspect.

Again, this problem has not occurred in the samples, so for the matter of the subject this is insignificant.

4) The length of vowels

There are many differences between English and Italian, but the most significant and relevant one is that Italians tend to make the vowel short when it is placed at the end of the word or it is followed by a consonant (speaking in general terms, leaving aside the different Italian accents, because in Sicily for example this is totally different). In English the rules for making vowels longer or shorter are different, and it does not depend on whether the vowel is followed by a consonant, making it shorter, or placed at the end of the word, because if the final syllable of the word is stressed the vowel will be longer than the unstressed ones (as in "canteen" for example).

If I have to tell which features are more important regarding intelligibility, I would say that the ones of vowels are not, at least compared to the consonant ones.

3.1.3. Rhythm and stress problems

As said before, in Italian all the syllables are pronounced with full vowels, these being stressed or unstressed syllables. As learners tend to speak the second language with the habits of their mother tongue, this can be a problem (Kenworthy, 1987: 146). This happens especially because the tendency in Italian is that the stress falls on the penultimate syllable, I would say around eighty to ninety percent of all Italian words are stressed in that way (except for the words which have the ending suffix "-tà" like "universi**tà**", which brings up the problem of changing the stress of that word in English – "uni**ve**rsity"), and it can be a problem when it comes to stressing English words the same way. Right now I can think of two clear examples: "**li**terature" and "**com**fortable"; in both words the stress is in the first syllable.

In this particular case, many of the unintelligible parts of the samples are because the words are not correctly stressed; the most outstanding example is the word "disputing", and this is curious, because instead of stressing it in the penultimate syllable (as almost every word in Italian is), they change the stress to the antepenultimate syllable, and it becomes a proparoxytone word, maybe this would be a case of overcorrection falling in the error of applying the English front-weight principle, which does not apply here. Obviously, changing the place of the stressed syllable also produces a change in the pronunciation of the word and the vowels.

I would say that this is one of the main problems that I have found in the Italian samples, bigger and more important than vowel or consonant problems regarding intelligibility.

3.1.4.   Intonation problems

Italian learners seem to have relatively few problems with intonation patterns. One feature is noticeable, though: a tendency for an equal rise-fall on stressed words, particularly at the end of the clause: ↗↘. This may have the effect of over-insistence, when this is not the intention (Kenworthy, 1987: 146). The samples are the reading aloud of a story, so the feature explained of over-insistence does not have any sense in our purpose, at least in an obvious sense.

3.1.5.   Consonant clusters and sequences problems

There are three HP problems regarding this topic:

1) Word initial clusters

The clusters beginning with /θ/, such as "through", "three" are difficult because this is a new sound to Italian speakers (Kenworhty, 1987: 146). There is no case of this sound in initial position in the reading, so this feature could not be judged.

2) Final clusters

There are no clusters at the end of Italian words, so final clusters in English may cause great difficulties. Clusters with unfamiliar sounds can be even more problematic (Kenworhty, 1987: 147). In the text we find what it seems should be a quite difficult word to pronounce for Italian speakers, "attempt", but strangely even the least intelligible speaker is able to pronounce it accurately.

3) Medial sequences

Learners also have problems with sequences of clusters across word boundaries, and will use the same deletion and vowel insertion strategies (Kenworthy, 1987: 147).

According to my data, the main problem that Italian speakers usually have is that of double consonants. In Italian, where there is a word containing a double consonant they make a little pause when speaking, for example *pizza*, or *oggi*, they pronounce those words approximately as /ˈpittsa/ and /ˈɔddʒi/, and between /t/ and /ts/, or /d/ and /dʒ/ there is a little pause in the pronunciation; so when they see two words which end and begin with the same letter, they tend to do the same, as if it were a single word in Italian.

In the text we only find a similar case, "that the", but they do not make an over exaggerated pause, just as a native speaker would do.

3.1.6.   Other intelligibility problems found

The words "fold", "obliged", "blew", "cloak", "wrapped", and "succeeded" are mispronounced by several speakers, it could be said that about half of them make a mistake in those words. But strictly speaking, only "obliged", "wrapped" and "blew" could give the listener problems understanding them. "Blew" in some cases could be understood as "view", "wrapped" as an inexistent word, and "obliged" may be understood if the listener guesses by the context.

These are the audios I have selected as the most intelligible (1) and the least one (2):

(1)   (Palermo).mp3

(2)   (Udine).mp3

3.2.   Spanish speakers

It is the turn now for Spanish speakers. Maybe this has been the hardest part of the whole research, as I am Spanish myself and there might be a clash when listening and dealing with their audios. I mean, as I am Spanish my ear is so much used to listening to Spanish people speaking in English, so I am not a "good judge" myself, simply because I might have not considered some intelligibility problems, since I am so used to them that I understand them and I do not perceive them as mistakes anymore.

Despite this, not everything is going to be negative, I will let Joanne Kenworthy guide me with her excellent book *Teaching English Pronunciation* (Part two), which has clear objective references to the way Spanish people learn and speak English; but also I have been asking different people to listen to the two audios that I have selected in order to know if they could understand them. As it was their first contact with the samples and they

did not know the speakers, their answers were valid and suitable for my purpose. This helped me very much to decide which two audios from the Spanish samples I was going to select. Another advantage that I personally think I have is that as I myself am a native speaker of Spanish I have a wider knowledge of the language itself, and I already knew about some of the problems set out in the book, so I have an advantage in this particular section that I did not have in the previous one.

Again in these parts I am going to comment on what Kenworthy considers "High Priority" Problems (HP), since these are the ones that she considers would interfere in terms of intelligibility (Kenworthy, 1987: 153-156):

3.2.1.   Problems with consonants

There are ten HP problems and three LP problems, and in this case I consider interesting to see them all, even though some are not relevant because they do not appear in the text. I will mention the HP problems first:

1)   Confusion between /b/ and /v/

There is not much to say about this point, since I have already explained it when I dealt with substitutions above, and I have also included some examples of minimal pairs, like "vet" and "bet".

In the text there are two words, "traveller" and "gave", which contain the sound /v/, but even if they pronounce them with the phoneme /b/ the listener is still able to understand the word, so it does not affect intelligibility.2) /d/ and /ð/ practically identically pronounced

This is another case of problems with minimal pairs, but in this case, even though they may sound as foreigners, intelligibility is not affected.

There are several /d/ sounds as well as /ð/ sounds in the text, but again, most of the speakers do not make mistakes concerning this particular issue and, if they do, this does not affect intelligibility.

3) /θ/ as in "*th*row" does not exist in some varieties of Spanish and it is substituted by /f/ as in "*f*un" or by /s/ as in "*s*ea".

I had never heard of this particular characteristic, so I cannot agree nor disagree. Additionally, this problem cannot be analysed in the text because the only word that contains this phoneme – Nor*th* – has the sound at the end, and the most repetitive problem is that the Andalusian speakers omit it, because in Andalusia speakers tend to not pronounce the last consonantal sounds of words. As a result of this, people from this region are said to have ten vowels instead of five – like the rest of Spanish regions.

I will explain this a little bit: in Spanish there are five vowels, which would be /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/ and /u/; but in Andalusia, as, for example, final /s/ in plural forms are regularly not pronounced, speakers need to express in some way the difference between singular and plural, hence the ten vowels. For example, in English we have "dog" (singular form) and "dogs" (plural form); the word in Spanish is *perro* (masculine, singular), but also *perra* (feminine singular), and in the plural *perros* (masculine or generic), and *perras* (feminine). The "a" or "o" in the singular forms would sound different from the ones in the plural, but how? It is simple: for the singular Andalusian speakers use a closer vowel, whereas for the plural it is a more open one.

4) /s/ and /z/ are confused

It is more or less the same problem as with /b/ and /v/, with the difference that in Spanish the /z/ sound only exists as an onomatopoeic sound – for example, to represent a bee's flying sound – so Spanish speakers learn that both sounds are similarly pronounced, and as it does not exist in Spanish, both sounds are pronounced the same. In this part it is nonsensical to talk about minimal pairs for Spanish, since they would not see the difference, and even less in words which are written the same, such as "abuse" or "house" in which the noun will be pronounced with /s/ and the verb with /z/.

In the text there are examples of words containing the /z/ sound, but these are words like "wa*s*" or "hi*s*" that can be guessed by the general context and do not really interfere in the intelligibility of the text.

The least intelligible speaker does not pronounce a /s/ sound nor a /z/, as he is from an Andalusian region in which all words containing these letters ("s" and "z") in initial and medial position are pronounced with the phoneme /θ/.

5) /ʃ/ as in "*sh*eet" does not occur in many varieties

In this case, they get confused with the /tʃ/ phoneme, so they can say "cheap" when they mean "sheep". When they acknowledge the sound, they could use it in excess, and do the opposite of the example, say "cheap" when they really want to say "sheep". Another example would be the minimal pair "shop" and "chop".

This can be messy and cause confusion among the listeners, but even the least intelligible Spanish speaker did make a differentiation between both sounds.

6) /j/ as in "*y*et" or "*y*es"

For what it seems, Spanish people will tend to get confused with this sound and use the /dʒ/ sound instead. So they would say "*j*et" instead of "*y*et"; or "*g*el" instead of "*y*ell".

This particular sound, /j/, does appear in one word in the text which has been particularly difficult for Spanish speakers. We are speaking about "disputing", and only four out of the twelve speakers were able to pronounce it correctly. The rest of them made mistakes in the stress pattern, saying something like /ˈdiːsputɪŋ/, omitted the /j/ sound, saying something like /dɪˈspuːtɪŋ/, or, finally, changed the vowel sound, saying /dɪˈspʌtɪŋ/. Both of these last changes make it difficult to understand the word, even though the stressed syllable was the right one. I would say that this particular mistake interferes in the goal of intelligibility.

7) /w/ as in "*w*ell" or "*w*ill"

This phoneme is not really common in Spanish, at least in initial position (some speakers even get confused and say something like *güevo* instead of *huevo*), so they will look for the closest sound there is, which would be as if the sound /w/ were a /u/ sound and they will add a /g/ sound in front of it, so if they try to say "when" it may sound like "Gwen" to the listener.

There are several words in which we find this sound, such as "Wind", "were", "was", "when", "warm" and "warmly"; but strangely, they were all more or less capable of pronouncing these words accurately, at least the part concerning the sound "w", because the mistake in the word "wind" had to see with the vowel, and we will see about that in another point.

8) /p/ as in "*p*et" and /k/ as in "*k*eep"

This particular feature is for South American Spanish speakers, according to Kenworthy (1987: 153-154), and all of my samples belong to Spanish people from Spain so I cannot judge this one.

9) /h/ as in "*h*ell"

In this case, we face four different situations, which are the following:

a) They may omit or delete the sound, and "pronounce" the letter just as in Spanish, in which it is a silent letter.

b) They may pronounce it with a "hissing" quality (I have never heard this particular one).

c) They may get confused with the /dʒ/ sound so that "ham" and "jam" may sound the same.

d) They may pronounce it as the Spanish letter "j", which is a velar sound /x/ that does not exist in English (only in some dialects, such as Scottish).

I would not be able to discern which of these four pronunciations is the most important to avoid so the discourse may be intelligible, perhaps the least important is the

second one. What I can assure is that the commonest are the first and the last one, as far as I am concerned.

There are a couple of words in the text which contain this sound ("he" and "his"), but as they have two forms, the weak form (in which the /h/ sound is omitted) and the strong one (in which it is pronounced), it does not affect the intelligibility of the samples, since these words are rarely heard in their strong form.

10) /ŋ/ as in "sw*ing*" (substituting /n/ when it should be /ŋ/)

If, instead of saying "sing" /sɪŋ/ they change the /ŋ/ for /n/, the listener will hear "sin" /sɪn/ instead. Again, these are minimal pairs, which in my opinion are a vital matter for intelligibility.

There are three cases of this sound in the text (all the gerund tenses of the verbs contain it): "disputing", "making" and "stronger"; but this has not been a problem of intelligibility, it may help that those words do not have a minimal pair, so we cannot get confused. With the word "stronger" there have been several problems, one of the students mispronounced it to the extreme of causing confusion, because it seems that he said "stranger". This is one more of those cases where graphophonology definitely affects pronunciation negatively.

Now that we have dealt with the HP problems, I will continue with the LP ones, which are three:

1) /dʒ/ and /ʒ/ ("*j*et – plea*s*ure")

The first one does not exist as such in Spanish, so speakers are not familiarised with it and may confuse it with the /tʃ/ sound in "*ch*ur*ch*" for example, or the pronunciation of the Spanish letter "y" (the word "pla*y*a", for example). Both will give the speaker a foreign accent, but the speech will still be intelligible.

Only one of these sounds is found in the text, in the word "obliged", and this confirms the theory that Spanish people have difficulties when dealing with this sound, as they do not seem to be sure about how to pronounce it. Guessing the diphthong seems as difficult as choosing the correct phoneme, it is normally pronounced as /g/ instead of /dʒ/.

2) /r/

Spanish has two different pronunciations for the letter "r", one that is similar to the English /r/ sound, and the other – and commoner – is the "rolled r", very rhotic, which will make the listener realise that the person who is speaking is a foreigner, although this feature is also common to the Scottish accent, so it would not affect the intelligibility.

This feature can be appreciated in the sample selected as the least intelligible, although I do not consider this speaker as the least intelligible for this specific reason.

3) /ŋ/ as in "swi*ng*"

Pronouncing both sounds separately as /n/ + /g/, as if it were a consonant cluster, will not affect intelligibility, although it will sound very strange.

This problem does not occur in any of the collected samples, even though there are two words with which they may have made the mistake: "disputing" and "making". The additional case of "stronger" has been mentioned above.

3.2.2. Problems with vowels

In this section we find six high priority problems (HP) and one optional attention problem (OA), I will follow the same pattern, first I will be dealing with HP and then with OA.

High Priority:

1) /ei/ – /ɛ/ ("*a*ges – *e*dges") confusion

The students mix up vowels and diphthongs and this is one of the worst problems for Spanish people, they turn monophthongs into diphthongs and the other way round, because in English there are no fixed rules concerning spelling and pronunciation, as there are in Spanish.

This is the case of the least intelligible Spanish student, who turns /wɪnd/ into /waind/ for example.

2) /ʌ/ ("b*u*t")

This sound does not exist in Spanish, so they oscillate between /a/, /u/ and /o/, as both "u" and "o" can represent this sound.

This is another problem which is very common to all the Spanish collected samples, and it does interfere with intelligibility. In the text, one of the clearest examples is the word "sun", which appears in several occasions all along the text.

3) /ɪ/ – /i/ ("b*i*t – b*ea*t") confusion

Another problem which may involve minimal pairs, the learners will tend to use the latter for both sounds, so the words between round brackets would sound exactly the same.

This feature is also common to most of the samples, but in this case it does not affect intelligibility, as both phonemes are really close to each other (regarding pronunciation).

4) /a/ – /ɛ/ ("b*a*t – b*e*t") confusion

I do not get to understand this confusion, as I have not found it in the samples, it would affect intelligibility for sure, but not this time.

5) /ə/ does not exist in Spanish

One of the biggest problems for Spanish students of English, as this sound does not exist in Spanish, the tendency will be to substitute the schwa for whatever letter represents it.

In this case, this particular problem does happen, as will be seen in the audios below, when we deal with other intelligibility problems.

6) No length variation in Spanish vowels

As the length variation of vowels does not occur in Spanish, speakers will tend to pronounce them equally long, which in some cases will be too short for the English ear.

I could not totally perceive this feature in the Spanish samples, so I cannot judge this particular problem.

Optional Attention: /u/ – /ʊ/ ("b*oo*t – b*oo*k") confusion

Both sounds will sound almost the same for a Spanish speaker, who is used to only one sound for the vowel "u". Although it is true that they will tend to opt for an intermediate /u/ sound option.

There are no clear examples in the text to analyse this feature, but again, in my opinion, it does not truly affect intelligibility.

3.2.3.   Word and sentence stress

Firstly, the difficulty in the analysis of word stress comes with compound nouns and adjective plus noun combinations, because depending on where we place the stress it will mean one thing or another.

In the text, changing the stress pattern of a word resulting in meaning another thing does not happen, but it does affect the pronunciation itself, that is, think of the word "disputing" that has caused many problems to most of our students' analysed samples; as some of them placed the stress on the first syllable, it has affected the rest of the word, making it quite unintelligible.

In the case of the least intelligible speaker, we have to comment on the words "attempt" and "confess". The first one is mispronounced to the level of changing the first /t/ sound for a /θ/ sound, omitting the /p/ and /t/ sounds of the consonant cluster, and changing the stress from the second to the first syllable to the first; so the resulting word is

very similar to "anthem". In the second case, the change of stress from the second to the first syllable is also obvious.

The case of sentence stress is similar to the one concerning word stress, it does not affect intelligibility as much as if this were spontaneous speech, but it is affected in any case. What happens with this feature is that in Spanish we use specific words to give prominence, whereas in English they make special stress for the same purpose, but this does not change the fact that if the students make the pauses in the wrong places the speech of the reading aloud exercise will be affected as well.

Let's see, for example, what happens in the following passage of the text: "The North Wind and the Sun were disputing which was the stronger, when a traveller came along wrapped in a warm cloak" (International Phonetic Association, 1999: 39). Here the least intelligible student makes pauses between "North" and "Wind", "disputing" and "which", between "one" (an added word by the speaker) and "was", between "came" and "along", and so on. These constant pauses make the speech difficult to follow, as we do not really know where a sentence starts and when it ends.

3.2.4. Intonation problems

"There seem to be three areas that need attention: pitch range […,] final falling pitch movement [… and] the rise-fall seems difficult" (Kenworthy, 1987: 155).

1) Pitch range

Spanish speakers use a very narrow pitch range for English, we tend to keep the pitch along the same line without extreme high and low peaks (Kenworthy, 1987: 155). For this study, this is not really relevant.

2) Final falling pitch movement

In statements or enouncing the last item of a list, the final part of the sentence may not sound low enough, because Spanish people do not tend to make a little rise before the final falling pitch, which makes them sound too flat (Kenworthy, 1987: 155). Another largely irrelevant feature for the matter of this study.

3) The rise-fall seems difficult

This might happen because there is no such case in Spanish, it is really difficult for Spanish speakers of English to learn a different pattern, and besides, they may feel ridiculous while trying to imitate this rise-fall intonation (Kenworthy, 1987: 155). Again, this feature is mostly irrelevant for a reading aloud exercise, because this is not a real conversation.

Failing in features 1 and 3 may result in speakers failing in accomplishing "involvement" or "interest" in the conversation maintained with English speakers, when this would not be the case (Kenworthy, 1987: 156). But, as I have said, these are insignificant details for the study.

3.2.5. Consonant clusters and sequences

Spanish and English share many clusters, so learners cope quite well except when the English cluster contains an unfamiliar sound (Kenworthy, 1987: 154). There are four high priority problems (HP) concerning this point, which are the following:

1) Two- and three-element clusters beginning with /s/ ("stronger, scream, stop", etc.)

As in Spanish there are no words beginning with /s/ followed by a consonant, when Spanish speakers come across this kind of words they tend to add a vowel in front of the word, usually /ɛ/, so "stronger" will sound like "a-stronger"; in this case it is a mistake that makes the listener realise that the person who is speaking is a foreigner, but in terms of intelligibility it would not affect much.

2) Final consonant clusters with /s/ are generally no problem ("picks, bets", etc.) But speakers of some varieties may delete the final /s/.

This would be the case of Andalusian speakers, who tend to delete final consonants in words, and hardly ever pronounce the final /s/. In the research it is a common feature among all the Andalusian speakers analysed.

3) Final consonant clusters with /t/ and /d/ are problematic ("test", "laughed").

Again, this is the same problem mentioned above, with the add-on that in Spanish there are normally no consonant clusters at the end of words, so speakers will opt for deleting the final consonant or adding a vowel between them.

This happens for example in the word "wrapped" in which the students insert an /ɛ/ sound between the /p/ and the /t/ sound, or in the word "considered" in which the same happens between /r/ and /d/.

4) The combination /s/ plus consonant plus /s/ is a difficult one ("ne*sts*", "ri*sks*").

If a two-consonant cluster is already difficult for Spanish learners, a three-consonant cluster in which the first and last sounds are the same is almost impossible to pronounce. The students in this case will opt for omitting or deleting one of the two /s/'s.

This particular feature does not appear in the text.

3.2.6. Other intelligibility problems found

Apart from the problems already mentioned above, the words "Wind", "cloak", "succeeded", "blew", "immediately", "wrapped", "stronger" and "shined" were the ones which presented more difficulties for the Spanish students. In some cases it was a mispronunciation of the vowel ("Wind", "cloak", "blew"), in some others the stress pattern was altered ("succeeded", "immediately") and therefore, changing the stress they changed the vowels as well. The cases of "wrapped" and "shined" had to see with the final consonant cluster, and with their lack of ability to pronounce all of the consonants. There is one special word that I would like to mention, "first", only the least intelligible speaker failed to accomplish its pronunciation, and made it sound like "fires".

These are the audios I have selected as the most intelligible (1) and the least one (2):

(1)   (Barcelona).mp3

(2)   (Cádiz).mp3

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude this essay, I would like to comment on the different aspects mentioned throughout the work. To start with, I would like to state that Received Pronunciation is the prestigious accent spoken by less than five percent of the British population. Standard English refers to grammar and vocabulary (dialects) but not to pronunciation (accents), so it can be spoken with many different accents. Standard English and International English – or English as an International Language – are not the same, the former pursuits a common dialect, whereas the main aim of the latter is that of making communication possible, thinking mainly of intelligibility.

There are some factors affecting English pronunciation learning, such as the native language, the age factor, the amount of exposure, the phonetic ability, the attitude and identity, and the motivation and concern for good pronunciation. Not all factors are equally important; some depend on learners themselves (like the phonetic ability, the attitude and identity, or the motivation), some others on the circumstances surrounding them (the native language, the age, and the amount of exposure); and of course they cannot be easily measured with accuracy.

We have also seen that there is nothing wrong about speaking with a foreign accent as long as your speech is intelligible. To hesitate or self-correct is not regarded as something negative (native speakers also do it) as long as the pauses do not interrupt the fluency of the conversation, so that it can be followed.

Continuing with the theoretical part, we have also dealt with the factors that usually affect intelligibility: sound substitutions, sound deletions, sound insertions, links between words, and the uses of stress, rhythm and intonation. After analysing them, we have concluded that the most important ones regarding intelligibility are sound substitutions, links between the words and the uses of stress, rhythm and intonation; always seeing this from the perspective of the subject of this study. We have also discovered that the uses of stress, rhythm and intonation form a group, and that if a speaker fails to accomplish one of the three, he or she will probably fail all of them.

The last aspect seen in the theory part is how to assess intelligibility. We have seen the ideal situation to judge the intelligibility of a speaker. The "ideal" judge is that one who has not had any previous contact with the speaker, and preferably someone who is not a teacher, because they are used to the students' mistakes. We have also seen that it is more recommendable to use spontaneous speech on the same topic rather than a reading aloud exercise, even though for this study it was preferable to use a reading aloud exercise which allowed us compare the speakers pronouncing exactly the same sounds.

Regarding the experimental part, which was divided into two parts, Spanish speakers and Italian speakers, we have analysed both nationalities speaking in English.

We can conclude that Italian people tend to have problems adding schwas at the end of the words which end up in consonant and also to have problems with the stress and intonation of words, a remarkable feature found was the pronunciation of the word "blew" close to "view".

On the other hand, Spanish speakers did not have as many problems with consonants as they did with vowels, word and sentence stress, or consonant clusters and sequences. The most outstanding problem regarding vowels was the confusion of monophthongs and diphthongs, because they did not know when a word had the former or the latter (as seen with the word "Wind"). The most representative examples of problems with word and sentence stress were "disputing", "succeeded" and "immediately"; and the clearest example of problems with consonant clusters at the end of the word were "wrapped" (in which they added a vowel between /p/ and /t/ sounds) and "attempt" (in which they simply omitted one of the sounds of the cluster).

Comparing both nationalities, I can only say that there are fully intelligible students and less intelligible students in both cases, perhaps the least intelligible Italian student was more understandable than the least intelligible Spanish speaker, in spite of his rhotic, marked accent. Out of the four selected samples I would say that there is only one broadly unintelligible speaker, (2) of the Spanish speakers, because if the listener does not read the story on a paper while listening to him it may be a hard task for them to understand.

So, to summarise, all the speakers spoke with a foreign accent, but this did not affect the intelligibility, we could say that they are speakers of International English because they accomplish its main aim or goal, which is intelligibility.

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