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English Language Teaching at the University of Milan

The Case of Esther Menascè, Academic and Textbook Author

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Abstract

Language teaching in Italian universities traditionally played second fiddle to the teaching of literature until the end of the 20th century. However, a number of English language and literature academics in different Italian universities were also authors of English language textbooks aimed at university and secondary school students, adults, and teachers. At the University of Milan, between the 1960s and 1980s, Esther Menascè combined her interest in literary research with the development of English language teaching materials addressed to different types of learners: university students, self-study learners, and secondary school students. This paper aims to investigate how Menascè's interest in linguistics and foreign language teaching methodology led her to design innovative materials to respond to the needs of Italian learners and teachers at a time of reform and change at all educational levels. The content analysis of the teaching materials sampled shows Menascè's interest in conducting applied research into English language teaching. This is reflected in the scientific description of English, especially as regards phonetics and phonology, as well as in her principled adoption first of techniques belonging to an aural-oral approach in her books published in the 1960s and 1970s, and then to communicative language teaching in the 1980s. These are innovative aspects in Menascè's materials production which make her stand out as an academic and a textbook author in the Italian context of her time.

1. Introduction[1]

With the adoption of an "open access" policy in Italian universities at the end of the 1960s (*Legge 11 dicembre 1969*), and the significant increase in the number of students enrolled in Foreign Languages and Literatures degree programmes, the study of English gained in popularity. These developments were instrumental in innovating the teaching of humanities in higher education and sparked an interest in elements which until then had been disregarded by the

[1] The article was jointly planned by the three authors. The individual contributions are as follows: Andrea Nava wrote Sections 1, 3, 4, and 6; Luciana Pedrazzini wrote Sections 1, 5.1, 5.3, and 6; Emanuela Tenca wrote Sections 1, 2, 5.2, and 6.

academic community, namely "linguistic performance, the communicative function, the formal aspects of writing and the non-written aspects of culture, the links with other disciplines, the theory of what one does professionally" (Marenco 2000, 55). The scientific relevance of the English language as an academic subject independent from its literature began to be recognised more widely, also thanks to the role played by the *Associazione Italiana di Anglistica* (AIA – Italian Association of English Studies), which was founded in 1977. A survey conducted by the Association across Italian universities at the end of the 1970s revealed a major preoccupation for "supplying basic English language tuition to the vastly increased number of Modern Languages students" (Nava 2018, 255) in Italian universities, a great scarcity of courses in linguistics, an overwhelming majority of dissertations on literature and culture, and only few instances of research into applied linguistics, stylistics, and discourse analysis (Nava 2018; Dodd 1982). The Association began advocating an overhauling of the degree, but it was only thanks to the introduction of *Classe di Laurea in Lingue e Culture Moderne* in the 2000s (*Decreto Ministeriale 3 novembre 1999*) that courses in language and translation gained full autonomy from those in literature (Nava 2018).

Against this backdrop, Esther Menascè,[2] professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Milan from 1983 to 2000, stands out as a highly innovative and forward-looking researcher. At a time when most academic research in the realm of Modern Languages focused on literary topics, Menascè devoted a large part of her publications to the pursuit of applied research into the teaching of the English language as well as its literature. Her work was grounded in the scientific description of the English language (in particular, phonetics and phonology) and in teaching methodologies which were popular in the USA and in the UK at the time, and which were slowly being taken up in the Italian context. This paper seeks to shed light on Menascè's output as an author of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials spanning three decades. The study is part of an ongoing project at the University of Milan aimed at the development of a digital archive of ELT materials published in Italy in the 20th century (Nava and Pedrazzini 2019).

After illustrating Menascè's academic biography (Section 2), the paper will analyse her publications aimed at university students (Section 3), self-study learners (Section 4), and secondary (lower and upper) school students (Section 5) through a content analysis methodology (Selvi 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018). Her publications will be positioned within the Italian historical context from the 1960s through to the 1980s, a period marked by crucial reforms at all levels of education.

[2] The author's name is spelled differently across her works, e.g. Esther/Ester, Menascé/Menascè, and sometimes with the addition of "Fintz," her mother's family name. The spelling used in this paper is the one adopted by Carotti and Andriani (2010), that is Esther Menascè.

2. Esther Menascè: academic career

Biographical information reported in Canova (2022) indicates that Esther Menascè graduated first from the University of Milan and then from Columbia University. In addition to working as an upper secondary school teacher of English at the *Liceo Scientifico* 'Leonardo da Vinci' in Milan until 1978, Menascè had a long academic career beginning at Bocconi University, also in Milan, in 1954. Here she initially obtained a position as an assistant in tutorials (*assistente alle esercitazioni*) of English Language and Literature, and later as a language instructor, which she maintained until the degree program closed in 1972 (Università Bocconi 2023). During this period, Menascè received financial aid to visit the USA and the UK, where she had the opportunity to investigate issues underpinning the teaching of English as a second language, as she states in the preface of her coursebook *The Golden Road to English* (1966).

While still an assistant at Bocconi University, Menascè was appointed as *professore incaricato* (adjunct professor) in the degree program in Foreign Languages and Literatures in the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Padua, at its Verona site. Menascè continued teaching in Verona until October 1978, when she finally moved to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Milan. Her career there was marked by her appointment as *professore associato* (associate professor) in 1983, and it lasted until 2000, when she retired.

Menascè's courses at the University of Milan were addressed to *non specialisti*, i.e. students of Foreign Languages who had selected English as their second (or third) language, and students enrolled in other degree programs in the faculty of Arts. A substantial part of the course syllabus was focused on literature, thus confirming the general preference at the time for providing students primarily with literary knowledge (Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia 1980/1981; 1981/1982; 1982/1983; 1983/1984). *Studenti non specialisti* were not required (according to the official curriculum) to sit written language exams in their second foreign language. Nevertheless, Menascè's course descriptions from the 1980s show a strong practical language component in all her courses. For each year in the curriculum, aspects related to phonology and morphosyntax were examined from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, and students were required to carry out activities such as dictation, phonetic transcription, translation, composition, and summary writing.

3. University English language teaching materials (1970–1984)

In this section of the paper, we shall attempt to shed light on Menascè's production of teaching materials aimed at university students, which are listed below.

- *Drills in English Sounds with an Appendix on Pronunciation and Spelling*. Milano: Cisalpino La Goliardica, 1970.
- *A Practical Introduction to Stress, Rhythm and Intonation in English*. Milano: Cisalpino La Goliardica, 1972.
- *Guida alla pronuncia inglese*. Milano: Sansoni, 1981.
- *Dictation and Translation Passages for Intermediate Students*. Milano: Cisalpino La Goliardica, 1984.

For the purposes of this paper, only English language teaching materials have been scrutinised while Menascè's large output of scholarly works and the more limited number of pedagogic materials in the realm of English literature and culture/civilisation have been disregarded. The university English language teaching materials sub-corpus spans (roughly) a decade (the 1970s), although most of the groundwork for these publications was laid in the 1960s. The most recent book in the university subcorpus was published in 1984, but it is a revamped edition, with minor cosmetic changes, of an earlier book which had come out with a slightly different title in 1968 (*Dictation and Translation Exercises for Intermediate Students*) and reprinted several times. Menascè's 1981 book too is based on earlier publications, featuring most of the contents of her 1970 and 1972 handbooks.

While Menascè's university English language teaching output primarily focuses on the teaching of spoken English, accomplished through instruction in phonetics and phonology and orthography, Menascè also had a subsidiary interest in translation and dictation teaching. Translation and dictation held pride of place as language teaching and assessment options in Italian foreign languages and literatures degree courses throughout most of the 20th century (Dodd 1982). Menascè's 1984 book features a collection of passages with the aim of providing practice in these two types of tasks.[3] The book is divided into two parts, each consisting of fifty passages of an average of 200-300 words in length. The first part includes passages in English meant for dictation and translation into Italian – the latter a far less common option in written exams compared to translation into English. These passages are extracts from essays and literature (short stories and novels), with a slightly higher number of British than American sources. Although the book is aimed at "intermediate students," the type of tasks students are meant to carry out using the passages as input arguably requires an advanced proficiency in both Italian and English. That said, Menascè attempts to sequence the excerpts according to a principle of textual/thematic and linguistic complexity. The first samples are extracts from the

[3] Dictation was also shown by Dodd's survey to be still a popular option in English language exams at the end of the Seventies: 55% of the universities polled used dictation for the second-year written exam and 60% for the third-year written exam.

popular genre of "Britain as seen by foreigners" (e.g., George Mikes' *How to Be an Alien*), followed by extracts from travel guides, political speeches and essays on history, history of art and literature. The literature extracts are mainly drawn from works published in the first three decades of the 20th century (e.g., *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence; *The Painted Veil*, W. Somerset Maughan), with a number of American passages drawn from more recent sources (e.g., *The Old Man and the Sea*, E. Hemingway; *Exodus*, L. Uris). A principle of linguistic progression is also adopted in the choice and sequencing of the literary passages, as witnessed by the following two extracts – the first from passage n. 7 and the second from passage n. 33:

(1) And he went for his train. His body acted mechanically. People talked to him. He heard faint echoes answering them. He was in a delirium. He felt that he would go mad if Monday did not come at once. From *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence. (Menascè 1984, 17)

(2) Young Tolley conducted with his usual inimitable grace, bending in swan-like undulations from the loins, and tracing luscious arabesques on the air with his waving arms, as though he were dancing to the music. From *Point Counter Point* by Aldous Huxley. (Menascè 1984, 48)

The straightforward syntax of the *Sons and Lovers* extract appearing at the beginning of Menascè's book contrasts with the more complex structure of the *Point Counter Point* extract, where a lengthy hypotactic sentence conveys the convoluted movements of the character, an orchestra conductor.

Linguistic progression does not only concern syntax, however. Descriptive passages tend to feature increasingly less frequent lexis in the second half of the first part of the book (e.g., the semantic fields of illness and disease in passage 31, minerals in passage 43, ships and ship parts in passage 50). Passage 20, from a speech delivered by Winston Churchill on 18th June 1940, was likely selected because it features several nationality names, which have a range of pluralisation patterns in English: "Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians have joined their causes to our own" (Menascè 1984, 31).

As regards the second half of the book, the fifty passages included in this part are drawn from Italian sources to be translated into English. Unlike in the first part of the book, all the passages are from literary texts, which is in keeping with what was usually required in the translation paper of written language exams in Italian universities. The principle of linguistic progression is here associated with reverse diachronic sequencing. In other words, while the early passages are extracts from works by 20th century authors (e.g., Cassola, Ginzburg, Moravia, Pirandello,

Pavese), 19th century texts are featured in the later passages (e.g., Verga, Manzoni, Pellico). Apart from one hundred passages in English and Italian, Menascè's 1984 book contains little if any explanatory material to aid the reader. Variation in spelling (e.g., between British and American English) is highlighted in footnotes (but with no indication of general patterns, e.g., regularisation of the *-re/-er* ending in Standard American English) in the first part of the book. This lack of support material hints at the fact that the book is basically a collection of handouts designed and used by the author in her practical English language classes when she worked as a university instructor. It is not meant for self-study – a perfect fit for the Italian university context when student attendance at lectures and practical classes was compulsory, i.e. until the early 1970s. The open access policy adopted on the heels of student protests in Italian universities (Pomante 2022) also led to a relaxation of the attendance requirement. Poor attendance was indeed one of the most common issues that participants in Dodd's (1982) survey highlighted as plaguing university English language teaching in Italy at the end of the 1970s. It took several decades for universities to adapt to what had become a "university for the masses" (Salustri 2020), which also involved starting to design materials catering for the needs of non-attending students.

While Menascè's pedagogical production on translation teaching is limited to one, not particularly innovative, book, it is to the teaching of spoken English that she devoted much of her effort as a writer of teaching materials. This is witnessed by her university teaching materials output, but the teaching of spoken English plays an important role across her work, whether aimed at universities, secondary schools or the general public, as will be seen later in the paper. Despite breakthroughs in applied linguistics and language teaching in the decades following the Second World War, the teaching of spoken English in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s was mostly a case of paying lip service, not only in secondary schools (Section 5) but also in many university courses preparing English language and literature specialists (Siciliani, Barone and Aston 1982).

Menascè views the acquisition of "una corretta pronuncia, un accento accettabile" (a correct pronunciation, an acceptable accent) (Menascè 1981, 1) as the cornerstone of the effective mastery of spoken English. She thus devotes three books to this area of English language teaching. The 1970 and the 1972 books are written in English and, like the 1984 book, are likely materials Menascè had designed and used in her university courses. The 1981 book is written in Italian, and while it mostly reproduces the contents of her two previous phonetics/phonology books it reorganises and expands some parts. The choice of using Italian may well be a result of the broadening of the addressees to include upper secondary school students, students of language courses or self-study learners, young working students, older English language teachers – the latter group was probably the main focus as the author was well aware of the

shortcomings of the training that would-be English language teachers traditionally received in Italian universities.

Menascè firmly believes that underpinning the acquisition of 'correct' English pronunciation is the mastery of not only English phonemes but also English stress and intonation patterns. The scholar argues that the study of English stress patterns and rhythm is vital for Italian learners, not only because of the different nature of the two languages (stress-timed vs. syllable-timed) but, more importantly, because lack of mastery of this aspect of spoken English hampers fluency – what ultimately makes a successful English speaker.

> This basic difference accounts for the difficulty Italian students have in understanding spoken English and in talking English fluently (which means moving smoothly and steadily from one stressed syllable to the next getting in between them any unstressed syllables). (Menascè 1972, 40-41)

She thus urges that stress and rhythm be practised from the early stages of the study of the English language and not be delayed or disregarded, as often happened.

As for intonation, Menascè realises that this is an aspect often viewed as the "icing on the cake" that only those aspiring to sound native-like need to bother with. However, she argues that intonation is key to intelligibility: "[…] it is easier for a foreigner to make himself (sic) understood if he pronounces a sentence with correct intonation and incorrect sounds than viceversa" (Menascè 1972, 91). Menascè's interest in the investigation and teaching of English stress and intonation was indeed an innovation in the Italian context, as the scholar acknowledges in the preface to her 1981 book.

Menascè's approach to teaching English pronunciation is eminently practical, but the importance she grants to a solid theoretical base transpires in the way she structures the exercises and in the explanatory material she provides them with. Indeed, even her 1970 book *Drills in English Sounds* – with the term "drill" harking back to the audiolingual tradition and a teaching approach favouring imitation over metalinguistic reflection – comes with an introductory section illustrating key features of English vowels, diphthongs and consonants. This focus on the development of explicit alongside implicit knowledge in the acquisition of pronunciation is even stronger in Menascè's 1981 book, where she points out that improvisation or even imitation, as advocated by the audiolingual teaching approach, do not lead to effective results if they are not backed up by at least basic awareness of key theoretical concepts in phonetics and phonology (Menascè 1981, 1).

Compared to the previous two publications, *Guida alla pronuncia inglese* attempts to cater for the growing number of non-attending university students. In *Drills in English Sounds*, IPA transcriptions of the example words are not provided, and readers are encouraged to add them

as they work through the book, after hearing or checking the pronunciation, taking for granted that a native model in the form of an instructor was readily available. This shortcoming is addressed in the 1981 book, where each example word is transcribed, even resorting to allophonic transcription when needed.

In this more recent book, Menascè also appears to be more mindful of the issue of language norms and variation. While no discussion of the type of accent selected as a model is to be found in *Drills in English Sounds*, *Guida alla pronuncia inglese* explicitly states that it uses Received Pronunciation as a model, justifying this choice on the ground of the accent's intelligibility throughout the UK. In the first part of the book, alternative options in pronunciation (such as /et/ as well as /eɪt/ for *ate*) are also provided.

The approach to the presentation of each English phoneme adopted by Menascè in her three books features the following components: brief theoretical information about the articulation of the phoneme, examples of occurrences in words in different environments (e.g., before a voiced or a voiceless consonant), pairs/sets of words in contrast (not only minimal pairs/sets but also pairs where allophonic variation occurs as a result of different environments), different spelling realisations of the phoneme. This systematic treatment of orthography is an attempt by the scholar to dispel a myth about English spelling being chaotic, as Menascè states in the preface to *Drills in English Sounds*. Morphophonemics is also addressed (e.g., different realisations of the past tense morpheme).

In the presentation of stress, several categories of stress patterns (e.g., one-syllable words, two-syllable words, functional stress changes, stress patterns of compounds) are briefly introduced and followed by lengthy lists of examples for the reader to practise with.

Finally, intonation is dealt with through the identification of four main "tunes" (e.g., falling, rising, emphatic falling, emphatic rising). Each tune is explored from three perspectives: description, meaning and use, and several examples for each tune and their combination in discourse are provided. Throughout, Menascè adopts an explanatory approach, in keeping with her belief that conscious awareness of linguistic principles aids the practical mastery of English pronunciation.

4. Writing for the general public: Menascè's *Corso di lingua inglese* (1962)

This section of the paper will focus on Menascè's pedagogical writing aimed at the general public, in particular self-study students. Our analysis will target the book titled *Corso di lingua inglese*, first published in 1962 and reprinted several times in that decade and the following one. This book was part of two multivolume encyclopaedias (*Capire* and *Conoscere*) which had

initially been sold as weekly instalments (Carotti 2006). While those encyclopaedias were aimed at secondary school students, the addressees of Menascè's *Corso* appear to be adults. The book features an "Introduction to English Pronunciation" (with a presentation of the IPA alphabet and an overview of "English Sounds"), 199 lessons (every 12th lesson is devoted to pronunciation and revision), an English-Italian/Italian-English dictionary (by Harold Shipman), and a set of 17 records. At the start of the book, Menascè provides a page of tips on using the coursebook. She highlights the increasing importance of English as a lingua franca and touches on the teaching method adopted in the book. Emphasis is claimed to be given to contemporary spoken English, in keeping with modern British and American language teaching methodology. As the book attempts to depart from the grammar-translation method still pervasive at the time in language teaching in Italy (Section 5), Menascè points out that translation exercises are not used at the beginning of the course and urges readers to refrain from carrying out word-for-word translation from Italian so that they may develop the ability to formulate complete sentences in English. She then illustrates how the needs of the self-study student have been addressed. Translation into English of unfamiliar lexis or lexico-grammatical constructions is provided in each lesson. A lesson is to be completed in a week, and if readers do not start a new lesson until they have mastered the contents of the previous lesson, they are guaranteed to make progress in the study of the English language. Special features of the book are the keys to the exercises and the self-assessment sections, which enable readers not only to keep track of their progress but also to check if their study method is effective. In the Introduction, the reader is also given guidelines on how to use the records. In particular, the reader is advised to focus on the IPA transcriptions in the book at the beginning of the course "altrimenti l'ortografia 'capricciosa' dell'inglese potrebbe confondervi" (otherwise the 'capricious' English spelling may confuse you) (2).

We will not dwell on the methodological approach followed in the 199 lessons. As this approach is to a large extent reproduced in Menascè's books for secondary schools, a detailed analysis will be carried out in the next section of the paper. It is, however, worth shedding some light on the view of language enshrined in the book. The first aspect that needs to be highlighted is the idea that as the various dimensions of language interact with one another, students need to be exposed from the very beginning to opportunities for language practice that integrate these dimensions. An example is shown in the following extract, from Lesson 4, Exercise 1:

(3) Pronunciate uno dopo l'altro i vocaboli illustrati nella prima parte della lezione facendoli precedere dall'articolo indeterminativo. Leggete lentamente, ma con il ritmo esatto, ossia con lo stesso intervallo di tempo tra un accento e l'altro, come se recitaste una numerazione:

a bòy/a gìrl/a dòg/…

Per controllare il ritmo potete aiutarvi battendo il tempo (un dito su un tavolo, per esempio). Se riuscite a pronunciare tutti i vocaboli senza mai incespicare, potete aumentare gradualmente la velocità.[4] (Menascè 1962, 10)

In this exercise, which is featured in one of the first lessons of the book, readers practise lexis and grammar, but they are also made aware of the distinctive stress-based English rhythm.

Another innovative feature of Menascè's view of language is her awareness of the key role played by collocations in language and language learning. As this is an area where languages often differ, it is through collocations that translation is introduced as an exercise, as shown in this extract from Lesson 24, Exercise 5:

(4) Dite in inglese:

a. Ora di colazione, ora di pranzo, ora di cena, ora di andare a letto (ricordate che *tea-time* è l'ora del tè);

b. Una mattina domenicale, un pomeriggio di sabato, una sera di mercoledì (ricordate che *Sunday afternoon* è un pomeriggio domenicale).[5] (Menascè 1962, 48)

Finally, the declared importance of spoken language in the book transpires not only in the systematic treatment of phonetics and phonology, but also in the adoption of spoken grammar norms:

(5) A proposito dei *relativi essenziali* ricordate:

1. Usare *who* per persone e *that* per cose

2. Omettere il relativo se è complemento oggetto

3. Mettere la preposizione dopo il verbo (e, se c'è, dopo il suo oggetto) e pronunciarla accentata.[6] (Menascè 1962, 174)

[4] Say the words introduced in the first part of the lesson, using the indefinite article. Read them slowly, rhythmically, with the same gap between each stressed syllable, as if you were reciting a list: [...] To check you're using the correct rhythm, you can beat time (using a finger on a table, for example). If you can read all the words without stumbling, you can gradually increase your speed.

[5] Say in English: [...] (remember that tea-time is the time when tea is served); [...] (remember that a Sunday afternoon is the afternoon of a Sunday).

[6] With regard to essential relatives, remember:

1. To use *who* for people and *that* for things

2. To omit the relative pronoun if it is an object

3. To place the preposition after the verb (and, if there is one, after its object) and place emphasis on it.

In this extract, the option of stranding the preposition and omitting the relative pronoun when it is not a subject is given as default – a feature universally adopted in spoken English, but one which at the time was still sometimes frowned upon when applied in more formal written English and was the target of prescriptive injunctions (Curzan 2014).

5. Secondary school ELT textbooks (1963–1988)

Menascè's experience as a textbook author ran parallel to her overall academic activity devoted to the study of English literature and partly to her job as a secondary school teacher. The 1960s and 1980s, in which she published her teaching materials, provide an interesting background to her experience, the Italian school scenario being characterised by reforms and new national syllabuses which favoured the implementation of new methodologies in foreign language textbooks as well. After providing an overview of the reforms in the Italian school context from the 1960s to the 1980s (Section 5.1), we shall analyse Menascè's textbooks for lower secondary (Section 5.2) and upper secondary schools (Section 5.3).

5.1 The Italian school context between the 1960s and 1980s

In the 1960s, the Italian school context witnessed a radical change due to what can be considered a ground-breaking reform for the lower secondary school system (*Legge 31 dicembre 1962*). The reform led to the publication of the revised national syllabuses addressed to this level of schooling (*Decreto Ministeriale 24 aprile 1963*). It is generally believed that the methodological change regarding the teaching of foreign languages in Italy began – albeit slowly – with this reform (Pellandra 2004, 118).[7] Although the upper secondary school system did not undergo a similarly impactful reform, it benefited from the renewal of its syllabuses. For example, the new syllabus for the technical schools (*Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 30 settembre 1961*) underscored the importance of starting a conversation in the foreign language about familiar topics in order to enable students to express themselves, both orally and in the written form, "in the language that is spoken today." The study of grammar is considered just limited to the essentials, that is, it focuses only on the forms, modes, and vocabulary necessary for the conversation between the teacher and students. Translation is seen as an "auxiliary exercise," which should not be an end in itself or just a test of grammar knowledge, but rather be prepared with words and structures already learned in the previous oral exercises.

These methodological recommendations came to influence both the content and the approach of most textbooks published in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the majority of teachers and

[7] The reform abolished the vocational strand at this early level of schooling and established instead a three-year unified system open to all students, giving them the opportunity to access different types of upper secondary schools.

schools were not prepared to embrace a methodology which aimed to give priority to the oral language. Textbooks seemed to take this fact into account, trying to find compromise solutions between common, well-established teaching techniques and new methods which aimed to enhance an oral approach to language learning. On the one hand, they timidly tried to implement an oral or aural-oral approach with batteries of drills (Richards and Rodgers 2001); on the other hand, they still provided a good many grammar and translation exercises. Textbooks also started to be complemented with an audio support – a record – including exercises to facilitate oral practice. However, the lack of technical equipment available in most schools discouraged the use of this kind of resource.

In the 1970s, the various widespread initiatives by the main teachers' associations aimed at a radical revision of the school syllabuses for languages eventually led to a new National Syllabus for lower secondary schools (*Decreto Ministeriale 9 febbraio 1979*). ELT, in different contexts, came to be dominated by one single idea, communication, which spread to almost every aspect of foreign language teaching: syllabus, planning, teaching materials and assessment (Howatt with Widdowson 2004). The very first effect of the spread of communicative principles can be traced in the 1979 Syllabus. The terms "communication," "language use," "functions," and "skills" in official documents can certainly be interpreted as a clear sign of transition from the traditional Italian teaching scenario. The syllabus provided inspiration in terms of contents and methodology of language education for the syllabuses to follow, which were aimed at continuing the process of educational reform at further levels of schooling (*Piani di studio della scuola secondaria superiore e programmi dei primi due anni 1991*; *Piani di studio della scuola secondaria superiore e programmi dei trienni 1992*). In the case of the upper secondary school, which was left without a proper and comprehensive reform, the process of change was slower and patchier.

5.2 Lower secondary school ELT textbooks

Our investigation will now focus on the following textbooks for the lower secondary school:

- *The Realms of Gold. Il mondo della fantasia. Antologia inglese per la scuola unificata*. Milano: Fabbri, 1963.
- *The Golden Road to English. Testo di lingua inglese. Junior book*. Milano: Fabbri, 1965.

The first textbook is a reader, first published in 1963 and then in a second edition in 1967 with minor changes. The second textbook was initially published in 1964 as a two-volume coursebook titled *The Golden Road to English. Grammatica inglese per la scuola media*. In 1965 a further one-volume edition was published (*The Golden Road to English. Testo di lingua inglese. Junior*

book). As Menascè states in the Preface, this edition was "snellita" (streamlined; Menascè 1965, 4) following the 1962 lower secondary school reform. This section begins with the analysis of the coursebook, on the assumption that such genre represents the primary material used by teachers in the classroom.

The coursebook consists of 97 lessons, each divided into four sections, namely Reading, Vocabulary, Structure, and Exercises, bar the first three lessons, which focus entirely first on the phonetic alphabet and phonetic transcription, then on pronunciation, the alphabet, and spelling. Similarly, beginning with Lesson 12, every twelfth lesson focuses on phonetics, rhythm, and intonation, while beginning with Lesson 13, every twelfth lesson is for revision. These lessons are also recorded on the four vinyl records which accompany the book. The emphasis placed on the teaching of accurate pronunciation indicates Menascè's implementation of the oral approach. Indeed, in the Preface, she explicitly refers to it as "un metodo rigorosamente scientifico" (a rigorously scientific method; Menascè 1965, 3), and she underlines how it is essential for learners to be able to understand spoken English and express themselves as naturally as possible. In this sense, Menascè underlines the importance of learning English sounds, rhythm, and intonation correctly as this had been generally neglected in Italian schools.

The Reading section is defined in the Preface as the most important one. Indeed, this is where new lexico-grammatical structures are introduced by means of reading passages of gradually increasing difficulty, ranging from simple sentences and short dialogues in the first lessons, to longer and more complex passages in later lessons. The rationale behind this design, according to Menascè, is that learners should be able to grasp the newly introduced language without having to resort to systematic translation. This attests Menascè's application of "the principle that simple forms should be taught before complex ones" (Richards and Rodgers 2001, 38), and her departure, albeit partial, from the grammar-translation method. Grammar-translation enjoyed great popularity in foreign language teaching in Italy across the 20th century, often in combination with other methods (Rizzardi and Barsi 2005). In fact, translation is still present in Menascè's book in the Vocabulary part of the lesson, where new words are followed by both their phonetic transcription and their Italian counterpart, and in the use of translation and 'reverse translation' exercises in the final part of lessons. This indicates Menascè's eclecticism in combining practice techniques from different methods, as also emerges in her upper secondary school textbooks.

Grammar is explained in the Structure section of the lesson, and it goes hand in hand with the presentation of the language in the reading passages. As underlined in the Preface, this is to avoid an *a priori* discussion of new language structures, while instead presenting learners with examples drawn from "lingua viva" (living language; Menascè 1965, 3), in compliance with the new National Syllabus for lower secondary schools. Hence, grammar is viewed as the end

point, not the starting point of a language lesson. The presentation of grammar is followed by both monolingual exercises and translation and reverse translation activities. Other techniques utilised in the book are answering open questions, gap-filling, dictation, composition, summarising, finding and correcting mistakes, as well as drills for pattern practice – e.g., substitution in Lesson 5 and transformation in Lesson 94 – which show evidence of the audiolingual method in Menascè's output. Closer inspection of the coursebook indicates that few structures are dealt with at a time. Lesson 5 begins with examples of the use of interrogatives and demonstratives, supported by drawings. The section dedicated to Structure foregrounds the explanation of these language areas, while briefly touching on the contracted forms *What's*, *That's*, and *It's*.

As for pronunciation work, this covers entire lessons in the coursebook, as mentioned earlier in this section. In these lessons, which are one or two pages long, various areas of English pronunciation are treated. For example, lesson 24 is divided into the following segments:

- phonetics, which focuses on minimal pairs including the phonemes /ɑː/ versus /ʌ/ and /ɔː/ versus /ɒ/;
- rhythm, which focuses on sentence stress, inviting learners to read phrases such as "son/my son," and sentences such as "my name is John," "he is speaking";
- falling and rising intonation;
- the third person singular of the present tense;
- the genitive inflection.

The teaching of pronunciation is implemented in a systematic manner in specifically designed lessons, yet it should be noted that the language used in the examples is decontextualised, thus still showing traces of traditional methodologies for foreign language teaching.

Compared to Menascè's 1965 coursebook, her reader published in 1963 shows both similarities and differences in its pedagogical design. As stated in the Preface, the reader's prime objective was to present the "multiforme civiltà anglosassone" (the multifaceted Anglo-Saxon civilisation; Menascè 1963, 6) to Italian lower secondary school students through texts which may spark their interest. The nexus between language and culture was emphasised in the new school syllabus, as the author herself acknowledges. The texts in the reader, which are sometimes adapted or abridged considering the target readership, include textual typologies such as excerpts from novels, poems, songs, anecdotes, excerpts from plays, games, riddles, cartoons, comic strips, and crossword puzzles. This is a considerable variety compared to other readers published around the same years: for instance, Braccesi Ratti's (1964) selection of texts is limited to reading passages, nursery rhymes, and poems. Menascè's background in both

literature and linguistics enabled her to exploit authentic texts as a springboard for language teaching activities.

The contents in the reader are organised in three "stages," i.e. elementary, intermediate, and advanced, one for every year of lower secondary school. The stages are in turn divided into ten sections beginning with a brief introduction in Italian to contextualise the material therein presented. The texts are accompanied by a variety of footnotes reporting the Italian translation of new words and phrases; in some cases, the phonetic transcription is given too. From Stage One, Section X onwards, monolingual exercises follow the texts, designed to assist learners in memorising the structures in the texts themselves. The exercises, which can be carried out orally or in written form, in the classroom or at home, as suggested in the Preface, cover three areas, phonetics, morphology, and syntax. The practice techniques are analogous to those adopted in *The Golden Road to English* and include open questions about the texts, drills, and gap-filling activities. Additionally, there are exercises titled "Build up your vocabulary," focusing on given semantic areas (e.g., words such as clock and watch, and related expressions in Stage One, Section V), as well as exercises for developing productive skills (composition, summarising, telling a story orally or in written form).

In general, the exercises in the reader focus largely on the teaching of exact pronunciation, which is one of the primary aims of *A Golden Road to English* too. In the reader, this aim is pursued by means of phonetic drills, exercises to practise minimal pairs, identify homonyms, and notice differences between spelling and pronunciation, especially as regards those phonemes which may pose problems to Italian learners. Therefore, not only is the linguistic input extremely varied, but so is the range of practice techniques.

A significant difference between the two textbooks is that in the reader there is no systematic presentation of grammar structures, a technique which is instead applied by other authors of readers at the time, who resorted to the grammar-translation method (see Braccesi Ratti 1964). A further aspect which should be noted is that, although the contents are organised in three levels of gradually increasing difficulty and the texts have been adapted, the linguistic input appears to be challenging for lower secondary school students. It is thus safe to argue that learners of the new *scuola media* were hardly able to complete the activities autonomously. For example, the alphabet is presented in Stage One, Section I by means of Edward Lear's *Nonsense Alphabet*: the large number of new words may discourage the beginners for whom it is intended. The same applies to the more advanced stages. One example, among others, is Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Song of Proserpine* in Stage Three, Section VI, which presents archaic words such as "thou," "thine," and "dost," as well as non-standard, stratified syntax. The texts included in the reader do not seem to suit the learners' presumable linguistic competence. The old syllabus for the pre-reform *scuola media* attached great importance to Latin, introducing students to its

linguistic complexity. Those students would have been thus better prepared to deal with texts such as the ones in Menascè's reader.

5.3 Upper secondary school ELT textbooks

Menascè wrote two textbooks for the upper secondary school (see below). Their publication occurred within twenty years of each other after the publication of two textbooks she authored for lower secondary school learners.

- *A New Approach to English*. Milano: Fabbri, 1967.
- *New Wave English: An Integrated Course for Italian Teenagers* (with A. Zambonini). Milano: Bompiani, 1988.

Besides being an academic, Menascè was also a teacher of English in the 1960s and most of the 1970s. She was thus aware of the innovations that the Italian context was going through. Her *A New Approach to English* (1967) seems to generally conform to an oral approach to language teaching which, starting from the 1960s, was gradually adopted by most English textbooks for the upper secondary school. In the Preface, Menascè emphasises that her course aims to introduce Italian upper secondary school students to the new techniques for the teaching of English as a second language, which have been developed by English-speaking linguists in recent years and that have been welcomed in the drafting of the new school syllabuses. However, she adds that "queste tecniche non sono state accettate globalmente, bensì, sono state adattate alle esigenze particolari degli studenti italiani cui il libro è rivolto. Donde il titolo"[8]

As an academic, Menascè spent periods of study and research abroad: this gave her the opportunity to develop a deeper knowledge of English teaching approaches, in particular oral approaches such as the audiolingual method (Fries 1945) and situational language teaching (Hornby 1950), which reached their period of most widespread use in the USA and UK in the 1960s and continued to be implemented in the 1970s. Although these methods were developed with different designs in terms of language objectives, syllabuses and learning activities, they shared a number of principles which provided "what came to be accepted as the 'standard model' of ELT for the next twenty years or more" (Howatt with Widdowson 2004, 299). According to these principles, speech is regarded as the basis of language and spoken skills should be given priority; learning the spoken language means acquiring a set of speech habits; instruction should be built round a graded syllabus of structures; vocabulary should be carefully selected

[8] These techniques have not been fully incorporated, but adapted to fit the specific needs of the Italian students the book is addressed to. Hence, this title.

and practised with the new grammatical patterns; grammar should be taught inductively; error should be avoided through practice and rehearsal (Howatt with Widdowson 2004, 300).

These ELT tenets seem to be the inspiring source for the design of *A New Approach to English* as well. In the Preface, Menascè states that her textbook is a course of English, which is a living, spoken language, not just a set of grammar rules. Speech is therefore considered a priority and needs to be explicitly addressed through specific practice. The first two lessons deal indeed with the main features of English phonetics and phonology, highlighting which phonemes may be particularly challenging for Italian learners. Moreover, each group of eight lessons in the textbook is complemented with an additional partly audio-recorded lesson on phonetics, rhythm, and intonation. This lesson includes study sections followed by practice exercises requiring students to listen carefully and do some oral drills focused on specific features such as stress, strong and weak forms, and intonation patterns. Compared to other English secondary school textbooks published in the same period, the focus on such topics of language study really stands out. Menascè motivates her choice of including these lessons on phonetics and phonology by stating that these topics are generally overlooked or even ignored in Italian schools despite being of the utmost importance. This staunch belief was likely to be grounded in her experience both as a school teacher and language practice instructor at university. In the Preface to her textbook, Menascè also claims to implement a graded language syllabus, which was one of the main features of most audiolingual and oral situational textbooks published in the 1960s and 1970s. The new vocabulary is provided with the phonetic transcription and Italian translation. The gradual and systematic development of language content is also supported by a set of practice exercises including oral and written drills. These are, however, preceded by a still bulky section of grammar rules attesting the enduring influence of a grammar-translation approach for the explicit teaching of grammar, also through translation and reverse translation exercises, which Menascè herself complied with. This approach seems, however, to contradict an inductive grammar teaching advocated in oral and situational methods.

Menascè's second textbook for the upper secondary school, *New Wave English: An Integrated Course for Italian Teenagers* (1988), was published twenty years after the first, that is, at the end of a period in which the Italian ELT scenario benefited from significant changes at different levels of schooling (Pedrazzini 2023; 2018). Since the early 1980s, communicative language teaching did somehow find its way into the ELT classrooms through the publication of a number of coursebooks specifically designed to address the needs of Italian upper secondary school learners. Labels such as 'communicative' and 'functional' started to crop up in titles and prefaces and gradually replaced the old labels of 'situational' and 'structural.' Lessons were expanded into larger sections called 'units' aimed at the teaching of both linguistic forms (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and what represented the prominent feature of the communicative

approach, language functions, that is, the speech acts which language is used for in 'real life' communication.

Although Menascè's full-time position as an academic kept her away from the school context after 1978, she appears in any case to be receptive to the changes affecting ELT in Italy. Her *New Wave English* does in effect 'integrate' some methodological features of the communicative approach, as suggested in its subtitle. Each unit in the textbook is divided into two "scenes," each aimed at teaching something specific about the language: Scene One targets at least one grammatical feature, Scene Two is focused instead on a language function (how you greet someone, how you make an apology, etc.). This design shows that the change from a structural to a communicative approach was gradual, as argued by Rizzardi and Barsi (2005, 169): "il metodo orale-situazionale confluisce in modo non conflittuale nel metodo comunicativo, che, più che il suo superamento, può essere visto come il suo naturale sviluppo."[9] As a matter of fact, the two methods came to coexist, influencing each other. Each Scene in the unit features a three-part structure labelled Listening and Comprehension, Practice and Activities. The new lesson design (presentation, practice, production) thus came to replace the two-part structure of foreign language lessons (one for presentation and one for practice) (Howatt with Widdowson 2004, 258).

The textbook was authored with one of the English instructors – Anthony Zambonini – who taught language practice classes in Menascè's course in English language and Literature at the University of Milan. The collaboration with an "English native speaker" with direct classroom teaching experience is assumed to have contributed to the implementation of a number of features characterising communicative language teaching: a story line based on "real" experiences of a group of people which unfolds with the support of photos and audio recordings, the use of different types of "authentic materials" such as extracts from newspapers and leaflets, and an array of "activities" which replaced the traditional exercises. The adoption of the concept of "activities" is indeed what distinguishes communicative language teaching most clearly from its preceding methods (Howatt with Widdowson 2004, 258). *New Wave English* includes different types of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities aimed at involving learners – individually, in pairs or groups – in the use of the foreign language to communicate. In this regard, the authors underline that, besides being varied, these activities reproduce a great deal of authentic contemporary English materials and introduce different types of writing (such as letter and summary writing) and reading (for example a story and a comedy in instalments) activities. The textbook also features sections on pronunciation which can be considered a

[9] The oral-situational method merged into the communicative method in a non-conflictual way, so that, more than its overcoming, it can be seen as its natural development.

constant feature in Menascè's teaching materials. However, oral drills are replaced here by more engaging exercises in which students are not simply required to repeat sounds and stress or intonation patterns, but also asked to focus on these patterns, identify specific phonological features and make comparisons. The parts devoted to a systematic study of the language, which used to precede practice exercises in the textbooks published in the 1960s and 1970s are now moved to a final reference section which is supposed to serve as a linguistic compendium providing rules and examples for grammar and pronunciation topics and an inventory of the language functions. Bearing in mind the conservative ELT context of the upper secondary school, this methodological choice may be considered innovative and more communicative oriented by placing more emphasis on the practising stage of the teaching unit.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate Esther Menascè's work as an author of English language teaching materials, at a time when academic scrutiny and pedagogical materials writing in the area of modern languages (as opposed to their literatures) were not encouraged in Italian universities.

The first part of the paper singled out the main stages of Menascè's career before she was appointed associate professor at the University of Milan. This included a stint as an assistant in tutorials and a longer period as an English language instructor at Università Commerciale Bocconi. The work Menascè carried out at Università Bocconi had mainly involved practical English language teaching, and her early publications are likely to have developed from that experience.

The second part of the paper scrutinised Menascè's output of English language teaching materials aimed (mainly) at university students and covering two main areas (translation and the teaching of spoken English). Two overarching principles seem to underlie Menascè's university English language teaching publications: materials design needs to be informed by sound theoretical principles (such as a multidimensional view of language and language learning); practical mastery of a language develops out of practice and use, but the effects of practice are made more durable if awareness of linguistic principles is developed. Menascè's pedagogical output was published in an era of transition for Italian universities: the 1970s heralded the phenomenon of the mass university, and evidence of Menascè's attempt to cater for the changed needs of her audience can be seen in the support given for self-study/non-attending students in her 1981 book.

Menascè's *Corso di lingua inglese*, which was analysed in the third part of the paper, was one of several English language courses aimed at the general public published in the 1960s. As a

result of technological developments, many such materials appearing after the Second World War were increasingly accompanied by records, thus enabling publishers to advertise them as a breakthrough in language learning and teaching. However, Menascè's *Corso* arguably stood out from the competition. While the voices of native speakers did indeed provide much needed pronunciation models, the view of language and the methodological approach enshrined in many self-study courses mostly remained strongly traditional.

The final part of the paper aimed to provide an insight into Menascè's activity as a textbook author with particular reference to the textbooks targeted at secondary school learners. The publication of her school textbooks occurred within twenty years of each other, that is, during a long period which witnessed several changes in the Italian ELT context. Her passion for English linguistics, specifically for the fields of phonetics and phonology, led her to give prominence to this area of study in her textbooks through the implementation of different techniques also aimed at highlighting the main differences between English and Italian. Menascè also succeeded in being particularly responsive to the innovations which characterised ELT from the 1960s to the 1980s, shifting her methodological choices from an oral structural approach to an integrated and communicative oriented approach which turned out to be more learner-centred and forward-looking.

In conclusion, Menascè's activity as an author of ELT materials addressed to both school learners and the general public can be viewed as a form of public engagement *ante litteram*. Until the 1960s, only a minority of school foreign language teachers held a degree in foreign languages and literatures. Moreover, the lack of institutionalised pre-service teacher training until the end of the 1990s made the spread of teaching innovations in the Italian context very slow. In this regard, associations of language teachers, official institutions of foreign languages and cultures as well as textbook authors played a key role in introducing new teaching methods. Menascè's textbooks may be said to have fulfilled this role too by introducing more solid notions of phonetics and phonology and giving more emphasis to the teaching of this language area. She also contributed to the spread of new teaching methods such as the aural-oral method in her 1960s textbooks and a communicative oriented approach in the textbook she published in the late 1980s, thus showing her ability to respond to the needs of learners and teachers across different generations.

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