

Learner profile: Italian

This guide presents common challenges faced by Italian learners of English and typical features of language production. Please note, these guidelines are intended to advise teachers on areas where students may experience problems. However, native speakers may not all find the following points challenging.



Facts

- **Language family:** Romance language from Indo-European language family, evolved from Latin.
- **Native speakers:** 85 million worldwide, 67 million in the EU.
- **Second language speakers:** 13.4 million.
- **Location:** Italian is an official language of Italy, Switzerland, San Marino and Vatican City.
- **Writing system:** Latin script.
- **Alphabet:** The Italian alphabet officially has 21 letters, excluding j, k, w, x and y – although these letters appear in loanwords, names and regional dialects.

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Pronunciation

- The 'th' sound in 'thanks' and 'this' is not used in Italian, so Italian speakers may replace this with a dental t or d sound.
- The majority of Italian words end with a vowel, so it's common for Italian speakers to add an extra syllable like an 'a' sound at the end of English words ending in consonants.
- There are 7 vowel sounds in Italian and no distinction between long and short vowels. This can lead to Italian speakers elongating vowels where they should be short, leading to issues with minimal pairs e.g. it/eat, live/leave.
- Italian speakers may over-pronounce vowels where they should be silent or the schwa should be used. One example is the pronunciation of 'ed' endings as in, 'happened', 'played'.
- Italian doesn't use the vowel sound /ʌ/ (such as in 'cup' or 'love'), so this may be pronounced like the vowel sound /æ/ (such as in 'clap' or 'man'), leading to, for example, 'mag' instead of 'mug'.
- Words with a 'w' may be pronounced as 'v'.
- The 'h' sound is silent in Italian, so they may omit this where it should be pronounced in English, and, conversely, overcompensate and add it where it is not needed.

Grammar

- The Italian past tense is formed as we would form the present perfect in English ('I have eaten'), so Italian speakers may overuse this structure where they should use the past simple.
- When forming the Italian past, the verb 'to be' is used instead of 'to have' with verbs of motion and some intransitive verbs. This may lead to pupils saying things like 'I was been'.
- The present simple tense is used much more frequently in Italian than in English, so Italian speakers may use this to express the future and say things like 'I go tomorrow'.
- Italian speakers may omit indefinite articles where they are needed, e.g. 'Is he teacher?'
- Italian speakers may also use definite articles where they are not needed. For example, 'the health is important in the life' or 'the my family'.
- Some nouns that are countable in Italian are uncountable in English so Italian speakers may make these plural: 'Can I have some informations?'; 'I like your hairs'.
- Italian has grammatical gender, and possessive pronouns must agree with the gender of the noun. This can cause errors such as 'Peter and her wife', which is a direct translation from Italian 'Pietro e sua moglie'. 'Moglie' is a feminine noun and therefore needs the feminine possessive pronoun 'sua'.

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- In Italian, the verb 'have' is used to express age, so Italian speakers may say 'I have 12 years' instead of 'I am 12'. Similarly, hunger and thirst is expressed using the verb 'to have', leading to mistakes like 'I have hungry'.
- Italian uses the same verb for 'to do' and 'to make' so there can be confusion between these in collocations, with mistakes like 'I make my homework'.
- Italian uses the same verb for 'to tell' and 'to say' and it doesn't take a preposition, so Italian speakers may confuse both and also omit the preposition 'to' in English when it's necessary, as in 'Say me your name'.
- Italian speakers may mix up prepositions, translating directly from Italian collocations e.g. 'I depend of you', 'marry with someone'.
- Italian uses double negative structures and doesn't have an equivalent of 'anything' or 'ever', which can lead to mistakes like 'I don't know nothing' or 'she does not work never'. There are also no negative auxiliaries in Italian as a verb is made negative by adding 'non' in front of it, which leads to mistakes like 'I no know the answer'.
- In Italian, possessives are constructed using the form 'the pen of my brother' so Italian speakers may stick to this grammatical structure instead of using possessive apostrophes.

Vocabulary

- Some false friends in Italian might also be confusing for native Italian speakers, such as:
'Brave' which means 'good' in Italian.
'Fame' which means 'hunger' in Italian.
'Libreria' which means 'bookshop' in Italian, not library!
- The word 'divertente' in Italian means both 'fun' and 'funny' and Italian speakers may confuse when to use these words in English.

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Writing

- Italian has a shallow orthography, meaning that written letters mostly match sounds exactly. Italian speakers thus may have problems with English spelling that is not phonetic, such as silent letters.
- Word order is less important in Italian for expressing sentence meaning; the position of the verb is much more mobile than in English.
- In Italian, nationalities, languages, religions, days of the weeks or months are not capitalised.

Recommended FlashAcademy® lessons

Some lessons which might help based on the above differences:

Beginner > Phonics 1 > Set 5, Set 6, Additional sounds

Beginner > Phonics 2 > Magic 'e'

Beginner > Food & Drink > Articles

Beginner > Holiday & Travel > Prepositions of place (in, on, at)

Beginner > Holiday & Travel > Prepositions of time (in, on, at)

Beginner > Holiday & Travel > In, on, by

Beginner > Work & School > -ing vs. -ed

Beginner > Punctuation > Inverted commas

Intermediate > Family & Relationships > Say vs. Tell

Intermediate > Everyday Life > Make vs. Do

Intermediate > Environment & Society > Articles