Language Group Specific Informational Reports

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

Language Group: Italian
Author: Ricardo Pimentel

Program Contact Person: Nancy Cloud (ncloud@ric.edu)
• Italian is the official language of Italy

• “Italian is spoken by around 58 million people in Italy, 24,000 in San Marino, 840,000 in Switzerland, and approximately 5 million in North and South America. Traces can be found in Libya and Somalia as well, both former colonies” (aboutworldlanguage.com).

• “Italian is considered one of the most romantic and melodic languages in the history of the world” (Whalling).

• Classified as one of the Romance languages in the family of Indo-European languages.

• Originally derived from the Latin language.

• Closely related to Spanish, Portuguese and French.

• Wide variety of dialects.

(Kwintessential)
“There are two major groups of Italian dialects, excepting the Sardinian group which is considered another language entirely. These two groups are separated by the Spezia-Rimini line, named for the two cities near which it passes; the line runs east-west across the peninsula, for the most part following the border between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, then cutting into the Marches. Above the divide lie the Northern (Septentrionale) dialects; below it the Central-Southern (Centro-Meridionale) dialects” (evolpub.com).
Major Dialects

**Milanese**: A Septentrionale dialect where the front vowels of ö and ü are present. kör (cuore) brüt (brutto)

**Venetian**: A Septentrionale dialect that does not use the vowels of ö and ü. “The verb xe serves in the third person for the standard è (is), and sono (are). Double consonants are to some extent singularized in Venetian: el gallo (il gallo), el leto (il letto); note also the use of the masculine article el (il)” (evolpub.com).

**Florentine**: A Tuscan and the most conservative of all Italian dialects. “An example of its conservatism is seen in the retention of the consonant cluster -nd- as in quando; in most dialects, this cluster is leveled to -nn-, e.g. quanno” (evolpub.com).

**Romenesco**: A dialect from Rome, there are few deviations from the Italian Language. “Firstly, -nd- is commonly leveled to -nn-: thus, quanno (quando), monno (mondo). The standard gi (similar to the -lli- in English million) is realized as j (pronounced like the English y): vojo (voglio); maja (maglia). We also see r substituted for l in some positions: er core (il cuore); and vorta (volta)” (evolpub.com).

**Neapolitan**: This is the most popular or best known dialect. The “initial chi- takes the place of pi-; thus chiù (più), and chiove (piove). Final, unaccented vowels are often pronounced as a undifferentiated vowel, similar to the English schwa. The articles (excepting li’) in Napoletano are clipped to bare vowels: ’o libbro (il libro), ’a casa (la casa), ’e piatte (i piatti)” (evolpub.com).
In English there are quite a few subtleties when it comes to formal and informal registers. For example, we say “good morning rather than hi, [or] how are you as opposed to what’s happening…but Italian has an entire grammar structure dedicated to formal language in the form of the third person lei” (Dolcevita).

**So What does this mean?**

- If you don’t know the person you are speaking to or if the person is much older, then “you must always refer to them as if they were someone you were talking about, not to” (Dolcevita).

  • Thus, *come stai*, becomes *come sta* (how is he or she?).
  • In addition, *scusa* becomes *scusi*.
  • Moreover, while the term *ciao*, is popularly used, it shouldn’t be used. *Ciao* means *hello* and *goodbye*. It also means *you don’t have a chance in the world*. It is “such a small word [with] so many uses…but when entering a shop, *buongiorno* is far more polite, *buonasera* is good for the restaurant when you’re out for dinner, and a firm *buona notte* is when you get rid of the guy who wanted to buy you a drink in the bar” (Dolcevita).
Italian learners are focused on grammar accuracy. “They have a high level of grammatical awareness” (Swan, 2001, p.73). Even though there are many differences between the English and Italian languages, the major difficulties Italian learners have are:

- Vowels and Consonants
- Influence of spelling on pronunciation
- Rhythm, stress and intonation
Phonological Issues: Vowels & Consonants

• “Shaded phonemes have equivalents...in Italian and should therefore be perceived and articulated without great difficulty” (Swan, 2001, p.74).
• Un-shaded phonemes may cause problems as listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowels</th>
<th>Consonants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i:</td>
<td>p b f v θ ď t d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɪ:</td>
<td>s z ʃ z̪ tʃ dʒ k g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʊ</td>
<td>m n ŋ l r j w h</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- /l/ is mistaken as //leave// for //live//
- /æ/ is mistaken as //met// for //mat//
- Because there are no diphthongs in Italian, there is difficulty distinguishing words like //coat, caught// and //cot//
- Confusion between //e// and //ei// as in //get// and //gate//
- The //t, d, n// are pronounced with the tongue against the teeth rather than the gum-ridge.
- /θ/ is mistaken as //tin// instead of //thin// and //udder// instead of //other//.
- The contrast between //s// and //z// create voicing issues like //zmoke// for //smoke//
- There is no phoneme for //z// in Italian so words like //pleasure// and //occasion// tend to be pronounced with //ʒj// under the influence of the spelling.
- There is no //h// in Italian, so students will either not pronounce it or stress it more.
- Final consonants in Italian are uncommon, so students may add vowel at the end of final consonants. //I wenté to schoolé oné the busé//

(Swan, 2001, p. 74-75)
“Learners may give Italian values to each letter and, because of the close relationship between spelling and pronunciation in Italian, expect each letter to be pronounced” (Swan, 2001, p.76).

- In Italian, the letter $r$ is always pronounced, so mistakes in words like farmer are made.
- Words with double consonants are also affected because in Italian double consonants are always pronounced. Words like summer, accurate, sitting and opposite are affected.
- The letters $c$ and $g$ vary in pronunciation in Italian depending on what letter follows the consonant. Thus mistakes are made with such words as: achiengt for accent; sinjer for singer; sheen for scene.
- Italian learners tend to pronounce the letter $w$ as $v$. Thus words like watt are pronounced as vat.
- In English, there are many silent letters in words. Italian learners tend to pronounce these letters. For example, pneumonia would be pronounced at pinewmonia.

(Swan, 2001, p.76-77)
“The stress-timed patterns of English cause great difficulty to Italian learners, particularly in terms of perception and comprehension” (Swan, 2001, p.77).

- The change of meaning with *word stress* in English, is comparable to the Italian language. For example, *un poco* (pron. /umpoko/)

- Word pairs are also comparable: *an’cora* (still, yet) and ‘ancora (anchor) or *capi’tano* (captain) and ‘capitano (they happen).

- Stress changes between parts of speech are also comparable with words like: *politics* and *political*.

“Some learners may be rather resistant to adopting English intonation patterns, hearing them as strange or even affected” (Swan, 2001, p.77).

- In Italian, the dissimilarities are indicated by restructuring a sentence so that the component being stressed comes at the end:
  - *Il treno arriva alle nove.* (*The train arrives at nine.*)
  - *Alle nove il treno arriva* (*The train arrives at nine.*)

*The primary stress is on different words.*

(Swan, 2001, p.77)
“The main difficulties for Italians learning English lie in the fact that English relies to a great extent on word order and phrase structure to indicate grammatical function, whereas Italian...[focuses] more on morphological inflections” (Swan, 2001, p.78).

**AUXILIARIES & NEGATIVES**

- There is no comparable to the auxiliary *do* in Italian, which causes confusion: *Where he work? What you want?*
- “Negatives are formed by the use of the negative particle *non*: *I not smoke. I no speak English*” (Swan, 2001, p.79).
- Double negatives in English occur because a set of negative particles used with *non* to say *nothing, never* and *no-one* is expressed: *I don’t understand nothing.*

**TO BE, TO HAVE & TO DO**

- In Italian, common physical states are referred to by the verb *have*: *I have cold; Have you hungry?*
- The full-verb form of *have* is also confused: *I hadn’t lunch today.*
- The equivalent of *make/do* or *take* is also confused: *I want to make/do a bath; I did/took a tea.*
- “The Italian equivalent of *to agree* is a structure with *be*: *I am not agree at all*” (Swan, 2001, p.81).
Grammatical Issues

TIME, TENSE and ASPECT: FORMS & USE

- Italian learners tend to omit the third person singular ending on the present tense. Italian words do not end in s, so Italian learners tend not to pronounce or write it in English: *he go* instead of *he goes* and *she say* instead of *she says*.

- “A group of verbs, most commonly intransitive verbs of motion…form this tense with *to be (essere)*” (Swan, 2001, p.79) which gives rise to errors: *I am cut myself*.

- Progressive verbs are more limited in Italian than in English, which causes confusion: *What do you read?* instead of *What are you reading?*

- Italian learners often misuse *since* for *for*: *I live there since ten years; It is three years that I learn English.*

- In the Italian language, there is no *going to* future, which causes confusion: *What do you do this night?* instead of *What are you doing this evening? Or I go soon to home* instead of *I am going home soon.*

(Swan, 2001, p.79-80)
MODAL AUXILIARIES

“There are five modal auxiliaries in Italian, which have all the morphological and syntactic properties of other verbs, unlike their English equivalents” (Swan, 2001, p.81). These English modals cause confusion and errors:

- I can to go; I would to go; She musts come soon.

Italian learners have difficulty with the shades of meaning. They overuse the word must (dovere) because in Italian dovere is used to shade meaning rather than differentiate modals: You must to know instead of You ought to know or You should know.

GERUNDS & NON-FINITE FORMS

“Although there is a gerund in Italian, the form is not used in the same way or as frequently as in English. The infinite tends to be used by learners after verbs instead of the gerund, and after adjectives instead of preposition + gerund” (Swan, 2001, p.81).

- When he had finished to eat; It’s not worth to buy that book; I am tired to listen to your stories

In addition, Italian learners do not realize that the gerund is needed after prepositions: I am looking forward to see you.

(Swan, 2001, p. 81-82)
“Differences between cultures play a very important role in teaching English. Teachers will often work on role plays, teach structures, etc. that mirror the exchanges of their own society rather than that of the society in which they are teaching. While it is true that teachers should encourage students to learn to speak English as it is spoken in an English speaking country, it is equally true that the more teachers are aware of cultural differences the better they can help students understand - and use - English in native speaking countries” (Beare).

- Family is the center of the social structure for Italians. Family is the foundation for both emotional and financial support.
- Appearances means everything in Italy. The concept of bella figura (good image), is very important to Italians. “The way you dress can indicate your social status, your family's background, and your education level” (Kwintessential).
• Italians much prefer face-to-face contact.
• Italians are very enthusiastic when greeting people. The common handshake is typical, but “once a relationship develops, air-kissing on both cheeks, starting with the left is often added as well as a pat on the back between men” (Kwintessential).

“Italians are extremely expressive communicators. They tend to be wordy, eloquent, emotional, and demonstrative, often using facial and hand gestures to prove their point” (Kwintessential).

Click on the link below to view a video on Italian gestures and body language.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MqrW3adt6E&feature=player_embedded
CIA. (2012). *Central Intelligence Agency: The world factbook* Italian Flag [Image], Retrieved on 30 Mar. 2010 from: 

http://it.imvu.com/groups/group/Italian%2BCulture/


M.Ed. in TESL Program
Nancy Cloud, Director
Educational Studies Department
Rhode Island College, HBS 206 #5
600 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Providence, RI 02908
Phone (401) 456-8789
Fax (401) 456-8284
ncloud@ric.edu

The M.Ed. in TESL Program at Rhode Island College is Nationally Recognized by TESOL and NCATE