

CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOKS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS
General Editor: Michael Swan

This is a series of practical guides for teachers of English and other languages. Illustrative examples are usually drawn from the field of English as a foreign or second language, but the ideas and techniques described can equally well be used in the teaching of any language.

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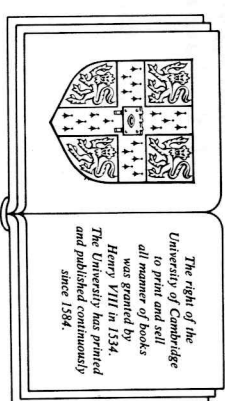
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Learner English

A teacher's guide to
interference and other problems

*Michael Swan and
Bernard Smith*



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Italian speakers

Alison Duguid

Distribution

ITALY, REPUBLIC OF SAN MARINO, VATICAN, SWITZERLAND, Malta, Somalia.

Introduction

Italian is an Indo-European language, directly descended from Latin, and closely related to Spanish, Portuguese, and French. There is a wide variety of regional dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible, and some of which have a literary tradition of their own.

Most Italians are very conscious of their regional origins, and are quick to point out that they are Neapolitan, or Tuscan, or Sardinian, as well as Italian.

Especially in the industrialised north, most educated Italians use the standard language, which evolved from a variety of Tuscan; but many can adopt the local dialect, and do so when speaking to dialect users, or in particular situations. In rural areas and in the south, dialect may be the first language for many, and this will obviously have an effect on the way English will be learned.

Italian is also the official language of the Vatican and the Republic of San Marino, and is the language of tertiary education in Somalia.

Italian speakers have some assistance in learning English through their awareness of the Latin origins of much English lexis and syntax. The Anglo-Saxon elements in English, however, can cause difficulties, and often the most basic and colloquial English usage causes more trouble than more formal or academic registers.

Phonology

General

Although there are differences between English and Italian in the distribution of the individual sounds, the main difficulties for Italian learners lie in the areas of stress and rhythm, and it is in these areas that

learners have most problems in understanding, and in making themselves understood. In addition, the relatively regular match between spelling and pronunciation in Italian sometimes causes learners to become quite indignant about the inconsistency of the English language in this respect.

Vowels

i:	ɪ	ɛ	æ	eɪ	aɪ	ɔɪ
ɑ:	ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ	əʊ	əʊ	ɪə
u:	ʌ	ɜ:	ə	eə	ʊə	ɪə aɪə əʊə

Shaded phonemes have equivalents or near equivalents in Italian, and should therefore be perceived and articulated without great difficulty, although some confusions may still arise. Unshaded phonemes may cause problems. For detailed comments see below.

1. /ɪ/ is frequently realised or perceived as /i:/: *leave* for *live*.
2. /æ/ is frequently realised or perceived as /e/: *met* for *mat*.
3. /ʌ/ is also sometimes pronounced /æ/: *bat* for *but*.

It should be noted that some loan words from English have adopted Italian pronunciation:

'*flash*' for *flash*
'*crack*' for *crack*

3. Diphthongs may not be perceived, giving rise to confusions between /b/ and /v/: *got* and *goat*, both vowels being realised as the Italian /o/. A similar confusion may arise between /e/ and /ei/: *get* and *gate*, both being realised as the Italian /e/.
4. If diphthongs are pronounced, students may give equal weight to the two elements, rather than stressing the first element. They may even pronounce English off-glides, such as /i:/, as diphthongs through over-compensation.
5. Neutral vowels resulting from English stress-timing cause problems, particularly in the comprehension and production of normal colloquial speech. Vowels are often given their strong pronunciation, and weak forms may not be recognised, even in words the learner is familiar with.

Consonants

Shaded phonemes have equivalents, or near equivalents in Italian, and should therefore be perceived and articulated without great difficulty,

p	b	f	v	θ	ð	t	d
s	z	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
m	n	ŋ	l	r	j	w	h

although some confusions may still arise. Unshaded phonemes may cause problems. For detailed comments, see below.

1. English alveolar phonemes (/t/, /d/, /n/) have dental equivalents in Italian.
2. /θ/ and /ð/ are often pronounced as /t/ and /d/: *tin* for *thin*, and *udder* for *other*, etc.
Over-emphasising these sounds can lead to excessive effort on the learner's part, which can be more problematical than the original error.
3. There are various problems related to voicing, particularly with the /s/ and /z/ contrast, which are positional variants in Italian. This gives rise to errors such as 'smoke' for *smoke*; and the devoicing of the plural morpheme and the third person singular present tense endings, in cases where English requires voicing.
Students sometimes have difficulty in perceiving initial voiced consonants in English, because of the late onset of voicing.
4. There is no equivalent in Italian for the phoneme /ʒ/, and a word like *pleasure*, for example, may be pronounced /'plezjur/. (This is a result of spelling pronunciation in many cases.)
5. /ŋ/ in Italian is a variant of /n/. The /g/ element is usually pronounced: /si:ŋge/ for /signe/.
6. There is no equivalent of /h/ in Italian, and students will either fail to pronounce it: 'I 'ope 'e ts', or over-compensate: 'Hai hope be his'.
7. Italian syllable structure rules are such that final consonants are rare, usually to be found only in foreign loan words, e.g. *bar*, *sport*, etc. One result of this is that final consonants in English are given a following vowel, usually schwa: *I wenta to schoola ona the busa*.

Consonant clusters

Consonant clusters in general cause problems, especially those containing /θ/ or /ð/, e.g. *sixths*, *clothes*, and although Italian has many of the permissible consonant clusters of English (and some more besides), more than one cluster in any one word proves particularly difficult, for example in *understandable*.

Influence of spelling on pronunciation

Because of the close relationship between spelling and pronunciation in Italian, learners are often dismayed and sometimes quite indignant about the seemingly irregular relationship between the two in English. Many common pronunciation errors typical of Italian learners are a result of grapho-phonemic interference, rather than any particular phonological aspect of Italian. Learners will give Italian values to each letter and expect each letter to be pronounced.

Other notable errors are:

1. The letter *r* is always pronounced in Italian, and this is carried over into English.
2. The letters *c* and *g* vary as to their pronunciation in Italian according to the grapho-phonemic environment: *c* is pronounced /tʃ/ before *i* or *e*, but as /k/ before other vowels; *g* is pronounced /dʒ/ before *i* or *e*, but as /g/ elsewhere; *sc* is pronounced /ʃ/ before *e* or *i*, but as /sk/ elsewhere.

Where morphological changes demand an alteration between *i* and other vowels, an *h* may be inserted to retain the consonant's sound value, e.g. *bosco* (pron. /bosko/) = *wood* (singular), becomes *boschi* (pron. /boski/) = *woods*.

Typical errors resulting from this are:

- 'kip' for *chip*
 - 'achent' for *accent*
 - 'sinjer' for *singer*
3. A /w/ in loan words from English or other languages is often pronounced as /v/: *vai* for *wait*. Students tend to carry this over to all English words with a *w*, even though the sound /w/ exists in Italian in words like *uova* (pron. /wova/).
 4. Attempts are sometimes made to pronounce initial silent letters, as in *pneumonia* and *psychology*, since such initial letters are pronounced in Italian.

Rhythm and stress

Italian learners often claim that English people 'eat their words'. The Italian learners often claim that English people 'eat their words'. The stress-timed patterns of English cause great difficulty to Italian learners, particularly in terms of perception and comprehension. The characteristics of stress-timing need to be pointed out. Special attention needs to be paid to the presentation and production of weak forms, since learners will expect full value to be given to all syllables.

Some factors of assimilation and the change of meaning with word stress have equivalents in Italian, e.g. *un poco* (pron. /umpoko/); and the pairs *an'cora* (*still, yet*) and *'ancora* (*anchor*); or *capi'tano* (*captain*) and

'capitano (*they happen*). The same is true of stress changes between parts of speech, which parallel English, e.g. *politics, political*, etc.

However, few students are aware of what happens in their own language, and most consider such phenomena in English to be bizarre.

Finally it should be noted that the word for *stress* in Italian is *accento*, and this may be confused with *accent*.

Intonation

Many Italians say that they think English sounds 'affected', so some learners may be rather resistant to adopting English intonation patterns. Students have a lot of difficulty in recognising intonation patterns: differences between *yes/no* questions and *wh*-questions cause particular problems. Contrasts in Italian are usually signalled by reordering the components of the sentence, so that the element under focus comes at the end, which coincides with the primary stress:

Il treno arriva alle nove. (*The train arrives at nine.*)

Alle nove il treno arriva. (*The train arrives at nine.*)

In English, of course, different emphases can be indicated by changes in the primary stress and the intonation pattern, without necessarily changing the order of the various elements. Italian learners need these distinctions to be pointed out.

Students also have problems in recognising affective meaning, which in English is signalled by intonation, and tend to sound arrogant or aggressive when making requests and asking questions.

Orthography and punctuation

Apart from errors resulting from the relationship between spelling and pronunciation, where learners' expectations often lead to phonetic spelling, other problems of accuracy come from the Italian spelling of cognates like *psichiatra, psicologia*, etc., giving rise to spelling errors such as **psicology*.

Italian conventions in the use of upper and lower case differ slightly from English. Small letters are used initially in the names of the days and months, and in adjectives of nationality and the names of languages.

The use of the comma presents difficulties after initial adverbs, adverb phrases and clauses; with participle constructions; and with non-defining relative clauses.

In informal writing, many Italians pay little attention to punctuation, frequently omitting full stops, or using dashes as all-purpose punctuation marks.

Style

Extended prose causes problems because of different conventions in the use of linguistic resources, and different ideas about what constitutes 'good style'. Students may use long, complex sentences, with more subordination than English would normally prefer, and elaborate periphrasis to avoid repeating the same word. Participle constructions may be overused.

Grammar

General

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, although it has developed a long way from the free ordering of words of its Latin origins, relies nevertheless much more on morphological inflections. There are exceptions to this: in forming the comparative, English uses inflected forms (*small* – *smaller*), while Italian does not. Italian speakers will tend to say **more small* in consequence.

The variety of syntactic devices in English, and the relative lack of morphological signals, will often cause students to complain that English has no rules, little grammar, and is unpredictable.

Statements, questions and negatives; auxiliaries

The auxiliary *do* has no equivalent in Italian and causes conceptual difficulties. Interrogatives are formed by putting a heavy functional load on intonation:

* *Where he work?*

* *What you want?*

Negatives are formed by the use of the negative particle *non*. (There are other negative markers, but all are placed before the verb.):

* *I not smoke.*

* *I no speak English.*

There are also a set of negative particles, which are used with *non* to express *nothing, never, no-one*, etc. giving rise to the use of double negatives in English:

* *I don't understand nothing.*

Confusion occurs with the negative of infinitives:

* *It is useless to don't speak.*