

Learning a Foreign Language (Italian)

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<http://www.geometer.org/todi/learn.pdf>

1 Introduction

This document lists strategies that have worked for me in my attempt to learn Italian. Most will work for other languages as well, but all the examples are specifically for Italian. I suspect that most of these techniques, but not all, will probably work for you.

I assume that you are studying Italian because you would like to be able to communicate with people—to read, hear, or speak it. If you're studying it because you have to but don't want to, I don't think there is any hope of learning it well.

This document is written for people who would be happier to fail their Italian class and be able to communicate than to get an "A" and be afraid to say anything. Of course it's pretty unlikely that you'll fail the course if you do learn to communicate unless you have a real jerk for a teacher. I wish I could say that I always follow all the rules below, but I don't, and you won't either.

All the sections in this document consist of lists of ideas that are organized somewhat randomly. I tried to list the most important ideas first, but your assessment of the correct ordering will probably be different.

Also remember that as you learn more, the relative value of various techniques change. For example, it's probably always a good idea to increase your vocabulary, but practicing conjugations of irregular verbs becomes less and less important.

2 What Is Your Goal?

1. Before you begin, think about what your personal goals are. Some people want to be able to get by on a trip to Italy and to be able to say "Grazie!", "Buona notte!", and to read a menu. Others may want to be able to have conversations, but have no interest in reading or writing. Some people want to become fluent. You are the only one who knows your own goals.
2. Remember that your goals may change, and if they do, make sure that your learning strategies change to match the new goals.

3 Classes and Teachers

1. You can't learn to speak or write by yourself from books and tapes. The only way to correct errors in your speech or writing is to have a person fluent in the language to listen to you or read what you write and give corrections.
2. You can, however, make a great deal of progress in learning to understand spoken and written Italian without a teacher, although a teacher can be a great help. By digging through grammar books and

dictionaries you can figure out most things, and my strategy is to do this a bit, but rather than spend an inordinate amount of time on some little point, I simply write it down to ask my teacher in the next class.

3. If you get a bad teacher, do something about it. Let the teacher know what's not working and give him a chance to change, but it's stupid to waste your time when the teaching techniques don't match your learning style. If things just aren't working out, change teachers.
4. The smaller the class, the better. In a class with 20 students, you will get to speak, on average, about one time in 20, unless you're particularly aggressive or meek. In a class with one student, you'll speak 20 times as often. I suppose you can learn something from other peoples' errors, but if you're like me, you won't learn much, and besides, it's always more interesting to listen to yourself talking, isn't it?

Remember that the key thing a teacher can do for you is to correct your written and spoken Italian, so the best use of class time is to talk as much as possible. Unfortunately, in larger classes the teacher is often in a bind, since her goal is to get everyone to learn the language. If the other students won't listen to tapes or read outside of class, the only way to force them to do so is to do those things in class.

4 Getting Started

1. It's probably a good idea when you begin to do it intensively. If you work hard for a week or two (a few hours every day), it's much easier to get started. Once you are started, you can relax a little.
2. Learn to talk your way around words you don't know. It'll sound strange, of course, but everyone will understand you when you talk about the "tool with points for eating food" when you don't remember the word for "fork".
3. Similarly, don't worry initially about all the verb tenses. After all, you understand exactly what I mean if I say, "Today I go to the store.", "Tomorrow I go to the store.", or "Yesterday I go to the store.", right? The original goal is to be understood; you can learn to use the imperfect subjunctive later.
4. Get a decent English/Italian and Italian/English dictionary. Don't skimp on this and purchase the \$3.00 micro-dictionary version. If you're not confident of your ability to select a good one, ask your teacher for advice.

But don't buy a giant one that's too heavy to carry around. Or if you do get a giant one, get another one that you are willing to carry.

One interesting technique is to place a dot next to the words you look up. If you look up a word again, put another dot beside it and so on. After a while it'll be pretty obvious what words are both common and hard for you to remember, and you can make a set of flash cards or something for those words.

5 Relax!

1. Don't be in a hurry. The person who reads three chapters of an Italian book once will learn less than the person who reads the same chapter three times.

When you are corrected, stop for a few seconds and make sure you understand why it was a mistake and think about how to avoid it in the future.

2. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. The faster you make them, the faster you'll learn. I studied Spanish in high school and I was terrified of appearing to be a fool in front of my friends so I minimized the number of mistakes I made by minimizing the number of times I spoke. As a result, I also minimized the amount of Spanish I learned.

Along the same lines, try to use new words, phrases, and structures that you've learned. Only by using them (and making errors) will you master them.

Of course making mistakes in classes where you care about the grade you receive can be a problem. If you do what I say above and sound like a complete idiot, and some other clown in the class keeps his mouth shut, the teacher, if he's not a good one, may only remember that you make mistakes and that the clown doesn't. That's why it's better not to care about your grades.

3. When you read a new word, don't turn immediately to the dictionary. Think about it—does it sound like some other English or Italian word? Can you guess its meaning from the rest of the words in the sentence?

After you've made a guess, it is probably a good idea to look up the word, since no matter how logical you were in your analysis, natural language has an infuriating habit of being illogical.

6 Be Flexible

1. Try all sorts of different approaches. Some work for some people and not for others. Find methods that work for you. Even when you find methods that work, don't get locked into using only those methods—you'll get bored, and you'll avoid discovering methods that work even better.
2. Pretend that you are the teacher in charge of teaching yourself. What would you make yourself do? Where are you weak? In some ways, you have a far better idea about this than any other teacher will have.
3. Figure out what time of day is best for learning a foreign language for you. My particular brain is most functional early in the morning, but I know that differs from person to person. Figure out when you're at your peak for learning language and study then.

7 Specific Techniques

1. Use tapes, especially tapes with transcriptions. I particularly like *Acquerello Italiano*, although you need to be at almost an intermediate level to use it well. It is a tape and transcription that comes every couple of months. The transcription is in Italian, but difficult words and phrases are highlighted and are explained in English in the back of the booklet. (By the way, the same company,

Champs-Élysées, that makes *Acquerello Italiano* also makes similar versions for Spanish, French, and German. I learned a lot from the Spanish *Puerta del Sol*.)

What I do is to listen to the tape once or twice before looking in the transcription. Then I read the transcription and notes, and then listen to the tape a few more times. I just keep the tape in my car, so I can listen while I'm driving. It would probably be better to listen at home where I could write things down, but I can't get myself to do that very much.

2. Rent Italian movies with subtitles. Depending on how much time you have, and your level of knowledge, you can follow various strategies. What works for me is to watch the movie first without subtitles, and I do this by taping a piece of paper over the TV in front of the subtitles. Then I watch it again with the subtitles visible. This is for movies on tape; if you've got a DVD player there are much better strategies—see below.

A beginner would get almost nothing from an initial viewing with hidden subtitles, so if you're at that stage, first view it with the subtitles, and then try to view it with the subtitles hidden. See what works for you.

I happen to be much better at reading than listening, so another thing that is wonderful for me when I can do it is when I can find an Italian movie on DVD where you can select the language of both the movie and of the subtitles. I set it to be spoken Italian and Italian subtitles. It works great!

Unfortunately, most DVDs sold in the United States do not have Italian subtitles, but they are still far better than standard videotapes with subtitles. There's a single button on the remote control to turn on and off subtitles, so as you're watching, if you don't understand something (with the subtitles off), it's trivial to back up a few seconds and listen again (and again, and again. . .). Then, if you really need the subtitles, back up once more, turn on the subtitles, and listen. Then turn off the subtitles and continue.

I find the arrangement of movies by scenes on DVD very useful. I work my way through a scene as described above, a couple of sentences at a time if it is difficult, and when I finish, I turn off the subtitles and replay the entire scene. It's a nice review, and it's usually only 4 or 5 minutes of video, so you don't have time to forget all of it.

3. Watch Italian TV. If you've got cable this is easy. For people like me living in the technological stone age, at least the news is on every day at 5:30 to 6:00 on channel 32 in the San Francisco area. If I were more organized, I'd record it so I could replay it and study the hard parts.

I learned a bunch of Spanish this way, and found that advertisements were the easiest to understand, then the news (since the anchors speak clearly and in complete sentences), then the soap operas and movies, then the talk shows. The show that was by far the hardest to understand was a series of jokes—I could understand every word up to the punch line, and nothing else. Generally the punch line is delivered rapidly, and often it depends on some strange word usage.

4. Try reading aloud without trying to understand what you're reading. Just concentrate on the pronunciation. If you hit a hard word, repeat it a couple of times until you get it, and then go back to the beginning of the sentence and try again. Then reread the entire passage a second time.
5. Read parallel-text books with Italian on one page and with the English translation on the facing page. You can read this pretty rapidly because it's so easy to "look up" the words you don't know. Unfortunately, I find that I don't remember them as well when I haven't gone to the trouble of looking them up myself; your results may be different.

6. When I read text that does not have a translation, I read it once without a dictionary to see what I can understand, usually underlining words that I don't know. On the second pass, I look up all the words and write them down with translations on another piece of paper. Then I review the new vocabulary, and read it a third time. And if I have the time, I read it more times, but a day or two later.

I also find it useful to reread things that I read a long time ago. This will make you feel good about the words you do remember, and will point out the words that are difficult.

Consider reading children's books. The vocabulary will be a little simpler.

7. I've tried using flash cards, and it's hard to say whether they help much. They may work for you, however. It may be that just the act of making the cards helps somewhat, since it forces you to write out the verb and some people learn things better when they write them out. Similarly, writing out verb conjugations may also help. Typically, on a flash card, people only write the infinitive of the verb, but writing out a complete conjugation will force you to look at all the versions.
8. When you're studying grammar, there is no hope of getting it the first time. Italian textbooks are organized so that you think that after you've read chapter one, you will know everything about pronunciation. After chapter two, you'll know the present-tense conjugations of the regular "are"-verbs, et cetera.

This is nonsense. Learning a language is like repeatedly throwing mud against a wall and seeing what sticks. After a while, go back to chapter one and re-read it (in other words, throw some more mud at the wall—more of it will stick the second time). Keep cycling through the chapters, and each time you'll pick up more.

9. Don't freak out too much about irregular forms. The ones that are irregular are the ones that are most commonly used, so it's a little discouraging at first, but you do use them all the time, so you get lots of practice.

In fact, although many verbs are technically irregular there are hidden regularities that your mind notices although you may not. After a while these will just click in without thinking. I had (and still have) a hard time with lots of the irregular past participles, so (in spite of what I said about flash cards above) I practiced with a large set of cards where one side had the verb and the other, the participle. I did this for a large set of irregular verbs, and didn't worry whether I knew what they meant or not. After some practice, I found I could guess on a very high percentage of the words, even when I had no clue what the word meant.

10. When I write essays, I do it with a word processor. Then I get the essay corrected in class with all the errors marked on the paper. When I get home, I correct the errors in the original on the word processor, but I do it one paragraph at a time. I begin by looking only at my original text, and try to remember the corrections and make those. Then I look at the corrected sheet, and make the rest of the corrections. Then I go to the next paragraph.

I like to print the original and the corrected version of each essay and I keep them in a folder for reference. Not only can you see the progress you make, but there's tons of information available about the sorts of errors that you are most likely to make. I don't do as much of this sort of analysis of errors as I should, but when I do, it is always interesting.

11. I try to write essays about things that are interesting to me. For example, I like to tell jokes in English, so I try to translate jokes into Italian. This way you'll learn the vocabulary that you're most likely to need.
12. Read stuff that's interesting to you. I'm an old geezer, and when I read from a college text the conversations between students talking about what classes they're taking, my mind goes numb. Then at the end there are questions like, "Is Maria studying chemistry?", and I haven't the foggiest idea because although I understood it when I read it, my brain erased that information the instant I started reading the next sentence.
13. When I'm out for a walk and I'm thinking about something, I often try to translate my thoughts into Italian. When I get home, I look up the words and structures that I was unable to say. It would be better to carry a notebook and write them down, but I'm too lazy, so I wind up remembering only a fraction of the troublesome problems.
14. Another useful technique is to take a word in Italian that you know, and to try to define it in Italian, in terms of other Italian words. This is harder than it sounds, but can be very valuable.
15. Once you reach an intermediate level, it's a good idea to acquire an Italian to Italian dictionary. It's obviously a little harder to use, but the effort is worth it, and you'll learn some interesting new words when you read the definitions. And if you get stuck, you can always go back to your English-Italian dictionary.
16. There are plenty of Italian-language newspapers that you can read on the internet. Corriere della Sera (<http://www.corriere.it/>) and La Repubblica (<http://www.repubblica.it>) are two, but there are lots more. Even better, in my opinion, is to go the Google news page for the Italian-language stories at <http://www.google.com/news/it/it/main.html>. There you can find, for each of the important stories of the day, many versions of the same story. What I have found particularly useful is to read about the same event from multiple news sources. The great thing about this is that any new vocabulary words that you look up are extremely likely to recur in other similar stories, and seeing a newly-learned word in a slightly different context again and again is the best way I know to learn it.

8 Future Linguistic "Research"

1. I haven't yet tried this, but I'm sure it would work well, and that would be to have a glass of wine (Italian, of course) before each class. When I was in Italy at a dinner with some of my Italian teachers, there was plenty of wine to drink, and the next day one of the teachers told me that my Italian improved with each sip of wine, up to about two and a half glasses. Then it turned into Spanish, and finally disintegrated.

But a little wine will relax you, and make you less fearful of making errors, so I'm sure it wouldn't hurt.
2. In fact, if you're studying Italian, you should probably eat Italian food, drink Italian wines and cappuccino, and wear Italian clothes.

3. In fact, why do this in the United States? Go to Italy to take classes, eat the food and drink the wine. Total-immersion courses are the way to go, so you have to speak Italian inside and outside the classroom. I did Spanish this way in Costa Rica, living with a family that spoke no English, and I learned very rapidly. The next year I did the same thing, but stayed with a family that had two of us English speakers living with them. Of course we always spoke English together and it didn't work nearly as well.

You might consider the Italian schools in more remote parts of Italy for just this reason. My Italian teacher here once joked that for her it's good to go to Florence in the middle of July for two or three days "for a crash course in English".