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More Italians are realizing the importance of learning English. Photo: Shane Global

Keen Italians face uphill struggle to learn English

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Italians have long been lambasted for their English language skills, but that hasn't stopped their desire to learn, even more so today, as The Local discovered.

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"Mummy, our English lessons start on Thursday," the girl of about eight years old was overheard telling her mother in a shop in Rome on Monday night.

"The teacher lets us sing English songs. I can't wait."

Italy might have finished just 28th out of 70 countries in the latest ranking by Education First (EF) on English language proficiency levels, but there is a palpable sense of eagerness among Italians to learn.

In fact, the country has moved up four notches in the annual ranking since 2013, with Italians now having a "moderate" proficiency level - a good stretch ahead of their French counterparts, whose standard of English is the worst in the EU.

They might have some way to go before reaching the top five, currently dominated by Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Finland, but Italians are slowly catching up as they realize just how crucial it is to speak English, especially when it comes to finding and keeping jobs.

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The high profile example of the Italian doctor who was recently suspended from practising in the UK because of his poor English language skills has also exposed the pitfalls.

Read more: [Italian doctor banned in UK over bad English](#)

“The problem was a lot worse a decade ago,” Roberto Race, a communications adviser, told The Local.

“Now, everybody is having English lessons. Companies looking to work in international markets are realizing they need staff who speak English, otherwise they come up against big challenges.”

Italians are also keen to hone their English language skills as they learn, added Race, and don't tend to be deterred or embarrassed when they make mistakes.

A prime example is premier Matteo Renzi, who has responded with good humour whenever his stumbling attempts at English have been ridiculed.

At least he can hold his head high when pitted against Italy's three-time prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who hardly speaks any English but is conversant in French.

“Italians of the Berlusconi generation and after were taught French at school, not English,” Race said.

“But that's changed a lot over the last 30 years, with schools teaching more English and less French.”

Despite the progress, “Italy still has some way to go in terms of re-gearing its education system to produce more students capable of speaking English,” Christopher Prentice, the British Ambassador to Italy, said during an event in Rome last week about Italian startups.

“If there's a strategic investment, then Italy should make English learning a priority.”

Riccardo Silvestre, a student from Bologna, said English teaching in school is sufficient in as far as the basics of grammar go, but is lacking when it comes to speaking practise.

“There aren't real ‘conversations’, the dialogues are systematic and you learn them by heart,” he told the Local.

Silvestre admits that he's never been a “model student” and never pushed himself to study English, but because he needed to improve his grades, he took private lessons.

“In the space of a month my grades went from four out of 10 to eight out of 10. In reality, the media helped a lot too, such as YouTube and the internet in general, along with video games, which enabled me to put my speaking and writing into practice.”

With the additional support of language groups, Silvestre can now speak and read English with little problem, and uses the language every day, something he, along with many other Italians, knows will stand him in good stead when it comes to applying for jobs.

Catherine Hornby, an [English teacher and translator](#) in Rome, says lots of people write to her saying they plan to move abroad, to London especially, and want to do an intensive English course before they leave.

Others say that English is becoming a more important part of their jobs.

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"They are increasingly having to take part in conference calls in English and communicate with colleagues and clients from around the world, and so they feel it is crucial for them to improve their English," she said.

"Some are starting from a low level and want to have crash courses on how to handle a business meeting in English. Others speak English quite well already but want to work on their pronunciation."

Most of her students are also keen to develop a British accent, she added.

"Understanding people with stronger accents such as those from Glasgow and Newcastle or those with thick [London] Cockney accents can also be a challenge, so we do lots of listening exercises with different accents," she explained.

"I find that most people are highly motivated and enjoy the language but find it difficult to deal with the different sounds we have in English compared to Italian."

With additional reporting by Catherine Edwards

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