



Analysis of Difficulties in Italian Phonetic Acquisition for Chinese Native Speakers from the Perspective of Third Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Research into foreign language acquisition has demonstrated that an individual's mother tongue can significantly influence the phonetic acquisition of a second language. If learners have command of their mother tongue and a second foreign language, the linguistic competencies of both languages can affect the acquisition of a third language. This paper summarizes the common pronunciation errors of Italian beginners in higher education in China, identifying that their pronunciation is affected not only by the transfer of English, the second language, but also by the first language Chinese. The paper recommends that in pronunciation teaching, emphasis should be placed on guiding students to pay more attention to the articulatory positions, to consult the pronunciation annotations in dictionaries, and to integrate a multi-tiered feedback mechanism to enhance students' phonetic discrimination capacity.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Italian Pronunciation, Native Chinese Speakers, Third Language Acquisition, Foreign Language Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Italian orthography is predominantly phonetic, with a consistent correspondence between letters and sounds, and vice versa [1]. Therefore, errors in pronunciation can affect the spelling of words. Proficiency in Italian phonetic rules is fundamental to achieving fluency in the language.

Word 1/pronunciation/meaning	Word 2/pronunciation/meaning
pelle ['pelle] (skin)	belle ['belle] (beautiful)
colla ['kolla] (glue)	gola ['gola] (throat)
fino ['fino] (until)	vino ['vino] (wine)
lusso ['lusso] (luxury)	russo ['russo] (Russian)
rosso ['rosso] (red)	rosa ['roza] (pink)

Italian words in similar spelling and pronunciation with different meanings.

Language transfer refers to the influence caused by the similarities and differences between the target language and any other previously acquired language [2]. Ioup (1984) [3] found through experiments that native speakers can identify non-native speakers through pronunciation but struggle to distinguish whether an individual is a native speaker or not from their written text. Language transfer is not solely confined to the interference of the native language. In the process of third language pronunciation acquisition, the third language (L3) may experience transfer not only from the mother tongue (L1), but also from the second language (L2) [4].

In line with previous findings, this study has observed that pronunciation errors of novice Italian learners in universities in China not only demonstrate the transfer from their mother tongue Chinese, but are also shaped by the phonetics of English. The data of this study was collected from undergraduate students majoring in Italian language and literature from a university located in southern China, the majority of whom are from Guangdong Province, with mother tongue being Mandarin and Cantonese. The pronunciation analysis mentioned below was primarily collected from students' classroom oral exercises and post-class reading assignments. These students start their Italian learning from scratch after entering university. Before that, they have extensive experience in learning English starting from their middle school.

2. Difficulties in Vowel Pronunciation for Novice Italian Learners

Italian has five vowels: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*, with seven distinct sounds. The letter *e* has two pronunciations, the open sound *è* [ɛ] and the close sound *é* [e], and similarly the letter *o* can be pronounced as the open sound *ò* [ɔ] and the close sound *ó* [o]. In contrast, the vowels *a* [a], *i* [i], and *u* [u] have only one pronunciation respectively.

2.1. Vowel *a*

The vowel *a* [a] is classified as an open central low vowel, articulated with the tongue in a flat position, similar to the Mandarin Pinyin vowel *a* [a] but with a mouth shape slightly more open than that of the Mandarin (Wen, 2003, p. 26) [5].

2.1.1. Mispronounced as [e] or [æ]

Learners generally have a high accuracy rate when pronouncing the vowel *a*, but a few may substitute it with the phonemes [e] or [æ], such as the mispronunciation of *anche* ['anke] as ['enke] or ['ænke], and *quando* ['kwando] as ['kwendo] or ['kwændo]. This pronunciation error occasionally occurs when the letter *a* occupies a stressed syllable and may stem from the influence of the phonetic patterns [æɪ] or [æŋ] frequently found in English words with *an-*.

2.1.2. Mispronounced as [ə]

Another prevalent mispronunciation of the letter *a* involves its articulation as [ə]. In Italian, the letter *a* can function independently as a preposition to indicate direction, location, or time, with meaning of *at* or *to* in English. Some beginners may incorrectly pronounce this preposition as the indefinite article *a* [ə] in English.

2.2. Vowel *e*

The Italian vowel *e* is characterized by two phonetic variations: an open sound *è* [ɛ] and a close sound *é* [e]. These two sounds are articulated in similar manners, with the main distinction being that the open sound requires a larger aperture of the mouth and a slightly lower tongue position than for the close sound (Wen, 2003, pp. 11-12) [5]. The writing of most words does not specify whether the *e* sound is open or close, and different Italian dialects vary in their choice between the open and close sounds. However, the difference between these two phonemes is not the teaching difficulty; And the challenge lies in the tendency of beginners to pronounce vowel *e* as other phonemes.

2.2.1. Mispronounced as [i] or [ɪ]

Novices sometimes pronounce the vowel *e* as [i] or [ɪ]. A common example is the first-person singular stressed pronoun *me* [me], which is frequently mispronounced as [mi]. This mispronunciation may arise from the phonetic and semantic similarity between the Italian pronoun and the English objective case pronoun *me*, resulting in the transference of English pronunciation to Italian.

2.2.2. -er mispronounced of as [ə]

In Italian, the sequence *-er* is pronounced as [-er] or [-ɛr], but many students tend to pronounce it as [ə] or [ɜ]. For instance, the preposition *per* [per] may be pronounced as [pə] or [pɜ], possibly due to the similarity with the English word *per* (for each) which may lead to the adoption of English pronunciation patterns.

2.2.3. Final *e* Not Pronounced

While the final *e* in English words is often silent, in Italian, it is essential to pronounce the final *e*. Some learners may neglect this pronunciation, as seen in the contracted preposition *alle* ['alle], which is sometimes mispronounced as *al* [al] or even *a* [a].

2.3. Vowel *i*

Vowel Omitted

The vowel *i* [i] is rarely substituted with other sounds by novice learners, but more commonly, it is omitted instead, especially in polysyllabic words with irregular stress pattern. In words with suffix *-issimo*, *-esimo*, *-ità*, etc., the non-stressed *i* in the penultimate syllable is occasionally omitted, as observed in the mispronunciation of *velocissimo* [velo'cissimo] (very fast) as [velo'cismo], *umanesimo* [uma'nezimo] (humanism) as [uma'nezmo] or [uma'nesmo]. This tendency may arise from the heightened complexity of syllable division in lengthy words, leading to the neglect of the [i] sound which requires a relatively smaller mouth opening compared to other vowels.

2.4. Vowel *u*

Mispronounced as [ju:]

Despite the fact that the pronunciation of *u* in both Mandarin Pinyin and Italian is [u], students often pronounce Italian *u* [u] as [ju:], akin to certain English words. For instance, *università* [universi'ta] (university) may be mispronounced as [ju:niversi'ta], and *studente* [stu'dente] (student) as [stju:'dente]. The rationale of this mispronunciation may stem from the phonetic and orthographic similarity between English words like *university* and *student* and their Italian counterparts, prompting learners to substitute English phonemes for Italian ones.

3. Difficulties in Consonant Pronunciation for Novice Italian Learners

3.1. Consonant *r*

3.1.1. Mispronounced as [ɹ] or [ɻ]

In Italian, the letter *r* is pronounced as an alveolar trill denoted by the international phonetic alphabet (IPA) symbol [r]. This sound requires the tongue tip to curl upwards, creating a vibration through the airflow. It poses a significant challenge for learners. Many beginners tend to substitute the trill [r] with the English approximant sounds [ɹ] or [ɻ], especially when the letter *r* follows other consonants, as seen in the words *bravo* ['bravo] (good) and *grande* ['grande] (big). Additionally, when the consonant *r* occurs at the end of a syllable, such as in the word *persona* [per'sona] (person), some students may pronounce it as the *Rhotic R* in American English.

3.1.2. Difficulty to Incorporate Trill [r] into Word Pronunciation

Some beginners, after learning the trill [r], struggle to integrate it into word pronunciation. This issue may arise from an overly tongue curl against the palate or from the entire tongue surface lifting and sticking to the palate, resulting in a noticeable initial sound [t] or [d] preceding the trill [r]. Another reason could be that the tongue curls too backwards, leading to a less agile pronunciation that does not seamlessly integrate into words.

3.2. Voiced and Voiceless Consonants

3.2.1. Consonants [b]/[p] and [t]/[d]

Both Mandarin and English include the letters *b*, *p*, *t* and *d*, but their pronunciations differ from those in Italian. In Pinyin, the IPA symbols for the consonant *b* and *d* are [p] and [t], respectively, while *p* and *t* are aspirated as [p^h] and [t^h] (Huang & Liao, 2017, p. 28) [6]. In contrast, Italian *p* [p] and *t* [t] are not aspirated, resembling the Pinyin sounds for *b* [p] and *d* [t]. For instance, the Italian pronunciation of syllable *pa* [pa] resembles the Mandarin Pinyin *ba* [pa] rather than *pa* [p^ha], and the syllable *ta* [ta] is more akin to the Mandarin *da* [ta] instead of *ta* [t^ha]. Moreover, Italian-voiced consonants *b* [b] and *d* [d] require more pronounced vocal cord vibration than their Pinyin counterparts. Therefore, beginners face two challenges in distinguishing voiced and voiceless consonants: adjusting to the unaspirated pronunciation of voiceless consonants, and differentiating the voiced consonants *b* and *d*, which may be pronounced as [p] and [t], respectively, by beginners.

3.2.2. Consonant *s* [s]/[z]

The consonant *s* in Italian has two pronunciations [s] and [z], sharing the same articulation position and forming a voiced-voiceless consonant pair with specific pronunciation rules. The pronunciation of the voiceless consonant [s] is relatively easy, while the voiced consonant [z], absent in Pinyin, often confuses students who may mistake it for [dz]. Some students may insert the vowel [ɪ] or [ə] between *s* and other consonants. Memorizing the rules to determine whether [s] or [z] should be pronounced in words is another challenge.

The consonant *s* should be pronounced as a voiced consonant in the following situations: 1) When *s* is between two vowels; 2) When *s* is followed by another voiced consonant. In all other cases, *s* should be pronounced as a voiceless consonant: 1) When *s* is the first letter followed by a vowel; 2) When *s* appears as double consonant; 3) When *s* is preceded by another consonant; 4) When *s* is followed by a voiceless consonant; 5) When *s* is the first letter of a component in a compound word. However, there are exceptions that *s* between two vowels could be pronounced voicelessly. Apart from *s* as the first letter of a component in a compound word, *s* in some common words like *cosa* (thing), *casa* (house), *mese* (month) and in affixes *-ese* and *-oso* can be pronounced in either voiced or voiceless ways. The Italian pronunciation dictionary *DiPI online* and the *Zingarelli* dictionary mark most of the aforementioned words with both [s] and [z] acceptable, and Salaris and Murenu (2020, p. 56) [7] also mention that although *s* between two vowels is sometimes pronounced as a voiceless phoneme, it is also acceptable to pronounce it as a voiced sound.

3.2.3. Consonant *z* [ts]/[dz]

The voiced and voiceless consonants [ts] and [dz] of the letter *z* present another pronunciation challenge. First, Pinyin lacks a corresponding pronunciation for the phoneme [dz], and the IPA symbol for the Pinyin letter *z* is [ts], which is closer

to the voiceless consonant pronunciation of the Italian letter *z*. Therefore, beginners may struggle to find the correct articulation for the voiced consonant [dz]. Second, there are many pronunciation rules for the voiced and voiceless consonants of *z*, and there are also many exceptions for each rule. For example, when *z* is followed by the vowel *i* and *i* is followed by other vowel letters, it generally pronounces a voiceless consonant, such as *zio* [ˈtʃio] (uncle) and *polizia* [politˈtʃia] (police), but *azienda* [adˈdʒjɛnda] (company) and *romanziera* [romanˈdʒjɛre] (novelist) require a voiced consonant; when *z* is the first letter and the second syllable starts with a voiceless consonant, it generally pronounces a voiceless consonant, but there are also voiced consonant exceptions; when *z* is the first letter and the second syllable starts with a voiced consonant, it generally pronounces a voiced consonant, but there are still many words with a voiceless *z*. Therefore, when learning the pronunciation rules of *z*, consulting dictionaries is necessary to avoid confusion.

3.3. Consonant Digraphs *gn* [ɲ] and *gl* [ʎ]

The consonant digraphs *gn* [ɲ] and *gl* [ʎ] do not exist in Chinese nor in English, and beginners need to spend more time acquiring them.

3.3.1. Consonant Digraph *gn*

Phoneme [ɲ], a voiced palatal nasal consonant, is articulated with the tongue body raised and approached the hard palate while tongue tip lowered away from the alveolar ridge. The airflow mostly exits through the nasal cavity with vocal cord vibration. The combination *gn* [ɲ] is pronounced as a single sound; However, beginners sometimes pronounce it as two separate consonants [gn]. Additionally, learners would confuse this pronunciation with the similar nasal sound [n], leading to mispronunciations such as *nia* [nia], *nie* [nie], *nio* [nio]/[nio], *niu* [niu] instead of the correct *gna* [ɲa], *gne* [ɲe], *gno* [ɲo]/[no], *gnu* [ɲu].

3.3.2. Consonant Digraph *gl*

The *gl* digraph, when succeeded by the vowel *i*, commonly articulates the voiced palatal lateral approximant phoneme [ʎ]. This requires the tongue body to be elevated against the hard palate, with the tongue tip lowered, allowing the air to flow through the sides of the tongue. The primary challenge in pronouncing *gl* is its letter combination: if *gl* is directly followed by *a*, *e*, *o* and *u*, the *g* and *l* are pronounced separately as [gl], and if *gl* is followed by vowel *i* or a diphthong starting with *i*, [ʎ] should be articulated with very few exceptions. Another challenge lies on the precise positioning for the articulation of [ʎ]. Some beginners may substitute it with similar sounds from Chinese or English, such as [l], [i] or [j]. For example, the word *famiglia* [faˈmiʎʎa] (family) may be incorrectly pronounced as [faˈmilia], [faˈmija], or [faˈmia].

3.4. Consonants *c* [k]/[tʃ]

The letter *c* has two phonetic variations, [k] and [tʃ], and its pronunciation

presents two challenges: the non-aspirated pronunciation of voiceless consonant [k] and the pronunciation rules of [k] and [tʃ]. The distinction between these sounds and their application within words can be problematic for learners.

3.4.1. Consonant *c* [k]

Like voiceless letters *t* and *p*, the voiceless consonant [k] in Italian is unaspirated, similar to the pronunciation of the Pinyin letter *g* [k]. This contrasts with the aspirated [k^h] sound typically associated with the English and Pinyin letter *k*. This distinction can be challenging for novice learners, leading to mispronunciations such as reading *come* [ˈkome] (how) as [ˈk^home].

3.4.2. Consonant *c* [tʃ]

The pronunciation of *c* varies depending on its combination with following vowels. If the letter *c* is spelled as *ca*, *che*, *chi*, *co* and *cu*, it produces the voiceless velar plosive consonant [k], while spelled as *cia*, *ce*, *ci*, *cio* and *ciu*, it needs the pronunciation of the phoneme [tʃ]. The presence of letters *h* and *i* in these combinations is structural and does not contribute to the pronunciation, a fact that often complicates learning. Teaching observations indicate that some students mispronounce *che* [ke] and *chi* [ki] as [tʃe] and [tʃi]. Such errors may arise from the influence of Chinese phonetics, given the similarity between the Pinyin letter *ch* [tʃ^h] and the Italian [tʃ]. Some students may even pronounce the syllable *ci* as the Pinyin *qi* [tʃ^h]. Additionally, learners may isolate the *i* [i] sound in *cia* [tʃa], *cio* [tʃo]/[tʃo] and *ciu* [tʃu], resulting in pronunciations like [tʃia], [tʃio]/[tʃio] and [tʃiu], as seen in the mispronunciation of *ciao* [ˈtʃao] (hello) as [tʃiˈao] or even as the Pinyin *qiào* [tʃiˈao].

3.5. Consonant *g* [g]/[dʒ]

The consonant *g* in Italian has two phonetic realizations: [g] and [dʒ], and the pronunciation is determined by the orthography, which poses a memorization challenge for novice learners. The voiced velar plosive [g] is articulated in words spelled with *ga*, *ghe*, *ghi*, *go*, and *gu*, whereas the [dʒ] occurs in the case of *gia*, *ge*, *gi*, *gio*, and *giu*. Some beginners may confuse the pronunciation of *ghe* [gɛ]/[ge] with *ge* [dʒɛ]/[dʒe] and *ghi* [gi] with *gi* [dʒi]. Additionally, some may mispronounce the phoneme [gi] as the Mandarin pinyin *ji* [tei]. Paralleling the pronunciation rules for the letter *c*, the letters *h* and *i* in the pronunciation rules of *g* are structural and do not independently produce the sound. However, when encountering the letter combinations *gia* [dʒa], *gio* [dʒo]/[dʒo] and *giu* [dʒu], students may unnecessarily pronounce the *i* sound, reading them as [dʒia], [dʒio]/[dʒio] and [dʒiu] respectively. For instance, the word *già* [dʒa] (already) may be mispronounced as [dʒiˈa] or even similar to the Mandarin Pinyin *jià* [teiˈa].

3.6. Consonant Clusters *sc* [sk]/[ʃ]

The pronunciation rules for the consonant clusters *sc* [sk] and [ʃ] present a learning challenge. In the spellings *sca*, *sche*, *sch*, *sco*, and *scu*, the [sk] sound is pronounced,

whereas in *scia*, *sce*, *sci*, *scio*, and *sciu*, the voiceless post-alveolar fricative [ʃ] is articulated. Some beginners may mispronounce *sche* [skɛ]/[ske] as *sce* [ʃɛ]/[ʃe] and *schì* [ski] as *sci* [ʃi]. As with *c* and *g*, the letters *h* and *i* only serve a structural role without distinct pronunciation, leading to potential confusion among beginners. When faced with the combinations *scia* [ʃa], *scio* [ʃɔ]/[ʃo] and *sciu* [ʃu], learners may add the [i] sound, incorrectly pronouncing them as [ʃia], [ʃio]/[ʃiɔ] and [ʃiu]. A few students might pronounce *scia* as the Pinyin letter *xia* [ei' a].

3.7. Syllables Ending with the Consonant *l*

A limited number of Italian words, including some foreign words, end with a consonant. Notably, the final consonant *l* requires special attention. In Italian, if the consonant *l* is followed by another consonant or at the end of a word, the tip of the tongue should touch the alveolar ridge and pronounce a subtle [l] sound (Wen, 2020, p. 13) [8].

In English, the consonant *l* is pronounced as a *Light L* or *Clear L* [l] before a vowel, with the tongue tip against the alveolar ridge and the airflow along the sides of the tongue. If the *l* follows a vowel (e.g., *pool*) or precedes a consonant (e.g., *help*), the *Dark L* [ɫ] is pronounced, with the tongue raised against the alveolar ridge or slightly behind it and the back of the tongue raised towards the soft palate (Kelly, 2001, p. 52) [9]. In modern English, some variations may vocalize the *Dark L* sound, meaning the tongue tip does not touch the top of the mouth but to pronounce as a back vowel [ʊ] (Gramley & Pätzold, 2003, p. 74) [10]. Italian novice learners may transport the vocalized *Dark L* sound from English to Italian, such as mispronouncing the definite article *il* [il] (the) as [iʊ], the adjective *bel* [bel] (beautiful) as [beʊ], and the contracted preposition *del* [del] (of the) as [deʊ], possibly due to spelling similarities with English words *ill*, *bell*, and *dell*, resulting in negative transfer from English pronunciation. If the word contains a syllable ending with the consonant *l* (e.g., *molto*, *volta*), some students may bring in the English *Dark L* [ɫ] sound.

4. Teaching Suggestions

4.1. Focus on Articulatory Positions

In pronunciation teaching, teachers can introduce more effective pronunciation instruction on articulatory positions, emphasizing the importance of oral aperture, lip shape, tongue placement, and vocal cord vibration. For instance, the difference between open and closed vowels (é [ɛ] and é [e]/ò [ɔ] and ó [o]) mainly lies in the size of the oral aperture and the front or back tongue placement. The vibration position of the trill *r* occurs at the tip of the tongue rather than across the entire tongue surface. The differentiation between voiced and voiceless consonants hinges on the presence or absence of vocal cords vibration.

4.2. Consult Dictionary Pronunciation Annotations

Unlike dictionaries of English, a vast array of Italian dictionaries does not provide

IPA as pronunciation annotations, but offers annotations for open and closed vowels, irregular stressed syllables, and voiced and voiceless consonants (especially consonant *s* and *z*). The grave accent [`], which leans to the left, is the annotation for open vowels, while the acute accent [´] leaning to the right is used to denote open vowels. Accent marks are also used to indicate irregular syllables. If consonants *s* and *z* are pronounced as voiced phoneme, the letters will be underlined with dot.

Dictionaries with pronunciation annotations include the *Dizionario Italiano-Cinese* (Italian-Chinese Dictionary) published by *The Commercial Press* and the *Modernissimo Dizionario Italiano-Cinese Cinese-Italiano* (Modern Italian-Chinese and Chinese-Italian Dictionary) published by *Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press*. Renowned Italian dictionaries such as *Lo Zingarelli* and *Zanichelli* also provide such pronunciation annotations. The online dictionary *DiPI Online* provides a comprehensive pronunciation guide, encompassing modern, traditional, acceptable pronunciation, and pronunciation to be avoided.

4.3. Introduce Multi-Tiered Feedback

While teachers' direct comments on students' Italian pronunciation in the classroom serve as an immediate and direct form of feedback, they are often constrained by time and space. Consequently, teachers are advised to encourage students to practice reading aloud and to self-record for subsequent self-assessment of their pronunciation. Teachers can also integrate peer review mechanisms, where students provide feedback on each other's pronunciation exercises. Multi-tiered feedback system can enhance students' auditory and phonetic analytical skills, thereby facilitating a more proficient command of Italian pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the prevalent phonetic mistakes among novice Italian learners in tertiary education in China, revealing that their mispronunciation of vowels and consonants is influenced by both their L2 English, and their L1 Chinese. The paper suggests that pronunciation instruction should emphasize the importance of correct articulatory positioning, encourage students to consult dictionaries for phonetic notations, and implement a multi-tiered feedback system to bolster students' ability to discriminate between phonetic sounds.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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