

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM – Overview

The education system in Italy is organised according to the subsidiary principle and autonomy of schools. The State has exclusive competence on general issues on education, on minimum standards to be guaranteed throughout the country and on the fundamental principles that Regions should comply with within their competences. Regions share their competences with the State on education issues while they have exclusive competence on vocational education and training. Schools are autonomous as for didactic, organisation and research and development activities. The education system is organised as follows:

- **Pre-primary school** for children between 3 and 6 years of age;
- First cycle of education lasting 8 years, made up of:
 - primary education** (lasting 5 years), for children between 6 and 11 years of age;
 - lower secondary school** (lasting 3 years) for children between 11 and 14 years of age;
- second cycle of education offering two different pathways:
 - State **upper secondary school** (lasting 5 years) for students from 14 to 19 years of age. It is offered by **licei**, **technical institutes** and **vocational institutes**;
 - three and four-year **vocational training courses (IFP)** addressed to students who have completed the first cycle of education. It is organized by the Regions.
- **post-secondary non tertiary education** offered through: post-qualification and post-diploma vocational courses organized by the Regions; Higher technical education and training courses (IFTS).
- **higher education offered by universities and the High level arts and music education system (Afam)**. Higher education is organised in first, second and third levels according to the Bologna structure.

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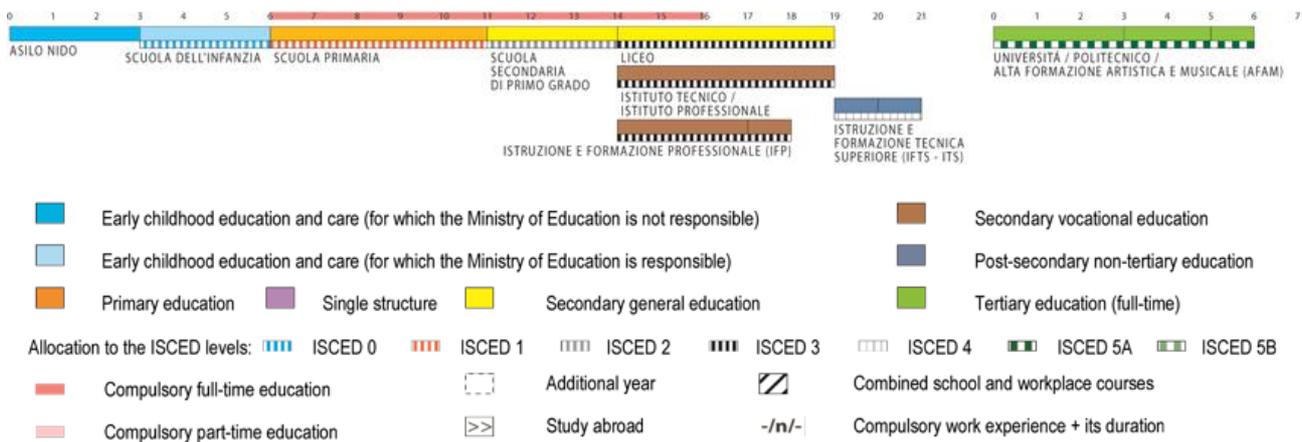


Table 1: The Italian education system (Source: Eurydice, 2013)¹

Education is compulsory for 10 years, from 6 to 16 years of age, and covers the eight-year first cycle of education (5 years of primary school and 3 years of lower secondary school) and the first two years of the second cycle (DM 139/2007). After completion of the first cycle of education, the last two years of compulsory education (from 14 to 16 years of age) can be accomplished either in State upper secondary schools (licei,

¹ Eurydice, Italian Education System – Overview, 2013.

technical institutes and vocational institutes), or through the three-year vocational education and training courses, falling under the competence of the Regions (law 133/2008). In addition, all have the right/duty (*diritto/dovere*) to education and training for at least 12 years in the education system or, anyhow, until they have obtained a three-year vocational qualification within 18 years of age (law 53/2003). Finally, 15-year olds can attend the last year of compulsory education also through the apprenticeship, previous specific agreement signed by the Regions, the Ministry of labour, the Ministry of education and trade unions (law 183/2010). Compulsory education refers to both enrolment and attendance. It can be accomplished either in a State and a *paritaria* school and also, at certain conditions, through parental education and merely private schools; regional three-year vocational training courses are offered by the relevant training agencies. Parents or caregivers are responsible for the accomplishment of compulsory education, while supervision on the fulfilment of compulsory education falls under the responsibilities of local authorities where pupils reside and school heads of the schools pupils are enrolled in. Once compulsory schooling has been accomplished, pupils who do not prosecute their studies receive a certification attesting compulsory education fulfilment and competencies acquired; these latter constitute formative credits for the attainment of any professional qualification. Access to both university and Afam tertiary education is reserved for students who passed the State exam at the end of upper secondary school. Yet, specific conditions for the admission are under the responsibility of the Ministry of education, University and Research (MIUR) or of each single university and Afam sector. The three-year vocational qualification, as well as the four-year vocational diploma, both obtained at completion of regional vocational training courses, allow access to regional second level vocational training, which can be access also with an upper secondary education leaving certificate. This latter certificate also grants admission to Higher technical education and training courses (IFTS).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION – Background information

All students in Italy start learning English as a compulsory subject from the age of 6. From the age of 11 to 14, they all learn two languages as a compulsory subject. From 14 to 19, there is only one compulsory foreign language for all students; however, they may choose educational pathways/types of school where they have to study up to three foreign languages until they are age 19 (for example, in the Liceo specializing in languages). Central education authorities do not determine the entire content of the minimum education provision that schools must offer. All schools, for pupils aged between 6 and 19, therefore have some flexibility in designing the school element of the curriculum. In practice, although school autonomy exists at both primary and secondary levels, schools most widely use this freedom at upper secondary level (students aged 14 to 19). As a consequence, some of these schools may decide to put more emphasis on foreign languages.²

In Italy therefore compulsory learning of the first foreign language begins at an increasingly early age. In 2010, the country undertook a reform in order to make this study compulsory for all students until the end of secondary level.³ In Italy it is expected that foreign languages in primary education are taught by generalist teachers, but in practice, they are also taught by subject specialists or de facto specialist/semi-specialist teachers (i.e. generalist teachers with good foreign language skills who teach foreign languages in several classes). This often arises because not all generalist teachers have acquired competences and/or a qualification in this area.⁴ In primary education only one teacher per class delivers all lessons, while for the English subject a second teacher shadows the teaching activity of the main teacher.⁵

In Italy more than 80 % of students enrolled in lower secondary education learn two or more foreign languages.⁶ In lower secondary education (ISCED level 2) the percentage of students learning two languages showed a particular increase between 2004/05 and 2009/10.⁷ In general upper secondary education (ISCED level 3

² Eurydice, Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012, p.148.

³ Ibid., p.27.

⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵ MIUR, Il sistema educativo italiano, p.25.

⁶ Eurydice, Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012, p.62.

⁷ Ibid., p.66.

general), no significant trends can be observed in many European countries but Italy, together with other few countries reports significant increases in the percentage of students learning two languages.⁸

Across 10 years of foreign language teaching, the official curriculum in Italy demands a total of 891 hours for the first language (English being the most widespread).⁹ In Italy the first foreign language generally commands the largest share of the timetable available for language teaching, as it starts being taught when pupils are six years old, while the second language is introduced at the age of 11. In Italy the teaching of the second language in full-time compulsory general education lasts only three years.¹⁰

English Learning in Primary Education: Although at primary level there are not specific subject timetables, English is one of the two subjects (together with Catholic religion) to have a specific weekly timetable: one hour teaching for English in the first grade, two hours in the second grade, three hours in the third, fourth and fifth grades, for a total minimum compulsory amount of 396 hours¹¹ throughout all primary education.¹² In the national guidelines for the primary school curriculum, the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR)¹³ sets out the learning goals for the development of competences for the English language. According to these learning goals, upon successful completion of primary education pupils are able to: understand short oral and written messages relating to family settings; describe orally and in written form basic elements relating to their lives, living environments and immediate needs; interact by using games and make themselves understood by using learnt expressions and sentences; carry out their homework, follow the instructions provided in English by the teacher, ask for explanations; exchange basic and routinary information; identify some cultural elements and the relationship between the linguistic structures and the uses of the English language.¹⁴ These learning goals correspond to level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). At the end of the first cycle of education, pupils are able to communicate in English at a basic level when speaking to people of other nationalities and are able to combine the use of the English language with the use of ICT tools.¹⁵

English Learning in General Lower Secondary Education: English and a second foreign language are among the subjects foreseen by the new Guidelines for the 3 years of lower secondary school and taught throughout the three-year lower secondary school. The following table shows the weekly teaching timetable for the English subject according to the two different school-time models. These tables apply to each year of lower secondary school (DPR 89/2009):

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Timetable and Subject	Weekly amount of hours	Annual amount of hours
English Subject, <u>Mainstream compulsory timetable (30 hours per week)</u>	3	99
English Subject <u>Extended timetable (from 36 to 40 hours per week)</u>	3	99

Table 2: English subject, weekly and annual amount of hours (Source: Eurydice 2013)¹⁶

Upon parents' request, and upon availability of school staff, the time devoted to the English language can be increased up to 5 hours per week, by using the two weekly hours foreseen for the teaching of the second foreign language. These latter can also be used for the teaching Italian language to foreign students. The first-cycle leaving State exam taking place at the end of the third year of lower secondary school consists of a national

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p.117

¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹¹ Unless otherwise specified, in this report one hour corresponds to 60 minutes.

¹² Eurydice, Teaching and Learning in Primary Education.

¹³ Italian acronym for "Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca".

¹⁴ MIUR, Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione, p. 38.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 10. For further information, cf. pp. 37-39 (only available in Italian).

¹⁶ Eurydice, Teaching and Learning in General Lower Secondary Education.

written test developed by the Invalsi (National institute for the evaluation of the education system) which includes four written tests, including the two EU languages studied. In the national guidelines for the lower secondary school curriculum, the MIUR sets out the learning goals for the development of competences for the English language. According to these learning goals, upon successful completion of lower secondary education learners are able to: understand (in oral and written form) the main elements of standard English texts covering familiar or study topics they usually deal with at school or during their spare time; describe orally a set of situations, events, personal experiences and study topics; interact with one or more speakers on known topics and in familiar contexts; read basic texts by adopting different strategies; read informative texts and listen to the explanations that relate to other subjects matters; write basic texts and draw up short letters or messages directed to peer learners and relatives; identify cultural elements conveyed by their first language or their language of schooling and compare them with those conveyed by the English language, face new situations by drawing on their linguistic repertoire, without displaying attitudes of denial; learn topics relating to different subjects and cooperate with their peers in carrying out activities and projects; self-assess the competences gained and be aware of their learning methodology.¹⁷ These learning goals correspond to level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)¹⁸.

English Learning in General Upper Secondary Education. Upper secondary education in Italy covers five years (organised into two two-year periods and a last fifth year) and is divided into three school types: *licei*, technical institutes and professional/vocational institutes, following Presidential Decrees n.87, 88, 89/2010. Upper secondary education in Italy is organized as follows:

Licei	Professional Schools	Technical Institutes
1. Liceo artistico (spec. in arts) 2. Liceo classico (spec. in classical studies) 3. Liceo linguistico (spec. in languages)	SERVICE INDUSTRY 1. Services for agriculture and rural development 2. Social and health services 3. Food and wine/ hospitality services 4. Business services INDUSTRY AND CRAFTS 1. Crafts and industrial products 2. Maintenance and technical assistance	ECONOMICS 1. Administrative services, Financial services, Marketing 2. Tourism SERVICE INDUSTRY 1. Mechanics, Mechatronics and Energy 2. Transports and Logistics 3. Electronics and Electrotechnics 4. IT and Telecommunications 5. Graphics and Communications 6. Chemistry, Materials and Biotechnologies 7. Fashion industry 8. Agricultural sciences, Food and Agricultural Industry, Agro-industry 9. Building industry, Environment and Territory

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The first two years of the upper secondary level of education, either general, technical or vocational, are compulsory. In the fifth year students are expected to have fully achieved the specific learning objectives foreseen by the curriculum for each branch of study and to have completed their educational, cultural and professional profile (Pecup). The MIUR has defined knowledge and competences that all students are expected to have acquired at completion of compulsory education. Such knowledge and competences integrate the curricula, specific for each type of school, currently applied at upper secondary level and are divided into 4 cultural areas, one of which being the "area of languages". The recent reform of the whole second cycle of education (2010) foresees, in the general paths, a strengthening of the general basic competences and skills specific of each branch of studies. The curricula for the *licei* have been revised. New curricula are now defined in the National Guidelines (Indicazioni nazionali). The Reform has also given strong prominence to language teaching/learning in the Italian upper secondary schools.¹⁹ Since 2010 in Italy, all students in the last year of

¹⁷ MIUR, Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione, p. 39.

¹⁸ For further information, cf. pp. 39-40 (only available in Italian).

¹⁹ Eurydice, Improving the Quality and Efficiency of Education.

upper secondary education are required to learn one non-language subject through a foreign language. Those on the 'language' pathway must do so from the age of 16. At the age of 17, students are taught a second non-language subject by means of a second foreign language from the three they are already learning.²⁰

As far as the second language is concerned, the National Guidelines for general upper secondary schools (Indicazioni nazionali per i Licei) suggest developing linguistic and communicative competences alongside the acquisition of cultural notions referred to the country where the language is native.²¹ Moreover, the Reform states that students should reach a B2 CEFR level of competence at the end of their upper secondary school courses. The Ministry of Education has promoted some projects with the aim of helping teachers and students achieve this target, also in the frame of the "eight key competences". Among these projects, "E-English", ended in December 2012, has had the aim of fostering language learning through digital devices, also including recurrent synchronous meetings with international experts. The reform of 2010 has introduced CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in the upper secondary schools. In upper secondary schools specialising in languages (Licei Linguistici), CLIL is used as a teaching method starting from the third grade, whereas other Licei and technical institutes will use the CLIL method in the fifth year. It refers to teaching subjects such as science, history and geography to students through a foreign language. This can be by the English teacher using cross-curricular content or the subject teacher using English as the language of instruction. Both methods result in the simultaneous learning of content and English. In order to help teachers and students better understand the CLIL methodology, strategies and effectiveness, the Ministry has implemented, for school year 2012/2013, a project named "E-CLIL", with the aim to lead upper secondary school towards CLIL and to simultaneously promote the digital competence. In January 2013, the project 'Read on! for e-CLIL' has been launched with the aim of promoting extensive reading in English connected with CLIL. The project involves upper secondary level schools. In general terms, the English subject is compulsory for all the 5 years of all types of Italian upper secondary schools (licei, technical institutes and professional schools).

The table below indicates the minimum compulsory annual timetable for foreign languages and cultures in the licei secondary schools:

	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade	5th grade
Minimum compulsory annual timetable for Foreign Languages and Cultures (compulsory for all students)					
Liceo specializing in arts subjects (Liceo artistico)					
Liceo specialising in music and dance (Liceo musicale e coreutico)					
	99	99	99	99	99
Liceo specialising in sciences, mainstream path (1) (Liceo scientifico)					
Liceo specialising in classical subjects (Liceo classico)					
Liceo specialising in languages (Liceo linguistico)					
(Each foreign language taught includes 33 hours per year with a mother-tongue teacher)					
1st foreign language and culture	132	132	99	99	99
2nd foreign language and culture	99	99	132	132	132
3rd foreign language and culture	99	99	132	132	132
Liceo specialising in human sciences, mainstream path(1)					

²⁰ Eurydice, Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012, p.40.

²¹ Indire, Indicazioni Nazionali per i Licei.

(Liceo delle scienze umane)					
1st foreign language and culture	132	132	99	99	99
2nd foreign language and culture	99	99	132	132	132

Table 3: Minimum compulsory annual timetable for Foreign Languages and Cultures. (Source: Eurydice)²²

In the liceo²³ specialising in languages, CLIL is compulsory in one language starting from the third year and in a second language starting from the fourth year. In all the other types of liceo, CLIL is compulsory in the fifth year.

As far as the technical and professional secondary schools are concerned, the learning outcomes established for the English subject (99 hours per year) provide for the following:

“Upon successful completion of the 5 years course of study, the graduate gains the following competences: Mastery of the English language and (if provided for by the school curriculum) of another European language for communication purposes. Command of the technical lexicon according to each specific course of study in order to interact in several job fields. These learning goals correspond to level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).”²⁴²⁵

The school curricula of some school courses (social and health services; food and wine/hospitality services, business services) also provide for a second foreign language teaching and learning.

The final state exam for upper secondary schools includes three written tests and an oral test. The third test allows to assess the knowledge of a foreign language.²⁶

English Learning in Higher Education. Each University regulates its study courses through its teaching regulations, which establish the name and the formative objectives of single courses, the general framework of the formative activities of the curricula, the credits for each formative activity as well as the procedures to obtain the final qualification. As for university, at a national level, the Ministry has established the “laurea” (degree) classes and, for each class, the qualifying educational objectives and the subsequent learning activities necessary to reach these objectives. In first cycle and second cycle programmes (BA and MA), each class or course of study should provide for learning activities aimed at the final examination to obtain the final qualification and at the evaluation of the knowledge of a foreign language. The knowledge of a language of the European Union is required to obtain the *laurea*.²⁷ The official teaching language is Italian. However, many institutions offer both formative activities (seminars, conferences) and study courses or single subject courses in a foreign language (mainly English).²⁸ The entry exam to access medical schools is held in English (unlike in Italian, as it happens for all other degree courses) in the cases where the entire course of study is delivered in English.²⁹

According to the national survey carried out in the academic year 2011/2012 by CRUI³⁰ (the Italian association of public and private universities in Italy), the number of university courses delivered in English totalled 671. This means that more than 70% of Italian universities delivered a course in English in the academic year 2011/2012, as shown below:

²² Eurydice, Teaching and Learning in General Upper Secondary Education.

²³ General term indicating institutes of general upper secondary education, preparing students to the university studies. The “licei” specialize students in: art subjects, classical studies, scientific studies, music and dance, foreign languages, human sciences.

²⁴ Miur, National Guidelines available at http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/riforma_superiori/nuovesuperiori/index.html#regolamenti

²⁵ Mondadori Education, Guida alla riforma degli istituti tecnici e professionali, p.6.

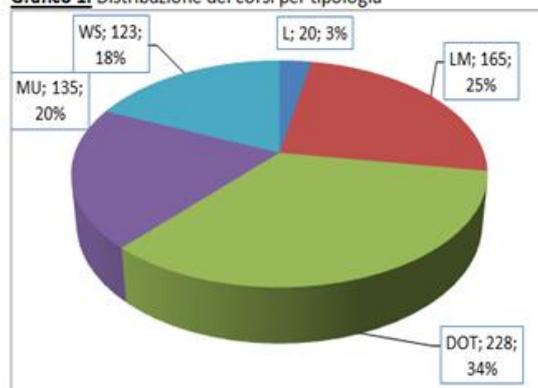
²⁶ Miur, Il sistema educativo italiano, p.51. Legislative References: DPR 22 June 2009, no. 122; Law 11 January 2007, no.1.

²⁷ Miur, Il sistema educativo italiano, p.74.

²⁸ Eurydice, Bachelor; Eurydice, Second Cycle Programmes.

²⁹ MIUR, Il sistema educativo italiano, p.80.

³⁰ Acronym for “Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane”.

Gráfico 1. Distribuzione dei corsi per tipologia

Table 4: Italian university courses delivered in English and grouped by category (L=BA; LM=MA; DOT=PhD; MU=Master's Program; WS=Winter/Summer School)³¹

Conclusions

Italy is among the 14 European countries that set the compulsory learning of the English subject at school. Moreover, English is with very few exceptions the most studied foreign language, as it is compulsory from primary school. The other foreign languages taught in Italy are French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian, while other extra-European languages have not made their way yet into the Italian education system:

ISCED ³² Level	English	French	German	Spanish	Russian
ISCED 2	100%	72,3%	8,7%	18,8%	0,0%
ISCED 3	97,7%	19,5%	6,9%	6,8%	0,1%
ISCED 3 (vocational and pre vocational)	94,7%	32,0%	7,5%	5,1%	0,0%
average ISCED 3	97,8%	26,7%	5,8%	7,3%	0,0%

Table 5: Foreign languages taught in Italy across different ISCED levels (Source: OECD)³³

As the majority of other European countries, Italy has set the following CEFR standards in reference to the minimum learning levels expected for foreign languages at schools:

- Level B1 for the first foreign language at the end of ISCED 2;
- Level A2 for the second foreign language at the end of ISCED 2;
- Level B2 for the first foreign language at the end of ISCED 3;
- Level B1 for the second foreign language at the end of ISCED 3.³⁴

As for qualitative data, Italy did not take part in the **First European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC)**, a survey of foreign language proficiency carried out by the European Commission, published in 2012³⁵. We might therefore need to wait further surveys that shed light on the effective results of the learning language policies on the study of foreign languages implemented by the Italian education system.

Available data are provided by the OECD as for language competences of adults, as part of its Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), where OECD collects and analyses language competences among others. The first results from the survey were released on 8th October 2013 and highlighted the following:

³¹ Crui, **Internazionalizzazione degli atenei: l'offerta didattica in lingua inglese A.A. 2011/12. The complete list of Italian Universities delivering their courses in English can be found here: <http://www.crui.it/HomePage.aspx?ref=2094#>.**

³² ISCED: International standard classification of education. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx>

³³ Table drafted from OECD, PISA 2012 Results: Excellence Through Equity: Giving Every Student the Chance to Succeed, Volume II, Preliminary Version. Chapter III, The challenge of diversity, Excel table II.3.5. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>

³⁴ CIDI - Centro di Iniziativa Democratica degli Insegnanti, Online Journal "Insegnare". <http://www.insegnareonline.com/istanze/interlinguismo/insegnamento-ls-scuola-italia>

³⁵ First European Survey on Language Competences: Final report / European commission. – Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/language-survey-final-report_en.pdf

- the language competencies of Italians are among the lowest of the OECD countries;
- the use of language competences in the workplace is more limited in Italy than in other OECD countries;
- the language competences have a positive impact on achieving success in the workplace and in social life; nevertheless, in Italy the effects of such competences on incomes are more limited than in other countries due to the country's relatively rigid salary system;
- the survey highlighted that Italy ranks last in the ranking surveying average adult language competences. On a scale ranging from -1 to +5, only 3.3% of Italians reach levels between +4 and +5 (the highest) compared to the average of 11.8% of the 24 participating countries; moreover, only 26.4% reach level 3 of language competences.
- the most worrying data refers to the average competences level of graduates from when seen from an international perspective: on average, the survey reveals that the average language competences of Italians holding a university degree equal to or are even lower than those competences of adults holding an upper secondary school diploma and living in those countries with the highest competences levels.³⁶

The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) can also help to provide an insight as for language competences of Italians.³⁷ The third 2013 edition of the report reveals the following:

- Italy ranks 32nd out of 60 countries surveyed; Italy's level of English has improved slightly over the past six years, but not significantly enough for it to move out of the Low Proficiency band or progress in relation to other European countries. Italy's English skills remain among the weakest in Europe;
- Although the low level of English is recognized as a concern by many in Italy, none of the reforms in the past decade have succeeded in addressing the issue. An unstable government, aging population, and challenging economic times make change all the more difficult. Many are calling for Italy to accelerate its transition to a more knowledge-based economy in order to get out of its current stagnation. Developing proficient English will be a key element for that transition to succeed.
- A disconnected university system: Italian universities have been widely criticized as disconnected from the workplace and overly bureaucratic. A lack of professional English skills are cited as symptoms of this disconnect.
- The teaching of another subject in English will be a mandatory part of the final year of high school in all tracks starting in 2014, though the lack of English skills among teachers has proven a hurdle for implementation. This year, 2,000 Italian high school teachers are attending university courses to improve their English and learn new teaching methodologies.³⁸

³⁶ OECD, *Inchiesta sulle competenze degli adulti, Primi Risultati, Italia*.

³⁷ It is a report which attempts to rank countries by the average level of English skills amongst adults. It is the product of EF Education First, a global language training company, and draws its conclusions from data collected via English tests available for free over the internet. The report was published for the first time in March, 2011 based on the results of over 2 million test takers.

³⁸ EF English Proficiency Index 2013 Report, pp. 26-27.

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