



Oral Production Challenges for Greek Learners of Italian as a Foreign Language: Anxiety, Vocabulary, and Cross-Linguistic Interference

Konstantinos Mylonas ¹

¹Teacher of Italian Language, Language Center National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, B.A. in Italian Language and Literature, B.A. in Biological Sciences, M.A. in Teaching and Promoting the Italian language and culture to foreigners, Greece

✉ **Corresponding author:**
mylonas.kmn@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the challenges faced by Greek-speaking learners of Italian as a foreign language (L2) in developing oral communicative competence. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives on language anxiety, vocabulary acquisition, and cross-linguistic interference, the study reports findings from a survey conducted with 19 adult beginners (A1-A2 CEFR level). Data were collected using a 20-item questionnaire that explored students' perceptions of oral difficulties, emotional barriers, and preferred learning activities. Results indicate that grammar (47.4%) and fluency (31.6%) are perceived as the most problematic areas, while vocabulary (15.8%) and pronunciation (5.2%) are less frequently mentioned. Performance anxiety emerged as a universal obstacle, often leading to hesitation, avoidance, and reduced confidence. Pedagogical implications include promoting supportive environments, implementing low-stakes oral activities (role-play, collaborative tasks, linguistic games), and promoting lexical expansion through authentic input and paraphrasing strategies. The study contributes to the field of glottodidactics by emphasising the interplay between affective and linguistic factors in L2 oral development and by offering practical recommendations for Italian L2 classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Italian as a foreign language; oral production; Greek learners; language anxiety; cross-linguistic interference

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Introduction

Oral communication represents a fundamental component of second language acquisition, integrating receptive and productive skills and fostering interaction in real contexts (Balboni, 2015). Despite its centrality, oral production is often among the most challenging skills to acquire, particularly for adult learners with limited exposure to authentic communicative situations. Research has highlighted the role of performance anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), limited lexical resources (Kormos, 2006), and cross-linguistic interference (Gass & Selinker, 2008) as key obstacles to fluency.

The Italian language, with its complex morphosyntactic system and distinctive phonological features (e.g., double consonants, tense-aspect contrasts), poses specific challenges for learners from different linguistic backgrounds. For Greek-speaking students, structural differences between Greek and Italian, combined with affective barriers, may significantly hinder oral development. This paper explores these issues through a small-scale empirical study, aiming to inform pedagogical practices in Italian L2 classrooms.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to identify the major factors that hinder oral production in Italian L2 among Greek learners and to propose targeted pedagogical strategies. Three guiding questions were formulated:

1. Which linguistic and affective factors do Greek-speaking learners perceive as the most challenging in oral production?
2. How does performance anxiety shape their participation in communicative tasks?
3. What pedagogical strategies can support the reduction of these barriers and the enhancement of oral fluency?

Participants: The study involved 19 adult learners (10 female, 9 male) aged 23-55, attending Italian language courses at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. All were beginners (A1-A2 CEFR level). The majority were native speakers of Greek with prior experience in other foreign languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, etc.).

Instrument: A 20-item questionnaire, combining closed- and open-ended questions, was designed to explore students' self-perceived oral difficulties, emotional responses (e.g., anxiety), and preferred classroom practices. The survey included items addressing grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and affective factors such as fear of errors or negative evaluation.

Research Results

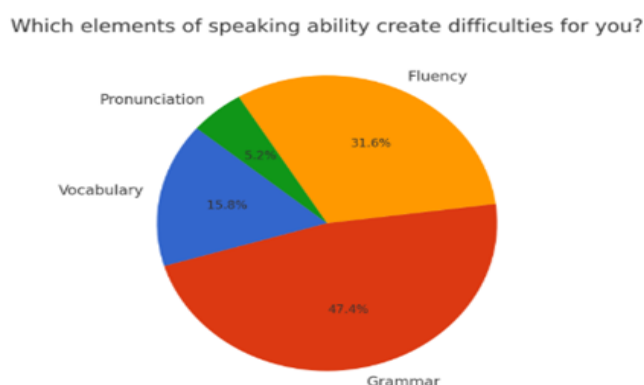
Based on a synthesis of theoretical insights and practical teaching experience, a case study was constructed to examine how performance anxiety, lexical limitations, and cross-linguistic interference affect oral fluency and to identify pedagogical strategies that alleviate these obstacles. The analysis revealed the following [Figure 1]:

- Grammar was identified as the main barrier (47.4%), with learners struggling with verb conjugations, prepositions, and sentence structure.

- Fluency was reported as the second-most frequent difficulty (31.6%), often linked to hesitation and pauses.
- Vocabulary limitations were highlighted by 15.8% of participants, whereas pronunciation was rarely considered a primary obstacle (5.2%).
- Anxiety was mentioned unanimously (100%), with learners describing fear of errors, avoidance of oral participation, and discomfort in public speaking contexts.

Figure 1

Which elements of speaking ability create difficulties for you?



Regarding preferred learning activities:

- Discussions on familiar topics (38.9%) and simulations of everyday situations (33.3%) were considered the most effective strategies.
- Role-play (11.1%) and monologues (11.1%) were also valued, though perceived as more challenging.

Findings confirm that performance anxiety is the most pervasive obstacle to oral communication in Italian L2, aligning with previous research (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Anxiety undermines lexical retrieval, reduces fluency, and leads to avoidance strategies.

Although grammar accuracy was reported as the main challenge, it is often intertwined with affective variables. Learners' fear of making grammatical mistakes exacerbates hesitation and interrupts communicative flow. While less frequently mentioned, limited vocabulary indirectly contributes to disfluency and grammatical inaccuracies (Kormos, 2006).

Cross-linguistic interference also emerged as a relevant factor, particularly in the misuse of gender (e.g., *il scuola* instead of *la scuola*), tense-aspect confusion (past perfect vs. imperfect), and phonological errors (e.g., failure to distinguish /ts/ and /dz/, or omission of double consonants). Such patterns resonate with Gass et al. (2008) on transfer phenomena [Table 1].

Table 1

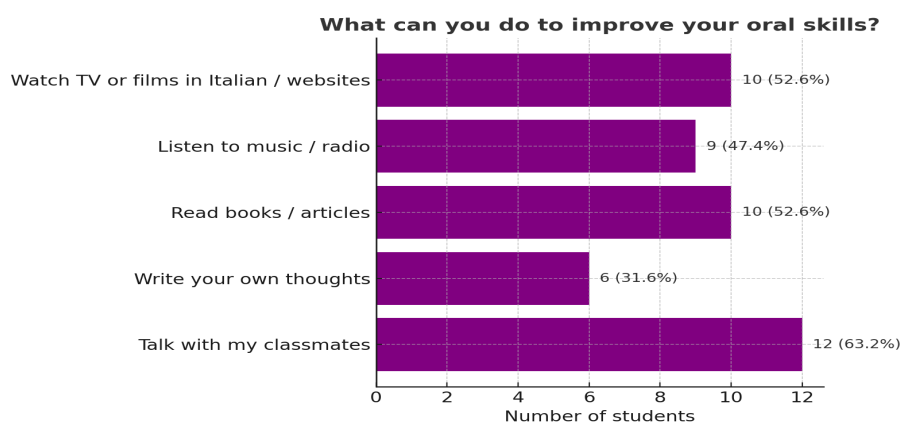
Dynamics of introducing ICT elements into the sociocultural space of the digital society

Factors causing speaking difficulties for ILS students	19 responses
Inhibition and anxiety. Students worry about making mistakes, fear criticism, or simply feel intimidated.	19 (100%)
Nothing to say. Students feel they have no reason or motivation to express themselves.	3 (15,8%)
Limited or uneven participation. Only one student can speak at a time due to large class sizes and the tendency of some students to dominate, while others speak little or not at all.	5 (26,3%)
Use of the mother tongue. Students who share the same native language tend to use it because it feels easier and less exposing than speaking in the target language.	10 (52,6%)

Pedagogically, the results suggest the need for low-stakes, interactive activities that reduce anxiety and promote risk-taking. Role-play, small-group tasks, and linguistic games create supportive contexts where errors are reframed as learning opportunities. Positive feedback and scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) further contribute to lowering affective filters (Krashen, 1982) and fostering communicative confidence [Figure 2].

Figure 2

What can you do to improve your oral skills?



Conclusions and Future Directions

This study highlights the effectiveness of targeted oral language activities in improving communicative competence among learners of Italian as a foreign language. Role-play, linguistic games, and simulations significantly enhanced fluency, spontaneous speech, and grammatical control, while also reducing performance anxiety (Tyrou, 2024). Techniques such as rapid-speech drills and playful interaction fostered a supportive learning environment, thereby encouraging

student confidence.

Vocabulary-in-action strategies, like word challenges and conceptual mapping, proved valuable for thematic lexical expansion and consolidation (Tyrou & Mylonas, 2023b). Learners showed increased readiness to use new vocabulary in authentic contexts, reflecting greater autonomy and expressive ability.

To further optimise oral instruction, integrating educational technologies and multimodal texts may provide extended practice and immediate feedback (Fedorenko et al., 2021). Diversifying activities with complex dialogues and rapid-response listening tasks can enhance adaptability in real-life communication.

Differentiated strategies and reflective feedback mechanisms are essential to ensure inclusive participation and promote learner self-awareness (Tyrou & Mylonas, 2023a). Future research could explore how peer collaboration and group dynamics influence oral development, enriching language learning through more engaging and interactive experiences.

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