

## Speaking Easy

When I tell a story in words, it is, by necessity, in English. It is the only language I have. Writing stories in the English language is easy for me; it has inherent meaning; it is reliable. Even without trying, I can discern the meaning of English words, whether spoken or written, and I can readily speak my own words into creation. I find comfort in my ability to express myself in English words and to be understood by other English speakers, and I am grateful for the fluency and ease with which I can use the English language.

This intense appreciation for language itself is a recent development in my life. Until being displaced from the English-speaking world of the U.S., I was not quite aware of what it means to be fluent in a language. While I long had an appreciation for the written word, and I reaped the academic benefits of my writing skills, I took English itself for granted. It seemed impossible that one would *not* understand this language that I had come to know so familiarly. While I had half-heartedly studied languages for the academic and personal accomplishments of bilingualism, English was sufficient for me in all aspects of my life. I needed no other tongue to conduct my daily activities and express a complete range of what I needed to say, and so other languages seemed more recreational than anything. At best, other languages seemed like abstract concepts, some of which I might understand in time, should I decide to dedicate myself to their study. At worst, I dismissed them as irrelevant out of the misguided notion of English superiority.

I only truly came to value my English when I studied abroad in Italy. Living for over three months in a country where I didn't speak the language was enlightening in many ways, but it was also a challenge that I did not quite rise to the occasion and conquer.

During my first few weeks abroad, I was desperate to prove that I deserved to be in Italy at all—I feared that I would be dismissed as just another tourist, unwantedly inserting myself into the pace of Florence, and that I would be better off leaving my English-only self at home. There were guidelines and standards I had to meet, in my mind, to deserve the privilege of studying here—guidelines that I certainly did not meet. By my own set of rules, the Italians I encountered would be completely justified in dismissing me and my below-the-bar skillset.

I felt rude for forcing any Italian conversation partners I met to use a language with which they were not entirely comfortable, but all of their English skills reliably trumped my few Italian words. As expected, skill levels varied—some Italian people I met spoke English comfortably and seemed eager to practice with a native speaker. Others seemed to resent switching out of their native language, but they still reliably made themselves understandable to me, which was more than generous of them. Each of them impressed me regardless of their skill level; if I could understand what they said, I considered that an impressive level of fluency. I gathered phrases in my brain, scraps of paper, the notes app on my phone—*vorrei, una studenta americana, non mi piace, due porzioni*—collecting as much language as I could. It was not enough. My few scraps of Italian and abysmal comprehension skills felt more than insufficient; they felt like an insult to the people of the country that had been kind enough to host me.

The first time I spoke more than one word in Italian, out loud, to a native Italian speaker, was on my third day in Italy. After managing to get spectacularly lost, I entered a gelato shop in the small town of Orvieto, asked the woman there for a small cup of chocolate gelato, and promptly became worried that I had misspoken. After a second's hesitation and apparent confusion, though, likely born of my garbled pronunciation, she understood and began to scoop from the chocolate pan. It was so easy—a matter of a few words—and yet so difficult. I had to constantly repeat those words in my head before speaking so that the pronunciations did not slip away: *una coppa piccola, una coppa piccola, una coppa piccola*. The sounds and shapes my mouth formed had no inherent meaning to me; I just put my face through the motions of what were apparently words and hoped that I was doing it correctly.

From there, my Italian skills grew slowly each day, but I knew I couldn't learn much in less than four months. Speaking a second language continued to be both more and less difficult than it seemed. It was easy to memorize a few useful phrases, walk into a shop, and test them out, and I became comfortable with greetings and gelateria transactions. *Buongiorno, come stai? Buona serrata, a domani. Vorrei un cono piccolo. Posso provare il cioccolato?* It was infinitely more difficult, though, to go off script and speak extemporaneously, to use words without careful planning. For every linguistic accomplishment, there was a healthy measure of disappointment that I had not advanced further.

The accomplishments, though, were some of my favorite moments in Italy. There was the visit to the cheese vendor at my usual market, a man who spoke very little English, when I successfully had an (admittedly short) conversation with him in Italian. He asked me why I was in Florence (*Io studio qui adesso*) and how I liked the city (*É molto bene!*) before giving me a free box of rice. There was the day trip with my program in which I was the only student to order our complimentary gelato in Italian, gaining praise from my program leaders. But it still never felt like enough. I could use my adopted language only in specific places, only in specific situations. Every time I compared my limping Italian to my agile English, advancing my Italian to any level of fluency felt further and further from possible.

Coming from a language that I can manipulate easily, it was frustrating to limit my speech in Italian. Needing to switch to English when concepts became too complex, or lacking the words to speak exactly what I meant and having to settle for a half-truth, or throwing some Italian words into being and hoping they translated the way I thought they did—these were everyday scenarios for me. I was no longer trustworthy when I spoke because I had an incomplete understanding of the very words and structures I needed to use. As someone conscious of my words and how I choose to express myself, it was especially frustrating to lack even the ability to speak simple, direct, inelegant sentences. My slow progress towards a more full use of the language frustrated me, and my future prospects as an Italian speaker scared me—because I feared, once I returned to my English-speaking comfort zone, that my progress would not continue.

The good moments continued, though. In the middle of ordering a chocolate croissant, I somehow forgot the word for “croissant” despite having used it multiple times. I stumbled but

quickly recalled it, and the kind server laughed a little bit and told me that I had done a good job. One of my professors praised my Italian progress. I asked a man working at the post office *parla inglese?*, and he responded with *un po*. “But,” he said in English, “with my little English and your little Italian, we will make it work.” And we did. He even asked me the correct preposition to use as he handed me an envelope and pen. “You write *on* the envelope,” I told him, admiring his dedication to the correct use of my language for a two-minute transaction. The most special times, though, occurred in a three-room apartment-turned-speakeasy called L’Appartamento.

---

I am not particularly good at working against my natural inclinations, and I had some strong anxieties and fears conspiring against me on this particular night. But I was determined that I *would* attend a multilingual happy hour event at this L’Appartamento place I had heard about, so I invited a friend. The pull to cancel and spend the evening in bed was strong, but I pushed myself to go through with it; I knew that it would be a good experience, regardless of the anxiety I felt beforehand. At 7:00 on a Wednesday night, I met up with my friend Dorcas, and we headed to 11 Via Gibaldi.

The will to turn back home continued as we marched up the stairs to the speakeasy, fearing not only the company we would find within but also that this wasn’t real, that there was no apartment bar, that we had the wrong address. A few minutes later, though, five euros poorer and red wine in hand, I formally became acquainted with a place now firmly lodged in my heart and mind.

From that first night, it felt like I had always meant to find L’Appartamento. I found myself among others who cared deeply about life—who wanted to supersede pleasantries and know other people on more complex levels, who weren’t concerned with everyday mundanities and who instead wanted to talk about finding fulfillment in life, and artistic accomplishment, and astute cultural observations. It was an environment in which I felt myself thrive. The first night, I spoke at length with an Italian doctor, who shared many of his experiences working (and learning French) in West Africa. Though at a completely different stage in his life than me, and though he was trilingual to my sad monolingualism, I felt comfortable and excited as our conversation progressed. He was as eager to hear my story as I was to hear his, and, though I sadly have forgotten his name, he holds a special place as the first person to connect with me at the speakeasy.

I eventually ended up at a small table on a candle-lit balcony with Elena, who was to serve her first English-speaking client at her job the next morning and who wanted to make sure her skills were up to par. We took turns trading languages—her speaking English, me speaking Italian—and, while her English skills were impeccable, she never discouraged me as I stumbled and misspoke. I taught her the word “bookstore,” and she taught me the words for “class” and “other” and “place” and “want.” It was a series of awkward half-sentences and “*come si dice*”s and one-word lapses into English, but I managed to communicate. “What are you doing tomorrow?” *Io ho una classe*. “Do you live with people from your school?” “*No, loro sono di altri posti*.” “Do you have a boyfriend?” “*No, non voglio!*” As I left, she told me that I was

“very good” at speaking in Italian, and it felt like I could have outshone all the candles surrounding us with my happiness.

From then on, every Wednesday night was multilingual speakeasy night. There were times when the apartment was crowded, groups of people populating every inch of the cozy space. On one memorable night, I ran into my program director, Chiara, and her boyfriend, who introduced me to several friends. We talked about theater and food and music and studying in London, and we laughed about the muddled accents of the Italians educated in England. Chiara convinced me to speak Italian for the group, and we ended up talking about the best gelato places in the city—a topic on which I was (and am) highly qualified to speak.

Other weeks were more sparsely attended, just a few close groups offering plenty of opportunities for deeper and more intense conversation. One of those weeks brought conversations on art and building a meaningful life with Simone and Alberto, both of whom were making their way as artists in one of the major artistic heritage sites of the Western world. I learned about the limitations often placed on Italian youth, the lack of opportunity to do the very thing I was doing—going abroad, exploring the world. I don’t even remember most of the conversation we had, but I remember feeling inspired and grateful and lucky to be allowed to have this experience. At one point, a young opera singer (who had moved to Florence four days previously) started playing “Clair de Lune” on the piano at the back of the room, and the twinkling notes of one of my favorite pieces solidified the moment into a movie-perfect scene.

Though I was one of the youngest attendees and one of few Americans to frequent the speakeasy, there was no shortage of people who wanted to share their stories with me. Adél from Hungary, the only person I met who was younger than me, had attended school in London before deciding to move to Florence. Isabella came to Florence from China to learn how to make jewelry, and she was jokingly deemed “the prodigy” for the speed with which she picked up Italian phrases. Simone from southern Italy insisted that his dialect was the best form of Italian to learn, sparking a playful and spirited debate among the Italians in the group every time he brought it up. Fabio refused to speak to me in English until I tried to respond in Italian, and his eyes lit up when I haltingly but correctly responded. Eric from Cameroon had just bought a camera. He spoke Italian proficiently after several years living in Florence, and he wanted to make YouTube videos, but he feared that viewers would make fun of his English. I told him he had nothing to worry about, that the majority of English speakers are non-native speakers like him, and that, if it were up to me, I deemed his English fantastic. I don’t know if I inspired him to fulfill his YouTube aspirations, and I don’t know how to check, because I never got his surname. But I hope he did it.

Beyond all of my doubts and fears and anxieties about living in Florence and speaking Italian, these were people who made me feel alive. They got excited about life and learning and art and culture. They collectively created a space where I felt fulfilled and expansive and deliciously possible—the gathering of virtually the whole world in one apartment, represented by its various citizens, energized me with the notion that there is more possibility than I can know.

My fears of attending quashed, I got into the habit of going alone, and the warm glow of community and true connection carried me through the twenty-minute solo walk home. Though the realities of being a woman traveling alone at night flitted through my mind, I tried to push all of that away in favor of the happiness I had experienced. On the nights I couldn't find a friend to accompany me, the benefits of the stories I would share and hear at the speakeasy outweighed the risks of going alone. Perhaps it wasn't the smartest move, but it's the move that my Florence self decided to make. Whatever the risks, I'm glad she did it.

I went to the speakeasy for the one last time the week before I left Florence. I said a last goodbye to every person I had come to know in a series of shared evenings and conversations; we passed hugs and Instagram handles around the room, and I smiled through the sadness of an inevitable ending. Here was a place that reliably attracted twenty, thirty, fifty interesting and dynamic and diverse individuals every week, and I got to be a part of that—I now live in the minds of people from Hungary, and China, and Cameroon, and Germany, and Croatia, and Romania, and Canada, and all over Italy. Their stories now live within mine. They motivated and encouraged me to continue speaking a language that felt hopelessly beyond my grasp, but they unknowingly did much more: they made at least one of my nights every week a special one. For a few months, I got to live in a world that contained the whole world, it seemed, and that's a gift I never knew I needed. I hold few memories more special than the hours I spent at 11 Via Giraldi and the people I met there. On the unlikely chance I ever see any of them again, I hope I'll once more have the bravery to say *grazie di tutto*.