

The difference between the IMPERFETTO and the PASSATO PROSSIMO (Italian past tenses)

This is an **intermediate/advanced topic** so **don't** let it **scare** you if you are a beginner. Also, this lesson will assume a basic knowledge of the two tenses we are comparing today (**IMPERFETTO** and **PASSATO PROSSIMO**).

▷ Let's start by saying that...

Understanding **when to use** one over the other tense is tough and most students struggle with this. So you are not alone!

The main reason so many English speakers struggle with the **IMPERFETTO** is that **it's not clearly visible or recognizable in English** (unlike a Future tense, or a Conditional).

Hopefully this guide will be of some assistance.

Let's start with a **basic distinction** between the **PASSATO PROSSIMO** and the **IMPERFETTO** in Italian.

Imperfetto is a **description** of what you were doing 10 years ago (and we kinda expect more info to come at some point).

Passato prossimo talked about **event**. Something you **did** (and it's over now) 10 years ago.

▷ PASSATO PROSSIMO

Used for an **action** (something) that **happened in the past**. It has a **start** and an **end point**.

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▷ SOME EXAMPLES:

*Ieri **ho mangiato** una pizza*

Yesterday I ate a pizza

*10 anni fa **sono andato** in Italia*

10 years ago I went to Italy

Both actions sound totally concluded, right?

▷ IMPERFETTO

Is used for an action (or something) that **happened in the past** that **does not have a clear time/start/end** and that is presumably carried out for a longer (or undetermined) period of time.

*Quando ero piccolo **mangiavo** sempre la pizza*

When I was young, I always ate pizza

*Quando **andavo** in piscina, di solito **nuotavo** per due ore*

When I went to the pool, I used to swim for two hours

▷ IMPERFETTO

It is also used to **describe** something, **in the past** (nothing happened).

▷ SOME EXAMPLES:

*La mia prima macchina **era** rossa*

My first car was red

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*5 anni fa Marco **aveva** una ragazza svedese*

5 years ago Marco had a Swedish girlfriend

*Quando sono andato in Italia 10 anni fa, **faceva** molto caldo*

When I went to Italy 10 years ago, it was very hot

▶ In the first example, I am **simply describing** my car **in the past. Nothing happened.**

▶ In the second example, all I am saying is that 5 years ago, for the whole time, Marco had a Swedish girlfriend. Again, **it's a description in the past.** It would be a different story if I was saying that HE MET a Swedish girl, because then we'd be talking about an action that took place and ended (the "meeting" of someone happens once, in an instant).

▶ The third example is **another description**, saying that the whole time I was in Italy (10 years ago) the temperature was high. **Nothing happened.** I'm not saying that there was a huge thunderstorm on the 7th of August, right?

▶ **The IMPERFETTO is just that: imperfect**

The **IMPERFETTO does not tell a full story.**

It just **sets the scene for what actually happened** (usually **expressed with the PASSATO PROSSIMO** or PASSATO REMOTO, or other past tense).

Here are **4 Questions** you can ask yourself to determine whether you should be using the IMPERFETTO in Italian

▶ **Question 1: Did anything actually HAPPEN?**

If the answer is **NO** then **you need** to use the **IMPERFETTO.**

Some examples include things like:

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La mia macchina era rossa

My car was red

Ieri faceva caldo

Yesterday it was hot

Ero giovane

I was young

Erano le 5

It was 5 o'clock

The fact that my car was red, that yesterday it was hot, that I was young and that it was 5 o'clock are **just descriptions in the past**. Nothing actually happened.

► **Question 2: Is it a HABIT (that could be rephrased with "USED TO" or "WOULD ALWAYS" in English)?**

If the answer is **YES** then you **need** to use the **IMPERFETTO**.

Some examples include things like:

When I went to the pool I used to swim for two hours

When I was young I played basketball

When we were young we always visited grandma for Easter

I am saying that **I USED TO swim** for two hours, that **I USED TO play** basketball and that **we WOULD ALWAYS visit** grandma.

Quando andavo in piscina, nuotavo per due ore

Quando ero piccolo, giocavo a basket

Quando eravamo piccoli, andavamo sempre a trovare nonna per Pasqua

▷ Question 3: Is it a **CONTINUOUS ACTION** in the past?

If the answer is **YES** then **you need** to use the **IMPERFETTO**.

If the **event** you are trying to report is **ongoing action/verb**, then you will need the **IMPERFETTO**.

How do you know? You would use the TO BE -ING construction in English!

Yesterday I was singing

They were selling apples at the markets

I was thinking we should go to the movies

The thing that these sentences have in common is that they **don't really tell a finished story**.

"Yesterday you were singing **AND...???**". They are **incomplete**, or **imperfect** sentences!

Ieri cantavo

Al mercato vendevano mele

Pensavo che dovremmo andare al cinema

▷ Question 4

Is there any TIME REFERENCE that would suggest that the action was ONGOING?

If the answer is **YES** then you **need** to use the **IMPERFETTO**.

Some expressions make it more clear that you should be using the IMPERFETTO.

▷ **DA PICCOLO** - when I was young

▷ **DA GIOVANE** - when I was young

▷ **SPESSO** - often

▷ **SEMPRE** - always

All suggest a habit, don't they?

Now, **don't take this as a rule**, since I could also use a PASSATO PROSSIMO with the above expressions, but they do offer a guideline.

▷ **The horrible truth**

In many cases, both PASSATO PROSSIMO and IMPERFETTO are possible. It all depends on the story you are trying to tell.

▷ **AN EXAMPLE:**

Quando vivevo in Italia mangiavo sempre la pizza

When I lived in Italy, I always ate pizza

When I used to live in Italy, I would always eat pizza

The eating of the pizza is a **description** of what I did the **whole time I was in Italy**.

Quando vivevo in Italia, ho mangiato una pizza fantastica a Napoli

When I lived in Italy, I ate an amazing pizza in Naples

When I used to live in Italy, I ate an amazing pizza in Naples

Here the eating of the pizza **only happened once**: when I **visited** Naples.

▷ **ANOTHER EXAMPLE:**

*Da giovane **avevo** i capelli lunghi*

When I was young I had long hair

This is a **description in the past**. **The whole time I was young I had long hair**. I used to have long hair.

*Da giovane **ho avuto** i capelli blu per due settimane*

When I was young I had blue hair for two weeks

Here I am saying that **during the time I was young**, I dyed my hair blue and kept it **for two weeks**. That's an **event**. **Something happened**.

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▷ EXERCISE

Translate the first group of sentences into Italian and the second group into English.

1. Yesterday I bought a new car.

2. Yesterday, while I was buying a new car, I saw Federica.

3. Ten years ago I lived in France.

4. Ten years ago I lived in France for 3 months.

5. La settimana scorsa faceva caldissimo.

6. La settimana scorsa ha fatto caldo per 3 giorni consecutivi.

7. L'anno scorso ho studiato il giapponese per 6 mesi.

8. Quando studiavo giapponese leggevo molti manga.

▷ ANSWERS

Of course these are only some possible translations! Yours could be right too!

1. Ieri ho comprato una macchina nuova
2. Ieri, mentre compravo una macchina nuova, ho visto Federica
3. Dieci anni fa vivevo in Francia / Dieci anni fa ho vissuto in Francia
4. Dieci anni fa ho vissuto in Francia per 3 mesi
5. Last week it was very hot
6. Last week it was hot for 3 consecutive days
7. last year I studied Japanese per 6 months
8. When I was studying Japanese, I read / was reading / would read many manga's.

▷ YOUR NOTES