

# Active breaks

## The key to students' cognitive wellbeing

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### **Active breaks: the key to students' cognitive wellbeing**

Subtitle: How simple, engaging active breaks can transform your Italian language classroom

Active breaks can reduce sitting time; increase physical activity; improve cognitive function, mood, on-task behavior, and perceived competence; and strengthen teacher–student relationships (Masini et al., [2020](#)).

1. **What are active breaks?**
2. **What are the benefits of active breaks in the Italian classroom?**
3. **Weaving active breaks into your Italian lesson**

Students today face higher cognitive load than ever - Whether we're teaching immersion or core Italian, we are asking students to think (or try to) in another language. Combine that with nervousness about speaking, pronunciation struggles, and don't forget grammar, and students can get overwhelmed pretty easily! sustained focus without rest leads to *cognitive fatigue*. Brain breaks act like a “reset button.”

Brain breaks restore attention, reduce stress, and enhance memory retention. Link to cognitive wellbeing: “Well-being is not a luxury in the language classroom — it is integral to learning.”


This is why we need **active breaks**! They really help students recharge and reset their focus so we can keep being productive.



Brain breaks are short pauses in learning activities that last as little as two to three minutes or can be as long as five to seven minutes.



They are designed to refresh the mind and to help students return to the task at hand with renewed focus.

They are perfect for times when the activity we are doing is challenging, because they'll help us fight off mental fatigue.



## What are active breaks?

### Key features:

- Short duration
  - Interrupt sustained sedentary behaviour (not the learning)
  - Incorporate movement, or at least a change of posture/attention
  - Include cognitive challenge (decision-making, switching)
  - Easily embedded, minimal equipment
  - In the language classroom, they double as language practice.
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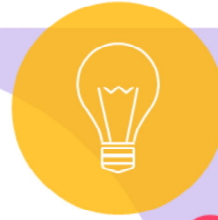
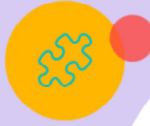
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**The narrow, traditional idea of the ‘brain break’ needs to be reconceptualised,** where active breaks are viewed as being separate from learning and teaching, and where physical activity is perceived as an interruption to learning.

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07303084.2024.2308253#abstract>)

The TransformUs program at Deakin, developed over 16 years, shows that active learning/movement rather than purely sedentary instruction improves engagement, cognitive functioning, behaviour, health outcomes. [Deakin University+1](#)

2.  
**What are the  
benefits of  
active breaks?**



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## What are active breaks?




### Key benefits

Brain breaks sustain motivation and strengthen neural connections by integrating movement, play, and emotion.

- improve focus and attention
- boost memory retention
- Prevent mental exhaustion
- encourage student engagement

If the brain breaks are physical, they have the additional benefits of:

- increasing circulation,
- increasing the oxygen in the bloodstream which leads to improved concentration,
- and allowing the students to get out of their chairs.



Singh et al., [2019 https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/53/10/640](https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/53/10/640)

In “Breaking up classroom sitting time with cognitively engaging ...” the study showed that children doing cognitively engaging active breaks used *less* brain activity to achieve the same performance. In other words: improved neural efficiency. [PLOS+1](#)

Increased circulation/oxygen from movement = improved concentration. [NSW Education+1](#)

These findings are encouraging: active breaks are not just “fun time” but have measurable cognitive/behavioural benefits. Especially the idea of “neural efficiency” (less brain power for same output) is compelling for us as language teachers: if students’ brains are primed, they can engage more effectively.

## Why this matters in the Italian classroom?

- Language learning requires sustained attention, working memory, retrieval, and often risk-taking.
- Many lessons are largely sedentary: students seated, teacher talking, limited movement.
- We want students alert, emotionally comfortable, cognitively ready to engage.

Active breaks help.

Because you're teaching Italian (or any world language), you're asking students not just to passively absorb but to *use* the language. Their cognitive and emotional state matters. Active breaks give a chance to reset, refocus, shift energy, and prime them for the next task.

- Link to cognitive wellbeing: cognitive wellbeing is about “how information is processed and judgements are made ... strategies include: providing brain breaks” (my italics) [NSW Education+1](#)
- Increased circulation/oxygen from movement = improved concentration. [NSW Education+1](#)

**Reduced sedentary time → improved circulation & alertness:** Movement invigorates students, helps them shift from passive listening to active engagement.

What the  
research  
tells us

## Managing the cognitive load

“The human brain has a fairly limited ability to hold thoughts or new ideas in working memory.”

**Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988)**

→ Frequent breaks reduce overload and improve retention.

**Managing cognitive load:** Language lessons can impose high load — new vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking. Breaks help reset working memory, allow consolidation.

- The AERO explainer emphasises managing cognitive load is crucial for learning. [edresearch.edu.au](http://edresearch.edu.au)
- Language learning requires sustained attention, working memory, retrieval, and often risk-taking.
- Learning a language involves new vocabulary, new structures, listening, speaking, often high cognitive demand. their working memory is under strain. [AERO+2TeachHUB+2](#)
- Without breaks, students risk cognitive overload and fatigue. The “managing cognitive load” literature shows that when working memory is overloaded, learning suffers. [AERO+1](#)

“Providing brief periods of reduced cognitive demand allows information to be processed and stored in long-term memory.”

— Paas & van Merriënboer (1994)

What the  
research  
tells us

## Looking after students' mental health

Physical activity has been proven to have positive effect on the mental health of children and adolescents by

- reducing levels of anxiety
- increasing resilience, self-esteem, and self-confidence
- improving mood and well-being

**Emotion & wellbeing:** Students who are physically comfortable, less restless, less anxious are more open to risk (speaking, error correction), which is essential for language acquisition.

It is well established that physical activity plays an important role in the metabolic, cardiovascular, and musculoskeletal health of children (ages 5–12) and adolescents (ages 13–17; Carson et al., [Citation2016](#); Janssen & LeBlanc, [Citation2010](#); Poitras et al., [Citation2016](#)). In addition, physical activity has a positive effect on the mental health of children and adolescents by reducing levels of anxiety and depression; increasing resilience, self-esteem, and self-confidence; and improving mood and well-being (Andermo et al., [Citation2020](#); S. J. H. Biddle et al., [Citation2019](#)).

What is less widely known is the role that physical activity plays in learning. Physical activity has been positively associated with increased academic-related outcomes, including cognitive skills (e.g., executive functioning, attention, memory, comprehension), attitudes toward learning (e.g., motivation, self-concept, satisfaction, enjoyment), engagement in learning (e.g., on-task time), and academic achievement (e.g., standardized test scores; Mahar et al., [Citation2006](#); Schmidt et al., [Citation2016](#); Singh et al., [Citation2019](#)).

What the  
research  
tells us

## Encourage students' engagement


"Emotion and cognition are fundamentally intertwined; emotionally positive learning experiences enhance memory formation."

— Immordino-Yang (2016), *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain*

### Active breaks can positively affect

- Teacher-student relationships
- attitudes toward learning
- behaviour
- On-task behaviour = classroom management
- academic achievement

1. Stronger teacher-student relationships when you incorporate playful, shared activities. [NSW Education+1](#)
2. **Executive-function support:** Many language tasks require working memory, inhibition (e.g., resisting native language), switching. Active breaks (particularly with cognitive challenge) help with impulse control and attentional regulation (see Deakin study) [Deakin University+1](#)
3. Better mood, reduced anxiety, improved behaviour. [Edutopia+1](#) If students are engaged in learning activities and feel connected, they are less likely to move off task and teaching will be more effective (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [Citation2020](#)).
4. **Classroom behaviour & engagement:** Breaks can positively impact on-task behaviour (Deakin study: higher odds of being on-task after breaks) [PLOS](#)



### 3. Weaving active breaks into your lesson

Implementation matters: if breaks are too long, or ambiguous, they can disrupt flow. If they're done poorly, students might treat them as free-time. But when designed and modelled well, they contribute to a purposeful shift of energy, attention, posture. In a language classroom you can tie them to the lesson content (vocabulary, gestures, target structures) so they don't feel "extra" but part of the learning.

## Turbo-boost memory

- Timing & consistency
- Variety
- Keep them short
- Link to learning goal
- Teacher modelling & participation
- Use the target language
- Tailor to your context
- Reflect & adjust



- **Timing & consistency:** schedule breaks every ~20-30 minutes (or when attention drops). Research on attention shows decline over time. [research.avondale.edu.au+1](https://research.avondale.edu.au+1) Insert them at natural transition points: e.g., after a heavy chunk of input, before a speaking task, after a monitored grammar exercise.
- **Variety:** physical, mental, mindfulness, language-play.
- **Keep them short:** 1-5 minutes can suffice. E.g., 5-minute break restores attention. [The University of Sydney](https://www.theuniversityofsydney.edu.au)
- **Link to learning goal:** after the break return to learning promptly, so the break serves the lesson not detracts.
- **Teacher modelling & participation:** Teachers joining the break increase buy-in. **Model** them and set expectations: students should know the routine, know that after the break we settle back quickly. (Language-class blogs emphasise modelling) [POSITIVELY Italian](https://www.positivelyitalian.com)
- **Use the target language** during the break (even if minimal): e.g., teacher gives instructions in Italian, students respond in Italian. This keeps it relevant to the language objective.
- **Tailor to your context:** For older students (12-18) you may choose more cognitively challenging or social breaks.
- **Reflect & adjust:** Ask: Did the class reset? Did students re-engage? If not, adjust type or timing.

## Considerations:

- Be mindful of logistics: space in the classroom, furniture, student mobility, time constraints.
- Avoid making the break too complex or long — risk losing focus or taking time away from target learning.
- Ensure transitions back to the lesson are smooth — students should know “on your mark, we stop, seats, ready for next activity.”
- Be inclusive: ensure the activity suits all students (physical ability, comfort, space).
- Keep the language objective in mind: breaks are in service of the language lesson, not just random movement.
- Evaluate impact: watch for improvements in focus, behaviour, fluency, readiness. But don't expect a sudden leap in grammar mastery — the benefit is supportive.
- Avoid over-reliance: Movement alone cannot substitute for high-quality instruction, scaffolding, input, interaction.
- Potential pitfalls: too long breaks; poor transition back; breaks that become distractions.
- Time cost vs benefit: even a 2-3 minute break can pay dividends in renewed focus.
- Ensure inclusion: breaks accessible to all students (physical differences, language proficiency).
- Classroom management: set clear expectations, keep the break structured.
- Monitor results: observe whether behaviour improves, attention resumes, learning outcomes increase.

With good planning you minimise disruptions. But you also need to monitor: does the active break help the subsequent task (better speaking, more attention) or is it just taking time? If it's the latter, adjust it.



1. I piatti
2. Zumba Eurovision
3. La pallado
4. Scale
5. Ce l'hai?
5. Sasso, carta, forbici
6. Evoluzione
7. Simon dice
8. Relassati



1. I Piatti – students line up in 2 lines, face to face. Teacher places a paper plate in between both. The teachers calls out something in Italian, anything that can be associated with gestures. Students do the gestures. When the teacher calls out I Piatti, the students have to drag the plate towards them with their foot.
2. Zumba in Italian
3. La pallado - Ball pass – you can spice it up with multiple balls, and make it as complex as you need - conjugate a verb or list vocab.
4. Scale – place flashcards on the floor to form 2 or 3 (or as many as need) ladders. Students form a line at the bottom of the ladder and have to say the word or a sentence associated with the image in order to move up. If they get it right, the're done. If they getit wrong, they go to the back on the line and try again until they get it right. The 'team' that finishes first wins.
5. Ce l'hai?

Students form a circle and pass a ball or an object behind their back.

Have one student leave the room or close their eyes AND plug their ears. The goal of the game is to pass the object from person to person without being "caught"

The student who stepped out of the classroom, comes back and into the centre of the circle.

Pro Tip - Don't give the object to someone who's back is turned to the door because the student coming back in the classroom will see it right away.

Once the student is in the centre of the circle, they start asking different people "Ce l'hai?". As they ask the students, they can respond, "non ce l'ho" (I don't have it).

If the student in the middle asks and is met with "non ce l'ho," the circle could all

yell "Che peccato!" (What a shame!).

If they find the person who does, they simply show the object and the Active Break is over (or repeat if that was really quick)

6. Rock paper scissors with legs

7. Evolution : Every student starts out on the floor as an "egg" they have crouch down on the ground. They then walk around in a squatting position versing each other with "1,2,3, Rock paper scissors

IF they win, they become a chicken. if they lose they stay an egg

Next the chicken waddles around flapping their arms at their sides, looking for other chickens, They cannot play rock paper scissors with an egg, only another chicken.

Once a chicken is found they verse each other with rock paper scissors. IF they win

they become a dinosaur and they go around looking for other dinosaurs to play with

IF they lose they shrink down to an egg again, and they go and look for other eggs to play

And the cycle continues. The order goes (in my classroom):

Egg>>>Chicken>>>Dinosaur>>>Dragon>>>Superman

8. Face off – simon says but facing each other.

9. Breathing exercises in Italian

# Thanks!

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