



## *Voices from the Field*

---

# Between World Language Teaching and International and Intercultural Education

Skylar Jeffries, interviewed by Casey Man Kong Lum

*Some highlights from the conversation below:*

- \* The motivation behind becoming a world language teacher
  - \* Challenges facing world language students and their teachers, as well as the triumph they share
  - \* A career path between (or from?) world language teaching and (or to?) international and intercultural education
  - \* Advocating for study abroad programs in schools: challenges and opportunities
  - \* Benefits for students to partake in curricular travels, such as foreign exchange or study abroad programs
  - \* The transformative experience of being an international and intercultural educator
  - \* Best practices in promoting international and intercultural education
  - \* Some advice for aspiring practitioners in the field
- 

*Skylar, thank you very much for making time to talk with me. To start, can you briefly describe your experience as an Italian teacher?*

I taught Italian at the High School for Environmental Studies (HSES) in Manhattan between 2018 and 2022. I taught 9th through 12th grade, so I was able to work with students who had just entered high school and were taking Italian for the first time, up to seniors who were advanced learners hoping to earn the Advanced Regents through their LOTE exam. At HSES, there is a diverse student population with a larger percentage of Hispanic students. This was great for our Italian

program since, due to the similarities between Italian and Spanish, students were usually pleasantly surprised at the ease of learning this "new" language and enjoyed diving into such a popular culture that wasn't so different from their own.

*What motivated you to become an Italian teacher and, by extension, a world language educator?*

From a young age, I always felt a calling to be a teacher. As a girl, I used to round up my neighborhood friends to give lessons on whatever topic or philosophical question I may have been pondering at the time. I was never quite sure, however, of what I wanted to teach. Over the years, my mind changed, as it will, to consider journalism, medicine, fashion design, until the calling returned time and time again.

I grew up and attended high school in Elizabethtown, Kentucky--a big, small town that I would consider your quintessential American town. It was a largely homogenous community, but we always had exchange students at our school who came from countries like France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Slovakia, Spain, and so on. These students were my first glimpse into the world outside of movies. I was amazed how a teenager from another part of the world could have the opportunity to study another language (English) and be able to live in this new community, build friendships, and have a transformative experience.

I also took Spanish in high school and remember always being enthralled in my younger years by the idea of learning a new way to communicate. I loved the challenge of learning Spanish and quickly became a top student. Experiences with international students, though, sparked my passion for teaching English as a New Language to either international students or newcomers. I would soon meet my now husband who grew up in Italy, so I began to learn Italian on my own and went on to study Italian at NYU and advanced to the point where I decided to add it on as a second major. I became more and more confident in Italian year after year, so much so that it became an inextricable part of my life - from the media I consumed to the new jokes I now understood, to how I communicate every day. This newfound identity and window into another world became a motivation for me to teach Italian to students who could discover for themselves an adoptive culture, self, and language they could call their own.

*From your experience, and from your exposure to professional colleagues in your field over the years, what have been some of the key challenges facing students (at the grade levels you're familiar with) studying Italian or any world language foreign to your students?*

First, I will say that Italian is undeniably 'in' right now. It's not Paris anymore - everyone wants to talk Italy. Italian pop culture, authentic or not, is omnipresent in our media and consumer culture - from fashion brands to new restaurants and food trends, to social media accounts dedicated to poking fun at Italian cultural idiosyncrasies.

With the rapid development of AI language learning tools and the presence of online language tutors, sometimes I feel students have more access than ever to language learning opportunities. In our schools, unfortunately, world language proficiency has long taken the back burner for both

policy makers and students. Students may only need one or two years of language to graduate high school, which in a high school setting usually means that they will remain Novice or Intermediate-Low speakers.

Additionally, students crave instant gratification in the digital age, and this is a serious threat to any serious, deep learning required to thoroughly process, debate, and internalize any new concept--especially language. Students aren't encouraged to take risks in their daily lives and are not rewarded for their mistakes - elements that are critical for effective language learning. Students have fewer authentic offline social interactions which leads to an increased anxiety in class when it comes to practicing language in a way that should feel lighthearted, fun, and exploratory, but instead evokes dread and embarrassment. Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter – about the role of affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety related to success in second language acquisition -- has, in my view, been exacerbated among our youth who are feeling increasingly anxious and who may also struggle with the discipline or attention needed to truly progress in a new language.

*From another angle, what have been some of the key challenges facing teachers of Italian, or any world language foreign to your students?*

Teachers of any content area, especially in urban public schools, face increasing challenges: large class sizes, growing expectations beyond the scope of teaching, limited funding for resources and curriculum support, and so on. In my role, it was my responsibility to create my curriculum and source all materials without access to centralized resources as simple as a digital textbook or learning platforms that all students could access. While I greatly appreciated the opportunity to be creative and trusted, creating a meaningful curriculum for three to four different courses for 150+ students daily (with limited resources themselves) was an incredible challenge that often did not feel sustainable, especially when working with students at vastly different academic levels.

In addition to large class sizes (NYC DOE's cap for high school classrooms was 36 until recent reforms), the disparity of students' academic preparedness poses a great challenge when seeking to develop an effective language program that spans multiple levels. Throughout my years in teaching public school at both the elementary and high school level, I have seen how students are moved through the education system without having mastered the essential skills of their prior grade levels, due to the pressure on our schools. This, of course, has consequences - students reach high school where they share a classroom with students of extreme differences in academic level, creating immense difficulty for both teachers who are expected to differentiate effectively, and for students who either crave more of a challenge or feel they do not have the fundamentals to access the content.

Although it may seem superficial, I also want to mention how the structure of a school day or even singular lesson can have adverse effects on the learning environments our teachers seek to create. I have long felt that a 7 or 8-period day with 40-minute classes is counterproductive to fostering a meaningful learning environment for young people. When we load a student's schedule with so many classes and we limit a teacher's time to deliver content (while fostering discussion, allowing

practice time, checking for understanding, and so on) to 40 minutes, we are signaling that it is not important to truly dive into a topic or skill or to enjoy unstructured learning time. As NYC DOE teachers, we are encouraged to structure each 40-minute session the same: a warmup, mini-lesson, practice, check for understanding, exit question. In order to perform well in our observations, younger teachers like me may incorporate inauthentic exercises just to tick a box. The misalignment between what an effective teacher looks like on paper vs. what one looks like in practice only adds to the existing pressures on our teachers and can discourage creativity and diverse learning approaches.

Lastly, I will reiterate the effect of deprioritization of language programs. When the average U.S. student does not have the option to take foreign language courses until high school, and even then, they are told they only need one to two years for graduate requirements, we are again signaling that true language proficiency is not important for their futures. Schools are investing increasing funding in STEM programming which I understand is essential to prepare our students for these ever-growing fields; however, it has been to the detriment of our students having access to quality world language programs that prepare them to engage, arts programs which let them explore their individuality and self-confidence, and so on.

*You left teaching Italian and took up what it seems to be an administrative position. What changed and why? And, perhaps just as importantly, please briefly explain how your experience in world language education may have prepared you for your current endeavor.*

I made the difficult decision to leave my teaching role in 2022. This was largely a personal family decision of where we wanted (or did not want) to be when growing our family. During my teaching years, two of my Italian students earned scholarships with an organization called the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) to study Italian for 4 weeks over the summer - one student went to Ferrara, and the second went to Rome. I was thrilled for their opportunity, in awe of the program, and equally as excited for them to return to our classroom to share their experiences, new perspectives, and new language skills. When planning to leave the city and considering my next career move, I had to face the fact that Italian language programs are few and far between. I decided to step back from teaching and explore roles in the study abroad / international education sphere. I applied for several roles at CIEE and eventually found a position on the High School Global Navigator team. I can't imagine finding a better fit, and I have my Italian students to thank.

In my current role with CIEE, my teams and I work with high schools across the Northeast to build relationships with educators who see academic study abroad opportunities as an essential component of a quality secondary education. We are fortunate to work with many established school partners who have 10, 20, 50, or even 100+ students travel with us to study language or other topics each summer, and we are even more fortunate to be the steward of \$7M+ in donor-funded scholarships each year for students who demonstrate financial need. Students apply to study abroad with CIEE independently of their school; however, they often learn about the opportunity through their teacher or their school's guidance department. Therefore, our school relationships are essential for program awareness and the growth of our mission. Students typically

study with us for 3-4-weeks and can choose one of eight languages where they can earn college credit and the Global Seal of Biliteracy, or they may choose to dive into a topic or possible career pathway instead, such as engineering, international relations, sustainability and conservation, creative arts, and so on.

As a language teacher, I developed essential skills which have allowed me to thrive in this new role. One of these is having developed a deep understanding of our area's schools and students, which helps me understand how CIEE's programming can bring value to both. For eight years, I worked in a classroom setting in support roles and as a language teacher in New York City. I worked from the Lower East Side to Sunset Park, Brooklyn, from specialized high schools to the Hell's Kitchen Title 1 High School that I called home, High School for Environmental Studies. I came to know thousands of students: their stories and their realities, where their families came from, the neighborhoods they grew up in, and what a program like ours at CIEE could mean for their development as young people, and what it could mean for their futures. These deeper connections have been critical for me when building meaningful relationships with educators across the tri-state area and the northeast. I have experienced the transformative impact on my students who had access to immersive international learning opportunities and can effectively communicate that to schools which may not have heard of our programs and may not immediately see where they fit into the curriculum.

Lastly, I cannot discount the intense professional preparation and discipline instilled by teaching 150 young people daily. How many decisions do they say teachers make a day? To be successful as a teacher, your organization and command of a room must be airtight. You come to work each day with a clear objective, a clear roadmap of getting there, while still allowing for differentiations/deviations along the way that will bring you and your students to the end goal. Your presentation style, questioning style, and timing must be captivating enough to hold others' attention, while still being personable enough to build trust among your students. You must navigate 150+ personalities each day--those who are excelling in your class, and those who may be truly struggling outside of your class. I often deeply miss those classroom connections -- hearing students' voices, seeing that lightbulb go off. I carry these memories with me as inspiration in my new role where my team creates opportunities all around the world for our students to build relationships, pursue a passion, grow confidence and independence, and develop as global citizens prepared to engage in lifelong intercultural dialogue.

*You work with various schools to promote study abroad programs. What are some of the key reasons that motivate schools to promote or support study abroad programs?*

When I reflect on our school partners, I am reminded of how different they are. We work with public and private schools across the country – from small schools with 300 students to the largest school in the country with 6,000 students. We work with suburban schools heavy on sports, urban magnet schools, all the way to schools in rural Maine or Montana or boarding schools sprinkled around the Northeast. Some schools' students rely heavily on our scholarships, while some schools' communities may be more comfortable paying for programs. The schools that we work with are a true representation of the diversity of our nation. The network CIEE creates with our U.S.

partnerships and international programs is a beautiful way for students to connect with peers from all walks of life, from every corner of the country.

Despite their differences, I find that schools and educators are motivated to promote study abroad programming for the following reasons:

1. They believe in the transformative impact of curricular travel, but they may be unable to build the experiences themselves due to bandwidth or school/district regulations which may limit school-led travel.
2. They see the growing impact of curricular travel on their school community. As the number of students who study abroad grows, so do the number of stories, perspectives, skills, and worldviews that return to their classrooms. Classrooms are enriched with unique experiences and deeper discussions, and other students are inspired by the possibilities of where they can take their learning.
3. An undeniable impact on college readiness. College admissions are becoming increasingly competitive. A small fraction of high school students participates in an academic study abroad program before graduation. Apart from tangible outcomes like college credit, service hours, and the Global Seal of Biliteracy, the experience in itself sets a student apart for their initiative, global perspective, and presumed independence gained from the experience. These gains signal to an admissions representative that the student in question is prepared to be successful in a diverse college setting away from home.
4. Generous scholarship support provides accessibility to our programming. Between a third and half of our students receive financial aid to participate in a summer abroad program. This means that schools can promote this opportunity to all students, and not only the select few who may be able to afford the program without that support.
5. Educators gain networking and professional development opportunities. We provide occasions for teachers, administrators, guidance professionals, and others to join regular PD programs, such as our U.S.-based Global Educator Summit, international program observations, our Global Educator Institute which dives into curriculum development and place-based learning, and more.

*Based upon current assessments in your current field, what are the key challenges facing some of the schools that have been unable to promote international and intercultural education?*

Schools that are unable to promote academic travel opportunities, or those that may be hesitant to work with CIEE, usually come under one of the following reasons:

1. Distrust or lack of awareness. School professionals can be bombarded with messaging from outside vendors, including CIEE. Understandably, it can be difficult to build trust with an organization you may not have heard of and have only received vague emails or voicemails from.



It can take months or years for me to have quality conversations with the right people at a school who resonate with our work and are willing to move it forward.

2. School- or district-level restrictions against promoting travel opportunities, or third-party opportunities in general. Many schools have top-down restrictions that prevent teachers, counselors, etc. from sharing external opportunities unless explicitly asked. This may be due to a negative past experience related to travel, or general liability concerns. School officials may also fear consequences of promoting one program over others.

3. Apparent financial barrier. Despite the significant scholarship funding that CIEE offers, some schools are uncomfortable sharing paid programs of any sort.

4. Competing programming within a school. Schools may already have travel programs in place, or students may already participate in a wide variety of similar programs. Teachers may fear that promoting additional travel opportunities will take away from the school-led trips they have in place. If students already participate in travel programs, a school may not see what their role is in promoting yet another one.

5. Bandwidth. I often speak with counselors, teachers, administrators who see the value in what we do, but simply do not want to take on the role of promoting it within the school, which can entail working to get admin on board, organizing a presentation, coordinating with other teachers, etc.

*From your experience and from your exposure to your peers in the field, what do you think are some of the best practices that schools can consider or adopt to address the challenges?*

We live in an ever-changing world where the careers of the future are in constant flux, college access is more and more competitive, and global readiness and intercultural competence remain as vital as ever for our young people. Given this, I hope that our schools will embrace the opportunity to work with organizations like CIEE that provide academically aligned enrichment opportunities where students can extend their learning to a global setting while developing critical skills for their futures. I understand how schools may feel frustrated or threatened by the sense of an outsider coming in to 'promote' something to students; however, having worked with hundreds of schools, I know, and our schools know, it is so much more than that. Working hand-in-hand with schools is at the forefront of our mission. Our educator network is essential to what we do - it informs the design and delivery of our programs, it makes our connection to students more intentional and meaningful, and it grounds us as true high school educational partners. We want to work with our schools to help meet the needs of our students and to give back to our teachers in meaningful ways.

In schools that may not yet recognize the importance of global learning opportunities, I encourage passionate educators who align with our mission to speak with fellow teachers and administrators about the value of these types of programs. I encourage parents and families to communicate with their school administration and district-level leaders that these experiences are important to them and then trust the school to provide guidance. Our schools are doing their best to provide a safe,

high quality learning environment for students. They are often overworked and under-resourced. They may not have the bandwidth to learn about outside opportunities, or they may fear the consequences. Once schools are able to see the transformative effect of a global learning experience for their students, and as more families start to ask, "What travel opportunities do you know about for my son/daughter? Do you know of programs where my child can learn a language, study international business, or urban sustainability? Do you know if there is funding available for study abroad?" the more schools will recognize and embrace their role in connecting students and families with these opportunities. In turn, they will hopefully see their community blossom with young world travelers who come home with newfound confidence and independence, but also empathy, a broadened worldview, and intercultural perspectives critical for fostering a community of inclusivity and respect.

For schools who already have travel initiatives or where families already seek out similar opportunities, we strongly believe that travel begets more travel, and that additional quality options can only enrich the school community. We work with schools who work with other providers to deliver certain types of travel programs but work with CIEE to offer something very different. Some schools have teachers who offer trips to certain destinations or in certain topic areas, but the school also shares CIEE as a way for students to independently pursue summer programs that may better align with their personal and academic goals. One school we work with promotes several study abroad opportunities during International Education Week so that students are exposed to different types of programs, proving that it's okay to promote several trusted organizations.

*What have been some of your most gratifying experiences or outcomes as a practitioner in intercultural and international communication and education?*

If you have ever been fortunate enough to be an educator, you know that managing a classroom and leading a group of students through any learning journey--whether it be a summer course, semester, or 4-year language track--is an incredibly rewarding experience. While I was teaching, I was lucky enough to have students for three or four years. Some of my best memories from teaching are when I reflect on students playing games in the target language, listening and analyzing music, following a film, or discussing cultural practices. These are priceless, authentic moments where I've seen my students be truly comfortable in trying something new and having fun while learning. That's what it's all about.

It was incredibly special for me to see two of my students earn scholarships through CIEE to study Italian in Italy. I couldn't help but think - if I hadn't continued the Italian program at HSES, would they have pursued this program? Isn't it incredible that this language brought them to travel the world at the ripe age of 16, live amongst real Italians, and experience not only great proficiency gains, but incredible personal growth?

In my role now with CIEE, I deeply miss my time in the classroom and developing closer relationships with students. However, there are still so many special, rewarding moments. When I visit schools, our program alumni run up to us to share about their amazing experiences in Morocco, Germany, Argentina, Taiwan, and so on. Our alumni hop on planes to meet up with



their new lifelong friends from around the country, even long after their program ends. In a post-pandemic digital age where our young people are struggling to build meaningful friendships, we cannot overestimate the importance of the bonds created through these programs. When our summer courses have concluded, parents write to us to share how amazed they are to see such (positive) changes in their children, and they thank us for making that transformation possible. In some cases, a student is the first one of the family to travel. Families share that, because of the program and funding making it possible, thanks to their child's experience, they were able to learn more about the world themselves.

Our programs wouldn't have nearly the same impact if it weren't for our dedicated World Language teachers across the country. We are fortunate to work with some incredible teachers. Our teachers give our students the language foundation that sparks their initial curiosity and the fundamentals to succeed so that, once on program, students are ready to flourish. On the topic of school impact - I work with schools that grow from maybe two CIEE travelers to 20 or more due to the combination of our team's efforts and investment from the school community. This is amazing for a school to have their students become global ambassadors and bring the world back to their classrooms and communities. It is a great source of pride for our educators who work with us to make it happen.

At one school visit, I was listening in on a conversation between a student who studied in Toulouse, France, and a student who hadn't yet traveled. The student asked the program alumni, "What's the coolest thing you did or learned while you were there?" The Toulouse alumnus pondered - you may have thought he would mention the outings, the food, the transportation, but he shared, "It makes you question how America does things." The other student replied, "In a good way or a bad way?" "Both. It just makes you appreciate some things, but then you see where we could really do things better. Like, sometimes, we think we do it the best way, but that's not really true. I don't know how to explain it."

Even if our students may need some time to articulate what they experience, this is the heart of our mission as intercultural educators, is it not? The ability to understand where you come from, the empathy and competency to understand another, and to build tolerance, openness, and mutual respect between people.

*What advice would you give to students aspiring to become professionals in either world language education or intercultural education?*

I would encourage those interested in the field to connect with as many professionals in the field as they can to network and better understand others' journeys in intercultural education. There are so many possibilities for contributions to this field - so many ways to make an impact. I think we often fall into a trap of limiting ourselves to what we know. For example, we may feel there are only a few different job opportunities or career paths. Having been in the field for nearly 10 years, I have been amazed at where my career has taken me, and I am equally amazed at the colleagues I continue to meet from all over the world whose work I previously didn't know existed. Keep an open mind while also paying attention to your strengths. Are you a teacher at heart? Are you a

project manager? Are you a curriculum visionary? Are you interested in program development? Each of these avenues (and more) contribute to our field in an essential way, reaching countless lives and making our world smaller in the best way possible.

*To cite this article, use this format:*

Jeffries, S., & Lum, C. M. K. (2025). Between world language teaching and international and intercultural education. *Voices from the Field*, 3. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2025/12/08/voices-from-the-field-3-between-world-language-teaching-and-international-and-intercultural-education>



*This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.*