



NAME

SHEILA XU

LENGTH

SIX MONTHS

PROGRAM

TEACHING ASL IN ITALY ON THE INTEREXCHANGE'S CHRISTIANSON GRANT



A Multilingual Gathering: Teaching ASL in Italy

Your friends are sitting around a dinner table, each speaking their own language. One person speaks Italian, another English, another American Sign Language (ASL) and still another Lingua dei Segni Italiana (LIS), which is Italy's sign language. Now imagine that you get to facilitate communication between all of you.

This experience might have seemed far-fetched to Sheila Xu at the beginning of her freshman year. Up to that point, she had limited experience connecting with other deaf people, and most of her friends were hearing. A friend connected her to ASL and Deaf culture, and Sheila took it from there.

She then became interested in Italy after taking an Italian cooking course in the last semester of her senior year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in which she and a group of students learned traditional Italian recipes along with basic Italian vocabulary.

Sheila used an interpreter who translated spoken English to ASL and finger spelled Italian words so that she could understand both the spelling and pronunciation.

"I have to point out it was very rare to find a trilingual interpreter (ASL-Italian-English)."

The next chance came when she backpacked to Italy after graduation, and met members of the deaf Italian community and learned the basics of LIS.

After those initial experiences, Sheila decided that she wanted to learn more about Italian culture; however, in order to do that she would need to establish residence. In order to establish residence she needed a visa.

That came when she was awarded the InterExchange's Christianson Grant, and collaborated with the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies at Ca' Foscari University to teach a course of 50 deaf and hearing students. This was her chance to not only immerse herself in Italian culture, but also to create an exchange between American and Italian Deaf cultures.

“There was a significant interest in ASL and the American Deaf culture in Italy, and I wanted a chance for further intercultural exchange between me and my students/community. And I admit it wasn't too bad having the experience of teaching a language in a university setting on my resume.”

As her students started coming in through the door, Sheila was worried. How would she teach the class with so many students? Yet she did not want to turn anyone away. She made sure not to forget her goal, which was to help the Italian students to become proficient in conversational ASL, so that they could interact successfully with deaf Americans.

She made sure that her students received plenty of opportunities to practice ASL. She facilitated group conversations, games, and discussions with guest ASL speakers.

“My approach is designed to work for both deaf and hearing students equally.”

Ultimately, her efforts paid off. Reviewing the feedback surveys from her students, Sheila appreciated the compliments that she received on her presentation style and engaging approach to teaching ASL.

Her times in Italy were not without their challenges. Sheila sometimes missed the United States where she could go to a movie theater and find multiple showings of a film with captions at anytime she wants to see a movie. She also missed having the free Video Relay Service (VRS) for communication.

Yet the chance to teach about American Deaf culture, and to sharpen her skills in LIS and spoken Italian made it all worth it.

Sheila will have plenty of time to continue developing her language skills in her next international exchange, researching deaf Italian entrepreneurs on a Fulbright Deafness Grant sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.