

Name: Christine Foster Meloni

Profession: Senior Research Associate at the NCLRC

Number of years in this line of work: 3

Native Language: English

Other Language(s): Italian, French, some Spanish

Picture of interviewee

1) What is your profession?

At the present time my “day job” is as a senior research associate at the National Capital Language Resource Center. In my heart of hearts I am a language teacher. I taught English as a Foreign Language full-time for many years and I now teach ESL part-time.

2) Describe a “typical” day as a research associate.

I spend most of my time working on the Culture Club. I look high and low to find kind individuals who are willing to help me out. I need to find authors for the Salon articles, reviewers of films, books, and CDs, and menu writers for the Banquet Hall. I need to wander the Web looking for interesting art work for the Art Gallery and for authentic websites for the Computer Room. I must also find teen-agers around the world who are willing to be interviewed for the Hangout. And, of course, the filing cabinet in the Teacher’s Lounge should always be full of interesting culture lessons.

3) What do you enjoy about it? What do you not enjoy about it?

I enjoy learning about other cultures and in my role as Culture Club President I am able to immerse myself in a wide array of cultures. I also enjoy interacting with language teachers at annual conferences to hear about their experiences in the classroom. I don’t enjoy the pressure of deadlines. We seem to be doing a lot here at the NCLRC but there is not enough time to do everything. I would like to have more “free” time to read professional journals and to visit teachers in their schools.

4) Do you speak any other language(s) besides the one(s) you work with?

I use English most of the time in my work but I also have the opportunity to use other languages. I read novels, watch movies, and listen to CDs in Italian and French and then I am able to write reviews of them. I can also locate materials on the Web in Italian, French, and Spanish that might be use to them in the classroom.

5) What language do you think in?

If I am speaking in English, I think in English. If I am speaking in Italian, I think in Italian. If I am speaking in French, I think in English, Italian, and French all at once. My French is not as good as my English and Italian!

6) What do you think helped you the most in mastering the foreign/second language(s)?

First of all, I was highly motivated to learn Italian when I was a college student. I was passionately in love with Italy and wanted more than anything else to go to Italy and communicate with Italians. I think motivation plays a key role in language acquisition. Secondly, I spent two summers at the Italian School of Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. At the beginning of the six-week period, we all had to sign a pledge that we would speak nothing but Italian at all times, 24 hours a day. This improved my Italian by leaps and bounds. Thirdly, I studied at the University of Florence for a year after I graduated from college on a Fulbright fellowship. I assiduously avoided Americans whenever possible and immersed myself in Italian culture. This helped my Italian immensely. And, last but not least, I returned to Rome a few years later to teach English and within a relatively short time, I married a Roman. Having an Italian husband helped me perfect my command of the Italian language. Since my husband and I continue to communicate only in Italian, I have been able to keep up with my Italian over the years.

7) What opportunities have knowing another language provided in your career that you may not have had otherwise?

One of the requirements for my current job was knowledge of a foreign language. I wouldn't be working here at the NCLRC without my knowledge of Italian and French.

Knowing Italian in particular has opened many doors for me professionally. Let me mention two examples. A few years ago I was invited to give a series of lectures on using technology in teaching foreign languages at the University of Rome. I would not have been invited without my proficiency in Italian. It was a great experience. Another exciting example is that I was invited to work on a child bilingualism project in Rome. I worked with two other researchers, one who focused on Italian-German, another Italian-French, and I was the one who studied Italian-English child bilingualism. And I was able to write a book about 21 Italians who were raised in an orphanage in Naples because I could interview them in their own language.

And, of course, knowing other languages has enriched my life personally. I am able to read novels and watch films in Italian and French and do not have to depend on translations. I can watch the news in other languages and get another point of view. (Subtitles don't always convey the message accurately.) But more importantly, I am able to speak to many more individuals. I meet many Italians and French who do not speak English but I can communicate with them because I know their languages. And while I cannot speak Spanish very well, I can understand it fairly well so I can communicate with Spanish-speaking individuals. I am able to learn much more about people in this way.

Knowing other languages has very definitely expanded my horizons and made my life much more interesting.

8) Do you think it is essential to learn not just a language, but also the culture(s) of the regions where it is spoken?

Language and culture cannot be separated. Although I love languages per se, I am even more interested in the cultures. Since I was a child, I have always been fascinated with differences between cultures and at the same time intrigued by the realization that people of different cultures are so much like me in their basic humanity.

9) If you had the time to learn another language now, what language would it be? Why?

I would like to learn Norwegian. I have finally discovered where my Norwegian ancestors came from and I would like to spend time in Norway communicating with Norwegians. Most Norwegians speak English quite well but in the villages where my ancestors came from, not everyone speaks English. And when I am in a non-English-speaking country, I prefer to speak the language of the country and not stick out as an Ugly American.

10) How do you think your life would have turned out if you had never learned another language?

I would probably not have had as many marvelous opportunities to travel. And I would certainly not have met my handsome Roman husband. Thanks to my knowledge of Italian, I have a wonderful husband and three great kids. Not to mention my five grandchildren. The two oldest (ages 9 and 8) are bilingual in English and French. The three youngest will soon be bilingual in English and Italian.

11) In your opinion, are there more career opportunities for people who speak two or more languages?

There are many careers that *should* require foreign language proficiency. Any career that involves contact with people from other countries should require a foreign language. Any American who needs to travel abroad for his/her job should know the language of the country. Knowing a language creates a lot of good will abroad. It shows that Americans care about other people and their cultures and we seem less arrogant.

12) What do you think you would be doing if you weren't a research associate or a language teacher?

Interesting question! I might be a librarian. I love books and being surrounded by books makes me very happy. I'd also like to be a full-time writer but not many can afford to have this profession! Who knows? I might become a travel writer yet.

13) Any additional information: