

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Matthew Kashdan, French teacher at Middleton High School. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Matthew Kashdan

Thanks for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so first would be great if you could just give us a super general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position in Middleton.

Matthew Kashdan

Currently, I am a high school teacher at Middleton High School in Middleton, Wisconsin, right outside of Madison. I currently teach French levels two, three, and four, mostly freshmen and sophomores, but a sprinkle of juniors and seniors in there. I guess I can quickly start kind of way back. I started taking French in sixth grade. So I was about 11 years old. And it was always something that just kind of clicked for me, I enjoyed it, I was good at it. And I always liked it. And I considered kind of going into something with it and related to French. When I went to college and I went to school at UW-Stevens Point, starting in 2011. And when I started at Stevens Point, I actually ended up going for theater. And French was kind of like an add on like a minor. But then as I kind of moved through the program, I figured out theater was more of a hobby and not more of a career choice. So through many shifts of majors, I kind of ended up at French again, and education as well because I'd always kind of pondered it and thought about like, Oh, I want to share what I learned with it and and share it with students as well. So that's kind of how I ended up there. And then I think I really solidified and like my decision and I'm really confident once I studied abroad, and I studied abroad in Caen, in the north of France in Normandy. And that was like that solidified my language skills, as well as like my understanding of French culture and things like that. And I was like, yeah, this is kind of the right thing for me. And then after a student teaching or prior to a student teaching experience in Stevens Point and the Stevens Point School District, no, what I am saying, *after* I student taught in Stevens Point for a semester grades 7-9. And then after that, I participated in TAPIF, the teaching assistant program in France for nine months in the 2016 to 2017 school year. My husband and I went together and we went back to Caen, and I taught at the lycée professionnel there. Mostly, what was it, dixième, so like the equivalent like 10th grade, and to like the equivalent to seniors in high school. And I taught about 12 hours a week there. And that was a really cool eye opening experience, to experience the French educational system and kind of understand how they learn English versus how we teach French and kind of learn about the ins and outs of their education, which I still don't fully understand. But I definitely have a better understanding of now. And then after that was my previous position. I taught at Pewaukee School District for three years, I taught seventh to eighth grade French at the middle school and then one level of high school French, level one. And I was kind of in charge of establishing a middle school program that really wasn't in existence because it was just one teacher throughout the school district. And I was kind of the first person to come in as like middle school only. So that teacher who teaches at the high school wasn't spread so thin, so I could kind of folk she could focus on her

work at the high school and I could focus on my work at the middle school. So I worked there for three years, and then recently came to Middleton. In regards to that, I wanted to switch to high school. So I found the opportunity there. And I've been living in Madison, so I wanted to kind of lessen the commute. And so I've been teaching in Middleton since August, virtually from August to beginning of March. And we just started back in a hybrid in person model. We started March 11. So that's kind of my chronology there.

Claire Darmstadter

Wow. And speaking of spread so thin, so you talked about this as your first year at the new school, you're in the COVID year and if I did my internet deep dive correctly, you may also be pursuing a graduate degree. I'm not so sure about that. But can you kind of talk about how you squeeze everything in? Is it totally overwhelming given COVID? Are you able to find a good work life balance? What's your theory on that and how do you keep the two separate even though it is like a passion of your life?

Matthew Kashdan

I've been working really hard and I think this is something that I established kind of from the beginning of my teaching career, right. You hear about teachers who are often like bringing work home and I'm working all hours of the night and working really hard on the Sundays to make sure their lesson plans are good to go. And while I definitely do bring work home and I work at home, I really try to be very clear with myself that I am going to create a work life balance. So especially now that I've been teaching for about four years, I kind of understand what I need to do at school in order to not bring work home. And in terms of COVID, it was interesting because I was teaching at home for a while. So that work life balance was really gone, because I was teaching at home and I could just walk out and I was home. So there was really no separation. And so I really had to, like, establish clear boundaries for myself and be like, Okay, I'm going to work in the room from this time to this time, I have class from this time to this time. And when we went back, we started working in the building again, while I wasn't 100% confident with the decision the district had made about returning, I do appreciate the work life separation that I have, right, I can set like goals for myself and make my list and kind of leave my work at school, and I'm not bringing it home with me. And like you mentioned, I'm also pursuing a graduate degree, a master's in Global Education at the University of Illinois, for their master's of ed. program, all virtually, but I kind of was going to wait until next year to start that because I would like to eventually move into international programs, study abroad, things like that, like the things that inspired me to continue on, and like, give me a better worldview. And I'm like, I should just do it now. Because I'm at home and like, there's no time like the present. And so I just kind of did it. And it's challenging at times to kind of find that work life balance. But I kind of establish that routine through teaching virtually. So I kind of had more freedom to be like, okay, I'm done teaching at this time. And I can put off the school work for lesson planning until now and work on my graduate school work. So I just, I guess my like, main thing, I am super intentional about what I'm doing, what work I'm bringing home. And if I'm bringing homework, and I found that that's helped me a lot.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, I think a lot of us in college feel the same, it's like, well, we're a lot more productive because we don't have to walk to classes and office hours are online, but then you feel like you're always doing work. And so it's hard to separate the two. So you've mentioned a little bit your interest in study abroad and how you had those experiences in the past And how you lived abroad beyond the typical semester college experience. So are you able to make culture like a super big part of your classroom? I know for students who may be living in Southeastern Wisconsin, and probably haven't had much experience outside of the state or exposure to native French speakers. Do you bring that to them? Do you have different materials that you use for your time abroad? Or how do you infuse all that into your classroom?

Matthew Kashdan

Yeah, so I guess if we will kind of break it down into a methodology about how I teach, I'm very CI oriented, comprehensible input. I don't have a textbook, and I never would have a textbook even if I was offered it. I'm all about using authentic resources to curate authentic experiences for my students as best as I can, right because there's an extent to which in a classroom cannot create authentic, authentic experiences, but you can do your best. I like to use authentic materials, whether that be through use of magazine articles, whether that be through use of newscasts, weather reports, different infographics, whatever I can find, pieces of art I use often. And I'm always really intentional with my students about like, we're not going to learn grammar, I will occasionally explicitly teach grammar because I do believe there's important things grammatically related that they can use to enhance their language skills. But I'm more about teaching the language through the culture. To me culture has always kind of at the forefront. And language I don't want to say falls behind but is infused within the culture. Right. So for example, I just did a unit with my level three students, so they're in their third year of French, mostly freshmen and sophomores because they had taken French at the middle school. And we just did a unit on the like environments and right so occasionally, like I use a lot of research to find what teachers are doing, whether that be through like a Facebook group or Pinterest or whatever. And oftentimes you see like, okay, we're gonna learn the words like flood and drought and climate change. And right, that's great. Those vocabulary words are great, but I always try to think about how can I authentically infuse the language into something that they're going to do and so, what we did is like the goal of the unit was we were going to write an open letter to like the government, right saying this is what we want to do and this is how we want to make our environment better. And so through the use of textual borrowing activities, or borrowing language from different authentic sources, including like a letter from an organization called Youth for Climate Change, located in Paris, students about the same ages then they can see like, Okay, this is what they're Doing so now I'm going to try to reproduce or use the things that we learned in class to write my own open letter. And what comes out of it is we learn lots of different structures to construct a letter, we learn how to write a professional letter, we learn lots of vocabulary related to the environment. And we're not sitting and drilling vocabulary or grammar, but they're using it in that authentic context. And I think that's like the most important thing and the most valuable thing to me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I think that's really important, right? You're not just learning the language, but you're learning through the language, and they're learning things that will help them in the rest of their life. And I would imagine, if I understand correctly, your experience growing up was maybe perhaps you didn't have a super CI focused classroom where there was more that grammar focus, and like you mentioned, you're not a native speaker. So, you know, even with lots of years of study and living abroad, I would imagine there are still some times a word or phrase where a student will ask you like, how do you say this? And you'll have absolutely no idea. So in a moment like that, how do you respond? Is it super honest? Like, *I have no idea let's look it up together?* Or how do you kind of fill in those gaps where maybe in school, you didn't talk about that? Like specific medical terminology?

Matthew Kashdan

Yeah. And like, you're right, when you said like, my experience in taking French was super textbook grammar focused, right? We go through the chapter, we do different exercises, we'd talk to each other about kind of banal topics, but that leaves gaps for me, right, because I didn't go over all these authentic contexts. And when I always tell my students and be really clear with them at the beginning of the year, I'm like, *Look, I encourage you to make mistakes.* I want them to make mistakes, I want them to try because especially in a language, they're really hesitant to raise their hand and get something wrong. And so I'm really like, I don't care about your pronunciation right now. I don't care about if it's right, like if it's not right, well, we'll walk through it together and see what's right. So I encourage mistakes. And I'm also super honest and transparent with them saying things like, *I don't know every single word in the French language, I have no idea. There's no possible way.* I don't even know every single word in the English language. And so I'm like, really honest about that with them. And so I have a student, which this happens often, like a student will ask me when like, I have, I don't know. I'm like, and I always point out to them, like, I don't know, see, I don't know every word in the French language. And so what I'll do is I'll pull up the online dictionary, Word Reference, and we'll search it together like, Oh, yeah, like, and I always tell them like, I always thank them. I'm always like, thanks for teaching me something today. So now I know that word, like for example. I think it was a few weeks ago, I don't know what we were talking about, but a student asked me how to say Brussel sprout. I think I know the word for Brussel sprout, but it just had like a blank in my head. I'm like, huh, I don't know, I can't remember. And so like, I just pulled up word reference, and like, Brussel sprout like, *Oh, yeah, chou de Bruxelles.* Right. And so they're like, Oh, yeah. And we, it was just like a super simple like, here, I didn't know the word and I don't think they really care. I don't think they expect me to know everything. But I think because I'm super clear and transparent with them from the onset of the year, I think that they like, okay, like, it's just like another like, oh, he didn't know. So I looked it up like, Oh, I can do that, too. And that's okay, too.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, that's so important. And so you know, you obviously work in a language department, a little bubble that's very supportive of language and linguistic diversity. But I'm wondering about the wider community that you live in. So looking at either Middleton or Madison as communities, do you think they're generally hospitable to individuals who speak more than one or a

non-English language? Because it kind of depends based on the language or the context? or What does that kind of like?

Matthew Kashdan

I think living in Madison, right, it's more like a liberal open community where there's different resources for people who don't have English as their as their first language. I'm not too familiar with most of the programming that goes on within Madison, I am a little familiar with some of the, like, the French stuff that goes on. For example, we have the French House on the UW campus that offers right conversation and meals that they serve, and you can go to those things. There's like, I know what the Chazen Art Museum on the UW campus, there's docent-led tours in French for school groups. So there's those speaking opportunities themselves. I mean, I feel like this is something I always like to tell my students to, it's like, I always ask them this question like, hey, like, what do you think the official language of the US is? And it's always like English and I'm like, actually, there is no official language of the US and they're always really shocked by that. And we always kind of talk about the beginning of the year like why do you think that and they're like, because I speak English, right? Because they're so like, trapped within their bubble. And obviously, I have non-native English speakers in my classroom occasionally too. And so I like to bring their viewpoint in but I always also like to tell them like, like, just because it's something you experience it and you're a part of doesn't mean that it's like the right way and then we talked about like, French being the official language of France or these other countries, and maybe why that is, for example, we talk about like countries in West Africa and why their official language is French, and it's a product of colonialism. And depending on the age of students, we kind of dive into that and talk about that. And we talked about that in regards to us and make those connections. And so, once again, I just wanna like open, they're like, pop that bubble, right? And be like, here's some French speaking resources that we have here. And you can participate with them throughout the community, but more, more so like, why is it mostly English? I really like to talk about that with them, if that makes sense.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. And so finally, the last question that you know, we tell little kids all the time, that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, in English, in French, a mix of both, whatever you want? Why is it a superpower to be multilingual?

Matthew Kashdan

Oh, my gosh. I feel like it's just for me, it's all about being able to speak another language or to other languages, just like opens up the world for anyone. I mean, think about what it could do in advance in your career, right? We're always looking for people who speak multiple languages to communicate across the world and work in those kinds of settings. It also opens your eyes to different people in different cultures and how they live. And I think my main reason for teaching language and for being able to speak another language. It's like, I just mentioned this, a pop, pop that bubble, let's explore outside of ourselves and outside of the environment we're familiar with, get a little uncomfortable and explore these different languages, right? And being able to understand a new language and speak it and communicate with those people is another way to make those connections and open your eyes and pop that bubble and to live an experience and

learn about someone else's global experience and kind of who they are and why. They're the culture that they live in.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much. Your classroom sounds like fun and welcoming spaces. I really appreciate you sharing your perspective. But I'll let you get back to all the things that you have on your plate and have a great day.

Matthew Kashdan

Awesome, thank you.