

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Aleksandra Olvera-Lara, a student at Fort Atkinson High School. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Aleksandra Olvera-Lara

Yeah, no problem.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so it'd be great if first, you could give us an overview of kind of your educational and linguistic background. And maybe if you have any ideas on how you might want to use your language skills in careers or college or anything down the road.

Aleksandra Olvera-Lara

So both my parents are from Mexico, but my mom was born here in America, but raised in Mexico. So I did learn Spanish first, that's my first language. And then because my mom wanted to encourage me to know more English instead, because we're living here in the US, she only put me in schools with a lot of English classes and stuff like that. There are some bilingual schools that she kind of tried to put me in, but she just encouraged me more in English. I've been getting more into the career of criminal justice in the FBI. And I know, like, a lot of people there don't really know other languages that they could use anymore. Because like, sometimes they're a jurisdiction where you have to, like, know, another language to communicate with certain people.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, and I understand that you have a little bit of contact with a Korean, Japanese, French as well. Can you share a little bit about how you engage with those languages.

Aleksandra Olvera-Lara

In middle school, I was put in a class because I was new in school. And one of my friends there, Elise, was Korean. And she went back to Korea. And then Japanese, my uncle studied Japanese during his high school career, and then he went to university for it, but then he ended up dropping out. Oh, yeah, I took French class for three years in high school. And I'm in my last year of French right now.

Claire Darmstadter

And do you think that experience in school — I know personally, for me growing up in high school, I did Spanish. And a lot of high schools in Wisconsin, of course, we have incredible, you know, great, awesome, super nice teachers. But a lot of the time when we go into these high school or middle school language classes, you learn some vocabulary, you learn a few things to say, but at the end of high school or even a couple years, and you don't feel very proficient. So do you feel like for you with French, you learned a lot, you can kind of conversationally speak the language? Or is it like, oh, there's not too much that I can actually do with it?

Aleksandra Olvera-Lara

The first two years, I actually do believe I learned a lot. I did learn a lot of the grammar and vocab. And then at least like, the simple language conversations in French. And then like, right now, because we're going even more difficult into like, actually, like, going on into a conversation and like learning more difficult words, it's kind of like getting there. Like, I might not actually get all the way there. But I'll try my best to do that.

Claire Darmstadter

Most definitely. And I think you mentioned that sometimes it's a little bit hard to, you know, concentrate in the languages you speak, at home or in school and other languages you're learning. Do you feel like it's ever really difficult to like, organize all the languages in your head? And maybe it's gonna be a couple years from now where you'll actually see the benefit and be able to, like, you know, use all of them in a way that makes sense in your mind? Or what does that look like when you're managing so many languages at once?

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

Sometimes I've been told by my friends that I snore, and I kind of get embarrassed with that, because I want to be able to be like, fully fluent, because I didn't really get taught Spanish. I just, you know, I just caught up on it. Because my parents, and then English, it's sometimes difficult for me, so to be able to, and then there's more languages like French, and then I am learning Japanese with my uncle, so having to learn so many languages does get confusing. I sometimes switch up on my mom from speaking Spanish to French or, and she's just like, what are you telling me? So sometimes I just can't organize it. And I'm just here to like, have to like, wait a minute and think about it. And I think sometimes, I just go with it.

Claire Darmstadter

And I think you mentioned that Spanish was a language that you might have learned through family members, not really in a formal setting. Do you feel like growing up or even now you've ever had to put in — I guess it's been an effortful process to learn Spanish? Or is it something that you've just had spoken all around you, you don't really have to think about it, you can just speak it?

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

Certain common words in Spanish, it just comes out because I've been surrounded in Spanish for a long time. But like if I had to, because my mom has been trying to get me more into like grammar Spanish trying to get me into how to speak Spanish right. So sometimes I'll just stop and think about what is this word in Spanish? Like I'm thinking so hard, and I just can't get it. My mom tells me this or if I say like a past tense, Spanish thing, and I'm talking about the present. My mom's like correcting me all the time. But my parents, both parents weren't really at the household when I was growing up. So I had to learn myself to read, write, and speak Spanish.

Claire Darmstadter

And do you think Fort Atkinson as a community as a whole is very supportive of individuals who speak languages other than English? Or do you feel like sometimes there's a pressure to just

only speak English or like the community, if you're speaking another language that people will kind of look down on you or say something that might not be super nice and supportive?

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

In our school, it's really supportive, because there are transfer students from the Dominican Republic, and so forth. So they ended up getting more teachers just to speak Spanish fluently to help them out. And then I did help them up a bit, because I did know both languages. But then but the community is a bit slow on picking up the pace, but they are getting there. Because a lot of the hospitals or like if you go to a dentist or anything, they don't really have translators, but they are hiring some and they're looking for some and I hope we're able to help more on those who don't speak English.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And I guess, you know, you've talked about how you've learned some of these languages outside of like a formal school setting, or it might be a mix of different things. I know it's COVID it's really hard to learn languages right now. So are there any fun ways that you practice language? Or is it just a lot of grammar study? Or how have you kind of worked with these languages when you don't have a class in school that's super effective or even existing at all?

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

Yeah, my brother knows French too. So we joke around when we speak French or anything. And then my uncle likes to play games and stuff. So he ends up putting them in Japanese language. That's how I learned more about that. And then I do call my friend in Korea because she's been trying to contact me a lot. So like, every couple of months we speak, and she helps me out with that. And most of the time, it's not really like all grammar and stuff. I just learn certain words. And it's little by little that I learn more.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. That is so impressive. Can you just give me one reason if you can boil it down to one reason why we should celebrate multilingualism as a superpower, as we tell little kids? You can say it in English, in French, in Spanish, in Korean, in Japanese in whatever language makes most sense to you. Or if you want to mix all them that works as well.

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

I would say, since not a lot of people here know English. And because of that, we should be able to use that power to communicate even better, because there could be misunderstandings or anything. And to have that superpower is really amazing. Because you were able to think around or anything with those languages and able to communicate with and knowing more people who know other languages is amazing. To have more connections is also amazing and helps you in your career later in the future.

Claire Darmstadter

Most definitely. Well, thank you so much for chatting with me. I think your background is super interesting and others will find it interesting as well. So I hope you have a great rest of your school year and that things will COVID online school goes at least okay.

Alexsandra Olvera-Lara

Thank you.