

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Catherine Wilson, EL teacher in the Fort Atkinson School District and Wisconsin TESOL Secretary. I had the opportunity to speak with Kari Johnson, who is an ESL teacher at Fort Atkinson as well, but works a little bit with the younger kiddos. So I'm excited to hear more about your work at the older level with the high schoolers and I'm really appreciative that you're willing to chat with me today.

**Catherine Wilson**

Thank you very much.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So you have a quite interesting background, as I understand you acquired Russian living in Kazakhstan. And it's very different from what most people would have in this position, although you do have that language background. So could you just explain a little bit, what your linguistic and educational background is and how you kind of got into ELL teaching at Fort?

**Catherine Wilson**

Okay, quite the story there. So yeah, so I graduated college with an English degree. And then I decided, I knew for a long time, I wanted to go into the Peace Corps. And I didn't think I was very good at languages. So I didn't put a preference. So they put me in Kazakhstan, and I suddenly had to learn Russian. So I think the experience of being a second language learner myself, made me realize that I could do it. And when I got back to the US, eventually, I realized that might be a good fit, so I went into English language learning, and got my teaching certificate there. And I, along the way, went to learn Spanish in Guatemala for a summer and have since worked on that. And that's super useful.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure, and like you said, the Spanish is super useful, but I would imagine the Russian might not be as common among your student population. So how do you, I guess, work with students who don't speak Spanish, necessarily, or Russian? Having that language background and knowing what language learning is like, but not having like that common language that you can communicate with right away?

**Catherine Wilson**

Okay. So at my current school, all my students do speak Spanish, which was kind of a shocker when I got here, because I was like, this is not the norm. But in the past, I've used a lot of just using really basic English and a lot of hand gestures to start off with to get kids comfortable and you know, used to some really basic vocabulary, and then, you know, sentences get more complex. And I still do that with my Spanish speaking students. I'll say, it's English class, we're going to communicate in English, it's a little harder for us to stick with it, because it's much easier to just go into Spanish if we're having trouble with something. But similar techniques either way.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. And can you just take us through what a typical day looks like? Because there are many different styles and forms of engaging in this type of education, so is there like a designated ELL class? Are you in the classroom with one on one hell visit a mix? Can you just give some context or like rationale for how your position kind of operates and why it's set up the way it is?

**Catherine Wilson**

Yeah, so I always describe it as my days kind of divided up into thirds. So one third of the day is English class, where I'm teaching — I have a level one English class for my kids for the first year in the country and my level two English class where my kids are in their second year in the country. In level one we're learning just *How can I communicate? How do I get around the school?* You know, how do I ask for the bathroom and a pencil and by the end, we get into some very basic short stories, then year two, we read a novel and we're actually going to be reading a memoir soon, which I'm super excited about. And then we do a modified version of Romeo and Juliet because that's something they do in regular ed. So it's kind of a bridging class to get them ready to be in the regular education program for English. Another part of my day is pushing into classrooms. So I've got this year, I'm in a geometry class. And then it was something I did economics first semester and career second semester, because there tends to be a lot of writing in careers class when they got a resume to do in a cover letter. So I'm in those classes, and I go through, you know, with the kids kind of co-teach as much as possible. And as I've been here every year, it's been nice, I've been able to do a lot of different classes. So at this point, I know most of the freshmen and sophomore core classes and core curriculum. So then the third part of my day is resource where I've got kids who just like it's time for them to work on their classes. And sometimes it's structured where I'll work on specific classes with specific groups for a time period, which is a way I really like to do it, but it doesn't always work out. It just depends on what kids are available at what times and all that. So that's a time in the day where kids sometimes they come in and work on their homework and I help them with that. Sometimes I'll have a structured like, okay, you guys are all in, you know, ninth grade English this year. We're going to focus on that and we'll talk about whatever is happening in 9th grade English, you know or 10th grade English or whatever class it is, and we'll just focus on — or US history and we'll focus on Okay, what were the notes that we took? Or what topics are they that we can either pre-teach or reteach?

**Claire Darmstadter**

That sounds busy! And so what I'm kind of wondering is you talk about how you have like, these first year, second year classes, where you might have students who are coming to the United States for the first time, or might be their first year kind of learning English. And I just wonder how you help support kids and validate their language when there's a lot more social pressures, because we know in like, elementary school, it's a lot more common with kids to be having this assistance and these services, because, you know, they might be early on in language development in general. And so having those services is pretty common. But as you get older, a lot of kids start to transition into like, non-assisted classes. So I would imagine for the kids who are still in it at high school or entering in high school, it's a little bit more tricky socially, to be like,

*Yeah, I'm really confident in my abilities, and I am smart, and I just need help with the language sometimes.* That doesn't mean that I don't have this awesome language faculty in another language as well.

**Catherine Wilson**

Yeah, and that's tough. And that's something that I sometimes wonder about, you know, do I have the balance, right? You know, I really, I try to keep, like, English class to be in English. And I try to tell kids, you know, I've had this experience of learning a second language, like, I know, you know, it's, we're gonna make mistakes, but this is the place to practice and make those mistakes, we can get better. And it just comes with time. You know, and it's definitely hard on kids' egos. I mean, it's hard on anyone's ego, when you go from being really intelligent in your home language, and then, you know, or you're in your school language, and then you come to new countries, and suddenly, you just feel really dumb. I don't know if I have any magic words for it. I've noticed with Google Translate and stuff, especially with everything being online, that makes kids a lot more independent, in some ways, in the regular classroom, because they can write their things in their language. Although I wonder what the long term effects are of how that impacts, you know, their language development in English. And that's something if someone has a study on it, I'd love to see. Yeah, I'm like Google Translate was not available when I was a second language learner. So it's something that's a little hard for me to relate to, in my personal experience. And then what I noticed, probably, I would say, for the kids at first being the regular, because, you know, my kids will be with me for their first two years of English, but that they're still in the regular classroom for the rest of their core classes. And I think at that point, it's so obvious to them and to everyone else, that they need help that there's, you know, it's hard on the ego, but there's no hiding it. And that's just the way it is. And I think it's the kids who've been in the system for years and years, where it can start to feel like, okay, I just want to feel normal, but I still have this label on me. But I do notice, especially after having been in middle and high school, middle schoolers, you know, it's all about — middle school just seems to be about kids, you know, wanting to fit in and be like everybody else. And in high school, they can open up and be more like, I'm an individual, and this is me. And I noticed kids become a lot more comfortable with their second language. And one thing that I love about my room is there are kids who just come in my room to say hi and hang out because they know they get to talk whichever language they want and not be judged, which is really what my job is about.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that is so important. And I know also, in addition to this role, as an educator, you also serve in a more like, organizational role with Wisconsin TESOL. So can you talk a little bit about what you do there? And then just any resources, if teachers want to kind of benefit from this organization, how they can get involved?

**Catherine Wilson**

Okay, yeah, so I am the Wisconsin TESOL secretary, just starting my second year in this, and I feel like one of the biggest things we do, it's super awesome is that we have a conference every year, which teachers can come to, I highly recommend going to that because it's just it's a great way, like, especially in rural districts, as an EL teacher, you can feel very isolated. And that's a

way to, you know, go and have other professionals to talk to about what you do. Another thing that we started doing, kind of maybe three years ago, I'm not sure, is give grants so that different districts or individuals can put on EL conferences, just like mini so within our district and for the surrounding districts, Kari and I have applied for a grant. I think Kari usually applies. I just kind of ride the coattails of her awesomeness. And we get a grant and then we do coffee and collaboration time where we invite neighboring EL teachers, neighboring districts to come and we just have time to talk about, you know, what are we doing in each of our schools, what's working and what isn't? What do we have questions about?, which is really wonderful. Because one thing that's very different that took a while to get used to me like other teachers, like math teachers, for example, can just go across the hall and ask, you know, five different math teachers. *Oh, you know, how did you make this lesson work? or What did you do? Or what do you do when you have this situation*, where in my first years I had no one that I could ask because I had coworkers at the elementary school. But that's a very different situation than the high school. So there were lots of questions that I had to find, you know, go outside to find other people in Wisconsin TESOL helped me to find more people and be able to do that in scheduled events, that's wonderful!

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure, it's like, super nice to have that flexibility. But then it's like, well, that's overwhelming because I have to make all the decisions. So I can imagine having that support system is really important and helpful. Just to wrap this up, so in celebration of multilingualism, and why we think it's a great thing, can you tell us and in whatever languages, or as few or as many as you like, why do you think we should celebrate multilingualism?

**Catherine Wilson**

Oh, my goodness, well, multilingualism is awesome, I'll probably stick to English so I can best express myself. And I tried to tell my kids like, it's wonderful. You know, it's rough at the beginning when you're starting out becoming bilingual or just multilingual. But in the end, you know, so much more than your peers. And you'll have a great understanding of different cultures and different ways of thinking. And just an expanded world that when you speak only one language, you just don't have all those opportunities.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. Well, thank you so much for your time and your input. I enjoy hearing other perspectives from all over the state and different types of programs and I know the field varies so much. So I really enjoy your perspective, and I hope the rest of the year goes well for you.

**Catherine Wilson**

Thank you very much!