

Claire Darmstadter

Hello, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Diego Román, who is not only an Assistant Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but also happens to be the advisor for this project. So I'm excited to flip things and let you all learn a little bit about him and his work. So thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Diego Román

You're welcome. Thank you, Claire, for interviewing me for your project.

Claire Darmstadter

So you wear a lot of hats, and you've done all the things, but it'd be great if you could just give us a really brief overview of your educational and linguistic backgrounds and how you arrived at your current position here at UW.

Diego Román

So I am originally from Ecuador. I lived in Ecuador until I was 19 years old. And then I moved to Honduras. And I lived there for five years and then came here to the US in the year 2000. So I have been in the US for a little more than half of my life. So first came to Illinois, and then Wisconsin and then California, Texas and back to Wisconsin. While I was in Wisconsin, I was teaching middle school science, math to newcomer and a Latinx students. And then I moved to do the same in San Francisco, California. I was teaching middle school science there. And then I started my doctoral program at Stanford University in education and linguistics. Then I became a professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas for five years, also in bilingual education. And then two years ago, I came here to Madison to teach bilingual bicultural education at the School of Education.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so how does having that background as an in classroom teacher inform your scholarship? What are some of the things that you learned from those day to day interactions that, you know, those who purely engaged in theory and practice and policy might not be aware of?

Diego Román

So for me it's that I want to conduct my research to what can be used by teachers and what makes explicit connections of how students and teachers use languages in the classroom. For instance, I had many heritage language speakers from different states and cities in the US, next to students from different Latin American countries who grew up in or were quote unquote, native speakers of Spanish, right? So that you have a very diverse audience who are bilingual, right? But when you work with children in these kinds of settings, and we also teachers who come from all of these diverse Latinx backgrounds, then you realize that there are many dimensions of bilingualism. And there are many dimensions of who is a Latinx. And then you start thinking, well, it's more complicated than I thought, to teach, let's say English, or to teach Spanish. Because then you start questioning what does that mean, like? And to whom? And what are the goals of the program? And am I trying to teach something that comes from my

perspective, growing up in a monolingual, or at least monolingual, in the sense of a Spanish as an official language, ignoring all of the native First Nation languages in the in Latin American countries, right? So you're still thinking a lot about what messages you are giving to children, as you work with them and with your colleagues as teachers in real settings, and questions, some of these guidelines, and as you are enacting them in your practice, or are resisting them in your practice.

Claire Darmstadter

And so like you mentioned, you've taught in Illinois, Wisconsin, California, Texas, four states, and though in some ways, they are more similar than we initially think, they still have very different situations when it comes to language and education. So speaking very broadly, are there any comparisons you can make between Wisconsin education and states that have a larger population of English learners or I know you're doing a little bit of research in rural education in Wisconsin. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Diego Román

Yes. So it's interesting, because with my former advisor at Stanford, his name is Kenji Hakuta, he's the one who developed this kind of theory — well, measured how long it takes to learn academic English. Like when you hear out of the seven years, it takes seven years to develop academic English, that's him. And Kenji used to say that, for example, comparing California liberal state, with Texas which is more quote unquote, conservative state, Texas never prohibited bilingual education while California did. So it's not always the politics, it's also the number of speakers of a language that can guide the development of policies around the language, the influence of different communities on educational policies and practices. And states like Texas and California are the top two states with the number of English writers and most of them are Spanish speakers, I think 70% of the students classified as English learners in the nation are from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. So when I came to Wisconsin, my idea was to work in what is what are called new destination areas. And Wisconsin used to be considered a new destination area. But I think that it's now changing to rural settings as new destination areas inside the state of Wisconsin. And even then, as compared to for example, cities like Madison or Milwaukee or even Green Bay, right. But even rural destination areas in Wisconsin, there are established Latinx communities like Arcadia, which is in rural Wisconsin, that has the majority of the student body is Latinx 70%, about 60-70%, and the other 40% or so white students in rural Wisconsin. So those are things that you never hear or think about if you are not in Wisconsin, so I'm trying to put light into the experiences of these Latinx children, some of whom are English learners, some who are not, some who were born here. And I think most of Latinx children in Wisconsin were born in Wisconsin. So, kind of changing the narratives, right, that these are new, not new populations, that they have been here for a while now. And how they are impacting the linguistic landscape of the state, as well as the cultural and social experiences in, especially in rural areas. So I think there are some similarities and differences between the southwest and the Midwest, where I have worked. But those differences are, in some ways, not as dissimilar as we could think of, because there are communities, Latinx communities in Wisconsin that have been here for a couple of generations already.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes the Arcadia story is very interesting. There's a page on the website that I'll link below that you can check that out, and also an incredible documentary that really gives a broad overview of the city and kind of their history. So here at UW, we don't necessarily have a bilingual education major, but we do have an ESL concentration area. So can you kind of talk about how this prepares or is a stepping stone to working in bilingual education? And then why someone may want to consider it even if they aren't multilingual or don't necessarily plan on going into language education.

Diego Román

And the good news is that Professor Mariana Pacheco, she's developing the bilingual education master's program in Wisconsin, in Madison. So it's coming, the bilingual education certification or at least a master's degree program. But the ESL program prepares you to work with multilingual students. So to address the richness of the languages that they speak, rather than through deficit way perspectives, trying to teach them the word they do not know. So I think we have gone through in the history of bilingual ed from seeing multilingualism as a barrier to then seeing others as a right, that it's my right to use my language when I want to use it, to now seeing it as a resource. And all of that framework was born here and was conceived actually by Richard Ruiz. He was a professor here at UW in the policy department. And this work continued with Nancy Hornberger, who then went to teach at Penn University, Pennsylvania, also working in this continuum of bilingualism. So Wisconsin has this rich tradition, the University of Wisconsin around bilingual education, bilingualism, multilingualism. And I think the ESL program prepares you to the kind of critically addressed these constructs these ideas of what it means to be a bilingual, who is a multilingual child, how can we work with multilingual children focusing on the richness rather than what they do not have, and seeing all of their languages as these big assets, advantages that they have when we work with them. And as I said, our goal is to also have the bilingual education program. So for teachers who want to work in dual language or bilingual settings, and they would teach particularly in Spanish, right if you're asked to teach science in Spanish or math or Spanish, or what would we prepare you to do that and to engage with you and teach in Spanish and read textbooks in Spanish, so when you're asked to do that, then you can do it in a document prepared to do that, so it's coming. So I am happy for them.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, I'm a little jealous, but I'm very excited for those of you to participate in that program. And so in addition to all your fabulous academic work, you're also a father. So can you talk a little bit about how you approach languages with your son? Is it pretty rigidly planned? Is it free flowing and it kind of like whenever we have opportunities to speak in Spanish, we're going to, or is it like, you really have to be intentional about it, to give them that exposure?

Diego Román

So when we decided with my partner was that since he was born, Andrés is his name, that I was going to speak with him in Spanish, like a one parent, one language approach. So I speak with him in Spanish, she speaks with him in English. So that's worked well, but I think my biggest recommendation for any family who wants to raise their children bilingual, or multilingual

is to identify social factors that the child cares about. So for example, when I tell my son, being bilingual is going to be great for you in the future, he doesn't care, right, but versus if he plays with children his age, who are bilingual, and we're playing in Spanish, he wants to play with them. And he wants to say, this is my toy. And this is my ball in Spanish to protect his toys. And to ask for someone, another child to lend him a toy or a ball or whatever. So that has been more effective, like finding friends and families who are also multilingual. Being multilingual helps you to do things, right, it's useful. So it's functional versus the more formal in which you are learning for somewhat abstract way of using it like in 10 years, I'm going to go to college in Spain, right? Like that sounds maybe or I like to travel around Latin America and I use my Spanish, maybe, you know that but that sounds too much too long term. And for a child that doesn't get it you know, it doesn't feel real. So for us, it has been finding those opportunities for him to practice in as many natural settings as possible. I read with him books in Spanish, I you know, we talked about it all the time. Yesterday, there was Rosita from Sesame Street. It was fantastic. So I talked to my son about that. There is not only one Spanish either, that there are many Spanishes. His Spanish, of course, sounds different from my Spanish because I grew up speaking Spanish since I was a child versus kids growing up speaking English and Spanish. So of course, he's going to mix both sometimes. And I do mix my variety of Spanish mixes Quechua, which is an indigenous language from the Andes where I'm from. And that is okay. Right. So it's okay, I think we need to kind of acknowledge that there are many varieties of Spanishes. And there is not one single standard that we should be comparing ourselves against, because I think in the end that diminishes or backfires in the type of multilingual society, in which we are growing, in which multilinguality is part or should be part of our everyday life because of the diversity that exists in this country. And we should instead of fighting and having this image of the native speaker, that sometimes reflects racial and socio economic and elitism, we should be disrupting that and saying, there are different varieties of English, different varieties of Spanish. All of us speak differently, and based on who we are, our life experiences. And we should be proud of that. We should be acknowledging that rather than feeling bad about our accents or the way we speak or languages.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And you know, you're talking a little bit I think about this, but I'll ask you again, because it's the last question I always ask everybody. So we tell little kids all the time, that's a superpower to speak more than one language and he talks about like, you're probably not going to sell them on brain plasticity when you're 65 years old. So if you're talking to a little kid, can you give us an answer in English, in Spanish, a mix of two whatever you want? Why it's a superpower for them to be speaking more than one language?

Diego Román

Porque se puede comunicar con mucha gente. [Because you can communicate with a lot of people]. And I always tell myself like in Texas, we say *troca* for truck. In Ecuador we say *camioneta*. But if Andrés will go and tell his friends in Texas No, no, no, no, no, you don't say *troca*, you say *camioneta*, that they will never play with him, you know. So multilingual children, they develop the sense of who their audience are, since they are very — and if the person is a multilingual as well and that they can switch back and forth like we're doing between two

languages or, and with whom they have to stick to one language or to even one language variety. So they have this awareness, or with whom they can fully express their linguistic repertoire. And so I always tell my son, see how lucky you are. You can talk to English speakers, you can talk to Spanish speakers, you can talk to multilingual speakers. So you have far more people to communicate with than if you were to speak only one of those languages.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, my favorite thing is when one person talks in English and other in Spanish, and they just go back and forth, and it's seamless. That's the coolest thing ever. Well, thank you so much. I usually include a couple links to work that professors have done in the transcript, but you have like a laundry list. So I'll include a couple of those below if people want to check out your work, but just thank you so much. You have so much knowledge you can share and I hope you have a great rest of your evening.

Diego Román

Thank you, Claire.