

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Jenna Cushing-Leubner, Assistant Professor of World Heritage language education at UW Whitewater. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Absolutely. Thanks, Claire.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so first, it'd be great if you could just give us a super broad overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you ended up at Whitewater.

**Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Absolutely. So I grew up as an English-only speaker, and I became multilingual later on in life. So I first became multilingual through German and then later on Turkish. And then as a graduate student, I started learning Spanish because I was working with heritage language teachers who were teaching Spanish as a heritage language and I was putting a lot of time in their classrooms and with young people. And so I started learning Spanish and most recently, the last three years I've started learning Hmong because I'm working with a group of amazing Hmong language educators across the country doing heritage language reclamation. My background is actually I was an English as a world language teacher in Austria first and then I came back to the United States. I worked in adult ESL English as a second language, community-based settings and then eventually in K-12 English as a second language classrooms. I got my license as an English as a second language teacher in Minnesota. And I went on to get my PhD in a second language education curriculum instruction from the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. While I was there, I entered into a whole new great world which is heritage language edge education. And I spent five years while I was there, working very closely with community driven curriculum instruction assessment and professional development designs for heritage language education and the teachers of multilingual kids of color in US schools. I've been at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater since 2017. And well, while I'm there, I'm the coordinator for the world language teacher licensure program. And I also designed a pretty wide-scale all online heritage language education professional development program. We've worked with hundreds of teachers from all over the country doing these online professional developments built out of the community-based and community-driven designs for language education, from the participatory design research I've been doing for the last 10 years with Spanish and Hmong language educators and young people and parents. And I also work in the English as a Second Language, and Bilingual/Bicultural Education licensure programs at UW Whitewater.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, amazing, there's so much we can chat about. Let's first start with terminology. So can you explain a little bit why it's important for us to call it world language instead of foreign language or another more perhaps antiquated term?

**Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Absolutely. So really, basically, I mean, calling a language a foreign language really reflects a very narrow view on who's the speaker of a language and who the language settings are for. So we teach a lot of languages in the United States, certainly not enough. And we don't start early enough, in most cases, but languages are used all over the world. And foreign languages suggest that this is a language that is used far away, in a far off land, far off community in kind of an exotic other culture. But of course, languages, we have hundreds of languages that are used in the United States, by young people, families and community members. And because of the nature of how connected our worlds are, you know, a language that is spoken as a part of a child's life in another country can be very present in their local life here too. And so there really aren't foreign languages. These are languages that are part of our larger world. And so talking about World Languages also reflects that we're not just talking about English-dominant kids, we're talking about multilingual kids and learning languages at the learning, for instance, a Spanish world language class or a Hmong world language class that has Spanish speaking kids and Hmong speaking kids in it, are learning a language that isn't foreign to them at all. It's really near and dear to their homes and their lives in their hearts.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So you listed up a lot of different programs that Whitewater has, and some people including me, at first, might be really surprised by how robust white waters language education program is compared to perhaps other schools in the state. So can you talk a little bit about some opportunities or programs that prospective or potential students might want to get involved in and kind of why it's so important that you have so many options?

**Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Absolutely. I mean, the way that we approached language education in Whitewater, at UW-Whitewater is through a multilingual lens. And so that means that everything we're doing with future teachers is really thinking about how do we sustain multilingualism and nourish and grow multilingualism and that that is going to be different depending on the multilingualism that kids bring into their experience. So multilingualism might be that a kid is coming in as an emergent learner of a language other than English, that their home language is English, they're learning a new language that's like a traditional world language setting. But multilingualism can also be about, like reclaiming heritage languages, or ancestral and indigenous languages, and regrowing those and nourishing and strengthening them. It can also be about sustaining home languages while acquiring a second or third language, maybe English, maybe Spanish, maybe German or French. Wisconsin has a really rich environment of immersion schools and bilingual schools from indigenous languages through Mandarin Chinese, French, Hmong, German, and Spanish. And so there's lots of different environments that teachers might be teaching multilingualism in, and so we like to think about all of our offerings as being something where a person could come through and figure out exactly how to do sustainable multilingual language education in any of these settings. And what that means is that for instance, our we have, we have this really incredible bilingual bicultural education program and the ESL minor is kind of embedded within that bilingual bicultural education program. And that means that people who are coming in and plan to be bilingual and dual language immersion teachers are taking all of

these classes together with people who are coming in and don't have the language skills yet to be a bilingual or dual language immersion teacher and may not get to that point in their life, in their in their teaching, teaching life, I mean, but they do plan on being an English as an additional language or ESL teacher. And so they are learning together these skills. And so we're teaching in sustainable multilingual ways, regardless of the language environment that they may be teaching in, whether it's ESL or bilingual education, and then our world language teachers, I think 90% of our world language majors, end up — world language education majors — end up minor in ESL, or bilingual education. And so all together, we're exploring all of these different ways to teach multiple languages, grow multiple languages, and sustain home and heritage languages. Depending on the different settings where teachers might be working with multilingual kids. We also have a really one of a kind thing that's happening at UW Whitewater, which is our heritage language education programming. And this is where practicing teachers from all over the country come together, it's all online, it's all it was all virtual before everybody is forced to be remote, so we like to think that we do it really well already. It's all synchronous. And they're really spending a lot of time exploring how to transform their teaching practices through the things that we're learning directly from communities, young people, and multilingual teachers of color about what works best to grow and sustain languages, in heritage language settings, as well. And so because we have all these options, there's so many places for new teachers and practicing teachers to find their way and figure out really exciting areas to grow in for their language skills and their teaching practices. We also have incredible summer programs where practicing teachers and pre service teachers go together to Oaxaca, México to learn about how to do community based and artspace language education in a community based education environment there. That's also a way for them to kind of develop their Spanish language skills within the context. And it's just, there's just so much kind of like, exciting innovation and growth that's happening on the campus. And, you know, we're just, we just have the right group of people, I think, coming together at the right time, and it's a really energizing place to be and to learn how to be a teacher.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, well, I've heard so many great things about the program. And it seems like everything's very intentional. And I think that's very important. So I'll leave some links below in the transcript if people want to check any of those things out. So from living in and kind of teaching in different places, you've been able to see lots of different styles of language education. I know, one topic that's really important to you is translanguaging. So can you talk a little bit about this and maybe some other pedagogical decisions that we tend to make in the US or Wisconsin or maybe we don't make what we should, but you might want to see reevaluated or implemented?

### **Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Absolutely. You know, translanguaging is interesting because it's really treated as this kind of like newer thing that's happening. But all translanguaging does is it reflects back the language realities of multilingual people and multilingual young people especially, and says, how do we make those languaging realities that happen in multilingual living spaces around children's lives, and make that the reality of their learning environment. And so it's a way of really, really supporting multilingual kids and the ways that their brains work in these fabulous ways and

supporting deep deep learning. And so translanguaging is at the heart of everything we do, at Whitewater and what I really think is incredible is that people who are going to be teachers who are not necessarily going to ESL, bilingual ed or world language teachers, many pre-service teachers end up taking this introduction to ESL bilingual ed class that we offer, and they learn about how to translanguage with languages that they themselves are not confident speakers in, which really, really creates a robust multilingual environment for any kid, which is really cool. I think some of the things that we have, that we we still have a lot to learn about, in terms of how to prepare teachers to be more powerful and effective teachers with multilingual youth of color especially and multilingual kids with recent immigrant experiences in their families, is to learn more, and bring into our classroom teaching more about the knowledge and skill sets and cultural practices and literacy practices of the families who are raising up and loving multilingual kids best outside of the school environment, right? And what that means is, you know, we're, we're working really hard at saying like, what does it mean to say that if you're going to be a language teacher, you have to also also understand, you know, knowledge systems, cultural practices, and creating culturally sustaining instruction, pedagogy and curriculum that Ethnic Studies is part and parcel, it's at the heart and core of sustainable multilingual language education, and that we can't really do sustainable multilingualism if we're leaving out these rich, deep sources of knowledge that live within the communities that are, again, raising up the kids that were that were that were tasked to teach and we have the responsibility and you know, privilege to teach. And so ethnic studies being integrated into language education is huge. I've written in some other places about this and also about understanding how racial formation plays out and impacts multilingual families and children with immigrant experiences who are coming into the United States, which is a heavily racialized place, and they experience this racialization process. And for teachers to really understand race and ethnic studies — racial consciousness and ethnic studies are central to transforming learning environments to support multilingual kids, especially multilingual kids of color. So I think those are the big things that we can learn about. I've been working with a group of Hmong language educators, I think I mentioned from all across the United States for the last three years. And you know, this group, they're the National Coalition of Hmong Language Educators, we have a website of all the resources that have been developed and shared freely and openly by this group of Hmong language teachers and community member experts. And it's curriculum units and materials. It's professional development, it's research, it's also, there's also community-created teaching and learning Standards for language, literacy, language arts, and culture. These are all things that that community members are deeply knowledgeable about, and our teachers and our teacher education spaces really, will become richer and better places for the preparation and support of teachers if we learn from this knowledge base, as key and central to what it means to be a good teacher.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And more links and resources I will be sure to leave so people can check out. I know you've also been involved a little bit in tribal education, teacher certification, can you kind of talk a little bit about some things you've noticed there if their approach to language learning is a little bit different than perhaps other languages? It just kind of yeah, your experience in that space?

**Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Yeah, so I'm actually not connected to tribal education and teacher certification. I have close friends who are doing that work in Wisconsin, and especially in Minnesota, especially with the Ojibwe language teachers, which crosses over state lines. But the work that I've been doing is really about heritage language, and less commonly taught language teacher licensure. And this is an area that we have a huge problem with. And it's not just the state of Wisconsin, it's not just the Midwest. This is something that people are really talking about all over the United States, that we do not have pathways for licensure for community member, expert teachers who are primarily teachers of color, who are multilingual, first language speakers of languages other than English. These are exactly the teachers who we need. They carry with them deep sources of knowledge, historical knowledge, literary knowledge, artistic knowledge, scientific knowledge, agricultural knowledge, all these things that our textbooks oftentimes do not reflect. But they also have the language skills, the literacy abilities in home languages in languages other than English that are less commonly taught languages. So these are languages like Hmong, Vietnamese, Somali, Romo, Amharic, Kurdish you know all of these languages that are spoken all over the United States, but we do not have the number of teachers who are able to bring those languages into the deep learning environments of students. And one of the reasons for that is because we don't have pathways for licensure for multilingual teachers of color to become language teachers in their own languages. And not only are those pathways out there, we have policies in place that actually act as barriers and make it incredibly difficult for multilingual teachers of color to become language teachers of their own languages, whether it's in a dual language immersion, or bilingual education program, or as a world language teacher or a heritage language teacher in a world language program. We do have pathways through for ESL, but even those are our pathways are so predicated, they're so reliant on English language proficiencies, that are shown through these the small group of tests, usually, that it creates massive, massive barriers for teachers who are really, really going to be powerful teachers who bring skill sets that monolingual and English dominant teachers just do not have to bring into the classroom to support multilingual kids. And they are being kind of relegated into these short term licenses, short term community expert licenses or licenses on stipulation, which is another way to say like an emergency or short term license. It looks different in a lot of different states. But it also looks the same in a lot of different states. And we have a lot to learn about the ongoing struggles for licensure that Native American, Indigenous, and American Indian ed teachers and language teachers, especially, have been taking on and really leading the way on for decades. And we are working on it, but every state has its own policy quagmires. And so that's a major, major issue that takes, you know, a lot of people collaborating together. So it's not just a couple people trying to make these gears move. I mean, we have like four or five, community organization, educator organizations at the state level, the regional level, and the national levels, all working together to try to figure out what these pathways can be in order to open up this space to make it more possible for there to be multilingual teachers of color teaching multilingual kids of color in our schools.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yep. And part of this website effort just to kind of demystify that process and help connect people those opportunities, but at the same time, there are some pages on the website where

it's like, this is the rule, and I'm sorry, we're working to change it, but this is what it is right now. And you know, we're gonna see what we can do, but I can't guarantee you that there's gonna be a pathway because there are those barriers like you talked about. So finally, what we tell little kids and older ones as well, is that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason, you can answer English, you can answer in different languages, you can answer in a mix, why speaking one language or more is a superpower.

### **Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Oh that's actually really hard to do, like succinctly, I think it's really more than it's a taproot. So I know we say it's a superpower, but I want to think of it as a taproot. And a taproot, when we think about plants that are growing, the taproot is the part of the plant that goes deep deep down past the upper layers of the soil into like the deepest parts of where the water source can be. And it stores that water source so that when in times of drought, and times of low rain and low moisture, that plant can stay alive and nourish not only itself, but through, you know, the mycelium network can also nourish other plants and the trees that need to benefit from that moisture. And that taproot. I mean, that's what I really think of when I think about bilingualism and multilingualism, the superpower is that it sustains us, it keeps us, it nourishes us, but it also as a collective as a community, across generations and across space and time, it's something that keeps us together and keeps us nourished and healthy, despite many, many efforts that are made, to separate, separate us and to also like do harm and take away those languages and take away the deep knowledge that that are reflected in those languages and those relations. So that's that's what I like to think about. I like to think of it as kind of the magical realism of a taproot.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Well I like my super simple sufficient superpower kind of metaphor, but I really like the taproot idea as well, so I think I may add that into future questions. So well, thank you so much for chatting. I know everybody's in this. So appreciate and value all you have to share. So thank you so much and have a great rest your school year.

### **Jenna Cushing-Leubner**

Thanks, Claire. You too. It's good to talk to you.