

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I am joined today by Macy Roberts, UW-Eau Claire student pursuing degrees in Elementary Education and TESOL. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me!

Macy Roberts

Yeah, of course.

Claire Darmstadter

So it'd be great if first you could just give us an overview of your educational and linguistic background and maybe some career aspirations you have down the line.

Macy Roberts

Yeah. So prior to attending UW Eau Claire, I went to K-12 school in Forest Lake, Minnesota. During my high school experience, I took French for five years with my last year being through the University of Minnesota, a College Within the Schools program, and then after that, I came into UW-Eau Claire as a social studies minor. I changed my mind, I wanted to work with ESL students, ESL students that seemed more up my alley. So switched my minor and then started taking classes within the English department at Eau Claire as well as the Communication Sciences and Disorders Department. And then as well as the Education Studies Department. I had no clue anything about linguistics, anything about language. I took a class my freshman year, and it was kind of just an intro to everything, we did like the phonetic alphabet, we did dialects, we did all this stuff. And I was like blown away. So that kind of got me introduced to everything. And then from there, I've just been taking courses. And I'm finally in my last semester of taking courses for my TESOL minor, so no more English classes, for the time being. But I've really enjoyed learning a lot about that, because I really had no no idea prior.

Claire Darmstadter

And I understand growing up, you didn't necessarily have the best experience with your language classes, or at least you didn't necessarily reach the level of proficiency that

you thought you might have. Of course, this is Minnesota, but I think there are some parallels we can draw with Wisconsin. So can you talk a little bit about that experience, specifically and if there's anything that could have potentially helped to maybe reach a higher level of proficiency?

Macy Roberts

Yeah, no, for sure. I just felt — well, first of all, my senior year of high school we moved into that college-level class through the University of Minnesota which — that was just a huge jump, like all of a sudden, we were just in like high school level stuff. And then we were taking a five credit French course in high school, and none of us knew what we were doing. And so that first half was very challenging. Second of all, I think, so I started in eighth grade. And so at my school, we had junior high, so it was seventh, seventh, eighth and ninth grade. And so I started French in eighth grade. And then I had the same teacher in ninth grade. And then I switched teachers again in 10th grade. So I think that was really challenging. I did really well in junior high, it was once that we did that switch. And then the other reason why I think I had such a struggle is at my high school, we had block scheduling. So our last two hours of the day were an hour and a half long, and they were only for a semester. So you're only taking French, I was only taking French, for half the year. And then I was expected to pick it up again the next year after not speaking it first semester. So I think that in itself is really challenging to learn a language like you can't, like how do you expect kids to be proficient when they're like, it's so choppy like that? And then just, I felt like our teacher kind of just, I don't want to say baby, but it was like, very, we could use our notes and like that kind of thing. And then all of a sudden, we had to take the test and we couldn't use our notes. And we couldn't do this. And so just as high schoolers we are trying to get around things with Google Translate, whatever, that does not help at all. So I just think the program itself needs to be rethought. And even like I had friends who took Spanish on the skinny, which was 50 minute classes, and they did so much better. And they understood the language. And so I think having that full year long program really helps your language proficiency.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, there's pros and cons to each. I know that I personally had that block switch, I think my junior or senior year and that's definitely different. And so it's interesting that you brought that up. So many people think that you have to speak one or all the languages that your students speak when you're working in primarily an ELL position. Although it's helpful, of course, it's by no means a requirement. So can you talk a little bit about why you think it isn't necessarily true and how your struggles in language classes maybe will help you understand what your students are going through? And how you found confidence working with students when you don't necessarily have that common denominator language?

Macy Roberts

Yeah, no, for sure. And every time I tell people what I'm going into it's like, "Oh, do you speak a language?" I'm like, no, no, I don't, I really don't. And so I think I'm kind of feeling in that same place of, like, on opposite ends of how my students feel like, they know a ton of one language, and I know a ton of English. And so trying to meet in the middle, where they can actually teach me a little bit about their culture, their language, their home life, and I can teach them some about English. And so I think kind of having that switch and that reciprocation with each other as teacher and student is going to be a really rewarding process. But in terms of just like, I mean, my professors here at Eau Claire, what I know is just visuals help a ton, like, you know, I mean, and just like showing, like this is a yellow shirt, like yellow. And you know, they usually mean the same thing in the same language. So, I don't know, I'm just really excited to be out of my comfort zone, too. And, thankfully, my mom's a teacher as well. And she was a Spanish minor in college. So I have a lot of people in my corner who speak Spanish, so I'm hoping, after I graduate, to maybe pick up Spanish like a little hobby, but learn it along the way. Just because I know, that's probably one of the most spoken languages besides English in the United States. I could be wrong there, though. So, yeah, and you know, there's so much communication with hand gestures, and facial expressions, and just working through that as well.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And now comparing where you grew up, we can look either like a really big state level or more city level, do you think there's a lot of differences, a lot of similarities between how people view languages and people that speak more than one language and linguistic diversity in Eau Claire versus in Forest Lake or Minnesota versus Wisconsin? Or what's kind of the vibe there?

Macy Roberts

Yeah, no, well, Forest Lake is a pretty small town, I would say, it's a suburb of the cities. So I think I'm, like, I think of like my grandparents or like, something like that. If someone was speaking Spanish to them, or a different language, they would probably get frustrated. And they'd probably be like, *Why can't you speak English?* Which is so sad. Like, that's not okay. That's not okay at all. And so I think if you were to travel, for example, into my mom's school district, or whatever, or even closer into the cities, just so much more common, you're gonna hear like, if you're at the mall, you're gonna hear other languages around you. Even as a kid, which is, this is so horrible, and I was so sheltered. I didn't like going to the Mexican restaurant in town, because they spoke Spanish. And I didn't like not knowing what they were talking about without knowing what they were talking about, I guess. And so obviously, I've worked and worked through that. But it just goes to show how sheltered childhood in the suburbs can be, especially north of the cities. But in Wisconsin, between Wisconsin and Minnesota, I don't really think there's a big difference. I think if you're in urban areas like Milwaukee and Madison, you're gonna be hearing more of those more languages around you just in common spaces, but also in the rural areas, too. We have lots of farming communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, too. So that's also not something that you can forget about either. I'm very surprised, my professor, who does the ESL classes, ESL classes at Eau Claire, she works for a CESA. And so she does like the whole Eau Claire area. And I'm so surprised at how many farming communities and how many people come up here to farm and that kind of stuff. So you can't forget about those students either.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, those rural areas are really interesting, because of course, we have the mass of students in cities like Milwaukee and Madison, but then in these rural areas it's an eightfold, tenfold increase in the number of students with a linguistic background that isn't necessarily English. And so that's a really good point, that we have to consider that as well. So finally, in celebration of multilingualism, can you give me one reason, if you can boil it down to one, why we should view students who speak more than one language or a non English language as having a superpower?

Macy Roberts

Oh, my gosh, that's so hard. And I have taken so many classes, just like probably you have, on the idea of trying to break down that stereotype of, you know, they don't have a language delay, they're speaking two languages at one time. That is a challenge in itself. I think that it's so amazing that they're able to decode and take information in and put themselves out there to learn a language that they don't know. So I guess one reason why they would be superheroes? I would say...that's a really tough question. I think probably that they're brave. I just think they're really brave for doing what they're doing. And I gave up on myself and on my linguistic journey, and I hope that they don't give up on theirs, and that they can be brave through it all.

Claire Darmstadter

So well said, well, thank you so much for chatting with me. I really enjoyed your perspective, and I think others will too. I hope you have a great rest of your school year, and I'm so excited for students, 2, 3, 5, 10 years down the road who will get to have you as a teacher!

Macy Roberts

Yes, thank you so much. Thank you!