

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Manuel Fernández, professor in the Spanish department and also director of the Latin American and Latinx Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me!

So from the little I've heard, you have a really interesting background with languages and a bunch of different experiences related to that. So can you just walk us through very generally what your linguistic and educational experiences were like growing up and how you got to being in Eau Claire?

**Manuel Fernández**

Okay, I can do that. So I was born in Cuba and spoke only Spanish. And then we left Cuba and went to Spain and lived there for two years. And then after that, we moved to New York, where we lived for one year, and that was my first exposure to English. And then we moved down south to Miami. And I lived there until I was about 27 or so I think. Growing up, though, you know, in a Spanish-speaking household, and in a community that was very Cuban at a time in a town called Hialeah, which was I think, at the time, like 90% Latin American, and it was heavily Latin America, and still is. And then I did, you know, attended school there and school was in English, and then got my bachelor's degree, they're also in English, actually. And then moved to Pennsylvania for graduate school at Penn State University, and then found a job in Naperville, Illinois, and worked there for three years until my wife found a job in Eau Claire. And then I came to join her here, and we've been here since 2003.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And if I understand correctly, your courses that you teach focus more on the cultural aspects of Spanish speaking world rather than specific language acquisition theory or pedagogy. So for individuals going into language education, especially ones who might not have a super strong cultural or ethnic kind of connection to the Spanish speaking world, or maybe learned Spanish later in life, why do you think it's really important to take these courses alongside their language or teaching methods courses?

**Manuel Fernández**

Well, I do teach third year language courses also. But I do also teach like, literature and civilization courses. And well, I mean, just in general formation of a global citizen, I think that's very important and learning more about the cultural and learning language. And specifically with Latin America, which is so varied, you know, they get to learn a little bit about the variety and the history and the things that make us Latin American.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure, and I know your lovely wife is also a professor in the language department, but she focuses on Japanese and her expertise is more of like the linguistics kind of language acquisition side. So you have a little bit different fields, but I bet they would overlap. So can you guys collaborate on anything or like, share ideas? Or is there any part of your research or work that overlaps with one another?

**Manuel Fernández**

Well, we haven't, although I have worked with students on people from Latin America, specifically from Peru and Brazil, in Japan, because there's been a history of migration out of Japan, and to Peru, and Brazil, back in the early 20th century, and then a migration back of the descendants of those people back in the 1990s. And when we've had students who have studied both Japanese, and Spanish, which is not the most common mix of languages, I just thought that was a natural topic for them to delve into. And so I've worked with a number of students over the years, when I've seen that they had those interests. It's just like, wow, you're just made for this topic. So that's something that I haven't collaborated with my wife on. It's a possibility for us to work on something along those lines. We do know, we have a friend in Japan who works with largely, you know, students who are from different communities in Japan. So they have a lot of the same kind of like issues here with heritage speakers and things like that. Issues of the language and adaptation. So we haven't yet worked on it. It's always on the backburner. It's something I would look forward to. But we haven't yet done it though.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. And if I understand correctly, I believe your children are raised trilingually. I would imagine that's a very difficult undertaking, especially when there's different levels of interaction that you can have these different languages kind of in the community or in Eau Claire. So how do you kind of make it work? Do you have specific times that you focus on different languages? Or was it just kind of like natural in your household?

**Manuel Fernández**

No. Okay, so from the get go, the idea was that I would speak in Spanish to them, and she would speak to them in Japanese. And so we have two of them. I do have a child from a previous relationship, who I generally speak mostly in English with because his mom, he grew up with her a lot. And she would speak to him mostly in English, even though I spoke to him in Spanish, the times that I was with him until he was about four or so. But with the two children that I have with my wife, my current wife, the son, who is the older one, I spoke to him in Spanish, she spoke to him in Japanese, he got I guess, a smattering of English at daycare, but he really was behind in English when he went to school. So he did receive some, you know, special education type classes for bringing him up to speed with the language. I would say, you know, it was purposeful, it was not difficult. We did also actually, we have been doing this for a long time, we live in Eau Claire. And since he was probably five or six, in Minnesota, there's actually two Japanese schools for, it's basically, they're partly funded by the Japanese government, and then you also pay tuition to attend. And it's schools that are geared originally, towards helping people who worked in companies from Japan that would come to work or be here to help, you know, they'd bring their family, and they wanted to keep their kids still, you know, in line with the education system in Japan, so they will put their kids in these schools, since then, it's opened up a lot to people like us, who are, you know, kind of like a mixed marriage, right. But we still want them to learn more and Japanese is not the easiest language in terms of writing to learn. It's got three different writing systems that use the Chinese kanji, there's like, you know, a regular person knows about, like, maybe 2000 of those, you do have to

devote time to it, right. So, it also helps for kids to have peers that they can, you know, talk about, you know, five and six year old things with, right. So for the last, I don't know, 10-11 years, we on Saturday mornings, we get up, you know, 6 am, class would start at around 8:30/45. So we'd leave Eau Claire around 7:00, usually, and then drive the 90 minutes that it takes to get there. So we've done that for like 10 or 11 years, except for the COVID exception in the past year, then, you know, the kids have, you know, it's been part of our life, basically, every Saturday has been basically from 7am until we got back around 4 or 5 or 6pm. That was our Saturdays for the past, however many years, and that was one way to help them develop their Japanese skills, especially in writing and also, you know, different registers, right. I mean, they learn to talk about math and science and history, which you don't necessarily incorporate into your everyday household conversation, right? These are not things we discuss. And then, you know, I would say Spanish was always the weaker spot, because while they had that school, and they had my wife and also great benefit to them, we also did this very purposeful, they had grandparents in Japan, and we would take them there in the summer, and we dropped them off there with the grandparents who were great at taking care of them. And that was invaluable to them in terms of language development. So I mean, you know, they've really been, they didn't know it, but they have been super privileged in a way that I you know, I mean, I, I'm glad they have that. I'm concerned how little knowledge they have of how privileged they are at times. Because, you know, I mean, my wife, but I definitely did not expect my kids to have that much global knowledge at their age. And then in terms of Spanish, that's always been the weaker point because my mom passed away before both of them were born. My dad is not necessarily you know, the most able to be a grandfatherly figure, doesn't have that kind of attitude necessarily or precision. So, Spanish generally came from me, for the most part, and there's not you know, we don't have that many people that I could speak Spanish to. I was lucky enough to take them to Costa Rica when I went there and taught abroad in the summer, taking students from UW-Eau Claire, and I was able to put them in school there. And you know, they were able to, my daughter is shy, so she never really spoke. But that has nothing to do with language skills. She understood everything that was said, but she was just shy, she was shy here too. But you know, they were able to, actually my daughter did make a close friend over there. But yeah, they were able to go to school, function in school, do things over there, and they're probably, let's see, my son was eight or nine, my daughter two years less. So that exposed them to kids who spoke Spanish. And that's important because that peer group is important, right? Rather than just, you know, it's the language of the old people, right, your parents, that's, you know, what they were associated with otherwise. So I think that was also something else that we also did purposefully. And then, you know, we also did charge them money if they spoke English in the house. So they would, you know, that it was always like, either Spanish or Japanese, or if it spoke money, and that, you know, once they get older, it got a little bit harder to implement that. But for a long time, you know, we charged them a quarter or something when they said something in English or something like that, right. So yeah, so those are the different things that we guys have done. And, you know I would read through them also, at night, in Spanish, I have these comic books I would read to them, which I've had since I was a kid in Spain, actually, which I would read to them in Spanish and my wife, we read them in Japanese. So you know, it takes, it's an act of will, you know, I mean, it is, you know, you have to make a conscious decision to do it. And, you know, as both me and my wife are comfortable speaking in the

language, I mean, I grew up speaking and she grew up speaking it's doable for us. Because you do have I think, you know, my personal opinion, you do have to feel honest, right? I mean, I feel honest, speaking to my children, as little kids and doing cutesy talk and all of that. You know, if you haven't had that experience, I think it would be dishonest to discuss it, you know, if you've been abroad, and you've dealt with little kids and you and you've built that, then I think you have it in you right, but you have to be honest with your kids. Right. So I think, you know, there are difficulties, I think that can come for people that can happen if you're trying to do that in a way that doesn't feel honest to you. Right? That's the difficulty I think. I'm not sure, you know, other generations in my family would be quite as able to do it. Because they've grown up in English, you know, so I think you know, their thing might be more Spanglish. And that's what they are, you know, that's what you have to recognize, you have to be what you are, right? And that's just the way it goes.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. Well, I think it's really important that you kind of mentioned to discuss that it is a privilege to have these opportunities, because not every family can do this. And when it works, it's amazing. But you can't just assume that everybody can do it, or has the time to. So I think it's important that we keep that in mind when we're talking about all these incredible opportunities and experiences we can give and help our children have. But finally, I think you've already kind of covered this, but just in celebration of multilingualism, can you give me one --

### **Manuel Fernández**

If I can interrupt you briefly, that privilege is one that I would support others having such as having, you know, education and languages at the elementary school level, which is where kids really kind of learn, you know, I mean, if you can do that we have an immersion school here in Eau Claire now. I mean, I, I've helped support that, because that's a great thing for everybody to have. I mean, I think having languages, obviously, I'm a language professor, right. But I think having languages just opens doors, I don't see how it does harm. I just don't see how it can harm. It opens doors, especially like Spanish, which is so cool. You know, I mean, not just Spanish. I mean, you know, Japan is a small country, but there's 125 million people. It's a wonderful culture also or any language. I mean, it just opens doors to ---

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And so why should we view language as a superpower? And I think you gave me so many reasons already. But if you have any nice bow that you could close it with? And you can give us a Spanish or an English or a both version, whatever you think.

### **Manuel Fernández**

Well, you know, I'm talking to you from Eau Claire and this is totally unrelated, but I'm bringing it in for a reason. We are the kubb capital of the United States. So probably we have the kubb tournament. I don't even know what kubb is, the game? We've had a tournament here for a number of years. And while the tagline for it is that code makes friends, right? I think you know, learning languages also, again, it opens doors, it makes friends. I mean, you can connect with people from all over. My daughter again, to give you more privilege, you know, she's able to

because of the technology that we have nowadays, right? She has a virtual friend in Chile, who she's learned about, you know, Chilean music from, right. I mean, this is great. That's fantastic. You know, I mean, it's just a wonderful world. If you can speak to people from other places and learn about what their experiences are. I think that's wonderful. You know, so yeah, I think languages and kubb they both make friends and I think that's a good thing.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. Well, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your perspective. And I know other people as well. So thank you and have a great day.

**Manuel Fernández**

Thank you.