

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Mason Gauthier, UW-Madison student preparing to go into Spanish education. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Mason Gauthier

Thank you so much for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So I would love to learn about your plan here at UW. So I'm going to bilingual ed, which we don't have a major for. And the major first stage education is kind of phasing out. So what does that like being in that last year? Are they changing the program? Is it kind of a different experience that has been in the past? What is kind of your plan here to go into your particular degree path?

Mason Gauthier

Well, for me, because I'm a sophomore, I had to kind of bump up the classes that I would have otherwise taken junior year to right now. So it was kind of like, quite a different plan. I guess like my study abroad I was supposed to do this year, but obviously I couldn't for a couple of reasons. But so the immersion experience, I'll just have to do like, as a senior, after my student teaching, which I'm doing, like, this semester is my first semester, my practicum. And then I'll do that all my junior year, and then I'll kind of have my senior year of classes that I just like, need to, I need to get my gen eds out of the way. And then I'll graduate after my senior year, and then get my, like teaching certification and everything by then.

Claire Darmstadter

Gotcha. And is this a program that's working in conjunction with the Spanish department? So you do like an education major, and then Spanish as separate as an additional major? How does that work?

Mason Gauthier

It's all come together into one degree. So my program is technically like world language, education, comma, Spanish. So I'm in the School of Ed. And I just take like, my Spanish classes, in addition to my education classes, obviously, but there are sometimes like, issues where, like, the Spanish major differs from like the language education majors, and there are some I like, prerequisites that I don't need to take for my Spanish degree. But I would have to take if I were like a Spanish major, and then that, like, implicates me when I'm trying to take upper level classes that I don't have these other prerequisites for. So it's kind of a lot to juggle sometimes.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I know that. I know that all too well. And can you just give us a more general background on your educational and linguistic background prior to coming to Madison? And what kind of, I guess exposure did you have to Spanish in the past? Was it something you grew up speaking? Or was it just kind of like a middle school/high school experience?

Mason Gauthier

Oh, it was definitely something that I did not grow up speaking. I started my Spanish classes when I was in seventh grade, I believe that was the earliest that my, like school district offered them. And then just from, like, right away, I knew I really liked it. And then my junior year, I started taking French as well. So I was kind of juggling both of them. And I didn't really know, like, what I wanted to do with them specifically, but I knew I wanted to do something with them. And then I eventually decided on teaching after I took an education class when I was in high school, but it's like, second and third languages, for me, are definitely something that have always occurred, mostly in an academic context, I guess.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And so when you added on that French, would you say it was easier to kind of begin learning that language because you had that Spanish background? And is pretty similar to French? Or was it actually more confusing, or it's like, okay, these words are pretty much the same thing in both languages, and they're just like, all mashing together in my brain.

Mason Gauthier

I think in terms of learning the actual, like, bones of the language, it was a lot easier, because there's a lot of things that I already understood in terms of like, I remember being in my, like, French one classes, and like my teacher describing gender. And that was something that like all my classmates, who were at, like, actually, all freshmen, were like, mind blown about, and I was like, Oh, that's, yeah, I get it. But I guess now I'm at a level where it's like, I use them both pretty frequently. So like, if I have a day where it's like, I'm trying to, like, a couple days ago, I was in my French class, like, a couple minutes before my lecture started. And I was reading an article for my Spanish class, just to get it out of the way. And that was crazy. My brain didn't know what to do for that.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and so then being someone who's not a native speaker of Spanish, but you're going into the field of teaching other people's Spanish How do you find confidence in your skills? Or are there things you do outside of class to practice or ways that you kind of reassure yourself that even if you don't know every single word, you're still competent to be in this position?

Mason Gauthier

Well, I think a lot about like, if you are the kind of person who is going into language education, you're someone who really appreciates knowing other languages and you really are like making an effort. In my opinion, you should be making an effort to live in the language to a certain extent. So I spend a lot of time like, outside of like, my classes and everything, like I watched Spanish TV, I listen to Spanish music, like it's to me at this point, just something that I feel like I've internalized to a point where like, I can interact with a lot of different like, media and other things in Spanish. So it is very much for me like a second language that I live in and I spend a lot of time with. So I think that's definitely a way that I like to assure myself that I can do this even though I'm not a native speaker.

Claire Darmstadter

And so speaking of media, you recently had a feature of your own on the UW School of Education media pages, talking about how you're going to take the Teacher Pledge, which for those who don't know, is basically in return for teaching Wisconsin for at least three years post graduation, you're going to have your junior and senior year, I guess, maybe sophomore, junior year for you covered tuition-wise. So can you share a little bit about why you're planning to stay in Wisconsin and kind of what you're thinking I'm doing post grad?

Mason Gauthier

Yeah, for sure. So I am a product of Wisconsin Public Schools. I feel very strongly about the value of a good well-funded public school and the impact it can have on an entire community. So for me, it was when I found out about the teacher pledge, I was super excited, because it was basically like it was what I was planning on doing anyway, it was I wanted to stay in Wisconsin, I wanted to teach in public schools. Just because I think, as someone who has spent so much time in a Wisconsin public school, and I understand the value of them, and I really wanted to be able to give back, because I feel like I would not be the person that I am today had I not like gone to public school my entire life. And that's something that I feel very strongly about.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you mentioned that you're probably a year ahead of everybody else. And so you're pretty young going into this program anyway. But also, there's a really interesting balance when you're a new teacher or a student teacher, because we come with sometimes the most recent and new ideas and studies and publications in education and language acquisition. And we're going into these classrooms where you might have teachers who have been there for 20-30 years, and they haven't really well down. But they might not be as privy to some of the newer theories and ideas. So it's a little bit awkward. And sometimes we might be scared to kind of voice our opinions, because we feel like oh my gosh, like they know it all. And they've been doing this for so long. But with that being said, Are there certain things that you've learned or that are really fundamentally important to you that no matter what you want to make sure you include in your teaching, whether it's inclusive language, or other theories or practices in education.

Mason Gauthier

I think I am in a unique position because I started, like in five years between starting Spanish and starting French, my school district really changed their tone about like, communicativity and comprehensibility in like, our language department. So the way I learned Spanish was very like, here's your book, here's your vocab list, we'll have a quiz next week. Good luck. And my French classes were very much like, oh, we're gonna watch a video, we're going to talk about it. And the teachers are going to talk; you're just gonna kind of try to make sense of it as much as you can. And I think because of that, my skill set in Spanish is very different from my skill set in French. So I definitely think that like, there's a place for both approaches. And I think something that I hope to incorporate in my teaching is trying to find that sweet spot of like, not necessarily,

like constant explicit grammar instruction, and not constant, like, I guess comprehensible would be the wrong word. But trying to find that balance of this is how it works. And this is how we're going to use it.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, yeah, because I know there is a big push right now, like you said, for comprehensible input. And that for a lot of people makes tons of sense. But I also know for someone like me, my security blanket is grammar. And so if I am unsure of what I want to say I kind of have that rolodex in my mind. And I can just kind of flip through the conjugations. And of course, that doesn't necessarily always lead to natural flow of production. But some students need that. And so I think it's important to recognize that what's trendy might not be the 100% best idea for everyone. And so finding a balance is really important. And so now looking at the UW-Madison community, obviously, within your major program, I'm pretty confident in saying that pretty much everyone is very supportive of linguistic diversity, but looking at the Madison campus more as a whole, do you feel like it reflects that similar attitude where UW-Madison is very supportive of individuals who might speak a non-English language? Or is it not maybe as hospitable as when you're in those language classes?

Mason Gauthier

Well, that's a good, a good question. I think in terms of diversity, linguistic diversity, I think UW is doing a pretty good job in the sense that like, I feel like I'm constantly being exposed to like a lot of different, like viewpoints of like people from all around the world in the sense that like, my Spanish professor, this semester, is Serbian. My French professor is Polish. So I feel like we have a really internationalized environment very globalized, like, learning community. So I would say yeah, I think that the University of Wisconsin is very — does make an effort to be linguistically inclusive. And I think that's something that students definitely benefit from. I feel like being able to see all these different points of view from all over the world is very enriching.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. And so the last question that I asked all my guests is we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason in English, in Spanish, in a mix of both, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to be multilingual.

Mason Gauthier

I think reading is a superpower also. So I think anytime that you can read something that is otherwise completely unavailable to you, if you only speak one language, that's a superpower, it's a superpower to be able to take something that to someone who doesn't think that language means nothing. I was just actually watching an interview with [unclear]. And she was talking about the one time she was at a hotel, and she turned on the TV and there was a news channel in Arabic, and she was staring at the subtitles in Arabic. And she said, I don't know why I am staring at it so long, there's nothing no matter how long I started, I'm not gonna be able to read it. So I think that's a superpower to be able to decode something like that. That's completely unavailable to so many other people unless you make the effort to, to learn it and figure it out.

Claire Darmstadter

That is such a good point. Right is bilingual, it's biliterate, it's bicultural. There are many aspects to language. And I think that the reading component is really helpful and important, like you mentioned. Thank you so much for chatting with me. I think your perspective is really interesting. I am now a little bit jealous that I did not figure out how to kind of rope the same program in the way that you did. But I think it's going to be a great experience for you. And I'm really excited for the students to get to have you as a teacher in a couple years down the road.

Mason Gauthier

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me.