

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I'm joined by Meg Kumar, who is not only a Spanish teacher at Sun Prairie High School, but was one of my former Spanish teachers. So thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat!

Meg Kumar

It's a pleasure.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So first, it'd be great if you could just give us a little bit of background. So a brief overview of your linguistic and education background, and maybe a little bit down your path of how you got into being a language teacher.

Meg Kumar

Sure. So I started learning Spanish when I was in seventh or eighth grade. And I initially was actually really drawn to German, but a friend of mine was taking a Spanish class, so I signed up for Spanish as well. And I don't know, something clicked in me, I guess, in probably ninth grade or so. And I just realized I really had a passion for it, it was really exciting. I enjoyed learning it and I wanted to know more. So I really kind of took every opportunity I could find when I was in high school to practice and learn, and knew that I wanted to major in Spanish in college. So that's what I did, not really having a plan for what I wanted to do with my future. I just kind of went with it. And I thought I'll go wherever it takes me. I know that there are lots of opportunities for using language, and especially in the United States, Spanish is huge. So it was gonna take me somewhere. And I ended up tutoring English to people from all over the world. And kind of in doing that, and in learning Spanish, and then starting to learn French, I just got really interested in language in general. After college, I still didn't completely know what I wanted to do. But I knew I wanted to improve my French skills. So I went and taught English in France for about seven months. And then when I came back, I was kind of hopping around in a bunch of different types of positions, some translations, some interpreting. And it was all very corporate feeling, and not quite what I was going for. I kind of wanted to get into human rights or a nonprofit or helping people in some way. And then a friend of mine told me about a position that opened up as an educational assistant, working in the EL department at the local district. So I took that opportunity, and in getting to sit in different classrooms and seeing different teaching styles and the passion that teachers brought to their classroom, and just like the opportunity to get kids excited about something that you're excited about, really inspired me. And I realized I wanted to be a Spanish teacher and share my passion for language with students. And so I went back to school and got my teaching license, and it is absolutely the best decision I've ever made.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And so you kind of mentioned how you probably weren't thinking you're going to go into education when you were in college. And there's a lot of people who might be unsure if they want to go into language education, or seeing everything that has gone down during COVID, it's like, wow, teachers have it really rough. I'm not sure I want to go into that career. We obviously

know, there are some things that are hard, there's downsides or struggles, but what are a few good things and reasons why people should consider going into language education?

Meg Kumar

So I think any teacher that you talk with, if you were to ask them if they enjoy teaching, I guess like, you know, bureaucracy aside, and you know, professional development and meetings, and all of these things that fall onto our plate throughout the day, all of that aside, when you get to the core of the profession, which is being with students, and helping to inspire students, and, and really teaching, they'll tell you it is the best thing they could possibly be doing. Nobody that I've ever met who's a teacher isn't passionate about what they do. And I think, yes, it's incredibly difficult. It's very challenging, but it's also incredibly rewarding. Getting to see those moments of understanding that students have when something clicks, getting to create moments of exploration with your students. I think there's something really beautiful about being a teacher that you can't get in many other professions. So I would encourage people to go into education. I know it's really difficult. We're seeing all of the difficulties with it kind of more prominently with COVID. But the entire world is struggling right now. And everything is difficult right now. So I would say don't be disheartened. It's a wonderful profession, you are going to be challenged, you are going to be exhausted at the end of the day, but it's so worth it.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And now, a lot of teachers, mostly at the upper level, you know, secondary, middle school and high school, kids will often ask, well, why do we have to be learning this? I don't care. I don't want to know calculus. And there's kind of a scale, right? So if you're an English literature major, and you're learning calculus, maybe not so applicable, but for most people, language actually is very applicable to their lives. However, most kids go into language courses not ever really thinking that they're going to walk away proficient, if you're in like Spanish 1,2,3, even the upper levels, it's like, I might like it, I might have a passion for the language, like you said, you really enjoyed it. But the expectation in a lot of schools in the US is that you're going to graduate and you're probably not going to be very proficient. And so knowing that, like you said, there's tons of bureaucratic issues, there's tons of curriculum and other humps and hurdles that we have to jump over. If those things weren't in place, what are some ways that we can maybe change the way we do language education, so we have better outcomes that are more motivating and encouraging and effective for both teachers and students?

Meg Kumar

That's a really good question. I think, before anything else, we need to start language earlier. The countries that have so much success with students learning language and becoming proficient in a language is because they start earlier. So I think if we could get more programs, more bilingual programs, more immersion programs in the elementary level, that would do wonders for our level of proficiency upon graduation. If that is impossible, or doesn't happen in the next few years, you know, unlikely to happen in the next few years. I would say, proficiency wise, it's hard to become proficient, if you haven't started earlier, but you can, if you have that passion, have that drive. Not everybody has that, right. So I think it's important to make sure that the lessons that we are teaching our students, the activities that we are, having our

students engage in are meaningful to the students. So it may be they're not passionate about language learning, but you find what they are passionate about. And you help them to explore that through language, and giving them opportunities to see that language is used for everything. And that the language that they're learning has a benefit to their life and what they want to do with their career. So I think making those personal connections is huge.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, right, language should be fun, and there's so many ways to make it fun. And I think it's important to remind ourselves that. So you as well as myself, we both did not grow up with that opportunity to be in a bilingual program, we started to learn Spanish, and you learned French, kind of later on in life, and it's a little bit more difficult. And so definitely, you can feel really proficient, you can feel bilingual, by most accounts, you can feel like, yeah, I have a really good manage and understanding of this language, but then you might be in class one day, and a kid says, goes, *¿Cómo se dice...?* and then they'll say a word. And you're like, I have absolutely no idea how I would say that. Because that's just such a nice word that I never learned in my schooling I never experienced before. So it's kind of that moment where it's like, do I admit to the kids that I don't know, do I make up something that might be similar? How do you kind of manage that, as somebody who knows that you're not a native speaker? There's areas where you sometimes might be confused? How do you approach that with your students and making it okay to not know everything, but still having authority as a teacher?

Meg Kumar

It's an interesting balance. I think, first of all, everything in the classroom comes down to relationships with students. So I think before anything else, you have to be vulnerable with your students to start with you. You have to let your students know that you're a human being and that you're learning and growing together. That the teacher doesn't know everything. And I think students these days are I guess more willing to question what the teacher says and ask, *Well, why is it that way? Or can you explain that to me a little bit more, I don't understand or that doesn't make sense to me.* And I think that the ability for a student to feel comfortable doing that in the classroom is hugely important. And then for the teacher to feel like they can be vulnerable with their students. So relationship is number one. Number two, I would say is to remind your students that language is a journey, and it's not something they're going to be perfect at, at a certain time. I think a lot of language learners have this idea that and, you know, some programs on the internet kind of perpetuate this, this idea that you can know everything about a language in six months, or learn Spanish in one month, you know, or, well, by the time I graduate high school, I'll be fluent. And the reality is that it's all just a journey. And there will be different portions of your journey where you feel more comfortable than you do at others. And so there's a lot a lot of stuff that I don't know, I don't live in another country that I live in a country that speaks Spanish, so I'm not constantly surrounded by it. And also, there's moments when we just forget words, right? As an English speaker, there are plenty of times when I've forgotten a word. So what I like to do is use those moments for a couple of different ways. One, to teach the students circumlocution. So how to talk around a word because when you're in another country, and you don't know that word, you're going to have to be able to either pick up another word from your vocabulary that gets your meaning across, or be able to talk around it and explain

what you're trying to say. Number two, teaching them the skills to look up those words on their own. without falling back on a translator, knowing that translators don't always give you exactly what you're looking for, you could end up saying something really embarrassing. So being able to read a dictionary, understanding what it means when there's a *v* next to a word or an *n* next to a word. And then lastly, just just being honest, and not pretending that I know how to say it. Just saying, you know what, I have no idea. Let's look it up together.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. Yeah, it takes a lot of bravery to do that, right. sometimes easier said than done. I really appreciate all the answers and all the input that you've given us and all your perspective that you've shared. Before we sign off, can you just give us one reason why it's a good thing and why we should celebrate multilingualism?

Meg Kumar

Absolutely. I mean, I think everybody should be required to learn another language because learning another language I say, there's a quote out there somewhere that says it's to have another language is to have a second soul. And I truly believe that every language that you add to your belt, you are opening your understanding to the world a little bit more, you're able to understand other cultures in ways that you didn't before. You can't with just one language. And it opens up your travel opportunities, honestly, anywhere you go. If you can use the language, you'll improve your experience.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you so much. I appreciate you taking a couple minutes. I know you're super busy. So I really appreciate it, but have a great day.

Meg Kumar

Thank you. Thank you for having me.