

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Hi, everybody. I'm joined today by Michaela Miller, Sun Prairie ESL and heritage Spanish teacher. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today.

**Michaela Miller**

No problem. Happy to be here.

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Yeah. So before talking a little bit about what you do at present, can you just give a brief overview of your education and linguistic background and maybe how you got your way to teaching at Sun Prairie?

**Michaela Miller**

Sure, so I studied International Studies and Spanish at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And from there, I did an internship in Perú teaching English for a year. I came home and needed a job. And I found a job as a bilingual assistant in Cardinal Heights Upper Middle School in Sun Prairie, which was my old high school, actually. So it's close to home. And I did that job for two years, my second year, I pursued my teaching license through CESA-6 educational agency in Oshkosh. That took about 10 months. And then I had my teaching license, and I got a job at Prairie View Middle School, and I taught there for three years. And then I was moved to the high school to teach the heritage Spanish speakers class, as well as the English language learners in the high school. And that's how I got there.

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Yeah, so heritage language classes are becoming more popular, but they're not super common in Wisconsin. So can you just explain a little bit about the purpose of them? What a typical day might look like, pre and post COVID, I suppose that would probably give us the best context?

**Michaela Miller**

So, I was not the person that advocated for it. There were colleagues before me who had been advocating for the heritage courses for years for Hmong, and Spanish. And the reasoning behind that was, is because our Hmong and Spanish speaking students, you know, traditionally don't feel as welcome and comfortable in schools, because their culture and their language is not validated, it's not encouraged. They don't have the opportunity, especially in elementary and middle school to speak their language really, and actually be fluent in their native language, they tend to lose it, which is really unfortunate. So I do think it's kind of late in the game to be having a heritage course. But it's better than nothing. And I think at this point, it's more of a cultural identity saver. The kids that come in, they learn about, you know who they are, and they feel comfortable, because they're around kids who are like them. And it's just like a community, it's helping them feel connected. And they get to, they get to learn about, you know, where they come from, and who they are, and use the language that is their part of their heritage as well. So it's like, it's a beautiful experience for them. And for me as a teacher of that class, and we learned so much from each other. And so I think that's ultimately the goal is to build that community. Their own, like, identity and pride and who they are.

### **CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

For sure. And so as a non-native speaker, who probably learned Spanish in a manner a little bit different than your students, how do you celebrate the differences in vocabulary, grammar, slang, all those things that you may not be as familiar with, or, you know, not have learned in your typical, like school college classes, while still helping them develop those communication skills that you might be more attuned to, or have that academic basis in so we can support their language, but also kind of give them additional tools that might be more requested or desired by individuals or organizations beyond high school or outside of their little communities?

### **Michaela Miller**

Yeah, so, um, I have experience with Peruvian slang, I suppose. None of my students are Peruvian, so I don't typically use that language. But I have picked up a lot of the Spanish I mean, sorry, Mexican, Mexican slang. And so I have picked that up. And it's now part of my vocabulary. And I have other students from more Central American countries and, or Puerto Rico even. And I often ask, like, do you use the same word in Puerto Rico? Or is it a different word? And I often ask their opinion, or ask, they're like, I asked for their input a lot and like, how would you say that or like, am I saying it correctly? Am I using it correctly? So I do ask them questions because like they know I'm not a native speaker. I speak very well. And I think that's why they buy in. I also have a lot of experience living abroad and with you know, people that are Hispanic, I have lots of friends, I've, you know, I've traveled quite a bit. And so they are interested in my perspective a lot. And so I just, you know, I'm really honest with them, and I open up and, you know, let them share. And we have, you know, I say, we have a lot to learn from each other, I have connections with a lot of people, I've brought in three different guest speakers this year, during the pandemic, which is a unique opportunity that we wouldn't be able to do normally had a speaker from Brazil, who speak Spanish to talk about like Afro Latinos, I had another I had a parent come like come in, in quotation marks, via Zoom to talk about you know, colorism, because that's not something I feel comfortable talking about as being a white woman, not that well being white, I should say. And so like, bringing in those diverse perspectives is kind of how I leverage, you know, my lack of experience in other areas. And so, you know, I had an Indigenous person from Chile come in and talk about, you know, the indigenous perspective of colonialism, because again, I don't, you know, I have my own opinions and strong beliefs about it. But again, I want to bring someone in who's like authentically from that identity to like, talk about it, because it means so much more. And so that's kind of how I leverage like, me not being a native speaker, me not being a native or Indigenous person, or me not being African descent, like, I bring in those perspectives as best I can. And I'm just honest, like, you know, like, we're all learning together. So and you know, everyone's open to share, and I hope the kids feel that way, too.

### **CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

For sure. And so what I've kind of heard, and what I'm understanding is, you might not have as much oversight, or you might have more flexibility in what you're able to do in your class, because it's just kind of you as the teacher. But I would imagine that also comes with sometimes a degree of stress, or like, *Oh, my gosh, I don't know what to do, because I can do whatever I*

*want and that's a little bit overwhelming.* So are there communities that you go to whether like on Facebook or professional organizations, or ways that you can kind of help get support from other heritage language speakers and teachers?

**Michaela Miller**

Absolutely, my colleague recommended a conference for teachers in Minnesota, Minnesota Conference of Teaching and Language Cultures. I don't know if I said it right. But it's like five letters, MCTLC, something, something. And that was a very awesome conference to go to. It's all language teachers, whether it's ELL, or heritage language teachers, there's a lot of both. And that was great, because I could attend different seminars based on you know, which ones applied to be the most. So that's a really cool resource. There's also this fabulous book that was published called *En Comunidad* which I think should be in every, at least Spanish heritage teacher's toolkit. I am in a Facebook group for teachers of Spanish for Heritage Speakers, I believe it's called, and there's a lot of professors, authors, just teachers like me, in the group. And so we get a lot of really good resources posted, and I'm checking all the time, and I've gotten some great ideas from there. And so that's kind of what I go off of, and we post our questions, concerns, and then you kind of get an idea of the broader field. And, you know, what are the best practices? Where's the language, where is heritage language going, what direction? And so that's really nice to, to, you know, have that kind of guide and know that you're, you're doing, you know, you're going in the right direction, and you're not doing it all wrong, you know?

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

For sure, yeah, I will link a couple of those things that you mentioned down in the transcripts, and I'll find out what letters actually make up that Minnesota conference and people can check it out. I guess just in closing, can you just give us one reason why we should celebrate multilingualism and if you want to say in Spanish or you want to say English or both, whatever you choose to best express yourself.

**Michaela Miller**

We should celebrate multilingualism because one, it's just such a huge part of someone's identity being the multilingual aspect. And a lot of these kids are unable to communicate effectively with their parents. And that's troubling, you know, when they don't speak the same language anymore. And so there's a lot of communication breakdown. And you know, when kids can maintain their native language, I feel like they do better in school, they have more confidence. They have a greater skill set, going forward after they graduate and go on in the world. They seem to be more proud of themselves. So I've noticed that kids who are more fluent, they're not ashamed. And it's unfortunate, you know, when the kid feels ashamed because they've lost their language, but they're also too ashamed to like, practice it. They've reached that point. And I feel like the more we embrace, you know, their cultures and their languages, you know, the better, the more success they're going to have. So that's why.

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Thank you so much for your input. And I know so many people have heard about heritage language courses, but they're not super sure what it means or what opportunities exist, so I think it'll be super helpful. So just thank you for coming and speaking with me today. And I hope you have a good rest of your year.

**Michaela Miller**

Thank you.