

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody I am joined today by Mike Ippolito who is a cybersecurity analyst with UW-Madison, and even though that doesn't have a ton to do with language education, he is the parent of two kids who went through Sun Prairie's language program and also grew up in countries outside the US that did not speak English as their primary language. Thanks for taking a few minutes to chat!

**Mike Ippolito**

Yeah, not a problem at all!

**Claire Darmstadter**

So growing up in a military family, you had a pretty unique childhood that had you constantly moving around the world and as a result you had exposure to a lot of different cultures and languages. Could you just give us an overview of the different places you lived and what your schooling and language experiences were like?

**Mike Ippolito**

Sure. So my father was in the army so we moved around every 2-4 years on average, and for example I was born in Germany, then we moved stateside for a while, then we went to Holland and went to Japan for a couple years, and then I finished up my high school career in Belgium. So during that time obviously when I was a little kid I didn't pick up any German, because I was two years old when we left there, but in Holland we were at a NATO post and as part of the requirements of the Canadians that were also on that post, the Canadians required French as an education program. And because there weren't that many Canadians there, they had a bunch of openings in the French immersion program. So when I was in third and fourth grade, I took part in this immersion program. So for those two years, that's all I spoke. They taught us every single thing that we learned in French. We did our multiplication tables and stuff like that in French. We learned a lot about Canadian culture, so that's where I picked up my French. Obviously when you're in a foreign country you pick up a little bit of words from that host country. I don't remember a lot of Dutch at all, but in Japan we went to this program called Head Start where you kind of pick up some phrases like *where's the restroom?*, how to get to a telephone, back when they had payphones and stuff, so I remember some of those. And some of our teachers were of Japanese descent, so they kind of taught us those things. And some of the students we went to school with were also of Japanese descent, and that's where we learned the phrases that you're not supposed to say in school, and those are the ones I remember the most. So that's kind of my background there. And then in Belgium I started taking German classes from a German teacher, and she was an actual German native. And then in college I took a lot of German courses also because I was thinking at one point that I wanted to move there. So that's kind of my basic background. As far as my kids go, they went to Sun Prairie like you said and they basically had the same experience as you did. They took an Intro to World Languages course in 6th grade where you learn Arabic and a few other ones.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yep I can still count to 10!

**Mike Ippolito**

Can you? I don't think they can do that. So yeah, they did that, like one language per quarter, but that was their real first exposure to languages. And then I can't remember if they started taking Spanish in 7th grade or if they didn't start until 9th grade, but then they took Spanish all through high school. My daughter wasn't a big fan of taking language courses, so we told her that she didn't have to take Spanish again her senior year. But then another thing I wanted to do for them because of the influence of China in trade and politics and everything else, I thought it might be a good experience for them to learn some Mandarin. So, I decided to basically force them to take some Mandarin lessons along with me, so the three of us went, but that only lasted about 4 months before I got tired of fighting the fight because they really didn't like that.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So I always wonder how much a parent should push their kids to learn a language if they resist or don't show an interest. We know in general, in most circumstances, the younger you can get a kid learning a language the better, and the easier it will be, so maybe later on in their life it will be more enjoyable since it's not so hard when they're 25 trying to learn a language for the first time. But I would also imagine that something like Chinese is something really hard to approach if you grow up in suburban Wisconsin and you don't have tons of opportunities to have contact with the language. Maybe Spanish for example, you may have Dora on TV, you might have some words you hear in the community, it's a little bit more approachable. But something like Chinese just seems like a really hard thing to dive into and a really hard adjustment. You talked about not wanting to force them anymore. How do you make that decision about when to push and when to be like *Ok, I realize this isn't their thing, and that's okay.*

**Mike Ippolito**

Yeah, that's a great question. And I struggled with it because I really do believe that getting kids to learn just like you said, the younger they start learning, the easier it is. And not only that, but if you learn a language, it's easier to learn another language, and another after that, just because there's something with the brain with how it decides to absorb that information and how it learns. So that was my real question. And I wish I had an answer for you about when do you stop pushing a kid to try to do things, but I was also fighting, I wanted them to take piano lessons to, so it was a double fight there, so I decided to let one of them slide, and that was the one, because I figured they were already taking Spanish, so at least they would have some exposure.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And I've been reflecting about my own personal experience growing up in Sun Prairie, and I would imagine they had a little bit of similar experience where we just have the pretty standard run-of-the-mill Spanish program, where you have Spanish intro class, then you have 1-5, then you may have AP senior or junior year, but for a lot of kids, me included, with those classes teachers are great, they are super kind, they are doing everything they can, but when I walk away at graduation it's like *Ok, I can say a couple things. I might know a little bit. I may be able to ask where the bathroom is in a different country, but I don't feel really confident in my skills.*

And as someone who you talked about being in the immersion program and how you lived in lots of different countries and I'm sure you were exposed to a lot of different ways of educating children, just both in general and in languages, is there something that you think maybe the US or Sun Prairie specifically should strive for to change language education, or are we so entrenched in our ways that we can't really make this radical change, it's not really realistic for what we are doing right now.

### **Michael Ippolito**

Yeah, that's a great question, and I can think of a couple things that can be done. First, it really has to start a lot earlier than 6th grade. There's been study after study that you probably know about, that if you can reach the kids by like the third grade at least, there's something about how their brains are developing at that time that will make it a lot easier for them to retain. And then second of all, the way that it's taught I believe can be improved. Like you said, the teachers are great, we had no problems with them, but it's a lot of memorization, there's not a lot of, I guess it's not an immersive experience. When you have a teacher that refuses to say things in English, for example, and forces you to try to think in that language, then it becomes a lot more natural for you to start thinking in that language, as opposed to translating it in your head. And that's really the key is trying to get kids to think in the language as opposed to translating from their native language. And the last thing, you know this is probably icing on the cake. Those first two things are pretty important. But if you can get a native speaker to teach you as opposed to an American teacher that learned the language later, then you have that native pronunciation, so the kids are used to hearing exactly the native speaker's accent.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And one thing that can be a little bit difficult to sell these programs, there tons of factors, but one thing is that parents may be resistant because they feel like *I can't help*. Like I don't speak that second language, and if we're really going to dive in and commit to this, well I don't speak Spanish, I don't speak Chinese, I don't speak French, I don't know how to help my student. Even with your own children, you were learning Chinese alongside them as a beginner, they didn't take French, so you couldn't really use your french to help them. Do you have any advice for parents or ideas about how you can support a student taking a language class, even if you don't speak that language?

### **Mike Ippolito**

I don't know if I have any advice, but I will say I had that same experience with trying to help them with their math because people in my generation, we didn't have the "new" math like you guys had, and trying to help them to do their math homework was probably similar to what you're talking about with helping with Spanish. But I do think that, I mean learning a language and doing any other kind of work that a parent doesn't necessarily know about isn't necessarily about the content, but helping them just be a better learner in general. I know that is kind of a way to weasel out of the question, but that's kind of my take on it. And really the other thing is, when you are living in Europe, you kind of almost have to use your language skills because all the countries are so jammed up together, whereas here, there's not a lot of call for, well, except

for there is a lot of Spanish spoken, so there is that, but I don't think it is as necessary I guess to learn those languages.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well thank you so much for chatting with me. I think your perspective and background will be both interesting and also helpful to those who are closely involved with language education, both educators but also perhaps fellow parents, even students maybe, and I hope the cold is going okay. For those of you that are listening to this in probably June when I publish this, we are very jealous because right now it is in the negatives, so I hope you're holding up well, but thanks for taking a few minutes to speak with me.

**Mike Ippolito**

Yeah, not a problem. Any time!

**Claire Darmstadter**

Great, thank you!