

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Sabeel Samrah, senior at Sun Prairie High School. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me. I'm excited to learn a little bit about your language journey.

**Sabeel Samrah**

I'm excited to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes. So first would be great if you could just give me an overview of your educational and linguistic background, and if you think language is going to figure into any future college or career aspirations.

**Sabeel Samrah**

Yes, so I'm like, where do I start? Well, my first language, technically speaking, it's actually Arabic, even though I'm not very fluent in it anymore, because you use it or you lose it. So I grew up speaking Arabic and English, and my neighbor spoke Spanish. So that was where I first got introduced to the language. And then my first actual language course was in middle school. And it was a Spanish class. And so I was at Whitehorse Middle School, and that's part of the Madison Metropolitan School District. And so I took Spanish 1 there, I took Spanish 2 at La Follette. And then I was at some very high school for Spanish three. And then when I went to Madison College, they actually placed me back in a Spanish to class. Because you have to test into each of their classes. So I took Spanish 2 and 3 at Madison College. And so far, I'm just gonna stop there, because my schedule is kind of packed.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. Do you think that your linguistic abilities are viewed as something that's an additive part of your identity; is the Madison area pretty hospitable speakers of non English languages, or does it kind of depend on what language is being spoken or the context in which it is being spoken?

**Sabeel Samrah**

I would say definitely depends on the context, for sure. Because there are some people who, like how do I phrase this? Well, when you go to a hospital, for example, so my grandma, her first language is Arabic, but she also knows French, German, Dutch, like 12 other languages. But like, when you get into like, specific specifics, and like medical terminology, those are the types of things where my mom usually comes in, and she's like, okay, like translating between them. But on days that my mom doesn't come, like, I usually hear my grandma come back, and she's just like, the translator wasn't very good there. And that was like a difficulty. But in other places, like if I go to a store, and I'll start speaking like Arabic to my mom and tell her like, Mom, I want this specific thing that — I don't know if there's anything in Arabic that I don't know the name of an English, labneh is actually one of these things. The official English term for it is dehydrated yogurt. So it's kind of like it's kind of a weird thing to say it in English. So I always tell my mom like, Momo, if you're going to the Turkish store, to the international store, can you please give me some Labneh? Because it's just so hard to say it in English. But like, it's not like if I start

talking in Arabic, no one's gonna fight me about it most of the time because they don't really like that I'm talking to someone in Arabic. They're like, okay, she's doing her own thing, whatever, mumbo jumbo.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And so for you with Arabic, you obviously said it's not something that you feel entirely fully proficient in. But, you said you speak with your family. Is it a pretty effortful process where you're working to refine your literacy skills, or do you need to make an effort on a continual basis to learn and practice the language? Or is it just you speak at home, it comes naturally, you don't really have to think about it before you say anything?

### **Sabeel Samrah**

It's a little bit of both. I actually have a really funny story. When I went to Egypt, and let's see, it was not last summer, but the one before that, I think it was 2019. So I was there. We had this really big family gathering for my sister's 20th birthday. And one of my mom's uncle's was there, and he was telling me how I need to learn Arabic. And he was like talking to me in English. And it was really like, kind of broken English, I guess. And so I went to my mom after he had finished giving me this lecture. And I was like, Mom, I don't think he likes me. And my mom talked to him, and then he comes back to me, and he started apologizing in English. And so I told him, انا افهم اللغة العربية, which means I understand Arabic, you can talk to me in Arabic, because I'm going to understand what you're saying, I can't promise you I'll respond. So I explained that to him, but it was like it was everyone there was really welcoming afterwards. I was just like, yeah, you can speak to me in Arabic, but I will not speak back very, like very fluently. One of the biggest problems I have, actually is that every week my family is a girl. So I'll go over to like my aunt's house, and I'll start speaking to her husband and I'll accidentally give him like a female verb. And my mom is just like, no, don't do that. So that's the biggest problem I faced. But like, other than that, it comes slowly, but naturally, yeah.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, I think that's pretty similar to a lot of individuals who are considered perhaps heritage speakers where they have really strong receptive skills. But the production's a little bit harder, because grounded by the language necessarily like a 24/7 basis. So looking at Spanish, that was a very different type of language acquisition. Can you talk a little bit about your experience in a fairly run-of-the-mill High School Spanish programs? We love our teachers at Sun Prairie, right. But most students leave high school nowhere near proficient, despite spending upwards of like six years, studying the language. So what may kind of contribute to this? Is there anything you would vastly change about the Sun Prairie system or the Madison College program that you participated in?

### **Sabeel Samrah**

I would say, Okay, well, the Madison College program was definitely a lot more rigorous than the Sun Prairie program. Which no hate to MMSD, but Sun Prairie was definitely better than some of the teachers they had there. And I think one of the biggest problems is that, like, they say that once you reach Spanish like three or four, you should be speaking totally Spanish in class all

the time. But what that does is that just makes some kids just go silent. They just don't say anything in English, and they don't say anything at all. And so I think that's problematic, because when I was in the Spanish three course at Madison College, I'll say something in English, like, I'll say something in Spanish. And then like, I'll have like an English word here or there. And one of my teachers, she was just like, *why is it that you say something in English while you're speaking in Spanish?* And I'm like, it's hard for me sometimes to translate from Arabic to English to Spanish. But it's like, I don't know how to say this. But it's because we want proficiency, but then our proficiency standard is like, woah, compared to where it probably should be. So when you go to college, and my college teacher, she was just like, I had two of them. And they both spoke very fluent Spanish. They're both ran international trips, and things like that. And they're like, yeah, so when you go on international trips, you're gonna learn so much more language than you ever will in a classroom setting. Because now you're surrounded by people who are speaking the language. And now you have a place to actually apply the language that you're speaking rather than just in the classroom. Or for some people, they might get the chance to apply it at work. I think that's kind of one of the problems that we have. We're not actively like holding conversations in Spanish as often as we should be.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. I think also, what I've noticed is that kids come into the language classes with a bunch of different rationales or reasons for pursuing it, right. So you might have some where they're there because they want to speak the language, there might be some heritage speakers, or maybe some people just want the credits. And so I remember like, personally, we would have a couple days where I was like, okay, we're going to travel to Spain. And so we're gonna talk in Spanish the whole time, you're going to pretend like you're at an airport. And some kids just weren't speaking Spanish, it would kind of fall apart. And once your peers start speaking English, it looks kind of awkward if you're the only one speaking Spanish. And so when you have a classroom community that doesn't necessarily all rally behind the language, whether it's Spanish, whether it's French, German, Hmong, whatever language you want to talk about, it can be really difficult when there's not that supportive community around you, because our peers affect a lot of our behaviors. And so like you said, it's hard to get that conversation flowing on a constant basis, especially when you might have classes for like, 45 minutes. And it's like, by the time you get through instructions, and kids go to the bathroom and everything, the class is almost done. So it can become very difficult.

So the last question that I asked everybody is we tell little kids all the time, that's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, if you can boil it down to one, you can answer in English, in Spanish, in Arabic, a mix of three, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to be multilingual?

### **Sabeel Samrah**

I think it is a superpower to be multilingual because you have so many more people you can connect with. And we also tell kids that teamwork is one of the greatest things that you can do. You have to put a team effort if you want everything to be successful most of the time. And so when you have all these languages, you have all these personalities, different people. And just

you can just make yourself a bigger team basically. So that's why it's a superpower to speak more than one language.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well thank you so much I so appreciate you chatting with me a little bit. I know that we knew each other in high school, but I didn't necessarily know about your language background. So it was really interesting for me to learn that I know all the listeners will be really appreciative of everything you had to share as well. So I hope we have a great rest of your school year and a great rest of your day.

**Sabeel Samrah**

Thank you and best of luck with your project.