

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody. I'm joined today by Sandra Descourtis, PhD candidate in Second Language Acquisition and a graduate teaching assistant in French here at UW Madison. And thanks so much for joining me today.

**Sandra Descourtis**

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, thanks for being here. So most of your life, you have lived in France, which gives you a super unique perspective on language in the US, could you just share a little bit of background about what your experience with language and education growing up was like, and maybe just a bit of the general philosophy of languages and multilingualism at the school you attended, or like in society in general, when you were growing up?

**Sandra Descourtis**

Whoa, okay. A lot. That's a good question. Okay. So when I grew up in France, you know, in France, we're not very good at languages. Or maybe we're better now. But growing up, I started learning German when I was 12. So you need to choose a first language at 12, back in the day, so I chose German. And then two years after that, you have to do English. So I started English. And then when I went to high school, you need to choose either you want to do science or more humanities, social branch. And so I choose the humanities one. And so you have to choose a third language. And so I did Spanish that time. So, I did German for a long time, all my middle school. And I can't say anything in German, now. We did English and English was really bad. Like the teachers were not really good. And we did mostly stuff that was pretty useless. Like, Brian is in a kitchen. Oh, it's raining. I need my umbrella. So that was pretty bad. So I was not very into languages. When I was younger, I think I feel like my teachers didn't give me any -- I was not eager to learn because they were not. I don't want to say they were not good teachers. Because I know how hard it is to be a teacher and especially where I grew up. It's a difficult area. So, but, well, yeah, I was not very interested in and nobody in France, at that time, really spoke any other languages. We were not, you know, you we just were not into this. But then I started thinking about other stuff and wanted to maybe explore more countries and cultures. And so I wanted to learn English. And obviously, my English was really bad. So I had to, you know, I started watching movies and TV shows in English and stuff like this.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure.

**Sandra Descourtis**

And I went many times in the US or in other countries where I had to speak English because that was the only language that could make people understand. You know, like, if you go to Thailand, there's no way I could speak Thai, so I had to speak English. And they were kind of speaking English too. So that was an example. Well, and then I decided to change my job. And I needed to be more proficient in English. So I went, I had some friends living in Tucson, Arizona.

And so I went to a specific branch that's called center for English as a second language. And so I did a three month intensive program there to learn English. And I was just immersed with other people from anywhere in the world except France. And so I had to speak English all the time. And I was living with friends who did not speak French. So I learned English, and one of my teachers there was a German speaking English, perfectly. And I just thought it was so cool to be in this class, with so many different people from everywhere in the world, with this German teacher teaching us English and English culture, and sharing all those languages and kids all together. And that's the day I decided I wanted to do this and I wanted to be a French as a foreign language teacher.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

So yeah, that is so interesting, because I think you often think of the European model, which is a very general you know, concept to apply to the entire continent, but you think like, oh, in Europe, they're all so fluent in all these different languages and they love and embrace language education. And it's interesting that in France, it was a little bit different and it seems like the way languages are approached in France even though we talked about the different requirements and levels, it seems a little bit more similar to the US often. And especially in Wisconsin, I know we have like the French immersion school in Milwaukee. But most kids who take French in Wisconsin will start it and maybe sixth grade will do French 1,2,3,4,5 or AP, maybe, and then they'll leave graduation, and they can say like, "Where's the bathroom?" and ask a couple basic things. But there's not that really strong proficiency. And so it can be kind of frustrating for both the students and the teachers, because they put so much time into this, but then what they get out of it doesn't seem to match the level of commitment and all the hard work that is required. So do you think there's a reason why we are still continuing with programs like this if we can see that it doesn't necessarily yield super strong results? Is it just that we're so stuck in our ways? Or? I don't know. Do you have any thoughts on that?

### **Sandra Descourtis**

But I will say that there is a matter of motivation, and of purpose to do it. Like, like, I'm teaching French, I'm a TA for the French department. And when you teach 101, 102, you know, the first semester, second semester, most of the students are here, because it's a requirement. And most of the languages most of the program requires 1,2,3,4 semesters of language. And then, I don't know, I feel like students are just doing it because they have to. And it's another thing to do, another class on top of other other classes, you know, there is no real motivation, no real goal, to learn that language. When you go to the upper level, well, yeah, some students are just doing it because they love it, or because they want to do a double major or certificate or something. But I think if you're not motivated, you're not learning. And that's this thing, like, if you're doing a language, because it's required, and you're doing it for the grades, okay, so you have an exercise to do, I'm going to do this exercise, I'm going to get an A, this is what I want, because I need to graduate, then you're not really learning, you know, you're learning that concept at that moment, for this exercise. But then as soon as it's over, you forget about it. Because whatever. I think the motivation is one thing. The other thing is how we teach, obviously, and I'm not judging anybody, because it's super hard to teach. But it depends how you teach, you know, if you teach just by learning grammar rules by heart, it could be boring for

students also for the teacher, but what do you get from it? You know, are you teaching through what we call authentic materials, right, watching videos, or the news or something that is not made on purpose for learners, but for the country, the target language country. And I think you need to find something interesting for the students as well. If you just do boring stuff it is just another class and you're not motivated.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And I think your perspective is interesting, because not only have you learned different languages, and you've taught them, but you're also studying them as part of your PhD program. So can you talk a little bit about what your work is there? Are you working with just French or other languages too, or what is just a brief overview of what you're doing?

**Sandra Descourtis**

So my program, the Second Language Acquisition is not focused on any language. In particular, it's more about how do you acquire languages, what's going on and blah, blah, blah. So the classes I took were more a general thing. But I'm working on French. So my research is based on teaching and learning French language variations, and especially slang and "argot" which is a specific type of slang. Because again, I think if you teach the students to learn like those basics of grammar rules, or the fake videos that are made for them, all those fake dialogues that you find in a textbook, it's not real life. And French is a very formal language and you need to know the formal language, what we call the standard language. But French is also a very non-standard language. If you go to France, people are not speaking just the standard language and so students are going there trying to interact with young people their age, and they don't understand what's going on. Right, right. And so I also think it's very important to bring this into the classroom, not just this, but introduce at least or expose the student to it, so that they know, well, there is a life outside the textbook, there is a language outside of the standard language. And so it makes it more real. And in second language acquisition, you know, it's a very, very, very vast field. And there is a lot of debate on how we should teach languages anywhere inside the same field. So many scholars are not. They disagree, you know, so it's very a matter of what you believe. So....

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, and for people who might be current French teachers or interested in going into French teaching, and like you said, they want to incorporate those authentic materials, but they might have like, you know, a textbook and curriculum they have to follow. Are there any sources where they can find these resources? Is it Facebook groups? Is there a professional organization? Is there a central place that can find some of these ways to embellish or enhance what might be an otherwise kind of dry or boring curriculum?

**Sandra Descourtis**

There are tons of resources online, there are a lot of Facebook groups for French teachers in the US also and in Wisconsin. So I'm sure a French teacher in Wisconsin knows about this Facebook group. So everybody's sharing a lot of stuff. But there is also curriculum online that French teachers could use, and you could find it or you could just, it's difficult, and it takes time

to create your own lessons. Obviously, it's harder than just open the textbook, and be like, okay, page 52, blah, blah, blah. And I and I understand some teachers, you know, they don't have time to do it, because they have other stuff, they have kids. And considering sometimes the paycheck, it's hard, you just like, Oh, well, I can't spend my weekends to work on my lessons. Right. So I and I get it. But it could be very easy, you know, you could just check online a cool video and be like, Okay, what can I do with this video, and the thing I strongly believe is like, there is no difficult text, or there is no difficult documents or difficult videos, there is just difficult tasks. So basically, you could take any video and make it accessible to the students, right? Even the beginners, you just need to adapt and scaffold it and adapt what you're asking them to do with it. And you could basically take the same video for every level, right? You just got to ask a different thing to them. And that's it. But the material could be the same. As long as the material is fun and interesting. And they could learn new words and new structures and a piece of culture. Because for me, culture is going with language, you can dissociate them.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that is such a good point, right? So if somebody teaches French, 1, 2, 3, and 4 and they're like, oh, my gosh, I can't plan for lessons. Well, you can kind of just do one lesson and then pull everything else along and just kind of change it to fit your students. And I think that's a really good point. So let's just wrap up here. Can you give me one reason why being multilingual is a great thing, why we should celebrate it, if you want to say it in French, that would be awesome. But you can also just say it in English too, if you want.

**Sandra Descourtis**

Wow, I just want to point out something that you might not know. I used to work in elementary school in Madison, where we design multilingual activities for the kids for them to be aware of language.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Oh, yes, I saw that!

**Sandra Descourtis**

And so while being multilingual is something we should all do. I don't believe that we could all be multilingual, like we could speak other languages. But we could at least be aware of the differences and by being aware of all the languages that exist, we also are going to be aware of the multi culture or the culture that exists in all differences that we have with all those peoples. But also all the similarities that we have together. And I think by sharing this, we could make a better world. I don't know, it's very like whoo utopia or whatever. But I think being multilingual just opens your eyes and, and your mind and in so many in so many ways.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking a couple minutes to speak with me. I think there's some really good takeaways that teachers can use that they might not have considered that can, you know, kind of cut down on the work and make some of these changes that seem really difficult actually pretty easy. So I really appreciate you talking with me.

And I will include perhaps that website and some of that work you're doing and the transcripts. So people want to check it out. They can learn more, but thanks so much. Have a good day.

**Sandra Descourtis**

Thank you. Thank you.