

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Xang Hang, UW-Madison senior and PASS Americorps Academic Coach. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely Claire. Thanks for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so first it would be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and kind of what you're thinking of doing post grad, if that isn't too stressful a question to ask.

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely. Definitely is a stressful question to ask Claire. But thank you for asking it. It gets me thinking. In terms of my linguistic background, I grew up speaking Hmong in the household. And so I am fluent in — I wouldn't say fluent. I am comprehensive in Hmong, because I have the ability to speak and understand it. However, reading and writing was never taught to me. So I am illiterate in terms of my abilities. I can read and write very simple things. But in terms of full sentence structures, or like to text my parents, I could never do it. But speaking to them over the phone, communicating with them in person, no problems at all. I did learn English technically, as a second language. Even though I was born and raised in the United States, I didn't start really learning English until I started going to school. At home, I spoke primarily Hmong with my family, and then English, mostly just with my siblings. So I was exposed to English at a young age. So I did learn them at the same time, technically, but I didn't get any formal learning with English until I started attending school. In terms of additional languages that I know, I had started taking Spanish my seventh grade year, so in middle school, and I finished six years of Spanish after my middle and high school years consecutively. And then I also took five years of French and so I was doing French and Spanish along my middle school and senior year. So by the time I graduated, I had six years of Spanish and five years of French under my belt. And then when I decided to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I decided to only keep on my Spanish. And so since then, I've been taking Spanish courses for the past four years here, graduating this semester with my degree in Political Science and Spanish.

Claire Darmstadter

Wow. So as somebody who is raised bilingual and you're on your path to becoming trilingual, or you already are, you know, it's very unclear where we put that bilingual marker, that multilingual marker. How do languages organize in your brain? So do you think having a bilingual background kind of helps you in acquiring Spanish and French? Is it an effortful process to kind of build and maintain abilities in English and among in Spanish, and French? Or what does that look like for you?

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely. In terms of learning a second language, it has definitely been beneficial to grow up bilingual already, because a lot of the a lot of the dialect and a lot of the pronunciation and rules that come with English don't apply to these other languages. However, their grammatics, their pronunciation, things like that, that were already present in my Hmong language, translated well into these other languages. And I think of it most simply I remember, like in middle school, we would have students who had like, my cohort, my fellow middle school, students would have a really hard time with like, things such as, like, in Spanish or French, where adjectives are before the verb, before the noun, or, I'm sorry, after the noun. And that was a really hard concept for a lot of people to grab on to because in English, we say, red shirt. But in Spanish, we say *camiseta roja* and so that was a concept that existed in my Hmong language already. And that translated well over into Spanish and other languages. And so there were little things that made it easier for me to maintain an additional language doesn't mean it was easy. And it doesn't mean by any means that I have a level of fluency that I would consider fluent as a native speaker by any means. But it definitely did help in a variety of ways to, to maintain and speak those languages, and especially to Hmong, as well.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you mentioned something that's similar between the languages, but I've also kind of learned through speaking with other people, and I'm sure many people who are listening right now already know this, but I've learned that Hmong is a pretty circular language, or it's a little bit indirect, and that there's a lot of terminology, whether it's like in medicine, or it's in school with like, you know, eighth grade geometry, where you're just like, those terms don't exist. And so for you, was it really difficult to kind of think in those scenarios, how you could use the Hmong language, how you could translate? Do you ever really venture into that angle of translation? Or is that something that you don't feel super comfortable with?

Xang Hang

Oh, yeah, absolutely. That's definitely something that comes up daily. And I think that if you spoke with more students as well, or other people as well, especially those who grew up bilingual, it most likely happens within families who are first generation Americans, like my family. I'm a first generation American. And so a lot of translating had to be done between me and my parents, even at a very young age, you know, and so that was something I would definitely say growing up, I had to experience more so than now but in terms of that terminology, like you said, like eighth grade geometry, like I, for the life of me couldn't describe. I couldn't describe what a trapezoid was like it was in Hmong. You know, I mean, like, that would be so difficult I would, I would try my very best and probably draw, but like in terms of just vocabulary and terminology, it just almost is non-existent. And, that's common, though. And that's bound to exist when you take a language that did not have those practices. And then you move them somewhere like the Western world where it has to assimilate and then adapt very quickly to an entire new system and society.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it, but up until probably like six or seven months ago, I didn't know much at all about the Hmong population in Wisconsin, and correct me if I'm wrong,

but I got the feeling that I'm unfortunately not the only one in that boat. So, how do you feel about the visibility of the Hmong population in Wisconsin? Do you think there's been positive or negative reactions? Is it kind of neutral? Or how do you think the wider community kind of interacts and responds to your Ethnic or language group?

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely. That's a great question. And I think that that's something that a lot of people don't realize, actually. Not even just in the state of Wisconsin, because I'm born and raised here. But our neighboring state of Minnesota, the Twin Cities, the Minneapolis area, and Twin City/ St. Paul area, that holds the highest population of concentrated Hmong people, I believe in the United States, if not alone, just I think that Fresno, California might also hold a very high number, but the Twin Cities, they they have a huge amount of Hmong population, and immigrant populations, period. But I've met people who are from the suburbs of the Twin Cities who have never met a Hmong person or knew of the Hmong or ethnicity ever in their life. And so it seems like it seems like sometimes you definitely can be sheltered from it in many ways. But I think more and more so where especially within the past decade, I would say even half a decade, the presence of more people has risen tremendously. We see a lot of Hmong people in our spaces now, whether that be in your schools, or whether that be in the legislature. It expands, and there are a lot of opportunities now for you to meet and connect. And so I think that that awareness has definitely risen. However, we still are a very small minority population, especially in the scope of Asian-Americans as a totality. And so I think it comes with these learning curves. It's hard to know what different people who coexist with you inside of the United States when you might have never interacted or or heard about them. And that's a situation where even I fall victim too right where I don't, I might have never met somebody from a certain ethnic background that is very prominent within my community. And I just don't know, because I never have met them or have spoken to anyone from that background. So. But yeah, if that answers your question —

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And are there any misconceptions or things that people typically assume it might not be true that he kind of bust? Or do you think that's not really the case? It's more just like awareness in general that people don't have?

Xang Hang

Yeah, I think that the people who I think that a lot of the misconceptions that come around Hmong Americans, for people who do have the knowledge of us are, for the most part, in my experience have been positive. However, that does not mean that I have never experienced negative misconceptions a bit. And that's existed even within our own studies here at UW Madison, I think a few years ago there was an incident where a professor had demonstrated some pretty false accusations about Hmong men and their situation in terms of marriage and household. And so there are a lot of false misconceptions. I think that it's more so they just don't know. And I mean, it could be blatant and explicit that they want to make it seem that way or not. But it is not a clear representation of who we are. And so there, there definitely is, and are these, I don't want to call them micro because nothing is a microaggression nowadays, but

these passive aggressions against Hmong Americans that are just not true, but I think a lot of the things that happen to us are also things that happen to a lot of minority marginalized populations in totality. And so it's nothing unique I would say to us, however, it does not mean it does not affect us.

Claire Darmstadter

And so with your experience at the University, at UW-Madison, are there any student groups you belong to? Or perhaps any like books you could recommend or I don't know, a course that the University offers or people can learn more about Hmong Americans or is that something that's not really very present on campus?

Xang Hang

Yeah, great question. I actually was a part of the HASA, the Hmong Student Association my freshman year, I haven't been back ever since. So sorry, I have not been an active member. But in terms of getting organized and being a part of those, and part of those groups, I wouldn't say that there are too many that are dedicated to Asian American among Americans alone. However, the coalitions for BIPOC people are very present, and all you need to do is reach out. Because I know it's very easy to become a part of those organizations and to become an active member. So I have no doubt that the students who are here are not making themselves present. In terms of classes, books, quite honestly, I can't say that I'm a great student to vouch for it. I unfortunately have never taken a class here that was specifically dedicated to Hmong Americans, although I do believe there are some semesters depending on the enrollment type, and how many students are interested, but I've never actually done it myself. And so unfortunately, I can't speak on that behalf as well. Sometimes I wonder whether or not I should have taken the Hmong courses that were available here. I do know that they offer the language as an international language that you can learn here at the university. And I believe you can get a certificate, or maybe even a major I'm not sure. But I mean, there are things out there that you just have to work for. And once you look for them, you will find them. Is there a diversity and an array of it? Absolutely not. But it doesn't mean that it's not there, it's not present. You have to do a little bit of digging.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, well, I will do that digging. And I'll try to include some links down in the transcript. So people can check a couple of things out. I don't claim to be the expert, but I can use the internet. So I'll see if there's anything I can come up with. So moving on to Spanish. If I understand correctly, I believe you were one of the unfortunate ones who had study abroad cut short by COVID. So can you kind of talk a little bit about what you're able to experience while abroad and perhaps how you've supplemented or maybe made up for the lack of immersive experience that you would have had but didn't have?

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely. So in terms of that I was in Lima, Perú for about two weeks in the spring of 2020. So last year, during this time exactly, was when I was supposed to be starting my spring semester down there. Since they're in the southern hemisphere, they start late because their

summer is our winter, vice versa. And so it was not an immersive experience in many ways. But at the same time, it was in a lot of different ways. I was down there for a day. Me and two other students from the UW. The three of us were down there for a day when the university decided that they were closing their programs, and that we had to return to the States. It was unfortunate, we wish that we would have received clearer communication from the University before that. We all knew going into it that anything could happen and that we could return. And that was part of their agreement when you signed up to study abroad. It was just unfortunate that they didn't take the time to look at us as students who are leaving only a day before they made that decision. Because these decisions didn't happen out of thin air. They were discussed, they were planned and preconceived before we left. And so the fact that they kind of forgot about us is unfortunate, but it is what it is, you we can't we can't hang on to that forever. But in terms of my immersion, itself, I stayed with the whole family down there in Lima. And during that time, like I said that very first day, we reached there, and we spent a day there, it was great. And then the next day that UW said come back, canceled programs all that. And so after that, the two ladies and I who were down there, we decided to take a trip to a nearby city because it just we couldn't leave without doing anything. And at that point, we literally did nothing other than walk around our block, and then see the homes that we were going to spend the semester in. And so we decided to go down to the city called Ica in the south of Peru, about a two and a half hour bus ride away, if not longer, if I'm not mistaken from Lima. And when we were there, we met an amazing group of people who I still am connected with to this day who really allowed us that slight immersive feeling. And that was I would say would be the extent of what I felt in terms of being immersed into that language into Spanish and Spanish culture that exists in Lima Peru. And so it was a really good experience. And we have come back from that. And then at that time, we spent another week in the country only because that's when the epidemic was announced as a pandemic. Then the President of Peru shut down the borders, we couldn't get out. And so it was a whole ordeal. I had my plane ticket already set out to find out that following weekend after we got back, that was cancelled. We were shut down, there was no domestic and or international travel allowed. Even within the country, no domestic travel was allowed, especially, and especially that international. And so some of us were lucky to get a flight out, some of us weren't lucky. So I spent about a week inside of my host family's home, not leaving at all, at all. They had our little little courtyard that was, had no roof on it. And so it was open air. And that was the closest I got to being outside. And so that's where I spent the last week of my trip on my study abroad program in Peru. And during that time, it was a great immersion experience, because the family primarily spoke Spanish, their daughter and son in law came to stay with us once the emergency or the state of emergency was declared. And so they knew a little bit of English as well. But it was Yeah, it wasn't too much conversation that immersion itself wasn't that great. And I think more than anything, I learned some very real life experiences from it that were not language related, such as, what do you do when you're locked down in the state of emergency in another country? How do you contact the US Embassy? How do you contact the different types of sources that you have in order to try to get your way home? All these things, right, that, that my language depended on, because I was in a nation that did not speak English, but also because, but also just more practical real life experiences that I think most of us won't ever have to go through. But, some of us did and some of us probably will have to in the future too. So that was that was kind of my, that was kind of my immersion into the Spanish

language for a short time period. So a little bit traumatic, a little bit. A lot of great experiences, but also a little bit traumatic at the same time, for sure.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I'm thinking to my like, you know, high school and college classes where it's like, okay, here's our travel unit, and you've lost your luggage. And that's like the one phrase you learn how to do. So I can't imagine trying to navigate the embassies and consulates and all that stuff. It sounds awful. So I really feel for you. Can you talk just finally a little bit about your work with AmeriCorps and kind of how you work with East and Escalera? And does language kind of figure into anything you do with your position?

Xang Hang

Yeah, absolutely. Those are great questions. So right now, halfway through my service with AmeriCorps, PASS AmeriCorps here in Dane County working at high school, we partner up with the Latina, Latino organization, Centro, in Madison here. And they have a support program called Escalera at East High School where they have a youth coordinator who works with us, we've been working together and coordinating a homework club, academic coaching with their students. And so I would say that the use of language pops up every now and then and we definitely have a presence of Spanish speaking households, Spanish speaking households, that's their primary and only language. However, I would say in terms of the work that I've done, I have not so much work with those students, they are pretty well-connected already with school translators and the resources that they need. So nothing has really fallen onto my lap, where I need to explicitly use my Spanish language. That doesn't mean that has happened, there have been a handful of students who I've worked with, who do need that help in Spanish and who do need those connections with other tutors or academic coaches who can help them in Spanish so that they can better understand the things that they are working on. But that's, I would, I would argue that's a very small amount of the time, most of the time I spend is in English, primarily because I'm also in that position that was meant for a Spanish speaking person in totality. The job description didn't say you will be speaking Spanish, it was more so if you know Spanish. That's great.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And so finally, the last question I asked everybody, we tell little kids and sometimes older ones, all the time, that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English, in Spanish, in French if you want to, a mix of all of them, why do you think it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Xang Hang

Yeah, I will. I will answer this one in English. My French is horrible. Now I can hardly get by on it. My French teacher would be so ashamed and so sad because she really did want me to continue my French and maybe one day I'll revisit it. But I'll explain this in English. I think that the most important piece of languages and being able to understand different languages, whether or not you've learned at home, or whether or not you're learning in an institution or university. That's the first and foremost part of this, right. You should understand that wherever

you learn your language, however you learn it, it's an additional language, do not discriminate and/or put other people down by the methods of education in which they've learned their languages. There's no right or wrong way to. You can move to a Spanish speaking country and learn Spanish only from hearing it spoken in your neighborhood. Or you can learn at a university where you take 35 credits in it and earn a degree in it. There's no right or wrong way to learn a language. And then a piggyback off of that is that this language that, you know, connects you with people in a way that is so intimate and I say intimate as in, when somebody looks at you and sees that you can speak a language that they are familiar with, when they are maybe struggling with a different language that they don't understand. You see this, you have this instant connection with this instant connection where they feel safe, and you feel safe as well, and you get to create that space with your language abilities. And you get to make that space for others. And I think that that's the most beautiful thing about languages is that there's just this, this raw, this very raw and primal connection that you get to make with people because you know their language or because you can speak to them in their native language. And I think that that is a connection that cannot be created any other way. Quite honestly, you can't make an artificial connection for that. So that is why I would say that I love learning languages. That's why I would say I continue to love learning them and why I think they're so important in our world?

Claire Darmstadter

Well, thank you so much. So well said, I really appreciate you giving me a couple minutes of your time to chat, and I hope you have a great rest of your school year.

Xang Hang

Thank you very much Claire.