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Episode 10: Diego Kroeff

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Transcript

Elizabeth Giltner

Hi everyone and welcome to Futures in Languages a podcast showcasing stories from UCF's Modern Languages and Literatures Department alumni. I'm Doctor Elizabeth Giltner and I'll be hosting this episode today. We'll be talking with Diego Kroeff who graduated from the French and Francophone studies program in the summer of 2020. Diego, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

Diego Kroeff

Pleasure is all mine. Thank you very much, Dr. Giltner.

Elizabeth Giltner

You're welcome, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, a little bit of your background?

Diego Kroeff

Yes, absolutely. Well, my name is Diego Villa Kroeff. I am from Brazilian background. My parents born and raised in Brazil. While I was raised here in Miami, FL in the United States, and I grew up in a very multicultural Latin community and grew up playing football, soccer, right? And very heavily involved with academics of course, and I decided later on to attend the University of Central Florida and pursue a double degree in international relations and French, with a minor in Italian.

Elizabeth Giltner

OK.

Diego Kroeff

And this was really heavily inspired by my international experience traveling with my parents many times to Brazil and abroad. While also having the opportunity to have studied in France in Montpellier, prior to beginning my degree at UCF, I studied at a linguistics school there, and this has really accumulated and developed into my own proper identity. It's become part of me the languages that I've learned along the way and the. The experiences that I've had abroad throughout my undergraduate career and this has pushed me into really pursuing the same thing in my graduate program as well, but this is kind of who I am is, has been mostly a construction of these experiences that I've had, whether in France and the Netherlands and Switzerland, studying and doing exchanges even during my degree here at UCF.

Elizabeth Giltner

Excellent, excellent. That sounds really interesting, so you grew up speaking Portuguese. Did you grow up speaking any other languages?

Diego Kroeff

Yeah, so English in school. Of course, I spoke Portuguese at home. I spoke Spanish while in school but also playing football and my friends, a lot of people around me in my community did not speak English

as a first maternal tongue, so I spoke Spanish as well, and then I learned French in high school, but also through UCF and in my programs abroad. And Italian I learned at UCF as well.

Elizabeth Giltner

OK yeah, that kind of leads me into the next question. So, you came in with a French major and did you have a minor? I know you said you studied Italian, so what other language programs did you study while you were at UCF?

Diego Kroeff

Well I just studied in with the French and Italian language programs. I considered taking German, but I was also involved with the Portuguese language program, so I was acquaintances with Doctor Sosa and the Portuguese department and I've attended some of her classes sometimes and even went to their Portuguese talks and I just wanted to get kind of an experience with Portuguese at UCF but also give back so a couple of semesters ago before I did my year abroad. I even hosted some future events where I was talking to people from the Portuguese club about this sport that we play in Brazil that's mixed between soccer and volleyball it's very interesting, but mostly I've just been official studies have been just French and Italian language.

Elizabeth Giltner

Gotcha and you did study abroad for both Italian and for French. I know French was outside of the UCF in France program, the language program we offered. But did you do the Italian, like month abroad, in the summer?

Diego Kroeff

Yeah, so in 2016 was right before I started at UCF is where I did this linguistics school during the summer before I started at UCF and the year the following year between my freshman and sophomore years when I did the 2017 summer abroad in Italy with professor Essa Spinner and there's when I had already taken one semester of Italian one-on-one, and then I progressed really quickly when I was in Italy and I was going to do it again this summer but unfortunately due to the coronavirus, I wasn't able to go again to Italy. And then in 2018 I went to the Netherlands and stayed there until the spring of 2019 is when I started in Switzerland, then I studied that's where I pursued my French language courses there and literature and such. So I got that opportunity, that was last year. Yeah, year ago today is when I finished my semester.

Elizabeth Giltner

That's amazing, it's amazing how different a year it is, especially now. So, what are your post-graduation plans?

Diego Kroeff

So immediate plans as soon as this summer is over I am going to start my masters. It's called the European Masters of Global Studies, so it's kind of similar to international relations and it is a program sponsored by the European Union where you get corporate consortium of different universities where you get a joint degree from these different universities, and I was offered a scholarship to attend. I'll be studying at the University of Leipzig in Germany. For the first year and the second year I will be studying

at the University of Penton, Belgium. So, these are my immediate plans post-undergrad. However, post-Masters program, I am unsure what I want to do. I definitely, I'm 100% sure I want to travel for a bit before I start my profession, but I've always been very passionate about the nonprofit development sector within international relations, and especially in francophone regions, I'm actually interested in doing during my Masters program an exchange semester going in in a non-European university and I was looking to do it in Cameroon where I would be able to study at the Capital where I would be able to take classes in French, about the development in francophone regions, so sustainable development primarily, and that's really been the focus of some of my research and some of my pursuits learned undergrad as well, and that's where I really wanted to apply not only my interpersonal communication skills, but my language skills, whether Italian, French, Portuguese or Spanish is what I bring to the table, especially with my other degree, which is internationalization.

Elizabeth Giltner

That's fantastic. That sounds really great. I know Africa is often looked at as such an undeveloped resource for business, for, you know, natural resources. But also, business opportunities and so it's really neat to hear that you'd be interested in applying your skills that you've developed through your education and through your life experience to furthering you know the organizations that are there in Cameroon or other places in Francophone, Africa that sounds really great.

Diego Kroeff

Absolutely, absolutely. And I'm thankful that with the romance languages like basic languages that I do speak, I'm able to communicate with a large part of Africa, if it all of it. And similarly in Europe.

Elizabeth Giltner

Absolutely. Are you a little nervous about not knowing German going to a university in Germany?

Diego Kroeff

Yeah, so that that's been on my mind as of recently and I think I'm going to learn it myself with at least the basics since I'll be there for a year and as well as enhance, I think Germans are pretty good with English, but my experience in Belgium has been that their English is not as good and I've been to France before, and I've tried speaking French there because bilingual country. And they speak Finnish, and if you speak French to them, they're going to answer you in Finnish regardless, so I'm a bit nervous, but I think that, I believe I'll get by either with English or with some other language. Hopefully in Belgium I'll be better off, but in Germany I'll have to learn some basic German that's for sure.

Elizabeth Giltner

Absolutely, absolutely, you've alluded to it several times during our little chat here, but the importance of language for your future plans. The next question on the list is, how did the language programs prepare you for your future? I think that as far as linguistics is concerned, is pretty self-evident. Are there any other aspects of language learning, you know the classes that you took, the experiences that you had through the UCF language, programs that you feel really prepared you for your future and helped you figure out what it was that you wanted to do?

Diego Kroeff

Yeah, absolutely. I think that one of the things that really inspired because I began with international relations. My primary major, but French was something that I was really passionate about. It was something that gave me almost as if even though I was studying full time as a degree student or something. It was something I was passionate about, but I had to drive to go home and study for and one of the courses that really was, I think, was a pivotal moment for me was my senior year I'm going to disregard the course I took studying abroad because that was a different experience myself, but.

Elizabeth Giltner

Of course.

Diego Kroeff

One of the courses that really changed my perspective on things was French Literature 1, The Survey of Literature 1 and Survey of Literature 2 at UCF. And these courses kind of reignited my passion for literature, and it opened so many doors to different books and history of France and the world. And it's something that we talk about when we look at humanities and we look at STEM majors that they don't have this humanistic approach sometimes, and that's why we need humanities, and especially in language, that's something that is so invaluable to your future career. And I think that it's because of my language skills that I am where I am today and the doors that have opened to me that with the previous State Department internships that I've done. I have done two State Department internships. One where I was literally a translator for French and Italian news. I worked for the American Embassy as a translator. And now I'm working for the State Department doing research in misinformation disinformation. And I'm focusing on Latin America, so I'm using Portuguese and Spanish. So these really these core, this passion and this fundamental knowledge that I have come from a lot that I've learned at UCF, and of course to my experiences abroad and some of the courses that really push me to think more than what I was limited to in politics, right? And I was exposed to different thing I think that language learning is a holistic approach that you, you can't just learn the French language you got to learn the French People, you got to learn the French Culture, and that has pushed me and developed my own individual identity.

Elizabeth Giltner

Yeah, absolutely. I mean your identity already growing up was so multicultural and you probably had a lot of different perspectives about events going on in your neighborhood and your life growing up from the different languages and your contacts with different people, different mindsets in different languages, so hearing that you found the language useful for broadening your horizons and considering different perspectives about the stories that are told about world events. Whether it's going on, and especially now, I think it's really interesting with your misinformation, disinformation focus. All of the information that we have flying around us about coronavirus. And you know, even still world events happening, what's going on? The perspective I know can be very different American news versus even for me most often in addition to the French news websites, it's the difference between American news and the BBC, even something such as that having that different perspective, being able to consider an issue from multiple angles and different facets, it's really interesting to get the cultural aspect of the language. Also, what is the focus? What are the values and things like that? I find that really interesting and I'm really interested in hearing about your research and what you've been finding out and everything like that, but I digress. For people coming into the French program at UCF, somebody who's

considering studying French at UCF, do you have any advice that you would offer someone either who's in the program now or somebody who is considering joining the program as a French major or minor?

Diego Kroeff

Yeah, I think I have a thing or two to say would be surely I think going off what I'm saying before about the holistic approach that language learning is something that teaches you. It's not only speaking a second language, it's opening the door to more than one country that speaks the language, especially if we're talking about French, right? You have the entire French region, which it opens the door to communicate with millions of people. This is something that it's hard to comprehend unless you get out there and you meet people that speak French and you interact them with them in your travels, for example. So, one piece of advice would be to break down some of the stereotypes that you have of perhaps the French language or the French people which, oftentimes what I found to be here in the United States is sometimes negative, they've had much more positive would say Italian and Italian people, but these stereotypes are sometimes negative and oftentimes very wrong. So and some of the most incredible people. And to me, one of the most beautiful languages in the world. So I think it's what I was saying the holistic approach where you have to take in mind that there is culture, right? When you learn the language you're opening also your vocabulary you see so much of an entire country. And its people. You see how they value their food, their wine, their drinks, and how they are very proud and patriotic people you can start drawing the parallels with your own culture and your own people, and this is something that's priceless, honestly. And so keep an open mind is essential as well, right? It's hard at first there's this huge learning curve and that surely applies to every language. And in the beginning it will be difficult. And it will be difficult for a while, but the benefits that you will reap is numerous, really. Not only professionally speaking, but in a very, very personal level as well. The fulfillment that you have that you gain this ability to speak to so many more people and you become a more cultured person that will pay off better than any anything else in life, I believe.

Elizabeth Giltner

Excellent, well that's a great bit of advice and hopefully our listeners will remember that and keep your advice in mind as they go through the program. Or consider what advantages might come from studying French at UCF. Is there anything that you could tell them about overcoming, perhaps some of those frustrations where you feel like you're not making any progress or you're having difficulty understanding a linguistic concept and putting it into practice? Do you have any advice for students who might feel stuck?

Diego Kroeff

I think everyone who has learned the language has encountered some moment in time or some moment in their language learning process where they've been stuck and they've almost not given up but found less motivation to keep studying right. And I think it would help me and I can speak from experience when I started, when I went to France the first time and I started studying this linguistics school. I was placed at a level much higher than mine, so this could be something quite intimidating because your natural self is going to compare yourself with others. You'll say wow this person speaks so well and everyone has to understand that it's a personal thing, right? Learn language learning everyone goes their own pace. Some people study for years and some people study for a couple months and they have roughly the same level. This is something that should not discourage you. I've learned this the hard

way with all my language learning. I learned that I cannot compare myself to others. I've always had to be headstrong. Of course, study plenty. And one of the things that broke me out of and really helped me improve actually was to not be embarrassed to make mistakes, and I think that's the biggest mistake that people make when language learning is that they're afraid to speak. They're afraid to make mistakes. The thing is people who speak the language whose literal language is French, for example, they understand that you're making effort to speak in their own tongue. And if you make mistakes, it happens. It happens even to French people. If you look at the soccer player, he makes plenty of mistakes when he speaks on camera and it's normal. It's natural, it's human, and these are the things that we need to overcome in ourselves. We have to think about it mentally and we have to say, OK, I'm going to make mistakes. It's going to happen, but I have to put myself out there. I have to speak the language or I'm not going to improve. I have to make these mistakes, ask people, be open to criticism, say look if I make a mistake, you're more than happy to correct me. And because people are sometimes depending on the culture they can be embarrassed to correct on certain things, and these are things that you can do to improve your language learning and also make it a much smoother and fun process, is changing it mentally within yourself.

Elizabeth Giltner

Excellent, excellent, yes that is. It's one of the hardest things I think for anybody to overcome is the fear of being incorrect, but for myself I still make mistakes even though I'm a teacher and I know the theory of the language. I know the rules of the language, but the application is often much more difficult because you're not looking at sentences in a workbook, you're communicating in real time and you have to remember is something masculine or feminine or what's the word for this and if I don't remember the word for it, can I describe what it what this thing does or what I need it to do, etc. So I am in definite agreement with you as far as putting yourself out there and the risk versus reward of making mistakes when you're interacting. In a different language that's wonderful.

Diego Kroeff

Absolutely, and I think that's something that's one additional benefit to putting yourself out there and pushing yourself to speak the language is that it opens you up more because you're almost forced to be a more extroverted person than that you're forced to talk because that's a fundamental part of the language learning is to talk to other people. And you're going to have to be more comfortable in uncomfortable situations. You have to get used to these awkward moments where you're not understanding where there's just silence and these are things that you learn while learning the language, and it builds into who you are as well, and it helps you become a person that is willing to speak to strangers. For example, and speak without shame about certain topics and even speak in their tongue, as if you knew. When I speak to French person and they replied to me in English because of course you will always have an accent, and that's something that is part of you as your identity. Yeah, a lot of people, most people, not everybody, is unable to get rid of the accent, and that's something that everyone should understand is that accent is going to stick with you as much as you improve it. So one of things that I've learn is that regardless of my accent, when they try to speak to me in English, and I say no, no speak to me in French and that's one of the things that the language has taught me as well is that I take pride in speaking it, and at one point when you get to a certain level and you gain this confidence you want to speak it and you don't want to speak anything else.

Elizabeth Giltner

Yes, absolutely, that's wonderful. And you're open to open to that scary situation of I want you to speak to me, even though I might not understand everything. But then again, it's putting yourself out there and being able to ask questions for clarification and having that ability as well. So I think you and I are e share very similar opinions as far as language learning, and again that risk versus reward the power of learning from mistakes. That's great. Well thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today Diego. I'm excited to have you in our lineup and I am excited to hear from you in the future about where your studies have led you, will lead you in the projects that you have developed for the future.

Diego Kroeff

Absolutely thank you so much. The honor is all mine and I really appreciate the interview and being part of this lineup and I will definitely keep in touch with everyone in the language department who has treated me so well over these last four years.

Elizabeth Giltner

That would be fantastic. We'll charge on Diego, and we will speak to you again, hopefully in the very near future. Thank you for listening to this episode of Futures in Languages. I'd like to give a shout out to Da Video Guy for our intro and outro music, downloaded from freesound.org. I'm Doctor Elizabeth Giltner and our featured guest today was Diego Kroeff. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from Modern Languages. For more information about the French and Francophone studies BA and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.