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## Episode 22: Courtney Jorgensen

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## Transcript

Christina Torres:

Hi everyone and welcome to Futures in Languages a podcast, showcasing stories from UCF's Modern Languages and Literatures Department alumni. I'm your host, Christina Torres. Today we'll be talking with Courtney Jorgenson, who graduated from a minor in Spanish in 2007 as part of her undergraduate and from the MA TESOL program in summer of 2009. Thank you so much for joining us today, Courtney.

Courtney Jorgenson:

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

Christina Torres:

It's so nice to have a chance to talk with you. We were talking right before we started this recording that we met in passing during my semester at the English Language Institute when you were also there teaching at the English Language Institute. But it's been a minute since we've caught up, so I'm very happy to have you on our podcast episode today to talk about your experiences in our Modern Languages and Literatures Department. Let's go ahead and start off with our first question, which is can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, of course. I'm actually originally from Orlando, Florida, aka, the mouse house. So exciting. And I did my undergrad and grad degrees at UCF, so go.

Christina Torres:

Nice, charge on.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Thanks. I pursued my undergrad at UCF in the area of political science, specifically international relations, and I was very excited to do so and part of my degree program required me to minor in a foreign language, so any language that wasn't English and so I chose Spanish.

Christina Torres:

So after you were required to join the Spanish minor what did you discover about the program?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, so at first I was struggling to decide which language to choose, and I settled in Spanish because it's widely spoken here in Central Florida, throughout the state of Florida, and it's growing in popularity across the states. This would've been back in 2005. And so, it's only grown in importance since then in my opinion. And at first I was a little hesitant. I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the classes. I wasn't sure what the dynamic would be like. Would the professors start speaking in Spanish and only Spanish from day one? Would I feel lonely, isolated, confused? Would I be able to keep up? And I was pleasantly surprised. I loved my Spanish course. The first one that I took basically elementary Spanish for

lack of a better course title. Fortunately, the professor was kind and did speak some English, at least going over the syllabus.

And little by little I fell into a rhythm. I enjoyed learning a whole different set of vocabulary in grammar structures and rules in another language. I almost treated it kind of like a second math class when it came to grammar. And so that kind of helped me plug in pieces of the language in a way that made sense to me. And I think the thing that I really didn't realize is that when you learn another language, whether that's for a specific purpose, like Spanish for medical professions or Spanish for the scientists, you want to be an engineer and do a project where Spanish is the language of communication is you actually learn a lot about the culture that goes with the language. Yeah, very much goes hand in hand. And so I just felt myself, my world just started to open up and expand and I just really enjoyed that aspect of it. And I had friends that spoke Spanish at home with their parents. They've grown up here and maybe I would be hanging out with them. And I started to pick up words, just words at first. And I just remember thinking, wow, this is almost like a superpower.

Christina Torres:

It really is. Language learning is a superpower. I'm so excited that you said that. And also going back to your point about how you treated it like a math class for years now. In my teacher training classes, I talked to them about grammar as the algebra of language, how you have to move the pieces around. So that was really exciting for me. I was like, I hadn't heard someone else talk about it in math terms before. So I'm like, yes, both of us use the same terminology. This is cool.

Courtney Jorgenson:

It just makes it a little less nebulous.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, I like that too. Just putting something concrete to it. We are balancing what we're trying to say, moving all those pieces around in those sentences,

Courtney Jorgenson:

Especially in the very beginning where it just feels very fish out of water type deal.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, that's a common feeling that folks have at the beginning, but we always encourage them to stick with it. There's a turning point if you stick with it. That's great. And what have you been up to since graduation?

Courtney Jorgenson:

I had the opportunity to work at UCF helping with the Center for Multilingual Multicultural Studies. That's the name of the department at that time. And so I was working with students from all over the world, including from predominantly Spanish speaking countries. And it was during that time that I was able to use the Spanish skills that I acquired from the minor at UCF and led me to eventually pursue my master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages. And during my time with the Spanish minor, I actually studied abroad in a small little town just outside of Madrid. And it was during that experience where I knew I wanted to do something international for sure, and I kind of left the international politics realm and started migrating over towards international education. So I would say

that the Spanish minor not only gave me the opportunity to learn a language, but it actually ended up influencing the direction that my life took in general.

Christina Torres:

That's a powerful, effect for a required minor that you maybe hadn't thought about before you started your undergrad

Courtney Jorgenson:

Very much. And that I was sort of hesitant to embark on. So yeah, you just never know.

Christina Torres:

Changed that trajectory completely. You talk about how you work with international students now and folks from all over the world. Do you have any favorite stories that you'd like to share about your career? Maybe something like what a typical day for you is nowadays?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, so a typical day would be four hours of instruction per day. So on my feet a lot talking a lot, but it's not a burden. I enjoy doing it. And I have students from all over the world. Then one class I could have maybe 9 to 11 different countries represented at once. My Spanish language skills have allowed me to help students through the process of entering the UCF environment and getting used to a higher education culture here and helping them transition to English language studies because I can relate having to transition to learning Spanish. So now I'm helping Spanish speakers transition out into learning English, which I never thought when I was pursuing the minor in Spanish that there would be any kind of relationship like this in the future.

Christina Torres:

Imagine that gives you a lot of empathy with your students too.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, a lot of empathy. And I spend most of my day in English because that's the reason why they're here studying. But at the same time, it creates kind of a bond where I can have small moments where I'll say a couple of things in Spanish and it just kind of creates that a commonality between me and a student and just kind of lowers that effective filter. Appreciate that I have the ability to be able to do that. And just learning not to be overly reliant on translation. That's another thing when you learn a language sometimes you really want to show off your skills because you're excited. You're like, oh, I work so hard for this. This is amazing. And I've had to learn. There's certain times that you do that and other times you don't.

Christina Torres:

Part of what I call the teacher toolkit is learning when to use what skill. So over time, but I can empathize with you with the power of, or I can appreciate the power of dropping the occasional language word here and there for students to, to just feel that you understand or feel that you're trying to understand their first language. There's a lot to be said about that from the instructional point of view. I used to do the same, especially in Bangladesh when everyone shared the same first language. I drop the occasional Bangla word in there and they were like, oh, teacher, your pronunciation is so

funny. And I'm like, well, that's right. You can help me out and I'm helping you. And here we are in this lovely exchange. So yeah, it's wonderful. It's fun. It's fun. Yeah, that was my favorite part about teaching international students here is about having all the diversity in those classrooms.

I always used to refer to them as the Mini UN where it's representatives from all over the world and here we are all using a common language, all getting to know each other. And I would always start off my EAP classes, especially by saying, hey, look around the room. These are your friends. These are the people who understand what you're going through. These are people you might be visiting in their home countries one day. Isn't that cool? And then by the time the semesters would finish, they'd be like, oh yeah, I'm going to go visit my friend over here. I'm going to go over here. And those are just such heartwarming stories to hear from our students who are all going through that experience together.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, absolutely. And I just building a little bit off of what you just said, your experience in Bangladesh. I would say that my experience in Madrid studying abroad through UCF, through their Spanish program, allowed me to actually go on to do a year abroad in Morocco where I was living in Casablanca. And I think if you can study abroad, I can't recommend it enough.

Christina Torres:

I say the same, yes, you heard it not from me. You heard it from Courtney our guest on the podcast here, study abroad.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah. And I kind of found the whole study abroad thing a little later in my time at UCF. And what I mean by found is it's not that I didn't know what existed, I just didn't know I wanted to do it. And so I was literally about to graduate. So the only option for me was to go in the summer, and it was only for a month. And I thought, oh, I don't know if it's worth it. I want to do the whole semester thing, but I don't want to delay my graduation date. And then I was like, stop complaining, just go. And I'm so glad I did and I hope that if anybody out there's listening, they don't self-limit. I almost did. They don't have the perfect city that you know really wanted to go to or you thought you wanted to go to, or you could only manage a two week program, or you can do a whole semester, whatever it is you can do. I say just go for it because it just ends up being such a magical experience. I think it's totally worth it, even if it's not in your head as perfect as you thought it should be.

Christina Torres:

It's such an opportunity for personal growth. I always tell folks, if I hadn't lived abroad, I think I would be a different person. That kind of experience is so foundational to my career trajectory and who I am now. And what I hear you saying is that Madrid and Casablanca were the same experiences for you.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, absolutely. And again, I just can't emphasize enough that whether it's a short-term program, it's a longer term program there are so many options out there and there's so many budget friendly options out there, and there is funding available as well. So there's scholarships and things like that. So if you're out there listings saying, hey, I really want to do this, but it feels kind of expensive for me, really chase after it, there is funding available.

Christina Torres:

There is. I always tell folks, check out the free money. And many scholarships go unapplied for. I was shocked by the low number of people, the Olga Pasta Belova Scholarship through the modern languages department. It's funded and very limited. Folks apply to this every year. So if you're listening to this and you're thinking, oh, I want to do a short-term study abroad, check out again the Olga Pasta Belova Scholarship, I'll link it in the description below for this episode but it never hurts to try to get free money folks. Worst thing that can happen is they say no. Best thing is you get free money.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Absolutely. I stand by that a hundred percent.

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. Thanks Courtney. Now how did you end up in Casablanca?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, that kind of went, came down to networking. Actually, one of my colleagues had spent some time in Morocco and in Casablanca in particular. And she recommended this NGO, non-governmental organization. And I was all about it because my undergrad was international relations and I was like, oh my gosh, like an NGO plus it emphasizes international education. I was ready, born for this, so to speak, you know, have all these things going through your mind. And I was pretty fresh out of grad school ready to take on the world by, you know,

Christina Torres:

I remember that feeling.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, just raw excitement. And so I applied and they had a spot available and the next thing I knew I was on the plane headed to Casablanca.

Christina Torres:

Awesome. What were some of the things that you did as your responsibilities for that NGO, if you don't mind sharing?

Courtney Jorgenson:

So it was very much on the fly. It was structured, but it wasn't structured at the same time. Enrollment was kind of unpredictable, which allowed for a lot of last minute changes and things like that. So it was a really great way to learn how to be flexible and think on your feet as drop of the hat type situations. So that was really good, I think. But it was managing classes, community outreach was part of it. Access to education for all different types of folks and things like that. It also was designed for cultural connections. It was through an NGO called Ames, which is basically language and cultural bridge between the MENA region so the Middle East, North Africa. And it was really an informative year for me, and I am so glad that I did it. And I honestly can say that the Spanish minor and study abroad helped pave the way for a much easier transition for me going into Casablanca because I already had some abroad experience under my belt.

Christina Torres:

Any small amount of international experience. And I tell folks, even if you can just travel, just travel a little and then that can also help you in the future when you want to live and possibly work abroad. All of that informs it. And it sounds like you've had a really nice confluence of your undergrad and your grad all in one place in this NGO placement.

Courtney Jorgenson:

And I'm not the type of person that had a master plan. So I hope that if anyone out there is listening and they're thinking, wow, everything kind of syncs up as she tells it. It definitely didn't feel like that in real time. But I will say that that Spanish minor did serve a valuable role in helping me piece together different little career moves that I made that ended up being bigger career moves. So starting something back in 2005 on a rainy January day, thank you for that elementary Spanish class. You just never know.

Christina Torres:

You never know where it leads. And when I talk to my students who come into office hours and try to and discuss professional development, I always tell them everything makes sense in retrospect. If you make decisions one thing at a time as opportunities present themselves. And you always do the decision that you think is best for you at the time. But I also tell them to follow their heart when opportunities come, even if something feels a little bit challenging and not a bad scary, but a challenging, scary. Obviously considering all the elements that go into it being thoughtful and mindful of the programs, but if you can challenge yourself, that's an opportunity for personal growth, right?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Absolutely.

Christina Torres:

Yeah. So I'm so glad that you're helping us to share that with our listeners here. Yeah. So, you took part in many classes in the modern languages and literature department between your Spanish minor and your and MA TESOL. Do you have any stories or memorable takeaways from your time in our department classes?

Courtney Jorgenson:

I do remember my last semester there, I really became obsessed, for lack of a better word, with the word ostrich in Spanish, because to me it sounded like a little bit German. And so I took this writing class and I always wrote about this ostrich, it always appeared somehow in my writing, even as a little joke at the end or something like that. And I just remember my Spanish professor she just really embraced it and she thought it was just really funny. And I knew it sounds totally kind of random and a little bit oddball and it totally was. But I think that was hands out my favorite class from undergrad. And it was just such a warm, inviting classroom experience. And I think it was the one class where everything finally clicked for me too. I could see the reading and I could see it interlacing with the speaking and the listening. And it was the first time I stopped viewing Spanish as separate skills, but everything that kind of meshed and joined together. So it was just a really, I kind of special time for me and it really clicked for me in that course. And if anybody out there is listening and you feel like a little discouraged because maybe you studied in high school and you kind of felt like maybe a friend or a classmate just kind of picked up the language a little faster than you so you feel like you don't have that language gene. Sometimes people will talk about a math gene. Everybody will have their moment where it clicks and maybe it'll take you one or two classes longer than a peer, or maybe you'll be one of the first people

that it clicks. You just don't know. But if you do struggle a little bit at all, just know that eventually you'll have your time and it will be worth the energy and effort that you pour into it. And it doesn't mean that you're not capable of learning a language. It might just take an extra class or two, at least it did for me. And I don't know, just remembering to persevere through that. And I will say that a lot of the professors, my Spanish classes really help with that. They were just very encouraging and I really appreciate that.

Christina Torres:

We always tell our students we want everyone to succeed, professors, instructors, we want everyone to do well in the class. So if you have questions, seek us out in office hours. And I'm sure that you've said the same thing to your students. If you have additional questions, come find me, come talk to us. And I, I've not met someone who hasn't answered a question in our department yet, because that's part of why everyone's there is to support the students. But I like that you said about not comparing yourself to others, because I think that that's such a temptation when you're in a class, but everybody learns at their own pace. And putting additional pressure on yourself to be quote like your neighbor in the class isn't always going to be the best choice. I like the idea of comparing to yourself of where you were at x time and see about the journey at various times, comparing to yourself, and that feels like the best way to think about progress. What would you, do you want to add to that?

Courtney Jorgenson:

No, I totally agree too. And not to sort of psych yourself out when it comes to things like pronunciation. Maybe you're struggling with a particular sound or blend of sounds and maybe somebody else in the class sounds almost like native to your ear. So then you kind of think, oh, well maybe I'm really good at writing in Spanish, but my speaking so bad, I don't feel comfortable speaking, so I never want to speak ever. So yeah, just really leaning into it. And if you're feeling insecure about any aspect of the language learning process, just go to office hours with your professor and say, there's a presentation coming up and I feel really confident about my writing, but this presentation has me stressed out because the Spanish R, I really struggle to roll that R. It's just really hard for me. Are there any pointers that you have? And so you don't have to struggle silently. You can seek out help, and the professors do want to help you through whatever you're struggling with. Just if you struggle in the math class, you go to see the professor to solve a certain type of equation, kind of like the same concept with languages.

Christina Torres:

I always tell folks it's okay to ask. It's okay to ask. It's okay to reach out for help. There's a beautiful time in your life when you're a student where people almost expect you to have questions. Take advantage of that time when folks expect you to have questions and are very happy to answer your questions because that's the time of your life that falls into this pocket. So I'm glad that you're sharing that advice with all our listeners.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Just embrace your oddball self, and if you want to write about an ostrich, just write about an ostrich. Just own it.

Christina Torres:

Do it. Do it. Yeah. <Spanish word> for the win.

Courtney Jorgenson:



Exactly. Thank you.

Christina Torres:

Awesome. So here we're coming to our final question, Courtney. And I'm just curious in general, you've already touched on some of this, but what advice would you offer someone who is interested in studying either Spanish or TESOL?

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, so my advice would be to ask yourself what your goals are. I would try to establish short-term, midterm and long-term goals. For example, let's say that you want to teach English abroad, but you want to study Spanish. Why not teach English in a , Spanish speaking country? Win-win, like yeah, a win-win, right? So you're combining maybe more of a short-term goal of, okay, I'm going to minor in Spanish or major. That's the other thing I would like to point out. Sometimes you start with a minor in a language, whatever language it is that interests you, and the next thing you know you're declaring a double major. So that can happen.

But instead of thinking of it as maybe two separate entities, how to blend them together would be my best advice. And education is a huge field, a huge field. I think a lot of times people think, oh, it's in a public school doing elementary, middle high school, or in a college slash university. But there's so much more to it than that. I mentioned the NGO that I happen to work for, but you know, can get a job at the United Nations as well, which is an IGO, right? And that's just like the tip of the iceberg. So TESOL is teaching English to speakers of other languages, but you can be a full-time teacher. I happen to be at the moment, but you can be on the administrative side, you can do curriculum building, you can do nation building through creating educational programming in countries whether it be your home country or overseas. So it's a really, really diverse field. And learning another language, whether it be Spanish, French, Russian, whatever that is, it can open those doors so you can work for those organizations and have the language ability to be able to make things happen for yourself. Yeah,

Christina Torres:

I mean, thank you, Courtney. That was awesome. I feel like that's where I want to leave it. I will just add very briefly that you never know where your career trajectory can lead you, but what I always encourage folks to focus on is what skills are you acquiring during your studies that can be marketable to whatever environment you wish to work in? And teaching teacher training will actually reinforce a lot of important skills for not just teaching, but public speaking, leadership, organization, time management, all of these things that are really applicable in a number of different settings, just like you've said.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Yeah, absolutely. And just as a final highlight coming from me, I have friends that are nurses and physicians. I have friends that are engineers, and the ones that are bilingual have so many more job opportunities than those of us that are monolingual. So if you're out there listening and you're like, well, she's mentioned teaching, which I totally have, and I'm more than happy to, I have so many examples of people that work in other fields that aren't necessarily commonly associated with, oh, I want to declare a minor in a foreign language and I'm an engineer. If that's new to anybody and you're out there listening, it can be totally worth it.

Christina Torres:

Thank you so much, Courtney. This has been a real pleasure catching up with you today during this podcast. We're so happy you could join us.

Courtney Jorgenson:

Thank you for having me.

Christina Torres:

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](http://freesound.org). I'm Christina Torres, and our featured guest today was Courtney Jorgenson. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from Modern Languages. For more information about Spanish, the MA TESOL and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at [mll.cah.ucf.edu](http://mll.cah.ucf.edu).