

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, and today we'll be talking with Anne Prucha, who did her undergrad in Spanish from Syracuse University, an MA in Spanish from Rutgers, and graduated from her MA TESOL from the Modern Languages and Literatures Department in summer of 2010. Thank you so much for joining us today, Anne.

Anne Prucha:

Thanks for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Christina Torres:

We're so happy that you could join us today, and I know that you have a lot of stories to share with our podcast listeners. Let's start off with a general question here. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, maybe where you're from?

Anne Prucha:

Sure. I was born and raised in Syracuse, New York, and I went to Syracuse University, as did all nine of my siblings, and I mentioned the number of siblings I have because eight of them are older than I am. And as I was growing up, starting from a very young age, we're saying we're talking preschool. My lot of my older siblings were in college, high school or college. They were living and traveling in Mexico and Spain and Guatemala and Costa Rica and Italy. And so that was something that was just very normal to me. And my parents over the years hosted probably about seven or eight exchange students who were all from Spanish speaking countries. Five of them were from a family from Mexico that we had become friends with when my oldest brother lived with that family in Mexico City and high school. So before Syracuse, my parents had lived in Houston, Texas, and they just fell in love with Mexican culture and they decided to learn the language, and so they did, and it was just something that they imparted to all of their children, the love of other languages and cultures and travel.

And so that was what I was exposed to and that was why I think I fell into languages. Plus I had the good fortune of going to a public school system that started offering foreign languages in sixth grade. Yeah, wonderful. You could take Spanish, French or German and you could take it from sixth grade through 12th grade because people always ask me are you Hispanic? And I'm not. And so they always want to know, well, how is it that you speak Spanish so perfectly? I mean, I can get into that subject in many ways, but I won't hear. But I was exposed to it and I was given well, exposure and tools and also a love and an appreciation for languages and cultures from my parents and from my family.

Christina Torres:

What a wonderful way to be exposed to that. As you say, you have your big family that's all very interested in travel and culture and language. What would you say prompted the initial interest in studying language and culture?

Anne Prucha:

Honestly, it was because I was good at it. I remember in sixth grade, it just was natural to me, and I had been hearing it my whole life in me from my siblings and our exchange students and the family in Mexico that we were really close with. All of their kids lived with us. Their mom used to come visit, and I don't know, I just aced everything. It was easy. I loved it. I had a good accent even, so much so that I

have to admit to my students in my Spanish language classes when they are upset about not understanding how to do accent marks, I confessed to them that I actually had to teach myself the rules for that when I started to teach Spanish, because I myself did not know them. I instinctively have known from day one where the accent marks go. I don't know how I know, I just do. So I think that was really the prompt was that was something I was good at.

Christina Torres:

So you had that natural joy in your learning? I think so, yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's wonderful. I always tell my students how wonderful it is when you find something that brings you joy and you can continue to go down the path of studying something that brings you joy, and then you can end up working in that same area that brings you joy, which takes us to, I think, the next section here, because you mentioned that you did your undergrad in Syracuse and your MA in Spanish from Rutgers, and then you found yourself at UCF in the nineties, was that correct? The late nineties?

Anne Prucha:

Yes. Actually, I started as an adjunct in teaching Spanish at UCF in January of 1995.

Christina Torres:

Okay. All right. And then you found yourself in the MA TESOL program. Could you tell us a little bit about how that happened?

Anne Prucha:

Sure. Well, I started as an adjunct teaching Spanish in 94, and I did that for four years, and then I was offered an instructor position. And so today, now my title is senior instructor so I've been doing that now for, I don't know, a little over 20 years, but I think it was about 2005. I had been teaching Spanish. I had been rubbing shoulders with TESOL faculty and colleagues and friends, and I have a very good friend who got her PhD from UCF, and she had to take one last class TESOL class for her PhD coursework. And it was the applied, it was the linguistics course. And I said to her, well, I'm kind of interested in TESOL. And she said, well, why don't you just take the class with me? Of course, it's one of the most difficult ones in the program. But I said, okay.

And I registered for the class and decided to take advantage of the remitted tuition, and I loved the class. She and I had so much fun. I learned so much. There were so many connections with having got with Spanish, Spanish language. I mean, my master's in Spanish was really technically in literature, but I did teach as a graduate teaching assistant, so I also was learning about grammar teaching and things like that and language acquisition. But I enjoyed the class so much at that time, my two daughters were young, and honestly, it was really fun to go out one night a week and go to class and I loved the class and I did well at it, and so I decided to do another one. And same thing, loved it. And people would say, gosh, well, after a long day with working and the kids, I can't believe you want you go to class at night.

I said, frankly, I love it. I go to class and it's like a vacation. And then I took another one, loved it, did well, and Keith Folsch such a wonderful mentor, person, friend, professor, he said to me, Anne, you've taken three courses. You've done well in all three. Why don't you just do a master's degree? Do it. I said, all right. So I registered or I applied for the master's program. I was accepted and there, and then I took one course per semester. I think a couple of those were in the summer because I was teaching full-time as an instructor and had my kids at home. And so it actually took me five years, but I finished and I graduated in summer of 2010. So I really, it's kind of funny because the same thing with Spanish, what prompted me, part of what prompted me was just this curiosity and this interest and what is TESOL.

And nowadays today, when you tell people, oh, yeah, TESOL, they're like, what does that mean? Oh, yeah, ESOL, it's like, no, ESOL is part of it, but the T is the teaching. So I teach in my TESOL classes, I'm teaching people about second language acquisition and all kinds of things, phonics, phonetics, grammar. how do we acquire languages, first, second, third languages from the time we're born because this is information that's going to be helpful to say public school teachers, when they get students whose first language is not English, how can they accommodate their students and help them with this knowledge? So there's a lot of explanation along with that, but it kind of like with sixth grade, when I started in Spanish, I loved it. It was fun and I was good at it. So that was part of the prompt.

Christina Torres:

And that brought us full circle. And for the folks who are listening, the remitted tuition is a benefit that faculty at universities get where we can take classes for free, a certain number of credits each semester. And I think one of the things, and maybe you feel the same way, and when as someone who's taught a while, go into a classroom as a student. For me, it's fun to be a student because when you've been in charge of the whole class, it's a different experience to sit and be a student.

Anne Prucha:

A hundred percent. And I remember telling people when I would go in class, they'd be in Keith's class, or Dr. Purmensky or Dr. Mihai or Dr. Nova. I, it just tickled me that here I was the student and I was so used to being the professor. And so my role was completely reversed, and it was kind of a cool experience. And at the beginning it felt kind of weird in a funny way. And sometimes I would kind of be giggling to myself inside because it just was a strange, funny, but good feeling. Yeah.

Christina Torres:

It's so nice that we get the chance to continue to explore our curiosities in our professions, and that's, I think, such a wonderful aspect of our jobs. Yeah. Yeah. So you mentioned that you graduated from your MA TESOL in the summer of 2010, and you also were teaching the whole time that you were taking your master's in TESOL here in modern languages. What have you been up to since graduation?

Anne Prucha:

Since 2010, I have continued at UCF in the modern languages department as an instructor. I am an instructor of Spanish, but I do add TESOL to that because every summer, since I graduated in 2010, I have taught, except for this past summer, I have taught at least one TESOL class in the summer. It's online class. I've taught TESOL 4240 issues and second language acquisition during the master's in TESOL programming. When I was taking classes, I volunteered with graduate students whose first language is not English, helping them to work on their pronunciation skills so that they could be successful in the exam. They had to take I honestly can't remember the name of the exam,

Christina Torres:

Was that the speak test?

Anne Prucha:

Yes,

Christina Torres:

Yes, yes. Okay. Yeah.

Anne Prucha:

I also volunteered. It was a language laboratory where L2 speakers would come in and for help with pronunciation, vocabulary, all kinds of things. So I did that. So in terms of TESOL, since I graduated with the masters in TESOL at UCF, that's pretty much what I've done. Right now though, I'm really excited because I'm working with Carrie Perskie and Courtney Jorgenson. Courtney is teaches at the ELI. And funnily enough, Courtney was a student who went on one of my summer study in Madrid, Spain programs. I was the faculty director for our department for that for five years. And Courtney was not in my Spanish classes, but she went on the program. And then when she resurfaced later at UCF, at the ELI, I was looking at her at some event. I'm like, I think I know her. And then I realized, yes, she was on my program.

So that was a neat connection because I was the faculty director for that program. She participated, and now she's back at UCF, and she and Carrie and I are working on a project to finalize the course in English for the Florida Prison Education Project. And when it's done, we hope to be able to teach it, which is important to me because that is something that I'm interested in doing when I retire, is teaching in that environment, but also teaching, well, not necessarily even in prison environment, but any environment where you have people whose first language is not English and they need to learn English because it's a skill that I have. It's teaching. It is a knowledge base that I have, and it's something I think is so important that people want and they need, and it's something that I can help people with.

Christina Torres:

It's so nice that we're able to apply those skills to help the community, which is what you're talking about. The folks in our community who need that, and it's learning for the sake of learning and teaching for the sake of teaching. And how wonderful. I'm sure that you're working on a lot of details. Is there anything that you could possibly share with our podcast listeners about plans for this particular English class, for the prison education system?

Anne Prucha:

I can share a little bit. We've only just started, Carrie has some modules for the course that were already drafted, and so Courtney and I are looking at them before our next meeting, which is next week. It's going to be community English, English for community purposes, not for academic purposes. So it won't stress writing academic paragraphs, for example. It'll stress more how to write an email, how to read things you need to be able to read when you get out in the job market, things like that. I am really happy to be working with them because they have way more experience than I do teaching TESOL and teaching English, because although I do have a master's in TESOL, and I've taught this TESOL course that I mentioned before for UCF, they have a more vast array of experience. So I'm eager to learn really a lot from them on how to structure an English language course. I mean, I know how to structure a Spanish language course. I do tons of course, redesign. I've created courses and textbook material from the ground up in Spanish, so I'm eager to learn how to apply those skills to creating and teaching an English language course.

Christina Torres:

I do love working with faculty on teams for that very same reason, because it's just such a nice opportunity to get different lenses of approaches to how you might tackle a class. And I always find that I come away from those experiences learning a lot of new things for myself.

Anne Prucha:

Absolutely. And one of the things about taking the master's in TESOL at UCF, being in the student chair, and I said before, I was kind of laughing at the beginning because here I was the student, not the professor. That experience, one of the biggest values of that experience has been learning skills, strategies, pedagogical things that I now apply to my classes when I teach Spanish. And I'll just give you one small example.

Christina Torres:

Sure. Please.

Anne Prucha:

Keith Folse gave me some amazing ideas and strategies, very helpful for providing feedback to my students on their work. In fact, I just was emailing with him last week, and I mentioned that every time I provide feedback, Keith is in my head. Okay, Carrie Prosky, same thing. She provided such valuable, such a valuable model on how to provide feedback to your students that is meaningful, that is pedagogically sound. And that, let's face it, allows you to still have a life. You have 125 students a semester. You have to learn strategies to do your job, provide them what they need to meet the objectives and the goals of the course, and go away with the skills they need. But you also cannot work 24/7. Sure. And it's just really important to me because I did have an experience during the Masters where I got no feedback from a professor. And so I saw both extremes. And I even tell my students at the very beginning of my classes, whether they be face-to-face, hybrid or online, that I will provide them feedback on every single thing they give me. Sometimes it'll be global feedback. Most of the time it's individual because it's very important, and that is what they deserve.

Christina Torres:

So I talk about feedback a lot with my students as a dialogue between us. It's not just an explanation of a number. It's definitely with the intention of helping them to improve what I call their teacher toolkit in my teacher training courses or just their general toolkit if it's in a language course. But I always try to really encourage them to think of it as a conversation between us for the purpose of what they can push the ball forward.

Anne Prucha:

That's great. I'll have to steal that.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, please.

Anne Prucha:

Teachers steal stuff from each other. But not only that, but it's also, I learned, especially from Keith and Carrie and others, you don't want to just correct something for a student. We need to give them feedback that provides them the skills to correct, to improve, and to fix their own work so that they themselves understand what it is they need to do. Say, to understand a past tense or to know whether or not nouns are masculine or feminine. I could just correct it all for them. And here you go, here's your grade. But that doesn't help them.

Christina Torres:

No, and the goal, as I've said before too, again, different groups of folks that I've had in my classes is for them to eventually not need me by the time they're no longer in my classes. You know, want to teach them how to self-correct. And you want to teach them how to find what they need and how to think deeply about something, right? So they can problem solve it. And of course, we're obviously there to guide them through the process while they're in our courses. But the goal is for when they're no longer in our class that they no longer depend on that from us, and they're ready for the next step.

Anne Prucha:

And that's why, as you say, it's a conversation, but it's also a process. If they submit something, I give them feedback, and then they have to go back to that item and they have to revise it, for example, and then they have to give it back to me then. So it's a dialogue conversation, and it's a back and forth type thing. So process involved.

Christina Torres:

Yeah. I know I could talk about feedback for a long time. In fact, my dissertation happened to be on feedback too, so I'm keeping myself together. I'm like, I will be cool. I will stop it. I will. Yes. So my next question for you, Anne, is, and you touched on this a little bit already, could you give any additional insight on how your MA TESOL program prepared you for your life now, or gave you some insight for that you use in your life now? As faculty or in general?

Anne Prucha:

Yeah, I touched a little bit on it. I learned a lot of strategies for providing feedback to my students. I think, honestly, one thing that it helped me with was to become a better grammarian, I love grammar. I'm an old grammar geek. But my mother was, okay, my mother and my father, but mostly my mother. They would correct our grammar. And in the dining room, there was this lectern with a ginormous dictionary on it that we had all given my mom for Christmas one year. And of course, now it's crazy to think because we have the internet, but it was about two feet thick. And if anybody had a question about anything, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, look it up, look it up. So there we'd go and we'd look it up. When I was in high school, my school system would send home these newsletters and I would look at them and they'd be filled with grammatical mistakes.

So my mom and I would literally take a red pen to it, and then I would go back to school and I would give it to the superintendent whose office was in our building. And he was a friend of my mom's. So we'd give it to him and he would be just, oh boy. Okay. So learning, doing the masters in TESOL really allowed me to learn even more about my native language, which is English and grammar, how to teach grammar, how to approach grammar. Same with vocabulary building and the importance of vocabulary that has translated so much into teaching Spanish as a foreign language at UCF. And by the way, I teach all levels. I teach the students who know nothing. I teach all the way to advanced conversation composition, things like that. And the advanced grammar course, which I absolutely love. So much fun.

That's fun. Yeah. It's like I tell my students, this is the nitty gritty, this is the course I remember I took it in my undergraduate Spanish degree, and I happened to be taking it in Madrid, Spain. And it was the course where the light bulb literally went off in my head about the subjunctive. Yes. So the masters in TESOL really helped me learn about teaching grammar and understanding even better, the grammar of my own language. And now I apply that to teaching Spanish grammar. And one thing it also helped me with, and this is Dr. Folse, everybody thinks that you have to have perfect grammar to communicate in another language. The fact of the matter is, you can have the most terrible grammar, but if you don't

have vocabulary, if you cannot name things and talk about things, you cannot communicate. And that is a lot of his research.

And so I've shared that a lot with my students in my Spanish classes. And we've done a lot of work with vocabulary acquisition. And a great example of this is my parents, going back to my parents, they decided to learn Spanish. My dad had a beautiful accent, but he had a terrible grammar, but he wasn't afraid to speak Spanish. He just would speak and he would, whatever. And he had all this vocabulary. My mother had perfect grammar, and she didn't have as much vocabulary knowledge as my father. And my father was really, he was more successful in communicating because he had a bigger vocabulary base. So that is something I've learned in the Masters in TESOL, and that I've been able to apply to teaching Spanish.

Christina Torres:

I know, I remember reading one of Keith Folse's stories and one of his many publications, and this was about him in Japan finding flour because he needed to make biscuits. He felt the need to make biscuits in Japan, and he was trying to *cecum la cute*. And that was when it, it's such a great story for the importance of vocabulary. And I agree, I do love grammar, but without vocabulary, we don't have the pieces to put together in grammar.

Anne Prucha:

We can't name things. We can't talk about.

Christina Torres:

And he puts it in such a very succinct way. He explains it in such a logical way. And I'm like, well, of course we need to be empathizing. He does emphasizing vocabulary a lot more of it does. Yeah. Yeah. I'm so happy that you shared that with me. And now that absolutely, even

Anne Prucha:

He has a thing called a vocabulary notebook, and it's a strategy that he's used with his students. I've actually used that with my Spanish language students taking my Spanish courses. I've had that as part of the course requirement to keep a vocabulary notebook because it helps them acquire more vocabulary and therefore being able to speak better

Christina Torres:

Now my husband doesn't speak a lot of Spanish, but at this juncture, we've known each other for, what, 11 years? And we've been married for nine and change, and we, he's now studying Spanish, and he's asking me for advice. I'm like, vocabulary, vocabulary. Obviously we're going to work on grammar, but you got to get more vocabulary. Yeah, it's really important. So we've got it. We've got him on some vocabulary, learning flashcard apps and all of this.

Anne Prucha:

Well, my best advice to him is find a Spanish language, soap opera, like <Spanish Name>, it has like a hundred and something episodes and just watch it and watch it with first watch it with the English subtitles, then switch to Spanish subtitles that'll help his vocabulary.

Christina Torres:

That'll be good. I'm still trying to get him to watch, the classic <Spanish Name> it was in the nineties.

Anne Prucha:

Oh, I don't know, that one.

Christina Torres:

Let me write it down. That was a classic, a lot of the wonderful Latin American novella tropes in it, but it's such a classic. Yeah. One of the ones that we watched with my grandma, and she'd get very into the villain, be like, oh my gosh, can you believe? So that has a warm, I'll get, I'll let you know if he ends up watching that one. So here, I've got one more question for you towards the end of our recording today. And the last bit here is what advice, what do you offer someone who is interested in studying Spanish or TESOL language as a whole? Given your experience, what advice would you give someone who's starting off?

Anne Prucha:

Well, if you're going to study another language, my best piece of advice is make possible an experience in which you can immerse yourself in the language. Just do it. Go live in another country, go on a exchange program. The longer the better, shorter students say, well, should I go on this month long program? Is it even worth it? And I say, yeah, why not? I mean, not everybody can go on a study abroad program for a semester or a year, but immerse yourself. And if you don't go somewhere, find other ways to immerse yourself. And in Orlando, we're really lucky because Spanish is everywhere, and there are so many opportunities to immerse yourself. Number two, for Spanish, don't be afraid. I came across this expression the other day in a novel I was reading, and it was about learning other languages. It was something to the effect of be bold, not perfect.

And it made me think of students of mine. A lot of my students, the most successful ones in Spanish courses are the ones that precaution the winds. They're not afraid, they're not inhibited, and they just speak. And that was like my dad. He would just speak. He didn't care if he was making mistakes. So be bold, not perfect. And I've been really lucky because I've been able to study both TESOL and Spanish. And then there's been a lot of overlap and applications from both of those degrees into my career. I honestly, I have to be honest with you, I never planned on being a Spanish instructor, professor, whatever you want to call it. It didn't fall into my lap, but it is not something that I had always thought, I never thought this is what I was going to do. But because I speak Spanish fluently, this became possible.

Before I started teaching at UCF, when I lived in New Jersey, I worked for a legal services organization. It was a nonprofit. And at when I got hired, when my boss found out I was fluent in Spanish, he increased my salary and he gave me a whole bunch of other job responsibilities that really opened up doors for me. So I know it's such a cliché, but when you know more than one language, there's so many doors that are open to you. But it really is the truth. Because I moved here to Florida. I wasn't planning on being a college instructor, but I wanted a job. I said, oh, there's a university here. Let me go meet them. I mean, I started as an adjunct, and then I worked my way up and I became a full-time instructor. But then that opened up other opportunities, like getting a master's in TESOL, being able to teach a 4000 level TESOL class, which has informed my teaching of Spanish.

And also UCF has so many opportunities for its employees, and I've taken advantage of a lot of them. But going back to speaking in other language, I was the faculty director for our Madrid program five times. I was a faculty director with one of our colleagues in modern languages for Nicaragua service learning honors college program. I initiated and created a study abroad short-term program in Cuba that I did four times with a colleague. We took students there four times. Created a course to go along with

it. So because I speak another language, because I teach it, because I did the masters in TESOL, all these other doors and opportunities have opened up to me. And now new opportunities along the lines of learning design and online teaching and learning have been open to me. And I've been involved in many, many initiatives that have to do with those things and working with the Florida Prison Education Project course. So I hope I answered your question.

Christina Torres:

No, it definitely does.

Anne Prucha:

My best piece of advice would be for learning another language immersion be bold, not perfect, and then for TESOL, see how you can combine the two. I mean, I think that's what I've been able to do. But for TESOL, I actually recommend the program a lot to my students, the masters. And I've had many of my students in my Spanish classes go on to take it. I've been a big spokesperson for it, because I think having a master's in TESOL opens up a lot of doors for you as well. Not just in teaching, but maybe learning design, online teaching and learning practices. I mean, there's so many things you can do with it.

I think learning how to teach Spanish as a second language, learning how to teach it as a foreign language, and I'm already planning for when I retire, using these skills and these knowledge bases for what I want to do when I retire for the community.

Christina Torres:

What a wonderful way to transition into that next phase, which is really to continue to serve our community in different ways. I like that you're talking about how different doors open and different opportunities present themselves. I think that sometimes folks who are starting off in a learning path are starting off at university, might hesitate to think about, Hey, well, what job will I get at the end of something? But I always encourage them to continue to pursue the things that bring them joy, the things that create interest for them, because you really do get opportunities that present themselves as you move forward in time. And if you're in a lane, as I tell my students, if you're in a lane that brings you joy. And if you're in a lane that makes you curious and makes you want to continue working, I have been really grateful, very pleased with the opportunities that have come my way as well, just because I'm continuing to take each next step in the path. And sometimes you don't always know where the next step will lead you, but it does lead you in a direction that,

Anne Prucha:

I agree with you a hundred percent. And I know it's not fashionable to say this these days, it was when I was in college, but it's okay to go to college if you can, to get an education and not worry so much about how much money you're going to earn or what job you're going to get. And I know that's not popular these days because these days it's all about what are you going to study so you can earn money. But I also never had to pay for college because my father actually worked at Syracuse University, so I had a paid tuition. I was very, very fortunate. But I think there's some value in just becoming a well-rounded, educated individual. And if you are in a lane where what you're doing brings you joy and you're curious and you want to learn more, I just think if you're happy what you're doing and you love what you're doing and you're interested and curious and joyful about it, then so many doors can open up if you study something because you're going to earn a lot of money, or because your parents told you had to.

And I know people who've been in both those positions, you might be miserable. And those people were. One of them at the age of 44, still is trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life. So yeah, I, I'm with you on that. Yeah, I think it's good to see things that way.

Christina Torres:

The theme of being well-rounded is one that has gone through a couple of our different episodes in this podcast. So thank you for adding, thank you for adding your take on that. Yeah, for this episode, Anne, such a pleasure to have you joining us. Appreciate you taking the time to come and chat.

Anne Prucha:

Oh, well, thank you so much for having me. It was fun. I can talk for hours about these things. I'm sure you could too.

Christina Torres:

I could too. I'm being good.

Anne Prucha:

Thank you.

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. I'm Christina Torres on our featured guest today was Anne Prucha. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from Modern Languages. For more information about the MA TESOL Spanish and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.