Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 105 – Learning a Second Language

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello and welcome to the EAC Region VIII podcast, Equity Today! Today I am sitting here with Amber Mozet, and we are going to speak about her experiences with learning a second language and being immersed in a new culture, a second culture, and how those relate to the EAC and the work we do here! Amber, welcome.

Amber: Thank you, Tyler, for having me here today. I’m very excited to talk about my experience with learning a second language, and how it’s influencing the work that we’re doing here at the Equity Assistance Center, and how it’s just so important, I feel.

T: Awesome.

A: I guess it kind of ties in to, um, you know, empathy and just kind of an understanding of how difficult it is to be in a different culture, to assimilate into that culture, and one of the biggest issues is language.

T: The language barrier.

A: Yeah.

T: Totally. Um, you went to Germany, and uh, did you have anybody going with you when you were in Germany?

A: I should back up, because I didn’t just learn German one day.

T: Right!

A: I wish, haha.

T: It’s quite a struggle if you’re just deciding to learn a language.
A: Right. Yeah, or I'm just not that talented to have picked it up in one day. But I took German in high school, and honestly the only reason I did was because I didn't want to learn Spanish or French like everybody else, I wanted to stand out. And so I picked the hardest language to learn, I feel, at the time, and you know, I struggled through it, and you know looking back I realized, you get out of it what you put into it. So if you don't study for the tests, you're going to fail the tests.

T: Yeah, my language learning experiences have been directly like in other classes, I can usually phone it in for a test and get an A or a B, but you can't fake knowing a language.

A: Exactly, yeah. And you know, I think the other part of the struggle which gets better later is, you're in high school and you're feeling this pressure to fit in, and speaking a foreign language, everybody sounds like idiots, and in German it's very difficult because you spit, and there's a lot of throat noises you have to make, and so you feel very self-conscious of the noises that are coming out of your face, of your mouth, and so, that didn't help either, I was very shy about that.

T: I'm sure! Do you know what research says is kind of like the ideal age for kids to be learning a second language? Because it's pretty young, isn't it?

A: It is, um, I believe that the cut off, well, I've done some of this research too, is um, if you start picking up a language before your’e five, you can speak it without an accent. And, learning the language even after you’re five, you’ll still have the accent but you won’t have as many “why” questions;

T: Oh, OK.

A: Why do I have to say this subject with this verb? Why do I have to conjugate this verb this way, why do you have this rule? Why do you have this exception to this rule?

T: Yeah, that’s definitely a question I, questions I asked all the time when I took German, and it’s basically useless and I’m sure frustrating for the teacher, but kids don't care about that.

A: Yeah, it’s hard. Because you learn a rule and you try to stick to it like a typical German would, and they tell you all these exceptions to these rules and yeah.

T: Yeah, well English is a tricky language and German is pretty darn close but pretty different. So it’s not like we have an advantage, but it’s yeah, English is just as fraught with so many exceptions and bizarre things.

A: Yeah, exactly.
T: So, um, when did you actually go to Germany and what was actually the juxtaposition between learning in the classroom and actually trying to use it?

A: So, German was my minor here at Metro as I got my Bachelor’s degree, and, in the early springtime of 2008, I decided I wanted to, you know I was single, I didn’t have any kids, I didn’t have a house, let me go move to Germany. And so I found a family that I could work for, I worked as a nanny, for a really, really loving family in Southern Germany.

T: Just on a work visa?

A: Yes, as an au pair.

T: Awesome.

A: Yeah. And one of the benefits of working as an au pair in Germany they have these really structured contracts, and in the contract for au pairs is, you have to go to a language school. There’s like a time limit, you wouldn’t go to school everyday, but, and so I went to a language school three times for like a month-long, sort of session a couple of days during the week, and you know, it’s hands-on learning, the things that I learned about in school, I could use them the same day. Even if I wasn’t using them with the kids, I could use them speaking with my German parents.

T: Yeah, you can go out and order food and do all that stuff.

A: Right, right.

T: Yeah, that’s something that’s very different when you just get to speak it in the classroom, and then you speak English the rest of the day, and it seems kind of silly, and you use it more when you’re actually there, and that’s awesome.

A: One of the things that’s most interesting for me is the exam you have to take when you’re going to language school, they have to figure out what level you’re going in to, because I had had college level German, quite a few years, and so taking the test was interesting because I did really bad on the easy test, and I did really good on the hard test. And so they just kind of threw me into one of the middle classes and said, you know if it’s too hard, if it’s too easy, let us know, but it turned out to be just right.

T: Just right.

A: You know that porridge was just right.

T: Do you remember what they were kind of gearing towards more on the more difficult test that you wasn’t on the easy test? That’s so weird.
A: You know, I think because I had taken advanced German grammar here at Metro, and so we went over I think ten very basic, well not basic, but ten, very, you need to know these rules to speak German like an adult.

T: Standard rules.

A: Yeah, and so I was really set in those rules, I learned them, and so I think that’s probably why I did better on the harder test, and if it was something else it just kind of fell by the wayside.

T: Yeah, it could have just been random vocabulary words.

A: Yeah, exactly. Or, how would he call it, like adjectives, or describing words, or the actions. Like, I put this on the table, or, it’s laying on the table, I mean, to me, on is the same thing, but they have different words, two different words for on, like if you put it on the table or if it’s already lying on the table.

T: Oh, ok. So like, an action vs. like a sedentary thing.

A: Yeah.

T: Interesting, the things that we are not used to. Um, cool. Well, bringing it back around to equity, how has your experiences in Germany, well, I guess first, let’s go back. What were some of the difficulties in communicating with native speakers when you were there?

A: Well, definitely my accent. I don’t try to speak like a German speaker, I just try to speak like myself speaking German, so that was difficult. Because especially in the Southern part of Germany, they have accents and dialects just like we do in America, so imagine somebody from New York trying to speak to somebody in the Deep South like Louisiana. They’re going to have issues until they learn the kind of cadence and how you’re using the words.

T: Totally.

A: And so I had that struggle.

T: Would people just make you repeat yourself a few times?

A: Exactly. And well then another issue that kind of came up a lot you know, I’m older; I was Germany’s oldest au pair.

T: Oh, OK.

A: Because I just barely made the cutoff of 24, I turned 25 the day after I got out there. And, you know, I’m an African-American woman who has a college degree
and I’m going to Germany to be a nanny? That’s kind of unheard of. So I was in this...

T: Especially in terms of the German order of operations for career and stuff.

A: Exactly.

T: Interesting.

A: And to be in a small town, maybe I wouldn’t have had so many interesting interactions if I had been in Berlin or Munich, but for being in this village, and it was a village, that was an interesting time.

T: Yeah, totally. Do you think Germany is kind of similar, where you hear, in the more rural places in the United States tend to be more friendly, people who don’t know you will still say hi?

A: Definitely.

T: That’s nice.

A: Yeah, one of the things that my German mom Rita talked about, she said, “Everybody knows that you’re coming, a couple of people have seen your picture,” because they had shown it around to friends, and she said, “if somebody waves at you, wave back.” And I said, “that’s fine, I’m friendly too!” And I’m smiling at everybody, and I’m waving, and even if they don’t wave back, you know.

T: Yeah, that’s alright! I feel like, at least in my experience going to other countries, is people have been very gracious and just have kind of given me a little bit of a pass if I’m kind of a dork as far as their country’s standards go.

A: Oh yeah.

T: Like, oh it’s cute, he’s just a silly American, he doesn’t know.

A: Oh yeah. And I did that, I kind of had my own rules that I set to, for speaking German, you know it’s very difficult to be in that environment all the time and only hear this foreign language, and, you know, I had this rule that after 8 o’clock, if I spoke German, then I spoke it, if I spoke English, I spoke it. If I spoke a mixture, then that’s what happened.

T: You just kind of allowed yourself to speak whatever was comfortable.

A: Yeah. And the family thought it was a great rule.

T: Oh good!
A: And I also tried to influence some of the words that were coming into the house, like, there's this word, shin, that they put at the ends of words, and it means like, little. And so they say Tyler-shin, you're Little Tyler. Well you're a college student so you probably wouldn't be Tyler-shin, but you can add that to any word. I had a little tomato, and so I said tomato-shin.

T: Oh yeah!

A: And everybody laughed! And now it's a word that they use at home!

T: Oh OK! That's awesome. Why, do you know why, with tomato why you can't add that to the end?

A: It's some rule. I'm not sure.

T: That's so funny.

A: You know, another thing that was so interesting, going back to school, was, just the diversity in the students that were there at the language school and in some of my classes. Some of them had been immigrants from Turkey, or I think we had a gentleman from Vietnam, they had lived their for the most part of their life, and were only now getting a chance to learn, quote-unquote, real German instead what they had picked up just working.

T: Totally, that's really cool. And, so it's a pretty major immigrant population there?

A: Yes, yes. Lots of Turkish people are there, there starting to get a growing population of African-Americans – or, African people, I should say, African people.

T: Yeah!

A: Not all of them are, I mean they're black in terms of skin color, but there's Jamaicans, there's people from Haiti, there are, you know, just the Dominican Republic...I had class with a girl from Jamaica, I had class with a girl from Cameroon...

T: I don't even know where Cameroon is!

A: It's in Africa! Yeah, she showed me!

T: That's cool.

A: It's in the little...curved part of Africa.

T: On the Eastern side?
A: On the Western side. So it’s a small country, too.

T: Ah, there we go, Cameroon, by Gabon, and by, Abuha...Oh by Nigeria. Oh, there we go. That’s wild.

A: Yeah, and so, it was interesting, and I would say it’s like a meeting of the united nations every time we get together for class. Then on the other hand, my second round of classes, we had a woman from Italy, a woman from Albania, we had two Russians, we had a lady from the Ukraine, and um, somebody from, I think she was from the Czech Republic.

T: Nice.

A: Oh, and a lady from Hungary.

T: Awesome, so way east of there.

A: Yeah.

T: That is cool. I feel like Colorado has kind of a similar melting pot scenario going on.

A: I think so too.

T: Different parts of the world definitely. But tons of diversity. Especially in Denver. You don’t get as much in Loveland, Colorado, but Denver has got a lot going on. So um, now bringing it back to Equity, how has your experience there kind of translated into your job here, and then from there kind of bouncing off into what are the things that the department does to deal with in-house second-language learners, and stuff?

A: Well, you know, I, having been gone through this process of learning another language, you know I feel I can relate to the students in our six-state region, that we are serving, and I have an idea of what they’re talking about when they say that the kids are struggling once they’ve been moved into English-only courses, um, because it really does take time, and it, you know, you have to have that proficiency in your native language first so that you can build these bridges to what they’re talking about in the second language that you’re learning.

T: Yeah, and sometimes they don’t have proficiency in their first language.

A: Yeah, mmhmm.
T: Yeah, that would be a huge struggle. But I mean, at the same time, I guess it’s an opportunity for a blank slate, to teach them without any preconceived notions, but that is hard.

A: Right, right. And that, I mean this part about the bridging, that I didn’t really think too much about, because I wasn’t reflecting back on myself for learning that part of the language. But I went to the New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education, their conference this past April, and went to one of the presentations, and that’s what the gentleman there was talking about, was, not only do they need to be able to learn English, but they have to be biliterate, bilcultural, and that’s the only way that we are going to help those students who are not speaking English at home to get through school, get a good job, you know, live a good life.

T: Yeah. So, um, we obviously offer tons of more institutional things, but just form your own personal experience, what are some ways that just kind of, you know, from the family, or an individual level, how can somebody make an easier transition of it? Based on your own experience?

A: Um, well patience. Just knowing it’s not going ot happen overnight. It’s going to take time to get there. And honestly understanding that these children who are learning the second language in school, they need more time to be able to respond back to the questions that you might be asking, so giving them that time and letting them think about it and you know, seeing what’s going on at home. If you speak Spanish for example, and the students in your class speak Spanish, working with them and letting them know in Spanish, you know, “I understand that you’re working on this, and I appreciate what you’re doing.”

T: Yeah! Because, yeah, it’s hard if you are trying to learn just the basic material on top of trying to learn the language that is teaching the material. So I think patience is a huge, huge, it’s a huge virtue in life I think, but especially I think when we have guests in our country that we should be as courteous as possible. But that doesn’t always happen.

A: Right.

T: So what are some of things, kind of on a more formal basis, that the EAC does for second language learners?

A: Well I know that two of the members of our staff, are second language learners. One of them is Marcela Parra, whose first language is Spanish, and Janelle Johnson, who learned Spanish in school, and also when she was working overseas in Guatemala and in Mexico, so she really has perfected her Spanish that way, and so the two of them definitely will offer a training for teachers or school districts to better understand how to work more cohesively with the family, and with the teacher on helping the student in gaining that proficiency in the first and the second language.
T: Awesome, so helping them understand the basic issues that go along with it, and how to try to deal with it at least.

A: And I think for some teachers too, it’s going to be just respecting that this child speaks one language at home and is learning the second one in your classroom, and just to realize, that is difficult. I mean, that there aren't many Americans who speak a second language, and we should realize that we shouldn’t expect this child to speak English, like at the snap of our fingers.

T: Right, it is a little bit of a hypocrisy, where we are, as a nation, not really bilingual, but when someone else comes to our country, we expect them to know our language fluently, and like, obviously that’s not everybody. But that seems to be a kind of general sentiment that I have gotten from people. But that’s cool. What else do we do besides-

A: Language?

T: Yeah.

A: Um, I mean, we just went and visited a school out towards the airport here in Denver, where seventeen different languages are being spoken in that school. The kids, I think there are just under 800 kids. It’s pre-K through 8th grade, and so, it’s just language and cultural issues are some of the things that we’re going to be working one with this particular school, because some of the students are refugees, some of them are immigrants, some of them are born to, or are Americans, because they were born in this country, but they may not speak English at home, and just getting the teachers to kind of look deeper into how they can help the children in their classes, which some of it is learning the culture, learning the cultural norms. Kids, like Native American kids for example, don’t rush to speak up in class unless they’re called on directly.

T: Yes, silence is a very valuable commodity in a lot of Native American cultures.

A: Yes, exactly.

T: And the thing about culture is, it’s the non-verbal component of a language. It’s a whole means of communicating and operating unto itself. So having a kind of a cultural literacy is very necessary for teachers and I think more necessary in the country at large, for sure.

A: Yeah, definitely.

T: Um, cool, well, this is kind of an unrelated question but it was something that I’ve heard other second language learners talk about; did you ever start dreaming in German?
A: Yes, and it scared me at first! It was very scary at first. And I’d have, I think it happened about a month and a half of me being in Germany and just hearing it constantly. You just breathe and eat and live and feel German, um, and I kind of got scared that I would forget my English, and I did notice that it takes a little bit of time to switch back to English, you know, when I’d call my family or my friends, I’d ask them – tell me what’s new, tell me what’s going on in your life, so that I could hear the English, switch back to it, and then I’d be able to say what’s going on with me.

T: Ah, yes, you’d have to like, reverse translate, or something.

A: Mmhmm.. And now I do the same thing when I call my German family, because I still speak with them, the family that I nannied for; I’d call my inlaws, who speak German, so I’m asking them first, tell me what’s going on, until I’m ready to switch into speaking German.

T: Yeah, that’s wild. Well cool. Well I just wanted to end on a bit of a more esoteric note today. Awesome. Well thank you for sitting down and talking about this with us. Of course, if you need to contact the EAC, you may do so any number of ways which will be listed momentarily. Um, any other thoughts?

A: Well, I totally believe in learning a second language, AND I believe in immersion. So if you get the chance to study abroad or spend a larger amount of time in a foreign country that’s speaking the language that you are learning, I definitely think you should. And I believe that all students should somehow be in a study abroad program, and I’d love to see that be a part of everybody’s education process in America.

T: Awesome! Well, until next time, maybe we can all think about speaking in another language.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.