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Marisa Perez-Bernardo: A Spaniard's Perspective of America and Education

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Interview with Dr. Marisa Perez-Bernardo, Modern Languages Department, University of Dallas

MaryGrace Quinlan, Interviewer

Interviewed on March 24, 2017

1 **MaryGrace Quinlan:** So thank you so much Dr. Perez for sitting here and interviewing with
2 me. Okay, so I'm going to start off with just asking about your background.

3 **Marisa Perez-Bernardo:** Yes.

4 **MGQ:** Can you explain where you're from and then what parts? Like how is that different, so
5 you're from Spain and what part of Spain and how it's different.

6 **MP:** I'm from Spain. I'm from the Northern part of Spain so I could say the theme from the
7 Northern part of Spain is like being from New York, in the sense of people are very
8 straightforward, you know. Sometimes we have the reputation of not being very friendly, not
9 very nice. Like for some people from the South, [unclear] South, and of course they are more
10 friendly, whatever. But that is the way I am. I'm from the North and very straightforward, very
11 bold. Yeah.

12 **MGQ:** That's awesome. Ok, so then what was your education when you were there? From
13 primary education to the university level.

14 **MP:** Yes. My first years I went to a public school until fifth grade, and then from sixth grade to
15 twelfth, I was in two different private schools, Catholic schools. So my education was like
16 private, Catholic school, but I have to say in Spain, no matter if you are in a public school or in a
17 private, you receive the same kind of curriculum. It is standardized for everyone. And it's for the
18 whole country. So, it's not like in America that every school has a different approach, a different
19 curriculum. That was one of the things. Then in high school, I have to say, very different from
20 America. My first two years, it was like a general education so I had the same classes with the
21 same people, [unclear] are like humanities and sciences. But when I was a junior in high school,
22 you choose your track in Spain. You need to make sure you are in the right track. I chose the
23 humanity track. It's like the core curriculum at UD. I had to take Greek, Latin, English, Spanish,
24 like twelve different classes that were all humanities – history, history of art. And the only thing
25 is that if you choose that track then you have to [unclear] either go for law school or humanities.
26 You are already making a decision about your life when you are in high school. It's not like in
27 America, you can change your minds many times. And in college, I went to a big, well – then
28 normally you go to your same – it's like here, like the school district. If your parents have a
29 house in one area and you go to that university in that area. You cannot go to another university.
30 You have to ask permission because it's paid for by the government. – I went to a big university,
31 public, from the middle ages, from 1247. It was very different, I mean *very* different, from
32 America in that sense. I have to say that it has also – when I was in high school, I didn't have
33 time for other things rather than study because I had classes in the morning and in the afternoon.
34 Like from nine to 2pm, and then we had a break, and then from four to six. So it went, when I

35 came – I mean – when I went back home I was studying all the time. You know, doing
36 homework or whatever. And I think in America, I like the whole idea that education is also
37 integration of sports and different activities. So you know, for me education is not only what you
38 learn in the classroom. It's also what you learn with your classmates, you know, different
39 activities that you have in America. I love the European way, but the Spanish way, it also has the
40 good things, that it was very academic oriented, but we didn't have so much social life.

41 **MGQ:** Would you say that's the same for the grade school – like the primary education?

42 **MP:** Yes, primary I did sports, but high school, I was so busy and most people, they just do
43 work. And then in college, I lived at home because you live at home. It was very different. And I
44 had classes from 4pm, everyday, from 4pm to 10pm, and then I had to study really hard and we
45 had only one big test at the end of the academic year. Yeah, you have to work really hard, but at
46 the same time, you know in America you have to turn in a lot of assignments, do a lot of things,
47 and it was very academia in Spain. College is very – for professors, they just want to publish. It's
48 like going to a big research institution. The professors don't care about your name, they don't
49 care. You know, it's very different from UD. I received a great education because in college, as
50 well, I had to take – I was doing philology, so I learned a lot. It was like the Great Books and
51 then linguistics, English, History, and then, also another thing. Sorry I'm talking forever. That
52 for me was...

53 **MGQ:** No that's totally fine.

54 **MP:** ... very interesting is that in Europe we have a lot of international relations. As a junior I
55 had the opportunity to – I asked for a grant, and I got this grant to go to Ireland. For a year I was
56 studying at the university – College of Dublin, in Ireland. I think for me, it was very important as
57 an English major. It was very challenging because my English at that point wasn't very good and
58 I was with English majors, studying English and linguistics. But it has the good things and the
59 bad things, the Spanish system. I think it's lacking a lot in the whole social skills and also the
60 whole idea that in America, you do internships, you do a lot of things outside and you work. That
61 thing is missing in Spanish education. At least when I was studying. Yes.

62 **MGQ:** Ok, wow. So then when you went – you went to the University of Dublin for a year,
63 during your university?

64 **MP:** Yes, as a junior. And then I came back and then I finished my degree.

65 **MGQ:** Ok. And then after that, did you move straight to the US? Or did you...?

66 **MP:** Yes. As a senior we have the opportunity to choose – well, there are relations. My
67 university has relations with many universities, you know, all over the places. And I apply for
68 the US, there were ten positions and then the placement at was Virginia University. Immediately
69 our classes in Spain, we start in September, we finish in July because it's a little bit different.
70 And then in August, I was in the US. So it was a very different experience. The problem
71 consisted, I was there for two years. At the beginning I was going to be only for one year, but
72 then I was able to do my masters and then teach at the same time. And it was very, you know,
73 you end up college coming to the US not knowing anything about the system, it was a cultural

74 shock for me for everything, you know? But also being a teacher and working at the university as
75 a TA, but really and truly I was teaching two classes and taking three classes. And then from
76 there I went to DC and I got my Ph.D. at the Catholic University of America. It was a lot of... I
77 think at that point when I went to DC, it was very different because I was already – I had the
78 experience of two years living in the US and the American system. But my first year in the US, it
79 was getting used to graduate life that it was not so hard because it was harder in Spain, in the
80 sense of – but also teaching and the American system. So yeah.

81 **MGQ:** That's really different!

82 **MP:** Yes, and I didn't even know anything – I knew how to explain – in Spain we study a lot of
83 grammar and things like that, but I knew how to explain grammar to a native speaker but not to a
84 person who, you know like, because for me Spanish is my first language. And I was studying
85 English as a second language. It was like changing gears in a way.

86 **MGQ:** Wow. Ok. So then, when you came, did you have – were there people who had
87 stereotypes about Spaniards?

88 **MP:** No because I think Americans, in general, they don't have as many stereotypes as
89 Europeans.

90 **MGQ:** Really?

91 **MP:** Yes. In the sense of Americans sometimes they don't know much more about Spain. You
92 know, like, for some people they don't even know where – like they think oh, Spanish for them
93 is like Mexican. They don't have – they may have stereotypes about Mexicans, but I don't think
94 they have stereotypes about Spanish people. About people from Spain, Spaniards. I think it's
95 more Europeans. If you go to Germany, they have stereotypes about the Spanish.

96 **MGQ:** Ok, I guess that's good for Americans. So then, did you have stereotypes about
97 Americans?

98 **MP:** I didn't, but some Spaniards and some Europeans have really mean.

99 **MGQ:** Oh, about us?

100 **MP:** Yes! It's like they think – one of my friends asked me, “Oh, probably for you it's so hard to
101 teach Americans because they have – they are not intelligent.” I'm like, “What are you talking” –
102 like they have this idea that Americans, you know like, I was like no. America is a big country,
103 and people, there are so many million Americans that really and truly if you are very, like if you
104 study and you are in the top ten in your high school or in your college, normally you are very
105 good because it is very competitive. That's what I think about America. You know.

106 **MGQ:** With the large number of universities, especially.

107 **MP:** Yes, and everything. It's like, you know can you imagine if you graduate from UD. That is
108 a very challenging school. And you are the top ten? I mean, I think if you are in the top ten of the
109 ten best students at UD, you're going to do – you are a great student.

110 **MGQ:** Yes.

111 **MP:** Because for me, UD is harder than other universities.

112 **MGQ:** That's great. I believe you! (laughter) What brought you to UD? Like after – did you – ?

113 **MP:** Yes, it's really interesting. I shouldn't say this, but I always think God has His ways. I
114 always think God has His ways in everything. It didn't occur to me that I was going to end up at
115 UD. But when I was at Catholic University in DC, one of my friends, she was one of my best
116 friends, and her husband, she got married, and her husband [unclear] a professor at UD. I was
117 always talking on the phone, at that time, with her and she was telling me you should apply to
118 UD. I said no, I need to finish my dissertation. It was my third year as a graduate student, and I
119 was doing my comps and everything. My scholarship was – I didn't have any – I have never had
120 like – I have another thing that is very different from the US. My mentality of no loans. I didn't
121 want to have loans, I never paid any single dollar for education in the sense of, I have always
122 paid off for my education. I was – my scholarship was – my _____ scholarship was finished, and
123 I needed to find a job or pay for my class for the dissertation. Suddenly she told me “you should
124 apply.” I applied to UD but they never answered me back. But suddenly there was a problem,
125 they needed a person, they called me, I came. I was supposed to come only for one year. Then
126 there were people that left the university, they needed me to be here for a longer period of time. I
127 was doing my dissertation at the same time that I was teaching fulltime. And it was my first year
128 writing the dissertation. I was just done with my comps. I think my life, it has been so intense in
129 the whole idea of never having a break. No like – so then when I finished my dissertation, I was
130 looking for another job. I went to the MLA, I had job interviews, they called me for several
131 interviews, but I, at that moment, they offered me a fulltime – I mean, tenure position at UD, so I
132 accepted UD because I liked the students and I already – I was used to this university. That was
133 my whole why I came to UD. But I think there was not even like a job post(?) at that moment. I
134 just applied and everything.

135 **MGQ:** Wow, that's awesome.

136 **MP:** Yes, it was very strange. The whole thing.

137 **MGQ:** Okay, that's really cool. You had already kind of touched upon how the education is
138 different within university in the United States, and you were saying that socially –

139 **MP:** And also, another thing that I find is language. In Europe, in general, Spanish are not good
140 with languages, but it's like a concern that every single parent has about their children. To be
141 bilingual in another language. And even if you're not good, you think that it's important. And I
142 think that in America, some people they are monolingual and they are proud of being
143 monolingual, and that, in Europe, is like – it's not acceptable. Yes, so that is one of the things
144 that I think about education. It's more international education.

145 **MGQ:** And so would you say that in Spain, would they learn more English? Or do they learn
146 German, French – ?

147 **MP:** They learn, the second language – okay. When I was in college, you always have to study
148 classical languages. It's part of – because the Spanish comes from the Latin, so it's a requirement
149 to have Latin. Okay? I studied Latin and Greek, and then of course, English, it was very
150 important. And so when I was there in six – we started in sixth grade, but right now they start in
151 kindergarten. My nephews and nieces, they already know a little bit of English, like a few words,
152 you know. But, yeah, so English is the most important modern language, and then, right now
153 people tend to study French or German as well. German is very important right now in Spain.

154 **MGQ:** For... because of...?

155 **MP:** Because of the economy I'm thinking in Germany. Many Spanish want to learn German.
156 And also because of being part of the European community. I mean, in a way, well we will see.
157 And now with the present things are going to change. But I think, in general, people tend to
158 work. Like after graduation in another country because there is a lot of unemployment in Spain
159 so people tend to go to other countries and sometimes they decide to go to England or Germany
160 or France. Yeah.

161 **MGQ:** Okay. That's interesting.

162 **MP:** So people study foreign languages.

163 **MGQ:** Okay cool. Because we have some of that, like here in the United States as well. But I
164 think it's more like Spanish when you're in the younger grades –

165 **MP:** Yes.

166 **MGQ:** -- and then, not so much German or French. But that makes sense because they're all
167 kind of close by each other. Okay. So then, you said you had private and public schools, but you
168 said the curriculum was the same?

169 **MP:** The same. The only difference was that public school, theology was an option. Even in
170 public schools theology was an option. Yeah. But, I have to say theology was not very good.
171 [unclear] Neither in private nor in public, ok? So yeah, but everything was standardized.

172 **MGQ:** Ok, so then what would that curriculum consist of? So was it math, science?

173 **MP:** In elementary school or in...?

174 **MGQ:** In elementary.

175 **MP:** In elementary, normally – you know in America one of the good things of America is that
176 you study more sciences.

177 **MGQ:** Ok.

178 **MP:** Yeah, I remember studying biology, chemistry, but everything was studying things by
179 heart, we never went to the labs.

180 **MGQ:** Oh really?

181 **MP:** Yes! So

182 **MGQ:** That's hard!

183 **MP:** I feel like super ignorant, ok? Humility there. Because for me, I'm terrible with math. Math,
184 it was just math, we didn't have – here in America you have calculus, algebra, you know?

185 **MGQ:** Too much in my opinion. (laughter)

186 **MP:** No, it is important! I look at this as something important. I was never – I was like the kind
187 of person that I was always interested in reading, history – I love history – history of art, foreign
188 languages, you know. And I didn't like sciences. So, you know, it was interesting because it was
189 a requirement having biology, but biology, I like it. But math and physics and chemistry –
190 chemistry was hard. Physics was really hard for me. But, yeah we had like all classes, you know.
191 Normally mixed between sciences and humanities. But in the junior year of high school is when
192 you decide. But people who do sciences, they still have to do humanities. It's a requirement for
193 everyone to do philosophy, Spanish language as linguistics. And in America, people don't study
194 a lot of linguistics, and then, because you need to know your language very well, that's one of
195 the requirements in order to graduate. But another difference is that when you graduate from
196 high school, you cannot get to the university until – you don't – you go to the university that
197 senior year to take some exams and they are graded by the professors in college. And if you
198 don't pass this test, you graduate from high school but you cannot go to the university.

199 **MGQ:** So can you retake the test? If you fail?

200 **MP:** In September, if you fail in June, you need to retake them in September before you go to the
201 university.

202 **MGQ:** Wow!

203 **MP:** Yes.

204 **MGQ:** That's intense.

205 **MP:** Yes, and what you do in this test is like writing papers. So I remember perfectly that I have
206 to take – I went to the University of [unclear], and had to be like for three days at the university
207 writing papers. So it was like philosophy. Ok so I had to compare Thomas Aquinas and Livius,
208 you know –

209 **MGQ:** And you learned all about that in high school?

210 **MP:** Yes, you learn that, especially the last year of high school is where you study all these
211 things. You know, and it's like, the exams – is called *celestividad* – is where you go and you
212 have like tests that they are given by professors at the university.

213 **MGQ:** Okay...

214 **MP:** Yeah.

215 **MP:** It's a little bit different, the system. In Germany is the same, they have something that is
216 called *abitua*, and so that's their..., and it's also like an exam that you take in order to get to the
217 university. The US is the SAT's, but it's kind of multiple choice, things like that. In America – In
218 Spain, it's more writing essays.

219 **MGQ:** And it's more specific to your track.

220 **MP:** Yes, to your track.

221 **MGQ:** Okay. So then a biology student would have more bio...

222 **MP:** Everything is biology. Then it's like all the classes that you have taken as a senior in high
223 school, again you retake the test, but it's not graded by your teacher in high school, it's graded
224 by a professor who specializes in that subject in college. In a way, so when you are – you know
225 in America, everyone can go to college, but... over here in UD there is like a requirement that
226 you take a test, but it's a test that is corrected by your professor who is teaching you – teaching
227 English.

228 **MGQ:** That would be interesting to consider within the United States doing that.

229 **MP:** Yes.

230 **MGQ:** Because then the professor knows you somewhat, right? Would you say that?

231 **MP:** Then the professor...

232 **MGQ:** Or is it so big, like is the number of applicants very vast?

233 **MP:** Oh yes, it's huge. They don't know who, and you are not supposed to, because of the
234 grading process, it's like the APs. You cannot put – they don't know who you are as a name.
235 You know because that's confidential. In my [unclear], the person who is grading you knows
236 who you are, you know. Yeah it's confidential, it's like the AP test.

237 **MGQ:** Okay, gotcha. Wow that's crazy. Okay so then, we talked about it briefly but what do
238 you... what do you believe to be the "American Dream?"

239 **MP:** American Dream. For me it's not to be a multimillionaire. If people think that to be the
240 American Dream is to be multimillionaire, well for some people probably that's the goal in their
241 lives. For me, the American Dream is... well, to study. But at the same time, as you said, is to
242 have an important function in society. Sometimes I feel myself like, "Oh I'm a teacher teaching
243 students." You know, sometimes my life is very monotonous, if you could say. But I think God
244 knows, you know? Sometimes doing what you have to do in these circumstances and trying to
245 help the people you have around you. You may not become the President of the United States.
246 You may not be the governor of your state. You know, I couldn't like anything that has to do
247 with politics. But sometimes you have people that are around you, and that you can have an
248 impact on these people. And try to do your best with your circumstances. It has always been very
249 hard for me because I had to study at the same time that I was working, and I had other things in
250 life but I tried to do my best in the circumstances that I had. Even when it was not fun
251 sometimes, not perfect.

252 **MGQ:** So that answers my second question, is it realistic to live that American Dream? I mean I
253 think it's different for some people. Like we have different views of what that is, but for some
254 people, do you think that, if they understood it, would it be realistic for them? Like in their
255 circumstances.

256 **MP:** In their circumstances, even when not everyone is not going to be successful. Yeah, it's
257 hard, you know. I think we are going through a crisis, but the important thing is to do your best.
258 You know, in these circumstances.

259 **MGQ:** What's the crisis that you think we're going through? As Americans or as a country...?

260 **MP:** I think Western civilization is going through a crisis of values. Moral... Moral religious
261 values that are reflected into the economic system and the political system. And I don't want to
262 be too critical. For me, I don't like too much politics. I will never talk about politics, but I think
263 in general, we're going through a crisis of values. People talk about the economy, but I think we
264 need to go back to being more moral, more ethical, doing our best in the way we are, no
265 corruption. We need, at the same time, there are positive things. I have an optimistic attitude,
266 things will change. It's normal. We go through all this...

267 **MGQ:** Yeah, I think that, and I agree with you I think there's something – there might be
268 something in the school systems too.

269 **MP:** Yes.

270 **MGQ:** That needs to be focused on. But, so, if you had the power, what aspect of American
271 education would you change? If you've seen it, I mean – You're – You've been mostly
272 university- level, have you visited any other, like elementary or high school?

273 **MP:** Yes, yes, yes, I have to say. When I was a graduate student, I – you know, in order to make
274 money I was like, "Oh I really want to teach." During the summer, I taught two summers when I
275 was in DC/Virginia. And it was for immigrants, people who didn't have any money who just
276 arrived in the US. It was very hard, very, very hard. I admire teachers so much because after five
277 weeks I was so exhausted, and I have plenty of energy. But it was very hard because it was a mix
278 of students from different ages from sixth to ninth grade. For two summers I did that. I made a
279 lot of money teaching summer school. And it was four hours, only four hours, but for me, it was
280 like –

281 **MGQ:** A week? Or a day?

282 **MP:** A day. But it was very hard because I was in the class – I don't – I admire teachers. They
283 didn't know anything whatsoever. They didn't know English, they didn't know Spanish very
284 well because they didn't know how to write in Spanish. They were in – some of them were in
285 eighth grade, some of them in sixth grade. They didn't know any Spanish whatso – they didn't
286 know how to write in Spanish. They didn't know an English. So they put me in that classroom.
287 They saw me was a graduate student and thought, "well, she's bilingual." And I said, "well, you
288 know I'm not very good with education... you know, with little children, and I don't have any
289 background in education." I did my best, you know? But it was very hard because I found – I've

290 – there I was very realistic and I realized how hard is when people from other countries, they
291 come and their parents don't have much more education. How can you help these students? I
292 think, for me, it was like a very good experience. I realized that was not what I was supposed to
293 do. But I admire teachers. There are some professors at the college level, that they look down –
294 for me, I could never look down teachers. But I still think there are some people who are
295 [unclear]. We say in Spanish *la torre de marfil*, the ivory tower. And I have even heard
296 comments about “oh what a pity, that student of mine, she wants to be a teacher. She's wasting
297 her life.” From – yeah. Sorry to say that! I know that some people are going to hear this. For me,
298 teachers have a very important role. They're almost like parents. And then teachers, and then
299 counselors, they do everything because some students don't have anything, they don't even have
300 parents. So a teacher is one of – for me, teaching is one of the – also, my parents are teachers so,
301 I mean, for me and my siblings, all of them, they are teachers. And some of my in-laws are also
302 teachers. So my whole life is around education. And I admire – for me, it's one of the pillars of
303 America.

304 **MGQ:** Oh, I love that.

305 **MP:** If I could be like a politician, all my money would go to education.

306 **MGQ:** I love that!

307 **MP:** But yes. Sorry.

308 **MGQ:** No that's – honestly that was very beautifully said. So then, we had – we already kind of
309 touched – what qualities does the Spanish school have over the America... Do you think that
310 there are aspects of Spanish schools, like the fact that they start on a track at junior year of high
311 school. Do you think that America would benefit from that? Or do you think that America's fine
312 where they are right now?

313 **MP:** There's always like a pro – you know, pros and cons. It's good because you, as a Spaniard I
314 was very much thinking – well, for me it wasn't a problem. I knew that I was going to be
315 humanities. And then in college, you cannot transfer – or no. You cannot change majors.

316 **MGQ:** Okay...

317 **MP:** If you change majors, you start over again from the beginning.

318 **MGQ:** From junior year of high school. Or from...?

319 **MP:** No, when you are like in college, you decide your major. You are – you cannot change your
320 major. You can change your major, but if you are a junior and you change your major, you have
321 to go back again to a freshman in that degree.

322 **MGQ:** Oh wow.

323 **MP:** So in a way, it makes you mature. It makes you to be more responsible with your choices.
324 In America, you change your mind all the time. At the same time, when I was eighteen years old,
325 I was eighteen years old. And I was very naïve. So in a way, I made decisions that I do not
326 regret, but I think that some people go through law school – because you go to medical school

327 and law school when you are eighteen years old. And I don't think you are mature enough to
328 make that decision sometimes.

329 **MGQ:** ...to completely understand what you're going into.

330 **MP:** What involves.

331 **MGQ:** Okay.

332 **MP:** Yeah.

333 **MGQ:** Wow, okay. And then, so – do you think that there are like – so I'm going to go hopefully
334 to Spain – do you think that they like Americans? Do they like Americans in the education
335 system in Spain? And then do any Spaniards, like teachers-wise, come here? Like you came here
336 to teach in university, but do you have elementary coming as much? Because I know in Dallas
337 area there's a lot of Hispanic/Mexican teachers that come. But I have not met a Spanish
338 elementary teacher. But do you think they come to America for that?

339 **MP:** Yeah, there is a program that actually is a very good program. I think they come and they
340 teach for one year up to three years. And there is a program because there is an agreement, a
341 relation, between Spain and the US. Also, there are relations – I mean, Americans go and teach
342 in Spain for a year up to three years as well. Yeah.

343 **MGQ:** Okay. That's cool. Alright, and then, what is your opinion on the bilingual programs in
344 American public schools?

345 **MP:** Yes, I cannot say many things about that because I don't know very well. I don't like when
346 people make judgments when they don't know the thing very well. So I wouldn't like to say a lot
347 of things. The only thing that I have heard, I think is that at the beginning you study everything
348 in Spanish and then everything in English? Is that correct?

349 **MGQ:** Right. So usually – I mean there's different types of programs, but usually they'll go...
350 kindergarten through first grade, it's a hundred percent Spanish. And then they'll start going,
351 eighty percent Spanish – twenty percent English. Sixty percent – forty... And then they – to a
352 point, I think in fifth grade, they should be twenty percent Spanish, eighty percent English. I
353 think... But what they're realizing in public schools is that you're getting this bilingual program
354 but then there are these students that are coming in to school, there's a lot of students switching
355 out and around, switching schools, coming from Mexico to come to school. And then there's
356 like, so you have this program which is, I mean in theory a good idea, but then you have all these
357 students coming in that are at different levels of speaking English. So I just wasn't sure...

358 **MP:** I wonder... You know for me it's very problematic and I don't like generalizations. What
359 happened is – I know one teacher, he teaches at Dallas ISD. He teaches in a place where it is a
360 lot of Hispanic population. I mean it's like, if they're African-American or Hispanic. He has told
361 me that the students when they – he's a [unclear] teacher – an English teacher in high school, and
362 they don't write very well in English. So I wonder what's the problem? You know? Okay, for me
363 it's very hard to write in English because I mean, up to when I was twenty-two is when I came to
364 America. So my education, even when I was like an English major, I wrote everything in

365 Spanish. But I write very well, I mean in Spanish at least, in my first language. I write well. And
366 I think it's a problem for some people who are like educated in that system because they don't
367 write very well English. Neither in Spanish nor in English. For me, it's very hard to – it's very
368 problematic that sense of like – I think in America you need to write, you need to write *very well*
369 in English in order to do very well in college. Because when you will take politics, humanities, if
370 you don't write very well even if you're in a public university and for your professional work,
371 you need to have a lot of your skills – language skills need to be very good in English as well. So
372 English would be a priority, in a way, to write very, very well in English, and to be able to have a
373 great range of vocabulary in English. One thing is to be bi – let's talk about bilingual. What is
374 bilingual? You always have one language that is... you know, that you are more fluent than in
375 the other. You may not have an accent. I know people that their parents are from Mexico,
376 Argentina, whatever. They may not have an accent neither in Spanish nor in English. But your
377 writing skills are always better in one language than the other. And I think if you live in the US,
378 and if you are not a teacher of Spanish, English would be... you should write very well in
379 English and to be very competent in that language.

380 **MGQ:** Right. And you were saying that when you were teaching that sixth through ninth
381 grade... they didn't know how to write at all. Which is...

382 **MP:** No, I couldn't like – okay, in Spanish – can you imagine – that's the reason I was five
383 weeks with them. I felt frustrated, but then they told me they loved me and they told me that they
384 learned a lot! But I was like, “what am I going to do in five weeks?” Probably, that's a sign of a
385 good teacher. The good teacher is always thinking, “I'm not capable. I want to teach them a lot.”
386 I am very – you are always limited because I had thirty students in the classroom with different –

387 **MGQ:** At one time?

388 **MP:** At that time. Thirty students, and they were sixth graders, seventh graders, and eighth
389 graders coming from different countries. El Salvador, Guatemala. When I gave them dictation to
390 know how they wrote in Spanish. I couldn't figure out the spelling because it was more – even
391 with Spanish it is very phonetically – (goes to the whiteboard) – *alcanzar* – okay... the student
392 wrote... so I thought it was *Arkansas*.

393 **MGQ:** Oh my gosh! Yeah that's... oh wow. So that must've been really frustrating.

394 **MP:** It's like not know how – I real – and then when I told them to write this in English, they
395 didn't know how to spell “girl.” G – I was like G-I-R-L. They were like – they wrote it like
396 this... (back to the whiteboard). So I was very frustrated because I realized that the level, it was
397 not neither in Spanish nor in English – it was very – I was like so ma—I had like nightmares
398 because I felt that it was my responsibility to teach them how to write. They couldn't spell any
399 single word. Not even “girl.” They were like G-E – they wrote it with “e” instead of “i.” And I
400 think without...

401 **MGQ:** Mhm... so...

402 **MP:** ...they wrote this.

403 **MGQ:** Oh yeah.

404 **MP:** “gel.”

405 **MGQ:** So do you think that’s because they don’t understand the alphabet either, right? Because
406 if you’re thinking phonetic-wise, they have the sound that relates to the letter, but if they’re not
407 understanding the concept of a letter they don’t even have that –

408 **MP:** Can you imagine eighth grade? Do you think in eighth grade – do you have the American
409 Dream of becoming a multimillionaire if you are not able to have – how are you, ok – eighth
410 grade, in four years, how are you going to go to college when you don’t know how to spell
411 “girl?”

412 **MGQ:** Yeah, but then what’s the problem? Is the problem from the teachers – the prior teachers?
413 Because a lot of times these students come from, straight from like – I’m not trying to be a
414 generalization – but Mexico. A lot of these kids do come, they come with their parents.

415 **MP:** Yeah, and what happens is – another thing – I could be talking forever – One of the things I
416 don’t understand is like for example, in Mexico, there’s a big difference – economic differences.
417 So if you have money, you go to private school. And if you don’t have money, you go to public
418 school. For me, that’s not an option. Public schools should also be a good school system. And
419 one of my friends told me when she was eighteen, she was already a teacher. I was like, “what?
420 Eighteen years old and you were a teacher?” In the old system, in Mexico, while you were doing
421 *segundaria*, high school, you could get your teaching certificate at the same time you were doing
422 your high school diploma. So she graduated with a high school diploma, and when she was
423 eighteen years old, she was already a teacher. And then, of course, the salary is very low. And
424 then they – you are eighteen years old, and then you are teaching like in a rural area in Mexico
425 with fifty students and the government pays you four hundred dollars a month. As you can tell, I
426 realized that these students they have many problems because there was a financial problem in
427 their homes, they didn’t have money, and then their [unclear] their education was not good. I’m
428 telling you all these stories, but it is something that for me, Latin – some countries in Latin
429 America, some countries they have great education such as Argentina, they have a great
430 education. Chile, Uruguay. But some countries, depending on your...

431 **MGQ:** ...status...

432 **MP:** ... status in life, you receive some kind of education or the other. It’s very –

433 **MGQ:** I mean that’s interesting because it’s kind of similar to here because a lot of the times, in
434 public schools here, I mean – usually if you have money you go to a private school because
435 they’re really expensive. And then if you go to a public school, you tend – I mean, a lot of
436 families that do go to public school don’t necessarily not have money. But a lot of the times, I
437 mean the system within the public education, is if you’re doing – they focus on how schools are
438 doing. If they are doing well, they get more funding.

439 **MP:** Yes, I know.

440 **MGQ:** If they're not doing well, they don't get enough – there's not funding. If you are like – if
441 you have a school full of kids that are not doing well, then you don't get the funding. So you're
442 not getting the resources that you need to help them do well...

443 **MP:** I know...

444 **MGQ:** ... and then you get teachers – and then you see that school in the corner. It's like, ok
445 well they're not doing well, they don't have enough resources, I don't want to teach there. So
446 then you get teachers that aren't actually going to be helping them. Not all the time, I mean there
447 are definitely some very good teachers that go to those schools, but it's kind of what's happening
448 here as well. There's a spiral that's happening.

449 **MP:** Yeah.

450 **MGQ:** Within the public school as well.

451 **MP:** I know, it's very complex and I know people try to do the best. But sometimes it's very
452 hard. It's like everything – that was for me that was an eye-opening experience, the whole idea
453 of teaching these children. And I realized, "ok I'll do my best in these five weeks."

454 **MGQ:** Five weeks. And then you did that once or twice? Sorry.

455 **MP:** Twice.

456 **MGQ:** Twice, okay so two summers.

457 **MP:** Yes.

458 **MGQ:** Okay. And then... so... if you're thinking about – so you majored in English...

459 **MP:** Yes.

460 **MGQ:** Correct?

461 **MP:** And then I did, for my masters, TESOL, Teaching English as a Second Language, and
462 Spanish. Then for my Ph.D. Spanish. All of my life I have been humanities and also very – most
463 of my studies have been literature and then linguistics.

464 **MGQ:** Okay.

465 **MP:** All the time, with a lot of history classes and a lot of humanities. Yeah. And I have also
466 done translation. Yeah that's another thing, but it's like linguistics again.

467 **MGQ:** So then because you have both backgrounds in English and Spanish, what would you say
468 would be probably the best way of developing a Spanish Teaching-Spanish program? Like
469 teaching Spanish.

470 **MP:** Yes. Well, you know it's very interesting because there are many methods of teaching a
471 foreign language, and I have gone also through a process – I remember in – during my M.A. it
472 was the – many years ago, I remember the professor, the person in charge of the program, she
473 was very much communicative oriented. So everything was, you know, it was part of the 90s.

474 And also beginning – still there are some universities who have this communicative approach.
475 It's called communicative approach. I am very concerned about that because sometimes it's like
476 no, the grammar should not be taught. And for me, I still think that the grammar is important.
477 You cannot talk – you cannot write well, you cannot talk well if you don't know the grammar
478 very well. I think, for me also, the whole idea of reading proficiency based – oriented – you need
479 to be proficient in the five language skills: writing, speaking, listening. You know? And also,
480 very much into culture. I think it's very important to teach culture in the classroom because this
481 is —some people may not like the grammar, some people they may not like learning a foreign
482 language, but probably also, they will remember that anecdote that you told them. Or they will
483 learn about the Spanish-speaking world. You know, things that happen in Argentina, things that
484 happen in Mexico, things that happen in Spain, through their Spanish classes. For me, it's also
485 very much into culturally-based, content-based.

486 **MGQ:** That's very true. And would you think that here at UD they fulfill – do you think they do
487 that, in your opinion?

488 **MP:** We try to do that. But okay, one of the things of a foreign language and that's very
489 important is that you don't learn a foreign language in four semesters. The language requirement
490 – like if you take the placement test and you're placed in the [unclear] one some people think
491 “oh! I studied Spanish for four years and I'm still not very good.” Okay. Do you remember when
492 you were – you know, I mean...

493 **MGQ:** Yeah.

494 **MP:** Can you imagine as an American, for how long have you been studying English and still
495 you need to study a language. You know, the language, to prove your vocabulary. So for me,
496 right now I'm taking German because I was in Germany for my sabbatical and I was very – I felt
497 so bad because – I was at the library so they don't have to know anything. And at the library, it
498 was a library that specialized in Hispanic studies, Spanish and Portuguese studies. Yeah, I don't
499 know why in Germany, okay, Berlin. But I was embarrassed not being able to communicate in
500 German so I started to take German classes. This is my third year, and I still see that I will have
501 to study every day at least for twenty years in order to get a good command of the German
502 language. It's the same as playing the piano. It takes time. Every single thing takes time and you
503 need to have patience. And in English you say “practice makes perfect.” You need to practice,
504 make mistakes, you know. So for me, a foreign language requires time and some students will
505 think it's only a question of two years, four years, that's not realistic.

506 **MGQ:** No, I know. Actually, we're learning in – I'm taking an ESL class right now – and the
507 average number of years for a student to get somewhat of a firm grasp on academic language is
508 between four and seven. Four and seven years of consistent English learning to get, at least, a
509 firm grasp of the language. And I think it's harder as you get older –

510 **MP:** Yes.

511 **MGQ:** ...because your developmental stages, and everything like that, there's – it's more
512 difficult for someone who is older to grasp the language. So for me, I've been taking Spanish for

513 like ten years now, eight years? Eight years. And it's been on and off, some semester I'll have to
514 take a semester off. And then it starts right back at zero.

515 **MP:** Oh, yeah.

516 **MGQ:** And it's like, I left high school taking four years, and I was in upper level, and then I
517 came here, I took a semester. And then I had to take a year off because it just didn't work with
518 my schedule –

519 **MP:** Going to Rome and everything, yeah.

520 **MGQ:** And then I came back, and I was taking classes and I was like “oh no!”

521 **MP:** And I understand perfectly, you know I see also my limitations. So for me, when people tell
522 me “oh it's so hard.” I'm like “don't worry. I have the same problem with everything, you
523 know.” I love Latin because it's a language you need to study the – I'm very good with grammar.
524 So with grammar I think – and it's a language that I love because you don't have to speak Latin.
525 So you know, I'm very fast with the grammar and whatever, and very limited with
526 communicative – and I think English – right now I am going to take a test, by the way, because I
527 want to do a program, probably during the summer, in Belgium. And they have told me “no, no,
528 no, no. You need to show proficiency in English.” I'm like, but I have been living in the US for a
529 long time and they're like “but we don't know your level.” So I'm supposed to take a British test.
530 They don't allow me to take the TOFOL because I prefer the TOFOL, you know how you
531 pronounce it the TOFOL.

532 **MGQ:** T-E-F-O-L?

533 **MP:** Yes the TEFOL, whatever is the test. I prefer that. No, I have to take the British test. And
534 by the way, I'm so used to American spelling that I been studying – yeah because the –

535 **MGQ:** It's different in English.

536 **MP:** Yes, it's different like the spelling. That's the biggest problem. So I was like, oh “analyze”,
537 and I look, I put it with a “z,” and then in British English it's with an “s,” and the I was like I'm
538 going to be penalized so I have to study everything, you know. It's like, it's so humiliating right
539 now that I have to take that test, and I need to have a very high rate. But I think even Americans
540 if they take that test, they need to study a little bit of the test in order to do well with the spelling.

541 **MGQ:** Yes, because of the different... so crazy.

542 **MP:** And then “color,” I put with “ou” and then it's, you know...

543 **MGQ:** That's – In England that's correct, right? “Ou?” Colour?

544 **MP:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, and neighbour. Yeah they put it with “ou,” and you know with English
545 it's “o.”

546 **MGQ:** Oh yes.

547 **MP:** Yeah they spell differently. At least Spanish we don't spell differently. Like the
548 pronunciation of course is different, like different sounds, but you understand everything. But the
549 spelling is standardized.

550 **MGQ:** And that's probably why it's difficult for a lot of students coming to the United States
551 because they – for me, I think Spanish is easier because honestly, if I don't know a word, I'll just
552 sound it out in my brain and so – Spanish is so nice that it's very basic –

553 **MP:** Phonetic.

554 **MGQ:** Phonetic, yes. If I don't know a specific word, I know it's not going to have “ph” in
555 there, or “th” or things like or digraphs and everything like that.

556 **MP:** And you read something, and you know, you learn by heart how to pronounce it and you
557 learn it. In English, I tell you, I had to learn when I was little how to – I knew how to spell but I
558 didn't know how to pronounce it –

559 **MGQ:** Right. Because you have “read” and you have “read.”

560 **MP:** Yes.

561 **MGQ:** And then you have a bunch of other words that have the same spelling and it's all about
562 context...

563 **MP:** Yeah, and it's like, it doesn't make any sense to me.

564 **MGQ:** Right, exactly. I guess that's... How would you approach your students who may not
565 have a firm grasp of the language? This could go both ways, this could be English speakers
566 trying to learn Spanish and Spanish-speakers trying to learn English. Whichever you would like
567 to...

568 **MP:** Patience.

569 **MGQ:** (laughter) Yeah.

570 **MP:** Patience. For everything you need patience. Things in life are not easy. Things in life,
571 everything requires time. So as I said before, patience. To be patient. And I don't think people – I
572 mean, there are some people I know, I have met people that are not very good in a foreign
573 language. But you know, the good thing of a foreign language is that you have different skills.
574 Some people are very good, like they memorize by heart the grammar, and probably in the oral
575 test they are not going to do very well. But then, you know – patient and not to be intimidated. I
576 always find that people who work really hard, they may not get an A. But I think they could get a
577 B or a B-. And the important thing is not the grade, the important thing is learning for
578 everything. So don't worry, patience, don't give up, and continue with the language.

579 **MGQ:** Yes, continue. Would you like to add anything else? Do you have any other comments?
580 Because we have – this has been great.

581 **MP:** Yes, thank you so much for this. For me, education is very important. So, so important. I'm
582 the kind of person – I've been talking a lot about foreign languages, but for me, really and truly

583 if I was in the humanity tracks, all of the [unclear] are important. And everything. I know some
584 people look – even in some countries it’s like teachers, “oh you are a teacher.” In the sense that
585 you are a loser. I realized, “oh teacher.” For me, teaching is very important and should be better
586 paid...

587 **MGQ:** Yes!

588 **MP:** ...have more resources. And even – I think in some – I have asked teachers in the US and
589 they tell me, “I have like twenty-five.” Like, “Do you have a TA?” “No, I don’t have a TA.” So,
590 sometimes we blame teachers, we tend to say “oh, she was a horrible teacher, I didn’t learn
591 anything.” Sometimes it’s true, teachers, they don’t have resources, and they have personal lives
592 as well. I even think that people do their best. With the time and capacity and everything.
593 Because I tell you, when I – I also train teachers because I’m part of the College Board, and I’m
594 part of the AP Spanish language and AP Spanish literature, and I also do a pre-AP World
595 Languages. And some teachers tell me they have five – they teach five classes every day and
596 they have to grade everything, and then they have so many things. And I always say, oh my
597 goodness they have personal lives. They need to attend – help their family as well, you know? I
598 think also, I understand why some students are not so good in Spanish because having thirty
599 students in one class in high school and when the teacher has a hundred and fifty students, it’s
600 impossible to get all the grading back and to, you know. Yeah.

601 **MGQ:** Wow. Thank you so much!

602 **MP:** You’re welcome!

603 **MGQ:** This was actually really great because I didn’t know a lot of this, about the Spanish
604 culture and everything like that and the Spanish schools. But it was really, really helpful so thank
605 you so much, Dr. Perez.

606 **MP:** Thank you, Grace. It was a pleasure for me, thank you.

607 **MGQ:** Thank you.