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The Importance of Integrating Idioms and Expressions into the Second Language Curriculum

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Abstract

This article presents the importance of the use of idioms when learning Portuguese as a second language. The article explains why idioms should be integrated into the second language curriculum. In addition, it defines idioms and details some of the reasons people use them in every language. It also presents some of the difficulties that undergraduate students who speak both Spanish and English face when learning idioms in an accelerated Portuguese course. Moreover, this article argues that idioms have to be taught with the use of authentic materials and situations. Students need to see the purpose of the expressions they learn, as well as the right context to use them. Therefore, this article will share some experiences that facilitated students who speak English and/or Spanish to learn Brazilian idioms. These experiences include activities developed based on Brazilian films. The activities involve the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as vocabulary and grammar. The experiences detail the outcomes of such activities.

Course Background

In order to familiarize the reader with the dynamics of the course, a general description is provided. The Accelerated Portuguese Course, as mentioned above, comprises (two) semesters, the first semester being the beginner course, and the second semester, the intermediate course. In each semester, students have a total of thirty-six hours of Portuguese. By the end of the first semester students are expected to:

- Understand the main idea of spoken Portuguese intended for the non-native speaker on topics related to the daily life such as the classroom, weather, clothes, time, the family, daily activities and work.
- Speak in complete sentences on the above-mentioned topics with sufficient accuracy in pronunciation and the use of vocabulary and grammar (especially the use of present and past tenses) so as to be understood by people who are used to dealing with students of Portuguese.
- Read edited materials on familiar topics with an understanding of the main idea and some supporting details.
- Write coherent paragraphs on a familiar topic, such as those listed above, with a logical organization and sufficient accuracy in grammar and spelling so as to be understood by individuals who are used to dealing with students of Portuguese.
- Understand significant traits including lifestyles, attitudes and customs (behavior?) of the Portuguese-speaking world, and function appropriately in frequently encountered social situations.

By the end of the second semester, students are expected to:

- Understand the main idea and most of the supporting details of spoken Brazilian Portuguese intended for college students of Portuguese, on topics related to the daily life of the student and current affairs.
- Speak in complete sentences on the above-mentioned topics with sufficient accuracy in pronunciation and the use of vocabulary and grammar (present and past indicative tenses and present subjunctive mode) so as to be understood by the native speaker of Portuguese.
- Read edited articles on cultural topics with an understanding of the main ideas and most of the supporting details.
- Write a coherent composition of several paragraphs on a familiar topic, such as those mentioned above, with a logical organization and sufficient accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and spelling so as to be understood by the native speaker of Portuguese.
- Understand significant cultural traits including lifestyles, attitudes and customs of the Portuguese-speaking world, and function appropriately in frequently encountered social situations.

What are idioms?

Although researchers have given idioms different definitions, according to different categories, there is a consensus that idioms are noncompetition entities (Cacciari, 1993; Chomsky, 1965; Titone & Connine, 1965; Titone & Conine) 1999, and others).

Idioms are resources used in both speaking and writing and go beyond their literal meaning when applied to specific contexts. “Idioms are traditionally defined as fixed multi-word phrases whose meanings cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of individual words that constitute those phrases. As such, idioms are seen as a kind of linguistic idiosyncrasy – peculiar expressions that defy both the rules of logic and the Gricean maxims of cooperative conversation” (Vasiljevic, 2015, p.1).

Why do we use idioms in every language?

Idioms exist because there is usually a desire to add some meaning to a particular context that conventional language cannot convey. Idiomatic expressions are also a literary resource and as such can increase the impact of what has been said. They also serve to give subtlety to a sentence, to emphasize the intensity of our feelings, and add humor or irony to what we write or speak.

According to Keysar & Bly (1995), native speakers learn the nonliteral meanings of idioms through immersive exposure, which makes them perceive these idioms as more clear (clearer). Experimental research also indicates that native speakers have a strong intuition about idiom compositionality (Vasiljevic, 2015).

Idiomatic expressions are important because they are used in all forms of discourses such as conversations, letters, radio broadcasts, and television programs (Fotovatnia & Khaki (20012).

Difficulties second language learners face when learning idioms

However, for second language learners, idiomatic expressions are always difficult to learn, since it is hard for them to find its figurative meaning as opposed to its literal meaning. As learners usually do not grasp the figurative meaning of the idiomatic expressions, they tend to try to understand the literal meaning of the idioms only. In addition, even if they recognize the figurative use of expressions, they are not capable of understanding its meaning due to their limited language knowledge. (Cieslicka's, 2006).

These limitations include specifically grammar, vocabulary, culture of the target language, and context. According to Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers (2007), Learners also often lack the skills to take advantage of contextual clues, and the contexts are often not rich enough to make it possible for learners to infer the meaning of unfamiliar idioms and acquire idioms incidentally (Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers, 2007).

Difficulties second language learners face when learning idiomatic expressions

Second language learners find it extremely difficult to understand and use idiomatic expressions in the target language. Idioms are considered one of the most difficult language characteristics for students to learn (Andreou & Galantomos, 2007). These difficulties are related to the lack of ability to interpret the idiom correctly (Abu-Ssaydah, 2004); the degree of formality and the influence of the learners' first language (Aldobi, 2003).

One of the most common difficulty learners face is that they cannot find or compare idiom's meanings to their first language. Their tendency is to translate the idioms literally and therefore, they see no meaning in it. Therefore, it becomes more difficult for them to use the idioms learned. Whereas a native speaker easily realizes the meaning of an idiom, second language learners usually try hard to find the intended meaning of the expression (Maysoun & Noor 2010).

Another factor that makes it hard for second language learners to understand and use idioms is their lack of exposure to them. Native speakers of a language are exposed to every form of the language since they are born. Consequently, it is natural for them to understand the context that comes with the idiom, the culture involved and the opportunities for practice. Maysoun & Noor (2010) pointed out that “the lack of historical and cultural knowledge of English idioms poses a special difficulty, for EFL *learners* to recognize, *comprehend* and *produce idioms* comprehend and produce idioms effectively” (p. 150).

Vocabulary knowledge also poses some obstacles for second language learners.

Due to the limitations of their vocabulary knowledge in terms of both size and quality, it is more difficult for language learners to interpret figurative phrases by *stretching* the literal meanings of the individual words, a strategy that Grant and Bauer (2004) argue is sufficient for decoding the meaning of a large number of figurative idioms.

Limited vocabulary knowledge also prevents them from recognizing the constraining effect that individual words may have on the syntactic behavior of the phrases as a whole. One of the ways to expose students to idioms is through films. Movies usually show regional expressions, slang, and colloquial language. Next, Some examples of activities based on films.

Examples of Activities to introduce and Practice Portuguese idioms

Activity 1:

Film: **Vidas Secas.** – a classic Brazilian film

Professor introduces the topic of the film and goes over a list of useful vocabulary used in the film.

Professor also gives students a list of idioms used in the movie with their corresponding meanings.

Examples:

Quer dizer = you mean

não serve para nada = worthless

paisano = civilian

hein? = huh?

Lorota = lie

Jogo e cachaça = gambling and drinking

sósabe falar = he's all talk

After watching the movie, students do some reading activities to check their reading comprehension of the movie. The activities include developing the following reading skills: reading for general context, scanning, skimming, inferring.

Then students do a gap filling activity on vocabulary, using the vocabulary list provided by the professor.

After students do an activity on idioms. Students are given life situations and have to answer which idiom to use when commenting about such situations.

Example:

Quando algo inesperado acontece, costuma-se dizer:

(When something unexpected happens, one says):

- Vaichover, se Deus quiser(*it will rain, God willing*)
- Vida de bicho(*animal's life*)
- Era só o que faltava(*it was just what was needed*) (*correct*)
- Perde no jogo(*lose the game*)

Students then make up a dialogue using the idioms learned and present it to the class.

In the following classes, the professor should propose real life topics or situations in which students can use the idioms learned.

Activity 2

Film: Carandiru

Instructor presents the synopsis of the movie – as well as its historic context.

After watching the movie students do reading comprehension activities to get more familiar with the story. Instructor also gives students a list of idioms used in the movie with its corresponding explanations.

Then students do vocabulary activities to practice the idioms learned in the movie.

Examples of activities:

- Fill in the gaps – students pick an expression from a list provided and fill in the gaps in each sentence.
_____ se formar para se conseguir um bom emprego (answer – vale a pena).
(_____ *graduating to get a good job*) – answer: *it is worth*
- Translation

Ele ésafo – *he is a smart guy.*

c. Multiple choice questions.

O que você acha disso _____? (*What do you think of this dude?* – How would a person from Sao Paulo say dude?)

Diz uma pessoa de Sao Paulo.

1. Cara
2. Tche
3. Meu – correct.

Fluency activity:

Students pretend they are one of the characters in the movie. Instructor gives a set of questions to each student, and he/she has to answer them as if she/he were the characters chosen.

In the conversation, they are supposed to use at least 3 idioms learned in the movie.

Conclusions:

These accounts only touch on the most prominent issues concerning techniques to learn and practice idioms that students who learn Portuguese as a second language face when taking an accelerated Portuguese course. My intention was to share techniques used to make the process of acquiring Portuguese idioms smoother for these students due to their cultural and vocabulary limitations.

The study also highlights the importance of adding cultural authentic materials, such as Brazilian movies when teaching idioms. Context, not just meaning will help them understand the idiom better and remember it more easily.

Idioms as highly contextualized phrases play a central role in learning a language ([Cooper, 1999](#); [Fernando, 1996](#); [Kempen & Harbusch, 2002](#); [Wu, 2008](#)).

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