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Teaching Portuguese to Spanish and English Speakers – How to Facilitate Pronunciation, Grammar and Vocabulary Acquisition.

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Abstract

This article presents some of the difficulties undergraduate students who speak both Spanish and English face when learning Portuguese in an accelerated Portuguese course. The first assumption instructors have to deal with is the fact that many of these students choose Portuguese because as they say “it is similar to Spanish.” Nevertheless, students are not aware that although these similarities may help them understand their instructor when speaking Portuguese or understand a reading passage, they may also make it difficult for them to pronounce some words and utilize proper grammar and vocabulary when speaking and writing in Portuguese. Therefore, this article will share some experiences that facilitated students who speak Spanish and English to learn Portuguese. These experiences include examples on how to deal with pronunciation, grammar aspects of the Portuguese language that differ from Spanish, and common mistakes on vocabulary students make due to language interference. On a final note, it is important to state that the used “techniques” resort to both English and/or Spanish rules since the target students speak both languages. The article will include a brief course description, the main reasons why American students who also speak Spanish choose Portuguese, advantages and obstacles for Spanish Speakers when learning Portuguese, and how to facilitate the learning of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

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 2 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 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.

Why learn Portuguese?

Apparently there are many reasons for college students to choose Portuguese as a foreign language. Portuguese is spoken by more than 200 million people and it is the 5th most spoken language in the world (AATSP, 2014). Another possible strong reason is the fact that it is easier for students to learn Portuguese if they already speak Spanish, since both languages derive from Latin. Portuguese speakers are able to understand Spanish speakers and vice-versa. This could one of the reasons why The University of Texas at El Paso students choose Portuguese, since most of them have Spanish as a first language. In addition, Brazil has been growing economically and its weight on the world economy has captured the attention of college students in the United States (Northwestern University, 2014). Learning Portuguese also enables students to join the ranks of business oriented toward the South American market, since Brazil is the leading South American country (IDESLI, 2013). According to Silva, the relevant reasons for the choice of Portuguese are job advantages, as Brazil belongs to the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Moreover, once a student learns Portuguese, it will enable him/her to learn Spanish, French or Italian in a much easier and smoother way. In brief, “real-world” economic relevancy and similarities to other international commercial languages are the explanation for why the demand for Portuguese courses at American universities has been increasing.

Advantages and Obstacles for Spanish Speakers when Learning Portuguese

Although learners of Portuguese who speak Spanish can usually understand spoken Portuguese and are able to read a text in Portuguese and with a considerable understanding of the passage, as much as 94% of an academic text in Portuguese according to Gallardo (2013), they face the problem of Spanish interference when learning Portuguese. Such interference causes learners to say Spanish words thinking that they are speaking Portuguese or mixing grammar rules and pronunciation. As stated before, this interference may present hindrance to students. Nevertheless, this should be taken into consideration when teaching pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary to students, so that they are able to capitalize on their knowledge to make their learning process in the Portuguese language smoother. Although avoiding Portuguese, that is, the mix of Portuguese and Spanish is important, starting from scratch in teaching Portuguese to Spanish speakers would neglect the important knowledge they already possess, and it would not prevent negative transfer (Azevedo, 1978).

When students speak English and Spanish, the knowledge they bring from the two languages also has to be incorporated in their learning. Instructors of Portuguese who have a good command of both the English and the Spanish languages can be tremendously valuable for their students’ learning process, because these instructors have the capacity to capitalize on the knowledge of both languages to make students’ learning easier. Carvalho, Freire, and Silva (2010) suggest that there is a need for pedagogical interventions that raise the learner’s metalinguistic awareness of both the congruent and divergent aspects between Spanish and Portuguese particularly since most divergent forms are not salient enough to be noticed and acquired without explicit teaching. Classroom practices should bring an approach that: a. focuses on form in order to call students’ attention to linguistic details that are otherwise, unperceived; b. contextualizes practices that focus on new grammatical structures; and c. provides lots of exposure to authentic texts to encourage positive transfer (Carvalho, 2013).

Pronunciation

Pronunciation in Portuguese can be incredibly different from Spanish, although sometimes the spelling of the words is similar. During my years of teaching Portuguese for students who speak English and Spanish, I have found ways in which to make it easier to pronounce words that are particularly difficult for them. Sometimes I resort to English words whose sound is similar to the Portuguese words being taught, and sometimes I resort to Spanish, when that is the case as well.

One example is the “R”. As the students know English, I often tell them that the Brazilian *r* has two pronunciations. An *r* that begins the words and any double *r* are pronounced like the English *H*.

Usually the following examples are shown: Realidade rata rico carro bairro

And then the examples are contrasted to house, hire, humble. In addition, the words *rata*, *rico*, and *carro* are Spanish words, which facilitate their understanding and highlight the difference in pronunciation.

I also state that in Portuguese, an *R* that precedes a consonant, ends a word or is found between vowels is pronounced like the Spanish *R*.

“Aeroporto,” “arte,” “pergunta,” “dolar.” In this case I show them words that are similar to Spanish and have the same pronunciation, such as *caro*. It has been noticed that such examples and explanations make students understanding of the Brazilian Portuguese pronunciation extremely easier.

Moreover, an *R* between vowels is pronounced like the Spanish *R*. Examples can be words such as: “Caro,” “amarelo,” “barato.” Once again, words that have the same or similar spelling in Spanish are used to ease the comparison between Portuguese and Spanish and also to highlight the differences in pronunciation.

One particular sound that students have problems pronouncing is the “J” sound.

As for the letter “J”, there is no analogy to be made with Spanish in terms of how it is pronounced. Therefore, I tell my students that in Portuguese the “J” is pronounced like the “S” in the word “measure” in English. Then I show some words, such as “jardim,” and “Jorge” and point out the differences from Spanish.

Another problematic sound for students of Portuguese is the LH sound. When the sound is associated to the English sound [lya] in “battalion,” it has been perceived that students can easily relate to the same pronunciation in English and pronounce it the right way. Whenever they have any difficulty all I have to do is remind them of *BATALLION* and then they automatically pronounce the target word correctly. Such words are: “milho,” “mulher,” “olho,” “orelha.”

Students will find a great amount of words with the sound *L* in Portuguese, which is similar to the English sound of the word *L*, especially when the *L* is final or before a consonant. In this case, it is pronounced like “w” or “oo.”

Examples: “Brasil,” “Natal,” “bolsa,” “filme,” “louco.” Again the words used similar to words in Spanish, although they are correlated to English in terms of pronunciation.

One can say that a challenging sound for students of Portuguese is the “ão” sound. The closest similarity is to the sound [ae] in English. For example: “coração,” “não,” “mamão.”

In terms of the letter *S*, I teach them that it can be pronounced like a *Z* if it is in the middle of the word, such as in the word **symposium** in English. Besides, it can be pronounced with the sound of *S* if it is in the beginning of the word as in the word *SALA*, which is the same word and the same pronunciation in Spanish. In this case, comparisons are utilized from both English and Spanish languages.

One tricky sound for learners of Portuguese is the *X* sound. The Portuguese *X* has four different pronunciations, similar to English.

ShZKs S Xampu exemplo taxi excelente

It is important to observe that the words used are similar to English and Spanish. As a consequence it is simpler for the students to associate the words to their sounds.

The sound *NH* is explained through the pronunciation of *ñ* in Spanish which is the same sound. Examples: *montanha*, *baixinho*, etc....

Finally, one sound that is complicated for Portuguese students to pronounce is the G sound. It is clearer for students to perceive that it has the sound ZH such as in “gema,” but it has an English pronunciation in words such as “gol,” “Gustavo.”

Grammar

One frequent difficulty students have as far as language interference is concerned is grammar. As Gallardo points out (2013), “it is valuable to identify grammatical differences between Portuguese and Spanish”, especially the ones students find more problematic. The most frequent mistakes students who speak English and Spanish present when learning Portuguese relate to articles, such as “pelo,” “pela,” “pelo,” “pelas.” In this case, the instructor facilitates students’ learning by resorting to Spanish. The easiest teaching technique to apply is to show students the equivalency in Spanish: “por el,” “por la,” “por los,” “por las.” When utilizing this analogy students automatically acquire the concept.

Another common difficulty concerns the use of the possessives “meu,” “minha,” “meus,” “minhas.” This complexity occurs because in English and in Spanish there is no difference between genders, although in Spanish there is a difference in number. Therefore, students respond well in terms of understanding the differences in Portuguese when they are pointed out to them (both in English and in Spanish). In addition, the fact that in Portuguese possessives are used according to gender and number has to be highlighted.

Moreover, the verb “gostar” is challenging for the students because it is different both in Spanish and in Portuguese. Students assimilate the differences when they are made clear.

Example:

In Portuguese the verb gostar requires the preposition DE.

English: I like oranges.

Spanish: A mi me gustan las naranjas.

Portuguese: Eu gosto de laranjas.

Sometimes, students will tend to say the sentence in the way they would in Spanish. When that is the case, instructors should explain to them that if one says a me megosto (like some of the students say), you may be saying something like “I like me”. This explanation usually helps them avoid the Spanish interference of redundant object pronouns when speaking Portuguese.

Frequently students utilize the preposition **a** when stating “I am going to study” in Portuguese. Thus, they say Eu vou a estudar, instead of Eu vou estudar. This is direct interference from Spanish, in which, instructors should then emphasize that in Portuguese the article A is not used after the verb “ir,” in such a situation. A useful way to do that is to cross out the preposition “A” in example sentences.

Example: Ele vai ~~a~~ trabalhar. In addition, the mistake should be highlighted in other activities students have to do. It will work as a reminder that the sentence is not supposed to be said as in Spanish and students’ minds will easily grasp the differences.

The use of subjunctive: presents a different set of challenges. It is a little problematic because the verb conjugation is different. A practical manner to make the students aware of these differences is to show them the way the subjunctive is used in English.

For example, I will go by plane as long as I have the money.

Eu irei por avião desde que tenha dinheiro.

I want you to study.

Eu quero que você estude. Obviously the conjunctions have to be taught.

It has been noted that using English to teach the subjunctive in Portuguese seems to be more straightforward than resorting to Spanish.

There is a great amount of language interference when it comes to the use of indirect object pronouns usage in the infinitive of a verb. In the sentence “Ela vai comprá-la,” students tend to say [“Ela vai comprarla”.]

Once again, the mistake should be highlighted, so that students can perceive the difference in an easier way. This highlight should include manually crossing at the letter R to indicate that it should not be used. Example:

Ela vaicomprá-la. Instructors should also call attention to both the hyphen and accents utilized. When the vowel is **A** it becomes **á**; when the vowel is **E**, it becomes **ê**, and when the vowel is **I** it becomes **í**.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary poses a challenging situation for Portuguese students, especially when they speak English and Spanish, although most interference occurs with the Spanish language. As Portuguese and Spanish are extremely similar, it is common for students to use Spanish words thinking that they are actually using Portuguese, especially when these students also speak English. As Portuguese and Spanish are so similar, students get confused and end up using Spanish words when speaking Portuguese and Portuguese words when speaking Spanish. This is mostly a problem for native speakers of English who have learned Spanish as a Second language, rather than for native Spanish speakers (Hacking Portuguese, 2014). Nevertheless, some Portuguese words can be related to English in order to make students acquire the target vocabulary more smoothly.

Some examples are:

1. “Embaraçada.” This word in Portuguese means “embarrassed” while in Spanish it means “pregnant.” Thus, instructors should utilize the English word to make students see that it has a similar meaning in English and as a result they will relate the meaning of the word “embaraçada” to the meaning of embarrassed.
2. “Esquisito.” This word means weird in Portuguese. Therefore, it should be clear that it is different from “exquisite” in Spanish, and “exquisite” in English which, by the way, mean the same meaning of beautiful, delicate in both languages.. These similarities in English and Spanish and differences from Portuguese help students “memorize” the meaning of the word in Portuguese.
3. “Apellido.” “Apellido” means last name in Spanish, whereas in Portuguese it means “nickname.” Students find it useful when they are presented with the differences in English and Spanish. For example:

English	Spanish	Portuguese
last name	apellido	sobrenome
nickname	apodo	apelido

4. “Largo.” “Largo” means “long” in Spanish, whereas it means “large” in Portuguese. “Large” is “ancho” in Spanish and “largo” in Portuguese. Again, the differences should be highlighted:

English	Spanish	Portuguese
Large	ancho	largo
Long	largo	comprido.

Conclusions:

These accounts only touch on the most prominent issues concerning grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that students who speak English and Spanish face when taking an accelerated Portuguese course. My intention was to share techniques used to make the process of learning Portuguese smoother for these students due to problems concerning negative transfer, which produces the *portunhol*, a mixture between Portuguese and Spanish.

As Gallardo (2013) points out, the variations in rhythm between the two languages, the vowel instability present in Portuguese, and the variety of consonant sounds and blends not present in Spanish also cause some of this negative transfer.

The study also highlights the importance of adding structured grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary explanation to the communicative approach. It has been noted that students need this structured type of learning to assimilate in order to use grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation concepts. Classroom practices thus should include an approach that: a. focuses on form to call students’ attention to phonetic details that are otherwise, unperceived; b. contextualizes practice that emphasizes new grammatical structures; and c. provides lots of exposure to authentic texts that encourage the positive transfer of Portuguese to speakers of English and Spanish (Gallardo, 2013).

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