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Pronunciation Challenges in Learning Portuguese as a Second Language

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This paper explores the pronunciation challenges faced by learners of Portuguese as a second language (L2). Despite its melodic quality and phonetic richness, Portuguese presents several obstacles, particularly for speakers of languages with distinct phonetic systems. Key challenges include the nasal vowel sounds, the distinction between open and closed vowels, and the prosodic features unique to Portuguese. The influence of the learner's first language (L1) plays a significant role in these difficulties, affecting both perception and production. This study draws on phonetic theory, examples, and analyses to identify specific pronunciation errors and their linguistic sources. Additionally, it offers practical activity suggestions for Portuguese language educators on how to support students in overcoming these challenges. Finally, the study also highlights areas for further research or potential improvements in teaching methods in aiding language acquisition. By addressing these challenges, educators can better equip L2 learners to achieve greater fluency and confidence in spoken Portuguese, ultimately enriching their language acquisition experience.

Nuances in Portuguese Pronunciation

Learning Portuguese pronunciation can be a significant challenge for second language learners due to several unique phonological features that distinguish it from other languages. These challenges vary depending on the learner's native language, but there are a few key aspects of Portuguese pronunciation that consistently pose difficulties. Below is an overview of the most common challenges learners face when trying to master Portuguese pronunciation, with a focus on both **Brazilian Portuguese (BP)** and **European Portuguese (EP)**. For instance, the nasal vowels and specific consonant sounds often confuse learners. An overview of these common challenges indicates that both Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and European Portuguese (EP) present unique difficulties that learners must navigate (Smith, 2020).

1. Nasal Vowels

“Vowel Nasalization has played an important role in the history of the Romance languages and is particularly salient in French and Portuguese, the only two descendants of Latin to contain contrastive nasal vowels” (Porter, 2015, p. 1)

Therefore, Portuguese is known for its use of nasal vowels, which do not exist in many other languages, particularly English. The nasalization of vowels is an essential feature of the language, and it can be difficult for learners to both produce and differentiate these sounds.

- **Nasal Vowel Sounds:** In Portuguese, vowels can be nasalized in certain contexts, and this nasalization is indicated by the tilde (~) over the vowels (ã, õ, etc.) or by nasal consonants preceding a vowel (such as "m" and "n"). This phonetic feature plays a crucial role in distinguishing meanings and contributes to the overall complexity of Portuguese pronunciation (Neves, 2015).
- **Examples in Brazilian Portuguese:**
 - *pão* (bread) – /pãõ/
 - *bom* (good) – /bõõ/

Learners often mispronounce these nasal vowels, substituting them with non-nasalized versions, which can lead to misunderstanding. For example, an English speaker might pronounce *pão* as *pau* (wood), which has a completely different meaning.

As Wells (2000) points out: "Mispronunciation of nasal vowels can lead to significant misunderstandings in communication, as seen when English speakers substitute nasalized sounds with their non-nasal counterparts. For instance, the Portuguese word 'pão' (bread) may be incorrectly pronounced as 'pau' (wood), resulting in a completely different meaning."

- **Nasalization in European Portuguese:** The nasalization is often subtler in EP than in BP, but it remains a critical feature of pronunciation. In some dialects, nasal vowels may be even more difficult to distinguish due to their phonetic reduction in informal speech.

According to Porter, 2015, data on nasal sounds in Portuguese indicate that stressed vowels preceded by a nasal contain significantly more nasal energy than vowels preceded by an oral consonant. In addition, the place of articulation of the pre-vocalic nasal consonant does correlate with the level of the nasal energy in the vowel. Porter also points out that vowel quality is a better predictor of the level of nasal energy than is the nasal consonant place of articulation. According to Porter (2015), data on nasal sounds in Portuguese reveal that stressed vowels preceded by a nasal consonant show significantly higher nasal energy than those preceded by an oral consonant. Furthermore, Porter notes that vowel quality serves as a stronger predictor of nasal energy levels than the place of articulation of the nasal consonant."

2. Vowel Reduction and Schwa Sound

Portuguese, especially in European Portuguese, has a phenomenon of **vowel reduction** in unstressed syllables. In European Portuguese, this often leads to the presence of a schwa (ə) sound, which is a very neutral, unstressed vowel sound that does not exist in many languages. According to linguists Mateus and d'Andrade(2000), "vowel reduction" in European Portuguese refers to the significant weakening or near-deletion of unstressed vowels, particularly the mid-high vowels /i/ and /u/, which often occur in casual speech and can be dropped depending on the word position and surrounding sounds; this phenomenon is a key feature of Portuguese phonology where stressed syllables are pronounced strongly while unstressed ones are reduced significantly.

Unstressed Vowel Reduction: In EP, many vowels in unstressed syllables reduce to the schwa sound, especially in informal speech. This occurs in words like:

- *caminho* (path) → [kə'miɲu] (EP)
- *amigo* (friend) → [ə'migu]

Learners who are not familiar with the schwa sound may have difficulty recognizing or producing these reductions, often pronouncing vowels in a more stressed or full form, which can make speech sound less natural or harder to understand.

"In European Portuguese, many vowels in unstressed syllables reduce to a schwa sound, particularly in informal speech. For example, 'caminho' becomes [kə'miɲu] and 'amigo' is pronounced as [ə'migu]. Learners unfamiliar with the schwa may struggle to recognize or produce these reductions, often pronouncing unstressed vowels in a fuller form, which can render their speech less natural and more difficult to understand." (Cruz-Ferreira, M. 1995).

- **Schwa in Brazilian Portuguese:** While BP generally avoids vowel reduction and the schwa sound is less frequent, it still appears in some regions or in more formal speech. (Mateus and D'andrade, 2000).

3. Consonant Clusters and Consonant Changes

Portuguese has a number of complex consonant clusters and certain sounds that can be difficult for non-native speakers to pronounce correctly. Some of the most notable challenges include:

- **Consonant Clusters:** Portuguese has many consonant clusters (e.g., "tr", "br", "fr", "gl", "pl", etc.) that can be tricky for learners, especially when compared to languages like English or Spanish, where such clusters are either less common or pronounced differently. Learners may struggle to produce these sounds fluidly, often breaking them into smaller syllables or mispronouncing them.

- **Examples:** *trabalho* (work), *branco* (white), *fresco* (fresh)
- **The "S" and "SH" Sounds:**
- **Brazilian Portuguese:** In BP, the "s" at the beginning of a syllable (like *sapo* – frog) is pronounced as /s/, but in some regions (such as Rio de Janeiro), it is pronounced as /ʃ/ (like the English "sh" in *she*).
- **European Portuguese:** In EP, the "s" at the beginning of a syllable is pronounced as /ʃ/ in most regions, especially in Lisbon. This is something learners often have difficulty adjusting to, particularly if they are familiar with a more "s" sound in their native languages.
- **"R" Sounds:** The Portuguese "r" has several variants that differ between Brazilian and European varieties. In BP, the "r" can be pronounced as a guttural sound (like the French "r") or as a uvular fricative, while in EP, it's often pronounced as a guttural "r" or even a rolled "r" in the middle of words (e.g., *carro* – car).
- **BP:** *r* in *barco* (boat) → /'baxku/
- **EP:** *r* in *carro* (car) → /'kaxu/

All the above nuances present challenges and difficulties for students learning Portuguese as a second language. The most common phonological processes are: Epenthesis: Epenthesis, which involves the insertion of a phoneme, typically a vowel such as /ə/ or /ɪ/, between or before consonants to facilitate easier pronunciation." (Crystal, 2008); Elision, or deletion, which refers to the omission of a phoneme within a consonant cluster, which often occurs to simplify pronunciation (Ladefoged, 2001); and assimilation, a phonological process where one phoneme in a cluster is changed to become more similar to an adjacent sound, enhancing the ease of articulation (McMahon, 2002).

4. Intonation and Sentence Stress

Portuguese has a distinct **intonation pattern**, especially in Brazilian Portuguese, where speech tends to be more melodic and rhythmic. This can pose challenges for learners because they might unconsciously transfer intonation patterns from their native language, which can make their speech sound awkward or unnatural. (Moraes, 2012). Some of these difficulties include:

- **Stress and Rhythm:**

Portuguese tends to have a **syllable-timed rhythm**, meaning each syllable is given approximately equal weight, especially in European Portuguese. According to Roach (2009), this contrasts with English, which is **stress-timed**, where stressed syllables are longer and unstressed syllables are shorter. This difference can cause English speakers to misplace stress in Portuguese words, affecting both their fluency and intelligibility. "Portuguese, particularly Brazilian Portuguese, features a distinct intonation pattern characterized by a more melodic and rhythmic quality. This can create challenges for learners, who may inadvertently transfer intonation patterns from their native language, resulting in speech that sounds awkward or unnatural (Moraes, 2012)."

The Use of "L" and "LH" Sounds

Portuguese has the **"lh"** sound, which is somewhat similar to the English "y" sound in "yes" but is more palatal. It can be difficult for learners who do not have this sound in their native language to produce it correctly.

- **Examples:** *filho* (son) – /'fiʎu/ (BP)
- For English speakers, the challenge often lies in distinguishing between the regular "l" (as in *luz* – light) and the palatal "lh" sound. This distinction is particularly important in Brazilian Portuguese, where mispronouncing "lh" can lead to confusion with other words.
- Medeiros, C. (2010). Phonetic Challenges in Brazilian Portuguese: The Case of "L" and "LH." *Portuguese Language Journal*, 6(1), 45-60.

6. Diphthongs and Triphthongs

Portuguese has several **diphthongs** (two vowels pronounced together in a single syllable) and even **triphthongs** (three vowels pronounced together), which can be difficult for learners, especially those whose native languages do not have such vowel combinations.

- **Examples:**

- *ai* as in *pai* (father) – /ai/
- *au* as in *pau* (wood) – /au/
- **Triphthongs:** *uai* as in *baía* (regional variation in Brazil) – /uai/
According to Rosa (2011), Learners often struggle with these combinations, particularly if their native languages do not have similar phonetic structures."

7. Regional Accents and Variation

Another challenge in learning Portuguese pronunciation is **regional variation**. The differences between Brazilian and European Portuguese can be significant, and within each of these varieties, regional accents can further complicate the learning process.

- **Brazilian Portuguese:** In some regions, the "r" is pronounced more gutturally, and in others, it's pronounced as a "h" sound. The "s" sound can also vary widely depending on the region.
- **European Portuguese:** Regional accents also affect the pronunciation of certain vowels and consonants, and learners may find it difficult to adjust when exposed to different accents in formal and informal contexts.

As Menezes (2013) argues, "Portuguese exhibits significant regional accents and variations that can influence pronunciation, vocabulary, and intonation patterns. For instance, the differences between European Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese are prominent, with variations in vowel pronunciation, the use of diphthongs, and distinct intonation patterns. Such regional differences can pose challenges for learners, as they may encounter various accents and dialects in different contexts."

7. **Implications for Language Teaching:** When teaching Portuguese pronunciation for second language learners, educators usually use listening and repeating words, and phrases. However, this practice does not provide ideal outcomes. Listening and repeating activities, commonly used in teaching L2, are not enough to promote phonetic awareness and perceptual abilities. Activities especially designed to enhance attention to phonetic cues which are used in the L2 to cue phonemic distinctions are needed and they, nowadays, can be easily implemented with tools such as PRAAT- a free, open-source software tool designed for the analysis and synthesis of speech. It was developed by Paul Boersma and David Weenink at the University of Amsterdam. (Madureira, 2020).

- *Practical Suggestions:*

Improving pronunciation through games not only make learning fun, but also help reinforce students' knowledge through repetition and interaction. (Tallk paw, 2024). Below are some of the activities that I have used in my Portuguese classes to help my students improve their pronunciation.

1. Pronunciation Bingo

- Create bingo cards with different Portuguese words or sounds. As you call out the words, players mark them off on their cards. The first to get a line must pronounce the marked words correctly.

2. Sound Match

- Prepare cards with minimal pairs (e.g., "sapo" vs. "sapo") and have players match them based on pronunciation. They can take turns pronouncing the words to test each other.

3. Tongue Twister Challenge

- Have a competition where players take turns reciting tongue twisters. The one who can say them the fastest and most accurately wins!

4. Pronunciation Pictionary

- Instead of drawing, players have to pronounce words correctly before the team can guess the word being drawn. This encourages pronunciation practice while playing.

5. Rhyming Game

- Players take turns saying a word, and the next player must say a word that rhymes with it. This helps focus on similar sounds and syllable structures.

6. Phoneme Hunt

- Choose a specific phoneme (like "r" or "s") and challenge players to find and say as many words as they can that contain that sound within a set time.

7. Pronunciation Relay

- In teams, players run to a designated spot, read a word or phrase from a card, and return to tag the next teammate. The focus is on clear pronunciation.

8. Flashcard Race

- Use flashcards with words or phrases. Players take turns picking a card, pronouncing it, and getting points for correct pronunciation. The fastest to reach a certain number of points wins.

9. Charades with Sounds

- Instead of acting out words, players pronounce a word or phrase, and others have to guess what it is. This encourages clear articulation.

10. Audio Storytelling

- Players listen to a short story in Portuguese and then retell it in their own words, focusing on pronunciation. They can record themselves and compare with the original.

These games can make practicing pronunciation engaging and enjoyable!

The above activities are just some of the examples of so many that can be used to improve students' pronunciation in Portuguese. According to my students' feedback and my own assessment of their pronunciation, these games clearly improve their pronunciation performance.

8. Future Research Directions:

This paper only attempted to show the pronunciation difficulties students of Portuguese as a second language have and some ideas for teachers to overcome these difficulties. of the areas where more research is needed within the pronunciation aspects of learning Portuguese as a second language, are: the investigation of the effectiveness of various teaching approaches; the impact of digital tools, apps and online resources on the acquisition of Portuguese, especially in remote or blended learning environments; examination of how regional dialects affect learning and comprehension, and how educators can address these differences in the classroom.

Conclusion

Portuguese pronunciation poses a series of challenges for second-language learners, particularly due to its nasal vowels, consonant clusters, vowel reductions, and regional variation. Mastering these aspects requires careful attention to detail, repeated practice, and exposure to both formal and informal Portuguese in different accents. Given the complexities of the language, learners may benefit from targeted pronunciation training, listening exercises, and speaking practice with native speakers to overcome these obstacles and develop clear, natural-sounding Portuguese.

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