



A Significant and Team Based Learning Approach in the Portuguese Classroom

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Abstract

In this qualitative descriptive account the author shares her positive experience while incorporating features of Significant Learning and Team Based Learning into her first year Portuguese language courses at the college level with Spanish-English bilinguals. Both empirically based approaches to active learning are aimed at improving university teaching in general but also intersect with the use of authentic texts (in this case Brazilian songs) and notions of comprehensible input. Instructor reflection and student comments point to the potential of this principled based learning approach.

Key Words: Portuguese, college, Curso Ativo de Português, Significant Learning, Team Based Learning, Authentic Materials, Songs, Comprehensible Input.

A Significant and Team Based Learning Approach in the Portuguese Classroom

Over the last several years I have been engaged in developing a modest two-semester course sequence in the Portuguese language at the college level. Most students at this Texas-Mexico border university are native to the region and are likely to be bilingual in Spanish and English, though a few are primarily English speaking. For a fair number of these students, developing any level of Portuguese language ability constitutes a third language. The two courses can be taken to complete the six hours of required foreign language study as part of the core curriculum or as electives. Freshmen as well as seniors are drawn to the courses, and experience a language and culture that is different from the ones they are familiar with. Enrollment has been quite stable over the last few years and student feedback has always been very positive. I definitely attribute this outcome to the main ingredients of the principled approach I have developed.

Piecing Together a Principled Approach

Personal Language Learning Experience

I should begin by explaining that I am not a native speaker of Portuguese but Spanish and English is my third language. However, I had a unique opportunity to acquire and learn Portuguese for a six-year period by immersing myself in the Brazilian language and culture in Mexico City. During that period of time, I worked in the Portuguese department at the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) where I routinely interacted in Portuguese with Brazilian professors and instructors. I also formally studied the language for five years and completed the “Curso de Perfeccionamiento en Portugués”, a program for becoming certified to teach the language. I should add that I also sang and did theater in Portuguese for three years with a Brazilian director who was also one of

my Portuguese professors. Finally, and perhaps most valuable of all, I came to be somewhat integrated into the young Brazilian university community where I encountered unforgettable friends.

In this language department Dr. Helena Maria da Silva Gomes developed what is called the *Curso Ativo de Português* (Silva-Gomes, Lage-Pessoa, & Åkerberg, 1985), a communicative approach to language teaching that has been the basis for the program curriculum **until now**. The professors and instructors who helped develop this ambitious project led by Dr. Da Silva based the curriculum on the interests of the learners, in this case Mexican university students. Dr. Da Silva conducted a student survey pointing to the reasons why this Spanish-speaking student population was motivated to study Portuguese. The outcome was that Mexican Spanish speaking students were keenly interested in Brazilian music. Their motivation was not seeded in any kind of instrumental motivation like employment or fulfilling some kind of university requirement. Consequently, a very important part of my early acquisition and learning of Brazilian Portuguese was driven by this communicative and active approach to language learning with authentic materials, especially Brazilian lyrics and music. This experience was later followed by undergraduate and graduate studies in the Brazilian Portuguese language and literature in the US.

Significant Learning

Years later and in the context of the border institution where I am now teaching Portuguese, I was engaged in professional development aimed at improving student learning by examining teaching approaches. This brought me to the work of L. Dee Fink (2003) on course design for significant deep learning. While his approach is quite complex yet applicable to any university course, there are three aspects of it that caught my attention as a Portuguese language instructor.

The first matter concerns giving careful thought to important situational factors (p. 69). For instance, the instructor is asked to reflect on a range of curriculum design questions such as:

- What are the students' reasons for enrolling in the course?
- What prior experiences, knowledge, skills and attitudes do the students have regarding the subject?
- What prior experiences, knowledge, skills and attitudes does the teacher have in terms of the process of teaching?
- How long and frequent are the class meetings?
- How will the course be delivered (e.g., face to face, hybrid or online)?
- What curricular goals does the institution or department have that affect this course or program?
- Is this subject matter convergent or divergent?

While I do not claim that the *Curso Ativo de Português* is based on Fink's approach to course design, what is clear is that both approaches give very careful consideration to the specific teaching and learning context. More importantly, both attempt to design their respective courses around the students' reasons and interests for taking a particular course by carefully examining who the students are. This also implies that adopting a given curriculum designed for a generic student population may not be the best program decision.

The second aspect of Fink's (2003, p. 105) work that intrigued me as a Portuguese instructor was his specific position on the meaning of significant learning. He explains this notion as follows:

When you think about the goals for your course think about what it is that you want students to do with this subject after the course is over: design something, read articles critically, write

essays about the subject. Whatever it is that you want students to learn how to do, that is what they need to be doing during the course.

This position on significant learning also seems congruent with the *Curso Ativo de Português* as well as the one-year program I developed given that the goal of both is basic communicative competence in Portuguese. As such, students need to be listening, speaking, reading and writing the language for as authentic purposes as possible (given the constraints of the classroom).

The third point concerns the notion of active learning. Fink (2003, p. 106) is clear on how an active learning process, as opposed to a more passive learning process, generally leads to deeper learning. Fink states:

One of the more powerful ideas to emerge in the literature on college teaching in the last decade or so is the concept of active learning. In essence, the concept of active learning supports research that shows: students learn more and retain their learning longer if they acquire it in an active rather than a passive manner.

The *Curso Ativo de Português*, as its name suggests, was indeed designed to actively engage the learner in classroom based activities with the goal of promoting communicative competence through language acquisition. In the case of the two Portuguese classes, students are also actively engage in using the language as well as developing their metalinguistic awareness about how the new language works.

Team-Based Learning (TBL)

My continued and related professional development activities then led me to the work of Larry K. Michaelsen (2004, p. 27) on Team-Based Learning also used at the college and university levels in any discipline. According to Michaelsen:

...the effectiveness of Team Based Learning as an instructional strategy is based on the fact that it nurtures the development of high levels of group cohesiveness that, in turn, results in a wide variety of other positive outcomes.

In general terms, TBL involves four principles. First, teams, not mere groups, must be properly formed and managed by minimizing barriers to group cohesiveness, strategically distributing human capital, and establishing diverse and permanent teams. Second, students must be made accountable for their own learning and for that of their team. Third, team assignments must promote active learning and team development by requiring genuine, goal directed group interaction. The fourth principle concerns the provision of frequent and immediate feedback to students about their learning. According to Michaelsen (2004, p. 48) the benefits of TBL include but are not limited to: developing students' higher level cognitive skills in large classes; providing social support to at risk students; promoting the development of interpersonal and team skills; and building and maintaining faculty members' enthusiasm for their teaching role.

Bilingual Learners and Authentic Materials

Through the literature, and my own language learning and teaching experience, I have also come to realize that teaching Portuguese to Spanish-English bilingual students, potentially trilingual students, also presents its own share of unique challenges and opportunities. As one of the major challenges, Carvalho, Luna-Freire and Da Silva (2010, p. 73) make the point that the few textbooks designed for Spanish language background students fail to use authentic texts.

These authors maintain that:

Authentic materials are even more essential in the case of Spanish speakers acquiring Portuguese, because their early advanced reading skills make the gap between authentic and textbook language unnecessary and counterproductive. Thus, we recommend that

textbooks be complemented by authentic reading materials and a strong emphasis on reading skills.

Clearly songs constitute authentic reading materials. In fact, Nuessel and Marshall (2008) describe the use of songs for teaching foreign languages as excellent pedagogical resources. While they do acknowledge that music and songs have long been used to teach French, Italian, Japanese and Spanish, no reference is made to Portuguese. The two authors draw on a reference from D'Onofrio to summarize the merits of using songs for promoting second language acquisition:

[M]usic in the second-language classroom is an advantageous tool that must be exploited in the teaching of language and in developing communicative competence in second-language students. Songs can reinforce grammar points already learned and increase vocabulary both actively and passively, while remaining a veritable wealth of material for the learning of both colloquial and literary expressions. Listening to and working with songs can aid greatly in enhancing aural comprehension at the introductory stages and can develop in the more advanced students an understanding of symbolic and metaphoric language, as well as the need for various registers and levels of speech. (p. 140)

Comprehensible Input

All of the above recommendations are quite compatible with Stephen Krashen (2007; 2010) and his insistence on the provision of comprehensible input and the use of authentic reading materials to promote language acquisition. In fact, Nuessel and Marshall (2008) refer to singing as an acquisition activity in light of Krashen's theory of comprehensible input. Rote memorization or language drills are not examples of very active learning, for example. But studying the lyrics to a song with a Brazilian beat, a whole authentic text replete with varied and

natural grammatical structures, including historical, cultural, and political nuances, is clearly more in line with what might constitute more natural comprehensible input for these early advanced bilingual readers (Carvalho, Luna-Freire and Da Silva, 2010).

In sum, and in retrospect, my personal language learning experiences coupled with some recent professional development opportunities aimed at university students, in addition to the need to carefully consider the needs of variably bilingual Spanish-English students led me to approach my teaching in the following principled manner. First, I was compelled to infuse the courses with something I knew students loved to know how to do, something significant and active, in this case singing Brazilian songs. Second, I wanted to experiment with the notion of a team as opposed to just pairs or groups or cooperative learning groups. Pedagogically, I also wanted to create more immediate feedback opportunities to students about their learning, which is also a key component of the TBL approach. Finally, with the use of authentic Brazilian song lyrics I wanted to attempt to promote the transfer of Spanish language skills to facilitate the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese through a steady dose of authentic comprehensible input.

Putting It Into Practice

Creating teams

With regard to team formation, I attempt to balance teams by distributing students as equally as possible by gender, age, class standing, and language backgrounds. In this way I can minimize teams of all males or females or young freshmen as opposed to the graduating seniors in need of some final course credits. Given the variation in the degree of their bilingualism in Spanish and English, I do not want all of my Mexican nationals, U.S. born bilinguals, or the random English monolinguals creating their own language cliques. I operate from the principle

that a diverse team is a better team, since each of these traits entails strengths and potential weaknesses in meeting the language demands of the course.

I generally have between 25 and 30 students in my Portuguese I courses and between 15 and 25 students in my Portuguese II courses each semester. So, I divide each class into teams of five or six students. This team formation is more challenging in the first Portuguese level because I do not know the students yet. After examining the results from their first test, I sometimes have to make minor adjustments to the teams since I may want to more evenly distribute students across teams based on their initial test scores. I should note that it is not uncommon for students to beg me not to move them because they are already very comfortable with their team partners. Note also that the teams will remain in tact for the entire semester. As I get to know students, team formation gets easier and more effective the second semester.

Regular monitoring of teams by the instructor is very critical, especially during the first weeks when students are becoming familiar with the methodology. In some cases the more advanced language learner might be inclined to dominate the team's responses, but monitoring will mitigate this tendency. The instructor has to be sure that every team works as a team. Nobody should work independently to get ahead of the rest of the team during any activity, and each team member should contribute to reaching the team's responses and be able to articulate them. This can also be a challenge for some students, but again the problem is solved with regular monitoring. Also, learning student's names as soon as possible and getting to know students as much as you can will facilitate the process.

Routine In-Class Activities

The reader might think that most of what we do is sing and samba in the classroom but that is obviously not the case. Like most other language teachers I rely on a textbook to give me

some structure and a curriculum to cover. Routine in-class activities like reviewing textbook homework assignments, working on language related tasks and unit exams are approached at the individual level, team level and as a whole class. We start each class by reviewing individual textbook homework assignments as a team, and then we check it as a whole class. I have learned that encouraging turn taking is a key factor for this TBL methodology in team and whole class activity, and students get the hang of it after a few classes. So, during regular in-class textbook activities students are directed to take turns while discussing each question and to contribute as evenly to the team's final responses.

Similarly, when I give teams a problem to solve (figure out a grammatical rule, writing sentences, making inferences about the meaning of a reading or a song, etc.) each team discusses the problem, generates a solution and presents it to the whole class. However, each time a team response is requested the spokesperson is always a different student. One of the added benefits of the routine in-class activities is that even the students who did not study or do their homework end up learning something. Even so, a poorly prepared student is generally under a fair amount of peer pressure to come better prepared for class because poor preparation at some point will also undermine the performance of the team.

Authentic Materials: Brazilian songs

In an effort to provide the students with an opportunity to actively use the Portuguese language holistically and naturally, that is in an integrated manner across each of the four modes (speaking, listening, reading and writing), I select a song given some kind of connection to the textbook unit at hand. Song selection might depend on the verbal density of the lyrics, key grammatical structures or topic. For example, at the beginning of Portuguese I the simple but enjoyable song by Rita Lee "Nem Luxo Nem Lixo" works quite well. In fact, my Portuguese I

students sing it the first class day. Right after they introduce themselves, we repeat with Rita Lee, “Como vai você?” On the other hand, I start Portuguese II with a group called Capital Inicial and their challenging lyrics of “Eu nunca disse adeus”. The availability of these songs on the Internet being performed by the artists only adds to the students’ enthusiasm. It is very relevant to emphasize that in order to honor an active significant learning experience paired with comprehensible input, I am also very engaged in selecting appealing genres, lyrics, artists and videos for their young adult age.

Students are provided with the lyrics to the song at the beginning of each textbook unit. We watch and listen to the video and they talk about the possible meaning as a team. Then we listen to it a second time reading the lyrics, and they discuss them again as a team. At this point they are just searching for the general meaning, and I scaffold their comprehension as needed. After that, they try to sing the song a couple of times for the first time in chorus as a whole class which is always amazing and exciting since they manage to do it so well. Their homework is to finish studying the lyrics at home where they will have time to use online dictionaries. The next class we work the song a little more, and I end up filling in gaps if needed. From that point on, we sing the unit song during the last ten minutes of each class. The enjoyable highlight of the use of this kind of authentic material is obviously singing the song as a whole class and having at least one student break out in dance or alternatively having the neighboring instructor come and complain about how loud we sing!

In addition, and outside of class, students almost naturally seek out more information about the singer or band given their great interest and ready access to the Internet. To my very pleasant surprise, and since the first semester I started teaching Portuguese, there are always students who bring me not only new songs from the unit artist but also from different singers or

bands they find on the Internet. Due to the nature of the content and the level of difficulty of some of the lyrics, I cannot always use what they find in the classroom. Of course, this does not stop them from continuing to decipher the meaning of those lyrics they find so interesting.

Finally, I also believe that this activity is especially valuable in light of the variable bilingual abilities of the group. Again, some students are more developed in one of their two languages. As a consequence, and posited as more of a hypothesis, I suspect that their interaction with these natural texts facilitates their acquisition where it might be needed. At any given moment, some students might benefit phonologically, while others do so syntactically or semantically, for example. In other words, what students gain linguistically is hard to pinpoint or predict; it depends on their language background to some degree. Of course, embedded within the lyrics is a rich cultural, historical, and or political component.

Exams

Naturally each student first takes the unit exam individually. This is to ensure that the student takes responsibility for his or her own learning and does not come to rely only on what the team can achieve since obviously a team's performance is always superior to any one student's performance. Note that the student's individual test score (40%) is always weighted more heavily than the team score (30%). After each student has finished taking the exam individually and has turned it in, they rearrange the chairs and get into their teams. Everybody has to put their pencils and pens away. I proceed to give them back their ungraded tests, and I designate one student per team to answer the team exam. Then, I give a clean copy of the test to each of the designated students. Only designated students can get a pencil to answer the team exam.

As with the in-class textbook and related class activities, students take turns to answer each question but are free to discuss their responses to the test questions within their team. They are encouraged to challenge each others' thinking in a professional way and to make every effort to understand why a certain response might be the more appropriate one. Since this activity is limited by time a lot of discussion about the Portuguese language gets produced, and ultimately they must arrive at a consensus for their answers. Even though each student has their own exam on their desk, confidentiality of grades is completely maintained. During this TBL test activity they are completely concentrated on two main things: their individual performance and the team test because they know that the latter will bring their final grade up.

When all teams have finished and have turned in their team test, then we check the exam as a whole class again taking turns within the team and among the teams. Sometimes a problem has to be discussed more deeply as a class, and each team has to defend their position. This third test step provides yet another opportunity for immediate feedback. I only intervene as needed. Taking the same exam "twice" and checking the answers is a great learning process. This immediate feedback activity helps all students. Everybody ends up reviewing the unit's content and is better prepared to start the next unit. Moreover, students who did not study for the exam and could not contribute to the team's performance surely feel uncomfortable. My experience has shown that there is a good chance that those students do not want to put themselves in the same stressful situation again and will be better prepared for the next test, beginning with routine in-class activities. I should add that since this three step exam activity takes time, I create exams with no more than 30 questions. My Portuguese classes consist of 75 minute intervals. However, if for whatever reason there is not enough time to finish, I leave the third step for the following meeting.

It is important to emphasize that the song lyrics are used as part of each unit test. To motivate the students even more to learn and practice the songs on a regular basis, I assess the songs as extra points. A student can get between 8 to 10 extra points on the test if they know the written lyrics very well, including spelling. To do this I have chosen a very standard approach. I simply convert the lyrics into a traditional cloze exercise which can be integrated into the exams very easily. The active deep learning they gain from the song took place over the course of the unit, through their natural desire to enjoy the song and comprehend its structure and meaning.

Concluding Remarks

As a lifelong language learner and professor with several years of teaching experience, I believe that the use of teams and the use of significant authentic texts, in this case Brazilian songs, have indeed been the key factors that have transformed the way I teach my Portuguese courses. Further, while this is not an empirical quantitative research study, there is little doubt in my mind that my Portuguese classes are more active and effective, since adopting this varied but principled methodology.

On the one hand, this team approach has the following interrelated effects. First, the amount of focused interaction among students is greatly increased creating a more active learning environment. Second, the team's collective potential is always greater than the individual's. Even the more advanced learner will gain new language insights from the team's interaction. Third, the amount of immediate feedback is greatly enhanced through team interaction. Students have multiple opportunities to ask questions, debate and to reach a consensus about the problem at hand. Finally, I believe that students come to establish a different kind of relationship with their peers. Since the teams are enduring, students are more than mere

classmates. They become more interdependent around a common goal, developing communicative competence in the Portuguese language and culture.

On the other hand, the integration of Brazilian songs serves the interests of the students and the objectives of the instructor. The students are generally highly motivated to make sense of these significant natural texts and to respond to them verbally, in writing, and on occasion even physically. Linking this high level of identification and motivation to the collective power of the team makes for very active learning. I know for a fact that my Portuguese courses would not be as effective as they are at the moment without the principled approach at hand. I know this because I first tried teaching the courses without songs or teams.

The formal feedback I have received from students on course evaluations has been very favorable overall. I plan to continue building this principled approach, given student comments like the following:

“I think her methodology is very important. When you establish a rapport with the students in a team environment, you end up building a trust bond in your group, and you actually end up learning more. You push each other more. You motivate each other. So that method of teaching a language, a new language, it makes it a lot easier. We are able to study in groups, and it makes the retention a lot better. I am graduating, but otherwise I would be taking the next level”.

“I am just taking this class because I want to learn how to speak Portuguese. It is not a requirement or anything. I really liked the class. I really enjoyed it. It is very interactive. We get to speak a lot of Portuguese... We ask each other questions a lot. It is a really cool class”.

“La verdad se me hace muy divertida esa clase. ¡Muy muy padre! La clase es muy divertida. Aprendemos con canciones, y con prácticas en equipo. Todos nos divertimos durante toda la

clase.” [I think the class is a lot of fun. Very very cool! It is enjoyable. We learn with songs and practice in teams. We enjoy ourselves throughout the whole class.]

Naturally, I would encourage Portuguese instructors to take the opportunity to use these kind of authentic Brazilian texts in their classes as well as a team based approach as developed by Michaelsen (2004). In fact, instructors of any language might also want to consider the use of songs and teams. The notion of teams and song seem universal but neither is readily used in language teaching. The former seems to reflect strength and collective power, while the latter is anchored to human sentiments and language in all of its natural complexity.

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