

On Starting a Course Sequence for Heritage Learners of Portuguese

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Abstract: This short paper describes the development of a track for heritage learners of Portuguese. After discussing the reasons for the creation of such track, the article provides some details about course content, students, and materials and activities used. Possible future directions for the track are briefly considered in the concluding remarks.

Rationale

In the last 30-odd years, research into language teaching and learning has established that learners of a language that are heritage speakers have needs that may be different from those of learners of a foreign language (Brinton, Kagan and Bauckus; Colombi and Alarcón; Kondo-Brown; Kondo-Brown and Brown; Roca and Colombi; Valdés, “The Teaching”; Valdés, Lozano and García-Moya; among others). Solé, for example, points out that foreign language learners (henceforth FLLs) exhibit receptive skills at a level close to their productive skills, while heritage language learners (HLLs), on the other hand, oftentimes display receptive skills that are superior to their linguistic production (27). Having both FLLs and HLLs in the same class, using the same materials and methodology, may be discouraging for both groups of learners: FLLs believe that they are being unfairly evaluated in comparison to HLLs, who are perceived to have superior linguistic ability (which is not entirely untrue); HLLs often find that the material covered does not address their needs, at least not in a way that is meaningful to them (for example, see Parodi; Schwarzer and Petró about teaching grammar to heritage learners).

The type of approach commonly practiced in the foreign language classroom, which involves more or less controlled practice of structures and vocabulary with an emphasis on oral communication, may not work as well for HLLs as it does for FLLs: the former, oftentimes already capable of communicating orally, may not profit from exercises that develop vocabulary and structures that they are familiar with. Valdés (“Pedagogical Implications”) argues that HLLs may profit from approaches that incorporate areas considered basic to the English language curriculum in the United States. These areas include reading skills, competence and creativeness in oral and written communication, and language and reading for vocational purposes (11-12). Other authors (e.g., Acevedo 257; Colombi 175; Teschner 122; among others) also call attention

to the needs of (Spanish) HLLs regarding spelling and writing abilities, since most need to become acquainted with the written register.

Another characteristic of HLLs is the potential lack of familiarity with “standard” varieties of the language. Authors have argued that courses designed for HLLs must aim at bidialectalism—in other words, the learners’ dialect is not to be dismissed or corrected, nor is the “standard” to be universally favored (e.g., Fairclough 67). Instead, instruction should focus on recognizing the value of the home variety, along with teaching and practicing the “standard” variety.

Given the make-up of the population that surrounds our campus (an area that has received Portuguese immigrants since the 19th century and that, more recently, has witnessed immigration from Brazil as well), a separate track for heritage learners of Portuguese was warranted and necessary at our institution. Below I describe the newly implemented PHL track, which appears to be the first of its kind in higher education in the United States.

The track

Before offering the Portuguese for Heritage Learners (PHL) sequence, our offerings in the language program included a “regular” track (101, 102, 201, 202) and an intensive track (103-203). The intensive track differs from the regular track in contact hours only (six credits per course, as opposed to three for each of the courses in the regular track). The accelerated nature of the intensive track allows students to complete the Portuguese language sequence in one year, as opposed to two in the regular track. Note that the intensive track is not Portuguese for Spanish speakers, which might make use of different materials and methodology (we do not offer Portuguese for Spanish speakers due to lack of demand so far). Students who enroll in the intensive track normally need to finish the language sequence in one year, either because they want to fulfill the foreign language requirement quickly, or because they would like to go on studying Portuguese, and therefore prefer to speed up their basic language training. Either way, successful students in the intensive track are generally highly motivated and often enthusiastic about learning Portuguese.

Like the intensive track, the language course sequence for heritage learners is also completed in one year (one course per semester), but each course offers three credits. This way, we can make the sequence attractive to those who have the necessary background: it requires fewer contact hours, and thus costs less, than the other tracks. Requiring fewer credits also

follows guidelines put forth by UCLA's National Heritage Language Resource Center: materials for HLLs can move at a faster pace than those used by beginning FLLs. The PHL track, like the other two, also fulfills the College of Arts and Sciences foreign language requirement. So far, the demand for Portuguese courses at our institution has permitted that we maintain three separate tracks. Before the PHL track was created, heritage learners would enroll either in 101 or in 103. With the creation of the new track, heritage learners are strongly encouraged to opt for the PHL courses. Since we are located in a region that has received and continues to receive many Portuguese-speaking immigrants, we serve many heritage learners, as well as a comparatively large number of students of other backgrounds, who understand how valuable it is, in this area, to be able to communicate in Portuguese. Also note that, while we offer multiple sections of 101/102/201/202 (the "regular" track"), we only offer one section of 103 and 104 each in the fall semester, and one section of 203 and 204 in the spring semester. All three Portuguese language tracks serve as pre-requisite to our Composition and Conversation courses (301/302), the "bridge" courses to more advanced classes in the major or minor.

The PHL track focuses on bidialectalism, which, as mentioned above, is an appropriate approach, according to heritage language teaching scholars. Since the beginning of the first course, learners are exposed to the idea that the variety of Portuguese that they know is not considered "incorrect" or "improper." On the contrary, that variety serves as a starting point for awareness of (socio)linguistic issues, as well as development of other registers. To that end, discussions and activities are carried out related to issues that are relevant to learners (such as language and identity, languages in contact, language maintenance and loss). This approach also exposes learners to different registers of the language (e.g., formal, informal, academic, business, etc), exploring the appropriateness of each one.

In broad terms, some of the issues discussed in the PHL track are suggested, for example, by Parodi, who argues that a curriculum for a heritage language course "should include basic principles of regional and social variation, language change, diglossia, standardization," among others (212). Several of the topics are inspired by the Spanish for Heritage Learners courses coordinated by Sara Beaudrie at the University of Arizona, whose helpful syllabi can be found online (http://w3.coh.arizona.edu/spanish/heritage/under_heritage.cfm), and who kindly allowed those syllabi and the activities listed therein to serve as reference for our courses. In preparing

our syllabi, we have also followed some of the curriculum guidelines for UCLA's National Heritage Language Resource Center.

The standard variety is taught and practiced in contexts where it is required, while the learners' variety remains to be used with family and friends (Gutiérrez Marrone 73-74). It is important to remember that, in the case of Portuguese, two different standards exist: European and Brazilian. Our heritage learners are still mostly of Portuguese descent, though we see more and more students of Brazilian heritage. Our PHL track values learners' varieties while striving to teach the standard—but which standard? In our case, since we have students of both Brazilian and European background, learners are encouraged to practice the standard that relates to their heritage. Since the material adopted (see below) contains both standards, learners can choose which one they will follow. Ancillaries (workbook, website exercises, videos) are also available for both varieties, providing learners with further practice in the standard that is reference for the variety that they are familiar with. In class, however, learners are exposed to both European and Brazilian Portuguese, a necessity imposed by geography: with immigrants and descendants who speak both main dialects, our students need to be able to communicate with speakers of different varieties. Given the presence of immigrants from different regions in Brazil and in Portugal, one of the topics discussed in PHL relates to regional varieties. Needless to say, with this approach instructors must be sufficiently familiar with both standard varieties of the language, and also with (at least) the main characteristics of the different varieties of Portuguese represented in our surroundings.

Students and enrollment

Potential students in the PHL track are interviewed by the instructor to ascertain minimal communicative ability and to make sure that they are not foreign language learners. These learners are not required to know how to write in Portuguese or to know standard Portuguese grammar in order to be accepted into the first course of the sequence. However, some speaking and listening ability is required to enroll in PHL. To avoid enrollment by unqualified students, our online system only allows enrollment by permission for the first course, thus insuring that students contact the instructor prior to entering the course.

While having a “gate” keeps away learners that do not belong in the class, it may also discourage others: during our first year, enrollment in the PHL track was low (10 students), in

spite of our efforts to recruit students (which included going to all classes of 101 in the beginning of the semester and explaining the advantages of the PHL track). Another discouraging factor (or, perhaps, encouragement for students to enroll in the regular track) is the fact that heritage learners generally do very well in the regular track, which is more slow paced and tends to favor (at least in the classroom) the ability that many HLLs already possess: speaking. For heritage learners who opt to stay in 101, developing their linguistic skills while spending less money may not be a priority; rather, obtaining high grades in the course may be what drives their decisions.

Materials and activities

So far (the track started in Fall 2009), we have used *Ponto de Encontro* (Klobucka et al.) in the PHL track, adapting and supplementing it as needed. Authentic texts (for reading and listening) serve as basis for contextualized speaking and writing exercises (including spelling). Students are also responsible for research that leads to oral presentations (in order to develop their presentational skills), and are thus exposed to written Portuguese from various sources. Activities for the PHL courses include interviews and other interactions with native speakers, which allow learners to note specific cultural or linguistic traits. Since we have fewer contact hours than the other tracks, much of the work for the courses is done at home, including compositions, journals, and vocabulary/spelling entries. Students have a chance to rewrite and resubmit much of their work, which allows them to reflect on the structures used in light of what is practiced in class. Error analysis exercises based on their written and oral production, done in class, provide an opportunity to review/revise structures and/or vocabulary in a collaborative manner. The majority of the written activities are submitted via our online learning platform. This way, activities can be due on days besides class days, and feedback can be provided more promptly. Since the courses are fast paced, being able to revise the work quickly (and resubmit if necessary) is very important, so that homework doesn't "pile up," as it were.

Future directions and concluding remarks

Our PHL track is new and needs some revisions and improvements. First, we must do a better job of spreading the word about the track and how advantageous it is for heritage learners of Portuguese in order to attract more students. That work may involve cooperating with

administrators who are in charge of registration and orientation, so that freshmen can be correctly placed. It may also require closer collaboration with the Portuguese Language Club.

In terms of content and activities, community projects can play an important role in linguistic development and in raising awareness about the language and the need for bilinguals. Although this type of project has not been incorporated during the first year, we have been working towards identifying local organizations that could use our students' linguistic skills to serve the community.

It is hoped that this short article may serve as a springboard for the development of other heritage language courses for learners of Portuguese at the college level in areas where it may be needed. It is also hoped that other professionals who work with Portuguese heritage learners can share their insights with us, so we can all profit from a conversation about what is best for our students.

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