

Portuguese Heritage Language Learners: Proficiency Levels And Sociolinguistic Profiles

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Abstract: Many students of Portuguese at Bridgewater State College can be identified as heritage language learners. They mostly belong to two groups: first, Portuguese heritage speakers whose families immigrated from the Azores, Madeira or Portugal; second, Cape Verdeans, who speak Cape Verdean Creole and Portuguese. There are also Brazilians, who have recently become part of Massachusetts communities. There are important differences between these groups, although they share a heritage language. All of these heritage learners have varying degrees of proficiency. They often have better speaking skills than traditional learners do, but lack comparable literacy skills. The goals of this study are to (1) identify the similarities and differences between learners and their proficiency levels using a reading/recall test, grammar test and a written sample, (2) take comparative measurements of traditional second language learners, and (3) analyze the data from learners in order to document proficiency levels and sociolinguistic profiles. The results of this study will point to significant differences between learner groups and ultimately help inform the development of more appropriate pedagogical materials for heritage language learner classes.

Introduction

When I first started teaching Portuguese at Bridgewater State College, I noticed that classes included learners with a wide array of proficiency levels. By taking a quick look at the attendance roster, I recognized many Portuguese last names, such as *Correia*, *Medeiros*, and *Silva*. There were, as well, more traditional students with no family background in Portuguese, also with varying abilities in the language.

For students with family background in Portuguese, the most important reason for taking a Portuguese class is their heritage. However, many express concerns over the expectations set for them and want to assure me that they really do not speak the language, nor do they write well at all. Other students are Cape Verdean and speak a Portuguese-based Creole. Creole is a contact language that originated by the intense linguistic contact between speakers of different languages, often in an asymmetrical power relationship. In the case of Cape Verdean Creole, the most powerful social group, speaking the most prestigious language was comprised of Portuguese explorers. The less powerful group was the Africans who were forcibly brought into slavery and spoke various

languages belonging to the Bantu family. The process of “creolization,” or language genesis, is a complex one and there is political debate as to the mechanisms that influence the birth of a language.

Since Portuguese is still the official language of Cape Verde, some of these students had had some formal education in Portuguese before immigrating to the United States. It is possible that they are taking Portuguese due to the perceived similarities between these languages. Despite their background, they are just as ambivalent about their Portuguese proficiency, and often indicate that their Portuguese is not as well developed as their Creole. These statements from Cape Verdean learners confirm recent research conducted in Portuguese classes in Cape Verde (Cardoso 2004) where linguistic interference from Creole is revealed in their written work.

These initial observations in the classroom have prompted me to pose some research questions about the profiles and the proficiency levels of different learners. It became apparent that learners who came from Portuguese language backgrounds did not necessarily perform well in traditional language classes, despite the fact they had some cultural background in Portuguese. At the same time, traditional second language learners also had varying levels of proficiency, and fared differently in the classroom. Thus, in terms of general language skills, I wanted to know what were the similarities and differences between heritage language learners (HLLs) and traditional second language learners (SLLs). Secondly, I wanted to know what the specific motivations were for learners to take Portuguese classes. Finally, and more importantly, I wanted to know if there were significant differences among the various sociolinguistic subgroups of HLLs and their overall proficiency in Portuguese.

The goal of this research project was to gather information about these sets of learners by defining their sociolinguistic profiles and comparing them with their overall proficiency levels. For the purposes of this study, I narrowly defined learner proficiency by the ability to understand reading

materials and by the ability to produce grammatical forms in a grammar and a written sample test. Sociolinguistic profiles were outlined by a brief survey (adapted from Beckstead and Toribio 2003). Language motivation will be assessed by an open-ended questionnaire on the reasons why the class was selected.

Proficiency levels will be determined by (1) a short reading/recall test (Lee & VanPatten 1995), (2) the completion of an assessment of regular and irregular past tense verb forms and (3) the completion of a written sample in the past tense. The results of statistical analyses point to important similarities and differences among these groups.

Contribution To The Field In Theory And In Practice

This research project draws from a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological advances in the areas of language. An emphasis on *social networks* (Labov 1972) in dealing with language production, and *bilingualism* and *diglossia*, the use of two languages in different social spaces, such as the home and the workplace (Fishman 1967, Fishman et al 1971), informed much of the research on bilingual communities and issues of heritage language education. Second, the special circumstances of Spanish bilinguals informed methodological, as well as theoretical, perspectives in this topic (Valdés-Fallis 1978, Valdés et al 1981, 1995, Zentella 1997). Thus, the new conceptualizations of language and language learning, along with the growth of Spanish bilingualism in the U.S. (Lynch 2003:28), resulted in an increasing demand for bilingual and heritage language learning framework, from which this research project finds its theoretical underpinnings.

Languages other than Spanish have been studied from the perspective of heritage learner methodology. There have been contributions to the field about Italian (Titone 2000), Russian

(Kagan 2001), Japanese (Suzuki 2001), Korean (Kwak 1990, Ryu Yang 2001, Koo 2002) and Chinese languages (McGinnis 1996, Shen 2003), among others. Most of this research has indicated that heritage language learners typically show several degrees of language proficiency. However, studies in Portuguese are lacking. Overall, the number of variables in the profiles of the students is complex and dependent on multiple circumstances, which is taken into account in the present study.

This research project adds to the general discussion of heritage language learning. It will hopefully add to a more inclusive and overreaching model of heritage language learning. In practice, I wanted the project to have a direct and positive impact on the Portuguese-speaking linguistic communities in Southeastern Massachusetts and on the College community itself. Specifically, the data collected in this research may guide instructors and program developers to establish curricula that answer to this often underrepresented or misunderstood group of learners. Learners with varying degrees of proficiency should participate in classes that challenge them and at the same time instill in them a sense of pride due to their cultural identification. Ultimately, students may have the opportunity to learn about their socio-history and culture, after being deprived of such information in more traditional second language classes. Instructors of heritage learners may develop the best practices and approaches to language learning that are based on the heritage learner experience.

Methodology/Approach

In order to establish the sociolinguistic profiles of Portuguese learners I constructed a sociolinguistic survey, based on similar instruments previously developed by Beckstead & Toribio (2003:157) and Achugar (2003:231) for Spanish language heritage learners. With this instrument learners answered questions about their personal histories (place of birth, origin of parents) as well

as language use (languages spoken at home, access to language materials, educational experience). In order to inquire about the motivations behind the language selection and cultural identity, I used questions originally developed by Beckstead & Toribio (2003) in which respondents answer open-ended questions of linguistic insecurity and self-identity.

All respondents were asked to give written permission for the data to be collected and to be used for research purposes before proceeding. Surveys were administered during one class session, and lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. In order to safeguard their anonymity, survey respondents were assigned numbers. After the survey portion was completed, learners proceeded to the three attached language assessment tests, which lasted approximately ten minutes each.

Table 1. Research Instruments used in the research project.

Research Instruments				
surveys		tests		
background	attitudinal	reading/ recall	grammar test	written sample
5 questions	5 questions	test	10 questions	one paragraph
		one passage		

Table 2. Sociolinguistic groups of learners and corresponding number of respondents to be included in the initial statistical analyses. N = 46.

Sociolinguistic Profiles	Number of Respondents
<i>Heritage Group</i>	
Azores / Madeira / Portugal	20
Cape Verde / Brazilian	4
<i>Traditional Second Language Group</i>	22

There are sufficient sociocultural similarities between learners from the Azores, Madeira and Portugal, which justifies placing those respondents in one subgroup. Cape Verdeans are socioculturally distinct, since they are bilingual speakers of Cape Verdean Creole and Portuguese. In this case, there was only one student with Brazilian background, and her background as far as linguistic ability matched the Cape Verdean students. Cape Verde, like Brazil, is an independent country, different from the other aforementioned islands which are politically part of Portugal. There were twenty-two respondents listed as the second language group.

I used three separate research instruments following the precepts of research on second language proficiency (Harley et al 1990). The first one is a reading/recall test, geared towards the comprehension of textual materials. In this test students are given a passage written in the past called "A Day in the Life of Joãozinho," adapted from Lee & VanPatten 1995, which they will read for three minutes. Afterwards, they covered the passage and in English wrote down as much detail as they could remember from the passage. Learners were not required to produce the forms in Portuguese at this point, but simply to write down what they recalled in English about the passage written in Portuguese. This will test their connections between meaning and form (Fraser 2000). The responses were analyzed for the number of correct details recalled from the reading passage.

The second evaluative instrument is more focused on the production of grammatical proficiency, or the production of correct grammatical forms. Learners complete ten fill-in-the-blank questions that focus on the regular and irregular preterit verb forms. These forms are the topic of current instruction in Portuguese lessons. The final instrument in this study is the written sample, which focuses on communicative and literacy skills (Bachman 1990, 1991). In this test, students are required to complete a paragraph on their previous weekend activities. The samples were then statistically analyzed using SPSS, for the absolute number of verb forms in the past and the accuracy

of those forms.

The following are the hypotheses established for this research project.

HYPOTHESIS 1: More proficient learners, or those who self-reported as being more fluent, will produce a higher number of accurate items in the reading/recall test.

HYPOTHESIS 2: More proficient learners will produce more accurate forms in the fill-in-the-blank grammar test.

HYPOTHESIS 3: More proficient learners will produce longer, more accurate written samples.

HYPOTHESIS 4: Learners who identify as having a Portuguese or Cape Verdean heritage will perform significantly better than traditional learners in the reading/recall test.

HYPOTHESIS 5: No significant differences will be found among heritage learners and traditional learners in the fill-in-the-blank test.

HYPOTHESIS 6: No significant differences will be found among heritage learners and traditional learners in the written sample.

The following is the rubric for scoring the tests.

1. CONTENT ITEMS OF STORY

- 0 points for incorrect or additional content.
- 1 point for each correct content (verb phrase).
- 2 points for each correct content (verb phrase) written in Portuguese

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. initial description: pobre Joãozinho | 13. got up |
| 2. stayed at home | 14. looked for Stephen King book |
| 3. had nothing to do | 15. started to read |
| 4. prepared dinner: sandwich and soup | 16. read all night because of insomnia and interesting book |
| 5. ate | 17. read to the very last page |
| 6. studied | 18. looked at clock |
| 7. went to club | 19. said "time for Chemistry class" |
| 8. didn't find friends | 20. drank 3 cups of coffee |
| 9. after 15 minutes, went back home | 21. ran to building |
| 10. saw channel 7 / good reporters | 22. saw that nobody was there |
| 11. went to sleep | 23. realized it was a holiday |
| 12. didn't sleep / couldn't fall asleep | |

2. TENSE AND ASPECT TEST

- 1 point for each correct verb form (subject and tense correct).
- 0 point for blank or partially correct item.

3. WRITING TASK

- 2 points for each complete sentence with correct verb phrase.
- 1 point for a complete sentence with approximation of verb form
- 0 point for incorrect verb phrase or incomplete sentence.

Results

Table 3. Results for the RECALL TEST, according to self-reported proficiency level.

Proficiency levels	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1	13	7.46	3.099	3	12
2	18	8.94	3.404	2	15
3	5	10.60	3.782	5	15
4	10	12.00	3.859	5	19
Total	46	9.37	3.744	2	19

Anova. Between groups: Sum of squares = 127.342, mean square = 42.447, $F = 3.542$, $p = .022$

Table 3 shows that the higher the proficiency level, the higher number of semantic items recalled from the story. Levels 4 and 5 were combined since both averaged 12 items recalled. The minimum items recalled were 2, while the maximum number of items recalled was 19. The overall average of recall (9.37) tells us that learners on average recalled a little less than half of the details of the story. The difference between all groups is significant, and a level of about 2 in one hundred due to chance. So, HYPOTHESIS 1 is confirmed, more proficient learners did produce a higher number of accurate items in the reading/recall test.

Table 4. Results for the TENSE (grammar fill-in-the blank) TEST, by proficiency level.

Proficiency levels	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1	13	3.23	1.481	2	7

2	18	4.28	2.372	0	10
3	5	6.00	1.581	4	8
4	10	6.70	2.541	3	10
Total	46	4.70	2.448	0	10

Anova. Between groups: Sum of squares = 79.720, mean square = 26.573, $F = 5.874$, $p = .002$

In Table 4 it is possible to see that the average number of correct items increase with the proficiency level reported by the student. The total mean of correct items is about 4.7, or about half of the total, which is ten fill-in-the-blank questions. The differences are significant among all groups, at a level of 2 in one thousand due to chance. This is a very strong result, as far as significance. Thus, HYPOTHESIS 2 is confirmed, higher proficiency level students do produce more accurate forms in the fill-in-the-blank test.

Table 5. Results for WRITTEN SAMPLE, by proficiency level.

Proficiency levels	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1	13	4.08	2.100	1	7
2	18	7.22	3.703	1	16
3	5	10.40	6.656	4	19
4	10	17.80	8.587	4	28
Total	46	8.98	7.123	1	28

Anova. Between groups: Sum of squares = 1156.144, mean square = 385.381, $F = 14.364$, $p = .000$

Table 5 shows the results of the written sample by proficiency level. In it we can see that again, learners who report higher levels of proficiency actually produce more accurate forms than learners self-reporting lower levels. In fact, the mean of correct verbal phrases for level 4 is about four times larger than level 1. The stark differences between levels are significant at a very strong probability, which is less than one chance in one thousand results due to chance. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is confirmed, more proficient learners will produce longer, more accurate written samples. But, what about the differences among learners of different sociolinguistic

backgrounds? The next tables show the results of tests according to the background of the student.

Table 6. Results for RECALL test, by sociolinguistic profiles.

Sociolinguistic Profiles	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Third Generation Portuguese	7	8.00	3.317	3	12
Traditional learner	22	8.05	3.331	2	15
Cape Verdean / Brazilian	4	11.00	2.449	9	14
Second Generation Portuguese	13	11.85	3.783	5	19
Total	46	9.37	3.744	2	19

Anova. Between groups: Sum of squares = 142.071, mean square = 47.357, $F = 4.070$, $p = .013$

Table 6 shows that students who are third generation Portuguese (where at least one grandparent came from Portugal, the Azores or Madeira) have the lowest levels of items recalled, or an average of about 8 items. An almost identical number is found for traditional learners (at 8.05), thus no significant differences are found between these two groups. At the same time, Cape Verdeans and Brazilians recall about 11 ideas from the story. As do second generation Portuguese learners, who recall on average about 12 items, more than any other group. The differences among groups in general are statistically significant (p value of .013). However, Hypothesis 4 can only be partially confirmed, since there are significant differences among Portuguese heritage learners, depending on if they are second or third generation. If one compares third-generation Portuguese to traditional learners, there are no differences, at least as far as the recall test. But if one compares second-generation and traditional learners, there is a significant difference.

Table 7. Results for TENSE TEST, by sociolinguistic profile.

Sociolinguistic Profile	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
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Traditional learner	22	3.82	2.062	0	10
Third Generation Portuguese	7	4.86	2.478	2	8
Second Generation Portuguese	13	5.54	2.696	2	10
Cape Verdean / Brazilian	4	6.50	2.380	4	9
Total	46	4.70	2.448	0	10

ANOVA. Between groups: Sum of squares = 39.378, mean square = 13.126, $F = 2.393$, $p = .082$

Table 7 shows that again, the numbers for traditional and third-generation Portuguese learners are very similar. And, at the same time, numbers for second-generation and the Cape Verde/Brazilian sample are also close. However, the differences are not statistically significant, thus confirming HYPOTHESIS 5. Overall, the average of correct answers for the fill-in-the-blank test was about 4.7 or about 5 out of 10.

Table 8. Results for WRITTEN SAMPLE, by sociolinguistic profile.

Sociolinguistic Profile	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Traditional learner	22	5.91	3.206	2	16
Third Generation Portuguese	7	8.43	5.062	1	16
Cape Verdean / Brazilian	4	11.50	10.599	3	27
Second Generation Portuguese	13	13.69	9.366	1	28
Total	46	8.98	7.123	1	28

Anova. Between groups: Sum of squares = 523.677, mean square = 174.559, $F = 4.167$, $p = .011$

Table 8 reveals the results for the sample written test. In this table one can see that again, traditional learners write an average of about 6 verb phrases and third generation learners write a bit better with about 8 verb phrases. The group that writes better, the one that has the highest number of verb phrases on average, is the second-generation Portuguese learners. These differences among groups are significant, at a level of .011, or about one chance in one hundred due to chance. Thus, HYPOTHESIS 6 is not confirmed, since it predicted that as far as the written sample no significant differences would be found between learners with different sociolinguistic profiles. But, in fact, differences were found.

Finally, it is important to show correlation between the sociolinguistic profile of the learner and his/her self-reported level of proficiency. As can be verified on Table 9, second generation Portuguese learners self-report, on average, about 3.5 on a scale from 1-5. The Cape Verdean / Brazilian group self-report a little less fluency, at still a close 3. Lastly, both third-generation and traditional learner self-report an average of 1.7 on a scale of 1-5 for level of language fluency. As can be verified from these results, these self-reports match this groups performance in the tests, at varying levels of significance.

Table 9. Comparison of self-reported language proficiency and sociolinguistic profiles.

Sociolinguistic Profile	Average Proficiency Level
Second Generation Portuguese	3.5
Cape Verdean / Brazilian	3
Traditional Learners	1.7
Third Generation Portuguese	1.7

Discussion

The overall results of this research project shed light into the complexity of various types of Portuguese learners at Bridgewater State College. Those who are second-generation language learner are more likely to self-report a higher level of proficiency and to do better in reading/recall and written tests. At the same time, if a learner is third-generation Portuguese, he or she has less access to the language (maybe only the grandmother or the grandfather speaks in Portuguese occasionally) and thus he or she has less opportunities to listen and speak Portuguese. These learners self-report typically at lower levels and also perform at very similar levels to traditional learners. Of course, the items tested here are understanding of content, grammatical accuracy, and written fluency. Nothing is said here as far as the depth of cultural knowledge that

these learners could still possess, which puts them at a different level from traditional learners. One surprise outcome of this research was the levels of significance as far as the written samples. Previous research among heritage learners show that they are better at speaking and not so much in written performance, putting them at similar levels to traditional learners. Although this was true for third-generation learners, second-generation learners performed much better than expected in the written samples, showing that this productive skill is still very much a part of the set of skills that these learners have. In previous research done among intermediate Portuguese learners (Ferreira 2005), writing in Portuguese, especially to grandparents in the Azores or Madeira, was one of the most important motivations for learners to continue to take Portuguese.

Finally, these initial results point to a third-generation language shift where the language of the ancestors is lost by the third generation coming to the United States. Unless there is a constant influx of Portuguese speakers from the Azores, Madeira, and Portugal, this particular dialect of Portuguese will not survive in this country. On the other hand, judging from the new influx of Brazilians to many communities in Massachusetts, there may be a stop to the shift, albeit in favor of another dialect of the language. In short, "language shift happens," but language maintenance can be attained in different versions of the language. More research is suggested in the areas of cultural knowledge of language learners and the ways in which Portuguese classes can be fulfilling and motivating to heritage learners.

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