

## **Innovative Technologies – New Opportunities in Language Teaching**

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**Abstract:** A retrospective look at the building, growing, and maintaining of Portuguese programs hits hard when we realize that 30 years ago there was no such thing as “cut & paste” or “rip & burn”. There certainly was no online Portuguese Language Journal, much less anything like word processing, PowerPoint presentations, web pages, email, Skype, iPods, blogs, wikis, mobile devices, facebook, twitter, podcasting, video conferencing, or second life. It is hard to imagine, but at that time our biggest concern was getting the mimeograph machine to make our copies—I can still smell the fresh ink now. During the past 30 years there have been many developments in the area of language teaching and second language acquisition research. From communicative competence to brain lateralization, we cannot minimize these contributions. They have truly shaped the way that we teach foreign languages. However, when we look at how technology has changed the way that society communicates and exchanges information, my guess is that technology has done more to change our pedagogy than almost any other single factor. It is with this idea in mind that this brief paper focuses on how innovative technologies have influenced our capacity to build and maintain programs in foreign language education, specifically Portuguese, which lives on the border of what we call the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs).

### **Publish or Perish, Not Anymore**

Many of us in academic circles remember the days when publishing companies would tell us things like, “This is a great idea. If you could just publish something like this for us in Spanish we’d love to work with you.” It was always frustrating to know that marketability affected the development of pedagogical materials for Portuguese. Partly because of the difficulty in publishing teaching materials for Portuguese, there began an interesting synergy from sharing. Colleagues in Portuguese language teaching from all around the world have shared handouts, teaching ideas, recordings, and exercises. Over the years we have all benefited tremendously from the delightful phrase, “estou enviando em anexo...”

At the University of Texas, our online podcast series called [Tá Falado](#) is a perfect example of this type of sharing.

The podcasts themselves are a combination of audio recordings, pdf transcripts, and discussion blogs, all provided for anyone, anywhere, and without charge and without password restrictions. No publishing company could ever offer such a deal. Furthermore, and this just boggles the mind, the site gets millions of hits. Think about that for a second, millions of hits! Just this week I received emails from a listener in

Colorado (who listens while putting on makeup in the morning) and Holland (who wants to drive down to Antwerp to meet me, when I will be in Belgium to attend a conference). We have even had hits from listeners in Togo, Africa for heaven's sake! It is not false modesty, but seriously, I cannot imagine that a million of anything is actually associated with my name. One of the members of the Tá Falado team is Michelle Schreiner Lima. When she was at the American Embassy in São Paulo, they actually recognized her name and asked if she was Michelle from Tá Falado! I personally was on a city bus in Salvador, Bahia, when a passenger recognized my voice and asked if I was Orlando Kelm from Tá Falado! Truly, technology has given all of us an avenue to create teaching materials that exceed anything that traditional publishing companies could have offered us. With apologies to our associates at publishing companies, we no longer are limited by their limited marketability.

### **Real Materials for Real People**

Another thing that technology has provided is a way for real people to be exposed to real language. From YouTube clips to Rede Globo's home page, learners are now exposed to a never-ending flow of information about Brazil and Portugal. It is especially interesting, and gratifying, to see that our average Joe-student can write a blog about his experiences in traveling to Recife and those posts are just as easy to access as the writings of [José Saramago](#) or [Luis Fernando Veríssimo](#).

One of the reasons why exposure to real materials works so well is that our students are generally highly motivated to learn and very specific about why they want to learn Portuguese. Nobody studies Portuguese because they have to. Over the years we have all had students who want to learn because of family, friends, girlfriends, samba, futebol, history, business, botany, population studies, capoeira, movies, etc. Given these interests, it never ceases to amaze me how often students share information that they have found about different aspects of Brazilian society. As the professor, I would never be able to find, nor would I have the inclination to search for information on all of these topics. They, however, do, and they share them with others. For example, recently a student in our Advanced Grammar and Conversation class shared a link to a site dedicated to Portuguese phonetics and phonology. Here I am, a professor of linguistics, and he was showing all of the members of the class a site that I had never heard of. Of

course this keeps me alert to what is going on, but it also opens up the possibility that the teacher does not have to know everything. Technology allows motivated students to pursue their area of interest, even when the teacher may not share that same interest.

At the University of Texas, our materials called [Portuguese Communication Exercises](#) provide a good example of how technology helps students with real language from real people.

The site contains hundreds of brief video clips from Brazilians who discuss over 80 different topics, in Portuguese. All of the video clips include options to see a Portuguese transcript or an English translation of the video comments. Among the videos are comments from people from all parts of Brazil. Listeners are exposed to different styles and different dialects. As with all of our online materials at UT, these are also available to everyone everywhere, free of charge and without password restrictions. There are many published materials, and thousands of online sites, but there are relatively few options for students to see transcriptions of natural speech that can be used for language learning situations. I have seen students borrow whole sentences and phrases that they have heard from these materials as they try to speak Portuguese with their friends. There is something powerful in being able to analyze natural speech.

### **Connecting Students across Time and Space**

It is hard to believe, but I recall a time about 20 years ago, when Antonio Simões and I decided to use a new invention called “e-mail” to have our students send messages back and forth to each other. His students at the University of Kansas sent messages in Portuguese to my students at the University of Texas. At the time, and this is hard to believe, it was “cutting edge.” Even to this day, my office is decorated with a copy of an old 45 record of the Archies ‘Sugar, Sugar.’ It was a gift from a Kansas student who found it in collector’s store. In our emails, two of the students were gigantic fans of the Archies and I had joined in on the conversation.

Technology has given us a way to expand learning beyond the limited time that we are in the classroom. More than outside homework, technology provides a way to link students from one semester with students from another. Students in one part of the world become associated with learners from another. Materials and projects that students

work on in one course can be built upon by students in another class. As an example of this, let's look at the student project blog entitled "[É isso aí.](#)"

The blog contains an interesting mix of materials that we have created and a number of items that the students have created. More than that, some of the student contributions continue to develop from one semester to another. For example, as part of the blog, student teams create video clips of skits on a number of topics. Every semester a new group of students adds more video skits to the overall library. However they do not just add video clips, but the blog also contains their comments, and analysis of their work. In other words, students from one semester build on the previous work from other semesters. There is something about performing a skit that is going to be posted online that causes students to want to provide their best work. The time that they put into writing the scripts, memorizing the lines, performing the scenario, digitizing the clips, and writing the accompanying blog comments is impressive. I have actually seen students quote lines from previous groups, an interesting synergy.

As part of this blog, student teams in class are asked to summarize the daily class notes and add them to the blog. What a clever idea!-class notes, written by the students, and added to the blog for everyone's review in preparation for exams. This provides the instructor with instant feedback about what the students learned in class. There are days when I read the class notes that I find out that what I thought was important about the class was minimally recorded by the students. Other times, things that I thought were tangential, students focused on a lot. Additionally, it is impressive to see how many extra things students add to the class notes. For example, if we learn a new vocabulary word in class or discuss a certain topic, it is not uncommon for students to add images or links to the class notes. These are items that as the professor I did not actually present in class, but the students add them to provide additional background information. Finally, when it comes time for tests and quizzes, I go straight to the student class notes. It helps me to know what I should be focusing on and it gives the students a place to review for the test.

### **Use of video**

Technology has changed the way that we use audio and video for language teaching. Digitization has made it possible to create and show brief clips. On one end, students can produce and record their own audio and video and on the other end we can

provide brief snippets of audio or video content in many varieties. Recently at the University of Texas we have started to release a number of video-based lessons for intermediate and advanced learners called [Conversa Brasileira](#).

The video scenarios in *Conversa Brasileira* provide learners with examples of how Brazilians actually interact when speaking. We see their explanations, their turn taking, the clarifications and rephrasing. And the videos themselves contain analysis commentary. While viewing the clips there are “pop-up bubbles” that appear. By clicking on these pop-ups the video is paused and listeners are sent to brief recordings with additional commentary. Similar to *Tá Falado*, *Conversa Brasileira* also contains pdf files and discussion blogs for each of the lessons. The truth is that our learners are pretty sophisticated in their use of video and sound. Mobile devices have changed the way learners interact with media. As teachers, we have new opportunities to tap into these resources for language learning.

### **Life Imitates Art or Art Imitates Life**

So many of today’s technologies are designed to enhance communication. From mobile devices to search engines, we are constantly exposed to new ways to communicate. As language teachers, all of these new approaches provide us with ideas for teaching opportunities. If in society people communicate via video conferencing, we can practice Portuguese via video conferencing. If in society people create and store video clips on YouTube, we can practice Portuguese using YouTube. If in society people interact in Second Life, we can do the same to practice Portuguese. Often our students are ahead of us in these areas. For example, recently I witnessed how study abroad students created their own facebook groups to share experiences and photos of their trips abroad together. Totally independent from any assignment or course connection, students already socially interact. In another instance, students who were going to participate in consulting projects in São Paulo conducted video-conferences with the Brazilian point of contact, prior to the face-to-face meetings in Brazil. Last year I witnessed students, arriving at the airport in Rio de Janeiro and who were not in the country for more than ten minutes, the very first thing they did was to make sure that their cellular phone worked and their text messages could contact people in town.

One of the implications of all of this is that as technology changes, our role as language teachers also changes. The teacher-centered, textbook-focused, fill-in-the-blank oriented learning experience is gone. Recently I have felt a shift in becoming more of a language advisor. For example, a student recently posted a blog question for me, “Poderia explicar mais os usos da palavra “direito”. Sempre ouço, ex. ‘cê tá falando direito’. Isso quer dizer “bem” ou “correto”, ou talvez as duas?” What a great question. I still find myself with plenty of opportunities to specifically explain patterns, meanings, and tendencies in grammar and vocabulary, but more often than not, students now initiate these explanations. This is a by-product of our implementation of innovative technologies.

### **Conclusion**

For interested learners, we have created a new starting page of our University of Texas projects and materials for Portuguese. All are provided with open access in mind. They are independent from specific textbooks and specific courses. Feel free to mix and match as appropriate to your situations. The site is called [Brazilpod](#).

How interesting it is that this brief introspective look at how Portuguese programs have grown over the past 30 years really looks more to the future than back at the past. Given our opportunities via innovative technologies, the next 30 years are going to be exciting.