

## Resources for Teaching Your Students to Behave Brazilian

**Abstract:** This paper describes the available research and resources that contribute to developing a practice for teaching Brazilian behavior in the classroom. Behaving Brazilian means enacting a role that is embedded in the culture-specific rules of Brazilian time, place, people, and social interaction. The resources described have been published by researchers of pragmatics from the field of sociolinguistics, instructors of drama for foreign language teaching, and colleagues in Portuguese in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. I will argue that armed with the reasons, resources, and concrete examples of Brazilian behavior, we can and should teach social behavior in our Portuguese classrooms.

### Introduction

In what way does second language learning intersect with the dramatic arts? As second language speakers, our students should attempt to give the most authentic performance possible, not only as speakers but also as actors of culturally appropriate behavior. Proficiency in second language learning must be measured not only by abilities in the four skills, but also by abilities to enact appropriate social skills. Thus, the Portuguese language curriculum should be re-configured so that speaking and doing are given equal attention and that they are presented in cultural relationship to each other. This means, for example, that when students learn greetings and leave-takings, they learn not only the words, but also the people, contexts, and events in which these words are used. Saying hello and good-bye at a party of friends is not the same as entering a department store to buy shoes and greeting the salesperson. From the very first

moments in the Portuguese-language classroom, students should be guided to use the words they learn to say in interactions based on the context, the individuals involved, and the situation.

One way to teach students how to speak and do “Brazilianness” is through instruction in speech acts. Speech acts occur in transactions where words must enact deeds. These moments in which speakers must refuse, compliment, thank, or make complaints, requests, and apologies, often create discomfort and misunderstanding between second language learners and native speakers. Teaching speech acts helps to diffuse potential misunderstandings and provides the opportunity to develop communication skills through an understanding of cultural values and social behavior. Currently, I teach speech acts every spring in an advanced conversation and culture class. However, both my students and I recognize that behaving Brazilian should be integrated into all levels of the language curriculum so that students have more time to absorb both the cultural values and the behaviors they reflect.

Students have told me that they want to learn to behave Brazilian because they know it is crucial to inter-cultural understanding. When I asked them, “Which is more important, to speak Portuguese well or to act appropriately in Brazil? Why?”, a majority felt that it was more important to act appropriately. Here are some of their explanations:

“If you act well, people will overlook your grammar mistakes.”

“It is more offensive to violate social norms than to pronounce a word incorrectly.”

“If you act appropriately, people will be more open to you as a foreigner.”

“The right response is carried through the body.”

In my speech acts class we read about cultural values and their impact on communication using Tracy Novinger's book *Communicating with Brazilians: When Yes Means No* (2003), and then we attempt to put those values and body language into practice in short scenes that we film and analyze. When my students watch themselves, they can easily see the body language, hear

the vocabulary, and note the postures and interactions that do and do not approximate Brazilian behavior. We receive help from Brazilian students and visitors who attend our class and serve as informants for both the language and the behavior that the students perform. Details of how I teach the class have been published elsewhere and are noted in the bibliography.

There are potential hazards associated with a class that purports to develop a practice of behaving Brazilian. Brazil is a complex society that can be characterized as cordial in social interactions and at the same time rigidly divided by class and socio-economic differences. Any practice must deal in generalities so as not to reinforce cultural over-generalizations, stereotyping, or discrimination. I have witnessed “paulistas” and “cariocas” arguing about appropriate levels of politeness and informality in the work place, for example, which suggests that this territory is full of land mines. Nevertheless, feedback from Brazilian informants who have helped me teach Brazilianness has been unanimously positive and encouraging. Former students who have gone to Brazil have reported feeling more prepared for their interactions abroad because they rehearsed them before traveling.

### **Resources for Teaching**

Instructors have at their disposal a wealth of resources that have already laid a foundation upon which to teach students how to behave Brazilian. The title of this article comes from the groundbreaking work of Phyllis Harrison, *Behaving Brazilian*, published in 1983, that compared social behavior in the US and Brazil. The book includes seven chapters of cultural information about life in Brazil and a section on gestures, which are the most frequently researched feature of non-verbal communication. Although somewhat dated, much of the book is still relevant today.

In addition to Harrison's early work, the most important publication to document the value of learning how to behave Brazilian is *The Standards for Learning Portuguese in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1999). The Five C's of the *Standards*: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities, suggest that language learning is more than developing cognitive skills in the four areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In fact, Standard 2.1 and 2.2 of Cultures refer to the goal that students will be able to demonstrate "an understanding of the relationship between the practices, perspectives and products" of Luso-Brazilian cultures (364). The key terms here are "perspectives," which mean "what Portuguese speakers think and do from their own point of view" and "practices," which refer to knowledge of "what to do when and where and how to interact within a Portuguese cultural context" (373). In the sample progress indicators for grade school, middle school, high school and college, the *Standards* delineate activities that involve performance. For example, students must learn to use appropriate gestures and oral expressions, verbal and non-verbal behavior for daily activities, interaction in cultural contexts that reflect both peer-group and adults, and lastly, interaction that is appropriate in most social and job-related situations with Portuguese speakers (374).

The idea of behaving in accordance with cultural values appears again in Standard 4.2 of Comparisons which states that students will demonstrate "an understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons between the cultures studied and their own" (364). In this standard students take the elements taught in Cultures and compare them to each other and to their own. Therefore, gestures, verbal and non-verbal behavior, and social interaction are understood not only as identifying markers of how Portuguese-speaking people act in their daily lives, they also become the subject of comparison within Luso-Brazilian cultures and in contrast to the students' own.

The attention that most Portuguese-language textbooks and curricular materials give to the performance of culturally appropriate social behavior is inadequate to realize the goals of the *Standards*, especially when we understand that these goals are organized to reflect sixteen years of classroom instruction. The recent publication of *Ponto de Encontro: Portuguese as a World Language* (2007) will help fulfill the great need for teaching words and deeds in the appropriate cultural context at the beginning and intermediate levels. In addition, there are steps that we can take and there are resources in sociolinguistics and drama for the foreign languages that can provide us with a starting place for developing ideas for classroom instruction.

There are three areas of expertise that can contribute to a practice of teaching Brazilianness. From the field of sociolinguistics, there are the concepts of interlanguage pragmatics and transfer, as defined by Virginia LoCastro in *An Introduction to Pragmatics* (2003). The work of Monica Rector and Aluizio Trinta on non-verbal communication and gestures is also helpful. Finally, from the field of drama for the development of foreign language skills, it is important to mention the representation of social behavior in play performances as noted in several essays in the collection *Body and Language* (2002) edited by Gerd Brauer.

Speech acts are studied by socio-linguists and belong to the broader area of research known as pragmatics. LoCastro defines pragmatics as “the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and nonlinguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities” (15). Pragmatics focuses on real interactions and it examines how and why speakers understand or do not understand each other either within their own culture or in cross-cultural communication.

There are two useful concepts in pragmatics that apply directly to the teaching of Brazilian behavior: interlanguage pragmatics and transfer. Interlanguage pragmatics is a term

that refers to the progress that students make as they move from their native language interactions to some level of proficiency in the pragmatics of their second language (LoCastro, 251). It is a parallel concept to “inter-language” which describes the evolving sophistication of language skills that students are able to demonstrate as they move from novice speakers to advanced speakers. More on inter-language pragmatics later but first, a definition of transfer.

As students gain a greater awareness of, and ability to enact the words and deeds of the language they are learning, they often encounter interference from their own native language. This interference is called “transfer” and most of us see it in word choices and sentence structures that enter Portuguese through English or Spanish. However, students learning a second language also bring into that process from their first language the norms of interpreting and behaving in social situations. While we are able to document that our students are improving their language in the four skills, we may be unaware that they are not improving their social awareness and interaction skills.

Here is an example. Before teaching speech-acts, I taught an advanced level culture and conversation class in which my students worked on developing both their acting and speaking skills in order to film dramatic scenes from modern Brazilian plays. However, the images on the big screen revealed that while their abilities to speak Portuguese had improved through rehearsal, they were performing American behavior. The most obvious behaviors that caught my attention were that the distance between the actors was too great, the eye contact and physical interaction was too limited, and the gestures were too restrained to reflect the interactions that many of us have seen in real life, in movies and on television.

As I have noted, the films my students made of Brazilian dramatic scenes revealed mostly negative transfer in the nonverbal aspects of their performances. But there is research to

suggest that there are positive transfers as well. For example, my Spanish-speaking students from South America stated that they were at ease with many of the non-verbal features of Brazilian behavior and were comfortable with the closeness and touching that were common to the interactions performed in class.

The notions of inter-language pragmatics and transfer imply that students can move from low levels of proficiency (or competence) to higher ones in their performance of Brazilian behavior. This movement can be accomplished through residence abroad or through explicit instruction or a combination of both. As instructors we can help raise our students' awareness of cultural differences and how those differences can have an impact on inter-cultural understanding between native and non-native speakers. A more direct approach is to have students perform role-plays and scenes that involve the direct practice of pragmatics, giving attention to factors such as social context, status, age and gender of speakers, verbal and nonverbal cues, among others.

Two books by Rector and Trinta, *Comunicação não-verbal: a gestualidade brasileira* (1985) and *Comunicação do corpo* (1990) offer insights into the specifics of what constitutes communicating without words. These works contribute to the practice of social behavior, but they also add a theoretical framework for understanding non-verbal forms of human interaction. The first book includes an inventory of Brazilian gestures that are documented in photos, in descriptive terms involving the parts of the body used, and an evaluation of each gesture based on usage and acceptability in society. The second book, which is used in theater schools in Brazil, details communication through the senses, as well as the meaning of communication with the body. It has a helpful chapter on "proxêmica," or the social distances that people create between themselves, and "crônemica," or the perception of social time. There is a grid of non-

verbal language, such as movement of the head, use of the hands, positions and movement of the body that provides both the forms and the possible meanings of these elements of conduct. The closing chapter offers a synthesis of the characteristics of the “brasileiro médio urbano” that serves as a great starting point for a debate on what it is to behave Brazilian.

One approach to the teaching of Brazilian behavior is to apply the resources of pragmatics and non-verbal communication to drama. In the dramatic context, the traditional use of role-plays, dialogs, and impromptu scenes become the rehearsal tools for a more coherent project of representing another cultural reality. The contributors to Gerd Brauer’s collection *Body and Language* (2002) argue that drama fosters inter-cultural learning and develops not only linguistic skills, but also nonverbal abilities. The contact between non-native speakers and the native-language play produces opportunities to learn about many aspects of culture that go beyond spoken language. Second language drama aims to improve fluency and accuracy, to encourage cooperation and empathy, and to build appreciation for human interactions in other cultures.

Drama for the second language classroom offers the opportunity for students to rehearse and perform nonverbal behaviors, expressions, and modes of thinking, in addition to developing inter-cultural understanding. The search for a practice of behaving Brazilian needs to be based on learning the specific and unique features of social enactment that can be generalized for classroom use. However, contributor Schewe makes an argument for using gestures and pantomime in order to arrive at the universals of body language that allow individuals to understand each other (77-79). For example, gestures associated with basic bodily needs, such as hunger, sleep, and thirst, are understood in many parts of the world, including Brazil. Schewe's proposition reminds us that beyond the specifics of a culture are the common

denominators of human behavior. These observations agree with the *Standards* category of Comparisons, and with Rector and Trinta. That is, a practice of behaving Brazilian must be grounded in the realities of a specific culture, but at the same time must also be aware of the points of contact in social behavior across cultures.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the reasons to teach Brazilian behavior are provided by the *Standards* and by the needs of our students. The research and resources described here and listed in the bibliography can help instructors build an approach to teaching Brazilian behavior. One final consideration remains: What role do we play as transmitters of cultural behavior? Some practitioners in the Brauer collection on drama for second language learning argue that the instructor should be the primary model of appropriate behaviors and expressions, and provide the insights into cultural differences. In contrast, many socio-linguists in the pragmatics field argue that authentic models should be provided from television, movies, native informants, and from research itself, such as the books by Rector and Trinta. I argue for employing both of these perspectives in the classroom. On the one hand, it is important to use authentic examples whenever possible as models for appropriate social actions. On the other hand, it is wise to discuss cultural differences with students and provide them with examples of the instructor's own successes and failures in the practice of behaving Brazilian.

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