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A Self-Taught Language Learner

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## Introduction

Portuguese is the second most widely spoken Romance language after Spanish. Approximately half a million Americans speak Portuguese for various reasons: business, diplomatic relations, tourism, academic purposes, cultural exchange, and personal reasons such as marriages with Portuguese speakers.

The United States and Brazil have an extensive history of partnership for trading of information, technology, natural resources, goods and work force. Many corporations and employment agencies are based in Brazil or have some type of business relations with the government or private companies. The increasing need for specialized workers in Brazil has stimulated the learning of Portuguese.

Given the demand for learning Portuguese as a second language, many options have become available for students of Portuguese. Some learners attend regular educational institutions, some have private tutoring and some choose to self-teach. The choice depends upon the learner's age, schedule, language skills, learning style, financial constraints, and objectives.

This paper is a study of such a Portuguese learner. For purpose of the study, and to protect his identity, the student is referred to as Dan. My ultimate goal in working with Dan is to learn about the strategies he has been using to acquire the language and possibly to help him devise a plan that will enhance his linguistic ability and make him a successful learner. This paper will focus on his speaking skill, although I will briefly refer to the listening, reading and writing skills as well.

Dan is a neighbor of mine whom I arranged to meet for the purpose of this study. Each meeting spanned an hour, from June 15<sup>th</sup> through August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

We agreed that all meetings would be audio taped and how the sessions would be spent. The first fifteen minutes would be used to break the ice as well as answer some of my questions (Appendix A). The first part normally took place in English, his native language, because he felt that the answers required vocabulary he did not know. In the next thirty minutes we would speak Portuguese in order to clarify any doubts that would arise in the process, role play conversations, and have freer conversations suggested by him or the book. Finally, the last quarter of an hour was used to teach him language learning strategies that would maximize the learning process.

#### Profile

Dan was born in the United States in 1958 to a family of Eastern European immigrants who spoke Yiddish and some Russian. These languages were not carried over the generations. Dan's parents can speak them as a second language but Dan cannot speak them whatsoever.

The interviewee has lived in Atlanta since the age of 22. He graduated in Engineering from Georgia Tech. He is now a full-time student at Clayton State University pursuing a nursing degree after having worked in telecom for sixteen years.

He is by no means short of resources to support his studies. He is fully computer literate and has access to the Internet. He is able to access the library catalog online or physically at Clayton State and Georgia State. He has access to the local library and his private library, which has some dictionaries in Portuguese and other languages such as

Hebrew, Spanish, French, and English. He also owns a grammar reference, a practice book, a textbook in Portuguese and English and a set of cards with vocabulary words. He affirmed that he would be willing to buy Brazilian cable TV in order to be exposed more frequently to the language. He seems willing to spend more on educational materials if he feels that they are compatible with his learning style. Dan is definitely a student who has access to resources that certainly facilitates independent learning.

Dan learned French and Hebrew as a child, Spanish in high school and Portuguese as an adult. Since he already knows two Romance languages, I believe that he already has developed strong language skills, which I believe makes him an effective Portuguese learner.

His cultural background and the circumstances under which he learned Portuguese played an important role in the level of motivation. He was brought up in a Jewish Eastern European family that treasures the acquisition of knowledge, especially languages. His family's admiration for academic achievement in his family may be the reason that keeps him intrinsically motivated.

The need for learning Portuguese arose when he was making a business trip to Brazil to represent his company AT&T in a trade show. He had to make a presentation and thought it would be more appealing if it were in Portuguese. He expected to speak it on a basic, conversational level on a par with his knowledge of Spanish. Thus, he bought some books and hired a tutor for three months with a view to preparing for his presentation. The self-directed class gave him the flexibility to focus on the communication skills he needed. It is his belief that the apex point of his language learning was during the three-week stay in Brazil, in 2000. The fact that Dan took the

initiative to make this presentation in Portuguese rather than in his native language showed me that he is a very keen language learner who does not feel intimidated by communicating in such an anxiety- provoking situation.

Since then, he has been teaching himself. What keeps him motivated is his wish to live in Brazil for some time to work as a nurse and learn more about the culture.

### Report on the Findings

Portuguese, Spanish and French: these Romance languages have with numerous commonalities. For most part, Portuguese and Spanish have a similar syntax, morphology and lexicon. Nonetheless, phonetically they are quite different. Spanish speakers claim that Portuguese is very difficult to understand, but the reverse is not true. Dan`s fluency in Spanish certainly facilitates the process, but it does not guarantee complete comprehensibility.

When asked to rate speaking, listening, reading, writing in a spectrum from easy to difficult to learn, he reported that reading, speaking and writing are the easiest because of the connections he makes with the other languages he already knows. Reading and writing may seem easier because they take place at the language user`s desired pace.

Listening, however, was ranked as the hardest skill to acquire because, according to him, he has not lived in a Portuguese-speaking country long enough to understand a conversation. I agree that the fact that he has not been exposed to the language long enough affects his understanding. However, I also believe that the difficulty stems from the aforementioned phonological differences between the languages as well as the speed at which input has to be processed. In our meeting, for example, I enunciated the words

and allowed him time to process the input and, as a result, his understanding was significantly greater than when I spoke at a normal rate.

He uses reading strategies such as guessing from the context and finding cognates, which are very effective strategies. They demonstrate his capacity to cope with the unknown. In addition, he resorts to words in Spanish if he does not know them in Portuguese. In our meetings, he frequently used this strategy and most of the time he could convey his ideas successfully. His willingness to take risks and his self-confidence showed me that he has developed an affective strategy that can help him develop fluency.

The interviewee was required to put his speaking, listening, writing and reading skills on a scale from one to ten (ten being the highest and one the lowest) and, according to his perception, speaking would be ranked as 1 or 2, listening 0, writing 1 and reading 3. These are extremely low. Nonetheless, it seems to me that he underestimates his communicative abilities.

From my initial observations, based on *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) his listening is representative of Novice-Mid, and speaking, writing and reading skills fall into Novice-High.

At his level of proficiency, as I had expected, the occurrence of errors occurred frequently. The interviewee speaks Spanish far more often than Portuguese. Consequently, he tends to transfer verbs and structures from Spanish. For instance, “*Dame una caneta, por favor*” which in Portuguese would be “*Me da uma caneta, por favor*” (Give me a pen please). Transfers from English were also frequent and resulted in semantic errors. For instance, Dan often relies on false cognates such as *embarrassed* “*Eu fiquei muito embarassado*” (I got very *tangled*). Additionally, in terms of developmental

errors, although the learner is aware that there is a difference between the verb ‘to be’ that refer to permanent and another for temporary states and conditions, they are used inconsistently such as in the respective examples: “Minha casa não *está* muito grande” (My house is not very big) instead of *é*, and “*É* calor hoje” (It is hot today) instead of *está*.

Also, some Spanish sounds are transferred to Portuguese such as the trilled /r/, whose Portuguese counterpart is voiceless fricative glottal /h/. However, although there are several interferences, I believe that they do not significantly hinder intelligibility. At this level of proficiency, it is desirable that the student first develops fluency. If too much emphasis is given to pronunciation, he might feel discouraged.

Dan has a Brazilian friend to whom he writes every two weeks. He complained, however, that even when he writes in Portuguese, his friend often replies in English. Thus, in order to have extra writing practice, he writes freely on some topics from his textbook. Nonetheless, except for self-correcting dictation from a CD ROM he uses about twice a month, he does not receive any feedback on freer forms of writing. Dan showed me some of his written work and, surprisingly, it is far more accurate than his speech. I presume that due to his analytical style of learning, he might have developed excellent editing skills. Also, as mentioned before, the writing process happens at the learner’s pace, allowing him to check his notes and use the dictionary, which is not possible with the immediacy of speech.

Dan is highly motivated and has developed an array of language learning strategies. He could remember and describe them and most times he was aware of why he

employed them. I explicitly taught some strategies in the course of our study in order “to maximize his potential and contribute to his autonomy” (Larsen Freeman, 2000, p. 159).

One strategy Dan uses is to look at high-frequency words on flashcards with the translation in English in the back. Then, he orally makes a sentence using the word and writes it down. According to Oxford (1992), such memory-related strategy can become more efficient when visual learners like Dan make word lists and group them by class, topic, spelling patterns or rhyming. I also suggested that he used word webs and drawings or imagery (Oxford, 1992; Larsen-Freeman, 2000) to help him memorize the vocabulary words. Since he is a kinesthetic learner, I asked him how he could learn vocabulary in a way that would be entertaining for him. He then showed me a box with magnetic letters he uses to make poetry on the fridge. He would use them to practice his vocabulary words. He exhibited extraordinary metacognitive skill by planning his own learning. I stressed that independent learners like him often needed to devise their own strategies and that I thought that he would greatly benefit from becoming increasingly autonomous.

In general, as Dan is a very confident speaker in his native language it did not come as a surprise that risk-taking is one of his strongest affective strategies. He makes use of some strategies presented by Rubin (cited in Oxford, 1992) that are typical of a good language learner: he takes advantage of practice opportunities because he is willing to communicate, he is not inhibited with mistakes, and makes accurate and willing guesses. The one strategy mentioned by Rubin (as cited in Murphy & Byrd, 2001) I believed it would be essential for an independent learner to develop would be able to “monitor his own speech and that of others” (p. 19). In order to achieve this, I deem crucial that he is exposed to more communicative opportunities in order to receive

*feedback* (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). According to Mendelsohn, Pica and Allwright (cited in Murphy & Byrd, 2001, p.20) “Learners depend upon feedback from others” and that is something independent learners lack in the process. Therefore, I deem it very important that Dan is exposed to the language more often in order to develop language through negotiation of meaning (Murphy and Byrd, 2001). Not only should he increase the number of opportunities for *feedback*, but he should make use of the feedback for new input.

Dan complained that he wished he had more time to meet more Portuguese speakers. The first measure I took that I thought would be an avenue that would lead us to our goal of increasing the number of communicative opportunities was to introduce Dan to a website called [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) which forms groups of people who share the same interests. I assumed that the members of this group would be highly motivated to learn and practice the language and, unlike his friends, would not respond in English. I also gave him the email address of the American-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce in Atlanta that holds monthly social gatherings. Since he intends to work in Brazil, “networking” would be a motivating communicative practice. I also took his time constraints into consideration. If he felt that he could not handle meeting them often, he could choose to talk over the phone, email or “chat” online.

In our third meeting, Dan had already made contact with one Portuguese learner and one native speaker of Portuguese. The first contact, both by email and by phone, were made in Portuguese. However, he complained that it was not easy to understand his interlocutors, especially on the phone. I thought it would be appropriate to present and practice some social strategies with my subject that would help him get the feedback he

needed and negotiate meaning with others. We practiced asking questions such as ‘Desculpa. Pode repetir?’ (Sorry. Can you say it again?), ‘O que .....é em Português?’ (What is .....in Portuguese?), ‘Fala de vagar, por favor?’ (Can you speak slowly please?), ‘O que .....significa?’ (What does .....mean?), ‘Entendeu?’ (Do you know what I mean?), ‘O que voce quiz dizer com.....’ (What did you mean by.....?).

Another very important metacognitive strategy we practiced in one of our meetings was noticing (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). As mentioned before, Dan transfers his knowledge of Spanish when he is speaking Portuguese. Taking into consideration that Dan is an independent learner who lacks the assistance of a professional, the development of such strategy would enable him to be more sensitive to syntactic structures and lexis in the target language and incorporate them into his discourse. Description of this training can be found in the Lesson Particulars section of this paper.

Every class I asked Dan about his reactions and comments about the strategies I had been teaching him. He reported that the question-asking strategy not only helps him comprehend more, but also enable him to bring out new vocabulary words and expression and gauge how he is doing during the conversation.

I planned to gear the subject towards performing conscious monitoring of his speech. In order to make him an autonomous learner, I believe it would help him develop accuracy if he scanned his speech to notice problems. Acton (1984) suggested in his article that “post hoc monitoring” (p.76) should occur after they are speaking. As a consequence, Dan’s fast developing fluency will not be affected.

One strategy that might be effective to accelerate the acquisition of the language is to use a native speaker as an “informant” (Acton, 1984, p.77) who would act as a consultant and would also identify his problems. Acton suggests that the learner needs to “train” the informant as to how they want to be treated and how he or she would like to be helped. Dan and I brainstormed some ideas on how the informant could help him. He thought about soliciting his Brazilian friend’s assistance to identify problematic structures after a telephone conversation. His friend could also write to Dan in Portuguese rather than in English and correct any grammatical or semantic error in the email he receives from the learner. Peers (Murphy, cited in Murphy and Byrd, 2001) who are in proximity to the learner exert a powerful influence for modeling. Dan noted, however, that the informant must not make too many corrections all at once, for then he might begin to lose confidence, and hesitate before speaking again.

Finally, in our sixth and last meeting, I told him that I had noticed that he rated his language competence far lower than what he displayed to me. I went on to explain that students who learn a language on their own are prone to ignore their progress. Positive self-talk (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) was likely to help him through a difficult task. I also elicited ways of praising himself after accomplishing it in the target language.

Dan reported that the strategy he had been practicing and that caused rapid results was the one for retaining vocabulary. He said that whenever he learns a new vocabulary item, he tries to steer the conversation so that he can incorporate it. By the time this paper was submitted, Dan had not yet met with any of his conversation partners because of his tight schedule, but he had talked to one over the phone and emailed her a couple of times.

He stressed that her Portuguese was a little more advanced than his, but he welcomed the fact that she would be a “push” for him.

### Lesson Particulars

The following is a description of the last part of our fourth meeting when Dan was presented with a language learning strategy for noticing. The conversation was recorded and, at first, he played the conversation back and told me what he noticed. On the second conversation, it was not recorded and he was to recollect only.

Eve: Do you think that paying attention to someone’s speech can help you improve your use of the language?

Dan: Yeah.... I guess...I sometimes pay attention to how a word is pronounced, new word or I hear the person say it correctly and I realize I said it in Spanish.

Eve: That is right. That is why I want to teach you today a strategy that can help you tune into your conversation partner’s speech so you use that for your own learning. I want to transition from using Spanish sometimes to not using it at all. And you know that Spanish and Portuguese words sound very close. The grammar is very similar too. Sometimes you have to make just a little adjustment. I’ll start a conversation and at the end of it you’re going to tell me what you noticed so that might improve your Portuguese, all right?

Eve: Então, você é vegetariano....(So, you’re vegetarian)

Dan: Sim, não como nada muerto. Galina, bife, solamente pescado. (Yes, I don’t eat anything dead. Chicken, beef, only fish.)

Eve: Eu gosto de peixe e galinha. Os animais que não como são porco e rã. Que nojento... Não gosto nem morto nem vivo. (I like fish and chicken. The meats I don't eat are pork and frog... That's gross.... I don't like them neither dead nor alive.)

At the end of this practice conversation, Dan was able to tell me that he mispronounced *galinha* (chicken). Even though he was not able to tell me exactly what was wrong, he was aware that he had mispronounced it. He was also mindful that *pescado* (fish) is *peixe* in Portuguese, and *muerto* (dead) is *morto*. He failed to notice the morphological error caused by the transfer from Spanish to Portuguese (*animales/animais*) probably because it has a very subtle phonological difference.

After doing the activity, he pointed out that it would be a good idea to repeat the words to himself immediately after noticing them and to use them as soon as he finds an opportunity.

### Conclusion

This case study was based on my observations and interactions with Dan over six weeks' time. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to collect reliable data on the learner's progress. Obviously, Dan's success in acquiring the language will ultimately depend upon his effort to apply his own strategies, as well as the ones I presented and to take advantage of the communicative opportunities in authentic settings.

In this case study, I judged that feedback would be paramount for advancing his progress. Had we had more time, I would have continued to practice the strategies taught and would have introduced reading, writing and listening strategies that would develop the language skills he will need as a professional working in a Portuguese speaking

country. Further, it is essential for a self-taught language learner to be able to set long and short-term objectives and to check comprehension (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Dan exhibited excellent language learning strategies: affective, social, metacognitive and cognitive. My intention was to draw an instructional plan that would take into consideration his individual language needs, background, and goals and to some extent help him achieve them.

## References

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## Appendix A

- 1- How did the need for learning Portuguese arise?
- 2- Do you speak any other languages? What role did this knowledge play?
- 3- How did you start learning it? Did you have a plan?
- 4- Does your home country culture/family/friends/work environment encourage you to learn a foreign language?
- 5- Did you have formal classes in Portuguese? If so, how long?
- 6- What strategies did your Portuguese teacher use that helped you achieve your goals? What hindered your progress?
- 7- What did/do you expect to achieve?
- 8- What is hardest and the easiest to learn: Listening, Speaking, Writing, Reading? Why?
- 9- Have you ever lived in a Portuguese-speaking country? How was your experience? How long for?
- 10- Are you acquiring the language at the moment? How do you do it?
- 11- How would you describe your language skills in general?
- 12- What out-of-class strategies do you use to improve it?
- 13- From 1-10 (1 the lowest and 10 the highest), describe your general knowledge of Portuguese.
- 14- How would you grade your skills in: reading, writing, speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, and knowledge of grammar?
- 15- If you think you're making a great deal of progress, what strategies do you use?
- 16- At the moment, what keeps you from making faster progress?
- 17- Describe a positive real-world experience you had using the language. Describe a negative one.
- 18- How often do you have the opportunity to talk/listen/ write/read in Portuguese? For how long?
- 19- Why have you chosen to self-teach Portuguese?
- 20- Would you consider enrolling in a Portuguese course?
- 21- How do you plan, evaluate, and organize the learning of Portuguese?
- 22- How do you keep yourself motivated?
- 23- What is the easiest way for you to learn? By hearing, seeing, touching or playing with something?