Entangled in two Romance languages: Experiencing language barriers in higher education

DINIS FERNANDO DA COSTA

Instituto Superior Politécnico Gregório Semedo, ANGOLA
dinis.costa@igs.ed.ao

Abstract

Since 2002, which marks the end of the Civil War in Angola, a large multilingual and multicultural workforce from various corners of the world has entered the Angolan education system. This paper investigates language barriers experienced in the classroom of Spanish speaking lecturers by Portuguese speaking students. The study focuses on a group of 81 first year students enrolled at the Pedagogic School of Namibe (Universidade Mandume Ya Ndemufayo) and the Institute of Higher Education Gregorio Semedo. Using questionnaires and observation techniques, the article shows how Spanish poses a language barrier to efficient communication in the teaching-learning process. It also shows that students employ various strategies; from asking help from fellow colleagues to recording lectures, in order to comprehend the lecturers' explanation. Given that the Angolan higher education system hosts a great number of foreign lecturers, largely from Cuba, the paper recommends that restricted language measures should be employed when hiring foreign lecturers who are not proficient in Portuguese. Hence Portuguese language training should be provided to Spanish lecturers for at least one year prior to the commencement of lecturing; this intervention will lower language barriers and thus create a conducive environment for meaningful learning.

Keywords: language barriers, teaching-learning, Spanish, Portuguese, Angola

Introduction

Angola gained independence from the then Portuguese colonial master in 1975. At that time, the education system was on the brink of total collapse, thanks to the poor educational policies employed by the regime. This system resulted in the production of millions of illiterate shoemakers, washermen / women, and domestic workers. This was to the detriment of the indigenous people and in favour of the white Portuguese teachers, doctors, engineers, etc. (for further insight on the issue read Zamparoni, 1999; Thomaz, 2005; Duffy, 1963; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1983; Newitt, 1981; Ferreira

& Davidson, 1974).

The situation forced the Angolan government to ask for assistance from Cuba and Cuba, in response, sent "advisors to the Angolan ministry of education where teaching curricula, lesson contents and pedagogical concepts were drawn up based on Cuban models" (Hatzky, 2008, p.162). In fact, according to Hatzky (2012) Cuba's largest educational mission in Africa, ever, was in Angola. The scholar further deems that altogether about 10,000 Cubans from various fields of education carried out their internationalist duties between 1976 and 1991.

The choice of bringing in Cubans was not exclusively driven to close the skills shortage gap left by the Portuguese colonial regime. On the contrary, it was also due to the prosperous "record of Cuban education *system* is outstanding: universal school enrolment and attendance; nearly universal adult literacy […]; a strong scientific training; consistent pedagogical quality" (Gasperini, 2000, p.1). This was vital in order to revitalize the precarious Angolan education system as a whole.

There are currently 962 Cuban nationals, (the number might even be greater), lecturing in institutions of higher education in Angola (*see* Anuário de Estatístico do Ensino Superior, 2016). These employees make up 6,2%, the workforce, the highest among foreign staff working in this country. Though in small numbers, Angola also hosts teaching personnel from former communist nations such as Russia, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, Philippines, and South Korea, to mention but a few. Upon arriving in the country, no language training is given to them based on the belief that due to the similarities between the Portuguese and Spanish languages,and because both languages belong to the Romance Language cluster, it was pointless to learn Portuguese. In spite of this, almost none, if any, research has been conducted in Angola to assess the impact of language barriers in the classroom.

This thinking has shown to be flawed, unproductive and dangerous. For instance, the differences between Portuguese and Spanish are recognized by various scholars. In 1971, Ulsh conducted significant research on the matter. Five decades later, Lipsky's (2018) study has reported similar results. Both scholars established that the difference between Portuguese and Spanish is remarkable in respect of phonology, phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexicology. Ulsh's research further concluded that some of the most common words of Portuguese do not have a cognate in Spanish as some people modestly deem. Interestingly enough, Lipsky (2018) explains that "in their written forms, Spanish and Portuguese share a high degree of mutual intelligibility […] but regional and social varieties of the two languages often diverge to the point of limited mutual comprehension (p.499). This argument and others are a warning of potential pedagogical problems that might occur in the classroom due to lexical, phonological, syntactical, etc. variations between Portuguese and Spanish.

It is of high importance to observe that the Angolan Law Decree 13/01, 9th Article on Language of Instruction in the Classroom, is clear-cut. It establishes that teaching and learning shall be conducted in the official language, Portuguese. It also emphasizes that: the "State promotes and assures humane conditions, technical and scientific, financial and material for the expansion and use of National Languages in teaching and learning." This legal document strongly de-emphasises the use of languages other than Portuguese and local languages in the classroom, the latter only under exclusive circumstances. This work attempts to apprise the challenge(s) that students who happen to be in the classroom of Spanish speaking lecturers, encounter, due to language barriers. To be more straightforward, the work investigates language barriers to efficient teaching-learning. Thus the article is articulated by the following two research questions:

   1. What kind of language barriers do first year Portuguese speaking students face in the

        classroom of Spanish speaking Cuban lecturers?

2. What strategies do students employ to lower language barriers in the classroom of Cuban lecturers?

These research questions were based on the hypothesis that language barriers exert influence on the quality of the learning-teaching process in the classroom managed by Spanish speaking lecturers.

The role of language in the classroom

The significance of a language in the classroom has been documented for centuries. Both the teacher and learner's survival depends on it. As Bailey *et al.* (2008) stated: "like water for the fish, language is so fundamental in classroom settings that it becomes transparent" (p. 610). They further aver "classrooms are, first-and-foremost, language environments, *thus,* if classrooms are laboratories and teaching largely a matter of constant experimentation, then we see language is the medium, in a biological sense, in which those experiments are cultured and grown" (Bailey *et al.*, 2008, p. 610).

In addition, "language is one of a number of ways in which we represent the world to ourselves […] and it is the role that language plays in generating knowledge and producing new forms of behaviour that typifies human existence and distinguishes it from that of all other creatures" (Bullock Report, 1975, p. 47). Hence the role of a language in the classroom should never be belittled. According to Wellington (1998), there is a strong curricular rationalization for the increased use of language in science teaching, driven by the fact that for many pupils, the greatest barrier to learning science is the language barrier. As the scholar further deems, the quality of classroom language is bound up with the quality of learning (Wellington, 1998).

Overall, what has to be treasured is the fact that teaching and learning is conceivable through an interaction between teacher and learner; for this interaction to occur, the language of instruction has to be shared by both interlocutors. Wellington corroborates by contending "talk in the classroom involves the talk of the teacher and the talk of the learners, and, as in any relationship, the one can have a deep impact on the other, for better or worse" (1998, p. 36). Wellington's argument is relevant. One wonders about the complex nature of this interaction, taking into account the cultural aspect of the language of both teacher and learner which, besides "evolving within specific contexts, *is* being governed by phonological, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules" (Huff *et al.*, 2018, p. 3).

What does all this mean for Portuguese speaking learners or even Spanish lecturers, considering the issues pointed out earlier on by Ulsh (1971), Lipsky (2018) and now Huff (2018), in regard to differences between Portuguese and Spanish?

Literature Review

Since 2002, which marked the end of the Angolan Civil War, Angola has been receptive to a large multilingual and multicultural workforce from various corners of the world, including Portugal, Cuba, China, Vietnam, India, Brazil, and Zimbabwe, to mention but a few. However, no studies that broadly discuss intercultural communication or "language barriers," in particular in various fields of social science with a particular mention of health, businesses and of course education, have been documented for the Angolan context, despite a need to do so.

The communication barrier as a subject of social science, has lately captured the attention of many scholars in the field of education, linguistics and even business. As Dutã claims: "the theme of

communication in higher education has been, and will constitute in the future, a topic of interest and significant contributions and significant steps have been made in this respect, concretized in many studies and publications" (2015, p. 625).

Language barriers are a kind of psychological barrier in which language is a psychological tool *that affects the communication being put across* (Vygostky, 1978, as cited in Hallberg, 2010, p. 111). This definition seems to capture one central aspect. Given communication is dependable on language, be it verbal or non-verbal and "involves the meanings of transmission, channel and mutuality" (Kocamn, 2016, p. 1780), factors related to language will prevent individuals from having effective communication.

On this note, Harzing and Feely (2007, p. 13) assert that "the simplistic definition of the language barrier as a problem of "miscommunication" becomes replaced by a cycle of effects that explain not only how the miscommunication occurs, but also how it can escalate." To summarize, Harzing and Feely (2007) declare that where language is a barrier [.....] the communication process would be severely disturbed, the flow of information impeded and understanding would be difficult to achieve. This information preempts the negative effects of language barriers in communication, therefore the probing by the research is significant.

One notable study, without reducing the value of other relevant studies, was conducted by Smith in 2013. The study explored seven barriers of communication namely physical, perceptual, emotional, cultural, language, gender and interpersonal barriers. Concerning language barriers, which is the focus of this work, Smith's study pointed out that dialectal differences and language disabilities were examples of factors that prevented people from having healthy communication.

Smith's work provided a platform for subsequent studies on communication barriers. One of the studies was by Dutã (2015), published two years later. It focused on higher education and investigated barriers to efficient communication in the teacher-student relationship. The results showed that students experienced fundamental barriers such as physical discomfort, disinterest due to the lack of teaching materials, excessive verbalism and anxiety. The latter stood out the most. Interestingly enough, the study also found that distance between teacher-student was evident in situations where a student could not understand what a teacher was saying and needed clarification; this is an example of a language barrier.

Kocaman's (2016) work, which explored communication barriers in the process of learning a foreign language, produced remarkable facts. Language barriers with factors such as the native language of the learners and vocabulary knowledge, was remarkably regarded. Similar findings, mainly attached to vocabulary issues, were identified in the results of Henderson and Wellington's (1998) research which focussed on language barriers to learning and teaching science. It showed that students appeared to have problems with technical terms and scientific language which posed barriers to communication. This justifies the statement that these scholars make, "the quality of classroom language is bound up with the quality of learning" (Henderson & Wellington, 1998, p. 36). In addition, it validates Hallberg's viewpoint that "there can hardly be any shared world between them, *teacher and student,* if they experience linguistic barriers" (2010, p. 115, my emphasis).

By contextualizing Kocaman's and to a certain extent, Henderson and Wellington's work in this study, some similarities can be identified: most students taking part in this study are not Portuguese mother tongue speakers. Thus, learning academic discourse poses a huge challenge to students, essentially the concerns around vocabulary and pronunciation as noted earlier on by Ulsh (1971) and Lipsky (2018). This being the case, one wonders how students deal with this issue considering that

"language and communication are without doubt two of the most important factors in the learning process *where* instruction is given in language *learners* do not normally use outside school, a language they do not command and hardly understand" (Mudaly & Singh, 2018, p. 56)?

To answer this question, Mudaly and Singh's (2018) conducted a study in South Africa on language barriers in the classroom. They established that students experienced difficulties in understanding the content due to the disproportionate relation between the language used in the classroom, which also happens to be the language they are not well versed in, and the language of which they have full command. As Owen-Smith (2010, p. 1) defends "any child who cannot use the language which he/she is most familiar with, usually the home language, is disadvantaged and unlikely to perform to the best of his/her ability."

In order to understand the devastating dimension of language barriers it is of paramount importance to examine Ozmen *et al.* (2016) work. The study was based on existing communication barriers between teachers and parents in Primary schools. One of the findings is that socio-cultural differences, including language barriers, prevented all stakeholders involved, such as teachers, parents, school staff, and managers, etc., from having an effective relationship. This, in turn, did not only create problems in the relationship between teachers and parents, but also students' performance at school.

Furthermore Hallberg's (2010) work, whose aim was to explore both language and communication barriers in learning, has revealed that little weight was given to language and communication barriers in learning Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Therefore, it established that both barriers were the results of ignorance about the learners' background as well as technological knowledge. What is notable in Hallberg's study and others is the fact that learners and teachers who do not use the same L1 are prone to language barriers.

The literature explored has undoubtedly offered a distinguished body of knowledge on barriers in communication and why communication breakdown frequently occurs. Despite the fact that some studies do not specifically deal with language barriers per se, which is the objective of this work, the body of evidence on language barriers in general is satisfactory in recognizing that this issue needs particular attention. Education is a human rights business. Therefore, to borrow the words from Owen-Smith (2010), students taught in a language they do not understand is a barrier to their education.

Methodology

The study was conducted at two institutions of Higher Education based in Namibe Province, Angola, namely Instituto Superior Politécnico Gregório Semedo / Polytechnic Institute of Higher Education Gregorio Semedo (ISPGS) and Escola Pedagógica do Namibe / College of Teacher Training (EPN), a campus of the Mandume Ya Ndemofayo University. Both institutions were chosen for hosting Cuban teaching staff on the one hand and for the potential of hosting students who are not Portuguese mother tongue speakers, on the other hand. Though the latter factor was not taken into much consideration since the students are proficient in Portuguese, it exerted further influence on language barriers.

Sampling

In total, 81 undergraduate first year students participated in the study. The study population comprised 17 students from the IT class, 21 from the Chemistry class, 22 from the Mathematics class

and lastly 22 students from the Primary school teacher's Training class. The former class is from (ISPGS) and the latter three from EPN. The sampling method, to a certain extent, adopted a random approach though certain points were taken into consideration as noted in the subsequent section.

Sampling design

First year students were targeted on the basis of this study working only with students who had first experience of being in a class where the medium of instruction was Spanish. An informal unsystematic interview with 2nd, 3rd and 4th year's students established that these groups had developed various strategies to deal with language barriers in the classrooms so as a result they were excluded from the study. For them, though, the language barrier was still an issue but it no longer had the same repercussions as when they were in the first year. Apart from these points on which we based our selection method, it is safe to say the study followed a randomisation approach.

Instruments and data collection procedures

The study applied questionnaire surveys and participant observation methods for data collection. The questionnaires comprised three closed questions and two open-ended questions (see Tables 1 and 2). Questionnaires were distributed to students immediately after attending classes and collected after completion. Participants were advised to carefully reflect on the questions by linking them to classroom experiences.

The participant observation method was employed. The aim was to obtain a detailed description for question 3 of the questionnaires on what exactly the major language barriers entailed. This would have been difficult to do by applying a simple questionnaire technique. It took place over a period of two weeks in all four classes: two lectures of two hours each per class. The observation was conducted by a local lecturer who is well versed in Spanish. He lived and studied in Cuba for over 18 years. His role was to listen and write down sentences as they were uttered by lecturers during class. Thereafter these sentences were read again precisely as the lecturers had uttered them while students were asked to pay attention and pinpoint trouble spots, focussing on aspects identified in question 3 (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

Feedback from the questionnaires and participant observations were then carefully evaluated. The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Findings and Discussion

In regard to the first question, as we note from the above, the majority of students corresponding to 53%, concur that they understand between 50% to 70% of the lecturer's explanation, followed by 30%-50% which corresponds to 19.7% and finally 10% to 30% and 70% to 90% corresponding to 13.5% each. These results are clear cut, namely that most students encounter a serious communication setback when it comes to understanding what the lecturers say in the classroom. This of course reflects the feedback provided by students on the second question in response to "how many times the lecturer has to explain the subject to students." The answers were overwhelming. The number of students who acknowledged this was at least "twice"; it amounted to 37 corresponding to 45.6% followed by 34 students who admitted "trice" which is 41.9%. For the remaining responses there was a match for the number of students who said "once" and those who said "over three times," five each corresponding to 6,1% respectively. Moreover, the third

question also provides interesting results. The number of students, 44, corresponds to 54.3% who admitted that pronunciation is the major stumbling block of communication in the class, outnumbering the remaining reasons. Those who attribute "vocabulary differences of both languages" as the motive, reflect 22.2% followed by 19.7% and then 3.7% in responses to "complex sentences" and "other reasons" respectively.

Table 1 *Closed questions from the questionnaires*

Question Number	Response from participants	Number of participants & percentage
1. How much in terms of percentage do you understand when the lecturer presents the lecture?	1) Between 10% - 30% 2) Between 30% - 50% 3) Between 50% -70% 4) Between 70% -90%	1) 11 / 13.5% 2) 16 / 19.7% 3) 43 / 53.0% 4) 6 / 13.5%
2. How many times does the lecturer have to explain the lecture /subject for you to understand?	1) Once 2) Twice 3) Trice 4) More than 3 times	1) 5 / 6.1% 2) 37 / 45.6 % 3) 34 / 41.9% 4) 5 / 6.1 %
3. Where do you find the most challenges?	1) Pronunciation 2) Vocabulary different from Portuguese 3) Complex sentences 4) Other	1) 44 / 54.3% 2) 18 / 22.2% 3) 16 / 19.7% 4) 3 / 3.7%

Table 2 *Open ended questions from the questionnaires*

Question Number	Possible answers as per number of participants
4. What sort of strategy do you use in order to understand what the lecturer is saying?	Whereas the strategies were varied, the following dominated. The answers are organized from a higher degree of frequency to a lower frequency: 1) I pay lots of attention in the class; 2) I ask my classmates to explain it to me; 3) I ask the teacher to explain in simple language; 4) I do an audio recording of the lecture and when I get home I listen to it various times;
5. If on the 3rd question you chose one of the options given, please explain in detail what the difficulty is.	Reasons explained in the following discussions: "Some reactions as to why pronunciation is a stumbling block"; "Some reactions as to why "complex language" is a stumbling block"; "Some reactions as to why "non-cognate vs. cognate" is a stumbling block."

When students were asked about the strategies they use to deal with language barriers in the classroom, their responses varied. However, the following stood out the most (i) I pay double attention in the class; (ii) I ask my classmates to explain it to me; (iii) I ask the teacher to explain it in simple language; (iv) I do an audio recording of the lecture and when I get home I listen to it various times; (v) I read his/her body language.

These responses only confirm the struggle which students face in the classroom. Examples (ii) and (iv) suggest students have to wait longer than the usual time to understand the lecturer's explanation before learning takes place. The remaining examples also suggest students do not operate with normalcy. To ensure teaching-learning takes place, they have to make sacrifices that include recording material which then needs to be transcribed. One can imagine the amount of work involved in this kind of activity. Regarding "read lecturer's body language" as suggested by some, is also a hard and intricate task, given that language is culturally driven; this means one can easily read non-verbal language faultily. This argument is corroborated by Smith (2015), who contends that tone of voice and volume, which fall under the heading of perceptual barriers, can cause serious communication barriers during conversation if not well interpreted. What is more, by asking classmates to explain or clarify certain concepts, anything can be expected if the classmates themselves did not understand what the lecturer said. In response to iii) "I ask the teacher to explain in simple language" it is difficult to understand what they mean. Does it mean, for instance, that the lecturer uses easy Spanish vocabulary or code-switching and so on to make the lecture easier understood?

To close this discussion, Smith (2015) reminds us that even for those people who may technically speak the same language, dialectical differences can make communication between them difficult. If so, one then might ask, what about conversation between those who speak different languages, in this case Spanish and Portuguese?

Question five is summarised in three points as taken from responses in question 3, namely "pronunciation," "vocabulary differences" and "complex sentences." Below are some reactions as to why "pronunciation" is a stumbling block:

i) Porque a professora fala uma língua que eu não tenho domínio e ela não tem domínio do português e ao pronunciar a palavra fica-me muito difícil entender. / *Because the teacher speaks a language I do not know and in turn she does not know Portuguese so when she pronounces a word it becomes difficult to understand.*

ii) A pronuncia é diferente do que estou habituado a ouvir. / *The way words are pronounced is different to what I am used listen to.*

iii) A maior dificuldade consiste na pronúncia. O estudante faz um grande esforço para poder perceber o que o professor pretende transmitir e esta tem sido um dos fatores preponderante na fraca assimilação do estudante / *Though students do their best to understand the lecturer, the major problem still lies in pronunciation which has been contributing toward weak assimilation of the subject matter.*

iv) Agora com a mascara só piorou a situação. / *Things before COVID-19 was already difficult, now that lecturers wear masks it is worse.*

v) Em certos momentos da aula, o professor usa expressões que muito de nós conhecemos, mas como a pronúncia não é; bem clara tem dificultado no entendimento da explicação que dá / *Sometimes the lecturer uses words that we know but due to misleading pronunciation it makes it difficult to understand what he is saying.*

vi) Apontei pronuncia porque tenho dificuldade de entender as palavras, exemplo z falam c.. / *I pointed out pronunciation because I find it difficult to understand words that start with z but they pronounced it as c.*

vii) Pronuncia uma vez que raramente ouvimos a língua estamos habituados a ouvir / *I said pronunciation because we rarely in the classroom use the language we are used to which is Portuguese.*

viii) É complicado porque as vezes o professor pronuncia uma palavra ou frase e se as

alunas não estarem atentas acabam por escrever outra coisa. *It is really complex because sometimes the lecturer says (pronounces) one word or sentence if we do not pay attention we end up writing something else.*

ix) Através da pronúncia várias palavras do docente que não é igual ao nosso idioma impossibilitando a nossa percepção, dificultando a no estudar. Muitas das vezes estas pronuncias tem contribuindo para o mal aprendizado do homem enquanto estudante o que é mal. / *Pronouncing some words that are not similar to Portuguese becomes a stumbling block which in turn contributes to wrong teaching-learning which is bad.*

Most arguments brought forward by students are fair enough given that: (i) many words are pronounced similarly in the two languages but spelled differently (Bateman, 2017, p. 6), (ii) lexical differences as well as false cognates can cause issues (Bateman, 2017, p. 4) and finally, (iii) the phonology between the two languages differs significantly (Soares, 2013, p. 2).

Some reactions as to why "complex sentences / language" is a stumbling block are:

i) É difícil entender porque nunca tive aulas de espanhol, tenho ouvido somente o básico. / *It is difficult because I had never had Spanish lessons. I have been listening to the basic.*

ii) Eu tendo tido muitos problemas nas explicações dos professores cubanos porque a língua falada pelos mesmos não é idêntica a que nós falamos as vezes é difícil perceber o que na verdade o professor queria ou quer informar. / *I have been having lots of problems when Cuban lecturers are teaching because the language they speak is not the same as ours. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what really the lecturer wants to say.*

iii) A professora quando explica o conteúdo usa muitos termos que muitas vezes não entendemos. / *When the lecturer explains content uses many terms that we often do not understand.*

iv) Por causa da mistura do português e espanhol fica difícil entender o que a professora quer dizer. / *Due to mixing of Portuguese and Spanish it is difficult to understand what lecturer wants to say.*

v) As vezes por exemplo o professor mistura o português com o espanhol, "resta" em português para dizer "subtração." / *Sometimes the teacher mixes Portuguese with Spanish, e.g. says "remains" in Portuguese to say "subtraction."*

vi) O professor tem de ser mais explícito de modo a facilitar o processo de ensino-aprendizagem. / *Lecturers have to be more explicit in order to facilitate the teaching-learning process.*

vii) Quando ele explica rápido demais para torna-se quase impossível. É muito complicado entender o vocabulário quando penso que está falando algo para ele é outra coisa. *When he explains too quickly it becomes almost impossible. It is very difficult to understand vocabulary when I think he is talking about something but for him is something else.*

viii) Porque no espanhol tem frases idênticas ao português e outras não, então fica difícil entender realmente o que o professor está a dizer. / *Because in Spanish are identical sentences with Portuguese thus it becomes really difficult to understand what the lecturer is saying.*

ix) Quando ele fala rápido as frases complexas fica difícil de perceber o que ele quer dizer na verdade, falha algumas palavras e a frase fica sem sentido na minha maneira de perceber. / *When he speaks fast complex sentences it becomes*

> *difficult to understand what he trying to say. If he misses some words as it happens sometimes sentence becomes senseless.*

Some reactions as to why "non-cognate vs. cognate" is a stumbling block:

i)   Procuro saber da professora o que significa a palavra pronunciada. / *I ask the lecturer the meaning of word.*

ii) Existem algumas "palavras" que não se compreendem durante a explicação do professor. *There are some Spanish words that one does not understand during his/her explanation.*

iii) Existem certas palavras em espanhol que dificultam-me compreender a matéria explicada pela professora. /*There are some Spanish words that hampers understanding subject matter in the classroom.*

iv) As vezes é difícil perceber e por outra o vocabulário é diferente porque as vezes os professores fazem confusão com as escritas portuguesas e as espanhola, ora escrevem português, ora espanhol. / *Sometimes is difficult to understand things that are said. Besides, vocabulary is different. Yet lecturers confuse themselves with Portuguese and Spanish writing sometimes they write in Portuguese sometimes in Spanish.*

Although negative comments outweigh the positive ones, a few were noted about the lectures and lecturers' professionalism:

i)   A paciência dentro da metodologia de ensino deles tem facilitado no nosso aprendizado ou ensino / *Their spirit of patience and methods they use has been helping us.*

ii) Acho os professores cubanos são muito pontuais e explicam muito bem! / *I personally think Cuban lecturers are always on time and explain the subject matter well.*

iii) Eles explicam bem apesar de terem algumas dificuldades de língua. / *They explain well the subject matter in spite having language problems.*

Pronunciation issues

Given that students had indicated "pronunciation" as being the major language barrier, we decided to compare some Spanish words against the Portuguese equivalent. These words were identified in the sentences from the observation data (see Appendix 1), as already explained previously. The point was to weigh up the degree of discrepancy between both languages. We hoped that this exercise would shed light on what exactly students rely upon as justification for their argument. Nevertheless, the discussion on phonetics is not exhaustive; the examples drawn are simply used to illustrate problematic spots that pose a core issue in the interaction between lecturers and students. For those who wish to gain further insight into problematic spots between Spanish and Portuguese, can consult "Comparative Grammar of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French" by Petrunin (2018) or Azevedo (1978); otherwise any comparative grammar of these two languages will serve well.

Though students listened to the lecture material twice, both in the lecture and after the lecture, they were still unable to decipher the meaning immediately. In fact the meaning of some utterances, even after several attempts, were left unresolved entirely. When asked to point out words that made understanding almost impossible, they pointed out as per the examples in Table 3. This of course confirms the information gleaned from the questionnaires.

Table 3: Spanish vs. Portuguese lexicon with phonetic transcriptions

No	Spanish word / type	Pronunciation	Portuguese equivalent / type	Pronunciation	English
i	del / (prep. de + *art* el)	[d'el]	do / (prep. de + art o	[du]	of
ii	barrio / (noun)	['barjo]	bairro / (noun)	[b'ajɾu]	district
iii	nuestro / (poss.pron.)	['nwestro]	Nosso / (poss.pron.)	[n'ɔsu]	our
iv	Pueblo / (noun)	[pweβlo]	Povo / (noun)	[p'ovu]	people
v	siglos / (noun plural)	['siɣloz]	Século / (noun plural)	[s'ɛkuluz]	century
vi	hace / (verb)	[a'θe]	Fazer	[faz'er]	from verb "to do"
vii	habria / (verb)	[a'βria]	havia / tinha (verb)	[a'via] / ['ʧiɲa]	from verb "to have"
viii	el / (art.)	['el]	o / (art.)	[ɔ]	the
ix	búsqueda / (verb)	[b'uskeda]	Busca /busque	[b'uskə]	from verb "to seek"
x	asi / (adv. conj.)	[as'i]	assim (adv. conj.)	[a'si ¦̃]	therefore
xi	decirlo / (verb)	[de' θir'lo]	Dizer / (verb) + lhe (pron.)	[diz'er λi]	from verb "to tell"
xii	hay / (verb)	['ay]	haja / (verb)	['aja]	From verb "to have"
xiii	conecimientos / (noun)	[konoθi'mjen̪to]	conhecimentos	[koɲesi'mẽtu]	knowledge
xiv	han / (verb)	['an]	Vão	[v'ãw]	From verb "to go"

As seen from Table 3, though most words are cognates, the phonetic differences between Portuguese and its Spanish counterpart are discernible. If we examine the following examples i) Spanish preposition *del / [d'el] vs. do / [du]* Portuguese or yet ii) the article *el/['el] vs. o/[ɔ]* or iii) the possessive pronoun *['nwestro]* vs. [n'ɔsu], surely for these cases the Portuguese speaker needs to have some Spanish skills to understand what is being uttered for various reasons: a) though both *[d'el]* and *[du]* start with a plosive alveolar consonant "d" sound, the former is followed by a mid-front "e" then by a lateral alveolar sound "l" whereas the latter ends with a high back "u" vowel sound. Also, if we look at another example *['el]* and *[ɔ,]* we notice that whereas the first case starts with a mid "e" vowel and ends with a "l" sound, its Portuguese counterpart is determined by a single low vowel sound "ɔ." Furthermore, the example *['nwestro]* and [n'ɔsu] are only similar as far as the consonant nasal alveolar sound "n," and to a certain extent by the fricative alveolar consonant "s" sound, however the remaining sounds do not apply. In fact the ending of Spanish word with "o," a mid back sound, can be a challenge for Portuguese speakers who are used to replacing words ending in "o" with a high back vowel "u" sound, as noted in the first, and now on this example [n'ɔsu]. This extends to [pweβlo] vs. [p'ovu], and ['barjo] vs. [b'ajɾu].

Nevertheless, besides the problem already pointed out, the examples [pweβlo] vs. [p'ovu] show other

significant impasses. The first "p" sound from [pweβlo] is a plosive bilabial whereas "p" from [pʹovu] is an ejective bilabial, that is to say, one is pulmonic and the other is not. Furthermore, the combination of a consonant "p," "w" and a vowel "e" (pwe) together create a sound which is far more unusual in the way its Portuguese counterpart starts off. To make things even worse, the last syllable in both examples is also different. On the one hand, the Spanish example is created with a bilabial fricative (β), a lateral alveolar (l) and a close-mid vowel "o" whereas on the other hand, the Portuguese equivalent has a simple syllable (vu) which is also a labiodental fricative but this time with a close back vowel "u." While some similarities might at first suggest ease in terms of Spanish and Portuguese speakers understanding each other, in real life it is not that simple. Thus an example like the one latterly shown, can cause lots of frustration, especially when the main objective of the learner is not to learn the language but rather the subject matter.

In this regard, Bailey *et al*. (2008) explain that in many classrooms around the world where students and teachers do not fully share a common language for classroom instruction, a double bind can develop. For students, according to the scholars, the language of the classroom can be seen as opaque; instead of providing and being an accessible medium through which to work with new academic content, the language itself can introduce a formidable barrier. The scholars go further by saying that for the teacher, on the other hand, the language of instruction can be seen as a relatively transparent medium through which teaching is done. So the "double bind" means that students have to learn the language at the same time as they are trying to learn the content, while teachers try to teach the content while they are actually de facto teaching the language (Bailey *et al*., 2008). It is worth stressing in the context of this study that only those students who have acquired some Spanish skills might feel comfortable in the classroom. Those who are not skilled will often be left puzzled.

Interestingly enough, things develop into a more complex state when we explore the Spanish verb represented by [ʹay] sounds vs. the Portuguese [ʹaja] (study Table 2 above and Appendix 2 to see the context in which the word appears). Both start with a low front vowel finishing with "y" for the former and a low front "a" for the latter. Strikingly, in the Portuguese word sounds there is a "j" which is a central palatal forming the syllable "ja," making it stronger in terms of pronunciation compared to a front close vowel sound "y." In addition, the Spanish lexical "han" *[ʹan]* can also pose a problem to Portuguese speakers when compared to its Portuguese counterpart [vʹãw]. This occurs in spite of sharing a commonality, both being nasalised consonant sounds represented by "n" and "˜" on, respectively. One of the biggest differences in the tone of voice lies in the manner in which the sounds start and end, in this case, with the low frontal "a" vowel for the former and a fricative labio-dental "v" for the latter, and with a nasal alveolar consonant "n" and a central bilabial consonant "w" respectively.

Even for those examples, though they should have been easier in the first place, they end up being a complex issue as in the case of [asʹi] vs. [aʹsi ˛˜]. The Spanish sound could easily be confused with "a si" meaning "to you" in Portuguese. Besides, the lack of a nasalised sound at the end of the word in the Spanish version makes understanding more difficult. This of course validates Cyparsade *et al.*'s (2015) argument that "*some learners* are faced with two barriers in their learning process, the content and the *Spanish* language" (p. 407, my emphasis). Cyparsade *et al.*'s (2015) argument unmistakably stresses the challenge which students have to face in these types of learning environments whereby they have to divide their attention between "subject matter" and "language issues." Either way, the student loses due to lack of enough competence to address both issues as the following excerpts from a student demonstrate:

"*Os professores cubanos falam muito rápido que a pessoa quase não entende nada. Isso nos dificulta fazer apontamentos*." / "Cuban lecturers speak too fast. One does not understand much. This makes

the whole process of taking notes almost impossible."

Thus far, these examples reveal differences in pronunciation outweigh the similarities, hence validating students' perception of attributing pronunciation as a major barrier in communication between lecturers and learners in the classroom. In this respect, Bateman (2017) declares that though consonants may cause few difficulties for communication between Spanish and Portuguese speakers, vowels show a high degree of complexity. Consequently there is potential for interference in the communication process and of course in the teaching-learning activity. Furthermore, the results imply that instead of students focusing on a central point, which is learning the subject matter, they end up spending a quality amount of time and energy on dealing with language problems. This argument was earlier corroborated by Bailey *et al.* (2008). Drawing from these scholars again, it is imperative to articulate, "in order to participate in classroom life, students must have not only a working understanding of the dominant language used in the schools, but also how to use it so that they can participate in instruction" (Bailey *et al.*, 2008, p. 610).   This is to prevent poor teaching-learning outcomes caused, for instance, by constraint in learning, understanding, and concentration, decreased information retrieval and decreased motivation, unbalanced course components, and a sense of exclusion.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Though, generally speaking, the research questions and the objectives were answered through the scope of the study, the possibility of probing a larger sample of participants and increasing research questions as well the number of questions in the questionnaires, should not be discarded. This might shed a different light on the study. For the latter case, for example, questions such as "How lecturers could help students to better understand the lessons" could be helpful in finding ways to lessen language barriers in the classroom. Thus, for those who would like to do further research on the matter discussed, I suggest that they take into account these points presented.

Recommendations

This study has attempted to contribute to the body of literature on language barriers in the Angolan teaching context. It has created awareness around the selection process of teaching staff due to various challenges which students encounter in the classroom. Overall, the study served to inform educators, members of the Angolan Ministry of Higher Education and the public at large, about the challenges which the education system faces. This is occurring at a time that the narrative of developing quality education in the country is steadily gaining room in the political context. Thus, considering the issues identified in the results, it is recommended that restricted language measures should be employed when hiring foreign lecturers who are not proficient in Portuguese. This is similar to what is applied to Angolan students who study in Cuban universities and elsewhere in the world, whereby foreign students have to go through a linguistic competence test or do a language course. Portuguese language training should be provided to Spanish lecturers for at least one year prior to the commencement of lecturing. Finally, to once again call attention to Bailey *et al.*'s (2008) viewpoint, it is imperative to say that in order for students to participate in classroom life, they must have not only a sound understanding of the language used in the schools, but also know how to use it so that they can participate in instruction.

Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to investigate language barriers which are present in the classroom of Spanish speaking lecturers and Portuguese speaking students. The results obtained revealed that language

barriers are prominent in the classroom. This was visibly noted through analysing the results of the questionnaires which showed that students understand between 50% to 70% of the lecture content when the lecturers interact with them. In the same way, the findings showed that the lecturer(s) had to explain concepts at least two to three times in order for students to understand the subject matter taught in class. Furthermore, pronunciation issues were considered as the major contributor toward language barriers. Thus the paper revealed that in order to lessen the barriers, students used various strategies; from asking classmates to explain the lectures to them, to recording the lecturer and thereafter listening to the material.

Acknowledgments

References

Anuário de Estatístico do Ensino Superior 2016. (2016). Edições Ministério do Ensino Superior de Angola.

Azevedo, M.M. (1978). Identifying Spanish interference in the speech of learners of Portuguese. *Modern Journal, 62*(1/2), 18–23.

Bailey, F., Barkett, B., & Freeman, D. (2008). The mediating role of language in teaching and learning: A classroom perspective. In B. Spolsky & F.M. Hult (Eds.), *The handbook of educational linguistics* (pp. 606–625). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Bullock, A. (1975). *A Language for life*. London: HMSO.

Cyparsade, M., Auckloo, P., Belath, I., Dookhee, H., & Hurreeram, N. (2015). Beating the language barrier in science education: In-service educators' coping with slow learners in Mauritius. *Science Education International, 24*(4), 402–415.

Dutã, N. (2015). From theory to practice: The barriers to efficient communication in teacher-student relationship. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, *187*, 625–630.

Gasperini, L. (2000). The Cuban education system: Lessons and dilemmas. *Education Reform and Management Publication Series*, *1*(5), 1–38.

Hallberg, D. (2010). Sociocultural and cognitivist perspectives on language and communication barriers in learning. *International Journal of Behavioral, Cognitive, Educational and Psychological Sciences, 2*(2), 111–120.

Harzing, A., & Feely, A. (2007). The language barrier and its implications for HQ-subsidiary relationships. *Cross-cultural Management: An International Journal, 15*(1), 49–61.

Hatzky, C. (2008). "Os Bons Colonizadores": Cuba's educational mission in Angola, 1976–1991. *Safundi: Journal of South African and American Studies*, *9*(1), 53–68.

Hatzky, C. (2012). Cuba's educational mission in Africa: Example of Angola. In A. Hickling-Hudson, J. Corona González & R. Preston (Eds.), *The Capacity to Share* (pp.141–159). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henderson, J., & Wellington, J. (1998). Lowering the language barrier in learning and teaching science. *School Science Review*, *79*(288), 35–46.

Huff, L., & Christensen, L.L. (2018). The role of language and communication in the education of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. *A ALTELLA BRIEF, 7.*

Kocaman, O. (2016). Communication barriers that junior and senior ELT students experience in the process of learning a foreign language. *Abant Izzel Baysal Universitesi Egitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, *16*(4), 1779–1794.

Lipsky, J.M. (2018). Dialects of Spanish and Portuguese. In C. Boberg, J.Nerbonne & D.Watt (Eds.),

Handbook of Dialectology (pp. 498–509). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Lunenburg, F.C. (2010). Communication: The process, barriers, and improving effectiveness. *Schooling*, *1*(1), 1–11.

Mudaly, V., & Singh, K. (2018). Language: A barrier when teaching and learning business studies. *International Journal of Science and Research*, *74* (9/1), 56–71.

Osakwe, R.N. (2009). Dimensions of communication as predictors of effective classroom interaction. *Studies on Home and Community Science*, *3* (1), 57–61.

Owen-Smith, M. (2010). The Language Challenge in the Classroom: a serious shift in thinking and action is needed. *Focus*, *56*, 31–37.

Ozmen, F., Akuzum, C., Zincirli, M., & Selcuk, G. (2016). The communication barriers between teachers and parents in primary schools. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, *66*, 27–46.

Smith, C. (2015). The seven barriers of communication. Retrieved from https://guides.co/g/the-seven-barriers-of-communication/37298

Soares, C. (2013). Teaching Portuguese pronunciation to Spanish speakers. *Revista Multidisciplinar Académica Vozes dos Vales – UFVJM-MG-Brasil*, *4*(II), 1–21.

Ulsh, J.L. (1971). *From Spanish to Portuguese*. Washington, DC: Foreign Service Institute.

APPENDIX

Extracts from participant observations

	Term / expression used in the classroom by the lecturer	Spanish word identified as a potential language barrier in the sentence
(i)	"Realizei alguns câmbios, por favor revisar"	Realizei, câmbios
(ii)	"Por exemplo jovem del barrio qualquier que queira....."	del, barrio
(iii)	"Nuestro pueblo de la comuna de Bibala"	"Nuestro," "pueblo"
(iv)	"Três ou más siglos...."	Siglos
(v)	"Continiendo una coisa que nos hace pensar mucho porque habria sido...."	Hace, habria
(vi)	"Por lo que é necessaria para el professor la búsqueda um libro que explique o problema."	el, búsqueda
(vii)	"Por asi decirlo, pero que inicialmente tenía outro plano para mejorar el trabajo no laboratório."	Asi, decirlo
(viii)	"Siervieron como bueno exemplo de uno estudante exemplar."	Siervieron
(ix)	"Hay consenso entre los conecimientos escolares e no-escolar."	Hay
(x)	"Pero que nunca han alcanzado la categoria ou reputacion de uno estudante sério se no investigar más."	Han