

Portuguese as a Minority Language

Attitudes of Undergraduate Students Studying Portuguese Literature

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Language acquisition cannot be separated from the social arena in which it takes place. (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 227)

Introduction

Second language acquisition theorists have yet to conceptualize an understanding of undergraduate students' attitudes and experiences when studying the two different versions of Portuguese language most often encountered in experimental literature, European Portuguese (EP) and Brazilian Portuguese (BP). The differences between EP and BP raise some interesting issues that are well worth considering through undergraduate university students' perceptions and attitudes.

Instructors of undergraduate courses in Portuguese literature suggest that in terms of curriculum design, curriculum delivery, and attitudes of students these differences can be quite extreme, especially when one compares EP and BP with the Spanish language. Students enrolled in undergraduate Portuguese courses are often taking or have taken Spanish language courses, making possible a comparison between both programs and languages. The purpose of this study is to understand the existing discrepancies in the Portuguese language and the resulting attitudes of students when faced with these differences.

Using data collected with L1 English/L2 Portuguese students at a Canadian university, this article will show how a strong preference for one variety of the Portuguese language exists when studying the arts but how a different preference emerges when analyzing which language

variety is considered more standard by the L2 Portuguese learners.

It is important to note that L1 refers to a student's mother tongue and L2 is the second language that a student acquires. Herein all references to L2 are to the Portuguese language course being taught at the university level.

The primary research question for this study was:

- ◆ What are the attitudes and course experiences found among L2 Portuguese undergraduate students with respect to EP versus BP?

Background:

Foreign Language Acquisition

Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggest that it is around the age of 10 that second language learners are most receptive and display a friendlier attitude towards foreign language acquisition, whereas learning an L2 and the culture associated with that L2 language later in life is more difficult because the L2 learner tends to link cultural and linguistic differences with the norm that the student is used to in his or her own L1. Moreover, it has also been argued in experimental literature that the attitudes, motivation, and classroom experiences of an L2 learner will result in the student's success or failure in a foreign language course. Thus the learner's attitudes cannot be separated from what goes on in the classroom.

Most of the students registered in L2 Portuguese undergraduate university courses in Canada are of Portuguese descent. They are often heritage language speakers who spoke only Portuguese at home with their grandparents and parents until they started school at the age of four. They therefore arrive in undergraduate university courses with preconceived no-

tions of the way the target language is written or spoken—that is either EP or BP—as well as the cultural aspects associated to each of these two varieties of Portuguese.

Most of the students who chose such courses select them as an elective. Some students who enroll want to catch up on the Portuguese language missed over the years while others arrive in a first year Portuguese course for an easy credit. Contrary to what Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggest is the ideal age to start learning a second language, the participants in this study are much older and arrive in L2 Portuguese university courses with stronger attitudes and expectations about which variety of Portuguese they should learn in an undergraduate Portuguese university course. For instance, when referring to EP and BP, some students have argued that one version is a language and the other a dialect. This raises the question whether we are in the presence of one language with two dialects or is it actually two languages?

These L2 adult Portuguese learners are not alone in pointing out some differences between EP and BP. For instance, back in 1994, Kato and Raposo stated:

European and Brazilian Portuguese have long been considered as two dialects of the same language, with variable aspects in their lexicon, phonology and grammar.

There are, in fact, remarkable differences between EP and BP. One difference concerns the placement of words within common phrases. Some examples of these dialectal variations follow:

- (1) a. Chamo-**me** Maria. (EP)
(My name is Maria).
- b. **Me** chamo Maria. (BP)
(My name is Maria).

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- (2) a. Eu vi **ele** no ano passado.
(BP-spoken)
(I saw him last year).
- b. Eu **o** vi no ano passado.
(BP-written)
(I saw him last year).
- c. Eu vi-**o** no ano passado.
(EP-spoken and written)
(I saw him last year).

For purposes of this study I chose to narrow the research to focus on the attitudes and classroom experiences of the L2 Portuguese undergraduate learner, drawing on the theoretical considerations described by Dörnyei (2009) in his book *The L2 Motivational Self-System*. I felt that after looking at a vast number of other influential approaches, including Gardner (1985), Dörnyei's 2009 work seemed to be the most promising for investigating L2 learning. He offers an additional component of language learning not previously addressed that made it especially appropriate for this study.

Equally significant is that in the area of experimental literature not much has been said about the acquisition of minority languages at the university level. Most studies have focused on the L2 learner at a much younger age—Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981), Krashen (1982), Cummins (1984), Odlin (1989), Skehan (1989), Genesee (1995), Lightbown and Spada (1999), Snow (1992), and VanPatten and Sanz (1995), among others. Although Dörnyei's work (2009) does not address any specific age group of learners, it seems to provide a long overdue break-through in the conceptualized theory of L2 acquisition.

While previously Dörnyei proposed a configuration of an L2 theory that synthesized several of the influential constructs in the field of language acquisition, the novelty of his current and more updated model in *The L2 Motivational Self System* is that it is constructed under the view that there are now three components to be taken into consideration in any L2 classroom and not just two as seen previously in Dörnyei (2005) and other research.

According to Dörnyei these three constituents are the "Ideal L2 Self," the "Ought L2 Self," and the "L2 Learning Experience" (Dörnyei, 2009). Such a conceptual ladder is what most research has been focusing on over the last two decades and thus is what I feel constitutes an important structure worth utilizing in analyzing an L2 Portuguese course.

First, the "Ideal L2 Self" is an intrinsically generated self-concept of a foreign

language learner. It is an internalized ideal concept that the L2 learner has of himself or herself. Second, the "Ought L2 Self" is a more extrinsically motivated self-attainment that an individual possesses when trying to follow the norms of what he or she believes is expected in a L2 language situation. Third, the novelty in Dörnyei's reconfiguration of L2 learning (2009) suggests that the *environment* in the L2 classroom plays an important role in the learning outcomes.

The Language Situation in L2 Portuguese Courses

EP and BP are two somewhat heterogeneous varieties of the Portuguese language that need to be looked at from a socio-historic dimension. BP has a long history of being spoken only and not written by the marginalized illiterate minorities at the time when Brazil was under Portuguese governance. These minority groups were for the most part slaves from the African continent who came with their own languages and gradually developed a Creole language as their native languages mixed with Portuguese. One result of this mixture of language was BP. In contrast, EP was the variety of Portuguese used almost exclusively as the written language, and thus it was seen as the standard.

William Labov (1972), one of the pioneers in the theories of language change, argues that any linguistic phenomenon must be considered from a socio-historic perspective, especially when applied to the linguistic situation between Brazil

and Portugal (Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog, 1968). Thus, EP and BP are seen as two relatively heterogeneous varieties of the Portuguese language. This raises the following questions in relation to the current study: Which language variety is being learned in our L2 Portuguese undergraduate courses? Are the students seeing one variety of Portuguese as being more linguistically educated than other? Which one of the two is more vernacular?

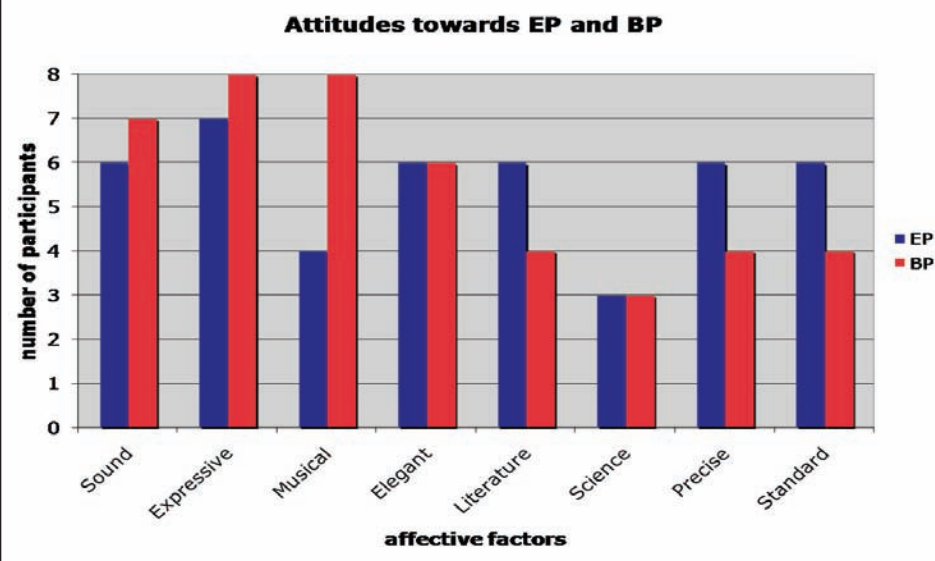
Methodology

The participants in this study were all undergraduate students who had each taken an L2 first-year Portuguese undergraduate course. Their languages were L1 English and L2 Portuguese. In this context the intent of the study was to consider:

1. The attitudes that the L2 Portuguese learners have regarding the two main varieties of Portuguese (EP and BP) (see Figure 1).
2. How the classroom experience has an impact on the attitudes of L2 Portuguese learners (see Figure 2).

The participants were each asked to comment on eight affective factors of the two versions of Portuguese: sound, expressiveness, musicality, elegance, literature, science, preciseness, and standardization. Dörnyei (2009) states that "affect"—the way by which research literature refers to emotions—has been a somewhat neglected topic in applied linguistics despite the fact that second language learning can be an emotionally taxing experience (p.219).

Figure 1



It is my view that one cannot separate the concepts of attitudes and motivation any more than one can separate classroom experiences from motivation. Herein lies my justification in applying Dörnyei's most recent three-component theoretical model to this study.

The affective factors tested in this study (sound, expressiveness, musicality, elegance, literature, science, preciseness, standardization) were selected based on what L2 students traditionally identify as the distinguishing characteristics of a particular language. Dörnyei (2009) is interested in how affective traits may play a role in the learning of an L2, just as I am quite interested in understanding how affective traits effect the students' attitudes during the L2 learning process.

Results:

Data Analysis and Discussion

According to the data collected (see Figures 1 and 2), BP is favored in terms of how it sounds, by its expressiveness and its musicality. This is not surprising since BP has long been known as a very pleasant language to listen to. The results presented here confirm the attitude that some L2 Portuguese learners display when first enrolled in a first year L2 Portuguese course, suggesting that BP is a fun variety of Portuguese to learn.

Such results should not come as a surprise to any individual who has basic knowledge of the Brazilian variety of the Portuguese language. BP is often referred to as being very romantic in comparison to its European counterpart. In terms of the way EP and BP sound, or how expressive they both are, the results were not particularly different. With respect to musicality the results for EP (4 on a scale of 8) are considered low.

The participants found both EP and BP to be equally elegant in language structure, but EP was favored for the writing of important literary works and for its traditional function in literature. As a literary language BP was reported as not being as precise or as standard as EP. Moreover, both BP and EP are seen by these respondents as not being highly appropriate for scientific fields as they both scored very low (4).

These data suggest that the L2 Portuguese students feel a social pressure to choose EP as the language variety more common and thus more important in literature works because it is perceived to be both more precise and more standard.

These results are not surprising, considering the linguistic attitudes experienced between Portugal and Brazil over four centuries of historic interaction between the two countries. Also, the students surveyed are English speakers and feel the pressures of a globalized world. They do not place great importance in the Portuguese language for writing in scientific fields, resulting in much lower scores in that area for both EP and BP.

Dörnyei (2009) sees the classroom experience as an important factor in the learning process and a key factor in developing increased motivation in L2 learning. Dörnyei's three-factor concept, stated as a "third possible attractor basin to [the] motivational landscape" (p. 218), further explicates the L2 learning experience, a topic that has been debated over recent years, especially in the education field.

One important aspect to consider, as Dörnyei suggests, is that the teacher, the curriculum, the student peers, and the overall experience each play a critical role in the attitudes and motivation of the L2 learner. I believe this is true regardless of the students' age. Most experimental literature in this area tends to focus on younger learners, but I suggest that these are really important factors in any L2 classroom regardless of a student's age. The students need to be actively involved in the learning process if we want them to be successful. At all age levels the information and materials presented in class shape a student's perceptions and attitudes towards the targeted L2 language and its culture.

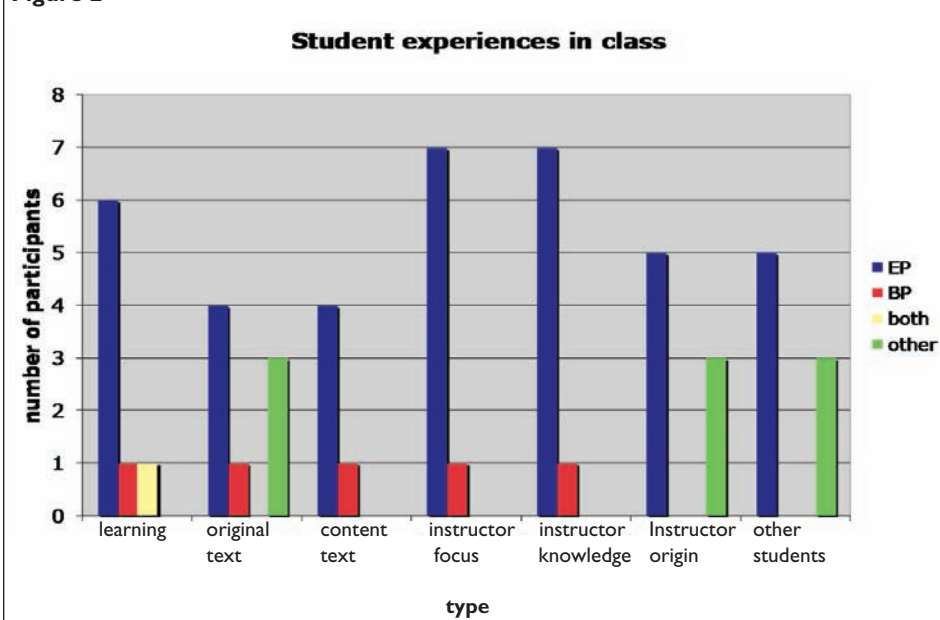
As displayed in Figure 2, the respondents in this study clearly reveal that there is a strong presence of EP in the classes they are taking. The professors are teaching mostly EP, the course materials are coming for the most part from Portugal, and their content is consistently focused on EP. Not surprisingly, the instructors' knowledge is mostly focused on EP as Portugal tends to be their country of origin. The study participants also suggest that the other students in their classes would prefer to learn EP rather than BP if given a choice. Thus, one may conclude that BP is receiving minimal importance in the classrooms of our study participants.

Dörnyei (2009) suggests the existence of one of the three suggested components is sufficient to influence and guide an L2 learner. In this study, the working knowledge of the course instructors who come from EP backgrounds serves as a clear indicator of where these students are headed with respect to one variety of Portuguese over the other.

Conclusion and Future Research Possibilities

As expressed in the attitudes and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation revealed among L2 Portuguese learners with respect to EP and BP, BP receives great importance in the arts based on the way it sounds, its expressiveness, and how musical it is when compared with EP. On the other hand, EP is clearly the favored language for writing and it is also considered to be more precise and standard.

Figure 2



Not surprisingly, then, these results appear to be directly linked to the “actual experience of being engaged in the learning process” (Dörnyei, 2009, p.218) with EP being experienced more directly by the participants in these university classroom settings.

Worth looking at in future studies would be an examination of the attitudes and motivation as well as classroom experiences in L2 Portuguese courses in the United States as well as Canada in order to develop a comparative study of the results between language learners in these two countries.

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