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Aprender com / Learning with: Collaborative Learning in a Portuguese Heritage Language Community

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Abstract: Language attrition, the switch to a dominant language and the loss of proficiency in the original language, are problems confronted by some families in the United States who speak heritage languages at home. This article is about the conviviality and outcomes of a Portuguese-speaking community. The main goal of the project was to create an environment where ideas and techniques are negotiated to help children and parents maintain language and culture. Drawing on Vygotsky's scaffolded participation, the article also describes how children, parents, a college student, and a researcher co-construct language learning with song and other playful activities to foster a sense of community. The analysis focuses on how the engaged-involvement of families connecting through memories and emotional relation with the language and the culture represents a powerful tool in this group context. It is also about how the project uses multimodalities and multiliteracies as parts of sociolinguistic and sociocultural construction in a shared space. In sum, this paper proposes to present a combination of practical experiences and theory-informed perspectives in heritage language community building.

Keywords: Brazilian, Portuguese, heritage, language, bilingualism, Vygotsky, play

Introduction

It is important to acknowledge that the awareness of language rights and the effort to reframe old myths around heritage language studies has developed only recently. Educators around the world now recognize the importance of heritage languages (Valdés, 2001). Heritage language (HL) is a new field as an entity alongside bilingualism, and it deserves more research and specific pedagogical approaches in school systems. Cummins (2005) maintains that, in the United States, the term "heritage languages" has only recently started to be used. In Canada, in contrast, the term took root in 1977 when it was first used by the Ontario Heritage Languages Programs; however, it was not until the late 1990s that U.S. scholars applied the term in the context of language policy.

Portuguese speakers, or Lusophones, come from at least eight different countries (and its diasporas) with a variety of historical, linguistic, cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds. In Massachusetts, most of the Lusophone immigrants are from Brazil, Cape Verde, and Portugal, resulting in the third largest linguistic group in the state according to the American Community Survey (Census). Therefore, the relevance of this study is reflected in the fact that Massachusetts has a significant number of Portuguese-speaking immigrants or first- and second-generation individuals born from Lusophone families. U.S. Census data from *the 2012 American Survey* estimates that a total of 173,705 Massachusetts residents speak Portuguese at home. The state has a total population of almost

6.8 million according to U.S. Census Data (2015). Thus, approximately 2.5% of the population in Massachusetts speaks Portuguese. The Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers, a community group based in Cambridge, estimates a larger number of Portuguese heritage language (HL) speakers: 800,000 to 1 million people including both documented and undocumented residents.

The work of helping families keep their culture alive is the main focus of this project, but it leads the group to other interesting issues, such as identity construction, community support, and cultural exchange. The project started in September of 2013, when a group of parents, a college student majoring in Brazilian Studies and Education, and I started a Lusophone heritage community that meets twice a month. Lately, we have also gathered together for birthday celebrations, play dates, and other events.

A central idea of this group is teaching and learning through enjoyable activities which I place under the umbrella term “play.” The use of the term “play” in our Lusophone group is one of the strongest uniting factors of its members and includes ludic activities such as songs, poetry, preparing and eating traditional food (rice, black beans, etc.). The group was further reinforced by the collective wish of both keeping the Brazilian identity and forming our multicultural identity. Families from Brazil are the majority in this group, although it is open to other Lusophone community members. The collective activities, the negotiation of decisions, the use of multiliteracies (books, iPads, camera, audio, and video) and multimodalities (aural, gestural, visual, linguistic, and spatial modes) led me to the following research question: How does play contribute to heritage language learning and community building in a Lusophone community?

While looking for answers, I recognize my own presence as participant and my interactions through social relationships in this context. It is also crucial to be aware of an analysis considering the differences and intersections among second language acquisition, bilingualism, and HL. These concepts are related to different linguistic skills of the members of this group.

Literature about Heritage Language

The debate around the issues in HL communities is still ongoing. It is probably necessary to focus more on HL language researchers and cross-language transfer. Many areas of study in the social sciences field can contribute to fill a gap in the study of heritage language literature. HL is normally the first language used at home, but it occurs, in many cases, that the acquisition of the family language is not complete due to the switch to a dominant one. Each HL speaker has a unique home background and linguistic exposition, so it is not the case of accepting one fixed definition. Therefore, an HL learner can be described as someone who has many different levels of contact with a

non-dominant language normally in a non-formal educational setting (Webb & Miller, 2000; Polinsky, 2008). One of the most cited definitions, introduced by Valdés (2001), considers an HL speaker as someone raised in a non-English home who speaks or just understands the HL and, in some degree, is bilingual in English and the HL. However, Valdés' definition, which considers bilingualism in both languages, seems to leave out HL individuals who do not have linguistic proficiency in the HL, but identify themselves as HL speakers or learners and have cultural knowledge related to their family language (Duarte, 2014, p. 37). In my opinion, Sara Beaudrie and Marta Fairclough offer a definition that seems the most comprehensive on HL (learners or speakers) by including various individual situations more recently considered for educational and research purposes. They say that the term HL embraces individuals who have a personal or familiar connection to a non-majority language. This definition also takes into account these individuals' connections to the language and its status relative to the dominant language (2012, p. 7). Emotion and cognition are inseparable in second language acquisition settings and in HLL settings as well. Swain (2013) highlights the importance of considering more carefully the significance of emotion in language acquisition (p. 205).

The emotional aspect is certainly not ignored in this community. A proof of it is that our HL community has been established almost as a live entity that nourishes itself from the exchange of knowledge among all participants: exchange of kindness, social interaction, translanguaging or practicing their bilingual skills through inter-changeable language communication; and appreciation for the culture and the language that forms our identity. In this scenario, Vygotsky's (1978) theories are important. His conception that learning should be matched with the child's development and combined with social interaction in a community while the children practice or learn is the foundation in our small Lusophone community. Regarding the idea of appropriation of meanings and culture, Vygotsky says that

play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102)

Other reflections in the matter of the cognitive approach in bilingualism are also relevant for this project, such as those by the psycholinguist François Grosjean (2013) who writes of various considerations especially in language acquisition. He comments specifically on how HL speakers are precious ambassadors of the two or more linguistic and cultural groups they belong to, within a nation and across nations.

Morgan and Chodkiewicz (2011), based on their observations in an informal playful bilingual program that has the goal of strengthening Maori and Tongan language in communities of inner Sydney in Australia, highlight the need for adults to be actively involved in the child's language learning. At the same time, this involvement provides the adults with techniques that help to build home practices to support language maintenance. Additionally, this study finds that "playgrounds remain sites where parents and children can connect socially, feel safe, laugh and relax. As safe spaces, playgrounds have an important role to play in strengthening parents' confidence and resolve in language maintenance" (Morgan & Chokiewicz, 2011, p. 88).

Ludic activities to develop Heritage Language practices

In the process of helping families feel comfortable in developing techniques that help in language and culture maintenance, we use Vygotsky's theories. Here, I return to the research question about how play contributes to heritage language learning and community building. One key answer is the element that unites all participants: playing. The resulting interpretations from Vygotsky's (1978) theories about dynamics within a community language environment are also related to who has more or less Portuguese language knowledge. In the group, we have native speakers; we also have first and second generation speakers; American-born parents raised in Brazil, an American-born father raised in a Portuguese family; and a British-born mother, whose parents are Brazilians.

In favor of the importance of the adults as models bringing their memories, Vygotsky (1978) states:

Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in this environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement. (90)

Helping a community to revitalize heritage language and cultural aspects is also a task realized in different and richer ways by taking into consideration the concept of multiliteracy pedagogies, initially pictured by New London Group (1996). Meaningful designs can be created combining words with visual, audio, spatial, and gestural modes. Web-based resources, for example, are nowadays a relevant medium for current generations of community-based projects. Kress (2008) says that "socially, medium is the result of semiotic, sociocultural, and technological practices (cf. film, newspaper, billboard, radio, television, classroom, and so on). From this perspective, the textbook is one more medium and web-based learning resources for students are (becoming) another" (2008, p. 172). Instead of "becoming," Kress can now say that it has already become

another medium. Our community even has a group social network page (on Facebook) as a resource where we exchange messages and store videos with the songs that were sung during the meeting, videos with stories, and videos of ourselves (filmed by group members).

The activities take place in a lounge room of the basement of an all-faith chapel in the northeastern United States. The meetings are every other Saturday. We started the group with an intern assistant, myself, seven child participants and six parents who are present on alternate days (sometimes the fathers, sometimes the mothers); plus two Brazilian grandmothers and one Brazilian grandfather, who come to the group whenever they are visiting their families. The number of families has been steadily growing since our fall 2013 beginning (see description of the participants below).

The first step for forming the group was to invite parents that I knew and that in the past have demonstrated interest in creating a group to benefit their children. The second was to invite a Portuguese-speaking college student to help me with the process of creating a curriculum and facilitating the meetings. The student is a Brazilian-American female majoring in Brazilian Studies and Education. And finally, the last step was to confirm the place to meet (the chapel's basement lounge) through my connection with the colleges in the area where we live.

Initially, the meetings would last two hours in the morning, but recently we have stayed together almost three hours each time. The lounge used by the group is comfortable and in the kitchen we can cook black beans, which are very representative of Brazilian culture. When it is not cold, we play outside to take advantage of the natural light. Despite the varied ages, everybody seems comfortable and willing to keep the children inspired.

The themes of the biweekly meetings are decided in advance at the end of every meeting. Each person commits to bring some special material or artifact (books, toys, color pens, and artifacts in general) to be part of the next meeting. Everyone also brings food to share.

From that common space, through activities that include playing with words, singing, and working in the creation of different artifacts, the participants are able to understand the importance of multilingualism and intercultural relations. The younger participants can also be led to understand the significance of being bilingual in their everyday lives.

The community group started in September 2013 and still meets according to the school calendar. The twelve meetings and four interviews mentioned here are from September 7, 2013, to February 15, 2014. Each meeting is about two hours in length plus about a total of 90 minutes of interviews, totaling around 25 hours of recordings. Most of the interviews were transcribed by Jessica (research assistant) and myself and parts of them are translated into English.

Participants (pseudonyms):

1. Rosa is Brazilian, mother of Isadora (5 years old) and Davi (3 years old).
2. Eleonora is American, raised in Brazil. Her children are Cléo (5 years old), Frederica (3 years old) and Happy Baby (18 months).
3. Fernanda is Brazilian. Her daughter is Carla (10 years old).
4. Renata was born in England to Brazilian parents. Her daughter is Sara (3 years old).
5. Author is the researcher-participant, Brazilian.
6. Jessica is the research assistant who was born in the United States to Brazilian parents.

Research Methods and Data Analysis

In terms of research, the methodology used for this project was ethnography due to the naturalist purpose of creating a community based in co-participation and intergenerational and social interaction. This approach was taken in order to understand how to help children and families to communicate and to maintain a familial language and culture. Ethnography is the most suitable methodology for this type of study where I am researcher-participant, observing, revisiting my own identity, sharing experiences with others, and finally writing about these experiences. It has been critical to see how the community evolves and how languages and cultural resources are introduced, used, negotiated, leveraged, and shared. Conducting an ethnographic study helps us to see how all the members of the community are transformed. The whole group expects longevity for this community and understands the importance of having observations, impressions, stories, and, registered data in addition to continuing to learn.

The process employed for data collection and analysis in this ethnographic study includes researcher-participant practices, observations, field notes, interviews, transcriptions of audio material, and reflections among the researcher-participant, the assistant-participant and the parent-participants. The data focused particularly on the language applied to parents and children related to playing and singing. Once the transcriptions (from audio material) were made, they were compiled with the field notes and the material was coded. After receiving a code, it was compared and categorized. Finally, I selected the ones corresponding to the theoretical framework. The next step was writing analytical and integrative memos that helped me to bring the data into conversations enabling me to reflect and answer my research question (Horvat, 2013). In the following section, I highlight some of this material presented with concrete examples of activities, interactions, and dialogues from the community meetings and interviews.

Our accomplishments so far

The community members are taking ownership of initiatives for the Lusophone HL group. The community has developed the sense of ownership of the project and Jessica and I are no longer the only ones bringing suggestions of activities for the group or carrying out the role of “teachers.” One example of this was when Eleonora (mom of three children in the group) started translating *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle with all the children around her. In that meeting we made an activity in which the children designed butterflies using fruits (then the children could eat them). She brought the copy of the book from home after we had discussed in the previous meeting with the parents, what could be done for the following meeting. She was telling the story, translating it from English into Portuguese while having all the children around her:

A lagarta construiu uma casinha que se chama...casulo né? Ela ficou lá dentro mais de duas semanas... depois ela fez uma mordidinha no casulo e se empurrou pra fora e virou uma linda borboleta. [*The caterpillar built a little house that is called... cocoon, isn't it? She stayed inside there for two weeks.... then she gave a little bite in the cocoon and pushed herself out and became a beautiful butterfly*]. (Eleonora's translation in the third meeting)

Nowadays the parents are also responsible for preparing activities for the meetings. This shows that the parents can be the best resource for capturing the necessities of lexicon improvement combined with fun, dynamic movement activities.

The “supermarket song,” for example, was one of Renata's (Sara's mother) suggestions that scaffolded in lots of other interesting participation and interaction with artifacts which are typically items of cultural or historical interest. The families brought “supermarket toys,” Eleonora's family brought *pãezinhos de queijo* (Brazilian-style cheese bread), I brought beans to “sell” in the market while some were cooking. The five-year-old girls, Isadora and Cléo, organized the market, determining where the products should go and how much they should cost. They decided to be the cashiers and the three little ones, the customers. Rosa (Isadora's and Davi's mother) helped them create paper money and helped them to say the price and make change, saying the numbers in Portuguese. This was a very fruitful activity that ended with all of us eating black beans together. And since that day, the black beans are part of the closure of every meetings. Informally, after that we have sometimes called our group *Feijão Amigo* which means something like Dear Friend Beans.

The supermarket activity led us to confirm one more finding: the importance of adult support for helping children with grammatical structures. Verb usage in Portuguese was not consistently brought up during the first semester of the

community, but has been a more constant topic among the parents in our group since that time. As in any natural process of language acquisition, the young children tend to use the third person when talking about themselves, especially considering that in Romance languages there is a different conjugation for each person. In our HL children this process can be noticed at later ages (around five years old) due to the fact that Portuguese is not their dominant language. But, being exposed to language through a stimulating, language-rich environment can help children learn the additional language. The more interactions with adults and the other almost fully bilingual children, the better it is for improving HLs' grammatical skills and for expanding their lexicon. Rosa (Isadora and Davi's mother) says that she is much more careful about using the first person when talking with them. She says, "Now instead of saying *vai colocar os brinquedos no lugar* (you go to put your toys away), I say *eu quero que você coloque os brinquedos no lugar* (I want you to put your toys away), using the first person more often" (Interview with Rosa).

The children noticed that the more they speak in Portuguese, the more appreciation they have for the grammatical intricacies of the language. I noticed some interesting processes in the dialogue that I had with Isadora after the activity. I was curious to learn how much vocabulary they retained. Isadora was able to use complete sentences and not only the word indicating the products, even if she was primarily using the third person singular in most of her answers and not the first person. Here is an extract of this conversation:

Author: O que nós vendemos no supermercado hoje? [what did we sell in the supermarket today?]

Isadora: Feijão, arroz, açúcar.... [beans, rice, sugar]

Cléo: Fruta, pão, bolacha.... [fruit, bread, cookies]

Author: O que mais nós vendemos? [what else did we sell?]

Isadora: Vendeu batata-frita [sell (third person) French fries]

Author (recasting): ah... vendemos batata-frita [ah... we sold French fries]

The children in our community often mix languages and cultures so they feel comfortable translanguaging and "transculturing." Another topic related to language production, also brings with it the social aspect: when using translanguaging, the children feel comfortable in a group. Sometimes our children feel shy because they do not know how to say something in Portuguese, so we ask them to express themselves in English, then we teach them to say the same thing in Portuguese.

According to Hymes (1972), the key to a rational conception of language change is the possibility of describing orderly differentiation in a language serving a community. When a child tries a native-like command of varied structures,

she is not doing it as a matter of multidialectalism or ‘mere’ performance, but as part of unilingual linguistic competence in a language serving a complex community.

Isadora, in fact, seems very comfortable doing translanguaging where English and Portuguese are used in one sentence or parents are speaking in Portuguese and their children are answering in English (the opposite is less common). The participants are also often “transculturating,” which is a way of combining the culture of the country adopted by the parents with the traditions from their family countries. Isadora’s mother, Rosa, said during the interview that at home both children say “shoepato” when they want to say “shoes.” They mix the word shoe in English with the word *sapato* (shoe) in Portuguese. They do the same with towel saying “towalha” (towel and toalha which is towel in Portuguese).

Bilingual children experience their languages and literacies simultaneously and not separately. The two languages are needed together and are a resource to make meaning and to negotiate their identities. The increase of confidence and awareness in translanguaging can be related to being more involved in building one’s identity, knowing that there is a support from their community. As Cummins (2005) states, interdependence across languages is a valuable tool and allows language learners to use their first languages to make sense of second language structures. Shin (2012) adds that many scholars talk about literacy skills transfer between languages, which goes against instructional assumptions that insist on the separation of two languages because that separation does not reflect the linguistic realities of bilingual students (p. 138).

In all the above matters, the parents’ engagement has been a crucial and fundamental element to keeping the group alive. Because of the short duration of our meetings, extending the work of teaching the language and the culture outside our meetings and at home has been helping not only the participants individually, but the HL group as a whole. This big step at home also represents a very important way to help the children recognize and appreciate their “Portuguese speaker” identity.

We can also notice some self-analysis and analysis of the group in some of the answers. I specifically chose Fernanda to start my series of interviews because her daughter (Carla), who was born and raised in the United States, is the oldest child in the group and is bilingual. When we talked about the first “school” experience for Carla, Fernanda’s visage seems to light up. She seemed to enjoy remembering Carla’s academic beginnings in a U.S. daycare.

This story is very funny. She started there (daycare) when she was 21 months, she was almost two years. Before that she only spoke Portuguese. She practically couldn’t say any word, but the teachers would speak in English with her. And her first word was “bigtruck” (all together). There was a truck passing by and I was arriving and I saw her teacher

very happy saying: “Carla said her first word in English: *bigtruck grande*.” She had said *bigtruck* altogether and then the adjective “*grande*” in Portuguese. In this same period they were “potty training” the children. Carla was only able to say “*xixi*” (pee). All the other children started to use the word “*xixi*” and even the teachers would say “let’s go *xixi* now.” (Fernanda during her interview)

The interviews with Renata and Eleonora show that both have been increasing their children’s exposure to Portuguese. Both are also interested in reading academic articles. The strategy of having parents singing the songs with us and repeating them at home has also been valuable because it seems an important step in stimulating the children to not be passive bilinguals.

For example, Sara (age four) has an excellent memory for songs and when she sings, her Brazilian accent is beautifully produced, although she does not fully comprehend Portuguese yet. Her mother, Renata, is an HLL herself (born to Brazilian parents in England). Her parents moved to the United States when she was eight years old and since then she has refused to answer her parents in Portuguese. She says that our group is a great motivation and that she enjoys speaking Portuguese again.

Conclusion

In sum, through games, songs, and traditional food, the whole group has been helping the children learn about and experience Brazilian culture. In trying to find a meaning in this community culture that we are creating together, we reproduce what Vygotsky call *vivencia* (perezhivanie in Russia), a word that exists in Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, and German, but does not have translation in English (Arias, p. 54, 2011). *Vivencia* is a notion that includes the idea of a cognitive dimension but goes further and emphasizes the importance of community and emotional involvement in the learning process. While living this experience of HL movement together, *vivencia* emerges as a great concept for this project’s future because we are creating an affective relation among the group.

The theoretical tools have been important in discussing the findings with regard to ownership, adult support, translanguaging/transculturating, and parent engagement in group maintenance. The aim now is to understand the effective ways to develop and maintain an HL community formed by families who want to keep alive their HL and culture. The creation of a social network and how it is still developing through playful activities and songs is an interesting issue to analyze under the lens of Vygotsky’s theory.

As a group we grew enormously regarding the social aspect of this theory; now we need to move into the linguistic aspect of bilingualism in HL communities. We can do this still using the activities that include playing with words and singing and working in the creation of different artifacts. The participants all see

these as fundamental to multilingualism and intercultural relations. The younger participants can also be led to understand (from an early age) the significance of being bilingual in their everyday lives.

The Portuguese use of the preposition “with” after the verb “to learn” which therefore becomes to “learn with” the instructor, not to learn from s/he (*aprender com*), as the title says, can be connected to the idea of an empowering way of looking at our work as HL communities. We are microcosms of language, culture, and diversity held together by a strong bond.

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