

Guest Editorial: Why Learning Portuguese is Important

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When queried on the status of Portuguese teaching in the United States in 1939, Dr. Ben Charrington noted, “For reasons which are difficult to discover, the Portuguese language has never received adequate attention in this country” (as cited in Massa, 1942, p.467). It is somewhat disquieting that nearly eighty years later we are still facing similar challenges and asking parallel questions. Looking briefly at the history of the subject, more widespread interest in Portuguese began in the 1940s, spurred by Brazil’s allied involvement in World War II (Maddox, 2018), and while early program adoption was somewhat irregular, overall Portuguese has seen relatively steady growth in enrollment over the past thirty years (Milleret, 2012). Despite this, Portuguese remains on the fringes of world language education, representing less than 1% of world language enrollments in higher education institutions in the United States (Looney & Lucin, 2018). This said, there are certainly encouraging trends both home and abroad; for instance, there has been notable expansion in Portuguese language programs in Asia and China in particular (Matos, 2016; Ye, 2017), while K-12 Portuguese language immersion and dual immersion programs have continually grown, with states like Utah leading the way (Leite & Cooke, 2015). As language learners and educators, we are at an interesting crossroads: on the one hand the need for and access to world languages is greater than ever, yet on the other we face threats of shrinking enrollment, competing interests, short-sighted program cuts, and, in extreme cases, xenophobic backlash. In leveraging opportunities and confronting such challenges, it is essential to revisit why we do what we do and to clearly articulate why it is important.

Global possibilities

Focusing on the economic and professional opportunities associated with the language, one can assert Portuguese certainly has its advantages. As an official language in Brazil, Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Equatorial Guinea, East Timor, and in the Special Administrative Region of Macau in China, Portuguese is indeed a global language. It is the sixth most widely spoken language in the world (Pinto, 2011), and, surpassing languages like French, Japanese, and Russian, it represents the fifth most commonly used language on the internet (Soares, 2013). While the industrial clout of Brazil or rich natural resources of Angola are well known, per-

chance less explored are the favorable investment incentives and opportunities in places like the Azores. In fact, Portugal has been lauded as an economic rebound model, bucking the austerity trend, and encouraging growth (Alderman, 2018). And companies are taking notice. Recently a number of international companies like Google have opened tech hubs in Lisbon (Lavinder, 2018).

In terms of job prospects for language educators, many language and Latin American and Iberian studies programs find fluency in Portuguese and knowledge of Luso-Brazilian cultures to be desirable traits in potential candidates. And those with the ability to work in both Spanish and Portuguese are well-positioned. As cited above, growth in K-12 Portuguese immersion and dual immersion programs is also pushing the need for qualified teachers who speak Portuguese. And looking abroad, increased interest in Portuguese in Asia (Matos, 2016; Ye, 2017), Africa (Nhaga, 2018), and even in Spanish speaking countries in Latin America (Ferreira & Azevedo, 2016) present diverse opportunities for Portuguese language educators.

Scholarship and grant opportunities

Fortunately, for Portuguese language students there are a number of grants and scholarships available. Portuguese has been deemed a critical language, strategically important for the country and yet one where the supply of proficient speakers often falls short of the demand (Waldvogel & de Souza, 2018). As such, the U.S. Department of State offers Critical Language Scholarships for intensive language study in Portuguese-speaking countries. Similarly, the Boren Awards of the National Security Education Program also offer scholarships for Portuguese language study in Mozambique through its African Flagship Languages Initiative. Perhaps one of the best known programs is the Fulbright Program, which currently awards thirty-four open research grants in Portuguese-speaking countries (Brazil, Mozambique, and Portugal) and 123 English Teaching Assistant grants in lusophone countries (Brazil, East Timor, and Portugal) and regions (Macau). Additionally, the Luso-American Development Foundation's Study in Portugal Network (SiPN) offers several scholarships and grants, some in partnership with the Portuguese National Library and the Fulbright Foundation for study and research in Portugal.

Heritage communities and learners

While many of us are familiar with the narrative of the Portuguese as prolific navigators and discoverers, perhaps lesser known is the far reaching impact of their migrations (Bastos & Miller, 2018). In the 1800s, Portuguese and Cape Verdean migrants arrived in places like New England, New Jersey, California, and even Hawai'i, first on whaling ships and later in more cohesive waves of migration (Bastos & Miller, 2018). And in many of those places there are still

thriving heritage communities, some enriched by later arrivals from both Portugal and Brazil (Marcus, 2009). Thus, studying Portuguese presents a means for heritage learners to actively cultivate and maintain linguistic and cultural connections. Milleret (2012) cited the presence of heritage communities and speakers as key factors in the growth and support for many Portuguese language programs. And for those learners who do not have a familial connection to the language or cultures, studying Portuguese can deepen both awareness and understanding of diasporic communities.

The language itself

Be it the drama of Camões, the prose of Machado de Assis, the vivid storytelling of Conceição Evaristo or Mia Couto or even the cutting social commentary of the rapper Criolo, with Portuguese most students will find something that moves them. It is quite simply a beautiful language and has been masterfully used in a wide variety of literary and creative expressions. It is a gateway to the rich and diverse cultural landscape of the Portuguese-speaking world.

Yet another appeal of learning Portuguese are its similarities to and differences from Spanish. Knowledge of Spanish may help learners grasp certain aspects of Portuguese more easily (Cabrelli Amaro, 2017); moreover learning a new language can help us build empathy for our students' experiences (Carvalho, 2013). In the field of applied linguistics, there is a vibrant and growing body of research on Portuguese for Spanish speakers and L3 acquisition (e.g., Bateman, 2017; Cabrelli Amaro, 2017; Carvalho, 2013). And in terms of pedagogical innovation, many Portuguese language programs have been on the cutting edge, taking advantage of technological affordances and forging intercultural connections via partnerships in projects like *Teletandem Brasil*, which fosters learners' linguistic and intercultural competence through real time interactions with native speakers (Telles & Ferreira, 2011). Programs such as STARTALK help encourage such innovation and best practices for Portuguese language educators through a variety of professional development programs and grants.

Final thoughts

As Kelm (2002) points out, Portuguese language learners often have a myriad of reasons for learning the language and indeed there are many reasons to learn (or teach) Portuguese far beyond the ones mentioned in this article. For me, perhaps one of the biggest motivations as a Portuguese teacher has been the meaningful opportunities, experiences, and connections it has afforded my students. From marine biology research in Mozambique to tackling literacy issues in low income communities in Brazil, learners can and do use the language in remarkable and meaningful ways. Unfortunately, we are at a moment when basic human rights are being challenged and threatened in many parts of the

world; therefore it is essential we use our voices to make a difference, and the more languages we speak, the farther our messages can go.

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