

5-2100 0619-3 0619-1

Portuguese-Language Training in a Graduate Business Program

José I. Suárez

IN 1974, the University of South Carolina began to offer a master's degree in international business studies. This two-year professional degree requires the development of considerable skill in a foreign language and related area studies in addition to the completion of an intensive international business curriculum. Today, approximately 120 students are enrolled in the MIBS program. To the original German and Spanish tracks, French, Portuguese, and a track for foreign nationals were added in 1975; three-year programs in Arabic and Japanese were introduced in 1982. Tracks in Chinese, Italian, Korean, and Russian are planned.

The degree requires seventy-two credit hours of graduate courses. Of these, twenty-four are devoted to language study and six to area studies. In addition, a six-month internship in a target-language country is required. This nine-credit internship provides the participants with two benefits: hands-on business experience and the opportunity to apply newly acquired linguistic skills and cultural insights. After arriving in a host country, a student spends six weeks in an obligatory intensive language and culture refresher course. On completing this course, the student works for an American or multinational corporation in the host country (or, on occasion, in another target-language country).

The MIBS language program begins in early June with a nine-week intensive language course on campus. This period is divided into two sessions of equal length offering 7½ hours a day of instruction. During a typical day in the Portuguese track, students are exposed to grammar lessons, oral drills, dictation, guided and unguided conversation, reading-comprehension practice, video interaction, and discussions of culture conducted in Portuguese. The pace is intense, and breaks do not exceed ten minutes an hour.

During the academic year, students take their core business courses in the College of Business Administration. Three hours a week, however, are dedicated to language study. The foreign language department

believes that adequate oral participation by students cannot be achieved in classes larger than fifteen, so that if the number of students in any language track exceeds that limit, they are divided into two groups and assigned separate instructors. This policy helps provide enough students for a rather large Portuguese staff; although the department offers no degree in Portuguese, it must maintain four full-time instructors in that language to meet the needs of the MIBS program.

The low student interest in Portuguese may be attributed to a series of obstacles that impede most post-secondary programs in that language—obstacles that differ from and exceed those encountered by the more commonly taught languages. Among the most often cited of these difficulties are the impression that Portuguese is exotic (even though the language is the seventh most widely spoken in the world); the scarcity of secondary school courses in Portuguese and, consequently, of college students predisposed to continue the study of the language; the lack of an extensive and articulate community of native Portuguese speakers in the United States (Luso-Americans reside mainly in New England and California, and they are less visible than other ethnic groups); and the failure of most Americans to recognize that Portuguese is the language of Brazil, the largest and most powerful country in Latin America.

Foreign language tracks in the MIBS program are headed by coordinators responsible to the language director, who, in turn, is responsible to the MIBS director. The MIBS director is a faculty member in the College of Business Administration, where the MIBS program is housed. From the program's inception, the relationship between the MIBS office and the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures has been

The author is Director of Language and International Trade at Clemson University.

one of mutual respect and cooperation. The MIBS director expects the language instructors to provide the program's students with two basic qualifications: a sufficient level of general language proficiency to live and interact smoothly abroad and a comparable level of business language proficiency to work effectively in a foreign business environment.

Each language track is autonomous in its internal management and pedagogical approach. Methodological options in the Portuguese track, however, are significantly limited by the dearth of teaching materials. Often instructors must make do with less than perfect textbooks and supply their own supplements, such as handouts and newspaper and magazine clippings. Consequently, the primary criteria for choosing textbooks in the track are availability and level of difficulty. This unique situation does not alter the MIBS director's proficiency expectations for Portuguese.

A day in the summer course in the Portuguese track begins with grammatical explanations and exercises from *A Grammar of Spoken Brazilian Portuguese*, by Earl W. Thomas (later, Brazil will host the students during their internship). Whenever possible, nonnative speakers are used as grammar instructors because the staff feels that individuals who acquired Portuguese as a second language (especially if English is their first language) often have a stronger understanding of the difficulties native English speakers have with Portuguese grammar. All explanations are given in English to avoid misunderstandings and to encourage discussion. This is the only section where English is spoken. Most students enjoy the traditional, prescriptive approach of GSBP, as well as of other Portuguese language texts, mainly for two reasons: the textbook provides a logical and standardized comparison of Portuguese and English, and it minimizes the effect of the instructor's subjectivity on test grading (i.e., an answer is either correct or incorrect). The textbook's paucity of exercises is perceived as its principal weakness, its emphasis on the spoken language as its strength.

In the second part of the morning, students split into two groups in order to work on pronunciation skills in rotation-drill sessions conducted by native-speaker instructors. The drills are derived from the text *Falando . . . Lendo . . . Escrevendo . . . Português: Um Curso para Estrangeiros*, by Emma Eberlein, O. F. Lima, et al. These exercises match the grammar concepts covered earlier. Students are asked to answer questions aloud with complete sentences and to repeat words or phrases spoken by the instructors.

Students also work on spelling accuracy by performing written exercises in the *FLEP* text and taking dictation. Besides offering enough exercises for students to improve their writing skills, *FLEP* provides the in-

structors with adequate material to teach proper pronunciation. Two of the book's weaknesses are the poor quality of the accompanying audiotape (with dialogues only at the beginning of each lesson) and the text's superficial grammar explanations; students also complain about the absence of a glossary. In general, *FLEP* makes a good supplementary text for a beginning grammar course because of its extensive exercises.

In one afternoon section, students attempt to converse using the vocabulary and situations contained in Neil Miller's *Conversation in Portuguese*. Although it provides ample material, the text does not differentiate between Brazilian and continental vocabulary—instructors must perform considerable editing to correct this serious drawback before classroom discussion. The book presents material conventionally, in the form of long vocabulary lists to be memorized and series of questions either about a drawing at the beginning of the lesson or about students' personal views or experiences related to the lesson topic.

Another afternoon section allows students to bring up matters of personal interest and to initiate unguided conversation. When students do not come up with topics of their own, instructors either work with them on the oral component of GSBP or introduce new material pertaining to earlier sessions in the day. Student response to this section is varied. Some students, objecting to the lack of structure, say that they would prefer the instructor to "challenge" them constantly and that formal testing would motivate them toward greater involvement in classroom activities. Other students see the section's purpose as the staff originally envisioned it: to attempt to resolve linguistic questions and difficulties while engaging students through a focus on personal concerns.

Later in the day, the class participates in the specifically cultural component of the session. In international business, cross-cultural understanding can be as important as language ability. In this section, videos, slides, films, and the text *Behaving Brazilian*, by Phyllis A. Harrison, promote a detailed understanding of the complex being known as "homo brasiliensis." Role-playing and additional readings also aid in the enculturation process. A major shortcoming of the text is that it is in English, obliging the students, already tired from a day's work, to translate its contents before discussion. The book's in-depth explanations of Brazilian cultural traits, along with its fine illustrations of the nonverbal language, are nonetheless invaluable.

The final grade for this session is determined as follows: grammar, 20%; oral drills and dictation, 20%; conversation, 10%; culture, 10%. The remaining 40% is derived from the three oral interviews given during the course—on the second Friday, the third Friday, and the last Tuesday. All daily material is geared to equip the student with the tools necessary for success

in these interviews. Because attainment of oral proficiency in the target language is a major goal of the MIBS program, students who consistently do poorly in these interviews are not permitted to continue in the program.

Essentially, each interview is designed to test the student's familiarity with the grammar and vocabulary covered up to that point. One instructor conducts the fifteen-minute interviews while another evaluates the student's performance. In the first interview, when the student's knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is rudimentary, the emphasis is on pronunciation and fluency. In the second and third interviews, however, the percentage of the grade based on vocabulary and grammar increases. The interviewer and evaluator are rotated for all three interviews; thus students do not always hear the same accent or intonation. The interview is taped in its entirety to permit the reviewing of evaluations, if necessary, as well as to demonstrate to the students their progress or lack of it. At the end of the session, each student may obtain a tape of his or her interviews.

The second 4½-week session starts after a two-day break. The morning schedule is very similar to that of the first session, with one difference: the time formerly devoted to written exercises and dictation is allotted to guided conversation. The text continues to be *Conversations in Portuguese*. In the afternoon, students discuss newspaper or magazine articles on which they have prepared presentations. They are encouraged to speak their minds and even to ad-lib when the discussion goes beyond the material before them. Language use is more often impromptu in the second session. In an exercise that enhances both comprehension and oral skills, students read selected articles from *Veja* (a well-known Brazilian magazine similar in format to *Time*) without the aid of supporting materials and then answer the instructor's questions on the content. The day concludes with active "video viewing." The class is shown segments of Brazilian TV programs (soap operas, documentaries, sitcoms, etc.) and is then quizzed both in writing and orally on the shows. One typical written exercise is to transcribe specified segments of the videos. Oral interviews, scheduled four times during the second session, again determine 40% of the final grade. The interviews are identical in format to those of the first session although, obviously, they are much more difficult. Students continue to face expulsion from the MIBS program if they fail to meet minimum standards in foreign language study.

In the fall semester, MIBS students of Portuguese devote the three-hour weekly language period to maintaining and improving the skills attained during the summer. The language class undertakes an in-depth analysis of Brazilian Portuguese grammar and syntax. It is at this juncture that the dearth of suitable text-

books is most acutely felt. The text *Para a Frente*, by Larry D. King and Margarita Suñer, is used because it attempts to differentiate the language of Brazil from that of Portugal. Such a contrast is most useful to students with a strong Spanish background, who may be accustomed to less regional variation, as the distinction illustrates that there can be marked differences in a language's pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax from one country to another. The text's approach is traditional: grammatical explanations and exercises are coupled with stories whose exercises both test reading comprehension and elicit conversation.

Relatórios, or oral reports, are required three times during the semester. The student must first choose a business-related article from *Veja* or any article from *Balanço Trimestral* (a Brazilian business magazine) and have it approved by the instructor; then prepare and deliver a five- to ten-minute oral synopsis of the article to the class; and, finally, field questions from classmates and instructor. Each report is evaluated on the quality of the presentation (preparedness, pronunciation, grammatical and syntactical discourse, etc.), the degree of difficulty of the chosen article, and the student's ability to understand and respond to questions at the end of the talk.

The intensiveness of the summer course discourages absences. Yet the strong emphasis on the business curriculum during the academic year so trivializes language instruction, in the opinion of many students, that some miss a considerable number of the early language classes. To correct this problem, the syllabus now states that "absences, whether excused or unexcused, in excess of ten percent of total class meetings will lower [a student's] class performance grade by one letter grade per absence."

Since three hours a week is not sufficient time to improve oral proficiency significantly, the MIBS program hires at least one Brazilian graduate student to *bater papo* (chat informally) with students during the lunch hour. In the French, German, and Spanish tracks, this task is handled by students enrolled in foreign language graduate programs and, therefore, already contracted as teaching assistants. Although the hired students may come from any discipline, those in the humanities are preferred. The frequency of the lunchtime encounters varies from term to term depending on a variety of factors, but each student averages two sessions a week.

It is in the spring semester that business Portuguese is introduced. *Pontos Essenciais do Português Comercial*, a textbook that I wrote, familiarizes students with the business idiom of Brazil in three steps. First, students are thoroughly instructed on how to prepare various kinds of business correspondence—for example, requests, orders, complaints, collection notices at different stages, references, and letters seeking employment

—and how to write résumés for the corporate world. Second, students learn vocabulary and expressions common to business practice in Brazil through alphabetical vocabulary lists accompanied by exercises in matching, term explanation, word derivation, reading comprehension, and translation from English to Portuguese. Third, import-export concepts and terminology are introduced, including the definitions and usage of “incoterms” (conditions regulating international trade), the various types of documentation required in domestic and international trade, the common terms of payment, and the names, codes, and symbols of the most widely used and pertinent world currencies. Generally, the students are skilled enough at this level to practice writing detailed orders or requests giving specific conditions as well as to prepare skits depicting complicated commercial transactions. The skits are performed for the class by pairs of students enacting the roles of buyer and seller.

To improve their day-to-day language skills while breaking the monotony of an entirely business-oriented curriculum, students work with *historinhas* (very short stories) from *Carlos Drummond de Andrade: Quarenta Historinhas e Cinco Poemas*, by Richard Preto-Rodas and Alfred Hower. A test from this book is given after every three stories; the midterm and final examinations for the course are derived entirely from PEPC.

After the intensive summer course and two three-hour semester courses, students are ready to depart for the city of São Paulo. On arrival, in August, they are assigned to the Unique Language Center to par-

ticipate in a six-week refresher course. Thereafter some fulfill their internship requirement in that city, others in Rio de Janeiro, and a few in other Brazilian cities. They return to the United States in late February to take additional, nonlanguage courses at the university and to prepare for graduation in June.

Teaching language in a graduate program that unabashedly gives its highest preference to the skills needed in the business milieu can be frustrating at times, for students feel, perhaps rightly, that the business component is the dog and the language training the tail. This perception is especially apparent once the summer training is complete and full-time studies begin. All too often students, when confronting the choice of studying Portuguese or, say, accounting, assign a rather low priority to the language.

Nevertheless, the endeavor is not without its rewards. Every year at least one student returning from an internship in Rio or São Paulo expresses gratitude for the linguistic background afforded by the program; some even say that they wish they could have studied more Portuguese before going overseas.

But perhaps the clearest indication that the language program is doing something right is what occurs after the students undertake a full load of courses in the fall semester. Whereas in the summer they would often come to class with apprehension, complaining loudly of the rigors of the language program, in the fall some would claim they actually looked forward to their afternoon Portuguese classes. As one student put it recently, “It’s the only soft spot on my schedule!”