

PERCEPTIONS ON LEARNING PORTUGUESE AS A THIRD LANGUAGE

 <https://doi.org/10.56515/PLJ82510045>



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Abstract: This study explores the perceptions of Spanish speakers and their teacher regarding the process of learning Portuguese as a third language (L3). Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: 1) How do Spanish speakers perceive their experience of learning Portuguese as an L3 with respect to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 2) How does the teacher perceive the process of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese as an L3 in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 3) How do the perceptions of the learners and their teacher compare on these aspects? The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, with data gathered through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, in-class observations, and a focus group. The findings indicate that most students found vocabulary and grammar to be the easiest aspects of learning Portuguese, while pronunciation was identified as the most challenging. However, discrepancies were observed between the perceptions of the students and those of their teacher. As a case study involving a small group of participants, this research contributes to the field of Portuguese L3 acquisition by offering an emic perspective on the language learning process. The findings may inform pedagogical practices and larger-scale studies in the future.

Keywords: L3 Portuguese. Language Transfer. Learner Perceptions. Crosslinguistic Influence.

Resumo: Este estudo explora as percepções de falantes de espanhol e de sua professora em relação ao processo de aprendizagem do português como terceira língua (L3). Especificamente, a pesquisa é guiada pelas seguintes perguntas: 1) Como os falantes de espanhol percebem sua experiência de aprender português como L3 no que se refere a vocabulário, gramática e pronúncia? 2) Como a professora percebe o processo de aprendizagem de português como L3 pelos falantes de espanhol em relação a vocabulário, gramática e pronúncia? 3) Como as percepções dos alunos e da professora se comparam quanto a esses aspectos? O estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa e interpretativista, com dados coletados por meio de um questionário, entrevistas semiestruturadas, observações em sala de aula e um grupo focal. Os resultados indicam que a maioria dos alunos considera o vocabulário e a gramática como os aspectos mais fáceis na aprendizagem do português, enquanto a pronúncia foi identificada como o maior desafio. No entanto, foram observadas discrepâncias entre as percepções dos alunos e as

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da professora. Este estudo de caso, envolvendo um pequeno grupo de participantes, contribui para o campo da aquisição do português como L3 oferecendo uma perspectivaêmica sobre o processo de aprendizagem da língua. Os resultados obtidos podem informar práticas pedagógicas e estudos em maior escala no futuro.

Palavras-chave: Português como L3. Transferência Linguística. Percepções de Aprendizagem. Influência Crosslinguística.

1 Introduction

Portuguese programs at universities in the United States are often predominantly composed of Spanish-speaking students—both native and non-native—who are learning Portuguese as a third language (L3). This tendency can be attributed to several factors, most notably the linguistic similarities between Portuguese and Spanish, which allow Spanish-speaking students to leverage their knowledge of Spanish as a foundation for faster acquisition of Portuguese. Additionally, the cultural and economic connections between Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil, the largest Portuguese-speaking nation, often motivate students to learn Portuguese for career opportunities and cultural exchanges.

In response to the growing interest among Spanish speakers in learning Portuguese as an L3, several universities have developed Portuguese courses specifically tailored to Spanish-speaking students. This study was conducted in one such course at a private university in the southwestern United States, focusing on a group of 12 beginning-level students. While previous studies have highlighted the advantages and challenges of Spanish influence on learning Portuguese, the perspectives of learners and teachers themselves remain underrepresented. Adopting an emic approach, this study amplifies the voices of those directly involved in the learning process and explores the following questions: 1) How do Spanish speakers perceive their experience of learning Portuguese as an L3 with respect to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 2) How does the teacher perceive the process of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese as an L3 in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 3) How do the perceptions of the learners and their teacher compare on these aspects?

To answer these questions, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, as detailed in the methodological section. The perspectives shared by the students and their teacher provide an insider's view of the learning process, which may inform pedagogical practices and future large-scale studies on the complexities of Portuguese L3 acquisition.

2 Literature Review

In his 2019 book, *Third Language Acquisition and Language Transfer*, Jason Rothman defines L3 learners as individuals who are either simultaneously bilingual from childhood, have sequentially acquired an L2, or are adults who have learned an L2 and are now acquiring an L3 later in life.

Numerous studies have shown that bilingual individuals are able to acquire an L3 faster than monolinguals learning the same language (Cenoz 2003; Cenoz 2001; Sanz 2000; Klein 1995; Cenoz and Valencia 1994). This advantage lies in the fact that L3 learners are already familiar with two language systems, which facilitates the process of language acquisition (Rottava). As Odlin explains, cross-linguistic influence, or transfer, occurs “resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin 27). Odlin (1993) and Kellerman (1983) have both indicated that L3 acquisition is influenced by factors such as linguistic distance and learners’ perceptions of similarities between languages.

The Typological Primacy Model, proposed by Rothman, posits that all previously learned languages can influence the acquisition of a third language (L3). However, when there is a notable typological similarity between one of the previously learned languages and the L3, this similarity tends to result in the dominant transfer of features from the more similar language, particularly during the early stages of L3 learning (Rothman 2015, 2013, 2011, 2010; Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro 2010).

Many quantitative studies that provide evidence for this model focus on L3 Portuguese acquisition (Montrul et al. 2011; Rothman 2015, 2011, 2010; Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro 2010), given that Portuguese and Spanish are, by all measures, typologically similar languages. Research, such as Henrique's (2000), has shown that native Spanish speakers, even without prior exposure to Portuguese, could comprehend approximately 94% of an academic text in the language. A study by Pinto also illustrates how typological proximity plays a significant role in language transfer. Pinto examined Moroccan students learning Portuguese, whose first language was Arabic and who spoke at least one foreign language, including French, Spanish, English, or German. When asked to write a text in Portuguese, some students displayed awareness of the linguistic similarities between languages. Specifically, those who spoke Spanish or French tended to use words from those languages to fill in gaps in their Portuguese vocabulary. However, none of the students transferred from their first language, Arabic (Pinto 2012). Sousa emphasizes that in multilingual education, it is crucial to take a holistic approach in order to recognize the unique features of the L3 and the possible connections that can be formed with other languages being acquired (Sousa 2021).

Some authors argue that, given the similarities between Portuguese and Spanish, it may be beneficial to place Spanish speakers in accelerated Portuguese courses, focusing more on the differences between the languages (Carvalho 2002; Judice 2002). However, teachers may encounter several challenges when teaching Portuguese to Spanish speakers in those classes, like the early fossilization of the interlanguage and the critical need to help learners develop metalinguistic awareness of the subtle distinctions between the languages (Carvalho 2002; Judice 2002). These issues can demand significant pedagogical preparation and a keen understanding of students' needs.

Regarding these needs, while it is recognized that similarities between languages can help accelerate the learning process for Spanish speakers learning Portuguese, teachers should not assume this is always the case. Montrul (2010) argues that the significant language transfer between Spanish and Portuguese is not always advantageous. Similarly, Forceline (2020) found in a study that Spanish speakers did not process Portuguese words more quickly because of their knowledge of Spanish. Almeida Filho (2004) challenges the common belief that Spanish speakers can easily learn Portuguese due to the similarities between the two languages. The author explains that this assumption can lead to frustration during the learning process, as students may perceive the language as easy but still struggle to fully understand it. According to Almeida Filho, it is crucial for teachers to focus on fostering motivation, cultural connection, and language comprehension during the Portuguese learning experience.

Child (2013) was interested in understanding the perceptions of L3 Portuguese learners regarding their experience in accelerated Brazilian Portuguese courses. After analyzing students' responses to a language learning perceptions questionnaire, Child found that groups of L2S (English natives/Spanish as second language) and Heritage Spanish speakers viewed the transfer from Spanish as more helpful than not, particularly "in terms of grammar and verb conjugation" (21). On the other hand, the Spanish natives found Spanish to be helpful for listening comprehension but perceived its impact on grammar as more neutral. This group recognized Spanish as beneficial for speaking and pronunciation in Portuguese, but overall, they viewed Spanish as a source of confusion in learning Portuguese. A study conducted by Maimone (2017) asked students to discuss how Spanish might have influenced their Portuguese learning. Many

students agreed that Spanish facilitated the recognition of Portuguese “words, verb conjugation, and structures, but it made it more difficult to remember the correct ‘spelling’ of a word or to differentiate Spanish from Portuguese words” (Maimone 302).

While quantitative data has shed light on the influence of Spanish on Portuguese acquisition, further research should focus on amplifying the voices of students and teachers. This study addresses this need by adopting a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis, with the aim of examining how students and their teacher perceive the Portuguese learning experience from an emic perspective.

3 Methodology

The present study addresses a research gap by exploring the personal perceptions of Spanish speakers and their teacher regarding the process of learning Portuguese as an L3, particularly in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Adopting an emic approach (Merriam 2009) and conducting an interpretive analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017), we seek to understand the learners’ experiences through their own lenses, thereby offering a more nuanced and potentially more authentic representation of the learning process. Specifically, this investigation is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do Spanish speakers perceive their experience of learning Portuguese as an L3 with respect to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation?
- 2) How does the teacher perceive the process of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese as an L3 in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation?
- 3) How do the perceptions of the learners and teachers compare on these aspects?

As a case study (Fraenkel et al., 2012) employing qualitative methodology (Dörnyei, 2007), this research focuses on a Portuguese classroom consisting of 12 students (8 females and 4 males), aged between 18 and 29, at a private university in the southwestern United States. All students and their teacher voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, which received approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board. The teacher, a 22-year-old heritage speaker of Portuguese, was an undergraduate student in the Portuguese B.A. program at the same institution. This was her first semester teaching a Portuguese course, specifically a beginning-level class tailored for students fluent in Spanish or another Romance language³. The class met Monday through Friday for 50 minutes during the Fall 2023 semester. There were three Spanish heritage speakers, three L1 Spanish speakers, and six L2 Spanish speakers.

Data gathering instruments consisted of a language background questionnaire, in-class observations, a semi-structured interview with each participant, and a focus group with nine participants. The questionnaire was hosted on Qualtrics and administered to students in the first few weeks of the semester, alongside a similar questionnaire given to the teacher. It was adapted from the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire⁴⁵ (LEAP-Q), developed by Kaushanskaya et al. (2007) to capture factors that have been recognized as key to bilingual status (language competence, age at which the language was learned, mode of acquisition, previous language exposure, and current language use). Based on the responses to the questionnaire, participants were classified into the following groups: Spanish heritage speakers (N=3), L1 Spanish speakers (N=3), and L2 Spanish speakers N=(6).

³ No participant spoke a Romance language other than Spanish.

⁴ Three of the 12 participants could not attend the focus group due to scheduling conflicts.

⁵ The LEAP-Q can be accessed at <https://bilingualism.northwestern.edu/leapq/>

During the 16 in-class observations distributed over a 12-week period, the researcher took notes of students' activities and performance, as well as the instructor's teaching approach and interaction with students. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with both the students and the teacher midway through the semester, at a point when we believed they would have gained sufficient experience with learning and teaching the language. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. The questions focused on their overall experience and their perceptions of language transfer between Portuguese and Spanish in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Some questions that guided the interviews with the students and the teacher included: What has been the easiest/hardest part about learning Portuguese as an L3?; How do you think your knowledge of Spanish helps (or not) learning Portuguese vocabulary/grammar/pronunciation?; What has been your experience like teaching Portuguese as an L3?; How do you think students' knowledge of Spanish helps (or not) their learning of Portuguese?

The focus group was conducted at the end of the semester to further discuss participants' Portuguese learning experience. This also provided an opportunity to revisit and, at times, clarify aspects that had emerged during the semi-structured interviews. Some of the questions asked included: What is the role of Spanish in your learning of Portuguese? What existing "sounds" in Spanish help (or not) your learning of Portuguese pronunciation? How does contrasting both languages in class help (or not) your learning of Portuguese?

According to Dörnyei (2007), the qualitative categories employed in content analysis are not predetermined. Instead, they emerge inductively from the data being examined. Thus, as we analyzed the data obtained from the various instruments used, we sought to identify recurring themes and patterns. In this effort, we followed the schema proposed by Van Manen (2003): 1) first reading or listening to data gathered; 2) second reading or listening and highlighting the most important parts related to the research questions; 3) third reading or listening and identifying emerging themes; 4) fourth reading or listening and categorizing recurring themes.

4 Perceptions on Vocabulary

Students were asked which aspect of learning Portuguese they found the easiest, considering their background in Spanish. In addition to grammar, which will be discussed in the next section, all students, except for one, indicated vocabulary as the easiest aspect. Eve shared: "The easiest part about learning Portuguese, I think, is memorizing words. All of them are very similar. [...] Like, sure, it's a lot to memorize, but it's a lot easier because it's very similar (interview)." Likewise, Amy emphasized the advantage of cognates between the two languages, stating: "There's a bunch of cognates that are just the same word, which makes that much easier" (interview). These and other similar student comments resonate with previous studies showing that Spanish speakers, even without prior Portuguese exposure, have high comprehension of written Portuguese (Henrique 2000) and are often able to use linguistic similarities to compensate for gaps in their vocabulary (Pinto 2012). The exception of one student, who did not find vocabulary the easiest aspect of learning Portuguese, cannot be explained by the data collected in this study. Nevertheless, it may be attributed to individual factors, such as learning style and language processing abilities, that could influence how learners perceive the ease of learning. Further investigation on how individual factors might influence L3 learning is necessary.

Despite the generally perceived ease of vocabulary learning, two students pointed out that false cognates pose a significant challenge, particularly in reading, as their meanings often have to be inferred from context alone. In the classroom, however, they feel that these difficulties are mitigated by gestures and other clarifying strategies used by the teacher. Interestingly, only these two students brought up false cognates as a real challenge in their

comments, even though they occur frequently between Portuguese and Spanish. One possible explanation is that most students, even with explicit instruction, may not be fully aware of the potential confusion false cognates can cause. Another possibility is that once students have been taught about false cognates, they no longer perceive them as difficult. Additionally, some learners may have a more intuitive ability to recognize when a word does not fit its expected meaning, which helps them avoid significant difficulties with false cognates.

Pedagogical implications can be drawn from the students' perceptions of learning vocabulary, the most obvious being the need to leverage the positive transfer between Portuguese and Spanish early in the instructional process. By doing so, students can make progress more rapidly, sustain higher levels of motivation, and remain appropriately challenged. For instance, teachers can introduce new vocabulary at a faster pace and in larger quantities, anticipating that retention and usage will follow more naturally in practice activities. Some Portuguese programs at U.S. universities already incorporate this strategy in accelerated courses designed specifically for Spanish speakers. Furthermore, textbooks tailored for Spanish-speaking learners of Portuguese often feature more complex vocabulary than standard materials for monolingual English speakers.

To maximize vocabulary learning, teachers should conduct exercises focusing on false cognates. Contextualized practice with these words is especially effective in helping students develop their inferencing skills and accurately understand their intended meanings. Moreover, students should review false cognates regularly and be encouraged to actively use them in conversation to solidify retention. While emphasizing the challenges posed by false cognates, it is essential to highlight that the overlap of vocabulary between Portuguese and Spanish is far greater than the differences. This is a key motivational factor for students and reflects the reality that much vocabulary learning happens through simple exposure.

Even though most students expressed that vocabulary was the easiest aspect of learning Portuguese, the teacher viewed it as a significant challenge for many of them. She commented: "I think Spanish hinders more than it helps with vocabulary"; "I think the vocabulary is more difficult for them. They are still using Spanish instead of Portuguese, especially if it's vocabulary they haven't learned yet. They want to use 'pero' instead of 'mas'" (interview). Additionally, the teacher noted—without providing specifics—that both native Spanish speakers and heritage Spanish speakers seemed to struggle more with vocabulary compared to L2 Spanish speakers. Further research is needed to explore this potential difference among student groups. One possible explanation is that L2 Spanish speakers, having learned Spanish in a formal setting, may be more conscious of, or careful with, the linguistic distinctions between Portuguese and Spanish. The teacher's perception seems to be consistent with Forceline's (2020) study, which did not find evidence that knowledge of Spanish contributes to faster word processing in Portuguese.

The teacher also observed that heritage speakers often use English translation, and that spelling is difficult for all students: "they want to write the same way as in Spanish, or they forget the accents in Portuguese" (interview). In addition, the teacher expressed concern about fossilization: "they like to use Spanish to try to invent a word that combines Portuguese and Spanish. [...] if it's not corrected immediately, they keep using the same thing" (interview). While the teacher's observations raise valid concerns, they tend to emphasize the challenges posed by Spanish knowledge when learning Portuguese. Teachers of Portuguese as L3 in a similar scenario may overlook the potential benefits of students' Spanish background, which enables them to use learning strategies—such as combining elements of both languages—to experiment with words and learn through trial and error. Moreover, teachers may fail to recognize the significant amount of language that students can understand and produce right from the beginning of their Portuguese learning journey. A more balanced perspective that considers both the challenges and

advantages of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese vocabulary is more likely to lead to effective pedagogical practices.

Further investigation is needed to better understand the factors influencing the differing perceptions of vocabulary learning between the students and their teacher. However, the teacher's comments suggest that this learning process varies between heritage and native Spanish speakers compared to non-native Spanish speakers. Similarly, lexical learning variations between heritage and non-native Spanish speakers were observed in the study by Maimone (2017). The teacher's comments also underscore the importance of timely corrections to prevent the reinforcement of incorrect forms, as well as the need for greater emphasis on written practice to help students internalize Portuguese orthographic rules.

5 Perceptions on Grammar

L1 and L2 Spanish speakers were unanimous in stating that knowing Spanish grammar was helpful when learning Portuguese grammar, attributing this perception to the many grammatical similarities shared between the two languages. This finding aligns with a study by Child (2010) with Spanish bilinguals. Reflecting on this, Sol stated: "Because I have studied as much Spanish as I have, it has made it (learning Portuguese) a lot easier, specifically in understanding the grammar" (interview). In a related vein, May explains (perhaps, overestimating the extent of similarities between the two languages): "I would say that the grammar is the same, except for two or three rules [...] verbs are very similar; verb conjugation is almost the same" (interview). Lucy complements: "I don't have to think about, should I be using imperfect here, or should I be using perfect? It's just like, oh well, I would say it whatever way I would say it in Spanish. It's the same thing" (interview).

Even though most students highlighted the grammatical similarities between Portuguese and Spanish as an aspect that makes learning easier, they were also aware of grammatical differences that require more attention. Lucy comments that the correct placement of direct objects in Portuguese can be a challenge: "The sentence structure in Portuguese is way closer to Spanish than it is to English. And so, for the most part, it helps. There are just small things that you have to know and have to pick up on. For example, direct objects that we haven't really learned yet" (focus group). The conjugation of irregular verbs, the personal infinitive, and contraction rules are other difficult aspects indicated by the students. It is important to note that the students were learning Brazilian Portuguese, which has some grammatical differences from European Portuguese. Students' comments might have been somewhat different had they been learning the European variety, which, for instance, is closer to Spanish with regard to object placement in both formal and informal language.

Unlike most students, the heritage speakers in the study found learning Portuguese grammar to be a significant challenge. They explained that they learned Spanish "naturally" while growing up and never had the opportunity to study the grammar of the language formally. As a result, they felt that the lack of this formal knowledge put them at a disadvantage when studying Portuguese grammar since they cannot make connections between the languages so easily. In Lucy's words: "I'm learning Spanish and Portuguese grammar at the same time because I have no idea about Spanish grammar at all" (interview). Since Lucy is bilingual, we interpret her statement "no idea about Spanish grammar" as indicating a lack of metalinguistic awareness rather than a lack of ability to use the grammatical structures of the language.

It is interesting to note that the Portuguese teacher may not have noticed this particular difficulty among heritage speakers, as she never mentioned it in the interview. She argues that heritage speakers simply accept the rules, whereas L1 Spanish speakers find Portuguese grammar more challenging compared to L2 Spanish speakers. This comment appears to contradict the opinion of L1 Spanish speakers, who believe that their knowledge of Spanish grammar greatly facilitates their learning of Portuguese.

I think it's more difficult for my native speakers because they've never thought about grammatical rules in this way. And now that they're learning (...) they just do the conjugation without thinking much, whereas my native English speakers think a lot more about the rules and ask more questions about them (...) my heritage speakers don't ask questions, they just accept it as it is and that's fine.

When asked about the challenges she faces in teaching Portuguese to Spanish speakers, the teacher identified grammar as the primary issue. As a Portuguese heritage speaker, she offered an explanation similar to that given by the Spanish heritage speakers regarding their difficulties with Portuguese grammar due to their insufficient formal knowledge of Spanish grammar: "Being a heritage speaker of Portuguese, I don't think much about grammatical rules [...] I get a little lost, so I need to make more effort before class, research more to really understand the language, understand the structure" (interview). In contrast, the teacher feels very comfortable teaching Brazilian culture because she grew up with it.

During the focus group, students elaborated on challenging aspects of grammar, with sentence structure being a key point of discussion. The group believed that Spanish could facilitate sentence structure in some areas but not in others. Many in the group agreed with the researcher's final statement: "sentence structures are different [in Spanish and Portuguese] and you cannot rely on Spanish all the time for that". Despite some difficulties, the fact that most participants in this study perceive Portuguese grammar as relatively easy to learn corroborates the idea that Spanish speakers would benefit from attending classes separately from those without a Spanish background. However, most institutions with Portuguese programs in the United States do not yet offer courses specifically tailored to Spanish speakers, even though they represent the largest number of students in Portuguese courses (Bateman 2017; Bateman 2014). Consequently, these students have fewer opportunities to draw on their knowledge of Spanish to both facilitate and accelerate their Portuguese learning process.

The perceptions of both students and their teacher on the influence of Spanish grammar in Portuguese learning support the nearly unanimous view that a contrastive approach is an effective teaching strategy (Bateman), particularly for more complex grammatical features that may challenge learners. This approach can also contribute to the development of metalinguistic awareness (Child), which can help heritage learners like Lucy in this study build the formal linguistic knowledge they often feel they lack.

Additionally, this study suggests that language difficulties differ among Spanish-speaking groups and that it is crucial for teachers to understand the specific challenges faced by each group. For instance, the views on grammar between heritage Spanish speakers and L1 or L2 Spanish speakers can differ significantly. Teachers should avoid treating L1, L2, and heritage Spanish speakers as a homogenous group, assuming they all benefit equally from their knowledge of Spanish. While this is undoubtedly a challenging task, implementing certain strategies can be helpful. One useful approach is for teachers to inquire more about students' language backgrounds, such as whether they speak Spanish at home and if they have had formal Spanish instruction. Heritage speakers, who often have little experience with written Spanish and standardized grammar, may require more explicit teaching and targeted activities to strengthen these skills in their L3. In contrast, L1 and L2 Spanish speakers may need less foundational support due to their previous formal studies of Spanish, allowing them to progress more quickly into advanced writing and grammar instruction. Other strategies that might prove useful include administering diagnostic assessments for each group, encouraging students to set individual language goals for improvement in specific areas, and diversifying the types of activities conducted in class.

6 Perceptions on Pronunciation

Regarding pronunciation, the majority of students found it to be the most challenging aspect of learning Portuguese. They were conscious that they often transferred Spanish sounds that did not correspond to Portuguese ones. For instance, Lucy mentioned: “It's kind of hard to, when you're speaking Portuguese, to not start speaking Spanish” (interview). Similarly, Sam stated: “It's more negative to learn Spanish and then learn Portuguese pronunciation” (interview).

Although most students considered pronunciation the most challenging aspect, a couple of students expressed that knowing Spanish pronunciation helped them with Portuguese sounds. One of them, Rita, stated: “I think that's why it's easier for me, because there are very similar words where you only need to pronounce them a bit more nasally, as in Portuguese. I feel that way, as it doesn't require changing the word much. There are words that are different, but most are almost the same”. Similarly, the teacher also perceived pronunciation as a challenging part of the learning process. She affirmed: “Everyone has the same difficulties [...] They are at pronunciation level. It hinders, it hinders”. This perception contrasts with the opinion of two students, who believed that Spanish pronunciation helped them to pronounce Portuguese words.

All groups considered vowels to be the hardest sounds to produce because they differ from those in Spanish. Portuguese has both open and closed front and back mid vowels (/e/, /ɛ/, /o/, and /ɔ/), while Spanish only has closed mid vowels (/e/ and /o/). Amy said: “Spanish is just straightforward like, a, e, o. It's always that way. But I feel like in Portuguese, there are things so different. So, I'm like second guessing”. Diphthongs and nasalization of vowels were also considered a challenge, as well as sounds such as [z] (*zebra, casa*), [ɲ] (*ninho*), [ʒ] (*jovem*), [ʎ] (*molho*), [ʃ] (*chave*), [s] (*pássaro*), and [h]/[χ] (*rato*). In addition, students mentioned difficulty with the letter {x}, which can be pronounced as [s] (*máximo*), [ks] (*fixo*), [z] (*exame*) and [ʃ] (*xadrez*). Some students found accent marks helpful for sound identification, while others found them confusing due to the many accented words in Portuguese. Students expressed finding it difficult to speak Portuguese because they keep thinking of Spanish sounds. May pointed out: “You need to be very aware of the pronunciation if you are not going to speak Spanish”. These comments suggest that students had certain awareness of the sound differences, but, for some reason, they were still unable to reproduce the correct ones while speaking.

The focus group was helpful in confirming the overall perception that pronunciation was an area of struggle for the students. They mentioned a few sounds that were easier for them to reproduce, such as those in words with letters [n] (e.g., *navio*), [d] (e.g., *dúvida*), [ɲ] (e.g., *vinho*), and [p] (e.g., *pato*). The perception of [d] as an easy sound was particularly interesting, as this was one of the sounds they struggled with the most during in-class observations, partially because [d] is pronounced as [dʒ] before [i] in most varieties of Brazilian Portuguese. They reiterated that vowels and nasal sounds are difficult to reproduce.

The perceptions of the students and the teacher concerning the learning of Portuguese pronunciation illustrate what Rothman (2015, 2013, 2011, 2010) and Rothman and Cabrelli Amaro (2010) proposed with their TPM model. Specifically, the influence of the most typologically similar language (in this case, Spanish) on the learning of the third language (Portuguese) is evident. According to students, this influence is, for the most part, not facilitative.

During the in-class observations, it became evident that students struggled with the pronunciation of certain Portuguese sounds. Although the teacher made several attempts to correct the students, there was no explicit instruction on pronunciation provided. This lack of targeted instruction may have made it even more challenging for the students to overcome their pronunciation difficulties. We argue that it is crucial for teachers to dedicate specific class time to

focus on challenging phonetic distinctions between Portuguese and students' other languages, such as nasal vowels or the pronunciation of open and closed vowels. This could involve guided listening exercises, targeted pronunciation drills, and interactive activities like minimal pair games to help students identify, differentiate, and accurately produce these sounds in context.

7 Final Remarks

This study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1) How do Spanish speakers perceive their experience of learning Portuguese as an L3 with respect to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 2) How does the teacher perceive the process of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese as an L3 in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation? 3) How do the perceptions of the learners and teacher compare on these aspects?

Findings reveal that the learners viewed the influence of Spanish on learning Portuguese as more beneficial than detrimental, particularly with regard to vocabulary and grammar. The most significant challenge laid in pronunciation, where the influence of Spanish phonology was thought to create difficulties in producing certain Portuguese sounds. The teacher's perceptions diverged from those of the students in some respects. She perceived Spanish as less beneficial for vocabulary and grammar learning for some students, though she agreed that pronunciation was a challenge for all of them. The focus group discussions highlighted struggles with nasal sounds and other specific Portuguese phonemes, which were confirmed during in-class observations. Sentence structure was also a concern, particularly with regard to object placement.

This research contributes to the field of Portuguese L3 acquisition by providing an emic perspective on the language learning process, which may help inform future large-scale studies. Moreover, when educators understand how students perceive the influence of Spanish on their Portuguese learning, they can better anticipate learners' needs, provide appropriate support, and address non-facilitative transfer more effectively. For instance, if teachers observe that heritage speakers and L1 Spanish speakers are more challenged by contrastive aspects of grammar in Portuguese and Spanish (as they were in this study), they should consider slowing the pace and ensuring that these students are familiar with the rules in Spanish before moving on. Additionally, incorporating more activities that raise awareness of proper word order in sentences may benefit students struggling with sentence structure. As far as pronunciation, instead of having students merely repeat words multiple times, teachers could focus on individual phonemes and ensure accurate pronunciation through various speaking activities.

Future research should further investigate the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the learning of Portuguese as an L3. A limitation of the present study is its small number of participants. Studies with larger groups could offer a more comprehensive understanding of these perceptions and yield findings that are more representative of other educational contexts. Additionally, studies should be conducted with students enrolled in Portuguese courses at different levels to examine how perceptions evolve over time.

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