AN ONLINE PLACEMENT TEST OF PORTUGUESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: Development and implementation

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Abstract

This paper focuses on proficiency assessment in Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) by reporting on the development of an online placement test within a multi-campus project of online Portuguese courses conducted in a Brazilian state university. The test classifies the candidates at levels A1, A2, B1 or above B1, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and the students are placed in online courses accordingly. The test items are based on language tasks related to university contexts, such as understanding spoken Portuguese, basic and intermediate grammar, and reading skills. A holistic proficiency scale based on the CEFR was created to correct the test and place the candidates at either basic or pre-intermediate levels. The experience of deciding on the most suitable online platform for the test, between Google Forms and the Moodle platform (*Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*), is also presented in this article, according to the advantages and disadvantages of each of these alternatives. Test results were successful in classifying candidates according to the aforementioned proficiency levels of the online course.

Keywords: assessment; language proficiency; online testing; placement tests; Portuguese as a foreign language; testing

Resumo

Trata-se, neste artigo, da avaliação de proficiência em Português como Língua Estrangeira (PLE) em um relato do desenvolvimento de um teste online de nivelamento, em um projeto multi-campus de cursos online de português implementado em uma universidade brasileira pública. O teste classifica os candidatos nos níveis A1, A2, B1 ou acima de B1, com base no Quadro Europeu Comum Europeu de Referência (QCER), e os alunos são inscritos em turmas online de acordo com esses níveis. As questões do teste se baseiam em tarefas linguísticas associadas a contextos universitários, por exemplo, a compreensão do português falado, gramática em níveis básico e intermediário, e habilidades de leitura. Uma escala de faixas de proficiência de caráter holístico foi criada para correção do teste e nivelamento dos candidatos em níveis básicos ou pré-intermediários. A experiência da seleção do ambiente online mais adequado para o teste, entre o Google Forms e a plataforma Moodle (*Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment)*, também é relatada, conforme as vantagens e desvantagens de cada uma dessas alternativas. Os resultados do teste classificaram os candidatos satisfatoriamente nos níveis de

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proficiência do curso online.
Palavras-chave: avaliação; avaliação online; proficiência linguística; português como língua estrangeira; testagem; testes de nivelamento

1. Introduction

The need to learn Portuguese as a Foreign Language (henceforth PFL) has increased in the past few years because the language is a requirement for university students, researchers and other professionals either for study and/or work or in order to engage in projects with partners in Portuguese-speaking countries.

São Paulo State University (UNESP) is among the universities that have partnership programs with foreign institutions; most of these programs entail undergraduates, postgraduates and academic staff traveling to Brazil in order to take courses or conduct research work for which at least an intermediate level of proficiency in Portuguese is needed. UNESP thus required that a PFL course should be developed and made available online so that foreign candidates travelling to Brazil in these programs could acquire a basic or pre-intermediate knowledge of Portuguese before they actually began their academic activities on any of UNESP's twenty-three campuses. The online course would also benefit students and other foreign visitors on campuses where no other PFL courses are offered.

Face-to-face PFL courses are offered on three campuses of UNESP (in the cities of Araraquara, Assis and Sao Jose do Rio Preto), from basic to advanced levels, and according to specific needs of university students and visiting researchers, for example, reading academic texts, doing oral presentations, writing scientific papers and preparing for the Celpe-Bras, a proficiency examination in Portuguese as a foreign language.[2] Students from outside UNESP (foreigners living in Brazil and immigrants) can also enroll in these courses.

Language assessment is an essential aspect of language learning and teaching; teaching, learning and assessment constitute the axes for successful language development (Scaramucci, 1999/2000). Assessment includes not only exams and tests, but also other practices and processes that can verify and reveal whether learning has taken place, and thus inform teachers and students, for example, about achievements or failures in educational contexts. Classroom tasks and other activities can be used not only to teach and practice language, but also to help teachers and students become aware of the students' processes of language development. According to Luckesi (2000), assessment implies two interconnected processes: diagnosing and

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[2] The Celpe-Bras examination is offered in Brazil and in various other countries all over the world. Pass levels vary from intermediate to higher advanced. For further information on Celpe-Bras, visit http://portal.mec.gov.br/celpe-bras.

qualifying a given object, and deciding what should be done once this diagnosis has been obtained. Assessment results can exercise a "washback effect" on course programs and, in some cases, indicate the need for remedial work.

In the present paper, the stages of developing an online placement test for the aforementioned online PFL course are described, including samples of test questions and the criteria used to classify the candidates according to the specified levels of PFL proficiency addressed by the test. The test items include providing personal information in written answers to open questions, dialogue completion, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension based on a short audio or video extract. A holistic proficiency scale based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was created to correct the test and place the candidates at either basic or pre-intermediate levels, and candidates whose levels were above B1 were oriented to enrol in PFL courses available on some UNESP campuses soon after their arrival in Brazil. Information about the experience of deciding on the most suitable online platform for the test, between Google Forms and the Moodle (*Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*) platform, is also presented, according to the advantages and disadvantages of each of these two alternatives.

2. Test Development and Implementation[3]
In order to offer prospective foreign visitors to UNESP online courses adequate to their levels of proficiency in Portuguese, the online placement test was developed and made available for a period of time prior to the dates when candidates would start their activities in Brazil. In this section, the process of developing the online PFL placement test, including question samples and the criteria used to classify the candidates' levels of proficiency according to the specified levels of PFL proficiency addressed by the test, is reported. Some aspects of the test are described in more detail and illustrated by means of computer screen shots.

The test results classified the candidates' levels of proficiency at A1, A2, B1 or above B1, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) proficiency levels, and the students were placed in groups for the online course according to their levels.

There are not many online PFL tests available on the internet and the tests found to date (for example, *Teste Online de Português do Brasil*, available at https://aprenda2.org/teste-de-portugues/; *Geniol Teste de Português*, available at https://www.geniol.com.br/testes/idiomas/teste-de-portugues/; *Speakwell*, available at https://www.speakwell.pt/pt/faca-aqui-o-seu-

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[3] An earlier report on the development of this online PFL placement test is presented in Consolo and Pereira da Silva (2016).

teste/?lingua=pt; *Language Proficiency Tests – Portuguese (Brazilian)*, available at https://www.transparent.com/language-resources/tests.html) focus on reading and grammar skills only, mainly by means of multiple-choice questions, but listening skills are usually not tested. Thus, when the UNESP test was developed, the research team involved in the online PFL project based the test items on a number of language tasks expected to be accomplished in university contexts, such as understanding informal spoken Portuguese, basic and intermediate grammar, and reading skills.

According to Caldeira:

> Online learning environments contain elements that constitute a new educational context, different from face-to-face learning, which is why it is essential that processes and strategies should be created to meet the new needs and circumstances of the new [*learning*] models. It is therefore not possible simply to adapt face-to-face models [*to online contexts*]. (Caldeira, 2004, p. 6)[4]

We initially suggested that the online PFL test should be developed in Google Forms, because a large number of test takers was expected, since having each test taker registered on the Moodle platform (*Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*), wherever the online course was developed, would have made the process harder for the test takers. Given the fact that it is an online test, we tried to minimize potential drawbacks caused by factors such as "digital illiteracy". Google Forms is relatively simple to use for the majority of people – easy to access and to configure by people familiar with Google tools.

Another factor in that choice was the easy uploading of Google Forms, considering that not all test takers would have a high-speed internet connection. However, problems in Google Forms were then noticed, for example, the lack of test security, as pointed out by Gomes:

> In the context of online education, one issue often presented is the difficulty of verifying the identity of students whom we intend to test online – How can we check their identity? (...) (Gomes, 2009, p. 314, in Furtoso, 2011)[5]

A comparison between aspects of security in Google Forms and the Moodle platform is presented in Table 1 below:

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[4] My translation of *"Os ambientes digitais de aprendizagem possuem elementos que configuram como um novo contexto educacional, diverso do presencial, e por isso é fundamental que se criem processos e estratégias que respondam às novas necessidades e circunstâncias dos novos modelos. Não é possível, portanto, simplesmente adaptar os modelos presenciais."* (Caldeira, 2004, p. 6)

[5] My translation of *"No contexto da educação online, uma das questões que mais amiúde é colocada de imediato, prende-se com a dificuldade de verificação da identidade dos estudantes que pretendemos avaliar online – Como verificar essa identidade? (…)"* (Gomes, 2009, p. 314, in Furtoso, 2011)

	Google Forms	*Moodle platform*
User registration	No	Yes
User identification	No	Yes
Control of number of attempts to take the test	Yes	Yes
Time control	Yes	Yes
Accessibility	Good	Regular
File attachments	Yes*	Yes
Multimedia	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Google Forms and the Moodle platform: A comparison of some security aspects
* With some restrictions: Users can visualize who created the form and send attachments by e-mail.

Security drawbacks started with the identification of the test taker. Google Forms does not accept anonymous answers and it requires the user's e-mail and password, but no identification data is shared with the authors of the form. It is therefore necessary to request specific information on the identification of the test taker. In addition, since there was no registration for the test takers prior to taking the test, access would be possible for individuals other than the candidates for the UNESP online PFL course, either as an open online test or accessed by means of a password that test takers could share with whomsoever they wished.

Figure 1 below illustrates the first screen of the test, as created in Google Forms:

Figure 1: Online PFL test – Google Forms – Screen 1

The Moodle platform offers a more accurate control over the data. When each test taker takes the test, examiners have access to the candidate's full name, e-mail address and geographical location, since that information must be fed into the platform by each candidate. It is also possible to know how

many times a candidate has tried to do the test (he or she might have had to attempt the test a second or a third time due to difficulties such as power cuts or problems in accessing the internet), to control the date range within which candidates can access the test and, if necessary, to extend access deadlines.

Figure 2 illustrates the first screen of the test on the Moodle platform. Instructions to access the test are given in Portuguese and in English. Instructions in Spanish were added later:
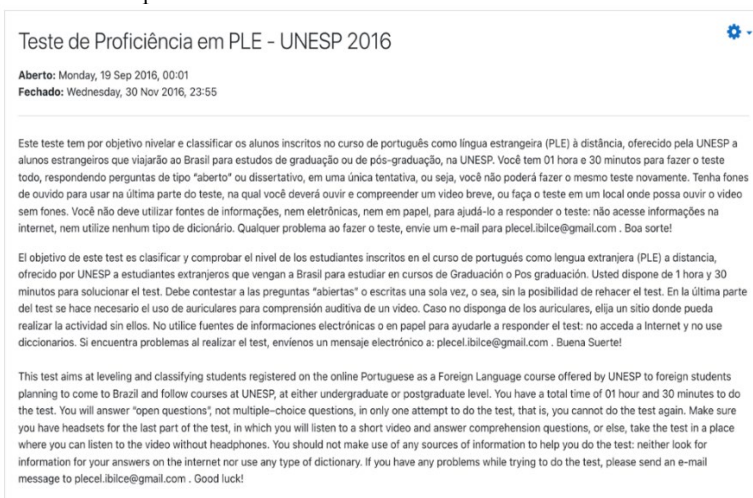
Teste de Proficiência em PLE - UNESP 2016

Aberto: Monday, 19 Sep 2016, 00:01
Fechado: Wednesday, 30 Nov 2016, 23:55

Este teste tem por objetivo nivelar e classificar os alunos inscritos no curso de português como língua estrangeira (PLE) à distância, oferecido pela UNESP a alunos estrangeiros que viajarão ao Brasil para estudos de graduação ou de pós-graduação, na UNESP. Você tem 01 hora e 30 minutos para fazer o teste todo, respondendo perguntas de tipo "aberto" ou dissertativo, em uma única tentativa, ou seja, você não poderá fazer o mesmo teste novamente. Tenha fones de ouvido para usar na última parte do teste, na qual você deverá ouvir e compreender um vídeo breve, ou faça o teste em um local onde possa ouvir o vídeo sem fones. Você não deve utilizar fontes de informações, nem eletrônicas, nem em papel, para ajudá-lo a responder o teste: não acesse informações na internet, nem utilize nenhum tipo de dicionário. Qualquer problema ao fazer o teste, envie um e-mail para plecel.ibilce@gmail.com . Boa sorte!

El objetivo de este test es clasificar y comprobar el nivel de los estudiantes inscritos en el curso de portugués como lengua extranjera (PLE) a distancia, ofrecido por UNESP a estudiantes extranjeros que vengan a Brasil para estudiar en cursos de Graduación o Pos graduación. Usted dispone de 1 hora y 30 minutos para solucionar el test. Debe contestar a las preguntas "abiertas" o escritas una sola vez, o sea, sin la posibilidad de rehacer el test. En la última parte del test se hace necesario el uso de auriculares para comprensión auditiva de un vídeo. Caso no disponga de los auriculares, elija un sitio donde pueda realizar la actividad sin ellos. No utilice fuentes de informaciones electrónicas o en papel para ayudarle a responder el test: no acceda a Internet y no use diccionarios. Si encuentra problemas al realizar el test, envios un mensaje electrónico a: plecel.ibilce@gmail.com . Buena Suerte!

This test aims at leveling and classifying students registered on the online Portuguese as a Foreign Language course offered by UNESP to foreign students planning to come to Brazil and follow courses at UNESP, at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. You have a total time of 01 hour and 30 minutes to do the test. You will answer "open questions", not multiple-choice questions, in only one attempt to do the test, that is, you cannot do the test again. Make sure you have headsets for the last part of the test, in which you will listen to a short video and answer comprehension questions, or else, take the test in a place where you can listen to the video without headphones. You should not make use of any sources of information to help you do the test: neither look for information for your answers on the internet nor use any type of dictionary. If you have any problems while trying to do the test, please send an e-mail message to plecel.ibilce@gmail.com . Good luck!

Figure 2: Online PFL test – Moodle platform - Screen 1

In Google Forms, a detailed control of candidate data is not possible in the same way as on the Moodle platform. Although Google Forms requires information such as the candidate's e-mail address and password to initiate, the purpose of this information is only to prevent the same candidate from taking the test more than once, not to screen who is allowed to do the online test. The problem of candidate identity in online tests is mentioned by Gomes (2009):

> The answer to the first of these questions [how to verify the student's identity] is related to the answers to the remaining questions in the test, for it is by monitoring the learning processes, by knowing the motivation, interests and difficulties of each student, by means of frequent interaction with each student, that we can establish, even in a remote-learning context, a relationship based on knowledge and form a "profile" of each online course participant, which will enable us, up to a certain point, to recognize the individual production of each student. (Gomes, 2009, p. 1679)[6]

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[6] My translation of *"A resposta à primeira destas questões [como verificar a identidade do aluno] está associada às*

The procedure of following students' learning processes and establishing a possible relationship between each student and his or her answers in a test, as suggested by Gomes (*op. cit.*), can be applied online in assessment tools used during a course, over a period of time; however, a placement test in which candidates are unknown to the examiners cannot be operated on Google Forms.

In an attempt to make the online test more secure in Google Forms, while still at the pilot stage, an extra alternative for a multiple-choice question was created, as a "security answer", and a password was generated as the answer for this question so as to control which candidate would take the test. The problem was that, apart from the fact that any user who had the password could make it available to other candidates, Google Forms does not indicate that the form is open, so a candidate could click on each alternative to answer the question until s/he found the right answer and then continue with the test. If the candidate did not manage to get the right answer at first, s/he could press the "return" command a number of times and have access to the test. If someone reads the whole test but does not click on "continue", the system registers neither that the test has been accessed nor who has accessed it. In other words, the status of "ongoing test" is not available; the test may be seen but not necessarily completed. There is also a risk that a candidate may answer the questions and close the test without saving their answers. The times when the form was accessed and the answers were sent are available to examiners, but it should be stressed that these times are registered only if the candidate saves his or her answers.

Figure 3 illustrates the answer screen in Google Forms:

Figure 3: Google Forms answer screen. Answers are displayed in a spreadsheet format.

Given the above technical limitations on developing the test in Google Forms, we decided to use the Moodle platform. Because the online course was offered on the same platform, candidates unable to use Moodle to do the test due to lack of digital literacy or any technical problem, by the same token would be unable to use Moodle to do the course itself.

To save time, we opted for a candidate self-registration procedure on the Moodle platform. First of all, potential students had to register on the platform. Each student then had to insert a keyword on the first webpage of the course, in order to register for the course and subsequently for the test. This keyword was already available on the same page.

Figure 4 illustrates the answer screen on the Moodle platform:

Figure 4: Answer screen on the Moodle platform. Candidates' names and e-mails have been masked.

As reported above and illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4, the Moodle platform permits a more precise control over the candidates and their answers to the test, despite the fact that its interface characteristics may be familiar neither to candidates nor to examiners. (Not too many people at UNESP and elsewhere had been using Moodle at the time when the online course and test were being designed.)

Another potential difficulty in choosing the most adequate platform or tools for an online test is related to the conditions for website uploading, for platforms may be too heavy and only work well if a high-speed internet connection is available.

Thus, the choice of the Moodle platform was based on the fact that it allows the duration of the test and the number of access attempts to be controlled, and ensures that, at the end of a given attempt to do the test, the answers will all be either recorded or lost. These are some of the features of

Moodle to be taken into consideration when developing assessment tools.

Once the Moodle platform had been chosen for the online PFL placement test, it was necessary to decide on the test items to be included, bearing in mind that we only had around a month to correct the tests, which would be taken by students of various nationalities. We opted for a placement test at levels A1, A2, B1 (since these were the levels at which the online course was going to be offered initially), and above B1. "Above B1" students were considered minimally able to come to Brazil and, preferably, continue their studies in PFL on face-to-face courses available on UNESP campuses.

The test items included five open-ended written questions to test reading comprehension and writing abilities, and four questions about a short video extract to test listening comprehension. We did not include any oral production tasks in the test, but the Moodle platform allows the uploading of various types of files, and this feature may encourage the design and inclusion of such tasks in future versions of the online PFL placement test.

Given the target levels of proficiency and content, the test can be divided into five major parts, each of which assesses the competences of one level, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR):[7]

Personal information: Besides its "warming-up" function, the first part of the test seeks to obtain information about who the candidate is, his or her origin, and what s/he intends to do or study in Brazil. The questions in this part are all in an open-ended format and the answers are not considered for assessment purposes.

A1: This part aims to verify whether the candidate understands everyday language and questions about him/herself, his or her family and circumstances, and whether s/he can answer open-ended questions succinctly.

A2: By asking the candidate to fill in gaps in a dialogue, this part aims to assess if the candidate can understand and possibly participate in conversations in academic contexts and, by expressing him/herself in a short monologue, in written format.

B1: In this part the candidate has to express him/herself in argumentative language (but not focusing on any specific genre), for or against an idea, and also to communicate by means of an e-mail message, which represents a specific genre commonly used in academic communication.

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[7] For further information about the CEFR, visit https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions.

B2 or above: In this part the candidate watches a short *YouTube* video extract, in which a story is read aloud, and a few lexical items in Portuguese, as used in the video, with definitions or synonyms, are provided. The candidate answers open-ended comprehension questions about the video.

According to Almeida Filho and Moutinho (2011),

> […] language is not a system of descriptive usage rules taught as an end in itself, that is, there is no adequate justification for a course of a metalinguistic nature, in which [only] grammar and vocabulary are covered. Current requirements for professionals […] lead us to envisage teaching beyond the language, focusing on specific topics of interest to our learners. (Almeida Filho and Moutinho, 2011, p. 68).[8]

We therefore decided to design the test according to the linguistic demands of everyday situations and academic contexts, based on language uses the students would probably encounter in Brazil, and in a way similar to the items in the Celpe-Bras examination, which aims at assessing,

> […] the abilities necessary for pursuing studies or performing work functions in Brazil or abroad, when the use of Portuguese is required. These abilities include communication in everyday situations: reading and writing texts, interacting orally or in writing in activities within the academic context (clarifying doubts with a teacher, taking tests, presenting seminars, etc.) and outside that context (reporting facts, doing shopping, obtaining information, complaining, visiting a doctor, etc.). Because it is a proficiency examination, Celpe-Bras is not designed to assess learning in a given course, but what the examinee is able to do in the target language, regardless of where, when or how the language was acquired. Such learning may have occurred through contacts with speakers of this language or in a formal teaching situation.[9] (Brasil, 2006, p. 3, in Furtoso, 2011)

At present the Celpe-Bras is the only proficiency examination in PFL that

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[8] My translation of *"[...] a língua não é um sistema de regras descritivas de seu uso e ensinada como fim nela mesma, ou seja, não podemos justificar bem um curso de natureza simplesmente metalinguística abrangendo gramática e vocabulário. A demanda por profissionais hoje em dia, [...] faz-nos projetar um ensino para além da língua, focalizando temas específicos de interesse de nossos aprendentes."* (Almeida Filho e Moutinho, 2011, p. 68)

[9] My translation of *"[...] as habilidades exigidas para realizar estudos ou desempenhar funções de trabalho no Brasil ou no exterior, quando o uso do português se fizer necessário. Essas habilidades incluem comunicar-se em situações do dia-a-dia: ler e redigir textos, interagir oralmente ou por escrito em atividades do contexto escolar (esclarecer dúvidas com o professor, fazer provas, apresentar seminários etc.) e externas a ele (fazer relatos, fazer compras, obter informações, reclamar, ir ao médico etc.). Por ser um exame de proficiência, o Celpe-Bras não é elaborado com o objetivo de avaliar a aprendizagem em um determinado curso, mas o que o examinando consegue fazer na língua-alvo, independentemente de onde, quando ou como essa língua foi adquirida. Essa aprendizagem pode ter ocorrido pela convivência com falantes dessa língua ou em situação formal de ensino."* (Brasil, 2006, p. 3, in Furtoso, 2011)

provides a certification officially recognized by the Ministry of Education in Brazil (MEC). It has two parts: a written test, with two tasks that integrate listening comprehension and written production, and two other tasks that integrate reading and writing abilities; and an oral test, based on visual prompts and according to the candidate's interests, as informed in his or her registration form.

The choice of open-ended questions instead of multiple-choice questions in our online test was particularly based on our concern to test the proficiency of Spanish-speakers; since Spanish and Portuguese share many linguistic structures and cognates Spanish-speaking candidates may have some advantages when they answer multiple-choice questions in Portuguese. By means of written answers, some mistakes can be detected, such as the use of "y" instead of the conjunction "e" (and), and the structure "object pronoun + verb like + object" (*Me gusta café.*), which is typical in Spanish but incorrect in Portuguese.

In Figure 5, the first part of the test, the section concerning personal information is illustrated. The Moodle platform informs the candidate how many questions the test contains (below "1") and how many questions are shown in the current screen (in this case, questions 1 to 5 are highlighted). When the test is corrected, this part is colored in green if the candidate obtains the maximum score, in yellow if the candidate obtains a mark lower than the maximum, and in red if the candidate gets no marks (a zero). Below the questions the time remaining for the candidate to finish the test is displayed. In the upper right-hand corner, in "2", we can see the profile and the account of the person accessing the platform and, next to this information, in a black square, the language chosen for using the platform. Altering the platform's "operational" language does not change the language of the test questions.
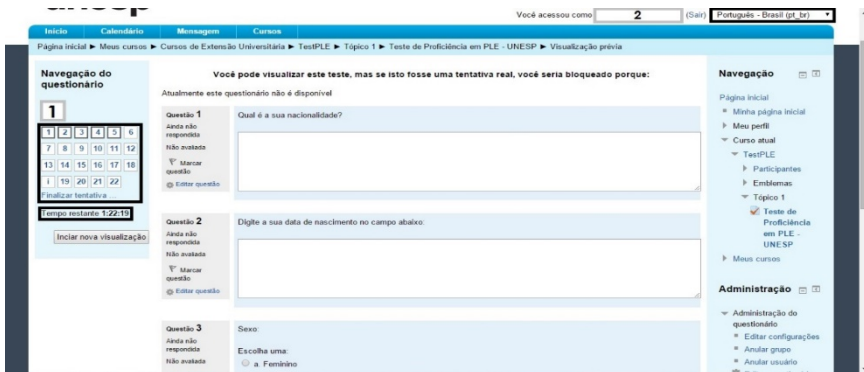

Figure 5: Test screen on the Moodle platform. This is the first group of questions (1 to 5), as shown in the first part of the test. The candidate's photo (in "1") and the candidate's name (in "2") have been masked. The options

"administration" and "previous view" are only available for users registered in the course as teachers or examiners.

The same screen, but now in English, is shown in Figure 6 below, to illustrate the option for language change on the Moodle platform:
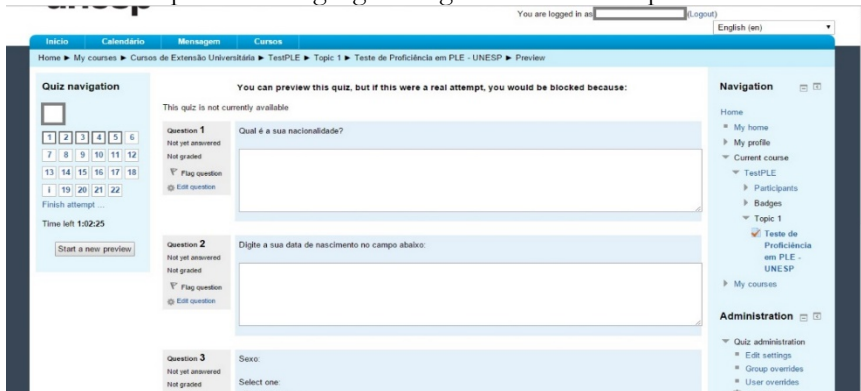

Figure 6: Moodle screen in English. The candidate's name and the account number have been masked.

By means of the questions in the first part of the test it is possible to obtain information about the demands for the PFL course, such as the candidate's research area, prospective institute or department within UNESP, level of schooling, age, gender and country of origin. Even though these questions do not influence the candidate's mark in the test, questions and answers are in Portuguese and, in some cases, require some writing ability. Alternatives were used in some questions, for example, when asking the candidate's gender (feminine or masculine), but these alternatives led to a drawback because the test requires a "correct answer" and this is not the case in answers about gender. When we designed the item so that both answers, "*feminino*" (female) and "*masculino*" (male), would be accepted, the platform informed the candidate that s/he had got the answer right, whichever alternative had been selected.[10] In addition to the difficulties faced when we attempted to use alternatives for the answers, problems also occurred when a candidate did not wish to answer either "*feminino*" or "*masculino*". We therefore decided simply to leave a blank space in which the candidate could write his or her answer to this question.

Even though the answers in the first part of the test are not marked, they help to assess the candidate's abilities at the A1 level, that is, whether s/he has at least a minimum level of proficiency in Portuguese, although not enough to do a course at the A2 level.

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[10] The following message (in Portuguese) would be displayed for candidates who had selected "*masculino*": "*Você acertou! A resposta correta é "feminine".*".

In the second part of the test, five open-ended questions on basic knowledge about Brazil and the Portuguese language are presented, such as musical preferences and tourism, and each correct answer is worth 0.3 marks, with a total of 1.5 marks.

In the third part, which aims to assess the candidate's proficiency at A2 level, a dialogue with four gaps is presented, which the candidate is expected to complete. The gaps must be filled in with complete sentences and not with single words. Each correct answer is worth 0.375 marks, with a total of 1.5 marks. In addition to completing the dialogue, candidates are also asked to write a short text about their home and their home town. Alternative test tasks in this part of the test might be to write an e-mail message to a friend, for example, about the candidate's plans to travel to Brazil, and to write a short text about the city in Brazil where s/he intends to live. This part is worth 2.0 marks.

In part four there is a short comic strip in which a social issue or opinion is expressed. The candidate is expected to write a short paragraph using argumentative language and state whether s/he agrees or disagrees with the opinion expressed in the comic strip. In the next question an academic situation is presented and the candidate has to write an e-mail message to contact a teacher about this situation. Alternative test tasks for part four, instead of the comic strip, a short text from a newspaper or from the internet may be presented, about which the candidate has to express his or her opinion; or a picture to be described in detail; and, in the next question, instead of writing an e-mail message, the candidate might have to write a whatsapp message to a teacher or to another staff member about the academic situation. This part is worth 1.5 marks.

In the fifth and last part of the test, the candidate watches a short video narrative (from *YouTube*). S/he is expected to answer four comprehension questions about the video – for example, about the plot, the characters and the ending. Each answer is worth 0.5 marks, with a total of 2.0 marks. Alternative tasks in this part of the test might be a short video about television news, or a video or an audio of an interview with a famous person, with comprehension questions about the audio or the video.

Table 2 below illustrates the parts of the test, the marks and the aims in each part:

Levels	Parts of the test & questions	Marks	Aims and competences
A1	Part I – 5 questions	0	"Warming up" and personal information. Check if the candidate is able to answer simple questions about her/himself.

A1	Part II – 5 questions	1.5	Obtain more information about the candidate and check if s/he is able to answer simple questions, for example about how s/he learned Portuguese, cultural issues and his/her level of proficiency in the language.
A2	Part III – 4 questions	1.5*	Check if the candidate can understand phrases and everyday language, and initiate/sustain a topic in a conversation.
A2	Part III – 1 question (2nd part)	2	Check if the candidate is able to describe her/his home and the town/city where s/he lives or intends to live.
B1	Part IV – 2 questions	2.5	Check the candidate's ability to understand the message in a comic strip and present an argument for or against an idea.
B1	Part IV – 1 question (2nd part)	1.5	Check the candidate's ability to write a short text, according to a specific genre, for example, an e-mail message to a teacher.
B2 or above	Part IV – 4 questions	2	Listening comprehension

Table 2: Proficiency levels and competences assessed in the PFL online test

3 Test results

The first trial of the UNESP online PFL placement test was taken by 201 candidates, who were classified according to the following levels (Table 3):

Proficiency level	Total marks cutting scores
A1	0 – 2.99
A2	3 – 5.99
B1	6 - 8
Above B1	8.01 - 10

Table 3: Candidates' levels in the first trial of the UNESP online PFL placement test

A classification of the candidates in the test is shown in the bar chart below (Figure 7):
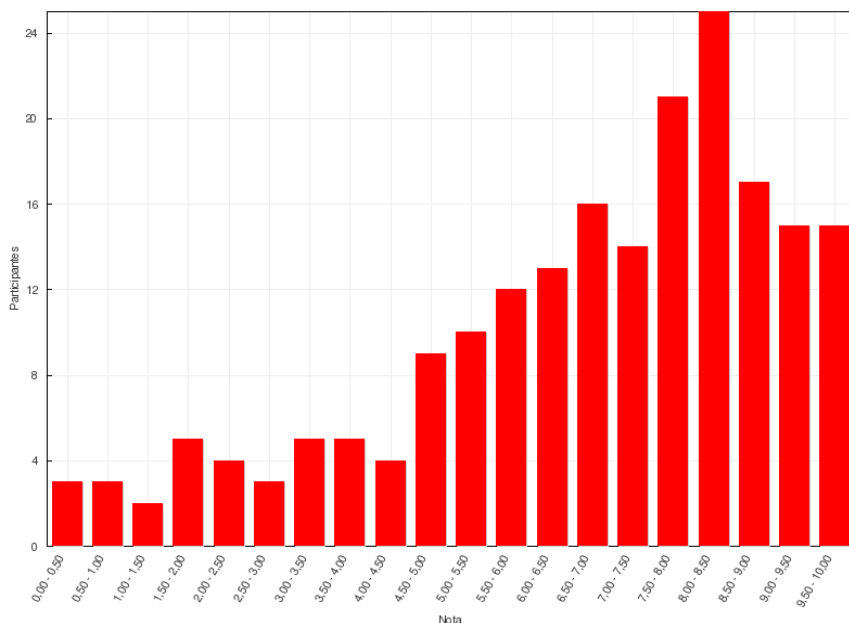
Figure 7: Candidates and marks achieved (in 0.5-mark intervals, as generated by the Moodle platform)

In the group of 201 test takers, 41 candidates were classified at A2 and 62 candidates were classified at B1 level. The remaining candidates, classified at either A1 or above B1, were informed that they should enroll in another PFL course because the UNESP online course only catered for A2 and B1 levels when it was set up. An A1-level course was planned and made available on the Moodle platform a year later.

4. Test correction

The PFL course tutors were invited to correct the online test and, in order to establish the criteria for correction, a video meeting with all the tutors and their supervisors was organized. The questions and the acceptable answers were discussed in the meeting, as well as some techniques for marking answers to which less than full marks should be given, for example, in the case of an incomplete answer. In the third part of the test each item was worth 0.375 marks but, because of the test configuration, correct answers in this part were given 0.38 marks by the Moodle platform, and some adaptations had to be made so as to fit total marks within the range between zero and 10.0.

The tests were distributed among groups composed of two tutors, who worked in the correction phase under supervision (by UNESP teachers). Answers were assessed according to content, grammatical accuracy,

vocabulary, cohesion and coherence. Mistakes concerning punctuation and homophones, such as "s", "ss", "ch" and "x", for example, were not penalized.

5. Final remarks

The present article has reported on the process of developing and administering an online PFL placement test. The aim of the test was to classify candidates for an online Portuguese course at levels A1, A2, B1 or above B1. Test takers would be foreign students and researchers planning to come to Brazil for academic visits or to pursue university studies.

The test content and its parts have been described, as well as the procedures for test correction, and some decisions taken about technical aspects. The test results helped the students to know whether they should enroll in the online course (levels A1, A2 and B1) or in more advanced courses (above B1 level) upon arrival for study or work in Brazil.

Revisions and changes to the first version of the test may be introduced, for example, the inclusion of a speaking task or tasks, which would further help in assessing the candidates' proficiency. In order to include spoken production in the test, however, technical aspects have to be considered, maybe even the choice of a different online environment to host the test. More advanced test tasks could also be included so as to classify candidates more specifically at levels higher than B1, according to the CEFR, namely B2, C1 and C2. The development of an item bank would also contribute to the design of different versions of the test.

Online tests have advantages such as the possibility of reaching candidates in different geographical areas, item storage and the inclusion of multimodal resources. With further advances in our knowledge and developments in online assessment tools, we hope to make future contributions to the alignment of language teaching, learning and assessment as new educational technologies are rolled out.

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Apêndice 1

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Douglas Altamiro Consolo holds a BA in Linguistics and an MA in Applied Linguistics from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), in Brazil, a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Reading, in England, and a title of Associate Professor in English from the State University of Sao Paulo (UNESP) in Brazil. He has carried out post-doctoral projects at UNICAMP, at the University of Melbourne (UNIMELB), in Australia, and at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He currently works as a lecturer and researcher at UNESP in Sao Jose do Rio Preto, and as the supervisor of the area of Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL) in the Language Centre on the same campus, where he supervises for training teachers in PFL. He has published books, book chapters, and articles in specialized journals and conference annals. He supervises scientific initiation projects, MA dissertations, PhD theses and post-doctoral projects in Applied Linguistics. His main research interests include Portuguese as a foreign language, language assessment and teaching, and teacher education. His experience in PFL includes acting as oral examiner for the Celpe-BRAS examination. He contributes as a reviewer for academic journals, publishing companies and sponsoring agencies.

Apêndice 2

RESUMO INSERIDO NO FORMULÁRIO DE SUBMISSÃO:

Trata-se, neste artigo, da avaliação de proficiência em português como língua estrangeira em um relato do desenvolvimento de um teste online de nivelamento, em um projeto multi-campus de cursos online de português implementado em uma universidade brasileira pública. O teste classifica os candidatos nos níveis A1, A2, B1 ou acima de B1, com base no Quadro Europeu Comum Europeu de Referência, e os alunos são inscritos em turmas online de acordo com esses níveis. As questões do teste se baseiam em tarefas linguísticas associadas a contextos universitários, por exemplo, compreensão do português falado, gramática em níveis básico e intermediário, e habilidades de leitura. Uma escala de faixas de proficiência de caráter holístico foi criada para correção do teste e nivelamento dos candidatos em níveis básicos ou pré-intermediários. A experiência da seleção do ambiente online mais adequado para o teste, entre o Google Forms e a plataforma Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), também é relatada, conforme as vantagens e desvantagens de cada uma dessas alternativas.

Apêndice 3

ABSTRACT INSERIDO NO FORMULÁRIO DE SUBMISSÃO:

This paper focuses on proficiency assessment in Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) by reporting on the development of an online placement test within a multi-campus project of online Portuguese courses conducted in a Brazilian state university. The test classifies the candidates at levels A1, A2, B1 or above B1, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and the students are placed in online courses accordingly. The test items are based on language tasks related to university contexts, such as understanding spoken Portuguese, basic and intermediate grammar, and reading skills. A holistic proficiency scale based on the CEFR was created to correct the test and place the candidates at either basic or pre-intermediate levels. The experience of deciding on the most suitable online platform for the test, between Google Forms and the Moodle platform (*Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*), is also presented in this article, according to the advantages and disadvantages of each of these alternatives. Test results were successful in classifying candidates according to the aforementioned proficiency levels of the online course.