

Meaning Negotiation in Interactions Between Learners and Native Speakers of Portuguese: Challenges and Outcomes

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Abstract

Every year, students in Portuguese 201: “Portuguese Reading and Speaking” at Northwestern University interact with college students in Brazil. They talk in Portuguese through a private group on Facebook, as well as by video interaction during the weeks of the course. The syllabus of Portuguese 201 is structured according to themes, which are discussed in class as a preparation for the dialogue with the Brazilians students, who might come from different parts of Brazil. Most of our students are from a Latino country and know Spanish well - a language that share more than 85% of lexical items with Portuguese. These aspects make the conversations flow more naturally with their Brazilian counterparts. Yet, there are many challenges to overcome. Studies show that Portuguese language learners who are fluent in Spanish negotiate meaning in different ways, and may especially rely on their previous knowledge of Spanish to speak Portuguese. This can actually interfere in the development of their proficiency in the language. How do we overcome this challenge? In this presentation we will demonstrate how our learners of Portuguese negotiate meaning in the language (a study led by 2 research assistants in our program) and present some solutions to help students attain proficiency through peer collaboration: follow-up questionnaires and conversation review.