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## Teaching Portuguese abroad: my experience at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica

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**Resumo:** Este artigo relata minha experiência ensinando Português como Língua Estrangeira na Universidade das Índias Ocidentais, na Jamaica. Apresenta uma descrição dos alunos, seus objetivos e das oportunidades de enriquecimento cultural que tiveram enquanto alunos de português na universidade. O artigo também inclui breves descrições de trabalhos que contribuíram para as minhas reflexões como uma instrutora de línguas no exterior: o papel da motivação na aquisição de conhecimento, a aprendizagem além das paredes da escola e o uso de diferentes estratégias de aprendizagem. O artigo ainda faz referência ao programa PEC-G (Programa de Estudantes-Convênio de Graduação) e ao Celpe-Bras (Certificação de Proficiência em Língua Portuguesa para Estrangeiros).

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino. Português. Cultura. Estrangeiros. Leitorado.

## Introduction

I worked at the University of the West Indies (UWI), in Jamaica from 2008 to 2012. I was sent to Kingston, after being selected for the Brazilian 'Leitorado' program, a project coordinated by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) and the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). My mission was to teach Portuguese Language and promote Brazilian culture in the city. I was a member of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and I taught Beginners' Portuguese I and II. The department welcomed students from all fields of study and strongly encouraged language learning on campus. The existing Faculties at UWI are: Humanities and Education, Law, Medical Sciences, Science and Technology and Social Sciences. Each faculty has both undergraduate and graduate programs. Portuguese classes were offered at the undergraduate level.

During that time I collected data on my students' choices of majors in order to verify which groups of students found Portuguese language more attractive or more suitable to their needs. Here follow three charts with figures from 2008 and 2009:

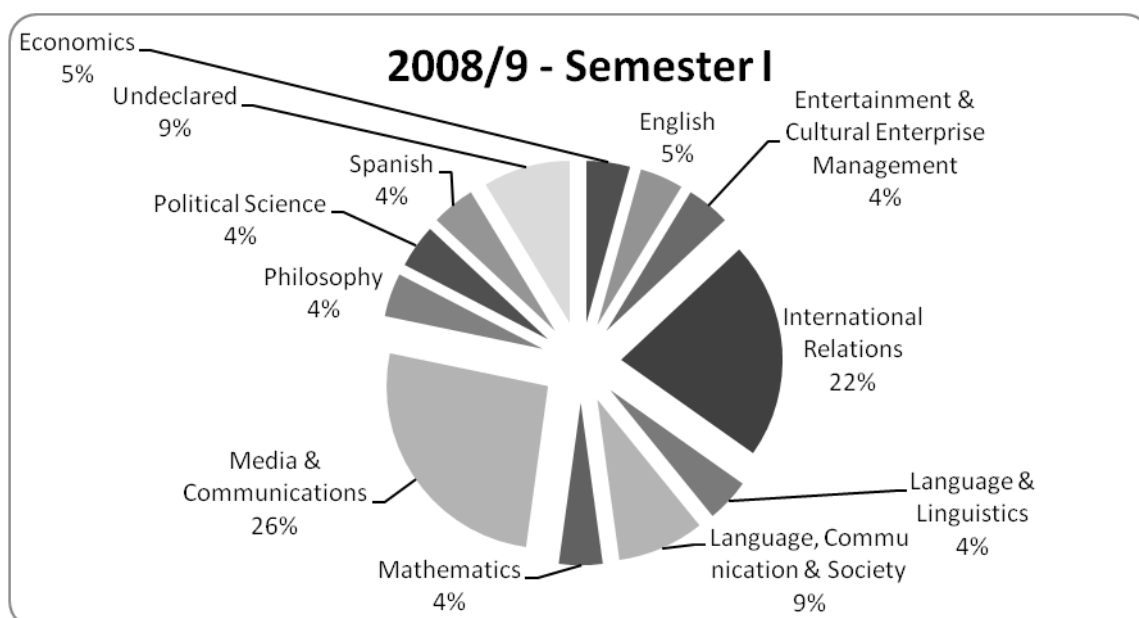


Chart 1: Most students in my Portuguese class, during semester I, were majoring in either International Relations or Media & Communications.

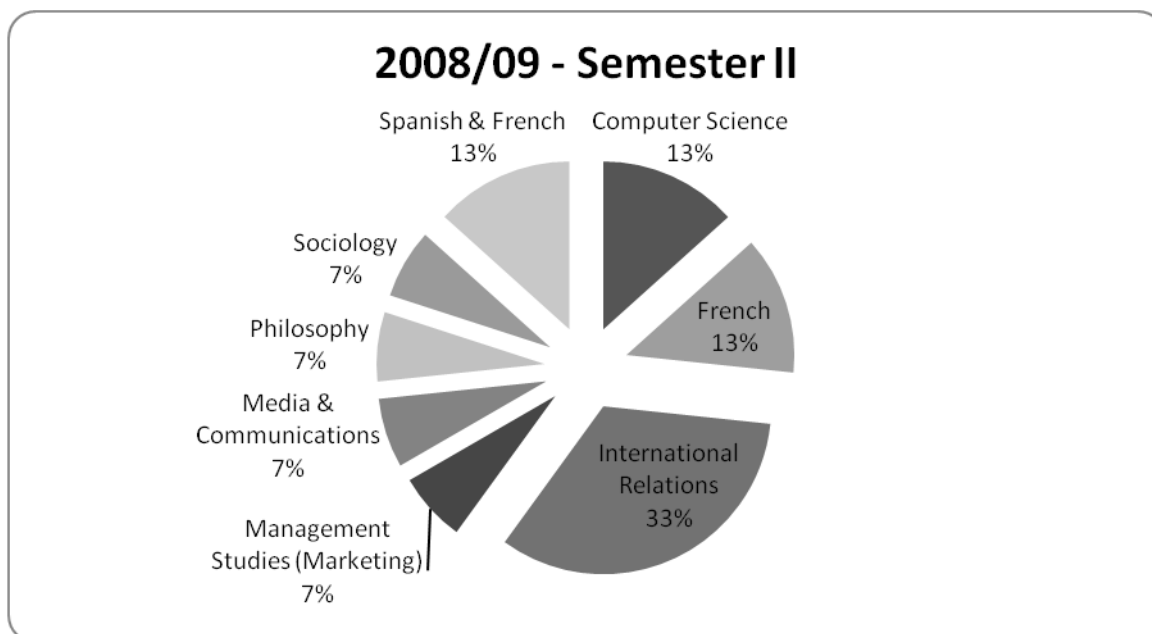


Chart 2: Most students in my Portuguese class, during semester II, were majoring in International Relations and were required to take one of the following foreign languages: Chinese, French, Japanese, Portuguese or Spanish.

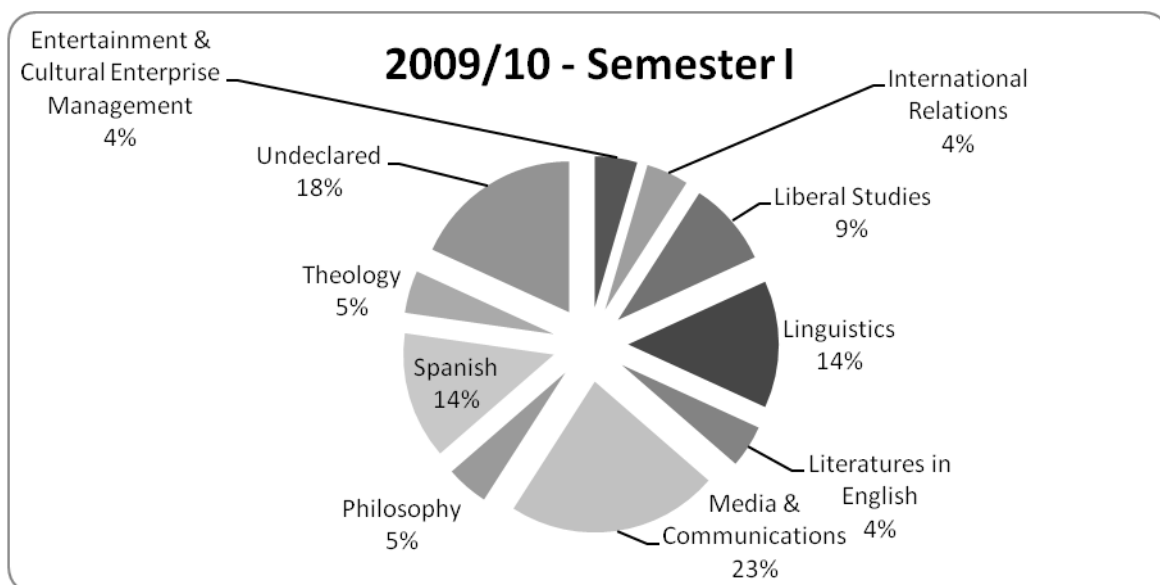


Chart 3: The Department of Media and Communications sent again a considerable number of students to study Portuguese.

Some of the students who were currently registered in programs at the University of the West Indies also had interest in participating in the Brazilian Program of Undergraduate Students Exchange (PEC-G). According to statistics

reported by Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>1</sup>, the numbers of Jamaican students who came to universities in Brazil through PEC-G in the last twelve years are:

2002: 5 students  
2003: 4 students  
2004: 3 students  
2005: 7 students  
2006: 5 students  
2007: 3 students  
2008: 4 students  
2009: 5 students  
2010: 10 students  
2011: 6 students  
2012: 8 students  
2013: 10 students

The application for this program is announced yearly in Jamaica and students, who meet the requirements, are encouraged to apply. A considerable number of Jamaican students look for opportunities to go to Medical schools abroad. However, the programs in Brazil with the highest number of places offered are: Languages/Literature, Social Communication, Business Administration, Biology and Pedagogy<sup>2</sup>.

When students arrive in Brazil they are offered Portuguese training at one of our universities. After this period of study they take the Celpe-Bras exam and, if they pass, they start their undergraduate studies in the following academic year.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Division of Educational Themes (DCE). For more information see: <http://www.dce.mre.gov.br/PEC/G/historico.html> ("Histórico do PEC-G") - last accessed on September 6, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>According to: <http://www.dce.mre.gov.br/PEC/G/historico.html> ("Histórico do PEC-G") - last accessed on September 6, 2013.

## 1. Learning more about my students

To get to know my students in their first day of class and also to have an idea of their expectations, I conducted a survey in which they had to give their reasons for taking the language. Some of the answers were:

“Another language will increase my knowledge of other cultures which use Portuguese. Eventually broaden my horizons, culturally, socially, perhaps spiritually”.

“To pursue a scholarship in Dentistry in Brazil”.

“To master a second language and it will help me in the future because I hope to visit Brazil or Portugal one day. It will also help seeing that I am planning to enter into politics”.

“To fulfil my department’s language requirements”.

“I think that learning another language is interesting. I would like to travel the world and hopefully visit Brazil. Brazilian culture seems to be very interesting. I have no idea what I would like to do with the rest of my life and I am doing as many different courses as possible to diversify my options”.

“It sounds like a beautiful language”.

“I want to do this course because I always wanted to do a foreign language course that was not Spanish or French. My girlfriend speaks it as well and it is close to Spanish and I have done Spanish as well. I believe it is an interesting language and I like the culture”.

“My career/future job does business with Brazil and there is a language barrier”.

“Reason for taking Portuguese is for communication purposes with my Brazilian friends. Also I am a footballer and I am interested in travelling to Brazil in the future for football tournaments and business”.

“Languages are my passion, and my niche and a bit of a collector’s item for me. I’d love to be fluent in as many languages as possible and to be able to immerse myself in foreign cultures and society”.

As we can see, students have different reasons and motivations for taking the language. Some have what we call intrinsic motivation, while others may still need motivation from teachers and classmates.

## **1. The role of motivation**

McKeachie *et al* (1998), observing teaching and learning in the college classroom, state that components of motivation (student goal orientation or expectancy for success, for example) should be considered, in conjunction with cognitive aspects, in order to explain a learner’s performance. Students’ intrinsic motivation may also be influenced by the type of instructors they have. An instructor’s attitude can help students develop appreciation for course material; his/her enthusiasm and ways of approaching problems are important factors in affecting students’ learning and motivation (MCKEACHIE, 1998, p. 114).

When we relate motivation to language learning, we can affirm that motivation is associated with the learner’s interest in the people who speak the language and in their customs and traditions. When cultural elements are brought into the classroom, students’ interest is stimulated and this propels motivation. If we try to create an authentic environment (and that could be by speaking more the language being taught, showing images, movies and songs), we will be using a good strategy for facilitating learning.

Decades ago, researchers were already analysing the relation between motivation and language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972), pioneers in this field, wrote their book observing attitudes and motivation in second language learning. According to them, motivation takes place when students identify themselves with the communities that speak the language being taught. It is the desire of interacting with these communities that motivates students. They state:

Social psychologists would expect that success in mastering a foreign language would depend not only on intellectual capacity and language aptitude but also on the learner's perceptions of the other ethnolinguistic group involved, his attitudes towards representatives of that group, and his willingness to identify enough to adopt distinctive aspects of behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, that characterize that other group. The learner's motivation for language study, it follows, would be determined by his attitudes and readiness to identify and by his orientation to the whole process of learning a foreign language. (GARDNER AND LAMBERT, 1972, p. 132)

## **2. Teaching according to my students' needs and aspirations**

The more authentic the material we use in our classes, the closer we take our students to the foreign culture and, consequently, to the foreign language we teach. It is very important to give students the chance of identifying themselves with people from other countries and we teachers must create opportunities for it. Even if time is short, we should consider putting some emphasis on activities that not only teach about the language, but that also promote cultural learning in our classrooms.

The internet can be a helpful tool in the work with visual elements. It can provide images that textbooks lack. These images can have a powerful effect on our students because they teach not only about people, but also about the world they belong to. The internet can also be helpful in the development of the four basic skills in language learning: writing, reading, listening and speaking.

A few of the internet tools that can contribute to the development of skills are: webquests, blogs, discussion rooms, Skype, chats, podcasts, etc. A very helpful website for teaching Portuguese at UWI was "BrazilianPodClass" (<http://www.brazilianpodclass.com/>). The University did not have a large number of CDs on Portuguese language, so BrazilianPodClass was the perfect way of encouraging listening practice among my students. The podcast producers release audio files once a week and all level students can have access. They learn about Brazilian culture and language while improve their listening and reading skills. I also suggested other sites to my students, such as "Sonia-portuguese" (<http://www.sonia-portuguese.com/>), "Easy Portuguese" (<http://www.easyportuguese.com/>) and Michaelis dictionary (<http://michaelis.uol.com.br/>). In addition, web sites on news

were valuable resources for offering authentic reading and a critical view of Brazilian social and economic problems.

Besides using the internet, another way of motivating our students is organizing activities outside the classroom. Several events took place in Kingston and students were encouraged to participate:

1. The Modern Languages Festival: it was organized by the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and included all languages taught at the department: Chinese, French, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.
2. The intercampus theatre festival: involved three campuses – Mona in Jamaica; Saint Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago and Cave Hill in Barbados. At this occasion performances of Brazilian plays, based on Brazilian novels or short stories took place.
3. Events supported by the Embassy of Brazil in Kingston: concerts on Brazilian music were financed by the Brazilian Embassy and they enriched campus life enormously. A Bossa Nova project was also taken to the general community, through a grand performance at the Bank of Jamaica Auditorium in 2009.
4. TV program Smile Jamaica: TVJ, the local TV station contributed to the promotion of Brazilian culture, through music, by broadcasting two performances of Brazilian songs during its program Smile Jamaica.
5. Research Day: event organized by the University of the West Indies, in which we could display information about Brazil and its culture. During the event, visitors could watch demonstrative short classes in Portuguese.
6. Noche Latina: organized by the Spanish Club, the event included Brazil, since it was about the cultural manifestations of the Latin American countries.



7. Brazilian Day: students organized an open exhibit on the following topics:

- a. Visit Brazil
- b. Brazilian fauna
- c. Brazilian History and Geography
- d. Brazilian celebrations
- e. Brazilian football
- f. Brazilian food
- g. Brazilian music
- h. Religion in Brazil
- i. Literature, Art and Cinema
- j. Capoeira

When reflecting on the importance of involving students in this type of activities, we can mention the work of Wildman (2005), "From the Outside In: Lessons in Learning Beyond the School Walls", in which he proposes a transition from cognition to social practice. According to him, learning in school has been seen as separate from doing and, in order to change that, social practice should be taken more seriously by educators. We should add to the existing curriculum at our educational institutions activities that provide learners with more authentic and interesting participation opportunities. Furthermore, we should show our students how important such opportunities can be to their personal and educational development.

Wildman invites us to look through the lens of social learning theory to better understand the kinds of participation that students are afforded in schools. He mentions students that benefit greatly from the opportunities offered through co-curricular activities.

Besides being interested in motivating my students, I was also interested in learning how I could make the process of learning easier for each of them. Therefore, I started observing and considering different styles of learning. James and Maher (2004) analyze the understanding and use of learning styles. They consider the different expectations that students have on the first day of class and make us wonder: how can we satisfy the needs of each individual learner? Do we tend to teach them without considering the variety of styles that can facilitate learning? According to the authors, diagnosis of learning styles can result in more rational

instruction (JAMES & MAHER, 2004, p. 122). Therefore we must stop and analyze how our students are learning, paying attention to the cognitive and affective dimensions of their brains.

James and Maher see instructors as lifelong learners who should always be investigating the ways students learn better: group interaction? independent study? Adult learners can observe and see what they need, in order to be effective learners and can also strategize when conditions are not ideal. A very important point is the responsibility that the authors give to learners in the development of learning styles. Instructors must help learners recognize their potential but the students themselves are the ones who will find their own effective strategies for learning (JAMES & MAHER, 2004, p. 137).

Finding their own strategies for learning was a piece of advice that I gave to those students who had a difficult time learning Portuguese. One of the areas that I noticed that could be improved was writing. During four years, I collected my students' assessments and tried to identify their most common mistakes. Most of their problems were related to grammatical structures, but I also noticed that there was a strong influence of Spanish in their writing. That is explained by the fact that most students took Spanish as a foreign language while in school. Spanish is a language that has been taught in Jamaican schools for years.

Prepare students to be able to write and speak Portuguese with no interference of other languages is a big challenge for us teachers. Both writing and speaking are important components of proficiency exams, such as Celpe-Bras, and it is our job to prepare students to reach the required level. We can conclude by saying that helping these students involves several tasks, such as preparing a good class, considering their different ways of learning and understanding that social learning should also be taken into consideration in the acquisition of a foreign language.

## Conclusion

Portuguese language is becoming more popular among international students nowadays. Students from different parts of the world have been offered Portuguese classes at their colleges or universities as a result of the Brazilian “Leitorado” program. As demonstrated initially, students have different reasons for learning Portuguese and we teachers are expected to motivate them and help them with their challenges.

Teaching Portuguese abroad meant to me more than the experience of teaching the language, it also involved learning about a new school system, a new institution, its values and priorities. Language teaching was accompanied by my wish to promote a culture that I admire and a strong desire to help Brazil strengthen ties with Jamaica. Both countries have been maintaining strong diplomatic relations and this can be confirmed with the establishment of the Embassy of Jamaica in Brasília in 2012. Its official opening was in June, 2013 and consolidated a period of important negotiations between both countries.

Portuguese teaching and the promotion of Brazilian culture were part of the plan that Brazilian Government had for Jamaica from 2008 to 2012. I am glad I was part of this plan, as a teacher, and I hope that, in a very near future, students who benefited from UWI Portuguese classes will be able to contribute to negotiations and further expand bilateral relations between their country and Brazil.

**Abstract:** This article describes my experience teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. It presents a description of students, their objectives and the opportunities of cultural enrichment that they had while Portuguese students at the university. The article also includes brief descriptions of works that contributed to my reflections as a language instructor abroad: the role of motivation in acquisition of knowledge, learning beyond the school walls and the use of different learning strategies. The article still makes reference to Brazilian program PEC-G and Portuguese proficiency exam Celpe-Bras.

**Key-words:** Teaching. Portuguese. Culture. Foreigners. ‘Leitorado’.

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