Gaining Proficiency through Task-based Activities in the Portuguese Classroom (Beginning and Intermediate Year Case Studies)

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The use of isolated task-based activities in the classroom can allow for greater flexibility on the part of the teacher in aligning the task-based activity to the needs of their students. As first-year students often have difficulty with real-world tasks that may require a multitude of verb tenses and situation-specific vocabulary, these task-based activities can be designed to enhance vocabulary acquisition and to complement the current language level and classroom lesson at hand, all with the aim of initiating spontaneous speech in the target language by completing the objective of the activity. At the United States Military Academy, we use one such task-based activity in our first- through third-semester Portuguese language sequence, which we rather generically call the "Proficiencies" (Proficiências). A stand-alone task-based activity can be an effective tool in gaining foreign-language proficiency at even the lowest levels of classroom instruction by limiting the scope of the task to a more attainable level. It can also encourage incidental vocabulary acquisition, increased student engagement in the classroom, and greater student responsibility in their language-learning process.

The "Proficiencies" were designed to be a set of tasks, divided into units, with the objectives of filling in vocabulary and other gaps of knowledge in the language learned in previous semesters. Each unit contains ten tasks. These tasks were varied, as the ultimate objective was to prepare students to encounter a real-life situation where various tasks may occur in one single social session (such as a conversation at a social gathering). The tasks were also limited to ten per unit, so as not to overwhelm the language-learner with too many tasks to complete before they reach the checkpoint. Finally, the tasks were chosen to reflect a myriad of uses: some can be keyed to the lesson and others can recycle previous information. The tasks do not need to be the same for every lesson, although continuity does have its advantages. This flexibility allowed us to match the tasks to particular lessons of the textbook, lessening the impression of "busy work," if we so choose. This flexibility also allowed us to vary the level of difficulty of the "tasks," to encourage weaker students to feel empowered with the completion of a task and yet still be able to challenge the stronger students.

We blended implicit and explicit knowledge tasks within the "Proficiencies," which made the activity a challenge for both students and instructors, especially in terms of assessment. As the "Proficiencies" activity was also created as an intermingled process of analytical tasks (which can be completed by the student alone) as well as holistic tasks (which needed to be completed through interaction with other students), the end result was ultimately focused on explicit knowledge capable of being assessed through holistic means. Students were required to take a leadership role in the activity, by directing the tasks and approving the successful completion of the objectives. By giving the students different tasks with specific objectives, the language learners are constantly engaging with a variety of ideas, concepts, vocabulary words and thought patterns; in essence, approximating language use on a daily basis in real-life situations.
The process of completing the tasks, and correcting others as they do so, allows the students to take ownership of their learning and of the completion of the task, while also allowing for incidental language learning to occur. If the activity works as anticipated, by the time the student meets with the instructor for the final grade completion, s/he will have completed the task and witnessed the completion of the same task enough times, hopefully, that they are able to successfully complete the task in a spontaneous fashion. They would also hopefully have heard several new words (in the context of lists) or encountered other ways of answering a question or addressing a situation, as most of the tasks are open-ended and do not have only one correct answer. This holistic approach also allows us to push towards what we call the “spontaneous speaking” aspect of the “Proficiencies.” The ultimate goal of the “Proficiencies” is to aid the student in anticipating circumstances based on their situation, and to provide enough practice so that 1) hesitation is reduced; 2) a sense of accomplishment is achievable; and 3) a correct or applicable answer is within reach.

In presenting and assessing learned and new material in a different fashion than in the traditional way, one end result of the task-based “Proficiencies” activity is to allow students to feel as though they are accomplishing a goal while using the language, and will have the confidence to be able to do so in the future if put in a similar situation. This use of the target language, or at the minimum, the perceived use of it, allows students to feel a greater engagement with the language and to take on more responsibility in retaining and using the language after they leave the classroom. In particular, the repetitive nature of the task-based “Proficiencies” activity allows us to focus on the five-year mark when many of our students leave active service in the United States Army and enter the civilian workforce, hopefully sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of the future global economy.

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WORKS CITED


