

Teaching Experience

Interview with Fabiana DePaula

Fabiana DePaula ¹

Marcia dos Santos Machado Vieira ² 

¹ Iowa State University

² Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

E-mail: fdepaula@iastate.edu

E-mail: marcia@letras.ufrj.br

Fabiana DePaula holds a Master of Arts in Religion with a focus on Ethics from Yale University, an MBA from Rollins College, and a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Production Engineering from *Universidade Paulista* in São Paulo, Brazil.

She currently serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor of Portuguese and International Studies at Iowa State University, where she has taught since 2018. Her teaching includes *Accelerated Portuguese*, *Brazil Today*, and *Introduction to International Studies*. She has also contributed to online course development and innovation in language instruction.

Before joining ISU, DePaula taught Portuguese at Yale University as a Language Lecturer in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese from 2013 to 2017. There, she taught beginner to advanced Portuguese, coordinated the *Teletandem* program with UNESP in Brazil, and served as a Portuguese instructor for Yale's World Class Program, teaching public high school students in Connecticut. She also taught beginner-level Portuguese at Fairfield University in 2016–2017 as a Language Lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages and Literature.

Fabiana DePaula possui Mestrado em Religião com ênfase em Ética pela Universidade Yale, MBA pelo Rollins College e Bacharelado em Engenharia de Produção Mecânica pela Universidade Paulista, em São Paulo, Brasil.

Editora-chefe

Marcia dos Santos
Machado Vieira

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Atualmente, ela atua como Professora Assistente de Português e Estudos Internacionais na Universidade Estadual de Iowa, onde leciona desde 2018. Suas aulas incluem *Português Acelerado*, *Brasil Hoje* e *Introdução aos Estudos Internacionais*. Ela também contribuiu para o desenvolvimento e a inovação de cursos online no ensino de idiomas.

Antes de ingressar na ISU, DePaula lecionou português na Universidade Yale como Professora de Línguas no Departamento de Espanhol e Português de 2013 a 2017. Lá, lecionou português do nível iniciante ao avançado, coordenou o programa *Teletandem* com a UNESP no Brasil e atuou como instrutora de português no Programa Classe Mundial de Yale, lecionando para alunos de escolas públicas de ensino médio em Connecticut. Ela também lecionou português para nível iniciante na Universidade Fairfield em 2016-2017 como Professora de Línguas no Departamento de Línguas e Literaturas Modernas.

We are deeply grateful to Fabiana DePaula for accepting our invitation to join us for this interview. Ms. DePaula, to begin, we'd love for you to share a bit about your experience teaching in the United States, particularly your work with Portuguese as a heritage or second language. Could you also tell us what inspired you to become a Portuguese instructor and perhaps share some of your current or future teaching projects?

After completing my Master's degree at Yale Divinity School in 2012, I knew I wanted to stay in the university setting and contribute to academic life. Around that time, I met an Assistant Professor who was teaching Portuguese in Yale's Department of Spanish and Portuguese. She invited me to join the department as a Portuguese instructor, and I accepted. That opportunity was the beginning of a journey I have loved.

From the start, I approached language teaching with a deep sense of purpose, recognizing that to teach a language is also to teach identity, culture, and ways of seeing the world. My early approach was grounded in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, which emphasizes meaningful interaction and real-world communication. Over time, I have incorporated additional research-based strategies, including task-based language teaching, multiliteracies pedagogy, and intercultural competence development. I also integrate technology tools like *Teletandem* exchanges and VoiceThread to promote collaborative learning and peer interaction.

My current work at Iowa State University continues to build on these approaches. I teach courses like Accelerated Portuguese and Brazil Today, and I am always exploring new ways to connect students not only with the language but also with the cultural and social realities of the Portuguese-speaking world. Looking ahead, I am developing new modules that include project-based learning and content-based instruction, especially for heritage speakers and students with professional goals tied to Portuguese.

To better prepare future Portuguese instructors for teaching in the United States, what theoretical, descriptive, and methodological frameworks would you recommend for undergraduate language education programs in Brazil?

To effectively prepare for teaching Portuguese in the United States, I believe undergraduate programs in Brazil should offer a balanced foundation in three key areas: theoretical understanding of second language acquisition, descriptive knowledge of Portuguese as it is spoken across diverse contexts, and practical methodological training grounded in applied linguistics. Let me explore these three points below: Theoretically, it is important to study how additional languages are acquired, particularly in adult learning contexts. Familiarity with theories such as the input hypothesis, sociocultural theory, and interlanguage development can help future instructors understand the learner's experience, especially in multicultural classrooms like those in the U.S.

Descriptively, training should go beyond prescriptive grammar to include sociolinguistic variation and pragmatic usage. Exposure to regional varieties of Portuguese, especially Brazilian Portuguese, and the ability to compare these with other dialects is essential, since students in the U.S. often come with diverse linguistic and cultural expectations. Methodologically, I strongly recommend an emphasis on communicative and task-based approaches, as well as newer frameworks like multiliteracies pedagogy and intercultural competence development. It is also valuable for future teachers to gain hands-on experience with digital platforms, open educational resources, and collaborative language learning tools such as *Teletandem* or language exchange projects.

What are the key considerations involved in teaching a pluricentric language like Portuguese? Specifically, how do you view the theoretical and methodological approaches to describing grammatical phenomena across Portuguese varieties — particularly in relation to different standardization models, such as pluricentricity (distinct national standards), polycentricity (a shared standard incorporating multiple varieties), or intra-varietal variation (coexisting standards within a single national or regional context)?

Teaching a pluricentric language like Portuguese requires not only linguistic expertise but also cultural sensitivity and an awareness of the political and historical forces that shape language use. Throughout my teaching experience in the United States, at Yale University, Fairfield University, and now at Iowa State University, I have worked with students from a variety of backgrounds: some with heritage connections to Brazil or Portugal, others learning Portuguese for professional or academic goals. This diversity has pushed me to adopt a flexible, inclusive approach to teaching that embraces linguistic variation rather than prescribing a single standard.

In terms of theoretical and methodological orientation, I believe it is important to move beyond rigid prescriptive norms and instead present grammatical phenomena within a descriptive and usage-based framework. I introduce students to *Brazilian Portuguese* as the main variety, given its global reach and my own background from São Paulo, but I also expose them to *European Portuguese* and *African Lusophone varieties* through multimedia materials, music, and discussion of sociolinguistic features. Regarding standardization models, I favor a pluricentric approach, where national standards, such as Brazilian and European Portuguese, are treated as equally valid, each with its own internal logic, grammar norms, and cultural reference points. To support this in the classroom, I use the textbook *Ponto de Encontro*, which offers parallel texts and activities in both Brazilian and European Portuguese. This flexibility allows students to choose which variant to follow more closely, and I have found that many of them have specific interests; some are planning to study abroad in Brazil, while others are drawn to Portugal or other Lusophone regions. The materials provide a structured way to highlight variation without creating confusion, and they open space for students to ask questions and compare usage patterns meaningfully. For example, in pronoun use, verb tenses, or syntactic order, while also helping students develop the metalinguistic awareness to navigate different registers and contexts. The goal is to prepare them not just to speak Portuguese, but to communicate across Lusophone communities with cultural competence and respect for linguistic diversity.

Could you share some of the most common similarities and differences you observe in the classroom between Portuguese and other languages your students may speak, such as Spanish and English? In particular, how do you see the interrelation between Portuguese and Spanish, often referred to as *Portunhol* or *Portuñol*, functioning in your classes? Do you find it to be more of a challenge or a helpful bridge for learners? And what would you say is the most frequent linguistic or cultural overlap you encounter in your teaching context?

In my classroom, where all of my students speak English and a significant number have a background in Spanish, I often encounter both helpful overlaps and occasional points of confusion between Portuguese, Spanish, and English.

One of the most frequent similarities students notice, particularly between Portuguese and Spanish, is the shared Latin-root vocabulary, verb conjugation patterns, and grammatical structures. This familiarity can be very encouraging at the beginner level, especially for heritage Spanish speakers who feel they can “get the gist” early on. It gives them a sense of early success and builds confidence. However, this can also lead to false friends, words that look similar but differ in meaning or usage, and overgeneralization of Spanish rules, which leads to the *Portunhol* or *Portuñol*. For example, students may say “*estoy cansado*” instead of “*estou cansado*”, or transfer Spanish syntax directly into Portuguese without realizing the subtle grammatical or phonetic differences.

From English, students often bring a different set of challenges, such as pronunciation habits and sentence structure. For native English speakers, Portuguese's gendered nouns, verb conjugations, and nasal sounds are usually the biggest hurdles.

I view *Portunhol* not as a problem, but as a developmental stage in the language learning process. It is a natural reflection of the learner's effort to bridge what they know with what they are acquiring. I try to leverage it as a teaching opportunity, helping students become more aware of cross-linguistic influence and refining their ability to "code switch" intentionally. Through contrastive analysis activities and peer discussion, students begin to recognize distinctions and develop greater metalinguistic awareness.

The most frequent overlap I see, particularly among Spanish-speaking students, is in verb forms and shared cognates, which can be both a blessing and a trap. For English speakers, the most helpful similarity is often the sentence rhythm and subject-verb-object word order, which aligns more closely with Portuguese than they expect. In both cases, I try to cultivate curiosity about these connections, using them as entry points into deeper linguistic and cultural understanding.

In your experience, what is one aspect of the Portuguese language that is particularly challenging to teach or explain to learners? What do you find to be the most difficult area for students learning Portuguese as a non-native language? Additionally, what thematic or grammatical topics do you believe should be prioritized or explored more deeply to better support instructors who teach Portuguese as a second or foreign language?

One aspect of the Portuguese language that I find particularly challenging to teach is the use of object pronouns, especially clitic placement, which is very different from both Spanish and English. Explaining when and why pronouns appear before or after the verb, or are attached to infinitives or gerunds, often feels counterintuitive for learners. This is even more complex when we consider regional variation: in Brazil, for example, pronoun use is less rigid than in European Portuguese, and in spoken Brazilian Portuguese, we often use alternative structures that diverge from the textbook standard. Teaching this balance between formal written norms and actual spoken usage can be difficult, but it is also an opportunity to discuss register, context, and linguistic change.

From the learners' perspective, I would say verb tenses and moods, particularly the subjunctive, are the most challenging. Unlike English, which uses modal verbs to express doubt or uncertainty, Portuguese relies on morphological changes in the verb itself. Students can struggle with recognizing when the subjunctive is needed, let alone master its conjugation. I have found that role-playing, storytelling, and real-life scenarios help make this more accessible, especially when we focus on *why* we use the subjunctive, not just *how*.

For teachers working with non-native speakers of Portuguese, I believe it is essential to prioritize grammatical topics that intersect with sociolinguistic variation, such as pronoun usage, verb forms, and regional vocabulary, and to frame them within real communicative contexts. Also, including contrastive grammar, especially comparisons with Spanish and English, can be very helpful. Beyond grammar, I think it is equally important to include cultural and thematic content that fosters engagement, such as music, current events, or social movements in the Lusophone world, so students are not just learning rules, but entering a broader conversation.

Is there any kind of immersion program or resource at Iowa State University, considering that there is the Language Studies Resource Center (with a recording studio)? If so, how is it?

Yes, Iowa State University offers resources that support immersive language learning experiences, particularly through the Language Studies Resource Center (LSRC). While the university may not have a traditional, full-scale immersion program, the LSRC provides facilities and programs that enhance language acquisition.

One notable feature of the LSRC is the One Button Studio, a recording facility that allows students to create high-quality audio and video recordings with ease. This studio is particularly useful for language students to practice speaking and listening skills, record presentations, or engage in interactive language exercises. Additionally, the LSRC provides access to virtual reality tools and other technological resources that can simulate immersive language experiences. These tools can help students engage with the language in a more interactive and engaging manner.

Which cool teaching activities or tools do you use or consider for the process of teaching-learning Portuguese? What are classroom activities or thematic fields that students really respond to? What digital resources can be explored? Do artificial intelligence applications have any impact on classes? If so, how?

In my Portuguese classes, I strive to create engaging, culturally rich, and student-centered learning experiences. One of the activities I regularly use is project-based learning, where students develop creative presentations or digital portfolios on topics such as Brazilian music, contemporary social issues, or Lusophone film. These projects allow students to apply vocabulary and grammar in meaningful, real-world contexts while building intercultural awareness.

I also love incorporating authentic materials, such as Brazilian newspapers, magazines, websites, and social media posts, into classroom activities. These materials help expose students to current language use, informal expressions, and culturally relevant content, making the learning experience more immediate and dynamic.

In terms of digital resources, I frequently use platforms like VoiceThread, to encourage oral practice and asynchronous engagement. These tools help students feel more confident speaking Portuguese and offer flexibility for different learning styles. At Yale

and Fairfield University, I have used *Teletandem* exchanges with Brazilian university students, which give learners a real opportunity to practice Portuguese with native speakers in a collaborative setting.

I have not yet incorporated artificial intelligence tools into my courses. As these technologies evolve, I look forward to exploring how they might enhance language learning in responsible and pedagogically sound ways.

What do you foresee as the future of Portuguese language teaching, mainly considering technological development, in the so-called era of Digital Humanities, and the (de)creasing interest of people in Portuguese in the United States?

I think Digital Humanities offers exciting opportunities for us to teach Portuguese through new, interdisciplinary lenses, incorporating tools like digital storytelling, interactive archives, geospatial mapping, and multimedia cultural analysis. These innovations allow students to engage with the Portuguese-speaking world not only linguistically, but also historically, politically, and socially.

As for the interest in Portuguese in the U.S., I would say that while enrollment numbers may fluctuate, the strategic value of Portuguese remains strong, especially given Brazil's economic and cultural importance, the presence of Lusophone communities in Africa, and the growing interest in global issues like sustainability, health, and migration. However, we do need to be more intentional in how we promote Portuguese programs: highlighting their relevance in global markets, international diplomacy, and cultural industries, while also making space for heritage learners who seek to reconnect with their linguistic roots.

What recommendations would you offer to a research group interested in collecting samples of oral and/or written texts produced by learners of Portuguese as a second or foreign language, such as those working on the InCorpora Project (Digital Portal on the State of Portuguese and Romance Languages for Variation and Teaching)? Are there specific practices, ethical considerations, or pedagogical strategies you would suggest guiding this type of data collection?

I would begin by emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations, particularly around informed consent, privacy, and the respectful representation of learners' voices. Participants should clearly understand how their data will be used, and ideally, can remain anonymous or review their contributions before publication or analysis.

In terms of pedagogical strategy, I recommend designing tasks that are both authentic and varied, so the data reflects a range of linguistic performance. For written texts, this might include reflections, discussion posts, short essays, or project-based outputs. For oral samples, recordings of presentations, interviews, or guided storytelling can provide richer data than isolated grammar exercises.

It is also useful to document relevant metadata: the learner's proficiency level, linguistic background (including heritage language status), learning context (*e.g.*, university classroom *vs.* community program), and exposure to Portuguese outside the classroom.