

DEPLOYING LITERATURE TO ENHANCE PORTUGUESE ORAL PROFICIENCY: CHALLENGES AND OPORTUNITIES

*O uso da literatura para aumentar a proficiência oral em português:
Desafios e oportunidades*

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ABSTRACT: In the realm of foreign language instruction, there is a discernible resurgence of interest in incorporating literature within language classrooms. Studies have shown the potency of literature to approach diverse linguistic dimensions (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014; Santos, 2015; Savvidou, 2004), and that literary texts can be used across proficiency levels (Lazar, 2009). This article focuses on the integration of literary texts as didactic tools in the teaching of Portuguese as a Foreign Language in higher education in the context of the United States. Based on backward design classes aligned with ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines, this study explores the challenges and benefits of utilizing literature for language acquisition. In addressing the practical dimensions, the article offers illustrative examples to illuminate the strategic incorporation of literary resources aiming an oral proficiency gain in Portuguese.

KEYWORDS: Literature. Foreign languages. Portuguese. ACTFL guidelines.

RESUMO: No campo do ensino de línguas estrangeiras, há um ressurgimento significativo no que tange à incorporação da literatura nas aulas de língua. Estudos têm demonstrado a potência da literatura ao abordar diversas dimensões linguísticas (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014; Santos, 2015; Savvidou, 2004), e que os textos literários podem ser utilizados nos diversos níveis de proficiência (Lazar, 2009). Este artigo centra-se na integração de textos literários como ferramentas didáticas no ensino de português como língua estrangeira no contexto de ensino superior nos Estados Unidos. Seguindo o modelo de design retroativo e alinhado às diretrizes de proficiência oral da ACTFL, o presente estudo explora os desafios e benefícios da utilização da literatura na aquisição de línguas. Ao abordar as dimensões práticas, o artigo oferece exemplos ilustrativos da incorporação de recursos literários visando o aumento de proficiência oral em português.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura. Línguas estrangeiras. Português. Parâmetros ACTFL.

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1 Introduction

While some language instructors and academics would rather preserve separate domains for the teaching of literature and the teaching of language, others propose an integration of disciplines, recognizing literature as a valuable resource of authentic materials conducive to enhancing language proficiency. The proposition to blur the boundaries between literature and language learning marked a significant paradigm shift, serving as a foundation for ongoing scholarly inquiry in this area. As a result, it emerged as a pivotal moment that not only stimulates dialogue but also emphasizes the importance of integrating literature into the language classrooms, thereby validating its pedagogical merit.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the incorporation of literature into foreign language instruction, resulting in diverse pedagogical approaches. Regarding the teaching of Portuguese, notable examples include the book *Atividades de literatura brasileira: Para o Ensino de português língua adicional/ português para estrangeiros* (Silva, 2023) and *Mapeando a língua portuguesa através das artes* (Sobral; Jouet-Pastré, 2013). While the former focuses on literature by presenting literary texts and providing guided exercises based on these texts, the latter introduces students to a variety of artistic expressions, including literature. In a more didactical approach, aimed at “any language teacher who wishes to explore the hows and whys of using literature in the language classroom” (Lazar, 2009, p. xii), the book *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers* (Lazar, 2009) serves as a comprehensive resource for teaching literature across different language proficiency levels, including lesson plans for short stories, poetry, and plays.

Esteeming the incorporation of literature in foreign language classes, this article aims to explore the use of literary texts within Portuguese language courses at higher education in the United States based on the ACTFL¹ proficiency guidelines. Particularly, this study proposes

¹ ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) is an organization founded in 1967 as an offshoot of MLA (Modern Language Association) (ACTFL, 2024). Currently, ACTFL is independent from MLA, and it holds its own yearly conventions gathering thousands of language educators from the U.S. and abroad. The organization approaches language teaching and learning of all languages at all levels. ACTFL provides publications, assessments, resources, and professional development. One of the most used language assessments in U.S. institutions is the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI).

leveraging literature to enhance oral proficiency through performance² practice. As the ACTFL proficiency guidelines are structured around learners' functional abilities at each level, an effective strategy involves developing exercises that use proficiency guidelines within a backward design³ model (Wiggins; McTighe, 2005). The ACTFL proficiency guidelines aids instructors in assessing and understanding the learner's current linguistic skills, which helps to define desired proficiency objectives for short-, mid- and long-term goals. Therefore, within a backward design approach, the ACTFL proficiency guidelines serve as a framework to foster proficiency gain.

To address these themes, this article commences by examining both the challenges and advantages associated with incorporating literature into language classes (Section 2). It then approaches the potential of literature as a didactical tool aiming proficiency enhancement. More specifically, providing insights on the progression from Advance Mid to Advanced High and Superior levels based on the ACTFL oral proficiency parameters (Section 3). Finally, it showcases illustrative examples of focused practices using the play *Ópera do malandro* (1978) by Chico Buarque as a primary material within a framework based on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines to target the Advanced High and Superior levels of proficiency (Section 4).

2 Literary texts in language classrooms: To use them or not to use them, that is the question

Considering that by “working with literary texts, students are exposed to real language — originally intended for native speakers — and this allows them to become familiar with the target linguistic forms and communicative functions” (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 250), why

² Both terms, performance and proficiency, refer to evidence of what the speaker can do with the language. However, performance is the ability to use the language in an instructional setting: “Coached by an instructor, whether in a classroom or online, or guided by instructional materials, performance refers to language ability that has been practiced and is within familiar contexts and content areas” (ACTFL Performance descriptors for language learners, 2012, p. 4). On the other hand, “proficiency is the ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language” (*Ibid.*).

³ “Backward design is goal directed. We aim for specific results and design backward from them accordingly” (Wiggins; McTighe, 2005, p. 56). This pedagogical tool serves as a framework, broken down into stages, that consider what students have learned to establish “clear, consistent and coherent educational goals” (Wiggins; McTighe, 2005, p. 62). Additionally, the direct co-relation between established goals and performance tasks are imbued in a backward design approach as “the desired goal [...] suggests the types of instructions and learning experiences” (Wiggins; McTighe, 2005, p. 56) to be approached in class. Thus, the goals must be determined before selecting instruction materials or crafting performance tasks.

do literary texts occupy a peripheric place in language classes, if any? Drawing upon insights from various scholars regarding the challenges and benefits of integrating literature into language instruction (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014; Santos, 2015; Savvidou, 2004), this article argues that the answer to this question is a result of both mindset and practical obstacles encountered in incorporating literature into foreign language classes. As discussed below, some examples of mindset hurdles are the persistence of myths related to teaching literature or a perception that the teaching of languages is disconnected from other disciplines. As for practical obstacles, some examples are instructors' lack of preparedness to connect literature to language learning, lack of teaching materials for this purpose and text selection.

Delving into these challenges, according to Santos, there are several myths related to teaching literary texts in language classes, such as literary texts should be used to approach culture and not language, it is difficult to teach literature, literary texts are not authentic materials as it does not reproduce real conversations, it is not an appropriate tool for communicative approach, therefore, it should not hold the same importance as other cultural expressions in language classes (2015, p. 41).

Additionally, Savvidou (2004, p. 2) points out the following:

There is a general perception that literature is particularly complex and inaccessible for the foreign language learner and can even be detrimental to the process of language learning [...] There is a perception that the use of literary discourse deflects from the straightforward business of language learning, i.e. knowledge of language structure, functions and general communication.

Furthermore, for some, literature remains associated with the canon, symbolizing high culture and representing an impractical use of the language. As a result, considered irrelevant to language instruction. These beliefs collectively shape a mindset that inhibits language instructors from utilizing literary texts in classroom. However, although there is no consensus among educators in terms of how to incorporate literature in language classes (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 257), an increasing number of researchers and educators (Savvidou, 2004; Lazar, 2009; Teranishi *et al.*, 2015; Santos, 2015) defend literature as an efficient tool to language teaching. Their work demystifies these beliefs and actively proposes methods for incorporating literary texts into classrooms, thereby fostering a shift in perspective.

Nevertheless, the use of literature as an input in language classes has experienced periods of demise and resurgence. Paraphrasing Bobkina and Dominguez's (2014) historical

analysis of literature in EFL classes, the early 20th century witnessed a close study of English and American canonical literature in non-English speaking countries. Employing the Grammar Translation Method, literary texts served as examples of proficient writing and grammatical correctness. However, in mid 1920s the Grammar Translation Method fell in disuse, leading to the discrediting of literary texts as effective teaching tools and their subsequent elimination from language classroom. By prioritizing grammar structure and vocabulary acquisition, the Grammar Translation Method neglected to acknowledge that language competence involves a broader spectrum of skills, including cultural and social nuances crucial for what is now recognized as a communicative approach. Consequently, from the 1940s to the 1960s, the disappearance of literature from language teaching curricula shifted the focal point of language programs towards linguistics. The renewed interest in integrating literature in language teaching appeared in the mid 1980s, period when the attempt moved towards content knowledge and to support developing skills (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 249).

About the dichotomy between language and literature related to the teaching of foreign languages, Savvidou mentions a “border dispute over territory between linguists and literary critics” (Short, 1996 *apud* Savvidou, 2004) and that this historic divergence “has resulted in the teaching of the two subjects as disconnected pedagogic practices” (Carter; McRae, 1996 *apud* Savvidou, 2004). This observation brings to light a crucial aspect of the present study: despite language acquisition and literature being separate and independent subjects, they are not isolated from each other. Indeed, “literature is language and language can indeed be literary” (Savvidou, 2004). Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that language learning intersects with various domains of education, encompassing not only linguistics and literature but also cultural studies, history, sociology, international studies, anthropology, among others. Language learning is inherently interdisciplinary, and the process of acquiring a language unfolds within a multifaceted context, rather than in isolation.

Therefore, the articulation between programs is fundamental in addressing this and other significant challenges outlined by Bobkina and Dominguez (2014), who draw upon the insights of Lima (2010) Khatib and Nourzadeh (2011) and Edmonson, 1997 to underscore the following:

Those teachers who try to incorporate literature in the classroom inevitably find themselves facing serious problems that include key factors as lack of preparation in

the area of literature teaching in EFL, absence of clear objectives defining the role of literature and a lack of the necessary background knowledge and training in literature, or shortage of pedagogically well-designed materials (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 248).

These obstacles align with the lack of substantial literary text in language teaching materials, which, according to Santos, compels instructors to either adopt alternative methodologies when compared to the use of other cultural materials – resulting in an artificial treatment of literature, such as in “a literature moment” – or do not use literary text at all (Santos, 2015, p. 42).

Regarding the teaching of foreign languages within U.S. higher education, both schools of education and L2 departments count with faculty whose research and expertise are closely aligned in terms of identifying effective tools for language instruction. This encompasses various aspects, ranging from instructional design to the utilization of frameworks for language teaching and the development of pedagogical materials for language classes. Regarding the implementation of proficiency guidelines and standards as framework in language classes, Lacorte’s affirms that, “it would be crucial to put an end to the ongoing lack of communication between L2 departments and schools of education” (2017, p. 187), advocating for collaborative efforts aimed at establishing innovative and effective professional programs for language instructors.

This collaboration holds immense potential for shaping curriculum development in language programs. In L2 programs in the U.S., including Portuguese, language instructors frequently are graduate students enrolled in Literature and Culture M.A. or PhD programs, often supported by Teaching Assistant Scholarships to teach or co-teach language classes, with a few exceptions. Essentially, these individuals acquire expertise in literature through their graduate coursework while concurrently receiving training in language teaching as teaching assistants. However, there is a critical gap in integrating these two facets, particularly in providing training for teaching literature within language classes. A collaboration between the school of education and L2 departments, as proposed by Lacorte, could be a possibility to reduce this gap, as well as for the development of substantial teaching materials and strategies joining literature to the teaching of foreign languages.

Another major challenge to employ literature in language classes is text selection. Numerous factors come into play when deciding on a text, including language proficiency level,

age, gender, background knowledge, and the length of the text (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014). Additionally, the relevance of the theme and cultural aspect of the book to the overall topic of the course are important considerations. Furthermore, Lazar (2009) pinpoints some criteria for selecting a text, and takes into account not only the linguistic level, but also students' emotional and intellectual understanding of materials.

While finding the perfect text is undoubtedly challenging, it should not derail instructors from all the benefits of incorporating literary text into language classes. According to Lazar, "if we ask students to respond personally to the text we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English⁴" (2009, p. 19). Thus, adequate literary texts that resonate with students' emotions can serve as valuable assets in enhancing student motivation, facilitating comparisons of values and traditions across cultures, and fostering a deeper enjoyment of reading. However, we also must account for students who are not motivated by the encounter with literature. For some students, the use of literature can be perceived as a loss of time and other materials would be preferable. This perception could stem from the lack of reading habit, even in their first language, and/or a response to the misconception that literature is unreachable or that literary texts are not as engaging as other authentic materials, such as songs or current events. Nevertheless, in such instances, well-chosen texts that resonates with students' emotions can spark their interest and, even when this attempt falls short, literature remains a valuable resource and didactical tool for language learning. Therefore, it is beneficial for students to be exposed to literature as much as to materials derived from other cultural expressions.

In essence, "literature is language in use and therefore can be exploited for language learning purposes" (Maley, 1987 *apud* Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 249) despite the challenges that instructors may encounter, be it mindset hurdles or practical obstacles to incorporate literature to the teaching of languages. Literary texts are authentic materials composed by examples of text types, discourses and registers: a "potpourri of language types and varieties – from slang to formal – and various subject matters" (Maley, 1989 *apud* Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 250). These multifaceted aspects of literature collectively formulate texts

⁴ Despite Lazar's statement pertains explicitly to the teaching of English, the underlying principle is broadly applicable to the instruction of any foreign language.

demanding language comprehension and interpretation from the reader. This process stimulates critical thinking and provides learners with opportunities to cultivate a sophisticated use of the foreign language.

3 The potential of literature aligned with ACTFL guidelines to foster proficiency gain

While literature holds potential for fostering proficiency across different levels⁵, this article delves into the advancement from the Advanced Mid (AM) to Advanced High (AH) or Superior (S) levels⁶. This section commences with a succinct overview of the expected abilities at these specific levels⁷, alongside the key hurdles encountered by AM speakers as they strive for progression. Subsequently, attention will be directed towards the utilization of literature as a valuable tool in facilitating this advancement.

The speaker at the AM level demonstrates a robust mastery of the language, facilitating active engagement in discussions spanning various topics including personal anecdotes, community matters, and contemporary affairs. Additionally,

Advanced Mid speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future by providing a full account, with good control of aspect. Narration and description tend to be combined and interwoven to relate relevant and supporting facts in connected, paragraph-length discourse. (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012, p. 6).

Furthermore, individuals at the AM proficiency level can adeptly communicate with a sympathetic listener, irrespective of whether the listener is a native speaker unaccustomed to interacting with non-native speakers.

Concerning the Superior level, speakers proficiently execute all tasks associated with the Advanced level. In addition, they articulate more intricate subjects in detail, demonstrating

⁵ The current study concentrates on proficiency levels beyond the initial stages. Nonetheless, as previously noted, literary texts hold utility across all proficiency levels. It is crucial that the selection of text aligns with the specific proficiency level, as the challenges encountered in language acquisition vary. Hence, tailored instructional strategies should be designed accordingly.

⁶ According to ACTFL, the primary proficiency levels are Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. Except for the Superior level, each major proficiency level is subdivided into Low, Mid, and High sublevels to accommodate the diverse range of language proficiency within each major category.

⁷ In this article, I offer a concise overview of the AM/AH/S proficiency levels, which may not encompass all facets of each level. For a comprehensive understanding and further information regarding these and additional proficiency levels, please refer to the following resources: ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) (2003), Oral proficiency interview: Familiarization Guide (2020) and ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012).

an organized and “extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point” (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, they express opinions on a range of issues, encompassing social and political matters, providing well-structured arguments to substantiate their viewpoints and display the ability to formulate and elaborate hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities (*Ibid.*). Hence, Superior-level speakers manifest an exceptionally elevated proficiency in the foreign language, adeptly navigating not only concrete subjects but also effortlessly delving into complex and abstract topics.

The AH level occupies an intermediary position between the two levels described above. AH speakers adeptly execute all tasks associated with the Advanced level, demonstrating assurance and proficiency in their speech.

However, when called on to perform the complex tasks associated with the Superior level ... their language will at times break down or prove inadequate, or they may avoid the task altogether, for example, by resorting to simplification through the use of description or narration in place of argument or hypothesis (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012, p. 5).

The AH speaker showcases a strong linguistic proficiency, facilitating clear and precise communication. At this level, the speaker displays the ability to handle tasks typically associated with the Superior level, although not consistently.

This article posits that the predominant challenges for students to achieve higher levels of proficiency encompass several key areas: 1) the technical aspects of the language, such as syntax, morphology, agreement, lexicon, repetitive language, and lack of precise vocabulary; 2) difficulty to articulate arguments and hypotheses, 3) discomfort in navigating abstract discourse and 4) issues related to motivation.⁸ The first three areas primarily concern language production, involving the mechanics of language as well as organization, formality, and adaptability in discourse. Conversely, the fourth area is connected to students' emotional engagement and plays a crucial role in their progression towards higher proficiency levels.

The incorporation of literary texts into instructional strategies presents a promising approach to addressing the aforementioned challenges. While it is important to note that literature alone may not provide a complete solution, its strategic use alongside other teaching

⁸ This assessment draws upon my experiential background engaging with the ACTFL Proficiency guidelines as an educator, providing support to students attaining proficiency enhancement in higher education settings.

materials can significantly contribute to overcoming these obstacles. Literary texts, serving as authentic materials, provide rich linguistic contexts, diverse vocabulary usage, and nuanced discourse structures that enhance students' language skills. Furthermore, the analytical engagement inherent in literary analysis cultivates critical thinking and deepens students' comprehension of cultural nuances. These characteristics empower students to navigate complex ideas, embrace diverse perspectives, engage in abstract discourse, and formulate hypotheses more effectively.

Therefore, by integrating literary analysis into language instruction, educators provide students with a holistic learning experience that promotes both linguistic and cultural competence. Consequently, lesson plans incorporating linguistic intricacies and literary analysis are well-positioned to facilitate focused language practices specifically addressing the primary challenges associated with achieving Superior level proficiency. Hence, when employed purposefully and in conjunction with other resources, literary texts emerge as a powerful tool in the arsenal of language educators guiding students towards higher levels of proficiency.

As for the motivation factor, it can play a dual role influencing the learners' trajectories: it can act either as a catalyst propelling students towards achieving higher proficiency levels or as an impediment delaying or thwarting their progress. Professional and personal motivations tend to inspire individuals towards elevating their language proficiency levels. Conversely, complacency or a deficiency in motivation often culminates in apathy, hindering students' substantial advancement of proficiency gain.

Starting with the professional motivation, heightened oral proficiency, typically evaluated through the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)⁹, holds considerable significance for career advancement and promotion within various sectors and governmental entities. Additionally, several academic programs¹⁰ require or encourage students to attain higher

⁹ The ACTFL-OPI is a standardized test that evaluates the oral proficiency of test takers consonant to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The exam is "based on a holistic approach and addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and analyzes them from a global perspective rather than from a point of view of the presence or absence of discrete linguistic features" (Massei, 2020, p. 5).

¹⁰ Prominent examples include the Portuguese Flagship Program (PFP) at the University of Georgia, alongside the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. While the specifics of these programs may differ, their overarching goal remains consistent: to graduate students with a high proficiency level in Portuguese, ideally Superior, thereby enhancing their academic and professional trajectories. While PFP caters to undergraduate

language proficiency levels (AH/S), also assessed through OPI, as an exit exam. Consequently, the OPI emerges as a high-stakes exam that delineates outcomes for both students and professionals, thereby serving as a motivator for some individuals. On a personal level, some language learners may be motivated to surpass concrete linguistic benchmarks, whether by exceeding personal standards or aspiring to emulate the achievements of peers. Therefore, the pursuit of Superior-level proficiency in a foreign language embodies a multifaceted journey often driven by a fusion of both professional requirements and personal aspirations.

Regarding complacency, achieving the Superior level might not be the desire of some learners. As elucidated in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, “speakers at the Advanced Mid sublevel are able to handle with ease and confidence a large number of communicative tasks” (2012, p. 6), enabling proficient communication and active participation “in most informal and some formal exchanges on a variety of concrete topics” (*Ibid.*). Hence, individuals assessed at the AM level in Portuguese possess the capability to adeptly engage in daily activities and interact with both native and non-native speakers alike. Consequently, some learners may find contentment in attaining an AM level and might not feel compelled to surpass the thresholds into the Superior level.

The incorporation of literary texts in language instruction intersects significantly with motivation dynamics, as pointed out in section 2 of this article. When literary texts resonate with students, evoking emotional responses, they engender a profound personal engagement (Lazar, 2009). Additionally, “students usually get engaged in the plot of the story, commonly feeling close to their favorite characters. This motivating engagement creates a positive general effect on the learning process which is at the same time positive for the particular process of language acquisition” (Bobkina; Dominguez, 2014, p. 250). Thus, the inherent richness of literary texts provides fertile ground for stimulating discussions, allowing educators to design activities that solicit personal responses from students, thereby enhancing their involvement and engagement. These activities may encompass thought-provoking cultural or socio-political comparisons with students' native contexts, as well as exploration of moral and ethical

students from various majors, the Lauder Institute is a master's program in International Studies with a joint degree in MBA/JD. Programs like these underscore the interdisciplinary relevance of Portuguese proficiency within a globalized academic and professional landscape.

dilemmas aimed at prompting contemplation of solutions for societal advancement. Hence, even if the learner's primary objective is not focused on advancing oral proficiency levels to the Superior stage, engaging with literary texts, and participating in targeted practice fosters a positive impact on the overall learning process, and it can still yield substantial gains in language proficiency.

4 Practical use of literature in classroom

The subsequent pages present a selection of sample exercises utilizing Chico Buarque's *Ópera do Malandro* (1978) as a pedagogical instrument aimed at fostering oral proficiency development¹¹. The instructional material spans across five 90-minute sessions. Prior to each session, students are assigned homework tasks, which typically involve reading specific sections from the book along with supplementary materials such as grammar resources or additional readings. This preparatory work sets the stage for productive and focused engagement during class sessions.

While this article delineates a subset of potential activities, *Ópera do Malandro* (1978) offers innumerable opportunities for student engagement. These encompass activities such as dramatizing scenes from the play or assuming character roles to enhance speaking skills, fluency and refine pronunciation. Moreover, the text serves as a springboard for discussions including literary genres, textual analysis, and close readings of select passages. Furthermore, the incorporation of songs within the play introduces an additional dimension to the pedagogical approach, fostering avenues for honing listening skills, expanding vocabulary, practicing grammar, and more.

Ópera do Malandro (1978) is a musical that transports audiences to the vibrant underworld of Rio de Janeiro from the 1940s following the charismatic *malandro* Max Overseas. Amidst the backdrop of samba and bossa nova rhythms, the reader witnesses Max charming his way into the hearts of both women and criminals alike and, along with the other characters, he becomes entangled in a web of love, betrayal, deceit, power dynamic and moral dilemma. This book contains political aspects intertwined with its narrative, reflecting the social and

¹¹ These examples are derived from my classes, which I designed specifically to target proficiency towards Advanced High and Superior levels.

political context of Brazil during the time of its setting (1940s) and creation (1970s). Thus, the play subtly critiques political corruption, societal inequalities, and the power dynamics during both Getúlio Vargas administration and the military dictatorship in Brazil.

Regarding the language in *Ópera do Malandro* (1978), it reflects the rich cultural and linguistic variation of Brazil, blending colloquial Brazilian Portuguese with poetic and lyrical elements. Not surprisingly, Chico Buarque's dialogues and lyrics are characterized by their rhythmic and melodic quality, often infused with wordplay, humor, and wit. The language captures the vibrant spirit of Rio de Janeiro, incorporating slangs, idiomatic expressions, and regional dialects to evoke the authenticity of the setting and characters. Thus, this play provides innumerable examples of linguistic structures commonly used in Portuguese that can be explored in class.

Based on a backward design approach, the performance activities that follow adhere to the ACTFL guidelines as a framework that mirrors real-world communication contexts. They facilitate discussions spanning from concrete to abstract concepts, refining linguistic skills, and fostering connections to broader societal themes—all essential competencies of a proficient speaker at the Superior level.

Relevant information:

I. Course theme and context:

- A. Course: Aspects of Brazilian Culture; Module: Understanding Social-political facets of Brazil through Literature.
- B. Current students' level: Advanced-Mid.

II. Course objectives and learning goals:

- A. Understand and articulate content materials within broader contexts.
- B. Achieve proficiency enhancement.
- C. Targeted level: Advanced High and Superior.

III. Material selection:

Play: *Ópera do Malandro* (1978) by Chico Buarque

IV: Performance tasks goals:

- A. Reinforce Advanced Mid proficiency.
- B. Practice of AH and S functions, such as organized and formal discourses
- C. Language control

SAMPLE 1

Goal: Solidify AM domains.

Focused practice 1: Language function: description.

Focused practice 2: Articulate meaning and supporting information.

Prompt 1:

Pair work: During a phone conversation with a friend, present the captivating cover of the book you are currently reading. Provide a detailed description of the image to enable your friend to visualize the book cover accurately.

Prompt 2:

Pair work: Elaborate on the interpretation of the depicted image. Discuss the relevance of the book cover to the overall message conveyed in the play. Present your response in a coherent oral paragraph.

Source: developed by the author.

To advance to a higher level, the speaker must demonstrate mastery at their current level. Therefore, while the primary focus of the course lies in targeted practices aimed at Advanced High (AH) and Superior (S) levels, it is imperative to include activities relevant to the Advanced Mid (AM) level, as exemplified in Sample 1.

In the first part of the activity, students engage in a task that involves describing the cover of a book, which aligns with a significant function at the Advanced level: description. This task requires the use of appropriate vocabulary and the organization of sentences in a coherent manner. Moreover, the activity simulates a phone conversation, introducing an additional layer of complexity as the interlocutor must mentally visualize the described content.

In the second part of the activity, students move beyond the concrete topic of describing an image and are prompted to verbalize their interpretation of the image in relation to the narrative of the book. This requires students to extract and articulate meaning from the context using oral paragraphs.

SAMPLE 2:

Goal: Language control – Reinforce the combination of subjunctive and conjunctions.

Focused practice 1: Use of Present, Past and Future subjunctive with conjunctions.

Focused practice 2: Organize answers into oral paragraph.

Preparation for prompts

Step 1: Instructor highlights excerpts from the text to illustrate and analyze the use of subjunctive with conjunctions within a context.

Excerpt 1:

Conversation about watches:

Ben: Serve um Patek Philippe?

Chaves: **Contanto que ande...** (*Ópera do Malandro*, 1978, p. 69).

Excerpt 2:

Geni: **Se** vocês **conhecessem** pessoalmente o Max, tenho certeza que ficariam cativados (*Ópera do Malandro*, 1978, p. 41).

Max: **Assim que** a coisa **serenar**, venho correndo te buscar (*Ópera do Malandro*, 1978, p. 146).

Step 2: Class discussion about the meaning of these passages.

Step 3: Instructor explains why subjunctive was used in the highlighted excerpts.

PS: Students have reviewed this grammar topic as a homework. If needed, instructor provides a brief review of the Present, Past and Future subjunctive tenses.

Prompt 1:

Answer the following questions using the subjunctive in combination with at least one of the provided conjunctions. Construct your answers in full sentences, ensuring clarity and conciseness.

What are possible ways for Max to leave prison?

Caso – Contanto que – Desde que – Se

What would happen if he could never leave prison?

Se – Mesmo que – Para que – Ainda que

What is he going to do after he is free?

Assim que – Quando – Logo que – Depois que

Prompt 2:

Organize your answers into a coherent oral paragraph and present them to your peer.

Source: developed by the author.

These exercises begin by contextualizing the combination of subjunctive and conjunctions. By posing questions related to the reading material and presenting a list of conjunctions requiring the subjunctive, students are directed to employ this specific

grammatical structure. This practice not only enhances their ability to use the subjunctive correctly but also offers valuable experience in incorporating conjunctions into their responses. Furthermore, crafting responses to these questions encourages creativity as students navigate hypothetical scenarios and articulate their ideas using a specific grammar topic.

Additionally, organizing the answers into oral paragraphs helps students develop the skill of producing coherent and comprehensive output rather than mere strings of sentences. Additionally, presenting their oral paragraph to peers allows practice of the interpersonal and presentation modes of communication.

SAMPLE 3:

Goal: Practice Superior level communication strategies.

Focused practice 1: Organized discourse: deliver content, make comparisons, and provide speculations.

Preparation for prompt:

Step 1: Close reading of a passage from the text.

Text excerpt:

Duran: Você não lê jornal, lê? Pois fique sabendo que os alemães perderam as calças em Stalingrado. Os aliados já ocuparam o norte da África. Os ingleses e os americanos já desembarcaram em Nápoles, viu? Mussolini tá perigando. Enfim, pra teu governo, o nazi-fascismo tá no fim! ... E o que é que te faz pensar que aqui no Brasil os criminosos vão ficar impunes? Hein? Como é que o Hitlerzinho da Lapa vai se safar desta, hein? (*Ópera do Malandro*, 1978, p. 151)

Prompt 1:

Respond to the questions below using the following format: introduction, development, and conclusion. Use specific examples to support your arguments.

The previous passage mentions World War II.

- Describe the involvement of Brazil in this war.
- How does it compare to other countries in Latin America, such as Argentina?
- What would be the implications had Brazil not been involved in WWII?

Source: developed by the author.

This exercise requires students to develop sophisticated answers that connect themes from the book to a broader context. Linguistically, students are expected to present content sustained by supporting ideas, as well as providing comparisons and speculative insights. This facilitates practices of specific grammar structures, such as comparison and imperfect

subjunctive. Overall, this exercise offers a holistic approach to language learning by requiring critical thinking while integrating linguistic proficiency with historical and cultural comprehension.

SAMPLE 4:

Goal: Practice Superior level communication strategies.

Focused practices 1 and 2: Organized discourse: expressing opinions supported by arguments.

Prompt 1:

Answer the questions below using the following format: introduction, development, and conclusion. Ensure that you support your arguments with specific examples.

- How does *Ópera do Malandro* (1978) represent the political situation from different periods in Brazil?
- In your opinion, does Literature have to represent social or political aspects of society?

Prompt 2:

According to the anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, the *malandro* is a “professional do jeitinho” (1986, p. 68). Elaborate on this statement to an audience unfamiliar with the DaMatta’s perspective? Use the following markers to structure your response:

No que tange a...

Partindo do pressuposto de que...

Diante do exposto...

Source: developed by the author.

These exercises nurture critical thinking and analytical skills by prompting students to explore various facets of literature, history, and culture, thereby enriching their comprehension of the language and its cultural significance. Through the structured format of formulating answers with an introduction, development, and conclusion, along with the assistance of provided language markers, these activities aid in familiarizing students with formal and organized discourse. Furthermore, elucidating intricate concepts or ideas encourages students to articulate themselves with clarity and precision, thereby enhancing their language proficiency even further.

SAMPLE 5:**Goal:** Practice Superior level functions.**Focused practice 1:** Develop and present formal discourses.**Prompt 1:**

Groups of three. Each student is going to organize and present a formal speech based on the options below. While one student delivers their speech, the other two will take notes to provide constructive feedback following the presentations. Rotate roles accordingly.

- Option 1: Imagine that you are the author of *Ópera do Malandro* (1978), and that you won a Literary Prize for this work. You are invited to the stage, greet the audience, receive the prize, and present your “thank you speech”.
- Option 2: Imagine you are Chico Buarque and you are being interviewed for a TV program. Answer the following questions: What inspired you to write *Ópera do Malandro* (1978)? What were your goals? What were your challenges to write and publish this work?
- Option 3: Imagine you are a professor giving a speech about *Ópera do Malandro* (1978). In your speech, mention the contribution of the play to the academic world and, using specific examples, mention its relation to social aspects of the society.

Source: developed by the author.

This exercise is proposed after students have finished reading and discussing the book. It provides students with opportunities to refine and apply various language skills within a supportive and interactive setting. By organizing and delivering formal speeches, students are challenged to engage with complex language structures in a systematic and coherent manner, thereby expanding their linguistic proficiency towards the Superior level. Additionally, assuming different roles such as an author, an interviewee, or a professor, exposes students to diverse registers and styles of language, facilitating the development of their ability to adapt language to various contexts. Furthermore, the requirement for classmates to take notes and offer constructive feedback after each presentation encourages active listening and critical thinking, fostering a deeper comprehension of the language and providing opportunities for peer learning.

5 Conclusion

This article has navigated through the complexities of incorporating literature into language classes, beginning with an exploration of the challenges and advantages associated with this approach. By delving into the potential of literature as a didactic tool aimed at enhancing oral proficiency, this study has focused on the use of literature with the aim of

progressing from Advanced Mid to Advanced High and Superior levels based on the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines. To this end, exercises using the play *Ópera do malandro* (Buarque, 1978) as primary teaching material were furnished to provide illustrative examples of focused performance practices.

By addressing these themes comprehensively, this article underscores the strategic importance of integrating literature into language instruction to cultivate linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. It emphasizes the transformative potential of literary texts in fostering critical thinking skills, encouraging creative use of language, and deepening students' appreciation for the target language and its cultural nuances.

Moving forward, it would be beneficial for educators to collaborate with other disciplines and to continue exploring innovative approaches to foreign language instruction that embrace the rich potential of literature. This would create dynamic learning environments with the potential to guide students in becoming more proficient and culturally competent speakers of the target language. As the field of language education evolves, the integration of literature promises to remain a vital component in fostering linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding among language learners.

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