



Using Pimsleur for the self-regulated learning of spoken phrases in Brazilian Portuguese: a case study

Francis Will^a and Walcir Cardoso^b

^aDepartment of Education, Concordia University, , francis-will@hotmail.com and ^bDepartment of Education, Concordia University, , walcir.cardoso@concordia.ca

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Abstract

This case study examines the self-regulated use of Pimsleur, a Language Learning Platform (LLP), as a tool to aid in the acquisition of spoken phrases in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and their related pronunciation. Like many LLPs, research on Pimsleur is scant, as is the number of studies done on BP compared to other major languages. This study aims to address this gap in research. The participant-researcher completed the Pimsleur program through daily study over a 10-week period, after which quantitative data were collected through a post-test and delayed post-test. The results showed that Pimsleur contributed to the learning of the target phrases in the short term and that the participant produced speech that was highly intelligible, moderately comprehensible, but heavily accented. This shows that Pimsleur can be an effective tool for developing spoken BP and can offer a unique learning experience with its methodology and mobile capability that mitigates some of the issues around mobile-assisted language learning (e.g. app attrition).

Keywords: *Brazilian Portuguese, self-regulated learning, Pimsleur, language learning platforms, pronunciation, vocabulary.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, language learning beyond the classroom has been significantly affected by the rising popularity of technology-enhanced Language Learning Packages (LLPs). One such LLP is Pimsleur, which is at the center of this study. With rising accessibility, LLPs have multiplied in recent years, giving learners a considerable selection of apps to study, each marketing distinct curricula and expected learning outcomes for their users (Scacchi, 2022). The emergence of LLPs has had a positive impact on language learning (Loewen et al., 2019), particularly among learners interested in setting their own learning goals and monitoring and regulating their progress. For instance, a study by Loewen et al. (2020) involving students learning Spanish autonomously using Babbel (an LLP) showed that this app is effective for increasing explicit vocabulary knowledge (for similar patterns, see Vesselinov & Grego, 2019 and Rachels & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2018). Despite these positive results, LLPs are problematic due to their limited interaction potential and the negative attitudes learners have toward them, which can lead to lower motivation and high attrition rates (e.g. Tuncay, 2020).

Pimsleur is based on an auditory teaching method developed by Pimsleur called *graduated interval recall*, a system whereby the app teaches the learner a linguistic item via translation and then recalls the item with decreasing frequency in subsequent lessons (Pimsleur, 1967). Pimsleur translates the words/phrases so that the

learner knows their meaning and uses native speakers so that the user knows how the word is pronounced. It promotes the long-term retention of linguistic items by using multiple, spaced exposures instead of a single study session, which is an effective practice strategy for SLA (Choe, 2016). According to Chapelle (2003), repetition is an input enhancement technique that is fundamental in SLA and, in the case of vocabulary, research shows that word knowledge and recall are optimized by meeting a word ten or more times (Webb, 2007). In their study on the efficacy of Pimsleur with Spanish learners, Vesselinov and Grego (2019) found that the app was effective in increasing oral proficiency and that user satisfaction was high after using the LLP.

Pimsleur was chosen for this research for two main reasons. Firstly, this study is interested in oral performance, and this LLP distinguishes itself from other popular apps because it concentrates on *spoken* phrases, with little to no consideration for the explicit teaching of grammar or literacy skills (Pimsleur, n.d.). Secondly, this study focuses on a lesser-taught language (BP) in a foreign learning context, where learners have limited access to the target language and its speakers. According to Nation (2001), an L2 learner in this situation will benefit considerably from having the kind of enriched input that Pimsleur offers.

As such, this study focuses on two underinvestigated topics: Pimsleur as a pedagogical tool and Brazilian Portuguese as the target language, a less commonly taught L2. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the effect of the self-regulated use of Pimsleur as a pedagogical tool in the learning of 36 spoken phrases in BP, including their pronunciation. This study addressed the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent can a learner acquire 36 target phrases in Brazilian Portuguese after completing Pimsleur's curriculum in a self-regulated context?

RQ2: Based on holistic measures of pronunciation (intelligibility, comprehensibility, accentedness), to what extent can the learner be understood by speakers of BP after using Pimsleur in a self-regulated context?

2. Method

2.1 Participant and materials

The participant in this case study was the first author, a 33-year-old male with no previous knowledge of BP and no previous experience using Pimsleur. The rater, the second author, was a native speaker of BP. Pimsleur's BP program is comprised of 150 lessons across five levels with each level containing 30 lessons. Each lesson took the participant approximately 40 minutes to complete, with the participant completing the entire curriculum over a ten-week period. With roughly two hours per day dedicated to Pimsleur, the total time spent was approximately 100 hours of self-regulated BP study. For a description of Pimsleur's lesson scheme, see Frumkes (2021, p. 260-261)

Pimsleur lessons consist of 30-minute audio sections focused on rote repetition, followed by additional exercises designed to reinforce learning by linking spoken language with written language (which improves learners' grapheme-to-phoneme associations), and providing focus-on-form practice. The participant spent approximately 30 minutes on these activities, followed by 10 minutes dedicated to completing each lesson's practicing activities such as 'quick match' (a multiple-choice exercise), 'flash cards' (e-cards with a word on one side and its English translation on the other side), and 'speak easy' (listen and repeat).

2.2 Instruments

This study explores the extent to which a language learner can acquire 36 phrases in BP (see Appendix) and the extent to which these phrases can be aurally understood by a speaker of BP, based on three measures of pronunciation: intelligibility (the extent to which a listener actually understands an utterance), comprehensibility (the listener's belief of how difficult it is to understand an utterance), and accentedness (the extent to which a person's speech sounds compared to that of the target variety); for details on these measures, see Derwing and

Munro (2005). The phrases selected for this study were adapted from Baumgartner and Thering (2022), which are useful for general communication, socializing, working, and shopping. They are also covered in Pimsleur's curriculum.

Since the participant had no prior experience with or exposure to BP, no pretests were administered. A post-test was conducted immediately upon completion of the Pimsleur program, with a delayed post-test following two weeks thereafter. During this period between tests, the participant did not engage with BP through practice or exposure.

Vocabulary (RQ1): The instruments for measuring vocabulary and pronunciation were adapted from van Lieshout and Cardoso (2022). Accordingly, the computation of learning for the 36 target phrases was measured by the researcher, who rated the accuracy of each utterance using a 0-1 scale: 1 point was given for correct phrases, 0.5 for partially correct (e.g. incorrect use of a word or expression), and 0 for fully incorrect phrases.

Pronunciation (RQ2): The instruments used to measure intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness were based on Derwing and Munro (2005). The rater was given a scalar judgment task to measure the comprehensibility and accentedness of the participant's speech using a 9-point Likert scale (1=completely incomprehensible/very accented; 9=completely comprehensible/not accented at all). Intelligibility was measured by having the rater listen to the recordings of the target phrases and transcribe what was heard. The researcher then evaluated the proportion of words transcribed correctly. For comparison purposes, the results for the transcribed phrases were converted into a 9-point scale.

2.3 Procedure

Upon completion of the Pimsleur program, the participant was audio-recorded producing the target 36 phrases in Portuguese immediately after the intervention (post-test) and two weeks later (delayed post-test). Pronunciation was evaluated by an L1 native speaker of BP who rated (for comprehensibility and accentedness) or transcribed (for intelligibility) all 36 audio samples.

3. Results

3.1. Vocabulary

To determine the extent to which a learner can acquire 36 target phrases in BP (RQ1), the rater assessed each utterance and determined whether it was correct, partially correct, or incorrect. The results in Table 1 show that the participant made significant gains in vocabulary retention, going from no knowledge to scoring 27/36 points (75%) on the post-test. However, there was a significant drop in the number of phrases retained on the delayed post-test, with the participant only scoring 24.5/36 (68%). These findings indicate that the initial learning gains achieved after completing the Pimsleur program are not fully sustained long-term.

Table 1. Vocabulary Gains: Mean Scores

Measures	Phrases learned in BP
Pretest	N/A
Post-test /36	27
Delayed post-test /36	24.5

3.2. Pronunciation

Table 2 illustrates the data on how understandable the participant's pronunciation was when speaking the target phrases (RQ2), considering the three measures adopted. On the post-test, the participant had a mean score of

8.7/9 (98%) in comprehensibility, 4/9 (44%) in accentedness, and 8.8/9 (99%) in intelligibility (note: higher scores indicate better performance). On the delayed post-test, the speaker had a mean score of 6.8/9 (76%) in comprehensibility, 3.5/9 (39%) in accentedness, and 8.8/9 (98%) in intelligibility. These results indicate that the participant had a considerable foreign accent when speaking, but remained intelligible (this measure remained stable) and relatively comprehensible (decreased by approximately two points) after completing the Pimsleur curriculum.

Table 2. Learner Pronunciation: Mean Scores

Measures	Comprehensibility	Accentedness	Intelligibility
Pretest	N/A	N/A	N/A
Post-test /9	8.7	4	8.8
Delayed post-test /9	6.8	3.5	8.8

4. Discussion

The considerable gains in phrases by the learner indicate that Pimsleur can be an effective learning tool for acquiring commonly used phrases. The results also suggest that shortly after using Pimsleur, it is possible for learners to produce speech that is highly intelligible, considerably comprehensible, yet quite accented. Finally, these results indicate that learners using Pimsleur in a self-regulated learning context can make important gains in spoken Brazilian Portuguese, consistent with previous findings about Pimsleur's ability to teach oral skills (e.g. Vesselinov & Grego, 2019). The results also support previous studies that have shown that a speaker can be highly intelligible despite having a heavy accent (Derwing et al., 2008).

The results of this study are also significant insofar as they partially respond to a limitation in van Lieshout and Cardoso's (2022) study using Google Translate, which examined this LLP's ability to assist in the self-regulated learning of Dutch phrases and pronunciation. In their study, there was no assessment of pronunciation during the delayed post-test because many participants forgot some of the vocabulary during the period between the post-test and the delayed post-test. To address this issue, the researchers called on future research to use a longitudinal model of self-regulated learning over a sustained period with systematic, spaced repetition. While our study does not focus on Google Translate, it does meet much of the criteria laid out in van Lieshout and Cardoso's call for future research. While the participant in our study also experienced a loss in vocabulary following the post-test, this was not a major issue as it did not impede him from producing phrases that could be rated for pronunciation.

5. Conclusions

The goal of this case study was to start addressing a gap in research involving the use of LLPs for the self-regulated learning of spoken Brazilian Portuguese. This study has shown that Pimsleur can effectively teach the autonomous learner useful phrases in BP that can be understood by native speakers in the short term.

It should be noted that this case study has some limitations. First, there was only one participant; a future study with a greater number of participants would give a more diverse and dependable sample of language learners. The fact that this study used only one rater is also an issue; a future study using additional raters would produce results with greater validity.

The Pimsleur mobile application coupled with the rote audiolingual method bypasses some of the challenges of many mobile-assisted language learning applications and enables substantial learning, as evidenced by the retention of the target 36 phrases (vocabulary) and related pronunciation in Brazilian Portuguese.

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Appendix

Language Objectives (36 spoken phrases)

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Hi! I am [Name]. (And you?)2. Nice to meet you.3. Where are you from?4. What do you do?5. What do you like to do (in your free time)?6. What is your phone number?7. Do you have coffee?8. Thanks so much.9. I really like it.10. Excuse me.11. I am sorry.12. What do you think?13. That sounds great.14. (Oh,) never mind.15. I am learning Portuguese.16. I do not understand.17. Could you repeat that please?18. Could you please talk slower?19. Thank you. That helps a lot.20. What does 'do not enter' mean?21. How do you spell that?22. What do you mean?23. Can you help me?24. I am looking for my wallet.25. Where is the bathroom?26. I do not know.27. I need a glass of water.28. Where can I find this?29. How much does this/that cost?30. I do not need your help, thanks.31. Can someone help me do this?32. How can I help you?33. I will be with you in a moment.34. What time is our meeting?35. Please call me (back) at 514 739 082636. (Oh really?) Actually, I thought I was right.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Olá! Eu sou [Nome]. (E você?)2. Prazer em conhecê-lo.3. De onde você é?4. O que você faz?5. O que você gosta de fazer (no seu tempo livre)?6. Qual é o seu número de telefone?7. Você tem café?8. Muito obrigado.9. Eu realmente gosto.10. Com licença.11. Sinto muito.12. O que você acha?13. Isso parece ótimo.14. (Oh) não importa.15. Estou aprendendo português.16. Não entendo.17. Você poderia repetir isso, por favor?18. Você poderia falar mais devagar?19. Obrigado. Isso ajuda muito.20. O que significa 'não entre'?21. Como você soletra isso?22. O que você quer dizer?23. Você pode me ajudar?24. Estou procurando minha carteira.25. Onde fica o banheiro?26. Não sei.27. Preciso de um copo de água.28. Onde posso encontrar isso?29. Quanto custa isso/aquilo?30. Não preciso de sua ajuda, obrigado.31. Alguém pode me ajudar a fazer isso?32. Como posso ajudá-lo?33. Estarei com você em um momento.34. Que horas é nossa reunião?35. Por favor, me ligue (de volta) em 514 739 082636. (Ah, é mesmo?) Na verdade, achei que estava certo.
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