**REVIEW OF CENTRO VIRTUAL CAMÕES – APRENDER PORTUGUÊS**

| Site reviewed                  | Centro Virtual Camões – Aprender Português  
| Platform                      | Firefox 3, Flock 1.2, Internet Explorer 7, Opera 9, or Safari 3 |
| Minimum hardware requirements | Not specified |
| Support offered               | Website map, Contact options, Website search engine, Bilingual (Portuguese and English) "read me" presentation of the website |
| Target language               | Portuguese |
| Target audience               | Most activities aim at students at beginning and/or intermediate proficiency levels, regardless of age or purpose for learning Portuguese |
| Price                         | Free |

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The website Centro Virtual Camões – Aprender Português is supported by the Instituto Camões, a Portuguese national institute dedicated to promoting the teaching and learning of Portuguese around the world. This website focuses particularly on European Portuguese (EP) and does not address other variants, such as Brazilian Portuguese. The instructional goal of the website is to offer practice tools that learners, ranging from adolescents to adults, from beginning to advanced proficiency levels, can use as self-study or in conjunction with courses in Portuguese to improve mastery of the major skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. In fact, the website broadly defines its audience as "all those who seek to learn, teach or translate Portuguese, to get to know the Portuguese language and culture or to improve their Portuguese skills through a distance/e-learning training programme" (Centro Virtual Camões, 2008, para. 2). The Instituto Camões does offer online courses, but the use of Aprender Português is not dependent on them. In this review of Aprender Português, the organization, diversity, and creativity of its contents is addressed within the framework of multimedia-supported learning: short reading, extensive reading, listening, writing, speaking, games, grammar, and vocabulary.

**Reading**

The website offers reading comprehension activities based on sixteen short texts, *Pequenos textos*, most of which are authentic texts from newspapers and magazines, covering the topics of real estate, weather forecasts, horoscopes, recipes and diets. The activities associated with these texts involve the practice of specific vocabulary, such as food, parts of the house, means of transportation, the days of the week, and months of the year. These exercises are clearly intended for a beginner level and are, in general, very controlled, consisting of multiple-choice items, matching exercises, ordering sentences, and short answers.

An example of a developed group of exercises based on a short reading is the one associated with the text *Um horóscopo* 'A horoscope', which allows learners to practice both reading comprehension and verb structures such as the imperative mood and commands. The text consists of twelve horoscopes and, in the first exercise, students are asked to match signs of the Zodiac with corresponding dates and to type the correct answer. While not requiring higher order cognitive skills, this activity does comply with Mayer’s Spatial Contiguity Principle, according to which "people learn more deeply from a multimedia message when corresponding words and pictures are presented near rather than far from each other on the page or screen" (Mayer, 2005b, p. 198), and this positive aspect of the activity allows for enhanced learning of the vocabulary used (the days and months). In the case of 'A Horoscope', by clicking on *Exercício seguinte* 'Next exercise' on the bottom horizontal menu, learners are taken to another activity based on the same reading. Although this multiple-choice activity tests the understanding of the text, this new exercise does
not comply equally well with the Contiguity Principle as students have to scroll through the text to read the questions and scan for the answers. This shortcoming could be overcome by presenting the text in column format and showing the questions parallel to it. Other activities related to the text can be found under Consolidar ‘Consolidation’ on the top horizontal menu (e.g., grammar exercises about the future tense). The spatial layout of all the reading comprehension exercises based on the sixteen texts is diversified. Even if most of the activities offered in this section of the webpage are very controlled, they are nonetheless pedagogically useful as they require a thorough understanding of the authentic texts.

Aprender Português also provides a number of activities based on extensive reading of short stories and narratives (Contos e pequenas narrativas), which are appropriate for learners at the intermediate level. These consist of nineteen short stories (two folk stories, fifteen short stories written by well-known 20th-century Portuguese authors, and two others by 19th-century Portuguese authors) and a fragment of the epic poem Os Lusíadas (The Lusiads) by the 16th-century poet Luís de Camões. Students can listen to good quality recordings of the narratives either with or without simultaneously reading them. After clicking Para ouvir o texto 'To listen to the text', a pop-up window opens a media player application (a link to download Real Player is provided, but other applications, such as QuickTime, automatically open the file), allowing students to stop the recording, rewind it or fast-forward it in order to listen to specific passages or to skip them (Figure 1). This feature reflects Merriënboer and Kester’s Self-Pacing Principle, according to which "[g]iving learners control over the pace of instruction … has a positive effect on … learning and transfer" (2005, p. 89). From the twenty short stories presented, only one does not have an audio version (Trindade Coelho’s "A Choca" 'The Laying Hen').

Figure 1. Reading activity: Short story with multimedia tools.

The oral reading of any short story represents one interpretation of a text typically intended to be read silently, with idiosyncrasies such as the speaker’s voice, pace of reading, and choices of stress and intonation. In that sense, the pedagogic usefulness of these recordings lies in the fact that, being interpretations of these short stories, they complement the learner’s own reading and interpretation. The
website does not impose a simultaneous reading of and listening to the text, which arguably could create a conflict between the pace of the reader and the pace of the recording, but which allows students to contrast their own reading with another one, in this case a dramatized reading by a native speaker. The website indicates that the voices who recorded the readings of the short narratives belong to well-known Portuguese actors and actresses, such as Norberto Barroca, Filipe La Féria, Ruy de Carvalho, and Manuela Machado, all of whom participated in one dramatized reading. Unfortunately the only recordings actually available at the time of website access for this review were fifteen stories read by Luísa Fernanda, who, nonetheless, reads at a normal speed and in a very clear standard EP accent. The recordings that could not be downloaded were those of the short stories written by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Alice Vieira, José Cardoso Pires, and Manuel Alegre.

Comprehension aids for the vocabulary in the narratives are provided on the website in the form of annotations with definitions that appear in pop-up windows after students click on underlined words. Studies of different types of comprehension aids (Chun & Plass, 1996; Plass & Jones, 2005) have shown that the combination of visual and verbal annotations are more effective than verbal annotations alone; therefore, vocabulary learning on Aprender Português could be improved by including visual annotations. Annotations with translations (Plass & Jones, 2005) are not applicable for this website since it is not aimed at learners of a specific language background.

Figure 2. Reading activity: Virtual story with alternative paths.

Another interesting section within the extensive reading activities, called Histórias virtuais 'Virtual Stories', exploits the Internet’s ability to establish connections through hyperlinks. These exercises consist of open-path stories of different lengths or even with different endings. Students read narrative sequences of stories and choose alternative story development paths that correspond to different outcomes (Figure 2). The virtual stories are either investigation or mystery stories, such as a police investigation in "O Caso da Calçada do Jasmin" (The Case of Jasmin Walk) by Fernando Ribeiro and Regina Brasil, a historical
exploration in "O Manuscrito Misterioso" (The Mysterious Manuscript) by Maria Bernardo and Luísa Grilo), or a love story, "Ao Encontro do Amor" (A Meeting with Love), in which dilemmas such as choosing which personal ads to reply to need to be solved. These topics lead readers through the kind of deductive reasoning and choice making that are necessary to rewrite the stories. The alternative paths link to different webpages corresponding to episodes of the stories which can put one "on the right track" in the case of an investigation, or to different stages of a relationship in the love story. Some of the stories have only one ending, which is eventually revealed, but during the reading activity readers are given optional paths corresponding to different deductions or hypotheses at the end of each chapter, so the more wrong choices readers make, the more episodes they have to read.

These activities make full use of the hypertextual potentialities of the Internet. Hypertext, by definition, is "a nonlinear networked information structure with no predefined reading path" (Rouet & Potelle, 2005, p. 300), and these open-path stories make good didactic use of this potential by requiring very close reading, during which comprehension is tested through the choices students make, arguably allowing for a more active interpretation than when reading a linear story. Still, the format of the activities can cause frustration. While in two of the four available stories the number of alternative paths is quite limited, in the two other stories learners have too many choices. This may lead to "getting 'lost in space'" (Conklin, 1987, p. 38), a problem that arises from not knowing "(1) where [one is] in the network and (2) how to get to some other place that [one] know[s] or think[s] exists in the network" (p. 38). The example of "O Caso da Calçada do Jasmim", which deals with a police investigation, is particularly striking in this regard as the readers do not only have to follow three testimonies of five witnesses for a total of fifteen texts, but also have to complete grammar activities. Eventually, they have to submit their solution to the story by identifying the perpetrator and typing their reasons. However, in one trial run completed for this review, the final screen warned that the activity was closed, which meant that users could not confirm their choices.

Listening

The listening activities available on Aprender Português are organized into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Beginner activities focus on recognition of numbers and single words, intermediate activities focus on day-to-day situations and present short audio texts, and advanced activities make use of the recordings of the short stories mentioned above. In all beginner level exercises, students listen to a sequence of words and click on them or drag them to boxes in the order they heard them. All the beginner activities focus on the recognition of words with identical sequences of phonemes (e.g., blusão; bloqueio; bloco; blá-blá-blá; bloquear; blindado), or on the identification of numbers. This section lacks variety and challenge; in fact, no attention is paid to the meaning of the words, which could be done by including them in meaningful contexts.

The activities at the intermediate level, however, are titled Em situação 'In context' and offer a variety of recorded texts, such as a recipe description, a phone call to reserve a hotel room, a dialogue simulating the beginning of a TV contest, and two monologues with the characters describing what they are doing/seeing, as if thinking aloud. The activities accompanying these recordings are more diversified than those at the beginner level and include true/false items, multiple-choice questions, sentence ordering, sentence completion, identifying words, and counting the occurrence of certain words. There are three activities per recording, and all of them require learners to pay attention to the meaning of the texts. In addition, these recordings are more balanced in the sense that different text types are presented, addressing different vocabulary. The shortcoming of this section, however, is that all recordings are dramatized readings of texts, resulting in unnaturally slow speed or mechanical dialogues.

At the advanced level, the website re-uses some of the recorded readings of the short stories and offers listening activities based on them. All activities involve exercises in sequencing the text or restructuring it. In the sequencing activity, students listen to the text while they read short passages from it and choose
which script corresponds to what they are hearing. If they answer correctly, the text is reconstructed in a text box. Students can pause the text to read it more deliberately, and this feature might reduce the cognitive load that builds when students listen to a text and read different answer options at the same time (Kirschner, 2002; Sweller, 2005). In the restructuring activities, users simply rewrite the text in a box as they listen to it. While listening to the recording, users identify words they hear and type them in a small box, below a box with a hidden script; if correct words are typed, the words will be shown in the box with the script in all passages in which they are used. A negative aspect of both activities is that students are not required to show a real understanding of what they listen to, but only to identify chunks of text. On the whole, the listening activities at the advanced level are not very challenging at all; in fact, the ones at the intermediate level seem pedagogically richer. The listening section on *Aprender Português* would benefit from integrating more activities that focus on comprehension of these short stories rather than mere recognition of words/passage. Also, this section would benefit from including more authentic dialogues of real life interactions with activities focusing clearly on comprehension.

**Writing**

At present, there is no section in *Aprender Português* dedicated to writing. Before the update of the website in June, 2008, some exercises were available to get users to write in Portuguese and communicate with other users of the website. It is unclear why the writing portion has been removed. Prior to June, the production of written output was stimulated through competitions in which any user of the website could participate, for example, by rewriting the endings of short stories. Additionally, written output occurred in the form of collaborative writing, in which users could post their version of a story to be continued by someone else. Also, the Instituto Camões provided a list of "pen-pals" with whom users could exchange (e-)mail. However, all of this material cannot be accessed through the *Aprender Português* website anymore.

**Speaking**

The *Falar 'Speaking'* section of *Aprender Português* offers three different subsections: a webpage with studies of the pronunciation of European Portuguese offering a contrast with Brazilian Portuguese, a set of video recordings of the Portuguese TV show "Cuidado com a língua!" (Watch what you are saying), and a conversation guide. The pronunciation studies, written by Portuguese linguist Maria Helena Mira Mateus, a Professor at the University of Lisbon, are in-depth descriptions of aspects of Portuguese segmental and suprasegmental phonology, and dialectal divergence in EP. These studies include audio recordings to exemplify aspects of the pronunciation of European Portuguese and are accompanied by downloadable PDF worksheets with pronunciation practice exercises or general questions about the content of the studies. Although not stated, advanced learners are the likely audience of this subsection since these are in-depth studies that require a high level of proficiency. These studies might be particularly useful for instructors to integrate into their advanced Portuguese courses in order to call students’ attention to specific aspects of interest. However, it would be beneficial for students if more activities on this part of the website focused not so much on theory but on actual pronunciation practice.

The TV video recordings showcase varied topics, such as popular expressions and phrases, or the origin of toponyms. While it seems that these video segments would make for useful listening tasks, they are included in the speaking section as they often address expressions or common mistakes typical of oral speech. The videos present dialogues in which speakers use expressions, words, or proverbs that are analyzed both by the actors and the narrator, the latter giving further information about the use and rules associated with those linguistic features. Relevant vocabulary is usually grouped by topics (e.g., *Vestuário* 'Clothing'), and several words and expressions related to the topic are used in context (a clothing store). Many different aspects of the vocabulary are analyzed, such as multiple meanings, history and etymology, common mistakes, and differences in Portuguese variants. The information provided is thorough and the videos are quite lively due to well written texts, excellent acting, and good animation and sound effects.
The only speaking practice activities available are associated with the pronunciation of specific words/phrases from a conversation guide called *Guia de Bolso* 'Pocket Guidebook'. *Aprender Português* does not use speech-recognition technology – possibly because these tools are still scarce in the area of Portuguese – and, therefore, there are no pronunciation exercises with feedback to students. Although this is not a major drawback, the incorporation of this technology would certainly prove useful as it would allow students to actually assess the outcome of their speaking practice in a more informed way. The "pocket dictionary" presents vocabulary organized mostly in terms of communicative language tasks, such as finding accommodations or meeting people.

This exercise, formatted as a guide for tourists – hence the name *Guia de Bolso* – has two different versions, one in English and one in French, and students have to choose the one they prefer before accessing a list of vocabulary topics. After selecting a topic, such as "Health and Security", students encounter a list of typical tourist needs and select a relevant communicative situation, such as "Finding a hospital, a chemist [British English for *pharmacist*] or a police station", or "Describing your health condition". This opens a list of useful sentences and expressions with translations, such as *Onde fica o hospital*? 'Where is the hospital?', or *Estou doente* 'I feel ill'. Clicking on the sound icons allows users to hear a recording of these sentences/expressions; unfortunately, the quality of the audio files is not always very good, and certainly not as good as the other sound files available on the website. As pointed out above, a tool incorporating speech-recognition to help users evaluate their pronunciation through comparison to that of a native speaker would increase the usefulness of this activity. In fact, Plass and Jones (2005) predict that two of the main future research areas in computer-assisted language learning will be the enhancement of output possibilities and the development of tools for promoting and evaluating comprehensible output.

Figure 3. The “Goose Game” with virtual game board and dice.

**Games, Grammar, and Vocabulary**

Since the last update of the website, the grammar section has become part of a broader section called *A-Brincar* 'Playing', which presents games for grammar, vocabulary, and cultural topics. This section combines lively interactive games with excellent animations in activities such as *Jogo da Glória Virtual* 'The Goose Game' (Figure 3) and *Jogo da Forca* 'Hangman'. However, the pedagogical outcome of these games is disproportionate to the time and steps involved in completing them. For example, in "The Goose Game", having to set up the virtual game board, rolling the virtual dice, and watching the pieces move across the board seems too time-consuming compared to the actual learning outcome, which might involve, for example, the practice of prepositions. Nevertheless, game-like exercises such as Hangman are
often engaging for students in classrooms, and so it is plausible that, on the website, they can be equally engaging to users, partly because of their rich animation. Integrated into *A-Brincar*, the section *Gramaticando 'Grammar-ing'* presents activities on specific grammar structures. Even if they tend to be very controlled, these exercises have a game-like presentation format and sometimes have a rich graphic design, although, at times, the use of images is more ornamental than helpful.

Figure 4. Vocabulary activity: The human body / the face.
Centro Virtual Camões – Aprender Português offers several very interesting activities related to the learning of Portuguese vocabulary, some of which have been hinted at above. In an activity on vocabulary related to the human body (Corpo humano, Figure 4), the use of images is a good example of the potential of multimedia in computer-assisted language learning. Users have to complete a cloze passage using vocabulary related to the human face. The insertion of the words in the correct spaces automatically "reconstructs" a face in the image next to the text while simultaneously emphasizing specific collocations, such as escuro e comprido 'long and dark' and cabelo 'hair'. This is a good example of how a cloze exercise can make excellent use of the multimedia environment compared to the activities in Gramaticando 'Grammar-ing' mentioned earlier. The human face activity is more intrinsically rewarding as students receive both verbal and visual feedback on their answers, thus implementing Mayer’s (2005a) Multimedia Principle, according to which "people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone" (p. 47).

CONCLUSIONS

If users of the website need help, they can refer to support tools that can be found in links displayed on the main portal; however, these tools refer not only to Aprender Português, but to the entire website of the Instituto Camões. For example, the FAQ section addresses applications for fellowships, courses, and lecturer positions. Aprender Português would benefit from listing support tools for learners, such as a Help menu and Contacts on its main page. The navigation on the website is, in general, clearly structured and transparent and should be easy for the targeted adolescent and adult users, even if they are lower level learners. Navigation between the different pages and exercises, with back/forward links as well as links to other parts of the platform, is easy.

In conclusion, Aprender Português could benefit from improvement in the areas of providing feedback to users with regard to oral output and incorporating authentic texts in the listening section. All in all, though, the website’s usefulness and effectiveness lies in its generally well-structured and varied activities, which anyone interested in learning Portuguese can easily use for free, and which can also be incorporated by instructors into their own courses. Aprender Português, therefore, should be a welcome addition to the current dearth of multimedia resources for learning Portuguese.

NOTES

1. This review takes into consideration the latest update made to the website in June, 2008.


