

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PORTUGUESE STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MEXICO

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Abstract

The historical memory of the Portuguese Department at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) reflects the growing interest in the Portuguese language and Lusophone cultures within Latin American academia over nearly six decades. From its origins to the present day, the Department has played a key role in training specialists, teachers, translators, and researchers who have contributed to strengthening the cultural, linguistic, and literary ties between Mexico and Portuguese-speaking countries.

Keywords: *Portuguese as a foreign language, lusophone studies, UNAM, memory, language teaching.*

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the historical development of Portuguese studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the role of its Portuguese Department in promoting Lusophone cultures and Portuguese as a foreign language. Using collective memory and the Annales School approach, it examines methodological changes, teaching materials, and academic collaborations from 1967 to the present. The study highlights the Department's contribution to language teaching, intercultural communication, and Lusophone studies in Mexico and Latin America.

2. Objectives

The objective is to analyze UNAM Portuguese Department's historical evolution, memory, and academic contributions. This article is part of an ongoing research project that seeks to answer the following question: What has been the historical evolution and collective memory of the UNAM Portuguese Department in developing teaching methodologies for Portuguese as a foreign language and strengthening academic and cultural ties between Mexico and Lusophone countries from 1967 to the present?

3. Methods

To answer this question, a methodology based on the approach of the Annales School, founded by Bloch and developed by Fernand Braudel (1968) is employed. This approach proposes a history that integrates multiple temporalities: the long term (structures), the medium term (conjunctures), and the short term (events). Through the collective memory of its members, this research reconstructs the Department's trajectory, assesses its contributions, and reflects on present and future challenges. To accomplish this, it has been necessary to carry out a methodical and systematic historical investigation that involves searching for information in Stephen Bastien Library, newspapers, the *UNAM Gazette*, books, newspaper archives, internet and other reliable sources (the project also includes ethnographic interviews with professors, which cannot be addressed in this brief article due to space limitations). From the previous perspective, history and collective memory include shared experiences and events that strengthen the sense of belonging. Shared values and beliefs define what is relevant for the group and based on common principles that guide the behavior of its members. Shared references —such as language (in this case, a second language) and the links that unite UNAM and Mexico with Portuguese-speaking countries— represent important aspects for the group of teachers and students (Halbwachs, 1992).

4. Research development

4.1. Institutional context: The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the National School of Languages, Linguistics, and Translation (ENALLT)

UNAM is the largest and most important higher education institution in Mexico. Recognized for its high academic quality, profound cultural impact, and its secular, public, and free nature, is considered a fundamental pillar in the country's history and development. Its origins date back to 1551 with the founding of the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, one of the oldest in the Americas. The current university was inaugurated on September 22, 1910, under the name National University of Mexico, but a crucial milestone occurred in 1929, when the institution gained its autonomy following a student movement. This autonomy allows it to govern itself, define its own study plans, and manage its budget without government interference, guaranteeing academic freedom. Its main and most emblematic campus, where the Department of Portuguese is located, is University City (CU), inaugurated in 1954, is a unique example of modern urban planning, architecture, and art, integrating monumental works by muralists (Casanova, 2019).

4.2. The National School of Languages, Linguistics, and Translation (ENALLT)

ENALLT originated on November 30, 1966, when it was founded as the Center for Foreign Language Teaching (CELE). Its initial mission was teaching languages to the university community, a task it conducted for five decades, consolidating it as a benchmark for language teaching and applied linguistics in Mexico (Bufi, 2014). Another fundamental event occurred on March 24, 2017, when the University Assembly unanimously approved the transformation of CELE into a National School. This evolution responded to the growing need to train specialized professionals in a globalized world. With this change, the former CELE became ENALLT and expanded its educational offerings by incorporating two new undergraduate programs: Translation and Applied Linguistics (Gaceta UNAM, 2017).

4.3. The Portuguese Department: Origins and early years (1967-1970s)

The Portuguese Department was established in 1967, just one year after the founding of CELE. It was one of the first Portuguese departments in the country and led academic interest in the language. It served as a model and paved the way for other institutions to offer Portuguese studies. In the early 1960s, the founding teachers faced a challenge: no courses designed specifically for teaching Portuguese as a foreign language to Spanish speakers existed in Mexico. Therefore, they first resorted to a direct translation methodology and later to a structurally oriented course based on presenting an introductory dialogue associated with a sequence of images on transparencies or filmstrips (Wey, 2011).

4.4. Consolidation and methodological development (1970s-1980s)

In the mid-1970s, a Psychopedagogy Section was founded within the then CELE, which later became the Department of Applied Linguistics (DLA), now the Department of Research (DI), which encouraged research and the design of a course based on the communicative approach—the most current approach at the time—enthusiastically received by teachers and researchers. Those years were marked by intense reflection, debate, and renewal, and were decisive for the foreign language teaching in Mexico. The books produced in the early 1980s by Brazilian and Mexican professors emerged during the military dictatorship in Brazil, a period when many Brazilian academics arrived at UNAM as political exiles and made decisive contributions to the creation and vision of these materials.

4.5. Expansion of materials and approaches (1980s-2000s)

In the 1980s, the Department developed its core teaching materials: the *Active Portuguese Course* textbooks (Volumes 1, 2, and 3) and teachers' guides (Da Silva et al., 1982), produced with the collaboration of native-speaking instructors, illustrators, and designers. The series consists of six units designed to teach Brazilian Portuguese to Spanish-speaking university students and to help them communicate in everyday situations (Wey, 2011). Few years later, *Saravá: Reading Strategies* was created for the reading comprehension course. It covers key reading strategies, including basic reading processes, textual and non-textual clues, background knowledge, types of reading, and linguistic features related to comprehension (Reis et al., 1994). For intermediate levels, the *Sociocultural Dossiers* were developed. These materials were organized into thematic units built around authentic sociocultural texts, classroom activities, and grammar content, and they also incorporated Portuguese from Portugal (Colín et al., 2000). This sociocultural approach (Kramsch, 1995) aimed to strengthen both communicative and cultural competence while encouraging creativity in the teaching and learning of Portuguese. In 2009, CELE launched a curriculum design project for Portuguese as a foreign language. The initiative led to a new study

plan, *Programa de português* (Herrera et al., 2014), based on the task-based approach and structured according to each level of the curriculum, with an emphasis on meaningful interaction and real-life language use.

5. Discussion and preliminary results

The Portuguese Department today is a continually active entity. Besides language classes, it has various research projects in applied linguistics, curriculum design, and the development of didactic materials. Annually, it organizes cultural weeks, seminars, a conference, exhibitions, contests, and other activities related to Lusophone countries. Likewise, the department houses a branch of the Camões Institute for the Portuguese Language and a lecturer from Brazil, responsible for promoting Portuguese language and culture.

Academic relationship: The Department organizes courses, distributes subjects, and schedules. Teachers participate in the design or updating of study plans, collaborate on linguistic projects, publications, or academic events, and receive ongoing training through workshops, training sessions, and performance evaluations. Toward students, the department offers language programs, certifications, and language competence development, as well as assessment and supervision of proficiency exams, placement tests, and grades.

Social relationship: The Department promotes a climate of respect, collaboration, and professional development. Social gatherings, informal meetings, celebrations are organized, and emotional or administrative support is provided for personal or work-related issues. For students, extracurricular activities are offered, such as conversation clubs, cultural exchanges, film forums, language fairs, etc. Human, empathetic, and accessible treatment is fostered by coordinators and administrative staff, and student integration into committees, student councils, or department activities is promoted.

Impact, collaborations, and future projections: UNAM's Portuguese Department is one of the few programs in Mexico offering an in-depth and systematic study of the Portuguese language and has played a key role in strengthening Lusophone studies in the country and in Latin America. Its importance is reflected in the constant collaboration with academic institutions in Brazil, Portugal, and other Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as in exchange programs that allow students and teachers to experience academic life abroad. The Department has actively participated in cultural events and celebrations held annually to promote Portuguese speaking cultures and language. Nearly six decades connecting languages, cultures, and people. Today, it celebrates the history that has given it identity, the growth and solidity of its community, and its commitment to languages, translation, and linguistics.

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