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When it comes to language learning nowadays, there's Rosetta Stone and it's nothing else. Or at least, that's what Rosetta Stone would want us to believe. They have spent a fortune in advertising trying to convince us that if we just spend enough money, we can have a computer program hold us by hand as we move from step A to step B to step C and so on, finally achieving our dream of being fluent in a new language. Of course, it'll cost us a few hundred dollars. Like most luxury items, Rosetta Stone trades on its high price and slick marketing to create a perception of quality. I think Rosetta Stone is a good product, good product. But it's not a magic key. Studying the real language is a dirty thing, one that requires motivation, a diversity of approaches, and hard work. Rosetta Stone is well beyond the budget of many people who would like to learn a language, and its one-size-fits-all approach ignores the fact that different people learn in different ways, and at different rates. Rosetta Stone also sells us the idea that achieving fluency can be easy if we just spend enough money and then let a computer program take responsibility for our learning. But achieving fluency is not easy! It takes dedication, enthusiasm, discipline, and several years of work (a lot of that can be fun). So let's take a look at some of the alternatives to Rosetta Stone. One of the most popular alternatives is the Pimsleur audio course. I clung to Pimsleur at the beginning of my Portuguese journey and ended up completing all 90 Pimsleur lessons. I found my growing ability to say increasingly complex things to be completely captivating and kept me going through the course. Pimsleur worked so well for me that I have a pretty strong bias towards it, after I'll explain below. But I recognize that everyone learns in a different way and may need different tools. I haven't gone through the entire Portuguese Rosetta Stone course, but I've used Rosetta Stone French Level I previously and have received feedback from others who have used Portuguese RS. With so many language programs available, it is worth a distinction between methods that try to be truly comprehensive compared to those that address only part of the learning process (such as learning vocabulary or memorizing common phrases). I think a method that is truly comprehensive should ideally integrate vocabulary learning, grammatical practice, and all four ways of linguistic communication: speaking, listening, reading, writing. But in reality, nothing like that exists; each method has strengths and weaknesses in these areas. So it is necessary to create a well-rounded study regime, which a variety of different resources and activities. See the Roadmap page for some suggestions on creating a complete plan. However, let's take a look at some of the strengths and of each product, starting by comparing Rosetta Stone with Pimsleur: Rosetta Stone Type: Computer software, online app, additional audio, social site Best for: Reading, listening Not so good for: Speaking, writing Dialects: Brazilian only Cost: $200-600 Rosetta Stone comes in two forms, a very expensive software product that you install on your computer, and an online version , which is cheaper but requires an internet connection. They also offer additional products, such as audio CDs and a social site with access to native tutors (which can bring the bill up to $600, quite expensive when you get a large tutor accessible locally or from StreetSmart Brazil instead). Rosetta Stone only offers Brazilian Portuguese, so if you learn European Portuguese you may want to go with something else. Here are Rosetta Stone's strengths compared to Pimsleur: higher vocabulary. You'll come out of RS with a significantly higher vocabulary than with Pimsleur (which is limited to about 500 words). Interactive and captivating. Interaction and a wider variety of activities make RS a better choice for visual students, and for those who get bored or easily distracted. Go at your own pace. Pimsleur often doesn't give you enough time to respond to requests, which can be frustrating. Rosetta Stone allows you to take as much time as you need. More reading practice. Because Rosetta Stone is more visual, reading is part of most activities. Pimsleur offers very little reading practice. More comprehensive. While neither RS nor Pimsleur will reach you anywhere near fluency, RS through Level III has enough material to take you further towards this goal. The main weakness is that Rosetta Stone emphasizes the receptive modes of communication (reading, listening) on productive modes (speaking, writing). True, it has some speech recognition ability to help you with your pronunciation, but from what I've seen this doesn't work as well you might want. And while it encourages you to repeat words and short phrases, it doesn't give you much practice producing complete thoughts like you would do in a real conversation. Excercises writing teach you correct spelling, but don't give you much practice of doing background writing. However, I give RS credit for at least trying to incorporate all four modes, so I think it's getting closer to being comprehensive. Pimsleur Type: Audio Course, mp3 or CD Good for: Speaking and Listening Not as Good for: Reading and Writing Cost: $0-$180 Dialects: Brazilian and European Pimsleur is an audio-only method consisting of 90 half-hour lessons that will theoretically take 3 months to complete if you do a lesson every day. In my case, in fact, it took me 7 months because I ended up not doing them every day and had to repeat them occasionally. Unfortunately, there are a confusing number of different products there. The only difference between them is how many lessons each product contains - the lessons themselves are identical from product to product. If you are planning on doing the entire course of 90 lessons, the ones you want are called Portuguese Pimsleur (Brazilian), comprehensive, revised 2nd edition, levels I, II and III. (You can also choose to study the European dialect, although unfortunately there are only 10 lessons on offer). Each level (I, II or III) contains 30 lessons. Make sure the product you receive says Comprehensive – which is the only series that has all the lessons. What Pimsleur is going for is that rather than asking you to just memorize and repeat phrases like so many other courses, it actually prepares you for conversation training to quickly transform your thoughts into English speech. This means that you are actively involved in remembering the vocabulary you have learned, and you are committed to putting words together in new ways. Everything in Pimsleur happens in the context of a simulated conversation. During the conversation, the narrator can ask you in English: you ask the clerk, What are the instructions to the hotel?, then there is a pause of a few seconds to answer, and then the speaker will give you the answer, which you repeat a second time trying to make the pronunciation match that of the speaker. You can try the first lesson for free on their website to get a feel for how it works. New words are introduced into each lesson. You are asked to use them in your answers, at first frequently, and then as you move them to long-term memory, less so. This is what is known as spaced repetition, and Dr. Paul Pimsleur developed it in 1960. This solves a common problem with language programs, which is that when you move to a new section, you get to forget what you learned previously. Pimsleur doesn't let you forget, constantly asking you to remember the words you learned in previous units. I'll admit, the prompt-and-response format can definitely be boring and unexciting for some people. But I would at least suggest trying the first 5 pimsleur lessons. If you're like me, you might find that thrill of being able to say increasingly complex things in Portuguese makes you stick with it, even when it gets boring. But he needs some teeth. So here are the main advantages of Pimsleur over Rosetta Stone: Much better conversation practice. Pimsleur trains you to quickly translate your thoughts into English into Portuguese, which is exactly what you will do during the conversation, at least in the early intermediate stages of learning. You from Pimsleur much more capable and comfortable with making simple conversations. Emphasis on creating languages rather than memorizing. Cu Cu you won't just be memorizing and repeating back phrases, you'll be actively involved in using words and grammar you know to create new sentences and express new ideas on your own. This means that you actually have to focus and use the brain during each unit. Grammar is never taught explicitly, but is gently introduced by example, without you noticing that you are learning grammar. Better pronunciation. Because Pimsleur is so focused on listening and speaking, I think students will come out with a clearer pronunciation. Get instant feedback from a native speaker after each of your responses, after which you can try a second time to perfect the answer or pronunciation. And being safer with pronunciation gives you greater confidence during the conversation. Pimsleur is the obvious choice for auditory students. Cheap! Many libraries have a language learning section where you can check Pimsleur cds, in which case it is absolutely free. I finished the whole course this way and didn't pay a cent. You don't have to stay at the computer. You can do a Pimsleur lesson while driving, cooking, or even taking a bath. But unlike Rosetta Stone, you need privacy, if you don't mind people wondering why that strange person is talking to herself in Portuguese. Pimsleur has his weaknesses: The Pimsleur series is beginning to show its age. It's only available on CD (unless you download from Audible.com), so you'll have to break it to mp3 in order to get it into a more portable format. Narrator and speakers sound a little... old-fashioned. A lot of scenarios revolve around an American businessman in Rio, and you'll find yourself in some weird conversations about golf and trade exhibitions. And it's not as fun as clicking on colorful photos on your computer. Limited vocabulary. Pimsleur teaches you a very small, though well-chosen, collection of about 500 words. This is an area where Rosetta Stone beat Pimsleur in spades. But in my opinion, having a huge vocabulary is not so important when you're just starting out. What is important is the internalization of the sounds of the language, the structures of the sentence, the way to form questions, etc. On the Roadmap page, we'll see it's possible to combine Pimsleur with other resources to fill in your vocabulary while you're working on the course. It's not enough to focus on reading. Pimsleur does not include some reading practices, but they are nothing more than short lists of words in a small booklet that you are asked to repeat as a speaker reads them. This means that you get some real practice connecting the sounds you are learning to the written words. This is a consideration for Portuguese because as French (and unlike Spanish!), words are not always written like they sound. In fact, words are rarely pronounced in the way a or Spanish speaker wants to pronounce them. So you need to get practice by reading another way, probably through Tá Falado, semantics videos, or a manual. And if you're a visual student like me, you might find it easier to remember the words of their spelling rather than just sound alone. One last thing I should mention is that Pimsleur teaches you an overly formal way of speaking, especially in the early lessons, which would honestly sound pretty strange to most Brazilians if you talked like that in everyday conversation. Imagine the Queen of England trying to have a conversation with a random New Yorker on the street and you got the idea. Portuguese is a language that is very sensitive to the social register, and the formal structures that are often taught to use in business-oriented courses, such as Pimsleur, can sound very out of place in casual speech. But here's the thing: despite all these shortcomings, Pimsleur still works beautifully. It makes you listen and speak the language immediately, makes you think in Portuguese sentence structures, and drills the basic skeleton of the tongue into your brain until it becomes second nature. When you finish the entire series, you'll have a solid foundation on which to expand your vocabulary, learn new forms of verb, and make your speech more colloquial. Some people close themselves over to the lack of reading practice in Pimsleur. Let me just say that language is at heart about stringing together sounds to make sense. Reading and writing are just ways of handling the symbols that stand in for sounds. What does your mind do when you read? It's mentally vocalizing sounds. When do you really know a word? When you recognize it by the sound, not by the visual transcription. What this means for language learning is that speaking and listening must come first. Once the sounds are internalized, the reading becomes a piece of cake. Of course, no program will do everything. No matter what you choose, you should round up your study by using several different types of resources. But I still believe pimsleur offers the best value for the price. If you think of Pimsleur as the first gentle introduction to the language, rather than as a magic key to fluency, and if you have a well-rounded study regime to compensate for deficiencies, then these disadvantages can be easily overcome. On a final note, in the winter of 2012 Pimsleur launched a new product called Pimsleur Unlimited, which is a software program clearly designed to compete with Rosetta Stone. It looks like this product will address many of the weaknesses I mentioned and turn Pimsleur into a more comprehensive system, adding tools for reading and learning Unfortunately, it is only available for Spanish, French, German and Italian right now. I have no idea if they intend to release a Portuguese version, but I imagine if the product proves to be competitive, they will gradually launch other languages. Semántica Type: Video lessons featuring on location storytelling Good for: Listening and pronunciation Not as good for: Reading and writing Cost: $15-$30 per month. Use the promotional code hacking-Portuguese for 15% off any subscription. Dialects: Brazilian Semántica is the idea of James Hall, an American living in Rio, who produces incredible life stories in Rio designed to teach Portuguese at the beginner-intermediate level. I consider them one of the standard Portuguese gold programs on the web because of their emphasis on Portuguese, because it is actually spoken in Brazilian cities. Semántica was crucial to help me develop fluency. See my comments by beginners Semántica and advanced series here and their new intermediate series here. PortuguesePod101.com I've been using PortuguesPod101 for a year, and I think it's fantastic. There's so much material here at so many different levels that this could keep you busy for a few years at least. There are audio dialogues, written texts, exercises, spaced-rehearsal flashcards, wordbanks. We recommend that you sign up for their email list, because they have sales quite frequently. Other audio courses Michel Thomas Method Type: Audio course Dialects: European only good for: Listening, speaking Not so good for: Reading, writing Cost: $50 Method Michel Thomas is similar in the pimsleur approach, but teaching is more engaging, with more explanations in English because you listen to a teacher instructing a live group of 2-3 students (there are very few explanations in Pimsleur). The explanations are interesting the first time around, but many people find them annoying when re-listening to lessons. This method encourages you to relax and let the teacher be responsible for your learning, which they do by using spaced repetitions and requests that are all quite similar to Pimsleur. I've only done a cursory assessment of this method, but from what I've seen it looks like it's more carefully designed and less cookie-cutter than Pimsleur. On the other hand, you will need to listen to two other students who can distract. The same strengths and weaknesses I discussed with Pimsleur also apply to Michel Thomas. There are two levels, beginning and advanced. There is no practice of reading or writing. Also, some people don't like to hear other students' answers, because their pronunciation is not perfect; on the other hand, it can be instructive to learn from their mistakes when the teacher corrects them. One warning I have noticed is that the teacher and the speakers have a strong European accent, and therefore I assume that they teach Portuguese European grammar and also. If you want to learn European Portuguese, that's great, but if you really really To learn Brazilian Portuguese, Pimsleur may be a better option because it gives you the choice of dialect either. Foreign Service Institute Type: Good Guided Audio Course for: Listening, Speaking, Reading Not So Good for: Writing Dialects: European/Very Formal Brazilian Cost: Free so-called FSI bands are a series of language courses developed by the U.S. Foreign Service Institute in 1950-1970 for the purpose of training diplomats. They are now in the public domain and are available on the internet as audio files accompanied by poorly scanned pdfs. You can download all 48 units for free here. Beware of dubious companies trying to sell you these courses at the same advertising cost courses used by the U.S. State Department or similar language. The courses are in the public domain and should be free. I know how many people swear on the FSI course to help them achieve fluency, and obviously at one point it was good enough to train American diplomats to communicate well. And I've heard that the ISF course takes you much further to the fluency that either RS or Pimsleur, which, at best, are simple introductions to a language. Unit 48 seems to enter the subjunctive, which is quite advanced. But after working through a bit of Portuguese fsi program, I find it like an outdated way of learning that few people today would have patience for. You must pause continuously and cancel the sound interruption, as if you were standing in front of a tape recorder. The course is very dry and learns a fairly formal way of speaking, consistent with its intended audience. Book-based Comprehensive Portuguese Methods In addition to the courses mentioned above, there are a few other popular courses that try to be comprehensive. The two courses below are similar in their approach, in which they use a book complete with spoken dialogues on a CD. They differ from regular textbooks in that they are designed for self-study rather than use in the classroom – this generally means more explanatory text in English, more written grammar exercises to provide opportunities to practice on paper, and more listening exercises, but a few exercises based on group interaction or speech. These courses might be a great option for those who prefer to study more of a book and are less concerned about their conversational skills. Teach Yourself Books Type: Self-teaching book plus additional audio Cost: $30 Dialects: Brazilian/European + Brazilian I recommend this book + 2 CDs for beginners who go alone as a supplement to a more audio-focused course like Pimsleur. There are several versions of this well-respected course available. Complete Portugues: A Yourself Guide by Manuela Cook tries to teach both dialects at the same time, which I find confusing. A better option, if you are learning the Brazilian dialect, is completely Brazilian Brazilian A Teach Yourself Guide by Sue Tyson-Ward. In both cases, make sure you receive the latest edition of 2010. Colloquialportuguese Portuguese: Full Course for Beginners Type: Self-teaching book, plus additional CDs with good dialogues for: Reading, writing, listening Not so good for: Speaking Dialects: Brazilian Only Cost: $22 This is a very reasonable price course, which consists of two books, Level 1 and 2, along with additional CDs containing spoken dialogues. It's almost more of a self-study manual, which makes it quite different from RS or Pimsleur. I like that it is designed specifically for self-students, that there are a lot of exercises, that it is specific to Brazil, and that it is quite recent vintage (Level 1 was published in 1997, Level 2 in 2008). Like many textbooks, it is divided into thematic units, such as Education, Work, Sport, Holidays, etc. (which is an excellent way of learning vocabulary, in thematic pieces) and grammar is sprinkled throughout, but is not in the foreground. Exercises are all written, and some involve listening to a spoken dialogue; there is little chance of practicing speech or fine pronunciation. The text can be a little dry and uncommitted, more than the book Teach Yourself. Online courses Transparent Language Type: Desktop software, online applications, iPhone applications Good for: Vocabulary learning, pronunciation, reading (depending on product) Not so good for: Speaking, writing Dialects: Brazilian and European Cost: Depends on product Transparent Language offers a whole page of different products, most of which I have not tried and can not vouch for. It seems like many of their products, though, are based on the Byki platform, which I've used on my iPhone, and that's little more than a fantasy flashcard app. As flashcard apps go, it's actually one of the best out there, with an extensive database of premade vocabulary lists, a few games, and good records of each word to help with pronunciation – but nevertheless, I question whether any product relying heavily on this platform is really a comprehensive method rather than just applied learning vocabulary. At best, it might be a good supplement to expand your vocabulary, or a gentle way to introduce yourself to the sound of language learning a few words and phrases. In the early stages of my learning, I successfully used Byki to learn a bunch of verbs and the names of things would be vegetables, so it has its uses. Transparent Portuguese blog is pretty good, by the way. Duolingo Type: Online Course Dialects: Not Differentiated Good for: Reading, Writing Not So Good for: Speaking,

Listening Cost: Free Read My Full Review of Duolingo. LingQ Type: Online Dialectes: Good for: First reading and writing to start and intermediate students not so good for: listening, speaking, advanced advanced students advanced Four membership levels, from $0 to $79 per month LingQ is less of a comprehensive language system than a tool designed to solve a particular problem. As you progress in learning a language, you finally want to search for reading material on the web that both challenges and interests you – newspaper articles, blog posts, etc. This is a great way to present yourself to new vocabulary in real-world contexts. The problem is that every time you encounter an unknown word, you have to stop reading, search for the word either in a dictionary or online, maybe write it in a notebook and go back to reading. Then, you need a way to keep track of the words you've been looking for, so you can review them later and eventually move them to your long-term memory. Thus, your reading experience becomes painstakingly frustrating. LingQ is designed to make this process as fast and trouble-free as possible by bringing together several different tools in one interface. It works like this: Find text you want to read online. Then import it into LingQ, at which point it scans the article and highlights in blue any new words that it thinks will be unknown to you. As you read, you can click on one of these unknown words to bring an instant dictionary definition. Another click will save you to the collection of vocabulary flashcards, which you can review according to an anki-like memory program. How does LingQ know what words we are for you? Well, at first assumes you don't know anything and every word is new. As you add words to your vocabulary stack, it remembers every time you encounter them in a text or revise them, and eventually become familiar words. Over time, the collection of known words grows and you will see fewer and fewer unknown words highlighted in blue. This provides a nice psychological feeling of your progress. But what it also means is that you only get the full benefit of LingQ by using it frequently. For the process to work, you need to have an accurate picture of the words you're doing and you don't know, which takes time and investment on your part to read a lot of texts, flagging the words you already know, and LingQing the ones you don't. For a beginner starting from scratch who only has a small vocabulary, this works quite well. But intermediate or advanced users, unless they have been using LingQ from the beginning, will soon tire of loading a text filled with blue words and having to teach LingQ hundreds of words that they already know. For these users, it would be useful to allow them to your own starting point, automatically marking the most common 100 or 500 or 1000 words in the known language. LingQ also offers some social aspects, allowing you to participate in Skype conversations and have native speakers grade your writings, but the real flesh of the system Reading. Verbling Verbling is a system that pairs you with language exchange partners and allows you to discuss video instantly. Livemocha and Busuu Type: Social language sites Dialects: Numerous, depending on the user base Good for: Reading and writing in chat-based conversations, writing correction, asking complex questions of use Not so good for: Listening, speaking Cost: Free to register and use limited features; some courses may cost extra Livemocha and Busuu are part of a trend developing websites that offer social language learning by connecting with native speakers of the target language who are themselves learning their native language. So, as a Portuguese student, you might be partnering with someone from Brazil who is learning English. There are partner activities, such as conversations and games in which you complete tasks by helping each other learn your native languages. There are also places where you can have native writing review speakers that you've done. I haven't used these sites much, but I think they could be great for more advanced students who have questions of use that only a native speaker can answer. I'd be interested to hear about a beginner's experience using them. It is also very satisfying to help another person learn their native language as well. As for the beginner online classes that these sites offer, my guess is that they are mostly an incentive to get people to register to use the site, and probably don't take you very far. StreetSmart Brazil Type: Tutoring online via Skype Good for: Listening and speaking in real conversations, pronunciation, grammar dialects: Brazilian only Cost: Contact SSB for current time rates I reviewed StreetSmart Brazil elsewhere on this site, and even though they are a tutoring service rather than a product, I can't help but mention them here. None of the other courses on this page provide the same opportunity for learning conversation, grammar, pronunciation, and all four modes of communication simultaneously. The wonderful thing about Streetsmart is to get to interact with a teacher who can customize your lessons according to your ability and interests. Your lessons could include any of the following: chatting with your teacher, studying grammar using their proprietary materials and materials from other textbooks, reading news articles or blogs, listening to songs on YouTube, or going over a writing exercise. It can be as structured or unstructured as you want. In addition, you constantly receive instant feedback from a native speaker. Anything else... In addition to the courses mentioned here, there are dozens of other websites, phone apps, desktop software, and companies out there with products that claim to teach you Portuguese quickly and easily. My experience is that 90% of them claim to be comprehensive programs for Portuguese learning when they really nothing more than phrasebooks, vocabulary lists, poorly made videos, or flashcard-type apps. Most of them are of terrible quality, with no thought given to the pedagogical approach, the difference between European and Brazilian Portuguese, or teaching the correct pronunciation. And most of them take a cookie-cutter approach, using the same approach for each language. My advice is to stick with one of the courses observed above: Pimsleur, Rosetta Stone, Michel Thomas, StreetSmart Brazil, Teach Yourself, or Portuguese Colloquial Brazil as the foundation of your learning, and supplement it with other resources mentioned on top 10 Resources for achieving fluency in Portuguese. If there are other courses or products that you want to see reviewed here, let me know in the comments. Reviews.