Exploring Portuguese Heritage and Non-Heritage Learners' Perceptions of and Performance in Listening

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Abstract

This article discusses perceptions of and performance in listening by a group of heritage and non-heritage learners of Portuguese. Our data include a survey containing background information and perceptions about listening, two listening tasks and a post-task self-report on how learners arrived at their answers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data revealed similarities and differences between the two groups. With regard to perceptions, and unlike non-heritage learners, heritage learners find listening easier than the other skills. However, both groups of learners perceive listening tasks as challenging and both think that heritage learners have an advantage over non-heritage learners while listening. The analysis of listening performance shows that, while heritage learners achieved slightly higher scores than non-heritage learners, they encountered difficulties in tasks requiring integration of information or inferencing. Also, neither group is able to deal successfully with those task demands on a consistent basis.

Résumé

Cet article s'agit d'un étude sur la perception et la performance dans la compréhension auditive d'un groupe d'apprenants d'héritage et non-héritage portugaise. Les donnés comprennent une enquête contenant des informations de base et des perceptions sur la compréhension auditive. Les participants ont également effectué deux activités d'écoute et ont été invités à expliquer comment ils sont arrivés à leurs réponses. Ces données ont été analysées à la fois quantitativement et qualitativement. Nos résultats montrent des similitudes et des différences entre les deux groupes. En termes de perception, les apprenants d'héritage ont tendance à penser que l'écoute est plus facile que les autres compétences. En revanche, les deux groupes peuvent apercevoir un certain défi aux tâches d'écoute et les deux groupes considèrent que les apprenants d'héritage ont un avantage sur les apprenants de non-héritage pour cette capacité. L'analyse des performances de compréhension auditive indique que, tandis que les apprenants d'héritage peuvent en effet avoir de meilleurs résultats que les apprenants de non-héritage, ils rencontrent leurs propres difficultés en fonction du type de tâche. L'étude suggère aussi que les deux groupes ne savent pas toujours faire face aux exigences de ces tâches efficacement.

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Introduction

Research about heritage and non-heritage language learners has shown that these two groups may differ not only with regard to learning needs (Brinton, Kagan, & Bauckus, 2008; Valdés, Lozano, & García-Moya, 1981) but also how they perceive and perform linguistic tasks (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2010; Torres, 2011). Understanding those differences is crucial for heritage language education (Montrul, 2008), since it is not uncommon for heritage and non-heritage learners to be placed in single-track classes (i.e., classrooms comprised of both heritage and non-heritage learners), at least in the United States where the present study was conducted. As Moskver (2008) noted, enrolment numbers and resources rarely justify dual-track programs, especially in less commonly taught languages. Even for Spanish, the most commonly taught language in the United States, Beaudrie (2012) reported that only about 40% of college-level programs offer heritage language tracks.

Even though the two groups of learners are often placed in the same language class, we know little about how they perceive listening and how they perform in listening tasks. Our interest in listening is justified due to the centrality of that skill for effective everyday communication and academic/professional success (Chambers, 2007; Vandergrift, 2007), areas that are undoubtedly relevant to both heritage and non-heritage language learners (McGroarty & Urzúa, 2008; Tucker, 2008). Perhaps due to a general sense that heritage language learners are equipped with good aural comprehension abilities (Douglas, 2008; Shinbo, 2004), research has tended not to center on how this population perceives and performs listening tasks. Another possible reason for the lack of studies in this area may be a broader lack of investigations about language learners' beliefs about listening more generally (Graham, 2006).

The objective of this paper is to explore this gap in our knowledge by examining how a group of heritage language learners (HLLs) and non-heritage language learners (NHLLs) perceive and engage in listening in the context of Portuguese learning in an American university. As Milleret (2012) showed, enrolment in Portuguese in U.S. colleges and universities has been growing. Milleret reported that the presence of heritage learners of Portuguese is the second most commonly cited reason for growth in enrolment (after the presence of Spanish speakers), which adds to the importance of research into characteristics of HLLs and NHLLs of Portuguese.

It must be highlighted in this introduction that our motivation to do this study is pedagogical. If HLLs and NHHLs do tend to be placed in the same language courses and if there are differences in the ways these two groups of learners perceive and perform in listening, with the expectation that the former group outperforms the latter, then an assessment of these differences is a first step toward the development of pedagogical practices. A similar point was raised by Montrul (2013) in relation to the need for understanding second language (L2) learners' and heritages speakers' ways of processing the target language and engaging in classroom practices with a view to informing course development and assessment.

In this work we define heritage learners following Valdés's (2001) commonly-accepted definition: in contexts where English is the dominant language, a heritage

language learner is someone "who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English" (p. 38). We acknowledge the fact that the category "heritage learner" comprises a heterogeneous group and that it is important to attend to individual differences when studying those learners. In that sense, this study does not aim to achieve broad generalisations but, rather, to explore the characteristics of HLLs and NHLLs in an educational community which, in turn, might serve as a baseline for future investigations about these types of learners in other contexts.

Background

In this section we discuss how listening is perceived by L2 learners, and then examine how the literature describes the behaviour of more and less successful listeners, drawing on research on learner strategies. Next, we outline research findings involving HLLs' and NHLLs' perceptions about and performance in listening, locating these findings within research evidence characterising successful listening.

L2 Learners' Perceptions About Listening

Many scholars have highlighted the difficulties associated with L2 listening (Field, 2008; Goh, 2014; Vanderplank, 2014) and Vandergrift (2004) has argued that listening is in fact "the most difficult skill to learn" (p. 34). Various reasons contribute to making listening hard for learners, including its occurrence in real time and aspects of speech rate, word boundary, and grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Despite the recognition of these difficulties, the literature on learners' perceptions about listening is scarce. Goh (2000) reported on how Chinese learners of English perceive their L2 listening experiences from the analysis of diaries produced by these learners. Her findings pointed to learners' problems in their difficulty to recognise words in the L2 sound stream and in their inability to understand the meaning of words heard. Similar findings were found in Graham's (2006) investigation into the beliefs about listening held by English learners of French. Moreover, in the latter study most students rated listening as the most difficult skill, attributing their difficulties to external factors (such as the complexity of the task or speakers' accent) and displaying a helpless attitude towards the challenges imposed by the tasks.

In an earlier study, Goh (1997) investigated the same participants as in her 2000 study, but from a different perspective. Goh (1997) found that learners are aware of actions that might be taken to deal with some difficulties (e.g., taking notes or paying attention to repetitions). Such awareness relates to self-efficacy, herein defined as one's perceived capability to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1997). The literature points to a positive correlation between self-efficacy and listening success (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007; Vanderplank, 2014), which suggests that learners who are confident in their abilities to perform a listening task are more likely to be successful listeners than those who display low self-efficacy in listening. In the next section we expand these points by discussing what is known about the differences between more and less successful listeners.

L2 Learners' Performance in Listening: The Role of Strategies

Much of what is known about skilful listening derives from research into learner strategies and its interest to understand the differences in behaviour between more successful and less successful learners. In this study we follow Goh's (2005) definition of strategies as "conscious procedures for understanding, recalling and remembering information" (p. 72). In that sense, listening strategies differ from listening skills in that they involve listeners' conscious control of processes deployed in their listening. Skills, on the other hand, are automatic processes deployed by listeners with no effort or deliberate control (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008).

While good listeners are able to engage in a wide range of listening skills (e.g., listening for gist, listening for detail, attending to key words), they are also expected to be able to effectively orchestrate various strategies when faced with challenges in their listening (Goh, 2005; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This idea can be illustrated by a case study by Graham, Santos, and Vanderplank (2008) looking at the listening behaviour of a more and a less proficient listener in the context of L2 French listening in England: Whereas the latter listener tended to make use of no remedial strategies when comprehension failed, the former took on a strategic approach to the listening task by questioning and double-checking prior conclusions, focusing on key information and sometimes vocalising it (i.e., repeating it out loud), in a purposeful and continuous attempt to refine his understandings.

The literature on listening strategies does provide us with a robust amount of evidence regarding how more and less successful listeners engage in listening. In a seminal study in that area, O'Malley, Chamot, and Küpper (1989) showed that successful listeners were likely to attend to larger chunks of language while listening and to support their comprehension by drawing on top-down processes such as making inferences based on the context. For those learners, bottom-up processes focusing on sounds or words tended to be activated as subsidiary resources, and not as main ones as they were for less successful listeners. Subsequent studies (e.g., Osada, 2001; Vandergrift, 2003) confirmed a tendency by less successful listeners to focus on local information instead of pursuing global understanding while listening.

More recently, in a review of the literature on L2 listening strategies, Macaro, Graham, and Vanderplank (2007) concluded that more proficient listeners differ from less proficient ones in at least three areas: first, they tend to focus on chunks of language and not on isolated words while listening; second, they avoid translation; and third, they engage in metacognitive strategies (especially comprehension monitoring) in their orchestration of other strategies when listening. Similar patterns are found in Vandergrift's (2007) survey into skilled L2 listening, which concluded that more skilled listeners, unlike less skilled ones, are able to effectively orchestrate cognitive (e.g., inferencing) and metacognitive strategies involving planning, monitoring and evaluation in their listening process. Indeed, frequent and effective application of metacognition—or "the ability of learners to control their thoughts and to regulate their own learning" (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 5)—has been acknowledged as a characteristic of successful listeners in a number of studies (e.g., Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift, 2003). This, in turn, has generated a growing body of research investigating the effects of metacognitive instruction in L2 listening (Cross, 2010; Goh & Taib, 2006; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010) and has led to positive results in the development of learners' listening ability as well as their understanding of the

demands and nature of the listening process. Such understanding is important given the contextual nature of listening in general and of strategy use in particular (Field, 2008): A competent listener will understand the demands of a particular task, and will deploy the necessary clusters of strategies to support that listening. Graham, Santos, and Vanderplank (2011) have shown how less proficient listeners approach listening in rigid ways, not being able to adjust particular strategies to the task at hand. Lack of flexibility in listening by less able learners was also reported by Vandergrift (2003), and Goh (2000) has commented that less able listeners may not even be aware of their problems at inferencing or other high-level processes such as relating different parts of the text heard.

These research findings show that successful listeners deploy and manipulate a wide and complex set of skills and strategies in their attempt to make sense of what they hear. According to Goh (2005), it is this combination of knowledge activation, strategy use and control that characterises "expertise in listening". The extent to which these findings relate to what is known about HLLs' and NHLLs' perceptions about and performance in listening is the topic of the next two sections.

Heritage and Non-Heritage Learners' Perceptions About Listening

Research on HLLs' perceptions about listening explores that topic looking at anxiety issues, and results suggest that these learners may feel less anxious than NHLLs when listening. Investigating anxiety among both HLLs and NHLLs in the four language skills, Torres (2011) concluded that the lowest rate of anxiety registered by HLLs was in listening, followed by speaking; the opposite was found for NHLLs, who reported being most anxious in situations involving listening skills.

Self-reporting of anxiety in listening might be associated with both groups of learners' overall perception of how difficult listening is, with less anxious learners finding listening easier than more anxious ones. Indeed, according to Shinbo's (2004) study, which investigated what areas Japanese HLLs perceived as strongest and weakest, most participants ranked listening as their most proficient skill and felt that they needed to improve writing, reading and/or grammar abilities. Yu (2008) reported that listening was the skill that NHLLs of Korean felt they needed to improve the most, while for HLLs listening was the skill that required the least improvement (and writing was the skill HLLs most wanted to become better). The Korean HLLs in Lee and Kim's (2008) study also rated listening as the easiest skill, while writing was rated the most difficult. Xiao (2006) reported a similar finding: Most Chinese HLLs in this study rated their listening and speaking skills as "good" and their reading and writing abilities as "fair" or "poor". Similarly, the HLLs in Silva's (2011) study considered situations involving listening and speaking skills the easiest in which to participate, while half of the NHLLs in the study considered listening to be challenging or difficult.

Shinbo's (2004) study also included perceptions of NHLLs and language instructors about HLLs' linguistic skills. Every group (HLLs, NHLLs, and instructors) judged HLLs' listening abilities as their strongest, followed by speaking, writing and reading. Even though HLLs did not generally perceive their own abilities as stronger than those of NHLLs (with the important exception of listening), NHLLs believed HLLs to have advantages in every skill. Overall, instructors also perceived that HLLs had advantages over NHLLs.

In sum, HLLs report their perceptions of comprehension of spoken language in a way that, even if varied, often sets them apart from NHLLs' perceptions of anxiety when

listening and their views about the difficulty of listening. However, the literature about HLLs' perceptions of listening does not provide us with details about specific aspects in L2 listening that these learners might find more challenging, both when listening in general and when carrying out classroom tasks involving listening. The latter focus is important given the tendency for both groups of learners to be placed in the same classrooms: Ultimately, the development, implementation and assessment of pedagogical sequences suitable for these two groups of learners require an understanding of these individuals' ways of perceiving and engaging in listening tasks in the classroom (Montrul, 2013). In the following section we discuss how HLLs and NHLLs may differ regarding their performance in listening.

Heritage and Non-Heritage Learners' Performance in Listening

As mentioned above and elsewhere (Benmanoun et al., 2010; Hendrix, 2008; Montrul, 2012; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), the linguistic abilities of HLLs may vary considerably, with these learners falling anywhere on a bilingual continuum such as the one proposed in Valdés (2001). This variation is not different regarding listening skills. Discussing the results of her study on Korean sentence processing, Kim (2008) noted that "the (listening) comprehension skills of HL learners are affected chiefly by the quality and quantity of HL exposure and use" (p. 122). Overall, studies of speech perception (e.g., Au, Knightly, Jun, & Oh, 2002) suggest that HLLs often display good control of phonemic and/or phonetic contrasts in their heritage language. Oh, Au, and Jun (2010) further explored this idea by comparing Korean international adoptees relearning Korean as adults with novice adult learners of Korean. The adoptees, who had been adopted before they could speak, had not been exposed to Korean after adoption. Oh et al. showed that adoptees identified some Korean phonemes more precisely than the other learners, which suggests that some traits of early childhood language memory can be retrieved even many years later.

Comparing the performance of HLLs and NHLLs of Chinese, Xiao (2006) showed that HLLs performed significantly better than NHLLs on the Chinese SAT II test, which tested listening comprehension as well as grammar and reading. No further details about the listening test were provided, nor about how these students engaged in the listening tasks. Xiao asserted that exposure to an environment in which the language is used for real-life communication facilitates language learning and accounts for HLLs' performance in listening and speaking.

In sum, listening comprehension may be affected by exposure to the heritage language and to language use in real-life situations (Kim, 2008; Xiao, 2006). However, the literature does not provide us with a clear idea of what those performances involve in terms of skills and strategies adopted while listening; we do not know, furthermore, if HLLs and NHLLs listen differently depending on the listening demands of the tasks they carry out.

Our Study

In light of the previous discussion about key issues in listening and how they relate to perception of and performance in listening by heritage and non-heritage learners, our goal in this study was to address four main questions in one specific educational community:

1. How do HLLs and NHLLs perceive the level of difficulty of listening in relation to the difficulty of other skills?
2. How do these two groups of learners perceive classroom listening activities?
3. Do these two groups of learners perform differently in tasks with different listening demands?
4. How do HLLs and NHLSs compare in their perception of HLLs' performance in classroom listening?

Participants

In order to answer these questions, we recruited participants ($N = 23$) enrolled in two fourth-semester Portuguese classes at the university level in the United States. All participants would be considered "college age" in the United States (approximately 18-23 years old). Mirroring what often happens in university language programs in the United States (Beaudrie, 2012; Moskver, 2008), each class was comprised of both HLLs and NHLLs. Results from a survey[1] about participants' background information (see Appendix and more details about the survey in the next section) revealed the following distribution of HLLs and NHLLs in our sample:

Table 1
Languages to Which Participants Were Exposed at Home

	HLLs ($n = 12$)		NHLLs ($n = 11$)	
Language(s)	Portuguese	Portuguese/English	English	English/Other Language
Participants	2	10	8	3

Participants were considered HLLs if they included Portuguese in questions 1 or 2 in the survey, which asked about languages used by them and by their relatives when they were growing up. Participants in the current study were almost equally divided, with 12 HLLs and 11 NHLLs of Portuguese, as seen in Table 1. Among the former, two of the participants declared that only Portuguese was used at home as they were growing up. The majority of HLLs (10 out of 12) used both Portuguese and English. Most NHLLs (eight out of 11) grew up in a monolingual environment, using only English, while three were exposed to another language as well (namely, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish).

Instruments

We used three instruments for data collection in this study: a questionnaire, a set of listening tasks, and post-task written self-reports. We will give details about each of them in turn.

Questionnaire.

Following the background questions described in the previous section, the questionnaire included an item that asked participants to rate the difficulty of types of participation comparing the four linguistic skills. Next, the questionnaire inquired about textbook activities that focused on listening, asking whether, in participants' opinions, HLLs performed differently than NHLLs, and, if so, how. Our use of the phrase "textbook activities" in the questionnaire (rather than, for example, more general descriptors such as "classroom activities") aimed to address two issues: first, the centrality of the textbook for listening activities in the context of our investigation; and second, the attempt to make the focus of the question clearer for students. The questionnaire ended with a question about participants' own rating of textbook listening activities. Questions involving ratings contained a 4-point scale, from easiest to more difficult, phrased as *easy*, *not easy nor challenging*, *challenging but doable*, and *difficult*. They also contained an open-ended question asking participants to explain their rating.

Listening tasks.

These involved two listening tasks from Klobucka, Jouët-Pastré, Sobral, Moreira, and Hutchinson (2007), which were part of the lesson that participants were studying. The two tasks were selected because they were both dialogues, which allowed for comparison of what Hill and Tomlinson (2003) identified as a fairly common genre found in language textbooks. One of the tasks (Klobucka et al., 2007) involved a dialogue between a female attendant and a male passenger at a checking-in situation at the airport. Overall it was a simple dialogue from a linguistic point of view, made up of short sentences connected by coordination only, and making predominant use of formulaic language expected to occur in these encounters. The second dialogue (Klobucka et al., 2007) was a telephone conversation between a male customer and a female travel agent in which the latter provides details about two trips to Brazil. Much longer than the previous dialogue (333 words vs. 71 in the first dialogue), this one also posed further difficulties in its use of emotive and colloquial language as well as of numbers describing prices and time length of two different trips.

Each dialogue included a comprehension task to be completed by the listeners. Each task was comprised of a number of questions. The first task started with an open question about the setting where the dialogue took place, followed by five statements to be judged as true or false according to the dialogue heard. The second task was a multiple choice exercise comprising eight incomplete statements to be completed by choosing one out of three options.

To address the relationship between listeners' performance and the various task demands we coded each question according to the listening demands placed upon participants, drawing on the coding system proposed by Graham et al. (2008). We carried out an initial coding, reaching an inter-rater agreement of 70%. Differences were resolved by discussion. With regard to what listeners would need in order to answer the questions correctly, seven questions (two in the first task and five in the second) required local understanding at word, phrase or sentence level. Two questions in the second task required understanding and integrating more than one piece of information. Both questions involved understanding and comparing numbers. Finally, five questions (four in the first task and

one in the second) required inference drawing on world knowledge and/or global understanding.

Post-task written self-reports.

After participants had finished each listening task, we followed Graham and Santos's (2013) approach and asked them to report on the strategies they used while listening by responding to the following prompt about each of the questions: "The things that I did and the thoughts that went through my mind to help me answer item…".

Data Collection

The questionnaire, the listening tasks and the post-task written self-reports were completed in one class session. The questionnaire was completed at the beginning of the session, after one of the authors explained the purpose of the research and how data were going to be collected. After students answered the questionnaires and the researcher collected them, each class instructor proceeded to teach his or her class. After reviewing homework, each instructor introduced the first listening task and asked students to read the task prior to completing it. At that point, students were asked to record their answers in a copy of the corresponding textbook page that was distributed. They were also asked to complete the post-task written self-report described above. Instructors played the passage twice for the whole group, with a brief interval (about 1 minute) between each play. The passage was not paused while it was being played and students answered the questions as they heard the passage. After the second playing of the passage, students were given 3-4 minutes to answer the post-task self-report. Subsequently, the researcher present collected the answers to the task and the self-report. The same sequence of procedures was used for the second task.

Data Analysis

In order to protect participants' anonymity, students were asked to provide only their initials in the survey, the answers to the listening tasks and the follow-up questions (the initials allowed us to match the survey to the answers to tasks and follow-up questions). To analyse the data from the survey, we started by categorising participants either as HLL or as NHLL as described under Participants. Then, we coded the answers to question 3, about types of participation (speaking, listening, reading, writing) and levels of difficulty as follows: 1 = *easy*, 2 = *not easy nor challenging*, 3 = *challenging but doable*, and 4 = *difficult*. We then calculated frequencies of those responses. Question 4 asked whether and how, in each participant's opinion, HLLs performed better than NHLLs on textbook activities that focused on listening. Answers to the first part of question were simply coded as *yes* or *no*, leading to a quantitative analysis of frequencies. The explanations provided in the second part were analysed qualitatively in search for themes. Answers to question 5, which dealt with level of difficulty of textbook activities focusing on listening, were also coded 1 to 4 in the same manner as question 3, followed by retrieval of frequencies. Comments supplied by participants in their explanations of the answers given to questions 4 and 5 were analysed qualitatively looking at emergent themes. Both

sets of qualitative data in the questionnaire were analysed separately by each researcher and then moderated for agreement.

The answers provided for the two listening tasks were checked and scores were given to each student based on the number of correct responses. With these results, we were able to calculate how many correct answers each group (HLLS and NHLLs) obtained, both in raw numbers and in percentages. We also used descriptive statistics to calculate the mean, range and standard deviation of test scores for each group in relation to the three task demands (local understanding, understanding and integrating, making inferences). Non-parametric techniques (Mann-Whitney U test) were used to verify the statistical significance of the findings. We then combined the quantitative results with a qualitative analysis of the comments made by students in their post-task written reports. We carried out the qualitative coding, drawing on the issues discussed in our literature review and looking out for new themes.

Results

1. How do HLLs and NHLLs perceive the level of difficulty of listening in relation to the difficulty of other skills?

Analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that HLLs perceived listening as being the easiest among the four skills surveyed. For the NHLLs in our sample, however, listening was believed to be as challenging as writing, and almost as demanding as speaking. Figures 1 and 2 give details.
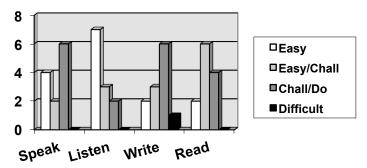

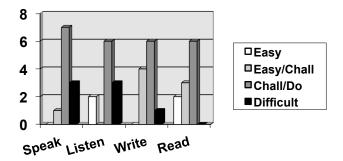*Figure 1*. Skill difficulty for HLLs.

Figure 2. Skill difficulty for NHLLs.

These results show that HLLs felt that the easiest type of participation in Portuguese involved listening, which for them appears to be even easier than speaking. On the other hand, NHLLs considered all four language skills somewhat challenging. Note, however, that some (three out of 11) NHLLs considered listening *difficult*, a rating only attributed to writing by HLLs.

2. How do those two groups of learners perceive classroom listening activities?

In relation to learners' perception of classroom listening activities, HLLs rated textbook exercises as *easy*, *not easy nor challenging*, and *challenging but doable*. Despite the fact that seven out of 12 HLLs considered overall listening participation *easy* (Figure 1), our results show that classroom listening around textbook exercises is perceived as challenging by several of the participants who are HLLs: five out of 12 considered those activities *challenging but doable*. For NHLLs, the results do not differ very much from those concerning listening participation in general: Textbook listening activities were considered *challenging* or *difficult* by the majority (10 out of 11) of these learners. Figure 3 illustrates how HLLs and NHLLs perceived textbook exercises that involve listening.
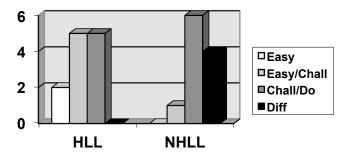

Figure 3. Perception of textbook listening activities by HLLs and NHLLs.

The chart in Figure 3 evidences two reversed scenarios: While no HLL considered listening exercises from the textbook to be *difficult*, no NHLL thought that they were *easy*. Moreover, only one NHLL believed these activities to be *not easy nor challenging*. Perhaps not surprisingly given the proximity between the two languages, this rating was attributed by an NHLL who spoke Spanish. In general, it is clear that the two groups of learners perceived textbook listening activities quite differently: the majority of NHLLs (10 out of 11) considered them somewhat difficult, while over half of HLLs (seven out of 12) considered these exercises somewhat easy, and no HLL perceived them as difficult.

Four themes emerged in the qualitative data from both groups of learners regarding the difficulties associated with textbook listening activities: speech rate, speaker's accent, inability to understand the meaning of words heard, and time pressure. The following excerpts illustrate those themes, respectively:

> They speak too fast. /Accent and dialect play a part. /Certain words throw me off./ Only a few chances to figure out everything. (HLLs)

The speakers tend to talk much faster than prof. /It's Brazilian accent. /It is difficult to understand a lot of the words. /I find it hard to process the information given the little time I have. (NHLLs)

3. Do these two groups of learners perform differently in tasks with different listening demands?

As seen in Table 2, HLLs performed only slightly better than NHLLs in the overall listening tasks, and this pattern was also found in each of the three task demand types.

Table 2
Performance in the Listening Tasks per Task Demand (in Percentages)

	HLLs				NHLLs			
	M	*SD*	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	Min.	Max.
Local understanding	96.3	6.5	85	100	93.4	12.8	57	100
Understand and integrate	75	25	50	100	68.2	38.6	0	100
Inference	78.3	15.2	40	100	63.2	38.6	0	100
TOTAL	83.1	19.6	40	100	75.0	32.5	0	100

Our data also suggest that both groups of learners were more successful in tasks involving local understanding than in those requiring inference or the understanding and integration of information. The figures in Table 2 show that the latter two types of task demand appear to pose similar challenges to both groups of learners. These numbers also show that, although HLLs performed somewhat better than NHLLs in the three types of tasks, performance varied within groups especially in tasks requiring understanding/ integration and inference ($SD = 38.6$ for NHLLs in both tasks; $SD = 25$ for the former task and $SD = 15.2$ for the latter task in the HLL cohort). A Mann Whitney U-test revealed that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant with $p = 0.88$ for tasks requiring local understanding and understand/integrate, and $p = 0.44$ for tasks requiring inference.

Although these figures show that HLLs performed somewhat better than NHLLs in the listening tasks more generally, they do not tell us how the learners arrived at their answers. In what follows we discuss how the two groups of listeners engaged in tasks with different listening demands, with a focus on the difficulties encountered and the strategies deployed to cope with those difficulties.

Tasks requiring local understanding.

The listening tasks completed by learners contained seven questions that required local understanding. To answer these questions correctly participants had to listen out for specific pieces of information in the dialogues such as a passenger's choice of seating on a plane (aisle or window) or the length of a trip proposed by a travel agent. Repetition of information might help listeners identify the information they needed, and in some cases successful listening required attention to elliptical information or negative statements. Overall there were no distractors in the dialogues, with the exception of a comment about the lack of window seats (the preferred choice of the passenger in one of the tasks and one of the questions in focus), leading the passenger to reconsider his choice later.

As seen in Table 2, both HLLs and NHLLs did very well in these tasks, with the former performing only slightly better than the latter. When asked about what they did and thought about while answering particular questions, students from both groups tended to mention hearing the key information without necessarily deploying any supporting strategies, for example: "listen for the word *janela* [window]" (HLL); "about window" (NHLL).

When strategies are mentioned, there are similarities and differences between the two groups. In terms of similarities, both HLLs and NHLLs used the prompts in the textbook to listen out for matches. As one HLL commented, "I listened for words that would indicate a, b, or c [the options given]"; likewise, one NHLL wrote, "I listened to see which of the three names [in the options given] I heard on the recording". Another strategy used by both groups of learners was guessing. Neither strategy led consistently to correct answers in both groups.

As to differences in strategic behaviour between HLLs and NHLLs in our data, two patterns emerge. The first involves the range of the focus of attention of the two cohorts. In general, and unlike NHLLs, HLLs tended to indicate attention to the conversation more broadly while listening (e.g., "I listened carefully to their *conversation*"; "He was *asked* if he preferred a window seat or isle [sic]"; "She *asked* if he had any luggage. He *said* he had one bag" [emphasis added]). HLLs also mentioned the organisational pattern of the passage heard as a source of information. For example, in the telephone conversation involving a travel agent and a client, four HLLs mention "the introduction" of the conversation as a clue toward the identification of the name of the travel agency. NHLLs, on the other hand, systematically commented on their listening around a focus on local information (e.g., "I heard the lady say it", "heard the number five"). This focus on the local rather than on the global passage is, as discussed earlier, a characteristic of less successful listeners (Macaro et al., 2007; Osada, 2001; Vandergrift, 2003). In the case involving the passenger's choice of seats, given that both window seats (the preferred choice) and aisle seats (the available choice) are mentioned by the speaker, it is important that listeners follow the flow of conversation in order to identify the point where the sought-after information is given.

The second difference in strategy use between the two groups of learners in our data is that, unlike NHLLs, HLLs may deliberately focus their attention on the part of the passage containing the information they needed when hearing the passage for the second time. In other words, there is indication of *selective attention* together with *problem identification* carried out by HLLs, as shown in these comments: "The 2nd time around I knew what it would ask so I listened for that part of the conversation"; "I heard *cinco* [five]. Made sure the 2nd time." No HLL mentioned using the second listening for checking answers. In fact, when listening for the second time is mentioned by these learners it involves the identification, and not the verification, of choices (e.g., "I had to listen twice to pick up on BTC [name of travel agency]").

Tasks requiring integration of different pieces of information.

Two items in the listening tasks called for identifying and comparing two pieces of information: one involved comparing the length of two trips and the other comparing the cost of those trips. Neither the HLLs nor the NHLLs performed as well in these questions as they did in those that required detecting local information, as seen in Table 2. A possible reason for students' difficulty may be that the tasks required the understanding of numbers,

as commented by one HLL who answered the question about prices incorrectly ("I tried to compare the numbers by translating them in my head") as well as by one NHLL ("it is hard for me to comprehend numbers").

Another possible factor for students' difficulty may be the listening demand in the tasks proper, requiring understanding and integration of different pieces of information while listening. As one NHLL explained, "I did not know what to listen for to be able to answer this question." Post-task reports by both HLLs and NHLLs who answered these questions correctly suggest that success in the tasks involved identifying and comparing key words, as illustrated in the following examples: "compare the prices" (HLL); "listen to her name both prices" (NHLL). Conversely, lack of success in the tasks seems to be equally associated in both groups by the use of inadequate strategies: Some HLLs mentioned "translating [numbers] in my head" and attention to some, but not all, key words (e.g., "key words *custa* [costs] and *pantanal* [the destination of one of the trips])". NHLLs also displayed the latter behaviour ("I think I heard the word *quanto* [how much]") and three of them mentioned guessing (e.g., "was unable to identify answer, thus guessed").

Our results suggest that, when faced with challenges associated with tasks requiring understanding and integration of information, both HLLs and NHLLs may deploy strategies that do not help them achieve positive results. In other words, although HLLs perform slightly better than NHLLs in those tasks, their ways of dealing with challenges posed by the task demands are not necessarily more helpful than those displayed by NHLLs.

Tasks requiring inference.

In the listening tasks, five items involved some type of inference on the part of respondents drawing on their world knowledge coupled with the understanding of the dialogues heard more globally. An example is provided by a question in the first task asking listeners where the conversation takes place: The word *aeroporto* [airport] is not mentioned but listeners are expected to infer the right answer from contextual cues in the check-in dialogue.

Questions requiring inference posed challenges to both groups of learners (see Table 2), especially to NHLLs ($M = 63.2$, the lowest of all per task demands for that group, although there was a large variation in performance within the group [$SD = 38.6$]). Both HLLs and NHLLs who answered these questions correctly mentioned the understanding of key parts in the dialogues and the application of world knowledge as factors leading to successful performance (e.g., "I listened to context clues, such as passport, if you want a seat next to the window or in the corridor, things like that" [HLL]; "Listened and then employed common sense" [NHLL]).

Some comments made by participants about how they dealt with questions that were answered incorrectly also indicate similarities in strategic behaviour between both groups of learners: Specifically, both HLLs and NHLLs commented on listening out for explicit answers to the questions in the passages—which, by definition, will not occur when inferences are required. As one HLL commented, "I missed it both times because I was thinking they would say it." Likewise, one NHLL explained a blank answer about the place where the check-in dialogue occurs: "[it] didn't say where."

Students' expectations for answers to be explicitly articulated in listening tasks may justify a surprising finding in our data: In participants' reports about how they answered a question on whether the airline employee at the check-in line served lunch, there are no

comments about the application of world knowledge based on the fact that lunch is never served at an airport check-in counter. Instead, both HLLs and NHLLs mentioned negative deduction and/or guessing in their explanations: "The woman did not ask the guy if he wants lunch" (HLL); "I didn't hear her say anything about lunch, figured it was false" (NHLL); "Didn't understand, guessed" (HLL); "I guessed on this item" (NHLL).

4. How do HLLs and NHLLs compare in their perception of HLLs' performance in classroom listening?

All participants in our study answered that HLLs perform differently than NHLLs. Learners opined that HLLs perform better and/or more quickly, mentioning a perceived advantage due to early exposure to the language, as illustrated in the following examples:

> Better, more experience. /They have more exposure to the language. /It's harder for someone to complete the activities if they weren't exposed. (HLLs)

> They have more listening and speaking experience than others in class. /Students growing up with Portuguese have *big* advantage [original emphasis]. (NHLLs)

Nevertheless, our qualitative data suggest that dialectal differences may be a contributing factor in difficulties encountered by both groups of learners: One HLL commented on becoming "completely confused and lost" when an exercise involved an accent that was different from the one to which the learner was accustomed. Another HLL rated listening activities as challenging, and explained that "the language may sound different coming from different people". Yet another commented that the activities were generally easy, "except in another dialect or Brazilian" (suggesting that the learner was used to another dialect of Portuguese). In general, that obstacle did not seem to be noticed by NHLLs: One of them observed that "[HLLs] don't seem to have any difficulty" and another commented that "they can understand every accent."

This idealised notion of HLLs' listening abilities can also be verified in these comments made by NHLLs: "They [HLLs] don't seem to have any difficulty completing the activities," "they have a firm grasp of the language," and "they understand better the language and cultures." HLLs tended to describe their own perceptions similarly, mentioning that they (HLLs) "know how to speak Portuguese and what is being said more [sic] of the time" and that "it is easier for them."

Discussion

This investigation examined HLLs' and NHLLs' perceptions about and performance in listening. Our first research question explored how these learners perceived participation in listening compared with participation in other skills. In our data HLLs generally found that the easiest type of participation involved listening, while for NHLLs listening was thought to be as challenging as other skills. This reflects findings of previous studies of HLLs' perceptions about listening in general (Lee & Kim, 2008; Shinbo, 2004; Xiao, 2006; Yu, 2008) pointing to a strong tendency among HLLs to self-report that they do not have much trouble understanding spoken language. Although we do not have specific information about the quality and quantity of exposure to Portuguese these learners

had had as they were growing up, this result suggests that the HLLs in our study heard and possibly communicated in Portuguese regularly outside of school environments, possibly at the time of data collection as well (especially considering the region where they live, which has a fairly large Portuguese-speaking population).

Our second research question explored how HLLs' and NHLLs' perceived classroom listening carried out through the use of textbook activities. We felt that such exploration was important given the pedagogical focus of our study: If there are differences in students' perceptions between listening in general and classroom listening, these need to be acknowledged when developing and implementing pedagogical practices for both groups of learners. Our findings about NHLLs' and HLLs' perceptions of textbook activities focusing on listening corroborated our findings about these learners' perceptions of listening more generally: More HLLs perceived textbook activities as *easy* or neutral (*not easy nor challenging*) than somewhat challenging, while most NHLLs thought that those activities were either challenging or *difficult*. Given the general tendency for HLLs to perceive listening to be easy overall, it is not surprising that many HLLs would also consider textbook listening activities to be easy. For NHLLs, who are not regularly exposed to the L2 in their daily lives, this skill is often challenging and their perception of difficulty might reflect L2 learners' perceptions about the challenges posed by L2 listening more generally. However, our results suggest that HLLs may find textbook listening activities more difficult than participation in listening more broadly, and four themes emerged in our qualitative data as potential sources of those difficulties for HLLs: task speech rate, speaker's accent, inability to understand meanings of what is heard, and time pressure. The first three themes have been acknowledged in the literature as sources of difficulty imposed by L2 listening more generally (Goh, 2000; Graham, 2006; Vandergrift, 2004). Time pressure, the fourth reason described as a difficulty while listening by the participants in our study, can arguably be linked with aspects of speech rate and also with learners' lack of ability to recognise words in the L2 sound stream (a difficulty reported by less successful listeners in both Goh, 2000, and Graham, 2006). Despite being linked with challenges associated to L2 listening more broadly, the four sources of difficulty reported by the participants in our study might gain special overtones in classroom listening that involves one-way listening tasks (i.e., tasks that allow no overt interaction between the listener and the speaker) like the ones used in this study and in "most classroom listening instruction" (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 26). In other words, the impossibility of negotiation of meaning (e.g., by asking for repetition, clarification or confirmation of understanding) in those tasks might make it more difficult for learners to deal with fast speech rate, unfamiliar accents or lack of understanding while carrying out listening activities presented in textbooks, but further evidence is needed to warrant this claim.

Our third research question explored HLLs' and NHLLs' performance in tasks involving different listening demands. Our findings indicate both quantitative and qualitative differences in this respect. From a quantitative perspective, only listening tasks requiring local information led to moderately successful performance by both groups of learners, whereas those involving more challenging listening demands such as understanding and integration of information or inferencing posed more difficulties to both groups. These findings demonstrate that HHLs do face challenges while listening, a fact that their self-reported perceived difficulties in listening (research questions 1 and 2) may underestimate. These findings corroborate Goh's (2000) claim that L2 listeners may not be aware of their difficulties at inferencing or other high-level processes while listening. Goh

(2000) and others (e.g., Graham, 2006; Vandergrift, 2003) have reiterated the need for further studies exploring learners' beliefs about listening as well as looking at the interplay between those beliefs and actual listening performance.

From a qualitative perspective, our results suggest that HLLs and NHLLs sometimes use similar strategies and, at other times, different strategies when listening. Successful performance in the three types of tasks is associated with comments by both groups of learners describing skills and strategies potentially helpful for each task demand. Both groups reported attention to key words when listening to local information, but HLLs commented on more focused attention to the overall passage than NHLLs. HLLs also mentioned problem identification and verification, strategies equally deployed by the more proficient listeners in Graham et al. (2008). Additionally, both groups commented on integration strategies for tasks requiring understanding and comparison between different pieces of information; both mentioned application of world knowledge in tasks involving inference. As seen, successful performance in the listening tasks in this study mirror the characterisation of successful listeners described in the literature (O'Malley et al., 1989; Osada, 2001; Vandergrift, 2003).

In our data, unsuccessful performance in listening tasks requiring local information usually involves listening out for matches and guesses in both groups; NHLLs also seem to get wrong answers in their attention to isolated words. In tasks involving understanding and integration, HLLs' lack of success involves translation or restricted attention to key words (neglecting the co-text) and the latter strategy is also found in the NHLL data. In tasks requiring inference, both groups of learners report expectations for explicit answers in association with negative deduction and guessing. All the strategies reported by both groups of learners in the unsuccessful performances are also reported in the literature regarding less successful listeners (Macaro et al., 2007), including their apparent inability to make use of remedial strategies when comprehension fails.

In general, the HLLs in our study were able to deal with the three types of tasks more successfully than NHLLs and several reasons might be related to that stronger performance. First, there is the possibility that HLLs do understand more than NHLLs, which in turn allows them to comprehend longer chunks of language more automatically. A related possibility is that HLLs' greater ease with decoding sounds and attending to grammatical cues of what is heard might free up processing space, which, as Chen (2005) has argued, they can then use to engage in higher-level processes including the selection and application of strategies. In any case, our data suggest that both HLLs and NHLLs engage in listening in similar ways to what has been described in the literature as "successful listeners" or "unsuccessful listeners." In other words, successful or unsuccessful performance in listening in our data tends to be predominantly associated with learners' strategic behaviour while listening rather than with whether those students are HLLs or NHLLs, although at times the former may display a more efficient behaviour. Even though our sample is small and it would be difficult to reach conclusions about subgroups of HLLs, we do know that a few participants in this group used more Portuguese than English in their home environment. Following Kim (2008) and Xiao (2006), the type and amount of language exposure could have affected these learners' listening skills in a positive manner.

The findings discussed so far suggest that the participants' unanimous perception that HLLs have an advantage over NHLLs in listening (as evidenced by the results of our fourth research question) is accurate to a certain extent: After all, the HLLs in our study

were more successful than NHLLs in the listening tasks they carried out. This is not to say, however, that HLLs are always more successful, or that they do not encounter difficulties while listening. Indeed, HLLs may have advantages due to their early exposure to the language (Xiao, 2006), but, like NHLLs, they may also encounter difficulties while listening. Unfamiliar accents (acknowledged by Graham, 2006, as a source of difficulty for L2 listeners) seem to be an important source of difficulty for HLLs and NHLLs alike. Our data also suggest that cognitively demanding listening tasks such as those requiring integration of information and inferencing may pose challenges to both groups of learners, although they do not seem to be aware of those problems. This echoes Goh's (2000) claim that the least proficient listeners are not able to perceive their difficulties. This lack of awareness has at least two important implications for these learners' listening development. First, it prevents them from being in control of their listening and hence from developing "expertise in listening" (Goh, 2005). Second, if NHLLs are to participate in the same listening activities as HLLs (whom they consider more capable), their lack of awareness of potential obstacles faced by HLLs may have a negative impact on their self-efficacy and hence on their listening performance, as argued by Mills et al. (2007).

        In sum, the results of this study point to similarities and differences between HLLs' and NHLLs' perceptions of and performance in listening. With regard to perception, both groups mentioned a perceived advantage held by HLLs over NHLLs in listening, possibly due to the former's exposure to the language in the home environment. Additionally, most NHLLs and some HLLs reported their perception of listening textbook activities as potentially challenging. In our study HLLs and NHLLs differed in their perception of listening in one main respect: The former reported their perception of listening as the easiest skill, whereas for the latter listening is as difficult as the other skills. As regards performance, HLLs performed somewhat better than NHLLs in the listening tasks carried out in the study and, as groups, both performed better in tasks requiring local understanding than in tasks requiring integration of information or inference. However, there are similarities across the two groups of learners in their strategic behaviour: Successful listening in both groups is associated with reports of strategy use that matches the characterisation of successful listeners in the literature (including, e.g., comments about attention to key words or to the global context). The same can be said about unsuccessful listening with both groups mentioning strategies often associated with unsuccessful listeners, such as translation, listening out for matches or guessing. What these findings suggest is that HLLs and NHLLs should not be seen as a dichotomous groups but as learners who may or may not share important characteristics in their L2 listening development.

Conclusion

        This investigation revealed that HLLs and NHLLs may perceive listening in different ways. NHLLs tended to find listening more challenging than HLLs, and also felt that HLLs do not encounter difficulties while listening. Yet there is evidence in our data that HLLs perceive a few challenges in listening and that their performance also faces challenges depending on characteristics of the passage and task types. Additional results about performance in listening revealed that HLLs are likely to achieve better results than NHLLs, but those results do not always differ greatly, especially when the listening requires local information. Finally, there is evidence of students in the two groups adopting

listening strategies that have been associated in the literature with "more skilful" and "less skilful" listeners, leading to success and lack of success, respectively. In other words, our study suggests that it would be inadequate to claim that HLLs are necessarily better listeners than NHLLs.

The main contributions of this study are therefore twofold: (a) the identification of areas that may pose difficulties to HLLs and NHLLs while listening with regard to the listening passage proper (i.e., accent, speech rate, understanding what is heard and time pressures) and the listening demands (with integration and inferencing tasks being more challenging than those requiring local information for both groups); and (b) the profiling of the strategic behaviour of a group of HLLs and NHLLs when listening, which revealed similarities and differences between the two groups that may be used as a baseline in future studies. Our small sample does not allow us to reach broad conclusions about the various subgroups of HLLs and further investigations are needed in this respect.

These findings have important implications for pedagogy. Given the pervasiveness of single-track language classes, an understanding of similarities and differences between NHLLs and HLLs is crucial for the development of pedagogical practices that may provide enhanced learning opportunities for these learners. Results from this study have outlined important similarities between the two groups of learners (in what they see as challenging when listening, in how they cope with listening demands) that could be incorporated in the design and implementation of listening programs for those audiences. Likewise, differences between the two groups should be addressed in the teaching of listening in the same manner as differences in proficiency are taken into account in mixed-ability classes. Classroom activities might even encourage these learners to help each other in identifying problems and proposing solutions regarding listening. Those interactions, following Blake and Zyzik (2003), could be incorporated into listening tasks, taking advantage of opportunities for negotiations and linguistic development.

Our study has suggested that although there may be differences between HLLs and NHLLs when listening, these differences do not appear to be irreconcilable. In line with recent studies about metacognitive training in listening development (Cross, 2010; Goh & Taib, 2006; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010), these differences should be exploited in classroom discussions about how these learners listen, what they find easy or difficult, and what they do to deal with difficulties. Ultimately, it is this reflective process that will help these learners to understand what listening involves, and what they need to do in order to become better listeners.

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Notes

[1] A similar questionnaire was used in Silva (2011), though that study focused on speaking and writing skills.

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Appendix

Activities survey   **Name: _____**

Please answer the following questions as candidly as possible. Your answers will **not** be read by your instructor and will **not** affect your class standing.

1. When you were growing up, what language(s) did **you** speak at home?

2. When you were growing up, what language(s) did **your relatives** speak at home?

3. Please rate the following types of participation in Portuguese (in general, both in and out of the classroom):
a. **Speaking**:   easy   not easy nor challenging   challenging but doable   difficult
b. **Listening**:   easy   not easy nor challenging   challenging but doable   difficult
c. **Writing**:   easy   not easy nor challenging   challenging but doable   difficult
d. **Reading**:   easy   not easy nor challenging   challenging but doable   difficult

4. Thinking about **textbook activities that focus on <u>listening</u>**, in your opinion do students who use(d) Portuguese at home perform differently (better, worse, more quickly, more slowly, etc) than students who never use(d) Portuguese at home? Yes____   No____
If yes, how do their performances differ?

5. Still thinking about **textbook activities that focus on <u>listening</u>,** please rate their difficulty:
        easy   not easy nor challenging   challenging but doable   difficult
Please explain your rating:

Thank you for your time!