

Motivation, Pleasure and a Playful Methodology in Language Learning

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Abstract Motivation is a fundamental motor for meaningful learning, or that which is stable and lasting in our memory. It can be defined as a motor because it etymologically 'moves' us toward a goal, while also determining the intensity and duration of the movement. This aspect is key as it reveals the didactic necessity to continuously sustain motivation. This article analyses these elements to present the playful methodology as one of the possible solutions to help students develop a passion for learning a new language.

Keywords Motivation. Language. Learning. Pleasure. Playful methodology.

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1 Introduction

Motivation is a fundamental motor for meaningful learning, or that which is stable and lasting in our memory. It can be defined as a motor because it etymologically 'moves' us toward a goal, while also determining the intensity and duration of the movement. This aspect is key as it reveals the didactic necessity to continuously sustain motivation.

Furthermore, teaching methodology is one of the main ways to strengthen student motivation and guide students toward the pleasure of language learning. According to a humanistic perspective (Arnold 1960; Austin 1962; Rogers 1969; Goleman 1995; Schumann 1994, 1997; a survey of humanistic language teaching can be found in Balboni 2014), pleasure is the ultimate goal when fostering a type of motivation that is consistent and not excessively conditioned by external factors (like a transient investment in scholastic success).

In this article, we will analyse these elements to present the playful methodology as one of the possible solutions to help students develop a passion for learning a new language.

2 Studies on Motivation: An International Overview

The studies on motivation belong to the field of psychology and psycho-pedagogy. There is a wide range of literature concerning motivation in language learning, including Deci (1975; Deci, Ryan 1985; Deci et al. 1994; Deci, Ryan 2000) and Atkinson 1964; Mitchell 1982; Harter, Jackson 1992; Vallerand et al. 1993; Baumeister, Leary 1995; Dickinson 1995; Csikzentmihalyi 1997; Dai, Moon, Feldhusen 1998; Boekaerts, Nenninger 1999; Murphy, Alexander 2000; Järvelä, Niemi-virta 2001; Stipek 2002; Barr 2016.

In regards to the psychological and psycho-pedagogic studies on motivation in general, at a national level we can cite: Boscolo 1997; De Beni, Moè 2000; Cisotto 2005.

Concerning the focus of this article, the motivational factor has been investigated in numerous international studies of glottodidactics, especially by Dörnyei (1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2014; Dörnyei, Csizér 2002; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, Henry 2015; Dörnyei, Ottó 1998; Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011; Csizér, Dörnyei 2005; Shoaib, Dörnyei 2005; Ushioda, Dörnyei 2009; Cheng, Dörnyei 2007). Along with the numerous essays and volumes written by the Hungarian scholar, in this overview, we can also mention Arnold 2006; Crookes, Schmidt 1991; Koestner, Losier 2002; Noels 2003; Ryan, Deci 2007; Sarrazin et al. 2011; Ushioda 2009; Chen, Warden, Chang 2005.

Since the 1970s, motivation has gained attention in the field of educational linguistics thanks to Titone (1973, 1986, 1993), Freddi,

(1990, 1993, 1994) and Balboni (1994, 2013, 2014): they all belong to the Venetian School of glottodidactics. Furthermore, we can mention Cardona 2001; Bosco 2004; Caon 2008; Mezzadri 2010; Coonan 2011; Cavaliere 2013; Bier 2014.

3 Motivation: A Definition

Deci and Ryan (2000, 69) provide a general definition of motivation by saying that “motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence and equifinality – all aspects of activations and intention”. Using this definition, we can affirm that a ‘motivated’ student is a subject who activates themselves for an internal or external cause and follows a specific path to reach a goal. Yet, there are two variables: intensity and persistence. They are connected to factors which determine the effort dedicated to achieve a goal and the ability to maintain motivation over time.

Each student has their own motivations, at school or in relation to a specific subject, which activate emotions and different cognitive processes (such as serenity or anxiety, positive or negative relationships with the teacher or topic, affinity with personal interests). As a consequence, they influence linguistic learning. According to Dörnyei, “it provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process” (2005, 65).

Intensity can be generated by factors which are external to school and vary according to the type of language studied. For example, the motivation connected to the study of a Foreign Language (FL) like English is different in comparison to French or other languages because English is supposed to offer, at least *a priori*, more opportunities to work in different sectors at an international level. According to an interview that we carried out among students and teachers of FL, it is clear that future projections significantly influence one’s dedication to study and their extra-scholastic investment in terms of time and money (Caon 2008).

Regarding persistence, it is possible to find in methodology and activities some resources that can help the language teacher to modify the ‘natural’ motivational trends of students (cf. Schumann 1997; Balboni 2014; Coppola 2000; Caon 2016). This will be the focus of the second part of this article.

4 Types of Motivation

Traditionally, there are two types of motivation, often considered couples in antinomy: intrinsic/self-directed vs. extrinsic/other-directed, instrumental vs. integrative (cf. De Beni, Moè 2000). In fact, we must remember that motivation is an integrated system of variables influenced by socio-cultural contexts and by types of relations. Therefore, they cannot provide a unique and constant frame. As Deci and Ryan state, “although motivation is often treated as a singular construct, even superficial reflection suggests that people are moved to act by very different types of factors, with highly varied experiences and consequences” (2000, 69).

On these bases the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is particularly interesting for language teaching from a humanistic point of view: we can define intrinsic motivation as the condition in which a student autonomously finds interest, need, desire, curiosity, and pleasure in learning. On the other hand, we can define motivation as extrinsic when the reasons for learning are not rooted in personal factors, but they have ties with external factors such as, for example, gratification or reward from the teacher (cases in which the reasons are connected with other directed incentives).

For Deci,

extrinsic motivation refers to any instance in which the reasons for one’s actions are some separable consequences, whether they be interpersonally administered (e.g. praise, monetary payments, or the opportunity to do other, more interesting tasks) or self-administered (e.g. praising self-statements or presents to oneself). (Deci, Grolnick, Ryan 1997, 161)

On the contrary, according to the author,

when intrinsically motivated, people engage in activities out of interest and enjoyment, out of the satisfactions that accrue spontaneously as they involve themselves in the activities... the rewards of the activities are the spontaneous feelings of engagement, excitement, accomplishment, or awe which accompany them. (161)

If the aim of humanistic language teaching is to valorize all individuals for their unique characteristics and help them to foster and develop their talents, then it is obvious that the kind of motivation coherent with our goal is the intrinsic one in which the very subject activates because, for instance, they can see their academic work as a means of personal achievement.

According to McCombs and Pope:

Human beings are naturally motivated to learn when they are not in a state of anxiety for failing, when they perceive what they are learning as meaningful and important from a personal point of view, and when they have a relationship with their teachers based on esteem and support... Students are motivated to learn when teachers offer them the chance to take autonomous decisions and take control on their process of learning. (1996, 17-18)

Although we acknowledge the need of many students to have extrinsic forms of motivation, we believe that, as Cardona claims, we risk creating a “strong dependence between the teacher (who reinforces) and the student (which is reinforced)” (2001, 17). This can prevent the development of the pupil’s personal cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and the development of autonomous parameters of judgment as their choices depend on the teacher’s reinforcement.

To promote meaningful language learning that is stable and lasting, the language teacher should favour the development of intrinsic motivation through:

- a. content, meeting the interests or needs of the students,
- b. methodologies, which, though mediating the very content, may activate more or less complex and meaningful cognitive processes in the students. A specific way of presenting a topic (for example through problem solving) may trigger motivation in students, like: to win a challenge, to fill in missing information through interaction, to draw on previous knowledge in another language, to actively take part in complex activities such as work projects, experiments, cooperative exercises, fun and playful activities that are challenging from a cognitive point of view,
- c. resources and teaching materials,
- d. relationships, built over time through transparency, trust, clarity, effective communication (requiring intentional mediation and strategic facilitation), active listening to both interests and needs, a sense of duty (which can be generated by shared responsibility among classmates and teachers), and the authority of the teacher.

In regards to relationships, a study on stress and English as a Foreign Language teachers, Mousavi highlighted that teachers and students “are constantly interacting with each other, [and] we cannot consider the emotional state of one group whilst ignoring the concerns of the other. The general outcome of the lesson depends on the quality of such interactions” (2007, 33). In this article we will focus on the relational and methodological elements of motivation, which find a synthesis in the playful Language Teaching Methodology (LTM)

5 Meaningful Language Learning

According to Carl Rogers (1969), ‘meaningful’ learning must be able to arouse the interest of the student, who, as well as a need to feel totally involved (from the cognitive, affective, and emotional points of view) in the process, is also able to perceive that the experience is capable of filling certain knowledge gaps felt as such by the student. Roger’s pillars or basic principles of education science have been adopted and in part redefined by other scholars, notably Ausubel and more recently, Novak.

For Ausubel (1968) ‘meaningful’ learning is a process through which new information enters into relation with pre-existing concepts in the cognitive structure of the brain, but it is only the student who can decide to implement this process. Novak (1998), for his part, while confirming the necessity of a constructive integration of thoughts, feelings, and actions in the pupil, also refers to the necessity of a constructive relationship between pupil and teacher. In his opinion, this educative relationship is based on shared actions that permit an exchange of meanings and emotions between the student and the teacher.

Regarding this concept, we can now list some concise observations that render the instruction of second, foreign and ethnic languages in school problematic. For instance:

- a. the fact that many students feel that the foreign language does not readily connect with their spontaneous need for communication, it is therefore necessary, through choices of content and/or didactic methodologies, to ‘create’ or contribute to the creation of knowledge gaps in order to promote a need or an interest to learn;
- b. new information is often discordant with the information already existing in the mother-tongue of the student: this discordance can be both grammatical/conceptual (Italian divides the world in masculine and feminine, German, into masculine, feminine, and neuter), and/or semantic (In Italian and Spanish *casa* includes both meanings of *house/home* in English or *haus/heim* in German)

The idea of meaningful language learning clearly calls into question many traditional approaches wherein the interest in the form of the language takes priority over the interest in the exchange of personal meanings. Conversely, in fact, it is precisely this latter process that is capable of activating the cognitive, affective, and emotional spheres of those involved in the didactic act.

To conclude the characteristics of ‘meaningful’ learning that we have so far identified may be paraphrased as follows:

- a. learning is *total*; it involves the cognitive, emotive, affective, and social sphere;

- b. learning is a *constructive* process, one of integrating new information with the student's pre-existing concepts;
- c. the quality of learning, in terms of memory persistency, is conditioned in a positive or negative way by *motivation*, which in turn largely depends upon factors internal to the student.

6 Neurobiological Bases of Motivation and Meaningful Learning

Among the most recent contributions from the neurosciences confirm the idea that in negative emotional situations (fear, anxiety, stress) there is the formation of a chemical mechanism that stops the production of adrenaline (a neurotransmitter that favours memorisation) and therefore also prevents the activation of the frontal lobes for memorization/learning.

Cardona writes that this negative phenomenon occurs:

When the stress is not positive, [but] a feeling of anxiety and discomfort takes place. In this case the suprarenal glands produce a steroid hormone, called the stress hormone, that prepares the body to react to difficult situations. Controlling the production of such a hormone is the palatine tonsil, that in a stressful or dangerous situation signals for an increased production of this hormone, which eventually reaches the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex of the brain. In essence, in a stressful situation (like, in our case, a language test, an oral examination, dictation, etc.), there is conflict between, the palatine tonsil, which requests more introduction of the hormone into the blood to cope with the situation, and the hippocampus, that instead tries to regulate and limit the quantity of it. However, if the situation continues, the hippocampus' control functions cannot work properly, nor can it carry out its normal tasks (note that the hippocampus is the appointed area for long-term memory). Therefore, the result is that information is deficiently recovered and the explicit or declarative memory does not work as it should. (Cardona 2001, 39-40; Author's trans.)

J.H. Schumann, in *The Neurobiology of Affect in Language* (1997), asserts that no cognitive process is generated without an emotional process being generated and that, also from the neurobiological point of view, the pleasant emotion plays a fundamental role in the activation of the cognitive processes that permits the stable and lasting acquisition of information. A confirmation of the value of this statement comes also from within the medical-neurolinguistic discipline: according to Franco Fabbro, "the emotive structures of the nervous system of mammals are strongly involved in the process of fix-

ing the memory recollections" (1996, 110; Author's trans.); moreover, he notes that, "Mc Ewen and Sapolsky's researches have shown that stressful situations... determine over time a selective destruction of the median temporal lobe system... with a consequential impoverishment of the capacity of fixing the information in the episodic and semantic memory" (110; Author's trans.).

To conclude this essential survey, the main contribution of the sciences that study the brain and the mind is that:

Memory is of course a key factor in learning, not only as far as language is concerned. The language input provided at a lesson and the activities carried out to work on it are stored in working memory, that is existing synapses are temporarily re-used. In order to create new synapses, that is, to acquire an information permanently, a molecule (CREB, Camp Response Element-Binding molecule) creates the protein which is necessary to synapsis stabilization. In order to work, CREB molecules require the activation of emotional experiences during teaching ("meaningful teaching", to use Ausubel's words) and/or in the teaching environment.

For further reading on CREB and language acquisition see Contreras Asturias (2016)

7 The Role of the Teacher in Developing Meaningful Learning

The teacher, who is up to the task of interrogating himself in an (auto-)critical way about the relation between teaching and learning, stands a good chance of avoiding the embarrassment inherent in this paradoxical question by:

- a. recognizing that it is the student who carries out the fundamental role in the teaching/learning process and that every student learns and remembers in a unique way;
- b. having the objective of promoting an intrinsic motivation in the student by drawing together the extremes of their relationship, by connecting the content he teaches with the ongoing and meaningful histories of the students in terms of their possessed competences, interests, and formative needs (real and present or possible and future);
- c. creating a working environment, that is serene, challenging and pleasant in the broad sense described above, through the search for a meaningful relationship;
- d. facilitating - through didactic methodology - the process of acquiring an autonomy in critical thought and in the learning strategies by resorting to a metacognitive didactic.

These points are fundamental in the conception of a general education as well as the daily didactic activity according to which the purpose of the education is to help the students to become responsible and to let them carry the burden of their own constructions of meanings and other, existential meanings.

With the objective of forming, as Montaigne stated, “well made heads instead of well filled heads”, we can bring to the surface in the students a “sense of duty” that is both extrinsic and intrinsic in nature and that can generate a full and profound pleasure; a pleasure that can also be derived from the labour of studying. It is important to emphasize that a meaningful relationship must not be characterized by permissiveness, because, being so characterized, in the name of adapting to the spontaneous needs and interests of the students, the teacher is forced to give up his role and his statutory duties that impose also discipline, respect for rules and scholastic or ministerial directives. It is instead in the ability to mediate between these two realities (the students’ interests and the school’s ‘interests’) and to draw them together, owing to the capacity of negotiation and growing joint-responsibility, that the teacher, in the perspective of the progressive autonomy of his students, can investigate the profound meaning of the educative relationship: *non scholae sed vitae*.

Summarizing the main concepts, we saw that:

- a. the intrinsic motivation, based on need and even more on pleasure, is fundamental to the student being profoundly activated;
- b. such a motivation has not only a conscious dimension but also an unconscious one: it is primed on a biochemical level and it generates pre-conscious emotive reactions that can favour or make more difficult the mnemonic fixation of information;
- c. the task of the teacher, coherent with the nature of meaningful learning, is to avoid anxiety or fear and to create certain favourable conditions for the active, interested, and self-motivated participation of the student in the life of the class;
- d. such a task is made easier by aiming for a meaningful relationship between teacher and student and between student and student. Attributing to the teacher a professional and personal authoritativeness, (that, in a humanistic context, cannot be achieved by being dictatorial), facilitates in the students the activation of a motivation connected to a ‘sense of duty’ based on the sense of trust and mutual respect and maintained by joint-responsibility. The relation that becomes established between teacher and students, as well as between student and student, is fundamental to the concept of meaningfulness.

8 Playful Language Teaching: A Methodology to Promote the Pleasure of Studying

In the preceding chapters we discussed the fundamental importance of intrinsic motivation and meaningful relationship, and we proposed pleasure as the best state of mind for a stable and durable way to learn a language.

In this chapter, we will present a methodological proposal - the playful language teaching methodology¹ - that translates into practice both the presuppositions and the purposes of the humanistic and communicative approach, and the presuppositions and purposes of socio-cultural constructivism.

A methodology that can foster pleasure during in-class learning is 'social mediation', which is intended to build knowledge, rather than encourage the passive reception of information. It places the student at the centre of the learning process as students are considered resources and origins of learning, actively involved in building their knowledge base. Social mediation methods do not exclude transmission, but they are not exclusively focused on using this methodology, as commonly seen in traditional lectures. If, as said, learning is a global and constructive fact ("learning is total" and "learning is a constructive process"), then it is fundamental that we utilize a didactic methodology which can promote the contemporary development of the linguistic-communicative, social, metacognitive and meta-emotional, cultural and intercultural competences.

The main social mediation methodologies are:

- Cooperative learning
- Playful and playful-linguistic teaching (Caon, Rutka 2004; Mollica 2010)
- Peer tutoring

In this article, we cannot present all methodologies; but Caon offers a detailed list in his book from 2008. Here we will briefly present the playful methodology, which has affinities with the concept of pleasure in class. Playful didactics is based on two concepts: game and play.

¹ The main references in dealing with play in language learning are Lee 1979 and Rixon 1981. More recent views of play in language teaching can be found in Caon, Rutka 2004; Wright, Betteridge, Buckby 2005; Chen 2005; Meyer 2010; Talak-Kiryk 2010; Ryu 2013; Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009; Mollica 2010; Thorne, Watters 2013; Pasovic 2014. Literature about play in language teaching usually focuses the student, while Golombek and Klager (2015) focus the role of play in a teacher's formation. A general view of research in gamification in education can be found in Kamp 2012. Research about gamification in language teaching has been increasing over the years, above all in dissertation repositories. Some recent studies that can provide a guideline are: Lombardi 2013; De Moraes Sarmiento Rego 2015; Figueroa Flores 2015.

To avoid understanding in a reductive way the playful language teaching methodology as a methodology actuated only through didactic games, let us broaden the operational horizon by presenting the concept of playfulness. By this term we mean *the vital charge in which strong intrinsic motivational inducements become integrated with affective-emotive, cognitive and social aspects of the learner*. Such a vital charge can obviously be emitted also in activities that, even though games, can completely absorb the attention and the interest of the students because they are supported by an intrinsic motivation, they are challenging and exacting.

8.1 Play and Meaningful Learning

To introduce the playful language teaching methodology, it is worth noting again the key words, *total, constructive, holistic*, that are characteristic to the concept of meaningful learning. Accordingly, the playful language teaching methodology clearly calls to mind – by its very name – the game, and it is specifically in this dimension that we would like to initially and briefly concentrate our attention. All of this because, in full coherence and similarity with the above mentioned key words, we can also infer that the game is defined as a *total* and *holistic* experience in which are integrated, at different levels of prevalence depending on the game's typologies, the components listed below:

- a. *affective* (amusement, pleasure)
- b. *social* (team, group)
- c. *motor and psychomotor* (movement, coordination, balance)
- d. *cognitive* (elaboration of a game strategy, learning of rules)
- e. *emotive* (fear, tension, sense of liberation)
- f. *cultural* (specific rules and modalities of relationships)
- g. *trans-cultural* (the necessity of rules and the necessity, in order for the game to take place, of respecting them)

The game, like meaningful learning, emerges as a complex and engaging experience because, as we noted, it completely activates the student and allows them to consistently and naturally learn through its practice, increasing their knowledge and competence. Hence, the student's involvement in playful activity is two-fold: on a synchronic plane (during the game) they are engaged and motivated by a multi-sensory experience; on the diachronic plane (by repeating the game) their competence continuously evolves and their motivations are renewed because they tend to surpass the achieved aim. Then, there is a third factor especially relevant for our perspective: the game, if perceived and experienced as such, both occupies attention and amuses. This way, the harmonic match of diligence with amusement

refers to the intrinsic pleasure of the activity without denying the cognitive and psycho-physical effort.

8.2 Games for Language Learning: Which Games at School?

As playing is a totalizing experience for students, it follows that a game is useful for learning in general and especially for language learning because almost all games demand the use of words to begin negotiating rules. With the objective of translating the above potentialities into a language teaching methodology and to avoid falling into dangerous prejudicial visions wherein the game at school is a moment of relaxation to be put before the “serious” learning moment, it is fundamental first of all to introduce a clarifying distinction between free games (practiced by the students in an extra-scholastic or non-controlled environment) and teaching games (proposed by the teacher in the context of learning).

Hence, we now need to note two terms introduced by the educationist Aldo Visalberghi (1980): playful activity (corresponding to free games) and play-like activity (corresponding to teaching games). According to Visalberghi, the playful activity has four characteristics:

- a. *it is exacting*: it demands a psycho-physical, cognitive and affective involvement;
- b. *it is continuous*: it is a constant presence in childhood and continues to have a role in adulthood;
- c. *it is progressive*: it is not static, it renews itself, it is a cognitive, relational and affective growth factor, it enlarges knowledge and competences;
- d. *it is not functional*, it is auto-framing, which means it has purpose-in-itself.

Conversely, in the play-like activity, although having exacting, continuous and progressive characteristics, the ‘purpose’ of the game does not correspond with the completion of the activity: in the didactic game it consciously achieves a purpose that is beyond the game itself. Thus, play-like activities are didactic games because the achieved purpose is not internal, is not auto-framing and does not end upon the completion of the game. Rather, the purpose remains external to the game and is determined by the adult. Therefore, play-like activities are “intentionally built to give an amusing and pleasant shape to certain forms of learning” (Staccioli 1998, 16). Coherent with what the Venetian scholars cited in the first chapter and asserted about intrinsic motivation, Aldo Visalberghi (1980, 476; Author’s trans.) declares that “only the auto-motivated activities, because they are *exacting*, *continuous* and also in a certain way *progressive*, that are playful or at least play-like ones, are capable of developing human

behaviour in both an innovative and flexible way. The activities that are compulsory, routine, hetero-directed or in any way such to sacrifice too much of a present gratification at the expense of future advantages, have no spiritual fecundity. Man explores his world for the enjoyment in so doing, not for some calculated advantage, immediate or otherwise. This is the divine spark that is present within him”.

Mario Polito has mainly the same opinion in that:

the game has enormous educative potentialities that facilitate learning and socialization. The playful capacity, being involved and creative with experience and with life, has to be developed in every person.

The game, in fact, ignites the enthusiasm, fires the interest, primes the involvement, favours social activities, increases expression, stimulates learning, and reactivates affections, emotions and thoughts. By valorizing the playful dimension of learning we avoid orientating the school solely towards the cognitive plane to the detriment of other formative dimensions, such as the affective, interpersonal, corporeal and manual ones”. (2000, 333; Author’s trans.)

Hence, the didactic game, the play-like experience, (projected and facilitated by the teacher for didactic, educative and not shallow recreational purposes) can emerge as an efficient ‘mediator’ in the transmission of concepts, as a consequence of which the student can appropriate structures, lexicon and new cognitive strategies through a total and intrinsically motivated experience (the pleasure of the game, of the challenge) that involves him from the cognitive and also affective, social, and creative point of view. Therefore, such spontaneous integration of the intra and inter-personal spheres, peculiar to the playful activity (confirmed as we saw by many scholars), can simultaneously favor, from the didactic point of view, the development of linguistic-cognitive competences along with social and educative ones.

8.3 Games for Children, Adolescents and Adults: Affinities and Differences

Considering the frequent and almost spontaneous association of the game with childhood, it seems important to us to deconstruct this prejudice (that is, that the playful activity belongs only to infancy and/or that the didactic game can be practiced solely in the primary school) and expand the horizon of the playful LTM in order for it to be proposed to adolescents and adults alike, with the obvious differentiations in the modalities and in the activities themselves in accordance with the age of the player.

In our own didactic practice and experimentations with adolescents and adults (cf. Caon, Rutka 2004) we noted an efficacy of the playful methodological proposal, provided that it is:

- a. explained and negotiated by the teacher;
- b. valorized in regards to the psycho-pedagogical and didactical motivations of LTM that support it and the complex cognitive processes it can activate (for example, group problem-solving games);
- c. proposed through activities with a cognitive and linguistic complexity adequate to the cognitive development and linguistic competences of the students.

Apart from this, there are other elements that assume relevance for the older adolescents and therefore can obviously represent valid motivational stimulations with which to initiate a process of linguistic acquisition and the development of transversal abilities. Next to pleasure and amusement, the adolescents gain a heightened capacity for recognizing and respecting the rules coupled to the capacity - experienced as a stimulating challenge to elaborate strategies and new rule systems - to search for logical and creative solutions to different problems (real or hypothetical), to plan actions, and, to discover new combinations among their pre-existing knowledge base.

The adolescent student often does not accept activities perceived as too infantile, or of little significance, that frustrate his intellectual capacities because they are cognitively too simple. In his new identity - fragile and confused - as a 'boy', he often identifies the game as a typical 'childish' activity of an age group he wants to demonstrate he has definitely passed. Added to this difference, there is also one deriving from inheriting cultural conventions that distinctly separate the school, (synonymous with hard work and diligence), from the game (perceived as relaxation and recreation, or wrongly, as solely an infantile activity). Inherited conventions, promoted by the family and the school alike, that never fail to emphasize how the game belongs to the 'recreational' sphere (further reading: Caon, Rutka 2004).

Thus, the objective is to encourage students to experience this pleasure through challenging activities (for instance, problem solving or certain creative activities where their talents are valorized) and to encourage intellectual and emotive understanding through feedback, through post-experiential discussion and the valorization of their intellectual conquests, personal and/or collective. The teacher has to create the conditions so that:

- a. on the one hand, difficulties are understood as proportionate to the competence and the cognitive maturity of his students;
- b. on the other hand, the class is organised (by group cooperation and by the valorization of the different personal abilities and talents) so that it can, with him functioning as an expert

helper, overcome the ‘challenges’ he initiated or those that spontaneously arise from within the group.

Therefore, the activities being proposed must be playful, defined thus far as pleasurable and also challenging in a cognitive sense, so as to initiate a desire to surpass oneself, to embark upon challenging oneself prior to any challenge directed at others.

The activities must act on what Vygotskij calls the “proximal development zone”, namely, the distance between the present level of development, (as it is determined by autonomous problem-solving), and the level of potential development, (as it is determined through problem-solving under the guide of an adult or in collaboration with more capable equals).

Exposing the student to stimulating activities, furnishing him with direct help through a meaningful relationship as well as an indirect one through cooperative working modalities, is fundamental in achieving meaningful learning, in developing a sense of self-effectiveness, in improving self-esteem, and in strengthening social abilities.

The play-like activity, if challenging because it is exacting, presents the advantage of being naturally complex and of generating pleasure in its operation as well as in its completion. If the teacher succeeds in encouraging his students to understand (through the expressive potency of the concrete experience) that the game is not recreational but is a way to acquire new knowledge and competences, and personal and social abilities, he can then make it didactically proposable, and thus more acceptable to the typology of more ‘diffident’ students.

The didactic game, that is sustainable in terms of linguistic complexity, that is adequate to the cognitive maturity of the student, and that is precisely explained in its manifold formative functions, can also encourage adolescents and adults to recover the auto-framing pleasure, the pleasure of the activity that in itself is amusing, absorbing, and gratifying.

8.4 What is the Playful Language Teaching Methodology?

The playful LTM is a methodology that coherently realizes, in operative models and in LTM techniques, the founding principles of humanistic, affective and communicative approaches, and those of socio-cultural constructivism. These principles may be summarized as:

- a. the attention to the communicative needs of the student (with particular regard for the psycho-affective and motivational components that influence the learning process);
- b. the importance of the language as an instrument of personal expression and social interaction (with particular atten-

- tion to the socio-cultural, intercultural, para and extra-linguistic aspects);
- c. the conception of learning as a constructive process wherein the pupil has to be actively committed in the creation of his knowledge. Such creation occurs by the connection between what he has learned on one hand, and his pre-existing knowledge on the other;
 - d. the consciousness and valorization of those differences among students that derive from their personal histories, their social ambience, their specific interests, their existential and scholastic objectives, and their cognitive and learning styles;
 - e. the conception of the role of the teacher as a facilitator with respect to learning (cf. § 3).

Hence, the teacher/facilitator who applies the playful LTM has as principal objectives:

- a. the creation of a learning/teaching environment characterized by calmness, serenity (play) and in which a frequent and purposeful use of teaching games is expected; an environment wherein the student is indeed the centre of the teaching/learning process, in which special attention is paid to the students' interests and formative needs, and to the teaching/learning modalities that are most effective with regard to the specific characteristics of the individual and/or the group;
- b. the promotion of a playful approach to the didactic activity, in which the cooperation in achieving clear objectives for learning is valorized, in which competitiveness is controlled so as not to generate anxiety and stress in the students, and in which taking pleasure in the challenge is promoted.

To reach these objectives, the teacher proposes every activity in a playful form, thus attenuating, hopefully, all resistance and difficulties of a psychological nature, which in turn permits the student to serenely face studying the language and involve all his cognitive, affective, social and sensory-motor capacities in the learning process. Furthermore, the teacher uses the game as a strategic modality for the achievement of educative aims and linguistic abilities peculiar to linguistic education (regarding linguistic abilities, cf. Balboni 2014; regarding linguistic education, cf. Titone 1993). Through the game the facts of reality become internalized and re-elaborated, and knowledge inside increasingly complex conceptual nets is expanded and organized. All of which occurs in a dynamic *continuum* that witnesses the student becoming intrinsically motivated as well as becoming the protagonist of their own formative path.

8.5 The Potentialities of the Playful LTM for Intercultural Education

In an increasingly multicultural educational context, it is fundamental to propose certain pedagogical models that educate the students not only to accept and respect diversity, but also to recognize and valorize various cultural identities within the lens of mutual enrichment. In order for this proposal to become meaningful for the students, that is to say, to arise from a real and profound desire for them to know and put themselves in a relation with the 'other', it is necessary to actuate it through a search for personal and mutual comprehension, (me of myself, me of the other, the other of themselves, the other of me), and for an active collaboration among the students to occur.

The objective is ambitious and certainly must transverse all disciplines and be promoted by all teachers. However, of course, the language teacher can have a privileged role in this shared search for an intercultural dialogue that is attentive to, respectful of, and interested in, difference. The motives behind this privileged role are easily understandable; for his part, Titone, in his "humanistic recovery of language" (1993, 54) locates two general motives to which we now add a more specifically intercultural one:

- a. "language is the person... The consciousness of being able to translate yourself into a word gives substance and security to the individual as a human being, both in his essential identity and in his social expansion" (1993, 54). Language is communication and expression, it is the primary means through which we enter into a profound contact with the other and through which we manifest our feelings and individuality. Therefore, the teacher has the task and the responsibility to facilitate communication among people and to facilitate the expression of the individual (though different linguistic codes and through perfecting those of one's mother-tongue);
- b. "every education operates by means of a language, and every teaching is language teaching... Any formative intervention regarding the person is translated into verbal stimulations... in school, every didactic act is centered on the informative and illuminating word, even if it subordinately makes use of the help of other signs" (Titone 1993, 54). Therefore, the language teacher has the task of:
- c. facilitating the learning of a foreign language, or a classic language, or a second language, and also has the task of proposing cultural models in part similar and in part different from the one of reference: The capacity of the teacher to make these affinities and differences recognised and appreciated permits the student to create a 'critical estrangement' from his own point of view, with the ultimate objective of making

his personal view relative. In an intercultural perspective, the teaching also of the first language or the ethnic language demands an explicitness and a criticalness of the cultural models that have linguistic correspondences (the use of the formal register, or real, communicative purposes that involve forms of courtesy, or idiomatic expressions).

Games that, as we noted, demand the frequent use of language while being played, present two characteristics that can favour intercultural didactic proposals. They are, simultaneously:

- a. *trans-cultural*; all children, independently from their geographical and cultural origin, play and share some aspects belonging to a “universal playful grammar”, as, for instance, the respect for rules or the ritual of the initial “count”. Thus, the game is an experience that creates fraternization, creates contact and establishes an equal relationship among different sets of knowledges and among different competences;
- b. *culturally determined*; as Staccioli (1998, 151) notes, “a game is a mirror/image of the society wherein it gets developed and every player ‘plays’ (consciously or not) within rules, symbols, aspirations, and fantasies peculiar to his culture”.

The teacher can use this peculiarities of games as a vehicle for promoting intercultural educational values (besides, obviously, making it an exercise for learning the language) in a playful and communicative context. Dialogue and collaboration appear spontaneously and linguistic-cultural understanding is necessary so that the motivation for success or the pleasure taken in the challenge (characteristic to the game) are satisfied. Pursuing the objective of intercultural education, the teacher can discover, in the dimension of the game, a meaningful context because it implies the recognition of some implicit trans-cultural values and regulations (like, for instance, the respect for rules and for whose turn it is, so to speak) and encourages in an absolutely natural way the interaction among students by totally involving them completely in the assigned task. The game, as we noted, permits an activation of the cognitive and emotive spheres in the learning process by stimulating capacities and abilities that, in mere verbal communication, would stay unexpressed. D’Andretta (1999, 24; Author’s trans.), notes:

interactive techniques and games are very useful in favouring the interaction with people and cultural contents that are “other”, in inducing an empathy towards “diversity”, in suggesting unusual languages that help us travel along unknown paths, and also in recognising that our languages and habits are partial and relative.

Therefore, games supply the teacher with occasions to modify the possible ethnocentric visions of the students,

they allow, in fact, to live in the first person the experience of “decentralisation”, the dizziness of loss that bursts forth from perceiving as relative what we used to consider as absolute, or from perceiving as cultural what we used to consider as natural. (24; Author’s trans.)

In concluding the playful experience, the teacher can then, in the phase of cognitive reconstruction of what has occurred in the game, encourage the students to ponder the characteristics of games and the value of their contribution, though reflection that stems from their experiences and confrontations. The objective of such common reflection and confrontation is:

- a. to critically examine the ethnocentric approach to culture and the deviating simplifications implicit in stereotypes;
- b. to recognise the value of cultural pluralism;
- c. to stimulate an interest in otherness and trans-cultural identity though pleasant and motivating interactions.

This last phase represents the ideal terminus of a didactic path that unites the linguistic-communicative objectives of the playful LTM with the transversal ones of intercultural education: namely, cultural decentralisation, deconstruction of prejudices, and overcoming xenophobic and racist attitudes. The teacher who wants to be ‘playful and intercultural’ will have the task of creating playful-educative contexts that are rich in exchanges, wherein the talents of the students are valorized and wherein the group enriches itself from the pre-existing experiences of each student. The teacher would likewise have to make the students aware of these values though direct experience by encouraging them to understand that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said, “the discovery of otherness is the discovery of a relation, not of a barrier”.

8.6 Beyond Language Teaching Games: The Concept of Playfulness

To avoid understanding in a reductive way the playful LTM as a methodology actuated only through didactic games, let us broaden the operational horizon by presenting the concept of playfulness. By this term we mean *the vital charge in which strong intrinsic motivational inducements become integrated with affective-emotive, cognitive and social aspects of the learner*. Such a vital charge can obviously be emitted also in activities that, even though games, can completely absorb

the attention and the interest of the students because they are supported by an intrinsic motivation, they are challenging and exacting.

By adopting a playful language teaching methodology, we locate in playfulness the founding principle that promotes the total development of the student and, in consequence, creates learning situations that are complex and rich in stimulations (experiential and creative activities, problem solving activities, and ones that demand multi-sensory involvement) that are followed by moments of linguistic formalization, reflection, and the systemization of grammar.

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