


## SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND SELF-EFFICACY IN THE ELDERLY IN A LUDIC ITALIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK<sup>1</sup>

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Licença: 

*Nilce da Silva*<sup>2</sup>

l'Université du troisième âge de l'UQTR

Quebec – Canadá

*Hélène Carbonneau*<sup>3</sup>

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

Quebec – Canadá

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents the conceptual framework developed for the study “Self-actualization and self-efficacy in the elderly in a ludic foreign language program.” We explicate the theoretical grounds for the ludic teaching approach used in the Italian language learning program *Pian, piano si va lontano*. Based on the concept of ludicity, this serious leisure activity is a form of social participation that fosters self-actualization and hence feelings of self-efficacy in older learners. We conclude with some research avenues to gain a deeper understanding of the protective effects of bilingualism on cognitive functioning in the elderly and the role of a ludic teaching approach in enhancing these protective effects from a gerontological perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** Serious Leisure. Ludicity. Active Ageing. Social Participation. Self-actualization. Self-efficacy.

### O SENTIMENTO DE AUTORREALIZAÇÃO E DE AUTOEFICÁCIA DE IDOSOS NO APRENDIZADO DA LÍNGUA ITALIANA: QUADRO TEÓRICO

**RESUMO:** Este artigo apresenta o quadro teórico desenvolvido no âmbito do estudo “O Sentimento de Autorrealização e de Autoeficácia de Idosos em um Programa de Aprendizado Lúdico da Língua Italiana”. Explicamos os fundamentos teóricos para a metodologia de ensino lúdica usada no programa de aprendizagem de língua italiana *Pian, piano si va lontano*. Com base no conceito de ludicidade, essa atividade de lazer sério é uma forma de participação social que promove a autorrealização e, portanto, os

<sup>1</sup> This manuscript has been translated from the original French by Margaret McKyes, certified translator. This translation have been paid by the Laboratoire de gérontologie (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières).

<sup>2</sup> PhD in Education – Universidade de São Paulo, Ph.D. student in Sociology at Université du Québec à Montreal, QC, CA and Master degree in Leisure, Culture and Tourism at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR), QC, CA. Professeure à l'Université du troisième âge de l'UQTR.

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D. in Gerontology, Department of Leisure, Culture and Tourism, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, QC, CA.

sentimentos de autoeficácia em alunos idosos. Concluimos sugerindo alguns caminhos de pesquisa que possam obter uma compreensão mais profunda dos efeitos protetores do bilinguismo sobre o funcionamento cognitivo em idosos e o papel de uma metodologia de ensino lúdica para aumentar esses efeitos protetores de uma perspectiva gerontagógica.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Lazer Sério. Ludicidade. Envelhecimento Ativo. Participação Social. Autorrealização. Autoeficácia.

## **Introduction**

The global population is ageing ever more rapidly. From 1970 to 2025, the total number of elderly persons should climb to approximately 694 million, for a 233 percent increase. In 2025, the Earth will house almost 1.2 billion people aged 60 years and over. In 2050, that number will reach 2 billion, with 80% of these living in developing countries (OMS, 2002, p. 6). This poses an enormous challenge, at the local, national, and global level: how can we keep seniors active? In this new social reality, it is essential to promote and support active ageing (OMS, 2002, 2015), which means finding the most effective life habit interventions to optimize the health and well-being of elderly persons. Importantly, how can we encourage them to play an active role in society? What are the best ways to teach the elderly, maintain their health, and delay neurocognitive decline as long as possible?

This article presents the conceptual framework developed for the study “Self-actualization and self-efficacy in the elderly in a ludic foreign language learning program” (SILVA, 2008). We explicate the theoretical grounds for the ludic teaching approach used in the Italian language learning program *Pian, piano si va lontano*<sup>4</sup>. Based on the concept of ludicity, this serious leisure (STEBBINS, 1992) activity is a form of social participation that fosters self-actualization and hence feelings of self-efficacy in older learners.

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<sup>4</sup> Roughly equivalent to the proverb “Slow and steady wins the race.”

## **Active Ageing**

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002, 2015) states that in order to age actively, elders must have good health, be able to participate in society, and feel secure. Their publication *Active ageing: a policy framework* (WHO, 2002) sends a more comprehensive message, recognizing the “rights, needs, preferences and capacities of older people” as well as the “principles of independence, participation, dignity, care and self-fulfillment.” Accordingly, elderly persons need an environment that is based on their “rights, needs, preferences and capacities” (WHO, 2002). Active ageing is a process that helps optimize not only social participation, but also health and security, all of which improve the quality of life in old age. Thus, with the support of the community, older people can continue to develop their individual potential.

Establishing the conditions for active ageing is beneficial in many respects. For example, recreational centers with programs for seniors, third-age universities, and volunteer work can help older people develop on a personal level, expand their social network, and feel a greater sense of social belonging and usefulness (GRENIER *et al*, 2017). Indeed, older people who participate in society or find new ways to do so can continue to contribute to society and feel useful. Moreover, they can discover new skills while maintaining their social network or building new ones. This helps them break out of their isolation and improve their self-esteem. In short, elders can continue contributing to the family and community in all kinds of ways (CONSEIL DES AÎNÉS DU QUÉBEC [Québec Seniors’ Council], 2007; 2010).

## **Active Ageing and Social Participation**

As mentioned above, according to the WHO (2002), social participation is one of the pillars of active ageing. Raymond; Sévigny, and Tourigny (2011) review a wide

assortment of definitions and applications of the term *social participation*, ranging from performing daily living activities to civic engagement. For example, Levasseur; Richard; Gauvin, and Raymond (2010) define social participation as personal involvement in activities carried out in interaction with others in a society or community.

Raymond; Sévigny, and Tourigny (2012) explain that as people reach retirement, they tend to change the way that they participate in society. Initially, many retirees just long to relax, so they postpone their plans for new projects. Then, as time goes along, they start to think about the meaning of life, which may inspire them to join some kind of community or social activity. Although the importance of this reflective process has been well recognized, it must also be acknowledged that there is more than one way to do it: individuals will follow their own path at their own pace and to meet their own needs. Therefore, rather than impose a single model of social participation, it is preferable to appeal to people's interests by offering stimulating activities and ways to get involved that connect them to their past lives.

Raymond; Gagné; Sévigny, and Tourigny (2008) characterize social participation in terms of the following forms: 1) maintaining individual social relationships, 2) maintaining social relationships within a group, 3) participating in community activities such as leisure activities, courses, clubs, and meetings, 4) doing organized or non-organized volunteer work, and 5) getting involved in a sociopolitical cause. Leisure activity is therefore one form of social participation.

### **Social Participation and Leisure Activity**

Leisure activity has been demonstrated effective to support successful ageing (RAYMOND; SÉVIGNY & TOURIGNY, 2011, BRAJSA-ZGANEC, MERKAS, &

SVERKO, 2011, CARBONNEAU, 2012). Raymond; Sévigny, and Tourigny (2012) explain that, particularly after age 65, leisure activity becomes a key factor for a more enjoyable life. This is because leisure activity enables personal growth, expands one's social circle, paves the way to new friendships, and promotes the development of individual identity as well as community spirit.

Many studies have corroborated these findings, as follows. Novek; Menec; Tran, and Bell (2013) tallied a list of the benefits of social participation through leisure activity: it helps maintain motor function, lowers the risk of developing handicaps, lowers the risk of impaired mobility, prevents depression and reduces depressive symptoms, optimizes memory, slows cognitive decline rates, and improves sleep quality. Brajsa-Zganec; Merkas, and Sverko (2011) show that engaging in leisure activity contributes to subjective well-being. Leitner and Leitner (2012) contend that recreational social activity nurtures healthy lifestyles and strong relationships. Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2006) maintain that leisure activity is one of the basic components of healthy life habits in the elderly. Linden and Juillerat (2014) argue that leisure activity helps the elderly remained empowered and independent.

Other authors have drawn similar conclusions. Newman; Tay, and Diener (2014) show that, regardless of age, leisure activity unleashes psychological mechanisms that foster subjective well-being. To explain these positive effects, the authors summarize the main theories applied in 363 research articles linking leisure and subjective well-being. They review a number of theoretical models developed to explain the relationships between leisure and the psychological components of subjective well-being, and they delineate the main concepts arising from these theories into five core psychological mechanisms: detachment-recovery, autonomy, mastery, meaning, and affiliation (DRAMMA).

While it is known that leisure activity, social participation, and subjective well-being are related in the elderly, Adams; Leibbrandt, and Monn (2011) identified certain domains and dimensions of these activities as determinant. These authors reviewed 42 studies published from 1995 to 2009 on social and leisure activity in relation to well-being. Their analysis indicates that informal social activities that involve participation, interaction, extension of social networks, and new friendships appear to have the most influence on well-being.

In a study of the relationship between leisure activity and social status in an elderly Dutch sample, Toepoel (2013) notes that older people have fewer social contacts and close ties, and often feel lonely. He observes that volunteer work, cultural activities, sports, reading, hobbies, and shopping are important predictors for social connectedness. He also explains that, for older people (aged 74 and more), cultural activities and sports reduce solitude. He adds that close relationships could be the most effective way to encourage participation in leisure activities and hence build social connectedness.

Another key dimension of the relationship between social participation and leisure is having a passion for the activity. Kleiber (2013) underscores the finding that passion for an activity and connectedness with others in a shared activity strengthen feelings of competence, belonging, and identity. Similarly, Rousseau, and Vallerand (2003) show that harmonious passion for a leisure activity generates a motivational force that enhances psychological well-being.

In light of the above findings on the relationship between social participation and leisure, we now focus on Stebbin's (1992) serious leisure perspective, and we consider the potential of serious leisure activity for overcoming challenges and achieving self-actualization.

## **Serious Leisure**

In his serious leisure perspective, Stebbins (1992) defines serious leisure in terms of six distinguishing qualities: 1) perseverance in the activity, through thick and thin; 2) continuity and improvement (e.g., as a career); 3) personal effort based on acquired knowledge, training, experience, and/or skill; 4) durable benefits of the leisure activity, including social, emotional, and physical benefits; 5) a unique ethos, or a special social world that grows up around the activity (e.g., shared interests, practices, values, goals); and 6) strong identification with the activity as a “serious leisure” activity.

Lee and Payne (2015) apply the serious leisure perspective in their study on successful ageing. They conclude that when a serious leisure activity includes a high social component, it is more likely to engage more seriously. In the same vein, Kim; Heo; Lee and Kim (2014) show that participation in the serious leisure activity Taekwondo is closely associated with personal growth and happiness, manifested in outcomes such as improvements in self-image, self-expression, social relationships, and social interactions. Furthermore, participating in a serious leisure activity improves social relationships and social interactions, which fosters personal growth, enjoyment of life, and happiness. In sum, social participation in a serious leisure activity promotes personal growth in older persons (Ibid., p. 153), which in turn generates personal and social benefits (Ibid., p. 153) and greater happiness (Ibid., p. 153).

## **Serious Leisure, Successful Ageing, and Self-actualization**

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of serious leisure in active ageing for self-actualization, we begin by tracing the origins of the concept of self-actualization. The notion of self-actualization is rooted in Maslow’s (1943) seminal theory of self-

actualization, whereby all humans—across all cultures—have the same basic needs, and people’s motivational behaviors may be considered in terms of these needs. The basic needs are depicted as five levels of a pyramid, or an ascending hierarchy of the following needs: psychological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

It follows that the type of leisure activity that a person practices would be determinant for the impact on that person’s self-actualization. For example, if an activity requires significant engagement and provides a good balance between the challenges it poses and the person’s ability to meet them, that person can enter a state of total concentration, commitment, or focus. This state leads to optimal experience and well-being, which in turn contributes to self-actualization. Here again, serious leisure provides a promising avenue. Stebbins (1992, 2015) argues that serious leisure, which includes activities that provide challenges as well as learning opportunities, are excellent ways to enhance self-actualization. Therefore, serious commitment to an effort, the mobilization of one’s competencies, and commitment to a leisure activity lead to greater life satisfaction and foster self-actualization.

Examples of such activities include intellectually stimulating tasks like playing chess or learning a foreign language, or physical challenges like jogging, rapid walking, dancing, cycling, tai chi, badminton, table tennis, hiking, baseball, and fishing (YANG, 2014). In addition, attending a course is a form of leisure that can stimulate cognitive processes and foster positive feelings (SIMONE & CESENA, 2010).

### **Serious Leisure, Active Ageing, and Self-efficacy**

Among the theories that attempt to explain how individuals perform daily activities, social cognitive theory (BANDURA, 1977) broke new ground in several



fields, including administration, administration, education, and leisure. Bandura (1977) defines perceived self-efficacy as a personal resource that protects individuals from threatening life activities and events by strengthening their ability to cope, an ability that fosters psychological well-being. Perceived self-efficacy is also a key component of the self-regulation process, as it constitutes a productive response to the failure to achieve expected results (BANDURA, 1971, 1977, 1993, 1995). He concludes that individual behavior can be better predicted by beliefs about one's competencies than by one's actual competencies. Beliefs, with their potential for self-direction, would therefore be determinant for what an individual can cope with.

Other authors have identified relationships between leisure and self-efficacy. Ra; Soonok and Rhee (2013) found a significant relationship between leisure and self-efficacy in a sample of elderly Koreans: leisure activity positively influenced feelings of self-efficacy. Kwang-Uk; Hong-Rok, and Eun-Surk (2014) confirmed this relationship in a study of elderly Koreans in Seoul. They found that "push factors" (including personal relationships) for participation in leisure sports had positive effects on empathy ability, psychological stability, impulse control, and self-efficacy. Similarly, Perkins, Drawing on self-efficacy theory (BANDURA, 1977), Perkins; Multhaup, Perkins, and Barton (2008) examined elderly people in Spain and the United States and found strong relationships between social participation, physical leisure activities, and self-efficacy. McAuley (1993, in LEITNER & LEITNER, 2012) adds that physical activity, which entrains a series of social practices, increases feelings of self-efficacy. In addition, Yang (2014), in a study of 174 elderly persons practicing sports in Shanghai, concludes that the reasons for participating in these activities, in order of importance for the elderly, are to meet their needs for self-esteem, belongingness, love, self-actualization, psychological support, and security.

Furthermore, Purdie and MacCrindle (2010) show that self-efficacy in the elderly is strongly rooted in self-perceived cognitive functioning (especially memory) and control over the environment. In addition, learning new things promotes social integration and emotional support, which leads to improved cognitive performance, which indirectly enhances feelings of self-efficacy. Here again, it appears that the type of experience is important. Purdie and MacCrindle (2010) also demonstrate the potential of an activity such as ludic foreign language learning for developing self-efficacy in the elderly. Timmer and Aartsen (2003) examine the impacts of leisure activity in the third age, including education and voluntary work. They identify three dimensions of self-efficacy that play a part: effort to complete the behavior, persistence in the face of adversity, and willingness to initiate the behavior, with willingness as the most important factor for boosting feelings of self-efficacy.

Furthermore, Simone and Cesana (2010) found that adult education courses improved the mood of older adults, to the benefit of their overall health and well-being. They demonstrate that cognitive stimulation is a key component of healthy ageing, and that ongoing education offers this type of opportunity. They conclude that life-long learning would generate long-lasting benefits for health and well-being. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2015), in a study of 420 elderly learners in a beginner English language class, found that they were motivated to learn by the satisfaction and enjoyment they derived from the course, and that the most influential factor proved to be self-actualization.

This enjoyment, or pleasure, is composed of a number of subjective components, including self-actualization and growing perceptions of self-efficacy. Enjoyment is based on the satisfaction that people obtain when they feel capable of practicing a leisure activity that has been adapted for their individual circumstances (BALTES & BALTES, 1990), and when it is carried out in an atmosphere of positive values

(POULIN & LECLERC, 1986) that are conducive to building significant personal relationships (Ibid.). These are the optimal conditions for developing personal goals (DUBÉ; LAPIERRE; BOUFFARD & ALAIN, 2003). Moreover, serious leisure activity that is stimulating and enjoyable generates the most optimistic attitudes about the future, which in turn foster personal development, and hence contribute to a sense of personal continuity, greater self-actualization, and greater self-efficacy (DUBÉ; LAPIERRE; BOUFFARD & ALAIN, 2003; PURDIE & BOULTON-LEWIS, 2010). Therefore, one motivational factor for participating in a serious leisure activity is the enjoyment of social participation.

In conclusion, serious leisure is conducive to self-actualization and self-efficacy, but under certain conditions. The prerequisite condition is enjoyment, or pleasure. In addition, even if the activity has certain work-like characteristics (e.g., dedication, maximum effort, repetition, training), as is the case for serious leisure (STEBBINS, 1992), it is important that there is no sense of obligation or duty. Furthermore, the activity should promote positive interpersonal relationships, emotional processes, and cognitive processes (STEBBINS, 2015). This perspective informs the design of the ludic teaching approach for the foreign language program addressed in the present study.

### **The Theoretical Framework for the *Piano, Piano si va Lontano* Program**

The activities that make up the *Piano, piano si va lontano* (PPSVL) program are based on Huizinga's (1989) concept of "ludicity," which is similar in meaning to "fun," "play," and "joy." However, ludicity goes beyond these simple ideas. It is a sociocultural phenomenon that combines motivation to participate in the activity, the perception of time as suspended and detached from ordinary reality (referred to as

“flow”), and mobilization of personal cognitive abilities in order to partake in an enjoyable activity. In the present study, the proposed enjoyable activity is learning a foreign language, which can be considered a “*jogo do não um*” (not-one-but-two game) (SERRANI-INFANTE, 2001).

To better understand this type of game, we will consider the concept *Homo ludens* (HUIZINGA, 1989) as well as certain elements of the theories developed by Winnicott (1975), Sapir (1949), and Wittgenstein (1922). First, we examine the theoretical groundings and introduce the notions of pleasure, the relationship to time, cognition, and motivation and how they have informed the didactic activities of the 12-unit PPSVL program.

### **Play, Serious Leisure, and the Concept of Ludicity**

In the Foreword of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, the Dutch historian Huizinga (1989) recounts how our species was given the name *Homo sapiens* (“wise man”) in the 18th century. Later, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, we were renamed *Homo faber* (“man the maker”). However, realizing that humans were more than just reasoning and making creatures, Dutch philosophers added a third function that appeared to be on the same level of importance. Thus, the term *Homo ludens* (“man the player”) was coined.

Huizinga believed that civilization “arises and unfolds in and as play” (HUIZINGA, 1989, Foreword, p. 1). He conceived play as a cultural phenomenon that transcends the immediate needs of life. In essence, play is *fun*, an idea that resists all analysis and logical interpretation. In this sense, play is a primary life force, and not superfluous. Indeed, it is a necessary mental process of transformation into another ego. Thus, play is never imposed by physical need or moral duty. Huizinga proposes four

basic characteristics of play. Beginning with the first two, 1) it is freedom; and 2) it is a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity, with its own disposition. With respect to this second characteristic, play fulfils a sense of satisfaction: it satisfies the need for communal ideals, which is a vital cultural function, for both individuals and society. Play therefore serves purposes that go beyond the immediate material needs for food, reproduction, and self-preservation.

The third characteristic of play is that it is 'played out' within certain fixed limits of time and space. This leads directly to characteristic number four: play creates a limited order: it assumes a fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Although there may be fluidity as play progresses, once it ends, "it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory" (HUIZINGA, *Ibid.*, p. 10). Therefore, it has the faculty of repetition, which is another essential quality of play.

According to Huizinga (*Ibid.*), play casts a sort of spell over us. Thus, we are enchanted. Play fascinates and captivates us with its rhythm and harmony. In addition, it incorporates the element of tension, or a striving to decide the issue at hand. Players may apply their strength, tenacity, intelligence, and/or skills in an effort to win or succeed. There are countless forms of play, including theatre, riddles, puzzles, hunting, language, law, and competitive sports. Through play, societies express their values, such as the need for self-approbation or a sense of superiority. To illustrate, winners of games also win esteem and honor, for themselves and for those who bestow the esteem and honor upon them. This triumphant feeling spreads to the group to which the winner belongs. The joy of leisure can be defined as the joy of letting go of the need to strive after that which one does not have, or the *telos* (i.e., the goal, end, or purpose). Play therefore provides a way to relax, a repose for the soul. Accordingly, the participant's

viewpoint is very important for the definition of what constitutes play and what does not. Different people who practice the same activity are likely to perceive it differently.

These multiple characteristics of play enable players to transport themselves to another world, outside the ordinary, without removing their ability to be serious. Here, Stebbins' (1992) concept of serious leisure meets Huizinga's (1989) emphasis on the seriousness of play. In serious leisure and serious play, one asks oneself, "Will it work?"; "Will I succeed?"; "Can I win?" In the present study, the participants in the PPSVL program might ask themselves: "Can I learn to speak Italian?"

Against the above-presented historical and social background, and to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of play from an individual perspective, we now consider the contribution of the English pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1975) and his theoretical understanding of transitional objects and potential space, which expands on Huizinga's (1989) concept of play. We will see how his theory contributes to our theoretical framework for foreign language learning as a form of play.

### **Transitional Space and the Concept of Ludicity in Foreign Language Learning**

In the present study, we draw on D. W. Winnicott's theory of play. In his pediatric practice, Winnicott observed that mothers and their babies developed an initial symbiosis, particularly when the baby was breastfed. When children "discover" external reality and realize that their mother is a separate being ("not-me"), they often become intensely attached to a particular object, a toy or blanket for example. The mother might habitually offer this object when the child is in distress, for instance, when she has to leave the child. Alternatively, instead of handling a material object, the child may develop certain behavioral patterns like thumb-sucking or babbling, demonstrating that the object does not necessarily have to be a physical toy. Whether material object or

immaterial behavior, these phenomena are called *transitional objects* (WINNICOTT, 1975). They belong to the child's external reality, and due to the intense attachment, they are also related to the child's internal reality (although they are not considered internal objects as such). In the end, these objects and the child's relationships to them become part of that child's identity. In the same way, as adults, we continue to cope with the realities of life by adopting transitional objects, in a lifelong process.

According to Winnicott (1975), individuals develop these transitional objects in several steps. One begins by being attracted to the external object, to the point of merging with it. There is a symbiotic state of intense pleasure. Gradually, as one realizes that existential anxiety persists, this illusion of symbiosis falls away. At this point, one starts to detach from the object, eventually to abandon it. Then begins the process of establishing a new relationship with another object, in a never-ending quest for pleasure. Because they are internalized, these transitional objects (which belong to the cultural sphere, which includes toys as well as words) also make up part of the individual psyche, or identity. Furthermore, the objects are in transit, or transitional. The pathway is a to-and-fro exchange between external and internal reality: the route by which the *self* is constructed. This is called the *potential space* (WINNICOTT, 1975), a creative space where individuals can create, play, and learn. It is a space that allows us to live in objective reality but in a creative, healthy way.

In the case of learning Italian in the PPSVL program, the new language becomes a transitional object for the elderly person for a certain period of time, as a way to construct the self. In this sense, learning a foreign language requires an emotional and cognitive effort: the individual commits to become a new and unfamiliar person. This is a personal (re)invention, or self-transformation. For Winnicott (1975), it is through play,

and only through play, that one can be creative and mobilize the complete personality in order to discover oneself.

In the present study, we address the *jogo do não um* (not-one-but-two game) (SERRANI-INFANTE, 2001) as the transitional space of interest. Serrani-Infante explains that the *jogo do não um* is a form of play in which an individual learns to divide oneself into two persons at the same time. It is a game of metamorphosis. Here, foreign language learning is considered as a transitional object (WINNICOTT, 1975). In other words, the game is to make the foreign language (an object that is external to the self) into an object that also belongs to the internal reality, to the identity, through the learning process.

In this perspective, Sapir (1949) explains that people learn a new language because they want to become another person. Language was the first tool that human beings forged in order to communicate, learn, and command. With the help of language, people can distinguish between things, define them, design them, and subsequently raise them to the level of the abstract or spiritual, only to bring them back to the material level once again. Thus, behind every abstract term lurks a metaphor, and the metaphor is a form of play.

Wittgenstein (1922) reflected on how people use words to communicate. He concluded that communication, knowledge, and logic were all merely “language games.” Furthermore, one has to know the rules in order to know how to play the game, or how the game works. This also allows understanding the circumstances in which a word may be used, given that experiential language is related to social practice. Wittgenstein (1922) explains that a thought is a proposition with sense: “Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning” (WITTGENSTEIN, 1922). Words therefore have meaning within the proposition of the



game. And these are the very characteristics that make learning Italian a game: a language game.

Against this background, the shift in foreign language teaching approaches over the past two decades (SCHNEIDER, 2010), from structuralist (form- and grammar-based) to communicative (based on pragmatic functional abilities and oriented toward relevant content for communication), has transformed teaching practices. Based on the knowledge of the new didactic paradigm, ludic glottodidactics (the study of ludic foreign language learning and teaching) has been deemed the teaching approach of choice for foreign language courses as an informal leisure activity (and not to meet workforce demands). Therefore, taking into consideration this long-standing debate in the field of applied linguistics, the PPSVL program, which was designed as a leisure activity, had to include stimulating activities (SALTHOUSE; BERISH, & MILES, 2002; SMALL; HUGHES; HULTSCH & DIXON, 2007; WILSON; BARNES, & BENNETT, 2007; WILSON *et al.*, 2002). In this respect, the selected teaching approach for the present study surpasses the IRA model (I= Initiation by the teacher, R= Response by the student, A = Assessment by the teacher) (TERRA, 2004), which belongs to last century's structuralist stream. Accordingly, we used a ludic glottodidactic approach to foreign language learning, which we present next.

### **Ludic Glottodidactics**

Ludic glottodidactics (MARANGON, 2008), which emerged from the Venetian School (CAON *et al.*, 2004, 2006), is the teaching approach that aligns best with our theoretical framework. Based on a humanistic approach (ROGERS, 1961), it is the most appropriate game-based method to teach adults a foreign language. It considers that all learning activities, including grammar and phonetics, can provide pleasure and

enjoyment when learners take an active part in their learning, are respected, and are in the process of developing self-actualization and self-efficacy. In other words, it can be enjoyable to understand and use language structures and grammar rules. In effect, ludic activities use imaginary worlds to introduce linguistic content.

The principles of active learning, respect, and self-development concur with those proposed by Balboni (2002), a member of the Venetian School and a proponent of humanistic theory whose work addresses emotional and relational aspects, personality characteristics, self-actualization, and self-efficacy in students. In this view, each student is viewed as a separate individual with a personal agenda and a unique potential.

The concept of meaningful language learning also has implications for this teaching approach, in which form is secondary to meaningful personal exchanges. Caon (2006) explains that this personal sphere can activate the cognitive, emotional, and socio-relational dimensions in linguistic acquisition. This supports the argument that in order to activate the basic cognitive functions (at the neurological and biochemical level), learning needs to be meaningful. In sum, play is a teaching strategy that is based on the concept of ludicity, and the purpose is to help students acquire linguistic skills in a foreign language.

Consequently, adults and older adults can use games to learn, as long as the games : a) are explained and managed by the teacher; b) match well with the learner's psychological, pedagogical, and didactic motivations as well as the complex cognitive processes that may activate them (e.g., a group problem-solving game); and c) are offered as part of an assembly of complex cognitive and linguistic activities that are appropriate for the learners' cognitive development and linguistic abilities (CAON & RUTKA, 2004, in CAON, 2006, p. 39).

Here, Haydée Silva (2008) has a significant contribution to make: play, whether educational or not, affords three key advantages. First, because it is motivating, ludic activity develops in players a willingness to venture further and surpass themselves. Second, play makes demands on the physical body as well as feelings and emotions, thereby encouraging communication. Third, play confers emotional benefits when the players assume imaginary roles (e.g., adversary, teammate) and become less egocentric.

Begotti (2007, in MARAGON, 2009, p. 24) confirms that the typologies of play used for didactic activities should vary according to learners' developmental abilities, the available materials, and the places where they are developed. Examples include listening and producing the correct response, exchanging information with classmates, solving problems, teamwork, role play, looking up words, constructing sentences, and using memory. As a multisensory activity, play lets students have a good time as they make cognitive and psychophysical efforts to learn a language.

At this juncture, we must add the contribution of Bour and Hoyet (2012), who explain that games that incorporate living language (e.g., poems, songs, theatre plays, nursery rhymes, short dialogues, proverbs, sketches, fairy tales, short stories) can motivate foreign language learners because they are required to listen to and produce oral speech, situations that are conducive to spontaneous speech (Ibid., p. 2). To summarize, didactic play, or ludic learning, has four basic characteristics:

- a) *It is exacting*: it demands psychophysical, cognitive, and emotional involvement.
- b) *It is continuous*: it is a constant presence in childhood, and it 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 (VISALBERGHI, 1980, in CAON, 2006, p. 37)

Furthermore, playful activity is “intentionally built to give an amusing and pleasant shape to certain forms of learning” (STACCIOLI, in CAON, 2006, p. 37). Playful activity is self-motivated, in that the learner is involved in a continuous and progressive manner. For instance, games provide stimulating challenges that require learners to use strategies, find solutions, and apply reasoning and/or creativity, all while having fun.

Consequently, pleasure cannot be considered as merely an agreeable feeling or attitude. It is also the gratification of cognitive needs and the desire to participate, the pleasure of new experiences, the pleasure of meeting challenges (and not just those posed by adversaries, but also the challenges to surpass oneself), the pleasure of systematizing knowledge into personal skills, and the pleasure of making connections between new ideas acquired in class and previous knowledge (BALBONI, 2002, in CAON, 2006, p. 18). As proposed by Caon (2006, p. 26), the purpose of the PPSVL program was to provide a serene and transparent atmosphere in which learners could challenge themselves. The program is based on the pleasure of learning, of mastering a new language, of participating in new learning situations, of learning from one’s errors in order to advance, of joining a circle of friends who share a passion for the Italian language, and of experiencing recognition, success, and empowerment.

In this theoretical and practical framework, the teacher plays a facilitating role by setting up the conditions that foster learning while positioning the learner at the

center of the teaching and learning process. Thus, while giving the learners the most important place in the learning process, the teacher creates a serene but challenge-filled atmosphere that is facilitated by a metacognitive didactic approach (Ibid., 2006).

The intermediate variables retained for the present study arise directly from the theoretical framework. The first is *pleasure*, which is understood as the satisfaction obtained by participating in an amusing game or playful activity. This pleasure cannot be considered as superfluous, and it is synonymous with freedom (HUIZINGA, 1989). The second intermediate variable is *the relationship with time*: the fixed space of the game produces an internal feeling that time is limited and passes quickly (Ibid.). The third variable is *motivation*, which the game generates through its ability to fascinate and captivate (Ibid.). The fourth variable is *cognition*, which the game exercises through the player's efforts, strength, tenacity, intelligence, and skills. To these we add the dependent variables *self-actualization* (MASLOW, 1943; ROGERS, 1961; 1968) and *self-efficacy* (BANDURA, 1982), which are mobilized in the *Pian, piano si va lontano* (PPSVL) program, itself the independent variable. In this way, the PPSVL program was developed to take into account certain explicit guidelines (a more traditional method) as well as certain implicit learning principles (e.g., task performance) combined with a pedagogical approach that incorporates meaningful learning based on the pleasure of learning.

## **Research Avenues**

Recent studies indicate that bilingualism helps maintain cognitive functioning and protects against neurocognitive disorder (NCD), including Alzheimer's disease (AD). According to Bialystok; Binns; Craik and Osher (2014), bilingualism delays symptom onset in AD and mild cognitive impairment (MCI). Generally, bilingualism

helps maintain executive cognition, memory, and attention functions in the elderly. In other words, bilingualism requires attentional control toward the language in use and the ability to ignore another language at the same time. Thus, bilingualism contributes to build a cognitive reserve that helps protect older adults from cognitive decline while maintaining alertness and cognitive health, as evidenced in studies on the development of bilingualism at age 60 and older (BIER & BELLEVILLE, 2010; BELLEY *et al.*, 2013). Still, the factors that enhance this protective effect remain to be delineated.

This theoretical framework, which provides the structure and context for the above-mentioned study on a ludic foreign language learning program for the elderly, also supports Lemieux's (1992 b, 2000, 2001) proposal for a new research field: the knowledge and understanding of older learners, as distinct from social and educational gerontology. Related to education and not gerontology, this field would be called gerontagogy, and it would be on a level with pedagogy (initial training) and andragogy (adult education). According to Lemieux (1992 b, 2000, 2001), gerontagogy should address concerns about life after retirement and the development of new social roles for retirees.

Briefly, this field would open new research avenues to investigate the protective effects of bilingualism on cognitive functioning in the elderly and the role of a ludic teaching approach in enhancing this protective effect in a perspective of educational gerontagogy.

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**Endereço das Autoras:**

Nilce da Silva  
Université du troisième âge  
Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières  
3351, boul des Forges, C.P. 500  
Trois-Rivières (Québec) G9A 5H7  
Endereço Eletrônico: [silva.nilce\\_da@courrier.uqam.ca](mailto:silva.nilce_da@courrier.uqam.ca)

Helène Carbonneau  
Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières  
3351, boul des Forges, C.P. 500  
Trois-Rivières (Québec) G9A 5H7  
Endereço Eletrônico: [helen.carbonneau@uqtr.ca](mailto:helen.carbonneau@uqtr.ca)