SUGGESTOPEDIA – A WONDER APPROACH TO LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES?

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Abstract*: Suggestopedia, one of the strangest "humanistic approaches" was developed in the 1970's by the Bulgarian educator Georgi Lozanov. It is based on the idea that people, as they get older, inhibit their learning to conform to the social norms and in order to reactivate the capabilities theyused as children, teachers have to use the power of suggestion. The suggestopedic approach is said to increase enormously the ability of students to learn, to remember, and to integrate what they learn into their personality.*

This paper presents the sequences of a suggestopedic session, the role of the teacher and opposite points of view regarding the use of the approach.

The conclusion is that, despite a lot of inconveniences, suggestopedia has elements that can be used successfully with all sorts of learners, some of these elements being employed by the teachers

Keywords: *word-recognition, elementary grades, strategies, teacher support.*

Suggestopedia is one of the teaching methods developed by Bulgarian psychotherapist Georgi Lozanov based on the study of Suggestology. The method has been used in different fields of studies but mostly in the field of foreign languages learning. Lozanov claimed that by using this method one can teach languages approximately three to five times as quickly as conventional methods.

The theory applied positive suggestion in teaching when it was developed in the 1970s. However, as improved, it has focused more on "desuggestive learning" and now is often called "desuggestopedia." Suggestopedia is the latest of the six major foreign-language teaching methods known to language teaching experts (the oldest being the grammar translation method.) The name of Suggestopedia is from the words "suggestion" and "pedagogy."

Suggestopedia is a dynamic and innovative teaching method that stems from a new vision of learning. Based on the most recent research on how our brains and memories work, this approach organizes material in special ways that the mind can remember spontaneously and then integrates this into what the learner already knows.

It is woven into unforgettable chains of association and courses are designed so that students are constantly surprising themselves with their own newly discovered capacities. People learn when they feel they are succeeding, because nothing succeeds as well as success. It begins by creating as safe an emotional environment as possible, where learners are unconditionally supported and are, therefore, unafraid of taking chances. It presents learners with quick successions of highly stimulating and artistic activities that appeal to all the senses, thus teaching in a multi-modal, matrix-like way. The same knowledge, coming to learners through a variety of different channels, "mutually" reinforces itself.

Dr. Georgi Lozanov says that as we get older we accept *social norms* and adjust our personalities to conform to them (Lozanov, 1978). One result is that we inhibit our learning to conform to these outside limits. The capabilities that we used as children are set aside and no longer used but they are preserved as *functional reserves*.

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According to Lozanov people can re-integrate these reserves into the active personality by means of suggestion, which increases enormously the ability to learn, to remember and to integrate what they learn into their personality.

Lozanov (1978) assumes that the only major linguistic problems in the language classroom are memorization of the words and patterns of the language and their integration into the students' personalities. Suggestopedia was designed primarily to make these two processes more effective. Suggestopedia uses mostly non-verbal forms of the Learning Hypothesis

The four principles of the suggestopedic method are:

1. Positive approach – everything must be positive, including mistakes. When students make a mistake, they actually say somethig new.
2. Short - Term and Long - Term memory – in this way the students do not forget what was said after 4 days.
3. Emotional meaning – people seem to remember easier when emotional meaning is given to the information. This is why the students will be given new identities so that they feel relaxed and self- confident.
4. Assimilation before analysis – once the students assimilate they have greater pleasure and facility.

Still, two elements of this system make it remarkable:

- All information is given emotional meaning. This "colouring" is precisely what enables the mind to retrieve the information later on.
- Important knowledge is taught by placing it in a background context while "side-tracking" student's attention with other relevant, but less essential, material. This is done because long-term memory retains what it has experienced indirectly; most input experienced directly only makes it to short-term memory and starts fading away after 3 or 4 days to "make place" for new information of more immediate importance - a little like a teacher, who might progressively erase from a blackboard the scribblings left from the previous lesson, as more space is needed for the new business-at-hand..

In this sense, Suggestopedia is the pedagogical application of the latest discoveries in brain research. All knowledge comes through blind effort or mere willpower: it can result from failure, but it is most happily embraced when it stems from success. Teachers should not act directive although this method is teacher-controlled but not students- controlled. For example, they should act as a real partner to the students, participating in the activities such as games and songs "naturally" and "genuinely." In the concert session, they should fully include classical art into their behaviors. Although there are many techniques that the teachers use, the factors such as "communication in the spirit of love, respect for man as a human being, the specific humanitarian way of applying these 'techniques'" etc. are crucial.

Teachers need not only to know the techniques and theoretical information but also to understand the theory and to acquire the practical methodology completely because if they implement those techniques without complete understandings and acquisition, they could not provide learners successful results, or even could give a negative impact on their learning. Therefore the teacher has to be trained in the course that is taught by the certified trainers.

Here are the most important factors for teachers to acquire, described by Lozanov.

1. Covering a huge bulk of learning material.

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2. Structuring the material in the suggestopaedic way; global-partial – partial-global, and global in the part – part in the global, related to the golden proportion.
3. As a professional, on one hand, and a personality, on the other hand, the teacher should be highly prestigious, reliable and credible.
4. The teacher should have, not play, a hundred percent of expectancy in positive results (because the teacher is already experienced even from the time of teacher training course).
5. The teacher should love his/her students (of course, not sentimentally but as human beings) and teach them with personal participation through games, songs, a classical type of arts and pleasure.

The Suggestopedic teacher's first task, then, is to devise entertaining and informative activities that lie within a learner's capacities and yet are beyond what learners believe they are capable of.

In Suggestopedia, the teacher is the architect of a highly stimulating, but psychologically safe, environment where students constantly surprise themselves by what they have been able to remember and use creatively. In this way, a teacher can prompt students to raise their expectations of themselves and reassess who they really are. "The teacher in a suggestopedic course not only radiates effective suggestive stimuli, but also coordinates environmental suggestive stimuli in a positive way for students to learn. One of Suggestopedia's unique goals is to release learners' minds from the existing framework of the <social-suggestive norms> " (Lozanov, 1978: 252).

Material is assimilated before it is analysed, much in the way that children naturally take in new situations. The emphasis is on the learning process: results - which are usually 2 _ to 3 times as fast as in conventional approaches - are regarded as "side effects" of a proper learning process. In fact, all language acquisition on this course will be part and parcel of learning how to learn.

The language texts used have been specially designed and written for this approach, either by your teachers, themselves, or by other experts in the field. They are in the form of plays, in which each participant plays a role. These texts are presented, dramatically, to Classical music - which gives emotional meaning to the information being integrated. An encoding session then follows during which each word and grammatical structure is made "unforgettable" through specifically chosen historical explanations and entertaining stories. Suggestopedia adopts a carefully structured approach, using four main stages as follows:

Presentation

A preparatory stage in which students are helped to relax and move into a positive frame of mind, with the feeling that the learning is going to be easy and fun.

First Concert -"Active Concert"

This involves the active presentation of the material to be learnt. For example, in a foreign language course there might be the dramatic reading of a piece of text, accompanied by classical music.

The students follow along in their text, underlining, highlighting, or making notes as they wish.

Thus the students have a translation of the text. This translation is collected after the concert session and the students work without it.

Second Concert - "Passive Review"

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The students are now invited to relax and listen to some Baroque music, with the text being read very quietly in the background. The music is specially selected to bring the students into the optimum mental state for the effortless acquisition of the material.

During the passive concert, after the active session, the students close their eyes and listen to the teacher who reads more or less normally to the accompaniment of *philosophic* classical music.

"As far as the integrating of the the textual materials is regarded the teacher uses both verbal and non-verbal ways to communicate the learning hypothesis: (X) I am doing this, so (Y) I am learning the language; (X) I did, so (Y) I can use the language. This is a necessary and continuous part of suggestopedic teaching. Now that the student has learned the text, all that remains to be done is to integrate this language into the student's personality. To do this the students read the text aloud stopping here and there for activities. The activities consist of acting out portions of the text, singing specially prepared songs and playing games, telling stories, carrying on short conversations, and psycho-dramas. Throughout this portion, Lozanov calls it the *elaboration*, the teacher carefully structures the class so that the language used by the students comes mainly from the present text. After the text has been read, the teacher introduces additional activities that allow the student to integrate the present language with that from previous lesson."(Lozanov, Georgi,. http://lozanov.hit.bg/ 4/30/2006)

Practice

The use of a range of games, puzzles, etc. to review and consolidate the learning.

The Activation Phase comes next. This is a quick-moving succession of games, role-plays, stories, songs, jokes and playful contests, all closely linked to the texts being learned . The activities change every 5 minutes, each one flowering into the next one, in a seamless succession of information-filled fun, designed to appeal - for different reasons - to learners of every conceivable learning style. (In fact, the very concept underlying each activity is that it must contain visual, auditory and kinaesthetic components to make sure that every learner is able to learn the way she, or he, likes to learn best.) Here, communication plays the main role and can be represented as followes: 7% what is said, 38% body language and 55% context.

The Relaxation Phase is a recapping of the day. The text, presented in the morning and subsequently activated, is reread to Baroque music (such as Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, etc.), while students just relax and listen. This music has a calming effect on mental activity, thereby making learners less active and more receptive; this change of state makes course participants more alert and gives everything they experience greater resonance.

Students are requested to reread texts every evening just before falling asleep and again every morning just after waking up - as these are the times of day most conducive to the effective assimilation of new material.

In Suggestopedia, learning activities are managed in a very special way. Much key information is sneaked in through "the back door" of students' consciousness by an extremely simple ploy: the teacher specifically designs activities that force learners to

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focus their conscious attention on less important, extraneous input at the same time as they are obliged to unconsciously make use of essential knowledge.

This "sidetracking" process ensures that key information is directed to the long-term memory, which soaks up peripheral perceptions, stocks them as vaporous intuitive impressions for four days and lets them seep into consciousness like a drip feed.

This process tries to replicate real life and allow the brain to do what it does best: decode complex patterns in order to ensure survival.

At the beginning and end of every training session, students take a one-and-a-half-hour test that assesses their levels in oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral expression, and written expression. These tests can be quite conventional; they determine objective levels before and after the course, as well as the progress made during the four or five weeks. Readers may be surprised that I differentiate between "objective levels" and "progress".

In Suggestopedia this distinction is particularly important, as groups are less homogeneous in level than in traditional teaching. Consequently, just as there were differences in level on Day One, so will there be differences at the end of the course. If this were not the case, the students who were stronger at the outset would have made less progress than those who were weaker, hence not making the most of their time.

The putting together of participants of slightly different levels creates a healthy dynamic within the group, which is favorable to an exchange between its members. The original form of suggestopedia presented by Lozanov made use of extended dialogues about people from the students' country visiting a country that uses the target language, often several pages in length, accompanied by vocabulary lists and observations on grammatical points. Typically these dialogues would be read aloud to the students and were accompanied by music .

In order to stimulate the creativity of the learners suggestopedia uses almost all the categories of art such as music, visual arts, and stage art. The suggestopedic teachers use music as songs in the elaborations and as classical background music in the concert sessions. They hang colorfully made grammar posters among other art posters in the classroom, and sometimes you give the group drawing tasks. They move like actors in the theater, use puppets like a show person, and read the textbook like poets at their recital.

Some methodologists, like Tim Bowen, say that there is little evidence to support the extravagant claims of success. The more obvious criticisms lie in the fact that many people find classical music irritating rather than stimulating (to some cultures Western music may sound discordant), the length of the dialogues and the lack of a coherent theory of language may serve to confuse rather than to motivate, and, for purely logistic reasons, the provision of comfortable armchairs and a relaxing environment will probably be beyond the means of most educational establishments. In addition the idea of a teacher reading a long (and often clearly inauthentic) dialogue aloud, with exaggerated rhythm and intonation, to the accompaniment of Beethoven or Mozart may well seem ridiculous to many people.

Another aspect considered negative by some teachers is the use of the native language more than in the case of other approaches. The lack of tests, the correction of errors later during classes and not on the spot, the emphasis laid on listening and speaking more than on reading and writing appeal to most of the students but do not

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meet the requirements of the schooling system in Romania and of the exams the students have to face.

It is true that not everyone can reach the levels of Lozanov's classes, but by using some of the suggestopedic methods we can, however, greatly accelerate our students' progress. Certain elements of the approach can be taken and incorporated into the more eclectic approach to language teaching widely in evidence today. The use of music both in the background and as an accompaniment to certain activities can be motivating and relaxing. Attention to factors such as décor, lighting and furniture is surely not a bad thing. Dialogues too have their uses .

There is no doubt that suggestopedia has raised some interesting questions and some of its techniques can be successfully used to achieve good results in the areas of both learning and memory.

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