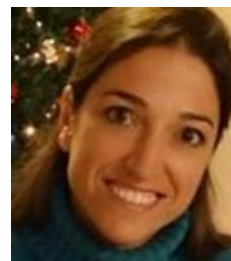


**Agnes Orosz**

## **Suggestopedia – Eccentric Outdated Nonsense or Viable Contemporary English Language Teaching Method?**



### **Introduction**

Suggestopedia has been heavily criticized, even ridiculed and subsequently all but forgotten in contemporary English language teaching, and yet it has fascinated me ever since I first came across it during my initial teacher training. Many of its basic tenets still chime well with what I believe about the importance of the affective aspect of teaching. During my teaching career, I have often found that students' affective filter (fears, insecurities, anxieties, past negative experiences, etc.) can have a huge impact on their learning, and I believe any method that purports to break down these barriers is worth investigating. So I decided to plan and teach a session using the Suggestopedic method in order to see whether despite all its far-fetched claims and eccentric elements there may nevertheless be some important and relevant lessons to be learned, and what aspects of it, if any, are worth incorporating into my teaching repertoire. I was also curious about how adults would react to a method that advocates silly games and fancy dress and whether I would find any evidence for claims that suggestopedia radically improves vocabulary retention.

### **The Approach**

Suggestopedia is a type of “affective-humanistic approach” (Celce-Murcia in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 73) where students' feelings are paramount. Lozanov, the founding father of Suggestopedia, believed learning can take place at a much faster rate than is experienced by most learners, and what gets in the way are our psychological barriers to learning. By breaking language down into small components and by limiting the new vocabulary introduced in one lesson to about 8 items, traditional methods of teaching “suggest” to the student that learning is difficult

and slow. Suggestopedia (later rebranded Desuggestopedia by Lozanov himself), on the other hand, wants to “desuggest” those ideas and instead give the impression that learning is fun, quick and easy. This is implicit in the technique of introducing much more material in one lesson than other methods do to give the suggestion that students will be able to learn a lot with ease (Norman, 2006, p. 5) in the lighthearted, cheerful atmosphere created by playful and humorous activities. Teachers using the suggestopedic method also constantly reinforce positive suggestions into their lessons, e.g. “you won’t need to try to learn, it’ll come naturally” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 74), and always have high expectations of their learners.

Another important aspect of the suggestopedic method is making students comfortable by creating the optimal physical environment for learning. This means using comfortable chairs and decorating the classroom with scenes of tranquil landscapes, fine art, cheerful motivational messages and colourful grammar and vocabulary information. This also aids what Lozanov calls “peripheral perception” (1978, p. 99), which is the idea that we can actually process a great deal of information without having to consciously attend to it. So, by providing posters around the room, students are even learning when they don’t realize they are, because their subconscious will have picked up on the information in the posters.

Lozanov also believed that by using music, art, theatre and creativity in lessons, we can engage both brain hemispheres, and thus free up some unused brain capacity and enlist it in the process of language learning. For this to happen most effectively, students should be in a relaxed but alert state, similar to the state of listening to a classical concert, so that we can tap into the “paraconscious” which is just below the fully conscious mind (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 81). Lozanov is very particular about the type of music he recommends to accompany the presentation of the material to the students; it has to be Baroque music, 4/4 beat, 60 beats a minute, because this is supposed to result in the most optimal relaxation / alertness ratio (Richards, 1986, p. 146).

Everything that happens in a suggestopedia lesson is done to put students into this optimal mind-set where they are open to learning and their “attentiveness is manipulated to optimize learning and recall” (Richards and Rogers, 1986, p. 143).

For example, students, even adults, are encouraged to enter a child-like state through silly games, singing children's songs and taking on new identities through play-acting involving props, costumes and instruments in order to "regain the receptiveness, spontaneity and self-confidence of a child" (Bancroft 1972, in Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 145). This is referred to as "infantilization" and is also purported to heighten memory capacity (Lozanov, 1978, p. 197). In fact, Lozanov made some extraordinary claims about the spectacular results the method can achieve, e.g. 1000 words memorized in one session (Lozanov, 1978, p. 32).

### The Stages of a Suggestopedia session

#### **1. The Active Concert**

The teacher reads a long text out loud to the students while they follow along underlining or making notes. Baroque music accompanies the reading and the teacher molds her voice to the music.

#### **2. The Passive Concert**

The teacher reads the text to music again, this time the students close their texts and simply listen to the teacher.

#### **3. Activation Phase**

Students practice the new language while taking on a new identity.

#### **4. Elaboration Phase**

Students are encouraged to play around with the new language creatively.

### Suggestopedia in Action

I spent a long time looking for an appropriate text for my pre-advanced multi-lingual adult students in London and finally decided on the first two chapters of *The Little Prince*, as it is a children's book that has been enjoyed by adults worldwide for generations. The first positive suggestion to the students was a pledge that the session will be "easy" and fun. This was followed by my reading the two opening chapters of the book with Baroque music played in the background. The students were following the text and were encouraged to participate actively by highlighting the unknown words. Since Lozanov claims spectacular results for vocabulary learning, I prepared a list of 38 potentially unknown words both for presentation and evaluation purposes. Next came the so-called passive concert when students were encouraged to relax and listen to the text again. Students were then encouraged to

take on the role of the Pilot, the Narrator and the Little Prince with the aid of crowns and aviator hats and other props and accessories. In the elaboration phase we focused on the use of “would” to express past habit, again by students taking on a new persona. Finally, students were asked to write down the new words they learned that day and fill in a short questionnaire asking about their feelings about suggestopedia.

### Reflection

Most parts of the session (all except the passive concert) were hugely enjoyable both for myself and for the students. Students were engaged in the story during the active concert, and thoroughly enjoyed the role playing and dressing up. There was a lot of laughter and smiling throughout and the atmosphere was very positive. The student questionnaires also confirmed students positive reactions with 13/13 students ticking positive adjectives (*interested, relaxed*) to describe their state during the active concert. I was surprised that only 1 student found the music “*distracting*”. All students wrote that the lesson made them feel positive emotions (e.g. *well, happy, comfortable*) and they all described the atmosphere with positive adjectives (e.g. *friendly, good vibes, fun, wonderful*).

However, one student wrote that role playing wasn’t appropriate for their age and level, and another responded that she didn’t like the props. This confirmed my skepticism about the infantilization element of suggestopedia. Some adults and especially in my experience, teenagers are uncomfortable with doing childish or silly activities.

The part I found most uncomfortable as a teacher was reading such a long text to the students with music in the background. It felt especially wrong during the second reading where students are supposed to just listen, as this really goes against my ingrained beliefs that students need a reason to listen otherwise they’ll switch off, and that listening passages should be no more than couple of minutes long. One student did also write that the second reading was unnecessary. So I remain skeptical about the effectiveness of reading to students with Baroque accompaniment.

Based on the vocabulary test, I found no evidence that suggestopedia significantly improves students' retention of lexical items. There were no cases of hypermnesia (super-memory) that Lozanov claims to have achieved (1978, p. 221). In fact, on average, students only remembered a distinctly unremarkable 6.5 words from a possible 38. However, Lozanov would probably say that the reason I found no evidence for hypermnesia is because I wasn't teaching the method in exactly the right way; after all, this was a two hour session, rather than a traditional suggestopedia lesson that might stretch over two whole days.

I found no scientific evidence to back up Lozanov's claims about the paraconscious, nor about the special effects of Baroque music on the brain, but using music did seem to help relax my students and make learning more enjoyable.

### Going Forward

I believe that some aspects of suggestopedia are without a doubt worth incorporating into a teacher's repertoire. Striving to make classrooms into more comfortable environments for learning by decorating them with positive messages, calming pictures and colourful grammar and vocab information cannot hurt, and it might help relax students and aid peripheral learning. Using music more during lessons, (not necessarily Baroque) can indeed help to create a positive atmosphere.

I think the main lesson I learned was that using positive suggestions and avoiding negative ones is definitely a good idea in the classroom; I have heard (and said) things like *"Today we're going to do a bit of grammar. Sorry, I know it's hard and boring, but we've just got to get through it"*. Looking back, I agree with Lozanov, that such messages are not conducive to learning and as teachers it is our job to encourage students to believe that they can be successful language learners.

All in all, I believe that, Suggestopedia still has a place in language learning and should continue to be presented to teacher trainees in their pre-service courses. Ultimately, this method aims to make learning more enjoyable and therefore more effective, and those are surely the goals of any language teacher.

A detailed lesson plan, a link to a video of the lesson and the full list of references are available from the author on request.

About the Author:

Agnes Orosz is an English teacher, teacher trainer and researcher currently teaching at the National University for Education in Ecuador. She has also worked in Greece and the UK.

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