

8 Suggestopedia

Background

Suggestopedia, also known as Desuggestopedia, is a method developed by the Bulgarian psychiatrist-educator Georgi Lozanov. Suggestopedia is a specific set of learning recommendations derived from Suggestology, which Lozanov describes as a “science . . . concerned with the systematic study of the nonrational and/or nonconscious influences” that human beings are constantly responding to (Stevick 1976: 42). Suggestopedia tries to harness these influences and redirect them so as to optimize learning. The most conspicuous characteristics of Suggestopedia are the decoration, furniture, and arrangement of the classroom, the use of music, and the authoritative behavior of the teacher. The claims for suggestopedic learning are dramatic. “There is no sector of public life where suggestology would not be useful” (Lozanov 1978: 2). “Memorization in learning by the suggestopedic method seems to be accelerated 25 times over that in learning by conventional methods” (Lozanov 1978: 27).

Lozanov acknowledges ties in tradition to yoga and Soviet psychology. From raja-yoga Lozanov has borrowed and modified techniques for altering states of consciousness and concentration, and the use of rhythmic breathing. From Soviet psychology Lozanov has taken the notion that all students can be taught a given subject matter at the same level of skill. Lozanov claims that his method works equally well whether or not students spend time on outside study. He promises success through Suggestopedia to the academically gifted and the ungifted alike. (For an overview of the tenets of Soviet psychology and how these differ from those of Western psychology, see Bancroft 1978.)

A most conspicuous feature of Suggestopedia is the centrality of music and musical rhythm to learning. Suggestopedia thus has a kinship with other functional uses of music, particularly therapy. Gaston (1968) defines three functions of music in therapy: to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of personal relations; to bring about increased self-esteem through increased self-satisfaction in musical performance; and to use the unique potential of rhythm to energize and bring order. This last function seems to be the one that Lozanov calls upon in his use of music to relax learners as well as to structure, pace, and punctuate the presentation of linguistic material.

Approach: Theory of language and learning

Lozanov does not articulate a theory of language, nor does it seem that he is much concerned with any particular assumptions regarding language elements and their organization. The emphasis on memorization of vocabulary pairs – a target-language item and its native language translation – suggests a view of language in which lexis is central and in which lexical translation rather than contextualization is stressed. However, Lozanov does occasionally refer to the importance of experiencing language material in “whole meaningful texts” (Lozanov 1978: 268) and notes that the suggestopedic course directs “the student not to vocabulary memorization and acquiring habits of speech, but to acts of communication” (1978: 109).

In describing course work and text organization Lozanov refers most often to the language to be learned as “the material” (e.g., “The new material that is to be learned is read or recited by a well-trained teacher”) (Lozanov 1978: 270). The sample protocol given for an Italian lesson (Lozanov 1978) does not suggest a theory of language markedly different from that which holds a language to be its vocabulary and the grammar rules for organizing vocabulary.

Suggestion is at the heart of the theory of learning underlying Suggestopedia. Lozanov distinguishes his theory of suggestion from the “narrow clinical concept of hypnosis as a kind of static, sleeplike, altered state of consciousness” (1978: 3). Lozanov further claims that what distinguishes his method from hypnosis and other forms of mind control is that these other forms lack “a desuggestive-suggestive sense” and “fail to create a constant set up access to reserves through concentrative psycho-relaxation” (1978: 267). There are six principal theoretical components through which desuggestion and suggestion operate and that set up access to reserves. We will describe these briefly following Bancroft (1972).

Authority

People remember best and are most influenced by information coming from an authoritative source. Lozanov appears to believe that scientific-sounding language, highly positive experimental data, and true-believer teachers constitute a ritual placebo system that is authoritatively appealing to most learners. Well-publicized accounts of learning success lend the method and the institution authority, and commitment to the method, self-confidence, personal distance, acting ability, and a highly positive attitude give an authoritative air to the teacher.

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Infantilization

Authority is also used to suggest a teacher–student relation like that of parent to child. In the child’s role the learner takes part in role playing, games, songs, and gymnastic exercises that help “the older student regain the self-confidence, spontaneity and receptivity of the child” (Bancroft 1972: 19).

Double-planedness

The learner learns not only from the effect of direct instruction but from the environment in which the instruction takes place. The bright decor of the classroom, the musical background, the shape of the chairs, and the personality of the teacher are considered as important in instruction as the form of the instructional material itself.

Intonation, rhythm, and concert pseudo-passiveness

Varying the tone and rhythm of presented material helps both to avoid boredom through monotony of repetition and to dramatize, emotionalize, and give meaning to linguistic material. In the first presentation of linguistic material, three phrases are read together, each with a different voice level and rhythm. In the second presentation, the linguistic material is given a proper dramatic reading, which helps learners visualize a context for the material and aids in memorization (Bancroft 1972: 19).

Both intonation and rhythm are coordinated with a musical background. The musical background helps to induce a relaxed attitude, which Lozanov refers to as concert pseudo-passiveness. This state is felt to be optimal for learning, in that anxieties and tension are relieved and power of concentration for new material is raised.

Design: Objectives, syllabus, learning activities, roles of learners, teachers, and materials

The objectives of Suggestopedia are to deliver advanced conversational proficiency quickly. It bases its learning claims on student mastery of prodigious lists of vocabulary pairs and, indeed, suggests to the students that it is appropriate that they set such goals for themselves. Lozanov emphasizes, however, that increased memory power is not an isolated skill but is a result of “positive, comprehensive stimulation of personality” (Lozanov 1978: 253).

A Suggestopedia course lasts 30 days and consists of ten units of study. Classes are held 4 hours a day, 6 days a week. The central focus of each unit is a dialogue consisting of 1,200 words or so, with an accompanying

vocabulary list and grammatical commentary. The dialogues are graded by lexis and grammar.

There is a pattern of work within each unit and a pattern of work for the whole course. Unit study is organized around 3 days: day 1—half a day, day 2—full day, day 3—half a day. On the first day of work on a new unit the teacher discusses the general content (not structure) of the unit dialogue. The learners then receive the printed dialogue with a native language translation in a parallel column. The teacher answers any questions of interest or concern about the dialogue. The dialogue then is read a second and third time in ways to be discussed subsequently. This is the work for day 1. Days 2 and 3 are spent in primary and secondary elaboration of the text. Primary elaboration consists of imitation, question and answer, reading, and so on, of the dialogue and of working with the 150 new vocabulary items presented in the unit. The secondary elaboration involves encouraging students to make new combinations and productions based on the dialogues. A story or essay paralleling the dialogue is also read. The students engage in conversation and take small roles in response to the text read.

During the course there are two opportunities for generalization of material. In the middle of the course students are encouraged to practice the target language in a setting where it might be used, such as hotels or restaurants. The last day of the course is devoted to a performance in which every student participates. The students construct a play built on the material of the course. Rules and parts are planned, but students are expected to speak extempore rather than from memorized lines. Written tests are also given throughout the course, and these and the performance are reviewed on the final day of the course.

Learning activities used in the method include imitation, question and answer, and role play – which are not activities “that other language teachers would consider to be out of the ordinary” (Stevick 1976: 157). The type of activities that are more original to Suggestopedia are the listening activities, which concern the text and text vocabulary of each unit. These activities are typically part of the “pre-session phase,” which takes place on the first day of a new unit. The students first look at and discuss a new text with the teacher. In the second reading, students relax comfortably in reclining chairs and listen to the teacher read the text in a certain way.

Learners’ roles are carefully prescribed. The mental state of the learners is critical to success, which is why learners must forgo mind-altering substances and other distractions and immerse themselves in the procedures of the method. Learners must not try to figure out, manipulate, or study the material presented but must maintain a pseudo-passive state, in which the material rolls over and through them. Students are expected to tolerate and in fact encourage their own “infantilization.” In part this is

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accomplished by acknowledging the absolute authority of the teacher and in part by giving themselves over to activities and techniques designed to help them regain the self-confidence, spontaneity, and receptivity of the child. Such activities include role playing, games, songs, and gymnastic exercises (Bancroft 1972: 19).

Groups of learners are ideally socially homogeneous, twelve in number, and divided equally between men and women. Learners sit in a circle, which encourages face-to-face exchange and activity participation.

The primary role of the teacher is to create situations in which the learner is most suggestible and then to present linguistic material in a way most likely to encourage positive reception and retention by the learner.

Lozanov lists several expected teacher behaviors that contribute to these presentations.

1. Show absolute confidence in the method.
2. Display fastidious conduct in manners and dress.
3. Organize properly and strictly observe the initial stages of the teaching process – this includes choice and play of music, as well as punctuality.
4. Maintain a solemn attitude toward the session.
5. Give tests and respond tactfully to poor papers (if any).
6. Stress global rather than analytical attitudes toward material.
7. Maintain a modest enthusiasm.

Materials consist of direct support materials, primarily text and tape, and indirect support materials, including classroom fixtures and music.

The text is organized around the ten units described earlier. The textbook should have emotional force, literary quality, and interesting characters. Language problems should be introduced in a way that does not worry or distract students from the content. “Traumatic themes and distasteful lexical material should be avoided” (Lozanov 1978: 278). Each unit should be governed by a single idea featuring a variety of subthemes, “the way it is in life” (p. 278).

Although not language materials per se, the learning environment plays such a central role in Suggestopedia that the important elements of the environment need to be briefly enumerated. The environment (the indirect support materials) comprises the appearance of the classroom (bright and cheery), the furniture (reclining chairs arranged in a circle), and the music (Baroque largo).

Procedure

As with other methods we have examined, there are variants both historical and individual in the actual conduct of Suggestopedia classes. Adaptations such as those we witnessed in Toronto by Jane Bancroft and her

colleagues at Scarborough College, University of Toronto, showed a wide and diversified range of techniques unattested to in Lozanov's writings. We have tried here to characterize a class as described in the Suggestopedia literature while pointing out where the actual classes we have observed varied considerably from the description. Bancroft (1972) notes that the 4-hour language class has three distinct parts. The first part we might call an oral review section. Previously learned material is used as the basis for discussion by the teacher and twelve students in the class. All participants sit in a circle in their specially designed chairs, and the discussion proceeds like a seminar. This session may involve what are called micro-studies and macro-studies. In micro-studies specific attention is given to grammar, vocabulary, and precise questions and answers. A question from a micro-study might be, "What should one do in a hotel room if the bathroom taps are not working?" In the macro-studies, emphasis is on role playing and wider-ranging, innovative language constructions. "Describe to someone the Boyana church" (one of Bulgaria's most well known medieval churches) would be an example of a request for information from the macro-studies.

In the second part of the class new material is presented and discussed. This consists of looking over a new dialogue and its native language translation and discussing any issues of grammar, vocabulary, or content that the teacher feels important or that students are curious about. Bancroft notes that this section is typically conducted in the target language, although student questions or comments will be in whatever language the student feels he or she can handle. Students are led to view the experience of dealing with the new material as interesting and undemanding of any special effort or anxiety. The teacher's attitude and authority are considered critical to preparing students for success in the learning to come. The pattern of learning and use is noted (i.e., fixation, reproduction, and new creative production), so that students will know what is expected.

The third part – the séance or concert session – is the one by which Suggestopedia is best known. Since this constitutes the heart of the method, we will quote Lozanov as to how this session proceeds.

At the beginning of the session, all conversation stops for a minute or two, and the teacher listens to the music coming from a tape-recorder. He waits and listens to several passages in order to enter into the mood of the music and then begins to read or recite the new text, his voice modulated in harmony with the musical phrases. The students follow the text in their textbooks where each lesson is translated into the mother tongue. Between the first and second part of the concert, there are several minutes of solemn silence. In some cases, even longer pauses can be given to permit the students to stir a little. Before the beginning of the second part of the concert, there are again several minutes of silence and some phrases of the music are heard again

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before the teacher begins to read the text. Now the students close their textbooks and listen to the teacher's reading. At the end, the students silently leave the room. They are not told to do any homework on the lesson they have just had except for reading it cursorily once before going to bed and again before getting up in the morning. (Lozanov 1978: 272)

Conclusion

Suggestopedia received a rave review in *Parade* magazine of March 12, 1978. Suggestopedia also received a scathing review by a leading applied linguist (Scovel 1979). Having acknowledged that "there are techniques and procedures in Suggestopedy that may prove useful in a foreign language classroom," Scovel notes that Lozanov is unequivocally opposed to any eclectic use of the techniques outside of the full panoply of suggestopedic science. Of suggestopedic science Scovel comments, "If we have learnt anything at all in the seventies, it is that the art of language teaching will benefit very little from the pseudo-science of suggestology" (Scovel 1979: 265).

And yet, from Lozanov's point of view, this air of science (rather than its substance) is what gives Suggestopedia its authority in the eyes of students and prepares them to expect success. Lozanov makes no bones about the fact that Suggestopedia is introduced to students in the context of a "suggestive-desuggestive ritual placebo-system" (Lozanov 1978: 267), and that one of the tasks of the suggestopedic leader is to determine which current ritual placebo system carries most authority with students. Just as doctors tell patients that the placebo is a pill that will cure them, so teachers tell students that Suggestology is a science that will teach them. And Lozanov maintains that placebos do both cure and teach when the patient or pupil credits them with the power to do so. Perhaps, then, it is not productive to futher belabor the science/nonscience, data/double-talk issues and instead, as Bancroft and Stevick have done, try to identify and validate those techniques from Suggestopedia that appear effective and that harmonize with other successful techniques in the language teaching inventory.

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