

# 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 they used 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 and professors at the Foreign Language Centre and at the Land Forces Academy.*

Suggestopedia, also named Superlearning (this is a registered trade mark of Superlearning, Inc., USA) [1], is considered to be the strangest of the "humanistic approaches" and it was developed in the 1970s by Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian educator. 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*. 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 [2]. The supporters of suggestopedia claimed that memorisation in learning through this approach would be accelerated by up to 25 times over that in conventional learning methods [3]. Lozanov (1978) has given classes where the students achieved a memorization rate of 1000 words an hour. It should also be noted that, recall increases with time. Speaking from personal experience, Charles Adamson says: "In the three hours we learned the Russian alphabet, the basic sentence structures, and 156 words. On the test at the end of the class I got 98%. During the following week I did not use Russian. A week later I took up a repeat of the same test. This time I got 99.5%. Other students from the class reported similar results" [4].

Lozanov says that the learners need a relaxed but focused state as the optimum state for learning [5]. In order to create this relaxed state (or „relaxed alertness” as Andrea Rohmert calls it) in the learner and to promote positive suggestion, suggestopedia makes use of soothing, rhythmic music, a comfortable and relaxing environment, and a relationship between the teacher and the student similar to the parent-child relationship. The students' feelings have an important place. They need to feel confident and relaxed and their psychological barriers must be „desuggested”.

Music, is vital for the approach. The following composers from the baroque epoch (XVIIth c.), recommended by Andrea Rohmert as suitable for suggestopedic learning, have music works, which contain Largo movements: Johann Sebastian Bach, Arcangelo Corelli, Georg Friedrich Händel, Johann Pachelbel, Georg Philipp Telemann, Antonio Vivaldi. Baroque "Largo" movements help the suggestopedic student to reach a certain state of relaxation, which increases receptivity. Experiments by Lozanov and his successors in both Europe and America showed that the following criteria have to be met by a music work to be useful for suggestopedic learning. The music that we want to use should have "largo" tempo (approx. 60 beats/min), regular patterns (works made up by rhythmic and melodic variations on a theme, following a somewhat mathematical pattern), voices (even choirs) and instruments should not stand out against the orchestra because they are likely to distract the student. Ideally, the orchestra must have a neutral colour (the same instruments be played throughout the work) - that is why the best choice is string orchestras [6]. The total effect is further increased by suggestion, especially using the concert session as a placebo. Research by Lozanov (1978) has shown that there is a positive effect when classical music is used during efforts to memorize, even without suggestion. Before the concert session the student is told by an authoritative figure that after the session the material will be memorized. The students notice that their memorization has improved, so they accept the statement of the authority. The result is a huge increase in memorization power [7].

Unlike other methods and approaches, there is no apparent theory of language in suggestopedia and no obvious order in which items of language are presented. However, Andrea Romhart says that a lesson which involves the learning of vocabulary by means of flashcards has three parts:

- First, an introductory Largo baroque music piece (60 beats/min) helps the learner to relax (approx. 3 min).
- Next, you listen to the **recorded flashcards**, on a background of soothing baroque music.
- Finally, a faster Allegretto baroque movement (120 beats/min) **awakes** the student from their half-sleep (3 min).

The speech for each flashcard is recorded following this pattern:

Breathe in (2 seconds) - Front/Back (4 s) - Breathe out (2 s)

(Typically, Front/Back contain an English word and its counterpart in a foreign language, etc.). The speaker should use different intonations and rhythms, to make each flashcard more impressive. The final recording must be about 20 minutes long (which makes 150 flashcards). It will later be played back along with soothing baroque music [8].

The suggestopedic session which is based on the memorizing of a text is accomplished through ritualistic *concert sessions*: an active session and a passive one. During the active session the teacher reads the text to the accompaniment of *emotional* 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. Here we have the LH/suggestion that since I can work in the class without the translation, I must have learned the text. 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 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 lessons” [9].

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 [10].

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 [11].

The teacher's attitude and behaviour in the classroom is one of the key elements which ensures the success of a suggestopedic session. He or she has to establish good human relations in the class so that students would help and praise one another. “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. p. 252)” [12].

Lozanov trains suggestopedic teachers through an apprentice system at Lozanov's Suggestopedia Institute. Very few working teachers are in a position where they can use this *system* as it is laid out by Lozanov (1988). Even with the active support of the administration, Charles Adamsom from the Myiagi University found that he could not use the system. Problems such as the length (one month) and size (12 students) of system classes, the cost-effectiveness of recruiting students, scheduling and other administrative factors forced major alterations as he began to use the method [13]. 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 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 [14]. Some of the suggestopedic methods like the fact that in class the students take on the names, professions and personalities of native speakers (the LH/suggestion is that since I am now a native speaker, I can speak and understand the language), playing games, narrating stories, the use of grammar and art posters or the special graduation ceremony given at the end of the course are some of the suggestopedic methods employed by teachers at the Land Forces Academy and at the Foreign Language Center in Sibiu. Creating conditions in which learners are alert and receptive has a positive effect on motivation. Another significant fact is that this method can be used with a remarkable mixture of students from different grades (2nd to 8th) and courses (beginners-advanced) like Worowsky uses at the International School of Dusseldorf [15].

The suggestopedic sessions can also be held on a computer, by way of VTrain (Vocabulary Trainer), a program which includes a sound recorder and a highly customizable slideshow mode [16].

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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