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ACCELERATED, FACILITATED AND PSYCHOHYGIENIC MASTERING OF
FOREIGN LANGUAGES – WAYS, MEANS, SIGNIFICANCE, PROBLEMS AND
PROSPECTS

**SOME DIFFICULT MOMENTS IN THE
SUGGESTOPEDIC TEACHING OF FOREIGN
LANGUAGES**

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It happens sometimes that some new teachers who finish the first qualification stage in suggestopedic methods of teaching foreign languages say in some general way: “Is this suggestopedia? Oh, it’s dead easy! You do

some sketches, sing a few songs, read the lessons at background music, then students play the grammatical games, sing and dance, ask questions and answer, say something and – that’s it!” That is it, really, but when the second qualification stage starts, i. e. the independent leading of a course, the teachers suddenly find out: Mozart sounds and influences brilliantly, triumphantly and heavenly but when it comes to performing this music it becomes clear that the “clear” and “easy” things at first sight end up being the most difficult things. Why? I think everyone understands – aside from the first condition – vocation, one needs an excellent technique, i. e. preparation.

Here I would like to go into some of the difficulties involved in the teaching of foreign languages, especially for beginners. These difficulties of suggestopedia can be seen and understood best. We have a rich experience in teaching beginners, both students and schoolchildren.

The basic and biggest difficulty begins and ends with teacher training. Because suggestopedia is definitely psychohygienic and psychotherapeutic, for the moment the role of the teacher as the motor of the suggestopedic machine is crucial. He needs to conduct flexibly, tactfully, diplomatically, and cleverly the process of giving, acquiring, assimilating and reproducing maximum knowledge in minimal time without tension.

If the teacher-suggestopedist does not have faith in his own strength and abilities to teach and to develop himself according to the dynamics of the time today and tomorrow, how could he inspire this faith in his students? If the teacher-suggestopedist in foreign language has not learned suggestopedically even one foreign language completely new to him, how

could he inspire the faith in his students that they could also learn the basics of a foreign language and could go with it to a country where this language is spoken? As the syllabus is more complicated and its volume is increased in suggestopedia (compared to the syllabus in the usual teaching programmes), it has to be acquired, assimilated and reproduced in very much shorter time than usual. In addition, the teaching process needs to take off the psychophysiological effect on the students. If the teacher has not been trained in the theory and practice of art, how could he cope with this synthesis? The entire suggestopedic process from the beginning to the end is pointed at the creation of high and long-lasting motivation to learn and to achieve perfection not only in the material learned, but in general.

So the teacher-suggestopedist needs to be: 1) a very good specialist in the particular subject which he teaches in order to be able to differentiate dynamically what is and what is not important in the material taught, according to the level of his students; to differentiate between difficult and easy, known and unknown; 2) versatile and naturally and spontaneously artistic in his multiplane behaviour; 3) psychologist and suggestopedist in order to know and to be able always and not just sporadically to avoid the didactogeniuses; to know how much, when and where to stimulate the students by not allowing psychophysiological tension.

Another basic difficulty in suggestopedia is the selection of students. The best thing would be if the group could be homogenous, but this is not always possible in life. The first thing which appears in a non-homogenous group is more or less obvious: hostility, intolerance, forming of cliques or pairs, estrangement, arrogance, disturbances etc. if one does not get the group under control in the beginning, the teaching process faces failure.

Therefore, it is necessary to have a vague idea and information about each student in advance. What is the student's entry level of knowledge in the language? What is his reactivity in his contact with the teacher or other persons? We underline that the information has to be general and not detailed because it is non-acceptable to require any kind of direct information of people. Furthermore, this information collected under such circumstances very often is not very precise. Yet at the beginning of the teaching, we have to conform our approach as much as possible to the two poles in the group – the one of the quick reaction and the one of the slow reaction, the students who do know and those who do not know. Because if this does not happen in the first moments of the first meeting with the group, later on the difficulties of psychological character will overcome us every day and every minute. I.e., the slower reacting persons understand the meaning of suggestopedia later. But they understand it excellently and in depth, and straight after that they participate actively and long lastingly in the teaching process. If in the beginning they get discouraged by the dynamics of the work, which is necessary and compulsory in suggestopedia, they will be some of the most difficult students – the doubting Thomas of the group. The responsive students orient themselves quickly; they are flexible and advance obviously, they are self-confident and show it without feeling shy. They are the most impatient ones as well. But these students as well as the others get the sympathies of the group. Therefore, the teacher, from the first contact, has to be like two taut chords tuned at different frequencies and ready to start vibrating harmonically and acoustically with the two groups of personalities. He has always to take them into account and not to correct them. This is both impossible and

inhuman. Only the tactful and fine psychological and suggestological approach will help him to overcome this difficult moment. This approach of genuine sympathy can be felt by all students and is imitated by them till the end of the course. The friendliness and tolerance could be sensed from the very beginning. Therefore, in suggestopedia, the first meeting is the most important psychologically. It is built as a theatrical game at most stages, at others as a concert but - all the time – didactically. The teacher partakes in the theatrical game, prompting that in this way, in the form of a game, each student can relax and forget about the theatre of life outside. But apart from that, the teacher indirectly gathers information during the musical session as well about the reactivity of the students, about their moods and experiences, about some features of their character. Each student gets the feeling that he has been noticed from the very beginning, that something about him is interesting. However, it can happen that the teacher forgets about the importance of the first meeting and its main purpose and goals – research, strategy, creating rapport, confidence and stimulation of spontaneous psychic reactions on one hand, and on the other – in the form of an artistic game – to introduce the complicated and increased syllabus. There are, however, some artistic, versatile, intelligent teachers who can not synchronise the artistic and the didactic sides of suggestopedia. Their courses unfortunately do not have the best effect.

Sometimes the teacher goes to the other extreme – he is too systematic in the didactics and too rigid in the psychological work. From the first meeting s/he projects the basics not of the suggestopedic architecture but of the lesson system of small portions and stereotypes, well thought out, worked out and mastered, which after long years of perfection

(if there is someone to wait) will lead to the desired success. The dryness and pedantism of the first meeting can discourage the students and stultify the introduction of a new syllabus of such an increased volume. It becomes clear that the artistic sides of suggestopedia are mutually, closely connected and one side causes the appearance of the other.

When the first meeting has been taken under control and made use of through the two approaches simultaneously, artistic and didactic, we can immediately perceive the first obvious changes in the students. In the beginning they are surprised – sometimes pleasantly, sometimes unpleasantly: some are enthusiastic, other bewildered or sceptical, later on, little by little, they are enlightened and feel something particularly pleasant, entertaining, funny, beautiful and “Oh, dear! But we have actually learned many things!”: the auxiliary verbs “to be”, “to have”, the modal verbs “can”, “must”, “may”, the personal pronouns, the positive, negative, interrogative form of the most important regular and irregular verbs, the basic conjunctions, lots of vocabulary about people, professions, the family, the way of life, travel and languages, accommodation in a hotel or a private lodging, drinks etc.

There is plenty of art in suggestopedia in all stages of teaching foreign languages, particularly in the first course. But art is exclusively subordinated to the teaching aims. One can not demand a professional performance either by the teachers or by the students. The aims of the stage and the classroom are different. It is impossible for a non-professional to perform roles spontaneously without this being dictated by his own will or preparation. It is well-known that improvisation is the latest and the “most dangerous” period in professional performance art. It

is a masterpiece, creating something new and valuable in that moment. In foreign language courses there is nevertheless a difficult task for the students – to change the sign system of thinking and expression. To partake in a theatrical game, to reject the impediments of the brain processes in one's mother tongue is one thing, to require demonstration and improvisation of thematic situations in a foreign language without preparation in front of an audience – totally another. Here there is a difficulty again – a trap in the foreign language suggestopedia, which has not been solved yet.

The suggestopedia in teaching foreign languages by us, as it is known by many people, consists of the following stages:

- 1) Introduction – we have already mentioned how in an artistic form and a game the new syllabus is being introduced in the form of a summary, i.e. the most important lexical and grammatical moments.
- 2) Melodrama and recital – a two-part musical session – to the background of entire works of classical and preclassical music, the new lesson is being read in a contrasting way. (For example: dramatically – lyrically, forte – piano, allegro – andante, etc.)
- 3) Developments of the syllabus introduced with the session – it is worked out through artistic and thematic games, songs and dances, grammatical and lexical games, puzzles and jokes, additional texts and dialogues, artistic pictures and illustrative materials, commercials, grammatical tables, films etc.
- 4) Summary – monologue-dialogue work out of the entire lesson and discussion on a summarised theme.

The most difficult parts of the first stage – the introduction – have been discussed briefly up to now.

We will pay attention to the second stage in even shorter form, because the theme is complicated and requires a great deal of time to be discussed in detail and in full. We mean the most important stage in suggestopedia: the stage where the new syllabus is being introduced in its real volume and complication. The greatest difficulty at this stage is again related to teacher training. If with the time the teacher does not get and build correct speaking and singing voice training, it will be very difficult for him to continue. This forms which we use for the introduction of the new syllabus – melodrama and recital – are musical and require compulsory voice training. We have a short publication on this theme to help suggestopedists, but it is not enough, of course. A fresh, clear, pleasant, healthy, beautiful and well-trained voice, combined with specially selected classical and preclassical music as a concert background can fixate a big volume of syllabus quickly, lastingly, and without any stress. And the opposite case is more than clear. Through the polysemantic, portentous and meaningful intonation and particular underlining of the first frequent lexical units and grammar in the new lesson, the teacher gives the information in a most economical way, by leaving enough time – the duration of a musical phrase – for the acquisition and logical assimilation of what is read by him. This is of particular importance for the learning of the grammatical paradigms, as well as those of phonetics, morphology and syntax. In the frame of the entire artistically and didactically balanced teaching process, the clarification of grammar is neither boring nor unpleasant. It is simply necessary, because in young and old students it

creates the feeling of completion, order and security. And that is something everyone really needs. The question is not to start and finish with the grammar, but for it to be present there all the time, but among other things.

If we avoid grammar, our speech production will have numerous mistakes because of lack of knowledge and illiteracy. If we pay attention to grammar even among other things the speech of the beginners will again be with some mistakes but not because of ignorance of the rules and paradigms, because of lack of time for automatization or because of pure coincidence. With time the student monitors himself, corrects himself and makes progress because he knows where he makes mistakes. This is a certain destruction of the difficulties with the session, but it is important.

The insufficiently trained teacher cannot consider all psychophysiological, artistic and didactic requirements, implied in the session. Here we have to reach the state of concentrative psychorelaxation if we want to assure a long lasting, quick and easy acquisition of the new syllabus. If that has not been achieved the students remain with an unclear impression of a fixed idea to give a great amount of information which passes without leaving any trace. So the musical session is the artistic didactical ritual which is remembered for the longest time. Through it again in indirect ways, for a second time, (after the introduction) one inspires faith in the strength and the abilities of everyone to acquire and assimilate new knowledge above the stated suggestive norms.

Another difficulty in suggestopedia is the dynamics of the teaching process. With those aims and purposes of suggestopedia, at the first meeting, the students have to feel that they have fallen into different dimensions. It has happened to me when the group consists only of new

teachers of training, that I have not been able to raise the tempo because of the extraordinary atmosphere of analysis into which each of them has fallen. Why do we do that this way, what does this method mean, does it really need to be like this, can I always include them in a normal group of teaching foreign languages. Then they can experience the methods for real on themselves and at the same time observe the progress of other students and of the group as a whole. Particularly in the beginning the tempo is quick, so quick that we do not give them time to endless and fruitless theorising on the methods and the teacher. The analysis only slows down the teaching. The group as a whole, and each student in particular start to drag like a ball in a chain. Time flies and the syllabus needs to progress.

Sometimes discussions start on the methods: opinions are given, advice, criticism, praise, without their knowing things in detail. All these are definite signs that the course is going to be difficult, that something is missing, and instead of suggestopedia we will learn little portions, and in the best case, in an amusing way. This means that the inertness of the mass has dragged the teacher as well and the effect is an evasion of the large syllabus. And vice versa – if from the word go the teacher stands up with confidence of a man who knows what he is doing and involves the group and each one in the suggestopedic dynamic, it is certain, that the course will be successful. The students themselves get involved and feel that they will fly by learning the syllabus. The feedback encourages both sides even more. However, the quick tempo is neither an end itself nor the only work tempo. We teachers give the tempo, we watch for the moment when we need to change it. We start with a quick tempo in the first lesson, change into a slow one in the second, mix the tempo with preponderance over the

quick one in the third and change into a moderate one in the fourth lesson and into a very quick tempo in the last five minutes. This is on the days without a session. Other combinations are also possible for changing the tempo but this one has been checked and proven effective. So we allow the brain and the psychic activities to function at different speeds and waves but they are changed with almost mathematical precision, of course without drastically interrupting a tempo and changing it then and there. We always have to do make some preparation.

Another important difficulty in suggestopedia is the first assimilation after the session, i.e. after the introduction of a new lesson. This difficulty is felt mostly after the first lesson and after a few more lessons. The large syllabus frightens the insufficiently trained teacher as well as (and even more than) the students, who are under the influence of the social suggestive norm of volume and difficulty of the new lesson. And here lies the great mastery of the suggestopedist: how to work out absolutely everything given with the new lesson, but in a manner that is interesting, pleasant, entertaining, amusing, without fatigue for the students and for the teacher himself. If the day of the lesson ends with a surprise for everyone “Oh! Have we already finished? It’s a pity!”, it means that the job is well done. This is achieved with a very skilful and brave change of activities: reading, translation, artistic games with props, grotesques, parodies, grammatical and lexical games, singing, dancing, joyful appropriate remarks and jokes and all this in a varied sequence but always carried out purposefully. – assimilation of the whole given syllabus.

Another difficulty appears here. The insufficiently trained teacher and the students themselves rely on acquiring the syllabus during the work

outs. But this is not so and has been proven by numerous test and measurements. Mostly, and for the longest period of time, the syllabus acquired during the melodrama and recital – the session. Because of this mistake, teachers often rely on repeating, on artistic games, on grammatical games as the best means of successful education. They make an extraordinary effort to include and create as many didactic games and other illustrative materials as possible. But most often they contribute only to the creation of a nice joyful atmosphere on account of the teaching effects. We also have a wide range of all kinds of games and other illustrative materials but we are very careful not to waste our valuable time on their application as an end in itself. We use them mainly in order to divert the students attention, so that alongside the game, we can introduce as much of the syllabus as possible and to repeat it with many variations. We leave the game to be finished the next day or we simply “forget” about it. Similar is the procedure of the theatrical game. Particularly with the beginners the theatrical game can divert and involve only the extrovert personalities and leave the others as passive audience. That is why we prefer the artistic games to be created and prepared at home.

Briefly I will dwell upon some difficulties which we face by stimulating the students. It happens that teachers always praise the students for everything they do or say. They forget that in suggestopedia everyone is more critical than in any other teaching process. The praise in suggestopedia has to be given only when it is deserved, at the right time and the right place, be it more reserved. Or it happens that the teacher might miss a particular suitable moment for a positive assessment of a

certain student. This is remembered for some time and has its consequences. But the students' stimulation matter is not as simple as it seems. Sometimes, depending on the features of the character of the student, a certain overstimulation or waiting to give the praise are necessary.

And finally, a few words on the difficulties in the organisation of the last stage in the foreign language suggestopedia: the monologue-dialogue and the summary and revision by the whole group of the entire worked out lesson. We proceed in the following way: we select one, two or three themes from the lesson about which each student has to think of a short story of about 5 minutes at home. We promise and give an award for the shortest but most interesting story. The teacher prepares this stage in the class by organising a small party with some tea, coffee, juice, sweets or simply around the games table: chess, draughts, cards or drawing on a given theme, decoupage or making models with available material. Every student who wins the game or creates an interesting picture or a model has to tell the prepared story. While playing the others listen to him. The teacher is alert and interrupts the student's story with suitable remarks, praises him and the rest of the students, (who interrupt with a remark, question, or comment), and changes the monologue story into a dialogue and into a panel discussion on the topical theme. This stage is particularly important because it shows to everyone and in front of everyone, the progress that students are making in the course. Each student understands for himself what has been learned and how well, how he copes with an independent story, with questions and answers, with participation in a free conversation on a given theme. Usually, this stage is difficult to organize

and turns into a question-answer pattern or is carried out in pairs without any supervision or is omitted completely. In fact, the suggestopedic process remains incomplete.

As one can see, the difficulties in the foreign language suggestopedia are different but not impossible to overcome. The more difficulties we face in suggestopedia the more it is going to develop. We have difficulties in the middle of the course when the information avalanche has grown and threatens to collapse. But here as well, there are ways and means to cope. The next collapse takes place towards the end of the course. Other difficulties are present in the overdone or insufficient illustrativeness and many other underwater reefs, awaiting us. Let us face them!

And now we invite you to take part in our short musical session on Italian, English and Bulgarian.