

DO THE ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF SUGGESTOPEDIA AND THE SILENT METHOD HAVE APPLICATION FOR INTRODUCING INTERACTIVE APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN RESISTANT EFL CONTEXTS?

Cameron Richards

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper will compare and contrast the approaches to second language teaching represented by the methods of Suggestopedia and the Silent Method (TSM) respectively. The paper will then discuss whether these methods have application for introducing interactive approaches to second language teaching in 'resistant' EFL contexts.

Introduction

This paper will compare and contrast the approaches to second language teaching represented by the methods of Suggestopedia and the Silent Method (TSM) respectively. These particular methods represent opposite perspectives on the connection between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Whilst a central focus of Suggestopedia is the memorisation of a vast vocabulary (Lozanov, 1979), TSM (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:99) encourages students to actively and consciously take control of their own learning.

An applied context for this discussion will be the following situation: a teacher of English as a second or foreign language with a basically communicative approach to language teaching finding himself, or herself, having to teach students in foreign cultural contexts where the Audio-Lingual method dominates but has only limited effectiveness (at least, as perceived by these teachers). An overriding focus of the following discussion will therefore be the question of whether Suggestopedia and TSM have applications to such a situation. To what extent is such a 'disjuncture' determined by student resistance to communicative methods on the one hand, and by the cultural assumptions and strategic failures of such English teachers on the other? In short, can the methods of Suggestopedia and TSM suggest ways in which the approaches of the Audio-Lingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) might be reconciled in terms of accounting for cultural differences and a diversity of learning styles?

A Comparison and Contrast of Suggestopedia and The Silent Method

The following discussion of the similarities and differences between Suggestopedia and TSM will be developed in terms of how both relate to the methodological poles represented by ALM and CLT respectively (Brown, 1994:70-71); also, in terms of how a general 'communicative' paradigm frames much of the current theory and practice of ESL and other second language teaching (Williams, 1995:12). A familiarity with the basic techniques and resources of both methods will be assumed. The focus of discussion in this section will be a contrast between the implicit sequences or stages of teaching (and learning) informing each method.

Suggestopedia

The founder of Suggestopedia, Georgi Lozanov (1979), based this method on the key insight of his research into human memory that the most fundamental limitation of people's ability to learn is merely their own preconceptions and expectations. The particular application to language learning of Lozanov's 'method' was its facility for students to acquire a vast 'useable' vocabulary in a short time. For Lozanov (1979:272), the main focus of Suggestopedia sessions are 'concert' sessions which use the kinds of music thought to be able to facilitate heightened memory and the fast assimilation of facts. As a general principle, Suggestopedia applies the insights of research findings that music at about 80 beats per minute usefully facilitates 'Alpha' brain waves associated with heightened memory and the fast assimilation of facts. For this reason Baroque music is especially recommended. However, Lozanov has also subscribed to other kinds of music. (Lehmann, 1988).

The selective or 'watered-down' use of Suggestopedia techniques by many practitioners lead to criticism of the method from various quarters. Scovel (quoted in Brown, 1994:62) suggested that this is more a method for teaching memorisation techniques than 'an enterprise of language acquisition'. However, a close analysis of the stages of a typical Suggestopedia lesson provides a response to such criticism in a way that situates this method in relation to a general 'communicative' paradigm of second language teaching.

The Sequencing of a Suggestopedia Lesson

1. Relax (including role play and interactive tasks)
2. Context ('map out' situation and features of focus text)
3. Peripheral Text (meaningful interaction with accompanying translations available)
4. Active concert - (reflective reinforcement with 'active' cognition)
5. Passive concert - (material repeated in 'meditative' mode to reinforce subconscious memory)

As indicated in the sequence described above, Suggestopedia not only distinguishes between active and passive modes of using music and other related techniques (e.g. the teacher's intonation patterns). It also emphasises the importance of activities preceding the 'concert' session. A typical lesson begins with strategies to get students to relax, to have fun, and to interact with the teacher and other students. On this basis, aspects of language are comprehended in terms of a text-context

relation in a non-threatening atmosphere (e.g. the focus texts have native-language translations in a parallel column). A crucial focus of Suggestopedia lessons, these focus texts tend to be dialogues that can frame or structure actual student interactions in an open-ended way - in contrast to the fixed scripts of ALM on the one hand, and the often 'unstructured' focus of the CLT approach on the other.

Yet, Suggestopedia involves two important connections to the CLT approach. Firstly, the acquisition of vocabulary takes place in meaningful contexts of activity as part of a process of progressive reinforcement. Secondly, the use of interactive dialogues in the initial phase of the lesson provides a means to an end. As conceived in Lozanov's theoretical model, relaxing a student's conscious awareness allows access to their subconscious memory. This contrasts with the way that TSM goes in the opposite direction from 'passive' to 'active' modes of learning, and from 'written' to 'spoken' modes of language usage.

The Silent Method

Whereas the goal of Suggestopedia is the teacher-directed acquisition of a target language, a central purpose of TSM is to facilitate active student learning. Alternatively perceived as a 'discovery' and 'problem-solving' approach (Brown, 1994:62), TSM advocates minimal verbal intervention and correction by teachers. There are significant connections between this and related methods - notably, Community Language Learning (CLL) and the Total Physical Response method (TPR). For instance, just as the requirement of 'silence' (or minimal teacher intervention and correction) means that basic techniques of TSM involve the use of accompanying physical objects (in particular, the Cuisinere rods) and physical gestures, so too some TSM techniques have been embraced by TPR (D'Amato, 1988:77). What these different methods have in common is a common strategy to facilitate learning on the basis of interactive involvement by students.

As with Suggestopedia, the organising strategy of TSM can be broken down into a sequences of stages. As indicated below, TSM involves a process of teachers providing on-going 'scaffolds' for progressive student learning. In short, students are provided with resources to respond to a challenge of a series of higher steps and levels of learning.

The Silent Method as Progressive 'Challenge-Response'

1. Teacher (T) frames initial Student (S) resources/stimuli
2. T gives S minimal correction/students co-operation
3. T allows S time to reach level related to initial resources
4. T readjusts S's resources - take next step (and basic process repeated)

The strategy of TSM to balance written and spoken accuracy also represents an implicit sequence. Typically, vocabulary and syntax are presented initially in terms of being 'associated' with the coloured Cuisinere rods. Charts with 'contextual clues' to pronunciation and spelling are also used. As Nunan (1991:239) has pointed out, this is a bottom-up approach involving techniques that are 'in many ways not so different from ALM techniques'. Yet, these activities are reinforced in context by co-operative student interaction that may be either specifically problem-solving in orientation, or clarifying and reinforcing. As Brown (1994:62) describes, in this 'secondary' phase of TSM students

refine 'their understanding and pronunciation among themselves with minimal corrective feedback from the teacher'.

It would be a gross oversimplification to say that TSM is a 'communicative' reframing of ALM techniques. Yet, in terms of a contrast with Suggestopedia, it might be helpful to view TSM as moving in a direction from the pole of ALM towards that of CLT; also, from a 'written' to a 'spoken' perspective about language use.

Key Similarities and Differences

There are a number of common similarities about Suggestopedia and TSM that reflect the general context of how both methods emerged and were promulgated as alternative methods in terms of a 'humanistic' approach on the one hand, and in terms of 'proprietary interests' on the other. Both methods have generally been recognised to have made a contribution to a humanistic-cum-communicative approach to language learning (Nunan, 1991:223-241). Conversely, however, the often lavish claims for both methods (especially Suggestopedia) were attacked because they were not readily duplicated by other teachers or researchers (Brown, 1994:62).

Although taking a different perspective about this, both methods reflect a 'cognitive' as distinct from 'affective' approach to language learning. With Suggestopedia stressing the subconscious aspects of learning, and TLM the conscious parts, both methods ultimately stress the 'interactive' functions of human cognition. In this way, both models subscribe to an interactive approach to language learning that embraces both communicative activities between students and individual interaction with materials and tasks (Richard-Amato, 1988; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Brown, 1994).

It might also be recognised that both methods subscribe to a similar interactive approach. This is insofar as their different emphasis on conscious learning and subconscious acquisition might be considered in terms of different stages of a general learning process. Such a contrast might be conceived in terms of the interactive approach balancing the tension between bottom-up and top-down approaches to language learning. (Brown 1994:246-250). On the one hand, Suggestopedia represents a basically top-down orientation that is 'grounded' in a subconscious process of language acquisition. On the other hand, TSM's initial 'bottom-up' focus on particular language forms is framed by the 'top-down' sequence described above.

Another key difference is that while Suggestopedia is dependent on the teacher as facilitator, TSM is more student focused. However, this is not the simple opposition typically represented in a contrast between ALM and CLT. TSM teachers need to be sensitive to the times when intervention and correction are appropriate or required. In contrast, the teacher role in Suggestopedia is more that of a facilitator of learning rather than an authoritative repository of 'knowledge'.

General Implications

As the discussion above suggests, a kind of 'complementarity' underlies many of the similarities and differences between TLM and Suggestopedia. Discussions of how both methods presuppose some implicit sequences of learning provided a basis for recognising this. It was also useful to consider how both methods fitted into the arbitrary methodological opposition between ALM and CLT

(Brown 1994:70-71). Although both methods ostensibly reflected this opposition in such terms as the contrast between teacher-centred vs learner-centred principles, they also 'cut across' this opposition in terms of their complementary relation at different stages of the learning process. Hence, it was found useful to view TSM as a 'trajectory' of language-learning moving towards and framed by the interactive principles of the communicative approach. Likewise, Suggestopedia was framed for my purposes here as a method which applies a communicative approach in its initial phases as the basis for subconscious language acquisition.

In short, a contrast between Suggestopedia and TSM provided the means for reframing the opposition between ALM and CLT as an 'interactive' spectrum rather than as arbitrary poles. Just as both methods exemplified a tension between 'top-down' and bottom-up' (also, passive and active) approaches, so too this contrast suggested a basis for reconciling the ALM vs CLT opposition. Such an interactive approach is able to flexibly frame different styles and tendencies of learning (e.g. age, gender and cultural differences) (Ellis, 1992). It provides the context for using different methods for different purposes in terms of a meaningful interactive strategy rather than merely a piecemeal eclecticism.

Specific Applications

The situation of teachers familiar with (or keen to apply) an 'interactive' approach confronted by students used to the Audio-Lingual Method

Teachers of EFL are often so closely monitored that they have no possibility of departing from a strict use of the Audio-Lingual Method (i.e. the approach to studying second languages in a more-or-less vacuum). Many teachers who do attempt to apply a communicative approach are often quickly disillusioned because they are too hasty and ambitious -subsequently reverting to ALM norms of teaching. In other words, the opposition between ALM and CLT is often a vicious circle in practice.

So how might either Suggestopedia or The Silent Method have some specific application to such a situation? It will be useful to begin by considering this question in terms of some of the reasons why ALM students might feel threatened by the 'overenthusiastic' strategies and methods of some 'communicative' teachers. Many students feel secure with ALM because it is clearly structured and predictable - in short, because its 'passive' modes of learning are much less threatening than those requiring 'active' participation. Moreover, such notions are often bound up in traditional and 'hierarchical' cultural assumptions about education. This is also reflected by how many such students remain suspicious about the humanistic and communicative approaches because they often involve 'implicit' learning in contexts of meaningful activity. Those students schooled solely in 'bottom-up', explicit modes of learning often perceive such methods to be frivolous and irrelevant.

Suggestopedia and TSM have application to such a situation because they both suggest ways of responding to such concerns. ALM students should not find the initial stages of TSM as threatening as a general CLT approach because, in Nunan's words again, the techniques of this method are 'in many ways not so different from those of ALM techniques'. If introduced sensitively, students should be less resistant to the 'top-down' aspects of TSM. On the other hand, Suggestopedia also aims to create a non-stressful, non-threatening environment for language learning. What distinguishes Suggestopedia from other interactive methods that many ALM students perceive as frivolous and irrelevant is how it uses such techniques as a means to an end - the fast acquisition of a vast and useful vocabulary. If these claims of Suggestopedia could be demonstrated to such students (and

there would appear to be enough evidence to give them some substance), then they might be more prepared to change such perceptions.

The sensitive and gradual use of such methods as Suggestopedia and TSM in contexts where students are used to ALM techniques might provide a basis for making teachers and education authorities more amenable to the general 'interactive' approach of both the humanistic and communicative traditions of second language teaching. Specifically, such methods suggest an approach that gives greater recognition to the diversity of student learning styles. So, with the proviso that any teacher of English in a foreign context needs to be sensitive to the local situation, an interactive approach might be recognised to potentially have significant application in the kind of second language context discussed here.

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