

From System to Fragments: A Critical Review of Suggestopedia's Core Elements and Later Variations

Doãn Anh Đức

Thuyloi University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Email: ducda@tlu.edu.vn

Abstract

Suggestopedia remains one of the most recognisable yet inconsistently represented methods in the history of language teaching. This secondary study examines how the functions and interrelationships of its key elements are articulated in foundational and later authoritative sources, and how they have been altered in subsequent ELT descriptions and adaptations. The analysis draws on foundational works by Georgi Lozanov and Evelyn Gateva, UNESCO documentation, LITTA materials, major ELT accounts, contemporary applications and critical scholarship. It highlights recurrent patterns of misattribution, overemphasis, omission, fragmentation and unlabelled adaptation. Music, relaxation, teacher prestige, games and peripheral materials are frequently presented as independent techniques, whereas the developed Lozanov–Gateva system assigns them functions within an integrated course architecture comprising introduction, concert sessions, elaboration and performance. This distinction matters because the same label may be used for different historical versions or configurations, making descriptions, applications and evaluations difficult to compare. Clarifying the method does not in itself establish its effectiveness; rather, it provides a more reliable basis for determining what has been implemented and what conclusions the available evidence can reasonably support. Future studies should therefore distinguish historical versions, specify adaptations, report implementation fidelity and align their conclusions with the outcomes measured.

Keywords: Suggestopedia; Desuggestopedia; Reservopedia; language teaching methods; pedagogical adaptation

Tóm tắt

Suggestopedia là một phương pháp nổi tiếng nhưng được diễn giải thiếu nhất quán trong lịch sử giảng dạy ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này xem xét chức năng và mối quan hệ giữa các yếu tố cốt lõi trong các nguồn nền tảng, đồng thời phân tích cách chúng bị thay đổi trong các mô tả và điều chỉnh ELT. Phân tích dựa trên các công trình Lozanov–Gateva, tài liệu UNESCO và LITTA, các mô tả ELT, ứng dụng và nghiên cứu phê bình. Kết quả cho thấy các dạng sai lệch gồm gán nhầm, nhấn mạnh quá mức, lược bỏ, phân mảnh và điều chỉnh không được nêu rõ. Âm nhạc, thư giãn, uy tín giáo viên, trò chơi và tài liệu ngoại vi thường được trình bày như kỹ thuật độc lập, trong khi phiên bản được phát triển bởi Lozanov và Gateva đặt chúng trong một cấu trúc khóa học tích hợp gồm giới thiệu, các phiên hòa nhạc, khai triển và trình diễn. Cùng một tên có thể chỉ các phiên bản hoặc cấu hình khác nhau, khiến

việc so sánh khó khăn. Làm rõ phương pháp không chứng minh tính hiệu quả, nhưng giúp xác định nội dung đã được triển khai và những kết luận mà bằng chứng hiện có có thể hỗ trợ. Nghiên cứu tương lai cần phân biệt các phiên bản lịch sử, nêu rõ điều chỉnh, báo cáo mức độ trung thành trong triển khai và giới hạn kết luận theo kết quả đo lường.

Từ khóa: Suggestopedia; Desuggestopedia; Reservopedia; phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ; điều chỉnh sự phạm

Introduction

Suggestopedia is a language-teaching method developed by the Bulgarian physician and psychotherapist Georgi Lozanov from his broader work on suggestion. In its developed form, created with Evelyn Gateva, it combines non-manipulative suggestion, artistic organisation, teacher training and a carefully sequenced course (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; Lozanov, 2005, 2009). However, the term is used inconsistently in language-education literature. Some accounts present Suggestopedia as an integrated pedagogical system (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; Lozanov, 2005, 2009; Hagiwara, 2020), whereas others foreground comfortable furniture, Baroque music, relaxation, dramatic reading and games (Bancroft, 1999; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Western adaptations have also associated the method with visualisation, synchronised breathing and explanations involving special mental states (Bancroft, 1978, 1999). These accounts can therefore describe historically different systems while using the same label.

This inconsistency affects both implementation and evaluation. Dipamo & Job's (1991) review, for example, shows that studies of Suggestive-Accelerative Learning and Teaching (SALT), a North American adaptation of Suggestopedia, often isolated relaxation, music or mental imagery. Their results therefore cannot be assumed to represent the complete developed Lozanov–Gateva system. Historical variation creates a related problem: Scovel (1979) evaluated claims in Lozanov's early English-language monograph, whereas later accounts may refer to the more artistic and communicative formulation developed with Gateva, as described in Lozanov (2005). The positions can appear to conflict because they concern different formulations. The disagreement involves both the quality of the evidence and the version to which it applies.

This study argues that Suggestopedia is best understood neither as a collection of highly visible techniques nor as a single unchanged method. It developed across several historical stages, and its elements acquire their functions through their relationship to an integrated course architecture. The study addresses two questions: (1) How are the functions and interrelationships of key elements represented in foundational and later authoritative literature? (2) How have these elements been omitted, reweighted or reinterpreted in later ELT accounts and adaptations? Answering these questions is necessary before future studies can determine what has actually been implemented and what claims their findings can support.

Review Methodology

Research design

This secondary research uses a focused, historically informed review of literature on Suggestopedia. It does not claim exhaustive coverage or attempt to calculate the overall effectiveness of the method. Its purpose is to compare influential descriptions from different periods, clarify the developed Lozanov–Gateva system and examine how the functions of its elements have changed in later accounts and adaptations.

Source selection and analysis

Sources were identified through Google Scholar, publisher platforms, backward citation searching from key publications and the official repository of the Lozanov International Teacher Trainers Association (LITTA). The source set comprised five groups: foundational publications by Lozanov, including work developed in collaboration with Gateva; institutional and later authoritative materials, including UNESCO and LITTA documents; historical accounts of Western adaptations; major ELT descriptions; and empirical or critical publications that evaluate Suggestopedia or practices identified by that name. Sources were included when they directly addressed the method's history, defining principles, course procedure, implementation or evidential status. Items that merely mentioned Suggestopedia without substantive description were excluded.

Each source was compared in terms of the historical version described, the element identified, its assigned pedagogical function and its relationship to the complete course. On this basis, divergences were classified as: (1) misattribution - a feature from another system or adaptation is attributed to developed Suggestopedia; (2) overemphasis - disproportionate weight is given to one element; (3) omission - an element or function is left out; (4) fragmentation - an element is retained but detached from the wider system in which it functions; and (5) reinterpretation - an element is assigned a different meaning or function. These categories were used as an analytical framework rather than as assumptions that later changes were necessarily errors. An adaptation may be pedagogically defensible while remaining conceptually different from the developed Lozanov–Gateva system. The analysis also distinguishes conceptual fidelity from evidential credibility: an accurate description does not establish effectiveness, and a useful isolated technique does not establish that the full method has been tested.

Review Findings

Historical development and later variations

From early suggestology to the developed Lozanov–Gateva system

One source of confusion is the tendency to read Suggestopedia as a fixed package from its first appearance. Lozanov's early work emerged from suggestology, his broader study of suggestion, psychotherapy, memory and reserve capacities. Lozanov's (1978) English volume, reviewed by

Scovel (1979), devoted extensive attention to clinical, neuropsychological and experimental material, and its pedagogical evidence centred heavily on memorisation. Scovel (1979) therefore read suggestopedia principally as a method for producing hypermnnesia and judged its wider claims against the experiments presented in that book.

Later Lozanovian accounts describe an important development after Gateva introduced a more systematic role for music, literature, visual art and performance. LITTA characterises the subsequent global-artistic variant as a movement away from vocabulary memorisation towards holistic language learning (LITTA, n.d.). In Lozanov's final account, classical art is not decorative enrichment but one of seven interdependent laws, alongside love, freedom, the teacher's conviction that something extraordinary is taking place, enlarged learning material, global-partial organisation and proportional balance (Lozanov, 2009). Hagiwara (2020) likewise interprets the classroom as a semiotic environment in which artefacts, performances and interpersonal behaviour acquire meaning through their relation to the whole course.

This developmental history complicates the familiar division between a first and second version. The method underwent multiple experiments, terminological shifts and changes of emphasis before being described as Desuggestopedia, the Reserves-Capacity Communicative Method and Reservopedia. Nevertheless, historical development must not become a convenient way of immunising the method from criticism. Later development may address pedagogical limitations of the earlier model, but it cannot retrospectively strengthen the design or evidential basis of earlier experiments. It can, however, clarify the scope of criticism: evidence drawn from early memory-focused work should not automatically be treated as an evaluation of the later Lozanov–Gateva classroom system.

Transmission, adaptation and the multiplication of labels

Western dissemination occurred while the Bulgarian method was still developing. Bancroft's (1978, 1999) observations and translations documented emerging Western adaptations. In North America, SALT was developed as a variant based on the Lozanov method (Schuster, Benitez-Bordon & Gritton, 1976). Superlearning represented another Suggestopedic adaptation, whose techniques were later examined empirically by Wagner & Tilney (1983). Across these related lineages, yoga, synchronised breathing, meditation, guided imagery and slow music became associated with Lozanov's name. Hagiwara's (2023) LITTA presentation argues that some of these practices belonged to areas Lozanov had investigated, or to SALT and related systems, but were not part of the developed Suggestopedia practised by Lozanov and Gateva.

The distinction is especially important because historical association is often mistaken for methodological inclusion. That Lozanov studied hypnosis or yogic phenomena does not demonstrate that hypnosis or yoga was a component of the final pedagogical method. Conversely, the later exclusion of a practice does not erase its presence in earlier discourse or in influential adaptations. A

critical review must therefore specify whether a source is describing suggestology, an experimental early form of suggestopedy, the Lozanov-Gateva course, SALT, Superlearning or a contemporary adaptation.

Core elements and patterns of representational divergence

Course architecture and analytical overview

The developed Suggestopedic foreign-language course is organised as a repeated cycle of introduction, concert sessions, elaboration and performance or synthesis (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; Lozanov, 2009; LITTA, 2023). A typical course extends across many meetings rather than a single demonstration lesson. The introduction establishes the fictive, linguistic and interpersonal world of the chapter. The active and passive concert sessions present a large, bilingual text through differentiated combinations of reading, intonation and music. Elaborations then activate linguistic material through modelling, pair work, songs, movement, humour and didactic games, while performance or synthesis provides increasingly independent use. The sequence gives each visible element a specific function.

Using this course architecture as the reference point, Table 1 applies the six forms of divergence defined in the Review Methodology to the principal elements of the developed system.

Table 1. Functional roles of core Suggestopedic elements and representational divergence

Element	Function in the developed system	How other representations diverge	Forms of divergence	Research implication
Suggestion / desuggestion	Non-manipulative communication that weakens limiting beliefs while preserving freedom (Lozanov, 2005, 2009).	Linked to subconscious control, hypnosis or directive influence (Bancroft, 1999; Richards, 1996).	Misattribution + Reinterpretation	A different psychological construct may be tested.
Relaxation	Calm, alert attention integrated with active work (Lozanov, 2005; Hagiwara, 2023).	Presented as deep relaxation, synchronised breathing, an alpha state or a meditative mode (Schuster, Benitez-Bordon & Gritton, 1976; Richards, 1996).	Misattribution + Overemphasis	Adapted relaxation procedures may be mistaken for features of developed Suggestopedia.
Music and intonation	Coordinated with text, voice and sequencing across active and passive sessions (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; Lozanov, 2009; LITTA, 2023).	Reduced to slow Baroque music intended to induce alpha waves or a special state (Schuster, Benitez-Bordon & Gritton, 1976; Richards, 1996).	Reinterpretation + Overemphasis + Fragmentation	Music may be tested instead of the session design.
Teacher prestige	Credible, trained leadership intended to coexist with learner freedom (Lozanov, 2005, 2009).	Presented as teacher-directed authority or a generic facilitator role (Richards, 1996; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).	Reinterpretation + Fragmentation	Labels alone do not establish classroom power relations.
Art, roles, games and peripheral materials	Create a connected fictive environment and support elaboration and performance (Lozanov, 2005; Hagiwara, 2020; Colliander & Fejes, 2021).	Listed as separate activities or motivational features rather than connected resources (Richards, 1996; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).	Fragmentation + Reinterpretation	Enjoyment may replace analysis of pedagogical function.
Course cycle and teacher training	Integrate large materials, sessions, elaboration and performance through trained teaching (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; LITTA, 2023).	Component-focused studies do not incorporate the extended course structure (Benitez-Bordon & Schuster, 1976)	Omission	Implementation fidelity and comparability become unclear.

Note. Forms of divergence may overlap. Citations in the 'How other representations diverge' column identify representative descriptions, adaptations or studies; they do not imply that every adaptation is pedagogically invalid.

Suggestion, desuggestion and relaxation

In the developed system, suggestion is non-manipulative communication operating through language, intonation, expectations, environment and teacher credibility while preserving learner freedom (Lozanov, 2005, 2009). Desuggestion weakens limiting beliefs rather than inducing a special state. Accounts linking Suggestopedia to subconscious control, hypnosis or directive psychological influence (Bancroft, 1999; Richards, 1996) therefore involve misattribution or reinterpretation.

Relaxation shows a related pattern. Later Lozanovian and LITTA materials describe concentrative psychorelaxation as calm, alert attention rather than guided relaxation or sleep-like passivity (Lozanov, 2005; Hagiwara, 2023). SALT, however, incorporated physical relaxation, mind-calming exercises and synchronised breathing into its procedures (Schuster, Benitez-Bordon & Gritton, 1976). Richards (1996), meanwhile, places relaxation at the beginning of the lesson sequence, describes the passive concert in meditative terms, and gives relaxation a direct explanatory role by linking reduced conscious awareness to access to subconscious memory. These cases represent misattribution where imported procedures are treated as Suggestopedic, and overemphasis where relaxation is assigned a central explanatory role in learning.

Music and intonation in the concert sessions

Music offers the clearest example of overemphasis and fragmentation. Richards & Rodgers (2014) describe it as especially important and connect musical coordination with a relaxed attitude. This is not wholly inaccurate, but the emphasis on music can obscure the distinction between the active and passive sessions and their dependence on text, teacher intonation and sequencing. In the active session, students follow the bilingual text while the teacher's reading responds to the musical phrasing. In the passive session, the text is no longer followed in the same way and the reading approaches natural communication. The two sessions form a sequence rather than interchangeable occasions for playing calming music (Lozanov, 2009).

Later Lozanovian and LITTA sources do not reject works by Baroque composers. Rather, they reject the generic formula in which slow Baroque music, synchronised breathing or guided relaxation is expected to induce alpha waves or another special mental state (Lozanov, 2005; Hagiwara, 2023). SALT itself coordinated learning material with synchronised breathing and slow background music (Schuster, Benitez-Bordon & Gritton, 1976), while Richards' (1996) description links slow Baroque music to alpha-related states. Dipamo & Job (1991) pointed out that SALT research frequently isolated music as a major independent variable. Meanwhile, the developed model coordinates music with text, teacher intonation and the concert-session sequence (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; Lozanov, 2009; LITTA, 2023). The divergence therefore lies not in using music by Baroque composers, but in attributing an independent state-inducing mechanism to slow music and separating it from the wider design.

Teacher prestige

Teacher prestige is similarly vulnerable to reinterpretation and fragmentation. Foundational accounts assign the teacher substantial responsibility: designing materials, organising the course, performing texts, monitoring the group and offering subtle correction. Such responsibility makes the method teacher-led, but prestige is explicitly distinguished from authoritarian command. It is intended to arise from competence, reliability, care and the learner's sense of safety (Lozanov, 2005, 2009). Richards & Rodgers (2014), for example, present authority as a central principle and describe learners as needing to trust and respect the teacher. This is not a wholly invented feature, but when detached from the later emphasis on competence, care and learner freedom, prestige can be read as coercive or hierarchical authority. Whether this ideal resolves the power imbalance is an empirical question. The concept should not be accepted at face value, but neither should it be translated automatically as absolute authority.

Art, roles, games and peripheral materials

Infantilisation does not mean treating adult learners as children. It refers to openness, trust, play and reduced fear of error. Later descriptions often list role-play, invented identities, games and peripheral texts as separate techniques (Richards, 1996; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Colliander & Fejes (2021), however, found that visual, aural and fictive artefacts operated together with scaffolding and task sequencing in four Swedish classes for adult migrants. Their study illustrates why these elements cannot be evaluated only as entertainment or decoration. Detaching these elements from the libretto, elaboration and performance reflects fragmentation, while presenting them merely as entertainment or motivational features represents reinterpretation. Positive affect alone does not establish linguistic development or fidelity to the method.

Course cycle, teacher training and adaptation

Course cycle and teacher preparation are less visible than music or games, but their omission changes what a study can claim. Research associated with Western adaptations has sometimes examined individual techniques separately from the extended course structure. Benitez-Bordon & Schuster (1976), for example, experimentally examined suggestion, synchronised breathing and music in relation to vocabulary learning. Dipamo & Job (1991) later showed that this component-focused pattern recurred across SALT research. By contrast, the developed Suggestopedic course integrates its elements across many meetings and requires specialised teacher preparation (Lozanov & Gateva, 1988; LITTA, 2023). When selected techniques are studied without the extended course cycle or teacher-preparation requirements, the divergence at this level is primarily one of omission. Such studies may still be useful, but conclusions should be limited to the configuration investigated only.

Discussion

Evidential concerns in historical context

Scovel's 1979 review remains the most forceful English-language criticism of Lozanov's early work. Its lasting value lies not in its rhetoric but in its specific methodological objections. Scovel notes inadequate descriptions of control instruction, experiments without controls, unexplained changes in sample size, arithmetic errors, weak retention designs and broad claims unsupported by operational evidence. He also questions the leap from vocabulary memorisation to comprehensive language acquisition and the claim that intellectual efficiency was accelerated twenty-five times (Scovel, 1979). These concerns cannot be dismissed as misunderstanding or cultural prejudice; they address the reporting and inference of the studies actually presented.

At the same time, Scovel's target has limits. He reviewed an early English presentation in which suggestology, psychotherapy, hypermnnesia and pedagogical experiments were interwoven. He did not observe the final Lozanov-Gateva course described in later manuals. Scovel himself acknowledged that the concert session was only one part of the curriculum, praised attention to the physical environment, and considered new identities and selected procedures potentially useful. A balanced conclusion is therefore twofold: his critique substantially weakens confidence in the early efficacy claims, but it does not constitute an empirical evaluation of every later form of the pedagogical system.

Scovel's concerns were not isolated, although later evaluations often examined different configurations. Dipamo & Job (1991) found inconsistent findings and recurrent methodological weaknesses across studies of SALT. Wagner & Tilney (1983) found neither accelerated vocabulary learning nor increased alpha activity when testing Superlearning techniques, while Shimbo (2008) found no broad achievement advantage in a twelve-week Accelerated Learning intervention that introduced music, relaxation and suggestion as separable components, although suggestion improved learners' self-concept. These findings challenge broad claims for the configurations tested, but they do not constitute direct evaluations of the complete developed Lozanov–Gateva course.

Conceptual clarification and evidence of effectiveness

Clarifying that hypnosis, guided imagery and generic relaxation are not part of the developed Lozanov–Gateva system improves conceptual accuracy, but it does not show that the system accelerates language acquisition. Although the later formulation is more communicative and artistically integrated than the early memory-focused version examined by Scovel, its effectiveness still requires contemporary studies with clear comparison conditions, valid outcome measures and delayed post-tests. The later evaluations discussed above reinforce the same distinction: negative findings from a fragmented adaptation do not automatically invalidate the complete system, just as positive findings for an isolated component do not validate it. Colliander & Fejes (2021) indicate one

useful direction by examining how Suggestopedic teaching is enacted and by attending to learners' experiences.

The same distinction applies to UNESCO's involvement. The expert meeting is historically significant and its report recommended further research, teacher training and institutional development (UNESCO, 1980). It should not be converted into a blanket certification of every theoretical proposition or numerical claim associated with Suggestopedia. Institutional recognition, conceptual coherence and treatment effectiveness are separate questions.

Implications for future research and practice

The first priority is terminological discipline. Researchers should identify the historical formulation and source on which an intervention is based rather than using Suggestopedia as a generic label for pleasant atmosphere, music and games. Terms such as adapted Suggestopedic practices may be appropriate, but the adaptation should be stated and justified. A one-hour lesson cannot be treated as equivalent to an eighty- or one-hundred-hour course simply because both contain classical music.

Second, studies should report implementation fidelity through a minimum descriptive framework: teacher training and experience; duration and meeting pattern; size and organisation of the learning material; use of a libretto or equivalent global text; functions of the introduction, active session, passive session, elaboration and performance; role of music and intonation; classroom artefacts; teacher-student interaction; and any omitted or altered elements. This information would allow readers to distinguish a test of the full system from a test of one component.

Third, claims should match the element and configuration tested. Overemphasis and fragmentation become problematic when vocabulary gains after music or relaxation are generalised to language acquisition or reserve capacities. Vocabulary recall, communication, anxiety, engagement and perceived feasibility are different constructs. Comparative studies therefore need credible controls and delayed measures, while process data from classroom observations, interviews and learner reflections can show how participants actually experience teacher prestige, learner freedom and the verbal and non-verbal dimensions of classroom communication.

Finally, adaptation should be examined as a legitimate object of research rather than treated automatically as faithful implementation or methodological failure. Full implementation may be unrealistic in settings with short lessons, large classes, fixed furniture or limited access to trained practitioners. Research can examine which principles transfer, which functions are preserved or lost, and whether alternative practices maintain the intended pedagogical relationship. A sensible programme would move from perception and feasibility studies to pilot interventions, while clearly labelling adaptations instead of claiming to test the full method after using a few highly visible techniques.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding Suggestopedia cannot be resolved by choosing between celebration and dismissal. The literature often conflates Lozanov's broader field of suggestology with Suggestopedia as a pedagogical method, early and final formulations, and the complete course with isolated techniques. Clarifying these distinctions is necessary for evaluating the method, but conceptual accuracy should not itself be treated as evidence of effectiveness. In the developed Lozanov-Gateva system, music, relaxation, prestige, art, games and peripheral materials do not operate as independent devices. Their meanings and functions emerge from an integrated, longitudinal architecture enacted by a trained teacher. Later representations frequently convert this system into visible fragments, while some criticisms legitimately expose weak evidence and excessive claims in its early presentation. Future scholarship should therefore pursue two forms of fidelity at once: fidelity to what has actually been implemented and fidelity to what the available evidence can reasonably establish. Only then can Suggestopedia be evaluated, adapted or rejected on a clearly defined basis.

Biographical Note

Doãn Anh Đức is an English-language lecturer at Thuyloi University in Hanoi, Vietnam, where he teaches general English and academic skills to university students. He holds an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from the University of Hertfordshire. His academic interests centre on humanistic approaches to education, teacher beliefs, classroom innovation and affective factors in second language acquisition. He is also interested in how teaching methods change across historical and cultural contexts. His MA dissertation examined Vietnamese English-language teachers' beliefs about the potential application of Suggestopedia, drawing on focus-group data and consultation with members of the Lozanov International Teacher Trainers Association. The project gave him access to specialised materials and established continued exchange with Suggestopedia practitioners. This experience encouraged him to explore the method further within his broader interest in humanistic education. In the future, he hopes to contribute to the international Suggestopedia community through collaborative empirical research on how selected Suggestopedic principles might be understood and adapted in Vietnamese language-education contexts.

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