

To Teach Intensively or not? - That is the Question!

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Abstract

Kitaigorodskaya's Intensive Method is little known in the West. The methodology has been mentioned only in name by other Western researchers. Consequently, this article traces the historical development of the Intensive Method and presents the key characteristics of the methodology in the hope that other researchers will be encouraged to explore it further. The Intensive Method is heavily influenced by Lozanov's Suggestopedia but still retains uniquely Russian attributes. Although it has evolved in relative isolation from the West, the Intensive Method contains elements, which can be found in a variety of Western traditions to FL teaching. These key points of comparison and contrast are examined. However, further extensive research in the areas of textbook production and classroom teaching is required before the West can fully understand the true nature of the Intensive Method.

Background

When writing about Suggestopedia, Felix (1992:45) wrote:

'Originally, the method was shrouded in mystery since only incomplete information was available from Bulgaria.'

The same description is still applicable to its equivalent method in Russia called the Intensive Method, as there is a dearth of knowledge about it in the West. Evidently, the Intensive Method has its origins in Lozanov's Suggestopedia. Bancroft (1999:265) describes the Intensive Method as an adaptation of Suggestopedia 1 (the Novakov version), which has been combined with other elements and renamed 'Intensive Teaching'. However, she gives no more details about the method in her book, which is extremely wide-ranging in terms of the variants of Suggestopedia which it covers, including Sophrology, Soviet Hypnopedia, the Tomatis Approach, the Suzuki Method, Schuster's SALT and Dhority's ACT. In fact, Bancroft's use of the term 'other elements' is vague and unsatisfactory for the demands of what the Western academic world should know about a method which has enjoyed a great deal of prestige throughout various parts of Russia and the former Soviet Republics.

The distinct lack of clarity in the West about the Intensive Method is exemplified further by a vague reference found in Felix (1992:54) when he comments on Baur's (1980) work, by implying that the latter 'may be referring to the Russian model of Suggestopedia'. Again, this reference is inadequate, as it sheds no light on the issue. In fact, the Bancroft and Felix comments fail to register the fact that within Russia, there are four variants of the suggestopedic method. Galina Kitaigorodskaya (1991:9-10), who created the Intensive Method with her team of researchers, identified the four models of Suggestopedia in practice in the Soviet Union in 1991 at an Accelerated Learning Conference. They are:

- (1) The system created by L. Gegechkori from Tbilisi in Georgia whose course combines Suggestopedia with periods of traditional teacher training.
- (2) The system created by I. Shechter, which is an emotional-semantic system, which lasts three months.
- (3) The system created by Petrusinsky called a suggestive-cybernetic system, which covers several subjects including a language.
- (4) The Intensive Method, which has been developed at the Centre for Intensive Foreign Languages Instruction at Moscow State University.

Although these four Russian variants of Suggestopedia exist, the aim of this article remains an analysis of the last of these, namely the one that Kitaigorodskaya and her team have devised and disseminated to FL teachers throughout Russia.

History of the Origins of The Intensive Method

Suggestopedia appeared early on in the Soviet Union. Lozanov visited Moscow in 1969 to introduce his new method and by January of the following year, Kitaigorodskaya went to Sofia where she was trained in both theory and practice. On her return to Moscow, she formed a team of interested academics from the fields of pedagogics, linguistics and psychology and founded the Centre for Intensive Foreign Languages Instruction at the Moscow State University. By 1976, the group was running Intensive Method training courses for teachers. Kitaigorodskaya, (1991:iv) writes that an institute for the Intensive Method was finally opened in 1988. To date, method books have been published for teaching in sixteen languages.

The origins of the term 'Intensive Method' are uncomplicated. Kitaigorodskaya sensed that there was public scepticism in the USSR about sub-conscious teaching and psychotherapy. By changing the name and subsequently elements of the original S1 version, she claims that she has made it more acceptable. The new version draws from social psychology that was not present in the same sense in S1 or even in the revised S2 form. Kitaigorodskaya also chooses to draw more elements from psycholinguistics, from which Lozanov had originally drawn elements of his theory. Similarly, account has been taken of the Soviet tradition of pedagogical psychology and teaching methodologies. In essence, therefore, the Intensive method is a Soviet version of the Lozanov model, modified to suit the needs and realities of life in the country at the time. One particular difference emphasised by Kitaigorodskaya is the fact that the Intensive Method is not the Russian equivalent of the American Accelerated Learning or SALT programmes. In contrast to the latter, the former involves the activation of psychological and creative potentials of the personality.

Following the political upheaval in Russia in 1991, the FL needs of the country changed. As Russia was opening up to the world, the position of English and other Western languages as virtual 'dead' languages was metamorphosised. In particular, English became the one key language to know for travel anywhere in the world, as well as for use in commerce and academic study. The political, social, economic and cultural conditions which have existed since 1991 in Russia have led to a massive increase in demand for English language courses for all learner groups. Within that framework, the relevance of having a specific course that can deliver fast and substantial linguistic success has been met, at least in part, by the Intensive Method.

Between the period 1979 and 1991, around 2,000 teachers throughout Russia were trained in

Kitaigorodskaya's Centre for Intensive Foreign Languages Instruction. It is claimed that there is a high level standard in the selection procedure for the two-month course, which includes a series of tests and interviews. Kitaigorodskaya has supplied no further detail on the exact nature of these screenings, although a similar selection procedure exists for learner entry to some Intensive courses.

Key Characteristics of the Intensive Method

Kitaigorodskaya presents the Intensive Method in a similar fashion to the way in which Lozanov presents Suggestopedia (both the S1 and S2 versions). The Intensive Method shares areas of strong parallel primarily with the original principles of S1. These include the authority and prestige of the teacher and the educational institution, infantilisation, double planeness, the use of rhythm, intonation of the teacher's voice and the concert pseudo-passivity with the three phases of activation, passive concert and adaptation.

The influence of S1 and Russian education is also apparent in the choice of material used in Intensive Method books. The first part of the Intensive Method course, Ignatova (1992), is set in the L1 culture where the Russian characters greet their foreign guests. Lozanov himself advocates that it is best for the learner to begin by learning to describe what is around him and of practical value. Subsequently, the second book, Ivitskaya, Samarova and Fletcher (1992), is taken one stage further and set in an international environment that incorporates a visit to the TL country. However, the atmosphere is predominantly an international one.

In addition, there are areas where Kitaigorodskaya extends the detail of the Bulgarian original, much of which remains strongly influenced by Russian educational traditions and not Suggestopedia. These areas include:

(1) As in S1 and S2, great prestige is attached to the Intensive Method. Grand statements are made, for example that an Intensive Method teacher is not so much trained as born to be one because the method requires a special type of personality (Kitaigorodskaya, 1991:41). In total there are 32 qualities listed which Kitaigorodskaya believes an Intensive Method teacher must possess. These range from 'love and devotion to the learners and teaching' to 'mental stability' and from 'artistic talent' to a 'knowledge of psychology, physiology and sociology'. Such grand statements are characteristic of Russian educational claims. Without the rigour of putting the theory to the test in order to provide substantiated evidence, as is the tradition in the West, it is difficult to support such claims. Kitaigorodskaya (1991:10) pre-empts such criticisms by putting forward the argument that an outside visitor who is untrained in the Intensive Method and who visits a lesson, will find it difficult to comprehend the strategy employed by the Intensive teacher. Her response to such a critic is: 'He or she will find it difficult to see through the teacher's intentions, as what he or she sees seems sheer improvisation to him. It may seem paradox but the more competent the teacher, the more improvised his/her lessons look to the visitor.' However no firm evidence exists to support Kitaigorodskaya's claims. She is not alone in this capacity. She is merely following the pattern set by her mentor, Lozanov. By contrast, attempts have been made in the West to create a variant of Lozanov's Suggestopedia and to subject it to the rigour of Western empirical analysis, thus proving that the suggestive approach can achieve a higher level of learner acquisition than other teaching methodologies (See Bancroft 1999 for an overview of all such methodologies) but the findings suggest that the levels of success claimed by Lozanov and Kitaigorodskaya are overly optimistic.

(2) Evidently, the teacher has a prestigious role in the Intensive classroom. However, in a break with the Soviet educational tradition of being a dogmatic instructor and following the collective approach to teaching, the Intensive teacher must develop a more individual response to the needs of the teaching group in his care in order to resolve their problems. While these strategies may seem unoriginal in the West, such pronouncements were at the time and in many respects still are groundbreaking, as Kitaigorodskaya was attempting to establish a new direction for foreign language teaching in the then USSR. She identifies three roles for the Intensive teacher using language, which conveys a different message to that posited by Lozanov in S1 and S2. These are:

(a) The teacher is a source of information for the learners and also a kind of scriptwriter, director and producer for the scenes that are acted out by the learners as well as an actor who must act out the dialogue in the concert phase.

(b) The teacher is an organiser of all levels of communication within the group, which involves initiating, sustaining and concluding the group communication, and eventually the role changes from the role of the teacher with superior knowledge to that of an equal partner among the participants.

(c) The teacher is a model of social, moral and ethical correctness in terms of behaviour and an example of linguistic competence, which the learners can strive to reach.

(3) In the Intensive Method, the notion of educational communication is highlighted through the five key principles of Intensive teaching and learning which differ in emphasis from those of Suggestopedia:

(a) Person-Centred Communication

Conditions are created so that the learner's attitude to the subject can be formed through the relationships established between the teacher and the learners. The hypothesis states that everybody communicates with everybody else. This incorporates communication at the levels of teacher-learner, learner-learner, teacher-group and learner-group. The personality of the learner is important as active participation in the group as well as emotional involvement are pre-requisites for successful learning. As in Suggestopedia, the optimum number of learners in one group is 12-14 and of mixed composition with chairs arranged in a semi-circle to enable more open communication.

(b) Role-Playing in Teaching Materials and Procedure

In all tasks, learners should be motivated through the role-playing (i.e. communicative learning and playing). The role-plays should be relevant to the intellectual level of the learners and give social roles to the learners. Rather than teach isolated communicative scenes which are not incorporated directly into a unified, singularly-directed sequence of inter-related natural events, (a criticism levelled by Russian educationalists against the approach adopted by many Western textbooks), the Intensive Method attempts to approach the idea of role-play in a gestaltist-like manner. Each long polylogue (note that use of the word 'lesson' is avoided in the Intensive Method) cycle contains between 7-10 micro-cycles that are intended to lead naturally one from each other. The continuity is further enhanced by the character assignment, which takes place at the start of the entire course when the learner is given a new role. This mask stays on the learner during the entire course and any creative role-playing is carried out under the same guise. Kitai gorodskaya uses the term 'real life-situations' to define the nature of the role-playing.

(c) Collective Communication Through Team Work

This is a key principle on which the Intensive Method is based. The organisation of group actions leads to the inner mobilisation of the learners. The importance of teamwork has its origins in Soviet socio-psychology, psychotherapy and pedagogy. In many ways, its emphasis here marks a return to the Vygotsky School that advocated the importance of the role of the group collective. Basically, it denotes that the learner learns not only from the teacher but also through group dynamics by communicating to and with the group at both a conscious and an unconscious level. Kitai gorodskaya identifies three key benefits in the use of teamwork. First, the learner gains knowledge and improves speech production through participation in discussion. Second, through inter-personal contact, the learner fosters 'friendly and ethical relationships' and third, the learner's progress is closely linked to the progress made by the fellow group members who are dependent on each other.

There are different forms of team work including (i) individual group work i.e. the individual in the teacher role with the group, (ii) pair work (Diada) and (iii) rotating pairs (which focuses on the first and second persons singular), (iv) working in groups of three (which focuses on the third person singular) and (v) larger sub-groups (but this is limited in its usage because only a few learners can communicate at any one time). While the same terms are also used in the West, the specific application of the above focuses on collective forms of co-operation between all the participants on the course which has an echo of socialist tendencies as reflected in all sections of

Vorotsova, a pupil of the Kitaigorodskaya School, works in the French Section of the Faculty of Romance and Germanic Philology at the Udmurt State University in Central Russia. She has published Intensive Method French language textbooks for use in schools throughout Russia. During an interview she stated that she believes that with a 500-word morphology, oral communication begins to stabilise and that pronunciation follows soon after. Learners should be taught 25-30 hours without writing, concentrating on oral work and aural comprehension: thereafter they learn reading and writing. The problem which Russian learners of English face when learning is that of the Roman alphabet but with the Intensive Method the key is to ignore the alphabet at the start. After about 25 hours the learner knows enough language to make it easier to work with the Roman alphabet because the hours of contact have already removed any sense of alienation.

(d) Concentrated Teaching Materials and Procedure

Through active learning it is claimed that large amounts of material can be absorbed by the learner, up to 5,000 words per course (a similar figure to that put forward by Lozanov). Kitaigorodskaya describes a three-step model for acquiring oral and written skills, based on (i) Synthesis 1, (ii) Analysis and (iii) Synthesis 2. Synthesis 1 implies the forming of 'communicative nucleus priority' with oral communication on a relatively simple level for which between 800 and 1,200 lexical units are needed. The Elementary Level is mostly in the oral form without any texts (i.e. just dialogues and listening comprehensions). Thus the learner acquires language but does not understand what all the structures and words mean. Analysis has less material than Synthesis 1 but is in principle the same (i.e. a lot of new material). This stage is necessary to achieve the transition from reproduction to situational variety and active production. Synthesis 2 occurs when a further substantial number of lexical items are introduced but almost new grammar material. These words can then be fitted into the models acquired in the analysis stage.

(e) Poly- or Multi-Functionality of the Exercises

Kitaigorodskaya (1991:6 & 23) explains that every communicative task solves several aims at one time in a hierarchical sequence for every level of teaching. Communicative training, for example, uses grammar, vocabulary and phonetics. In fact, each Intensive Method book is a cycle and within each cycle there is a series of micro-cycles, which include the core text (polylogue), additional texts (samples of writing), language commentary, homework, poems, songs and funny stories. The recommended breakdown of time allocation within the micro-cycle is 2 hours for the introduction of material, 6-8 hours of training to communicate and 2-4 hours for authentic communication.

Comparisons with Western Theory and Key Criticisms of the Intensive Method

There are findings, which reveal close correlation between elements of Western methodology and the Intensive Method and simultaneously areas that show a clear contrast. The key points are:

(1) The use of mnemonics and psychology resembles aspects of the Behaviourist habit learning theory. Both approaches aim to assist the TL learner in retaining and activating the TL taught through controlling of the learning experiences.

(2) The child-like state is also present in the Silent Way. The security which infantilisation gives in the Intensive Method contains aspects of the SARD principles in Community Language Learning. A learner who feels secure in his learning environment is disposed to more effective learning.

(3) Total Physical Response also seeks to create a stress-free environment by activating the right-hand side of the brain through movement. The Intensive Method tries to achieve proper suggestion through relaxing music.

(4) The Intensive principle of concentrated teaching results in the TL forming the basis of all classroom communication between all participants, corresponds to what Howatt (1984:279) describes in Communicative Language Teaching as 'using English to learn it'. The TL is used to maximum potential at all times in the classroom to produce better understanding and communication.

(5) The Intensive Method principles are strikingly similar to five of the six stages of the Oral Approach and Situational Language Learning: (i) The material is taught orally, (ii) The TL is the only language of the classroom, (iii) Any new language points are introduced and practised in

context, (iv) There is a high degree of selection of the TL lexical items to be taught through the construct of the polylogue, (vi) Reading and writing are introduced at a later stage when the learner has gained a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis. The only stage not followed is: (v) the graded sequence of grammatical items in the TL. This observation is supported by Vorotsova (interviewed at Udmurt State University in April 1997) who believes that the chapter system of the Intensive textbook does not need to be followed, as each unit is self-contained. Learners can go beyond the natural sequenced order of learning TL grammar and simulate the texts into their heads because the message is the most important aspect of communication.

(6) Similarities concerning the Intensive Method extend to Krashen's definition of Language Acquisition in the Natural Approach, but only to a certain degree. There is sub-conscious acquisition of the TL in both the Intensive Method and the Natural Approach, but thereafter, the similarities end. On one hand, the Natural Approach seeks to allow acquisition to occur naturally in a similar fashion to a child acquiring its L1. The knowledge required to manipulate the language properly is implicit. Formal teaching does not help in this process. In contrast, the Intensive Method seeks to teach the TL naturally but in an artificial environment in which reality is suspended through infantilisation. The method can only be successful if the learners in the teaching group comply fully with the requirements of the method and allow themselves to act child-like. Furthermore, the method is dependent on the Intensive teacher and the use of key teaching strategies.

(7) In the Intensive Method, the learning environment is crucial to the successful transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the learner but cultural competence in the TL is less important and can lead to echolalic speech. While the method teaches the learner what to say, it fails to teach him when and how to say it. Socio-linguistic competence can assist in this goal of proper communication but is clearly neglected by the Intensive Method. Not even the compromise offered by the Intercultural Method is feasible at present using the method books in existence.

(8) When compared to Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis, the Intensive Method creates a 'monitor under-user' who develops a feel for what is right in the TL. The Intensive learner is meant to be capable of more complex discourse at an early stage, which is the sixth and final stage of Krashen's Principles of the Natural Approach. Therefore, the Intensive Method does not comply with the Natural Approach's 'i + 1' theory. By inference, it is evident that the structural foundation of the Intensive learner's TL knowledge is not secure, though he may have a greater degree of communicative competence.

Conclusion

There remains a lack of proper understanding of the Intensive Method in the West. It is intended that this article should form part of a wide discussion that needs to be developed concerning the method. A key part of that process is a better understanding of the practical implications of the Intensive Method theory. There are two elements to this process, namely an analysis of the textbooks produced by Kitaigorodskaya and her fellow researchers and a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the success achieved by learners taught using the Intensive Method.

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