

## My Learner Autonomy Story



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**Irina Minakova is a university language centre lecturer as well as a secondary school teacher of English. She is originally from the Ukraine where she used to teach theory and history of music. After immigrating to the Czech Republic in 1996, she completed her master's degree in English and since then her professional development has been tied to teaching English. Her current pedagogical interests along with the empirical research within her PhD studies are devoted to the autonomous learning and its strategies.**

What has brought me to the learner autonomy concept is the fact that I have never stopped being a learner. Now I am convinced that my teaching career has gradually become a complex paradigm that embraces the skills of a learner, researcher, coach and facilitator. That is one of the reasons why my biggest concern in teaching is the question of how to teach students to learn. In other words, I keep working on how to lead my students to an effective, autonomous and inquiry-based way of learning. Nevertheless, all my initial attempts were only partly successful because my overall teaching style still remained teacher-centered, and autonomous elements in my teaching such as learner empowerment, reflective discourse, peer- or self-assessment were quite awkward and spontaneous. Later on I decided to try something new.

The turning point that changed my teaching style was my participation in a Fulbright exchange programme several years ago. Selected for this experience, I left the Czech Republic for a year and started teaching at University Prep Academy (UPA) in Seattle. All of a sudden, I found myself in a situation when I was expected to teach high school American students academic writing and world literature, which were the subjects I had never taught before. I had to turn my teaching methods upside down and come up with something that would work for me as well as for my new students. It was a matter of survival at the beginning. Finally, the situation turned out to be a great shift in my teaching approach and my whole personality as well. Along with teaching at UPA I did a lot of observations there and had a chance to see how my American colleagues taught in English and some other classes. The most impressive discovery for me was a student-centered approach of those classes and the active, self-directed attitude of the students resulting in their entire involvement in the learning process. The traditional knowledge transmission model was not used here at all. I was also struck by how the students constructed their knowledge through reflective discussions, group and individual projects based on their own research and its findings. To my surprise, all of them were cooperative and eager to learn; they also acted as if they were in the same boat being responsible for

what was going on. There was something in the air that made them feel an important part of the process.

At that point I was not aware of the concept of autonomous learning and its theoretical framework. However, I had a great chance to watch its incredible impact on the students in my American colleagues' classes. Gradually, I started to develop my own autonomous teaching style and realized how beneficial it could be to put the students in the roles of experts, researchers, actors or critics in order to learn. That was a wonderful way of activating their motivation and our mutual exploration of new knowledge. A lot of projects, task-based assignments resulted in wonderful students' work. Taking different roles helped them see the subject from the different angles and teach each other from new perspectives sharing what they found out. Learning by implicit teaching became a part of our classes naturally activating a self-directed way of learning in my students. They were eager to create their own handouts, quizzes, posters or other teaching/learning materials and share the chosen learning strategies among themselves. The role reverse became a part of my teaching as well. Depending on the task, I also played the various roles, which definitely took me away from the authoritative way of teaching.

When I arrived back in the Czech Republic for the next academic year, I couldn't wait to implement my experience in my secondary school English classes. The school I worked at the time was a medical college with the students at the age of 17 – 18. With all my enthusiasm and new teaching concepts in mind, I set up several projects and anticipated that my colleagues and students would be supportive and cooperative. After a while, it was crystal clear to me that my return had turned out to be a disaster. No one expected me to teach in a new way. Neither my colleagues nor the academic authorities wanted me to share what I had learnt and developed within my American working experience. Moreover, the students who had never been exposed to the autonomous approach had difficulty in accepting this change at the beginning as well. They were not used to making choices and decisions on their own; they had never done any long-term assignments before. Using log books for their reflections on the learning process, goal-setting, planning and implementing the projects were totally unfamiliar to them. However, after a challenging period of getting them familiarized with new ways of learning, both implicitly and explicitly, my students became more confident, autonomous and more successful in English. What helped them overcome most of the difficulties was their gradual but systematic involvement in the strategic way of learning and a constant reflection on its impact. When my students came out of their *comfort zone* of passive participants and accepted facing the challenges as a part of learning, they realized how beneficial autonomous learning could be. All of them really enjoyed the final parts of the projects and were very proud of their final products - films, magazines, articles, and so on. In one respect, it was a big challenge to get them to the tipping point. On the other hand, the final after-project discussion showed that it was worth trying. One of the students said, 'It was so hard, but we've made a miracle'.

The first attempt at implementing autonomous learning at my Czech secondary school revealed that there were a lot of constraints of different kinds to deal with. Most Czech students have very traditional, sometimes even conservative, educational backgrounds. At the certain stages of our project they felt helpless even having my entire support and willingness to help them. It took me a lot of energy and patience to explain why we were going in a different direction compared with other classes and teachers or why it was important to reflect on what was going on within the project. Therefore, the teachers who would like to foster learner autonomy within such a

conservative environment should develop a gradual and sensitive dynamic to its implementation. In the context of the Czech secondary school where teachers are supposed to follow the syllabus and the text-books selected by the department, there is a need to incorporate autonomous elements gradually but systematically. That is exactly where I am now, working out different strategies and techniques to develop autonomous learning at different stages of Czech secondary education. An essential part of this process is the creation of a so-called LA First Aid Kit – a tool box of work-sheets and handouts based on CEFR and EL Portfolio-related materials. I am really happy to see the first successful results of my efforts and the action research I have been conducting for the last two years. Hopefully, I will present those materials at one of the LASIG events. Now I am convinced that I have chosen the right direction in teaching English and will promote autonomous learning further on.

My current in-class experimental work has brought me to the desire to broaden my professional horizons again and explore the worldwide learner autonomy experience. The IATEFL and CEFR-related events along with various methodological materials have become an inevitable part of my life and help me study the concept of learner autonomy in broader terms. Therefore, I am so happy that I had a chance in 2009 to join the Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LASIG) while attending the annual IATEFL conference in Harrogate. That conference made an unforgettable impression on me and inspired me to continue my learner autonomy exploration. I was so happy to meet such wonderful devotees of learner autonomy as Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen, whose enthusiasm accompanied all LASIG sessions at the conference. Moreover, that was the point when I definitely decided to devote my current PhD studies to learner autonomy. Since the most successful outcomes of my own empirical research have to do with strategy-oriented learning, I keep exploring this field as one of the most effective and beneficial. If selected, I will have a chance to present the findings of my research in the upcoming IATEFL conference in Glasgow.

Now I am getting back to the initial point of my story. Being a keen learner by nature, I am so grateful for the opportunity to join such a welcoming international community as LASIG with so much to learn from. My special thanks go to Leni Dam whose openness and kindness affected me immensely. Leni creates a wonderful warm atmosphere at all LASIG events and has a wonderful talent for bringing people together. The most recent event I had the chance to participate in was the one-day conference in September in Venice, which again presented new interesting aspects of learner autonomy. The series of workshops let participants share their own experience and learn from each other how to get students involved in the autonomous learning process. The expert lecturers such as David Little, Anna Uhl Cha, Leni Dam, Lienhard Legenhausen and Marcella Menegale provided us with new methodological materials and inspiring ideas to implement. I hope to become an active participant of this wonderful community of teachers, researchers and theorists to promote and develop one of the most promising phenomena in ESL today - the concept of learner autonomy.

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