

Anyone who has taught English in a country with limited chances for students to engage in authentic communication knows the challenges it can present: few opportunities for students to practice language skills and get meaningful feedback; outdated or ineffective materials; words and phrases memorized by students as if they were symbols on the periodic table of elements rather than a means of communication. To confront these challenges and push through them, you need to be a fighter. You need to believe in something better. You need to be someone like Olga Afanasieva.



Olga Afanasieva at her desk in the English Grammar and Phonetics Department at Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University in Cherkasy

Photo by Jean Lundbom

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Ms. Afanasieva has been teaching English for over ten years, mostly with first- and second-year English majors at Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University in Cherkasy. Her friendly smile and ready laugh will strike you first, along with her excellent English skills. Soon enough, her dedication to students and her desire to teach real-life communication skills will become apparent. All of these qualities are admirable, especially considering that she works in a rather challenging teaching environment.

Ukraine declared its independence from the U.S.S.R. in 1991, and in the educational arena, parting from the familiar can be a hard sell, even when reforms are desired. Opinions

vary on the benefits of the traditional system centering on memorization and translation. Limited funding and a system in flux demand creativity and dedication from teachers. That is the scene; enter Ms. Afanasieva. Rather than holding on to the authoritarian style still common in classrooms, she is known for creating a comfortable, nonthreatening learning environment.

One of the ways she does this is through classroom setup. When possible, she likes to arrange students in a circle. This in itself can be a challenge, as teachers at the university are assigned different classrooms each day, and some classrooms are barely big enough for ten student desks and one



Ms. Afanasieva (far left) leads an activity with first-year students; the pieces of paper have different vocabulary lists that students, working in pairs, will integrate into a dialogue.

Photo by Inna Dubchak



The main building on the Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University campus

Photo by Jean Lundbom

teacher desk. But that doesn't stop Ms. Afanasieva, who sometimes has the students sit on their desks. "By doing something out of the ordinary," she explained, "their focus is on that rather than on being self-conscious about speaking. Some of our students come from country schools and are only used to retelling [reciting a story rather than speaking for themselves]." Ms. Afanasieva often sits in the back of the classroom in order to be a less intimidating presence, and she has seen this approach help students overcome their speaking anxieties.

Ms. Afanasieva also lowers students' affective filters with the activities she devises. In Ukraine, students go through primary and secondary school with the same group of students in their class, so studying with a new

group of classmates at the university is a significant change for them. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Afanasieva assigns each student a "secret friend" within the class, instructing students to anonymously do nice things for these secret friends. Many such gestures are communicated in the language of food, while others are communicated in English—for example, a poem written about a classmate, a song showing what the secret friend thinks of a classmate, and a book given for supplemental reading. Before identities are revealed, the students explain (in English) what was done for them or given to them, who they think was responsible, and why they came to their conclusions. This activity has had a positive effect; Ms. Afanasieva said that students "learn to pay attention to each other's needs

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and do not tend to judge each other when they make mistakes.” She is also keen on using activities that get students to laugh and have fun, as she believes they learn better in such an environment. She regularly uses skits and games to reinforce material and create an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

To deliver accurate and up-to-date language in her lessons, Ms. Afanasieva has made it a priority to learn English herself as well as possible. She is open to correction and advice. She has attended English language teaching (ELT) webinars, taken online classes, entered contests for teachers of English, and written articles for publication. She makes it a practice to expose herself daily to authentic input, whether by watching TV (favorite programs include *The Mentalist* and *Game of Thrones*), reading, listening to audiobooks, or attending teacher trainings. When an English Language Fellow came to the university, Ms. Afanasieva took every opportunity to observe classes, ask questions, and pick up new words and phrases. This attitude and drive have paid off in communicative ability that truly stands out.

Another of Ms. Afanasieva’s priorities has been to find authentic material to use in her lessons. She searches favorite teaching websites, plays audio tracks of native speakers, uses board games from busyteacher.org, creates webquests from British Council materials, and uses resources recommended in the online classes she has taken. She finds the English Listening Lesson Library Online (www.elllo.org) to be a helpful site for listening activities, the Purdue Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu) a great resource for writing and grammar help, and the British Council materials for teens (learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org) full of fun ideas and activities.

What kind of an impact are these efforts having on her students? Although Ms. Afanasieva is uncomfortable talking about her accomplishments, she is clearly proud of what her students have achieved. One student, after taking a class from Ms. Afanasieva and seeing what teaching could be like, decided to become a teacher and is now employed as such. Another student, with Ms. Afanasieva’s influence and encouragement, applied for and was accepted to a study-abroad program in the United States. Students whom Ms. Afanasieva tutors privately have benefitted from her skills and approach as well; one private student who had all but lost hope of passing her English entrance exams was, within one year, able to not only pass the exam but do well enough to be accepted into the university of her dreams.

These are the accomplishments of Ms. Afanasieva’s students, but it is clear that they are her accomplishments as well. She adapts her teaching to her students and their needs rather than expecting them to adapt to her. With the student who had almost lost hope, Ms. Afanasieva administered a multiple-intelligences assessment (based on Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences) and found that the student tested high for musical intelligence, so Ms. Afanasieva incorporated many songs into her tutoring. The student listened to music all the time, Ms. Afanasieva said, but had never thought about how she could use English to really understand what the songs were saying. English then took on value as a means of communication, rather than just a classroom subject.

Ms. Afanasieva understands how formative these years are for her students. She was not much younger herself when she decided to major in English, though her school was

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not one that specialized in teaching English. Through a great deal of study and dedication, she got into the university where she now teaches. While in her master's degree program, she realized that teaching was her passion. At that point, she said, "I started paying closer attention to the ways school and university teachers worked. I wrote down ideas for future use and made a list of things I'd do differently. At some point the list became so long that I understood: I had to be ready to go global if I wanted to make a difference and do more than the popular solution of 'cosmetic changes.'" Thus began her desire for substantial change, not just for herself and her students, but for the ELT educational system as a whole. Some of the areas she identified as needing change, besides the authoritarian classroom atmosphere, were "a rigid and memorization-oriented curriculum, outdated texts, and standardized final projects."

As time progressed, she noticed an overarching methodological problem in the cultivation of students' higher-order thinking skills. And so she concentrated on "students' inability to make their own conclusions, the lack of originality and individuality in written tasks, [and] the unwillingness to express their own opinions." In learning more about Western educational culture, she found that the Western educational system strongly encourages and values independent thinking.

While Ms. Afanasieva dreams of being an instigator of educational reform in her country, she is cautious in her hopes of what the future holds. When asked what she thinks will happen in her country in the next decade, she said she fears that changes will be cosmetic in nature, when the true change needs to occur on a governmental level. Teachers need to be granted more freedom,

she said, with more power to enact change when the curriculum, schedule, or policies do not work well. She also firmly believes in the value of cultural exchange and dreams of this being a reality at every school.

How does systematic change come about? Often it is born out of the passion of individuals who believe in something better and who won't settle for less. Often it comes about by way of those "on the ground" who work to embody the vision they have. Often it starts with people like Olga Afanasieva.

This article was written by **Jean Lundbom**, a community-college and adult-school English as a second language instructor currently teaching in northern California. Jean was an English Language Fellow for the 2015–2016 year, hosted by the Bohdan Khmelnytsky National University of Cherkasy. You can read about her experiences there at jeanieinukraine.com.
