

Learner autonomy – an interview with Anja Burkert



Anja Burkert, 10. März © treffpunkt sprachen

Anja Burkert studied English and French at the University of Graz in order to become a teacher and attended classes in French literature at the Université Aix-Marseille III for one year. She finished her studies in the late eighties, when the waiting time for teachers to get a job was ten years, which is why she started to teach at diverse institutions specialized in adult education. It was only five or six years later that she started teaching at the English Department of the University of Graz. For ten years now she has been working also at *treffpunkt sprachen*, focusing mainly on English scientific writing and presentation skills classes, but also teaching French classes. She then decided to do a PhD in English didactics and she started giving whole-day seminars on writing research papers at the Medical University of Graz. She is also an English teacher at the University of Technology.

In June this year, Anja Burkert will be organizing the second conference on *Learner Autonomy*. In this interview, we will talk about her personal connection to *Learner Autonomy*, about the conference's keynote speakers and about reasons to participate.

First of all, I wanted to ask you in general: What is *Learner Autonomy* and what do you find so fascinating about it?

Learner autonomy basically means for the learners to take over responsibility for their own learning. In other words, the learners should get a say in *what* and *how* to learn, they should get choices, should be encouraged to reflect on their own learning, and they should also evaluate the outcome of their learning. Learner autonomy does not mean learning on one's own without a teacher; quite on the contrary, it is about learning *with* and *from* each other, it involves interaction among learners, and between teacher and learners. What is particularly fascinating for me is the way my classes have changed since I started seating my students into groups in order to encourage collaboration, one aspect of a pedagogy for autonomy. It's the whole atmosphere in the classroom that has changed and also my relationship with my students.

How did you come in contact with learner autonomy? Do you have a personal connection with it?

I came across the concept of learner autonomy when I started work on my PhD as, in my first chapter, I reviewed the literature on recent developments in the field of language teaching and learning. And yes, I do have a personal connection to it as, very early on, I was daring enough to contact one of the leading figures in the field of learner autonomy, Leni Dam, and very quickly came to know her personally. Together with other experienced and well-known practitioners and researchers in the field, I soon started to work on the committee of the

LASIG (Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group) of IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language). I'm still working on this committee and very much enjoy the fruitful exchange of ideas with likeminded people at the annual IATEFL conference and other local events.

You are organizing the second conference about *Learner Autonomy* which will take place on 2nd and 3rd of June at *treffpunkt sprachen* – Centre of Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics. This time the conference's topic is "Current Practice and Future Developments". How and why did you choose it?

I chose this theme because I would like us to look, in some depth, at what has been achieved so far in the field of learner autonomy and at the extent to which we can say that the practice of learner autonomy has really entered the field of language education. So these one and a half days should be some kind of taking stock of the current situation so that, from this point onwards, positive looking and planning ahead can take place.

At the conference there will be three keynote-speakers – David Little, Leni Dam and Sarah Mercer. What are they going to talk about?

David Little, one of the most highly acclaimed theorists in the field of learner autonomy, in his opening plenary, "Language learner autonomy: where are we now?", will set the scene for the conference by addressing exactly this question: what has been the impact of learner autonomy on classroom practice, and why is the impact not the large-scale impact we would have hoped for. Leni Dam will give a plenary on the topic "Teachers as researchers of their own development towards language learner autonomy". As probably the most famous practitioner in the field, Leni has supported teachers on their path to developing learner autonomy in their classrooms through numerous talks and workshops as well as a huge number of publications. In her talk she will concentrate on how teachers can be supported in becoming researchers of their own development, drawing on her own experience in in-service teacher education. Sarah Mercer, a well-known researcher and practitioner in the field of learning psychology, will look at the topic from a psychological perspective and will focus on the relationship between teacher and learner. In this connection, she will point out the qualities which make up an autonomy-supportive teacher-learner relationship.

The program also offers a number of workshops. What topics do these focus on and how is the succession of workshops going to be organized?

There will actually be two series of workshops, one on Saturday morning after Leni's plenary and one on Saturday afternoon, after Sarah's plenary. The morning workshops will each focus on one specific aspect related to a pedagogy for autonomy such as the use of technology in an autonomous classroom, or the use of logbooks, or else, the promotion of cognitive strategies. The afternoon workshops will be running under the heading "Examples of teacher practice in the Austrian/Slovenian context". As the conference will be taking place in Graz, Austria, I thought we should have some kind of a local focus as well.

Who do you think is the target group of this conference?

The target group are teachers working at all educational levels from primary to tertiary level, as well as those involved in adult education. But the conference will also be of interest to students or student teachers, and to those working in institutions which are concerned with language education in some way.

What can the participants look forward to?

The participants can look forward to listening to three internationally acclaimed theorists and practitioners in the field of learner autonomy. They will also get the chance to attend workshops held by widely recognized researchers and teachers such as Annamaria Pinter from Warwick University. Last but not least, they can look forward to a highly interactive conference setting where they will have the opportunity to exchange and share ideas and experience with likeminded people. And don't forget – what Leni Dam likes pointing out – that autonomy people are NICE people.

General information:

Date:	2nd and 3rd June, 2017
Conference venue:	<i>treffpunkt sprachen</i> – Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics, Johann-Fux-Gasse 30, 8010 Graz
Registration:	is now open and closes on 21 May 2017 (early bird bookings accepted until 16 Apr 2017), please see: http://secure.iatefl.org/events/event.php?id=112
Website:	http://learnerautonomygraz2017.weebly.com/