

Yulia Bulatkulova discovered her passion for English language teaching at a young age as a result of the example set by an esteemed childhood English teacher, Elvira Kuyanova. “I liked the way she spoke, always in English, and I thought to myself, I want to be like her,” Ms. Bulatkulova recalled. She explained that it was her teacher’s command over a language different from the one they shared that captivated her interest.



Yulia Bulatkulova (inset) is a lecturer at Eurasian National University, pictured in the background.

Photo by Lauren Whitaker

Ms. Bulatkulova, now a lecturer at Eurasian National University (ENU) in Astana, attributes her aspiration for teaching to that teacher, who brought her love of language to the classroom. “I was impressed with the fact that a person is able to speak another language,” she said. Admiration soon shifted to motivation; her desire to make an impression upon her teacher kept her up late at night studying grammar and exploring the language intently. Her happiest day occurred when she won the Olympiad in English in her hometown of Zhezkazgan. The Olympiad, a competition held in each city during which students compete to demonstrate the highest mastery of a given subject, is the pinnacle of achievement for students in Kazakhstan. The English language competition consists of three assignments: a read-and-retell task, a grammar test, and a culture/country study test. By winning, Ms. Bulatkulova earned sought-after congratulatory remarks from her teacher, which continued to motivate her throughout her education.

As time went on, her motivation shifted from the desire to impress to the desire to master the language. Her current students, also preparing to be English language teachers in Kazakhstan, share the same overall goal of mastering the English language. Her students are motivated to master the language in order not only to teach, but to maximize their opportunities in other avenues of life, such as traveling and expanding their worldviews.

Ms. Bulatkulova’s personal wish is to improve the English-teaching capacity in Kazakhstan, and her goal is to do this through effective instruction and mentorship of her students in the Department of Theory and Practice of Foreign Languages. She hopes to increase her students’ knowledge and passion for teaching, mentoring them so that they find

pride in teaching, despite the challenges that accompany the profession. Her approach involves not only focusing on English language skills in the classroom but also harnessing her students’ unique talents in order to increase motivation, broaden students’ minds, and integrate various learning experiences in meaningful and authentic ways. “You don’t know how talented they are until you give them opportunities to express themselves,” she explained.

A typical week for Ms. Bulatkulova involves ten to twelve hours of instruction. She teaches courses in Etymology, English Literature, and English Language Teaching Methodologies to intermediate and upper-intermediate students. Her classes are relatively small, with no more than ten students in each class, and that allows her to personalize her teaching style to suit her students’ variety of needs.

Because each class meets in a different room—some small, some large; some with moveable tables, others with seminar-style seating that is immobile; some with chairs, others with stools—Ms. Bulatkulova must practice her creativity and innovation. She does not plan the lesson around the classroom but rather makes the classroom fit her lesson, an approach that sometimes requires her to arrive early and rearrange seating and desks, or even search the building for an empty, more compatible classroom.

Her main concern is maintaining student motivation and interest, and one strategy she uses is consistently changing the seating arrangements. “I try to make it different quite frequently,” she said. “One thing I am particularly convinced of is that students mustn’t always sit in the same place and work with one particular partner.” She explained that providing an always-changing

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Ms. Bulatkulova (seated) studies a textbook with students in her Etymology course.

Photo by Nursultan Albatyrov

environment increases classroom unity and student autonomy. Depending on her goal, she uses creative seating arrangements and classroom setups to promote skills such as team building, critical thinking, awareness of different patterns of thought, and responsibility for individual and/or group learning. Ms. Bulatkulova values establishing an environment conducive to the goals of each lesson and carefully considers each aspect of her lessons in order to create maximum positive impact.

What makes Ms. Bulatkulova's classes unique is her integration of the world's cultures, history, and art into her curriculum. Such focus encourages creative and critical thinking while broadening students' worldviews. Her students have created plays,

for example; groups of students read a piece of classical literature together and went on to create their own play based on their selection. Examples of the literature covered include George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, William Shakespeare's *Othello*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Students have the freedom to hone in on a specific piece of the text or to create their play using a variety of elements from the text. Ms. Bulatkulova believes in providing the literary and linguistic tools necessary for careful analysis and critical thinking, but she encourages students to be responsible for their own creativity when working together to create their plays. Her role in these projects is that of a linguistic and cultural guide, allowing students the creativity and confidence to create their own

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meaning and manage their own learning, while at the same time being supported and steered in the right direction.

Ms. Bulatkulova believes in a learner-centered approach and encourages her students to explore their creativity and the world through the arts. Her approach is highly effective, with students motivated by topics that are personally meaningful. Zhansaya Yessetova, a fourth-year student at ENU, explained that Ms. Bulatkulova “is curious, in a good sense, and her incorporation of critical thinking and analysis of interesting texts were really useful” in allowing Yessetova to apply the skills practiced in class to real-world situations. Through Ms. Bulatkulova’s approach to motivation by means of creative freedom,

her students feel empowered to use their comprehension and critical-thinking skills to explore classical literature and art in a way that is truly meaningful to them.

The student-generated plays enabled Ms. Bulatkulova to discover that her students were interested in another art form: textiles and costume creation. It was clear to her that the students had spent a great deal of time and collaboration in designing their costumes for the plays. She realized that focusing on this interest could offer opportunities for collaboration and engagement in English instruction, in addition to offering student ownership over classroom materials. An advocate for the interconnectivity between language and the



Ms. Bulatkulova leads her students in a game to review for the final exam.

Photo by Lauren Whitaker

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arts, Ms. Bulatkulova incorporated costume design into the play-project guidelines. She required students to collaborate and plan their costumes using English to discuss materials, work through the design process, and provide and receive opinions. She explained that just as seating is an important component of a conducive learning environment, so is allowing students to express themselves creatively. By creating their own costumes and props, students shape their own learning through careful consideration, planning, brainstorming, and making motivated decisions as a group and independently. These elements are at the heart of Ms. Bulatkulova's teaching philosophy.

This philosophy is present in all aspects of her instruction, from the classroom environment to the strategies she integrates into her lessons. She also believes that the key to being a successful teacher is maintaining the mindset of a lifelong learner. She likens teaching to the ever-changing nature of music, requiring tune-ups and alterations in order to hit the perfect note. "Even after a world-class performance, we must practice again the very next day in order to continue to hit those notes," she explained. This personal philosophy makes professional development an important element to her success, and she prides herself on transferring the value of lifelong learning to her students. She explained that she is "proud of teaching [her] students to *learn* . . . to be critical and creative in their approach to learning."

Ms. Bulatkulova leads by example and is an active participant in Global Education sessions and the Kazakhstan English Language Teaching Association, and she regularly attends teacher-training programs and workshops with English Language Specialists. She also participates in events arranged by

the British Council and Regional English Language Office of the U.S. Embassy in Astana.

Ms. Bulatkulova is a highly motivated and effective teacher, and her classes serve as evidence that this trait has been imprinted upon her students. Perhaps, just as she was once motivated to make an impression upon her teacher, her students are compelled to work hard to make impressions upon her. The culture of high expectations that she maintains in her classrooms, combined with her motivation and passion for teaching, contributes to the popularity of her classes.

Ms. Bulatkulova works hard to ensure not only that she maintains her passion as a lifelong learner, but also that her students find the motivation to expand their knowledge and experience in the field of English language teaching. She prides herself on providing the best possible classroom environment for her students. Ms. Bulatkulova's interactions with her students, both inside and outside the classroom, demonstrate that she has followed in the footsteps of her childhood role model in providing motivation and a love of learning and language.

This article was written by **Lauren Whitaker**, an English language teacher who is currently the English Language Fellow hosted by Eurasian National University in Astana, Kazakhstan. She holds an MA in Linguistic Studies from Syracuse University with a concentration in Language, Culture, and Society.