

## INTERVIEW WITH DR. ELENA BAZANOVA – CONVERSING ON EXPERTISE, INSPIRATION, LEGACY

This journal is devoted to spreading the expertise, best practices, and enthusiasm for teaching English in many of its approaches. For that reason we occasionally have interviews with outstanding colleagues who have already created a huge legacy of supreme expertise, very special projects, have truly educated students to boldly and safely start their professional paths.

Now I wish to present Dr. Elena Bazanova. Through a series of questions on basic principles, beliefs of her work, she demonstrates rare insight, originality, humanism and scholarship. It is my firm belief this interview will be a pleasant and encouraging peace to read and reflect on one's own practice.

Dr. Elena Bazanova specializes in Higher Education pedagogies in TESOL contexts and has published widely in the field, with research articles in academic journals, in addition to 17 published books. One of her books won the All-Russia competition in the nomination: "The best TESOL textbook for non-linguistic universities". She holds a PhD in TESOL and a Diploma in Educational Management from IHLondon. Elena is the author of the COURSERA Specialization *English for Research Publication Purposes*, which contains four MOOCs: Academic Literacy, Scholarly Communication, Grant Proposal, and Technical Writing (rating 4,6/5; over 135000 active learners, 2021). Elena is especially interested in promoting the global flow of Higher Education innovations in the practice and theory of teaching and learning across all disciplines in higher education.

Elena Bazanova is an alumna of the International Visitor Leadership Program "Developing Academic Writing Centers," USA, 2016. In 2017, Elena Bazanova did a Business Rhetoric course at Harvard University. Dr. Elena Bazanova is a member of the International Association of Writing Centers (IAWC), USA; European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), and the Association of Science Editors and Publishers, Russia. She is the President of the Association of Academic Writing Centers "National Writing Centers Consortium" established in 2018.

*Nadežda Stojković: Prof. Bazanova, you are a well experienced professor, with a significant record of outstanding achievements in your work. How would you define yourself – a professor, educator, project leader, innovator? What is the crux of your work?*

Elena Bazanova: For many years I regarded an old saying "Jack of all trades" as a compliment for a person who is good at fixing things and has a good level of knowledge in many areas. Until one day when a student of mine shattered my self-beliefs that guided my actions and influenced my goals, strategies, and accomplishments. I don't think that he meant to hurt my feelings or undermine my self-confidence, he just wanted to flaunt his brilliant knowledge of British sayings and proverbs. Nevertheless, the full version of that saying – "Jack of all trades, master of none", which I decided to prove wrong, determined the fundamental principles of my work – to hone my skills and competencies to succeed as a competent researcher, an educational innovator, and a motivating language teacher.

Many within higher education believe that one cannot become a good university teacher without a solid theoretical basis of teaching, and as a teacher one needs to be aware of what's going on in the education world and how this affects teaching and learning.

With this in mind, in 2010, when I was already a mature language teacher with a few published textbooks designed for English language learners in an academic English program, I applied for a PhD program in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) to do research into an area that was entirely new to me – the application and integration of Internet technologies in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. My PhD dissertation comprised three different domains – lexicology, which is a branch of linguistics that has its own aims and methods of scientific research, internet-based teaching methods, and management consulting.

You may wonder why I chose to investigate such a weird combination of topics. In fact, there were several reasons: to explore innovative technologies to immerse STEM students in real-world professional settings; to gain first-hand experience in management consulting to become an efficient project leader, and what's more important, to reflect on the beauty and power of the smallest meaningful unit of a language – the word – to approach the level of expertise and intelligence of my mum, who was a student of such great lexicologists of the English language as A.V. Kunin, R. S. Ginzburg, S. S. Khidekel, G. Y. Knyazeva, A. A. Sankin, Y.D. Apresyan, I.V. Arnold.

It was my dissertation research that awoke my now never-ending passion for science and transformed me from an 'old school traditional teacher', though a very good one, to a non-conventional and open-minded teacher and researcher who welcomes the challenge of transforming higher education through innovative ideas and technology insights.

Soon after I was awarded my PhD from the Maurice Thorez Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages (now the Moscow State Linguistic University), I was commissioned to establish a language training and testing center at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT). I did not know any nitty-gritty of management, but I was absolutely sure that the success of the center and the fate of all those who would have to work in it would depend on my professional competencies and experience. In those days I was not a manager. As Henry Mintzberg, a Canadian academic and business management expert, said in a 2004 interview with CNN: "You can teach all sorts of things that improve the practice of management with people who are managers. What you cannot do is teach management to somebody who is not a manager ... you cannot teach surgery to somebody who's not a surgeon." So, I set out to obtain a diploma in Educational Management and Leadership at the International House London and a certificate of Business Rhetoric at Harvard University.

A couple of years after the center was established it was acknowledged the best TOEFL iBT center in Russia.

And then a few more years later, I was appointed head of the department of foreign languages at the institute where I had worked as a faculty member for more than 30 years.

When I reflect on my work over the course of the past thirty-something years, I feel proud and extremely grateful for the variety of projects, small and large, in different industries and domains. I'd say no matter what I've been through, I am the enchanted soul (as in the novel by Romain Rolland), and my life is full and built on the foundation of love for my work, enthusiasm and inspiration that I always try to share with others. I am still struggling to become the best version of myself to make a difference in global education as a professor, educator, project leader, and innovator. ... Jack of all trades but oftentimes better than master of one.

N. S.: *Let us focus on education first. What is education for you? How is it performed, what is needed for it, how long does it last?*

E. B.: For me, education is the edifice of growth, development, and empowerment of humanity, the world around, and self. It is commonplace to say that the essence of education is learning new ideas, making new connections, and gaining fresh perspectives. But education is not just about learning new things from books; it involves gaining real-world experience beyond the classroom and applying this experience to create a holistic society of compassionate human beings, intellectually developed, professionally skilled, and socially committed. But the question how to achieve this lofty goal is a conundrum that I have yet to resolve for myself.

John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer known for his progressive ideas on pedagogical method, strongly believed that education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. It takes place throughout our life – ‘from cradle to grave.’ Recent research into early learning offers clues to what babies comprehend in utero and what they learn before birth, and how that information prepares them for the world outside the womb. The Guinness Book of World Records features an article about the oldest student in the world: 91-year-old Leonardo Altobelli, who graduated for the 15th time in 2023 with a degree in criminology. Prior to this degree, he had degrees in medicine and surgery, law, political science, literature, philosophy, pedagogy, agronomy, food science and technology, tourism science, history, biotechnology and archaeology, and investigative science. And that’s not all: he also obtained seven diplomas in social medicine, sports medicine, health law and general medical tutoring. This is truly incredible when you think about almost limitless capacity of the human brain for learning. Learning... Is it the same as education?

Albert Einstein admitted that the only thing that interfered with his learning was his education. Abraham Lincoln, William Shakespeare, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Steve Jobs, Henry Ford are the few examples of people who were college dropouts and became globally known for their invaluable contributions to the world. However, they represent only a handful of success stories as opposed to the ‘nobody’ status of the majority of college dropouts in reality.

I suppose they quit formal education because they did not want to be taught, with other people developing, structuring, and directing their process of learning in a systematized way. Being self-motivated and knowing their own true potential, they wanted to gain knowledge through real-life experience rather than trained educators. Formal education is vital but it’s not the only path to success. Yet, we cannot ignore its obvious benefits, such as interpersonal communication, sociocultural experience, character building, to name but a few.

Despite my considerable experience, I still strive to find a univocal definition of the meaning of education and consider it from various perspectives that incorporate myriad false dichotomies: individual vs. society, freedom vs. discipline, memorization vs. understanding, knowledge vs. skills, education for employment vs. liberal education, collaboration vs. competition.

N.S.: *Still focusing on education – what is your personal guiding principle?*

E.B.: In fact, there are three guiding principles that I formulated for myself years ago. I “borrowed” these principles from physics, which is no surprise as for almost three decades, I’ve been teaching English in the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT) founded by the Nobel laureates Pyotr Kapitsa, Lev Landau, and Nikolay

Semenov. These are MY interpretations of physical laws and principles that guide me in my teaching career.

Principle 1. Absolute Infinity of Knowledge (based on the uncertainty principle). This principle was formulated by the German physicist and Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg in 1927. The principle states that we cannot know both the position and speed of a particle, such as a photon or electron, with perfect accuracy; the more we nail down the particle's position, the less we know about its speed and vice versa.

I assume A. A. Milne in his children's book "The House at Pooh Corner" meant the same uncertainty principle when he described Pooh Bear's visit to Piglet:

One day when Pooh Bear had nothing else to do [...] he expected to find Piglet warming his toes in front of his fire, but [...] the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there.

The more we learn about something, the more we realize there's a lot more we don't know. I always tell my students that they should not arrogantly believe that they already know everything about their subject matter ... and the world around. How naïve of them! No matter how much knowledge they have acquired, it is still superficial. I encourage them to develop the habit of going the extra mile to learn more than required by their curriculum.

Principle 2. Interpersonal Energy Exchange (based on the Second Law of Thermodynamics) The law means that hot things always cool unless you do something to stop them. In my humble opinion of a person who knows little in physics but is fascinated by it, interpersonal relations are a perfect manifestation of this law – not to lose your energy and pass it to others, you need to constantly replenish it. Otherwise, you will suffer from emotional, physical, or mental exhaustion. The state that I metaphorically explain as 'professional or personal entropy' – unavailability of restoring your energy even by an external engine.

As an educator and a teacher, I made it an absolute rule for myself, my central guiding principle, to find inspiration and motivation in new things (this might be a professional development course, a hobby, a concert, no matter what) that learn on a daily basis, and what's more important to share what I learn with others to boost their energy.

Principle 3. Human-Human Entanglement (based on Quantum Entanglement Theory). Alain Aspect, John F. Clauser, and Anton Zeilinger won the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics for exploring a phenomenon where particles exist in an entangled state. The researchers experimentally proved that an action on one particle can predict the behavior of other particles. More precisely, if an observer determines the state of one such particle, its entangled counterparts will instantly reflect that state—whether they are in the same room as the observer or in a galaxy on the opposite side of the universe.

The Dalai Lama also reinforced the impact of our actions on others. Thus, he said: "Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects."

For me, this principle means that what I do affects my students, colleagues, all people around no matter how close or far away they are. And this influence must always be positive and encouraging.

N.S.: *How do you approach your students? What is the relationship between you?*

E. B.: I must admit that these days my approach is hardly applicable on a large scale. I'll try to explain what I mean. Most educational institutions have proclaimed student-

centered learning, also known as learner-centered education, as the foundation of personalized learning. Teachers are required to create connections with students' interests and the things students previously learnt. In other words, the ultimate goal is to make the educational process more meaningful to students. I very much doubt that this approach is effective.

Describing the ideal education, Winston Churchill wrote in his book *My Early Life*:

By being so long in the lowest form [at Harrow] I gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys.... I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence—which is a noble thing. Naturally I am biased in favor of boys learning English; I would make them all learn English: and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honor, and Greek as a treat.

Why do you think learning "dead languages" might be the very thing that gives learners the edge they need to succeed in life? The answer is obvious: learning Latin and Greek require abstract thinking, curiosity, and hard work. Students are likely to become more disciplined, have a stronger basis for further learning, [and] be a little more creative toward intellectual pursuits than most.

As educators, we need to prepare our students for life after graduation. Life is not always a bed of roses: in the workplace they will need to be disciplined, meet strict deadlines, do work that matters but not to their liking, think outside the box, and simply obey the rules. And there will probably be no special google-algorithmic-magic-recipe for getting a dream job.

Though I am a demanding teacher, my approach is based on clear communication, integrity, hopefully, mutual respect, and acknowledgment of the value and contributions of each student. Sometimes students resist when their preferred approach to learning is at odds with how this or that course is organized, or information is presented. In this case, I place myself in their situation of having to learn something they find confusing, irrelevant, or difficult. To experience what my students have to go through firsthand, I find a challenging course (of course, not a language course), get enrolled, and study. Such approach is quite sobering as it makes me more serious and thoughtful about my requirements to students. They value my commitment, and acknowledge the efforts to encourage and motivate them to continue their hard journey of learning.

N.S.: *Why did you choose to teach a foreign language? What is its value today? Has anything changed in its relevance?*

E. B.: Honestly, I had no other choice. I was doomed to become an English language teacher. Why? My mum was my first language teacher, and she is still my role model today! She is an outstanding person – in her youth, she went to a ballet school and played the piano, finished high school with a medal, and entered the Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology to become a chemist. A couple years after entering, she dropped out of university as she realized that her real calling was linguistics. She was absolutely great at teaching, and she was a brilliant lexicologist.

I was lucky not only to have my mum as a faculty colleague but also as a co-author of a wonderful book "Practice in Lexicology" in which we showed how to apply lexicology in English language teaching. Perhaps this is the book I am most proud of. It is dedicated to my first teacher and friend – my mother.

It's hard to overestimate the power of language learning, any language, in fact, including one's own. Let me just name a few values of language learning that are universal regardless of politics, religion, and ideology: it improves memory, boosts brain power, improves performance in different academic areas, enhances the ability to multi-task, improves knowledge of the first language, keeps the mind sharper for longer, enhances decision-making, increases networking skills, and as Winston Churchill said, it develops abstract thinking, curiosity, and makes a learner more disciplined.

Apart from these obvious values, there's another critically important value of language learning for the current world and even more vital for the future of our world – the use of the English language "as a global means of intercommunity communication."

*N. S.: How do you conceive of the educational system as a whole? What is your overall assessment regardless of the geographical differences?*

E. B.: The purpose of higher education has long been divided between liberal education, which is a wide, general knowledge base, and specialized training for particular professions. Specialized curriculum has been the predominant global norm. Surprisingly, though, given this persistent tendency, liberal education is becoming more and more important in higher education across the globe.

Many factors influence the success of the educational system as a whole. Psychological factors, which include motivation, intelligence, and personality. Social factors, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender. Other factors include access to educational technology, teacher quality, and parental involvement.

Speaking about tertiary education, technical higher education institutions in particular, I have a firm belief that curriculum should not revolve around or be defined by subject matter knowledge and a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills and knowledge for the common good. With all the emphasis these days on STEM disciplines, and the focus on "practical" training for careers, it is important that students also study liberal arts and find identity, meaning, and purpose in life.

It's a dream but Martin Luther King also had a dream. We all know that his dream came true because he had the courage to pursue it. So do I!

*N. S.: In which way do you educate yourself in your work? Who do you learn from, what do you read?*

E. B.: I read a lot, though the books I read are mostly non-fiction. I read them with the intent to learn and discover new ways of thinking, managing, and teaching, to understand myself more and get to grips with all the complicated decisions I very often have to make. Books I read are written by successful educators, great thinkers, prominent scholars in various fields, and certainty, by famous writers. Such books help me change and develop my overall personality, learn about people and remain at the forefront of hard science and humanities, as well as education and innovation.

My personal collection of books is an escape, a shelter, a place of pleasure, inspiration, and reflection. Of many books I have I'd recommend these few:

“What Does Your Fortune Cookie Say?: 80 Important Life Lessons the Universe is Trying to Share with You” by Adam Albrecht  
 “How the Mind Works” by Steven Pinker  
 “A Brief History of Time” by Stephen Hawking  
 “Man's Search for Meaning” by Viktor Frankl

N. S.: *How do you get inspiration for your projects and how do you approach the colleagues whom you invite to join you? What is the desired outcome of those projects on the whole?*

E. B.: I guess I'm lucky to have a well-developed intuition that guides me through daily challenges and helps me solve problems. All my projects, which were initially rather difficult to launch as they are far ahead of their time, have turned out to be successful not only at the level of a single university, but also at a national level for the overall higher education system.

For example, I am currently developing two very ambitious projects that require the perspectives of different academic disciplines: the creation of a series of textbooks for the English language curriculum for undergraduate students as an alternative replacement for textbooks by leading international educational publishers, like Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, and Macmillan.

The other large-scale project is the creation of AI-based testing system (ISTOK – Intellektual'naya Sistema Testirovaniya Obshcheyazykovykh Kompetencij) as a substitute of TOEFL iBT, IELTS, or Cambridge tests. The project team includes famous testologists, linguists, TESOL teachers, mathematicians who deal with mathematical statistics, neurolinguists, AI experts, and many others. ISTOK is an adaptive testing system deployed through neural network solutions. It provides assessment of receptive and productive language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) by using artificial intelligence and/or neurolinguistic models. The new approach to language skills testing can be used for various purposes in academia and industry, and the principles of AI training, validation, and test datasets can find wide application in various fields of applied research.

N. S.: *What is the area that you wish to explore next?*

E. B.: Digital Neuropedagogy, which is a recent discipline that draws on the fields of neuroscience, psychology and pedagogy to improve learning. I desperately need to acquire expertise in this field to further advance the AI-based testing system (ISTOK) project.

N. S.: *Are you satisfied with what you have done so far and what lies ahead of you?*

E. B.: Find a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life. I love my job, all its components: teaching, creating new courses, making strategic decisions, writing books, doing research, identifying development goals for my faculty members, organizing conferences, launching new projects. The scope is systematically expanding, and the emerging new tasks allow for the implementation of changes and innovation needed for improvement of work and ... life as well.

Here, I cannot help but agree with *Steve Jobs*, who once said: “Those who think they can change the world are the ones who do.” I want to be the one who changes the world.