

A nighttime photograph of a cityscape. In the foreground, a traditional Chinese gate with a tiled roof and ornate carvings is illuminated with warm orange lights. Behind it, several modern skyscrapers with lit windows rise into the dark blue night sky. The gate's structure features large circular openings, and its reflection is visible in the water in front of it.

# Developing Learner Agency in Your Classroom



## Meet Christien Lee



Christien Lee has worked in English Language Teaching for over 25 years. His roles have included teacher, teacher trainer, curriculum developer, materials writer, director of studies, school owner, consultant, and author. He has wide experience in ELT, but specializes in academic English and, particularly, exam preparation. Currently, his focus is on developing innovative e-learning materials and writing textbooks. He is the author of a dozen textbooks.

His books for National Geographic Learning include *21st Century Communication: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking*, *Pathways: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking*, and *World English Third Edition*.

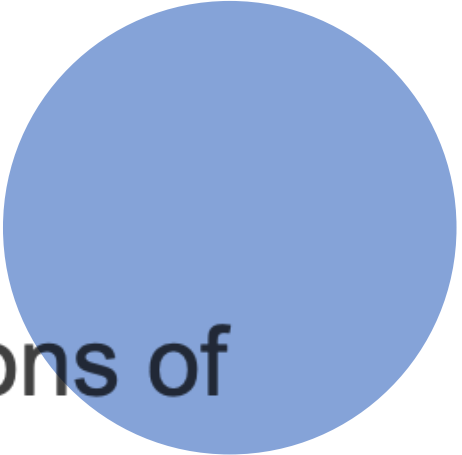
# Overview

- 1**    Introducing Learner Agency
- 2**    Exploring Principles and Best Practices
- 3**    Addressing Potential Issues
- 4**    Summing Up



# **Introducing Learner Agency**





There are many possible definitions of learner agency, but in simple terms, it can be defined as **letting students make learning-related choices.**


Learner agency is similar to two other concepts that are a common aspect of many ELT classes:

- Learner autonomy
- Personalization



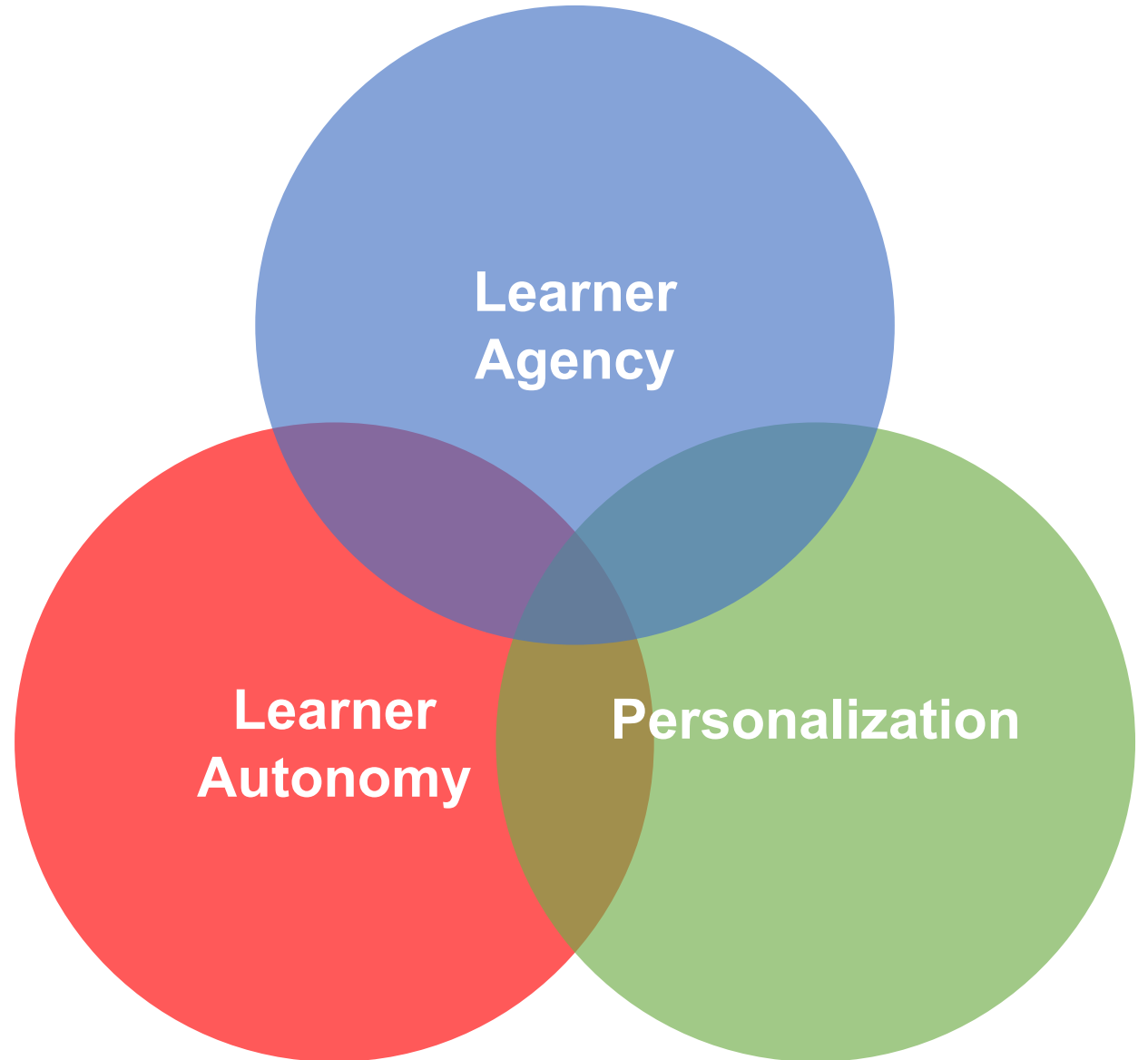
In simple terms, learner autonomy can be defined as **giving students the opportunity to take more personal responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.**

And again in simple terms, personalization can be defined as **giving opportunities for students to connect what they have learned to their own lives in ways that are personally meaningful.**





In an ideal world, of course, these three aspects of teaching can work together to create a classroom experience that is especially effective.



One reason learner agency, autonomy, and personalization are effective is that, in my experience, they can help students develop a “growth mindset.”



“In a growth mindset, people believe their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work – brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.

**Carol Dweck**





Contrast this with a “fixed mindset” which results in people feeling that things cannot be changed no matter what they do.



A student with a fixed mindset might say,  
“I’m no good at English.”

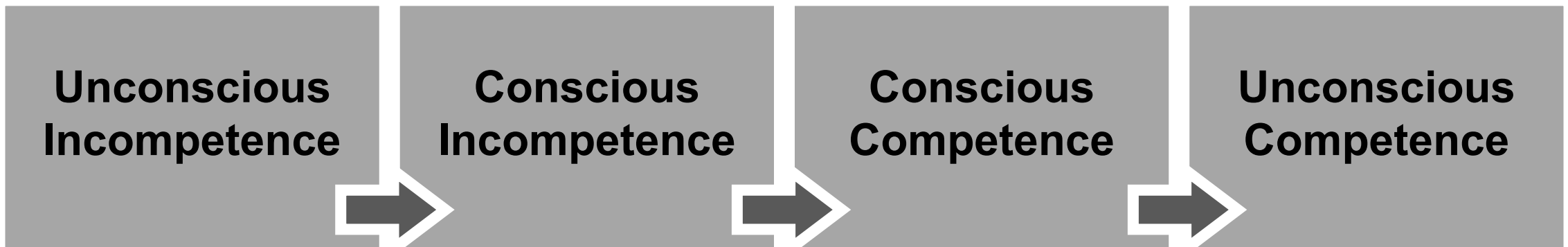


In contrast, a student with a growth mindset might say, “I’m no good at English yet ... but I’ll get better.”

Another reason these aspects of teaching are effective is that in my experience, they can help students become reflective learners.

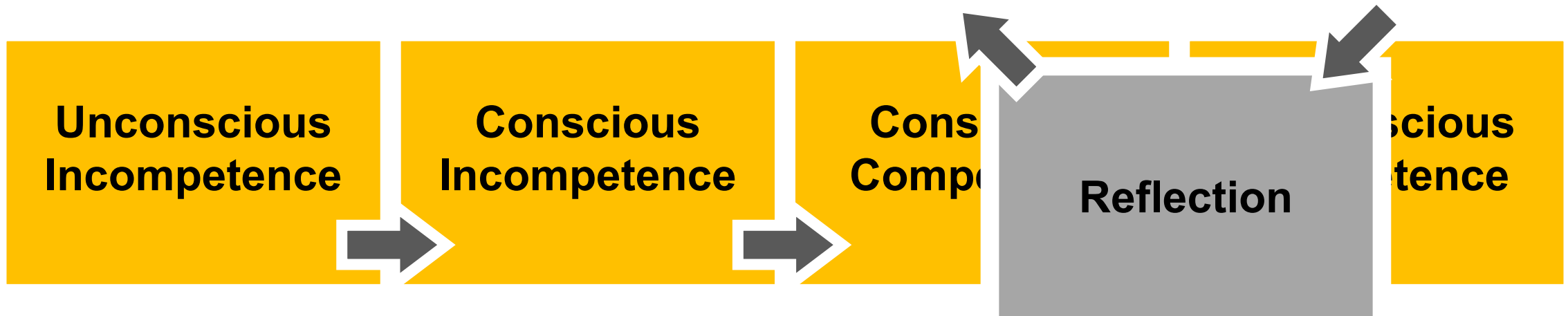
# The Conscious Competence Model

This psychological model describes four stages people go through when they learn something.



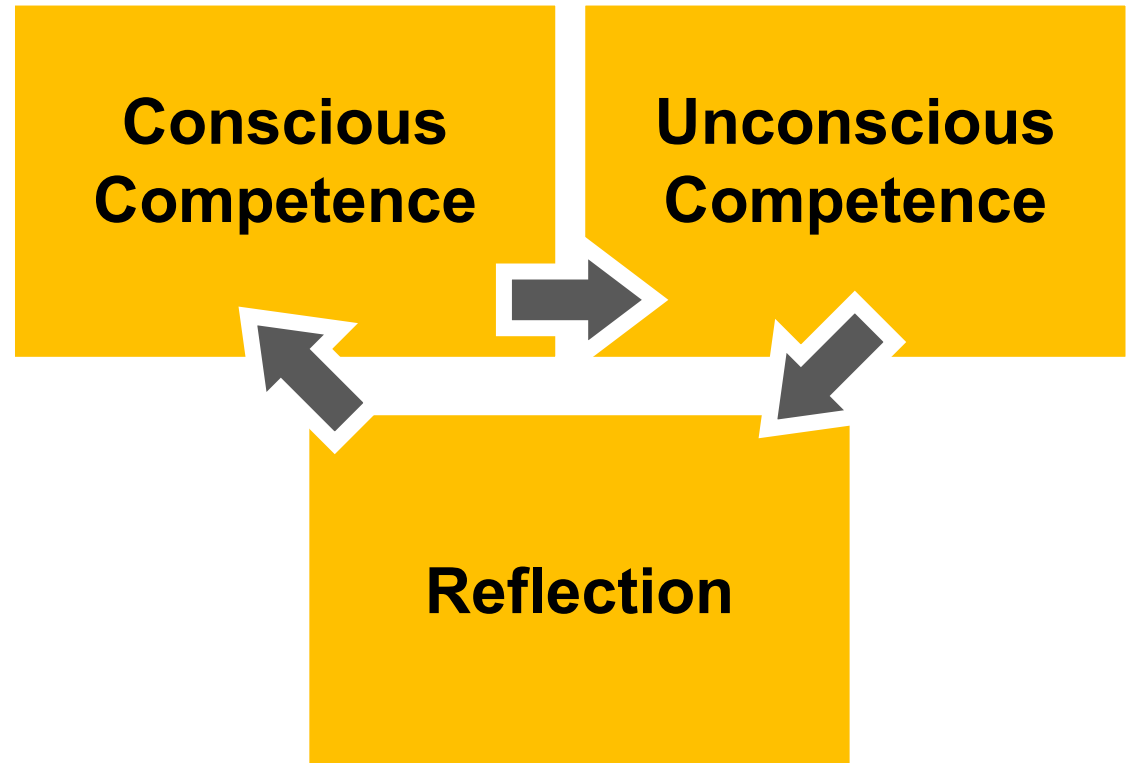
# The Conscious Competence Model

But over the years, I felt something was missing ...



# A **Revised** Competencies Model

Giving learners agency often leads to reflection and, in my experience, reflection can enhance the quality of learning.





**POLL**

# **2 Exploring Principles and Best Practices**

active learning

demand high  
teaching

the grammar-  
translation  
method

the flipped  
classroom

learner agency

**the communicative  
approach**

CLIL

the lexical  
approach

**POLL**

active learning

demand high  
teaching

the grammar-  
translation  
method

the flipped  
classroom

learner agency

**the communicative  
approach**

CLIL

the lexical  
approach



The grammar-translation method is inflexible: if you don't focus on grammar and do translation, you're doing it wrong!

In contrast, learner agency and the other teaching approaches are broad enough to accommodate a wide variety of ways of achieving them.

Based on this, we can say that when it comes to implementing learner agency in our classrooms, there is **no one “right” way to do it** and so we have **a great deal of flexibility**.

If you keep the definition of learner agency in mind, almost any activity could help develop it.

These suggestions for promoting learner agency are simple yet effective and easy to adopt / adapt:

- Offer strategies of value outside the classroom
- Set tasks that have personalization built-in
- Allow students to set aims and measure values
- Provide resources to help students do more
- Give students opportunities to make choices

The acronym **SPARC** may help you remember these suggestions:

- **S**trategies
- **P**ersonalization
- **A**ims
- **R**esources
- **C**hoices



# An example from *World English*:



## **GOAL CHECK** Describe Places to Live

Write a one-paragraph description of a place to live. Complete these steps in order.

Step 1: Choose the place you live now, a place you have lived before, or a place you would like to live in the future.

Step 2: Prepare to write the description. Use the checklist.

☐ Make notes about some ideas to include

☐ Review the guide to writing descriptive language

Step 5: Write a final draft and submit your description.



Give students opportunities to make choices



Set tasks that have personalization built-in



Offer strategies of value outside the classroom

# Another example from *World English*:



- B** In pairs, think of some social situations that are often difficult, such as starting a new job or giving somebody some bad news. Then, list the situations in order from the most to the least difficult.

## COMMUNICATION SKILL: Giving Advice

When people are in a difficult situation, other people may give them advice. For advice about emergency situations, it is common to use imperative clauses.

Cover your head.  
Move to a safe area.

or modals.

It's a good idea to change computer passwords regularly.  
You might want to change your online passwords more often.

English. In non-  
expressions

✓ Give students opportunities to make choices

✓ Set tasks that have personalization built-in

✓ Offer strategies of value outside the classroom



# An example from *Pathways*:



## FINAL TASK Giving a Persuasive Presentation

You are going to deliver an "elevator pitch." This is a short talk designed to persuade somebody to buy or invest in something. The name comes from the idea that if you were to meet a potential investor in an elevator, you should be able to deliver your whole talk before the elevator completes its journey. This is typically 60 seconds or less.

**A** Work with a partner. Brainstorm a smartphone app (a software application) that would help shoppers in some way, such as by solving a problem that many shoppers have. Discuss your app's benefits, features, price, and name.

**B** Complete the steps.

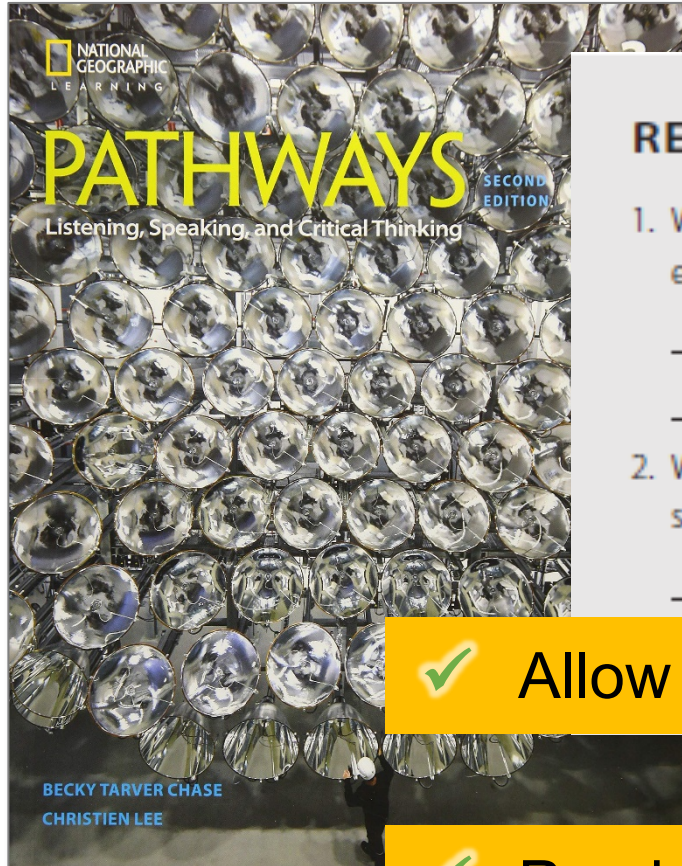
1. Create a plan for a 60-second elevator pitch to persuade others that your app would be helpful. Write down the questions you could ask. Practice delivering your pitch in 60 seconds or less.

**C** In a small group, deliver your pitch and answer any questions. Then listen to the pitches of other groups and ask questions of the shoppers.

✓ Give students opportunities to make choices

✓ Allow students to set aims and measure values

# Another example from *Pathways*:



## REFLECTION

1. What skill from this unit will help you present more effectively in the future?

---

---

2. What is the most interesting thing about how shoppers behave that you learned in this unit?

---

3. Here are the vocabulary words from the unit. Check (✓) the ones you can use.

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> addictive                 | <input type="checkbox"/> complex <small>AVL</small>  | <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> alter <small>AVL</small>  | <input type="checkbox"/> conduct <small>AVL</small>  | <input type="checkbox"/> mission                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> assume <small>AVL</small> | <input type="checkbox"/> consumer <small>AVL</small> | <input type="checkbox"/> out of stock                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bargain                   | <input type="checkbox"/> findings                    | <input type="checkbox"/> purchase <small>AVL</small>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bump                      | <input type="checkbox"/> frustrating                 | <input type="checkbox"/> retail                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ...                       | <input type="checkbox"/> ...                         | <input type="checkbox"/> sufficient <small>AVL</small> |

✓ Allow students to set aims and measure values

✓ Provide resources to help students to do more



# An example from *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication*:



**B COMMUNICATE** Work in a small group. What are some problems—global, local, or personal—that you would like to solve? How could having more data help? Discuss your ideas.

*A: I definitely think safer travel is important, but I'm not sure how having more data would improve travel safety.*

*B: Apparently some airlines use hundreds of sensors to get data while planes are flying. If the sensors detect a small issue, the airline can fix it as soon as*

*That's great!*

✓ Give students opportunities to make choices

✓ Set tasks that have personalization built-in

✓ Allow students to set aims and measure values



# Another example from *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication*:

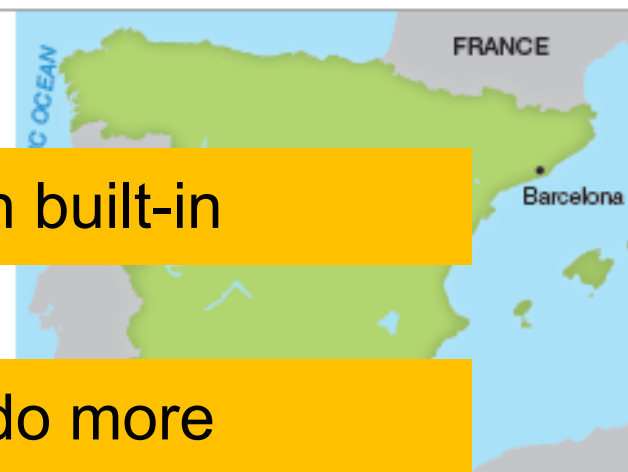


**D COMMUNICATE** Work with a partner. Take turns responding to these questions. Use the bold words in your responses.

1. Winning the lottery is many people's dream. Are there any **drawbacks** to winning?
2. If you could choose several foods to **feast** on, which ones would you choose? Why?
3. Think of a **thriving** business, such as a restaurant, that you know. What are some reasons it is doing so well?
4. Have you ever done something **intensively**? What did you do and why? What was the result?
5. In general, are you more of a **realist** or the opposite, an idealist? Explain.
6. Name some daily tasks that **deplete** your energy level. What tasks recharge you?

**learnmore** Veta la Palma fish farm is located on an island in the Guadalquivir River. The river runs through southwestern

as well as growing crops and raising animals. Veta la Palma is not a traditional fish farm in that its goals are not just to raise fish, but



✓ Set tasks that have personalization built-in

✓ Provide resources for students to do more

What does Creative Commons mean?  Bildersuche.org  
by Martin Missfeldt

**Creatives**  
Creatives enrich the internet with their works.

**Problem: what license?**  
Many creative people want to share their works for use, but...  
How do I explain the license conditions?  
What does it mean exactly?  
Artist User  
Licensing agreements are complicated.

**Solution:**  
**creative commons**  
Creative Commons (CC) is a nonprofit organization. It offers pre-licensing agreements. CC licenses are free, but...  
Four possible conditions are important to check:

**Version 3.0**

**Attribution (BY)**  
The author's name must be listed under or next to the work!

**No Derivatives (ND)**  
Exactly used! No editing!

**Non Commercial (NC)**  
No revenue by using of the work.

**Share! Gladly. But only under these conditions!**

As result of the combination of these conditions, the

| Icon | Short-Text      | means...                                       |
|------|-----------------|--|
|      | CC BY 3.0       | Only Attribution                               |
|      | CC BY-ND 3.0    | Attribution, No Derivatives                    |
|      | CC BY-NC 3.0    | Attribution and No commercial use              |
|      | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 | Attribution, No commercial use and No editing  |
|      | CC BY-SA 3.0    | Attribution, No commercial use and Share Alike |
|      | CC BY-SA 3.0    | Attribution and Share Alike                    |

**Important!** Creative Commons does NOT...  
In any case, at least the AUT...

**Advantages of CC licenses**

- Statement: free access to digital culture
- Interest in the processing and derivatives.
- Enlargement of the world's material pool.

**How to use CC licenses?**  
Include near your work a reference to the appropriate license and link it to the appropriate license agreement page. More about: <http://creativecommons.org/choose/>

**Sources:**  
creativecommons.org  
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative\_Commons  
feel free to use and share it, but please mention the author  
www.bildersuche.org/en/creative-commons-infographic

## UNIT TASK

You are going to collaborate with your classmates to create an infographic that describes different ways to become more creative.

**A** Look at some examples of infographics in this book and find some examples online. Then work with a classmate to complete the list below. Finally, share your list with the class and vote on the most important features.

**B** Work in a group to complete these steps.

1. As a group, discuss what your infographic should include.

✓ Give students opportunities to make choices

3. As a group, review your paragraphs from step 2. Give each other feedback and suggest ways to improve your writing.

✓ Set tasks that have personalization built-in

✓ Allow students to set aims and measure values

✓ Provide resources to help students do more

If you want to come up with your own tasks that promote learner agency, you may find it helpful to adopt / adapt these three principles:

- Keep the task as **accessible** as possible
- Ensure the task has intrinsic **interest**
- Try to include agency in **multiple** ways

A vertical yellow bar is positioned to the right of the list. To its right is a yellow rectangular box containing the word "AIM" in bold, black, uppercase letters.

**AIM**

**AIM** to keep the task as accessible as possible:

- The task should be a vehicle for delivering agency; it should not be a challenge itself.
- The task should be something every student in your class can manage, at least at some level.

**TIP** Use language below your students' level to explain what the task involves.



**AIM** to ensure the task has intrinsic interest:

- Tasks that offer agency can be motivating, but only if the task itself doesn't bore students.
- Be careful: even tasks with intrinsic interest can become boring as a result of topic fatigue.

**TIP** Ask questions about your students' lives in order to learn what interests them.

**POLL**

**AIM** to include agency in multiple ways:

- At a minimum, tasks should involve some personalization and let students make choices
- Tasks that provide strategies of broad value can be highly useful and motivating for students

**TIP** Remember the **SEA** rule for strategies: simple, effective, and actionable.



# **3 Addressing Potential Issues**

Although fostering learner agency has benefits, it may seem to have some potential drawbacks.

Luckily, there are simple solutions we can adopt to minimize each of these disadvantages.

One possible issue is that in many classroom situations, teachers are expected to “know what is best” for students.

Giving learners more agency may make it seem as if you are uncertain what is best for them.

Giving learners more agency may make it seem as if you are uncertain what is best for them.

➡ To combat this perception, it helps to be explicit about what you are doing and why.

(For what it is worth, I have found this to be a highly effective teaching strategy in general.)

Another possible issue is that teachers may be expected to be the focal point of the lesson.

Giving learners more agency may make it seem as if you are expecting them to do your job for you.

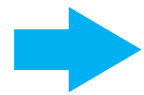
Giving learners more agency may make it seem as if you are expecting them to do your job for you.

➡ To combat this perception, it helps to take on a different, but still active role. Instead of being the “sage on the stage,” you can be a “guide on the side.”

A third possible issue is the difficulty of coming up with authentic, relevant, up-to-date content and tasks.

As a result, it is possible that students may find some of the opportunities for learner agency unexciting.

Students may find some of the opportunities for learner agency unexciting.



Use in-class monitoring in different ways:

1. Monitor to learn your students' interests
2. Monitor to gauge their mood (and be ready to move on if the activity isn't working).



A final possible issue is that when learners have agency, a lesson may go in directions that are both unexpected and unplanned.



Learner agency may cause a lesson to go in unexpected and unplanned directions.

➡ On the bright side, this can lead to engaging, motivating lessons full of emergent language.

Plus, it's *their* class, not *yours*, so shouldn't students have a say in its direction?

# 4 Summing Up

In this session, we covered several topics.

## **What is learner agency?**

Learner agency is similar to learner autonomy and personalization. In the simplest of terms, it is about giving students more choice and more opportunities to act in ways that they choose.



In this session, we covered several topics.

## **What are the advantages of offering agency?**

Learner agency can raise students' motivation and engagement by helping them develop a growth mindset and become reflective learners.

In this session, we covered several topics.

**What approach is needed when developing learner agency in the classroom?**

There are few rules when it comes to promoting learner agency because it allows teachers to be flexible in what they do and how they do it.

In this session, we covered several topics.

## How can we develop agency effectively?

Some effective ways to provide agency include the **SPARC** suggestions of providing strategies and resources for further study plus opportunities for personalization, making choices, and setting aims.

In this session, we covered several topics.

## What about tasks that provide agency?

Tasks that **AIM** to provide agency should be accessible, intrinsically interesting, and include agency in **multiple** ways.



In this session, we covered several topics.

## **Does learner agency have any issues?**

Developing learner agency in your classroom may seem to have some drawbacks. However, these are minor and there are relatively simple ways to overcome them.

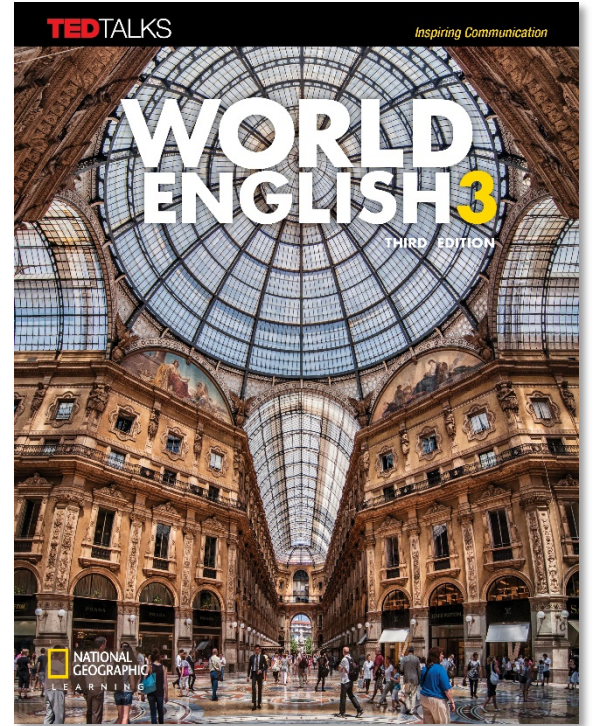
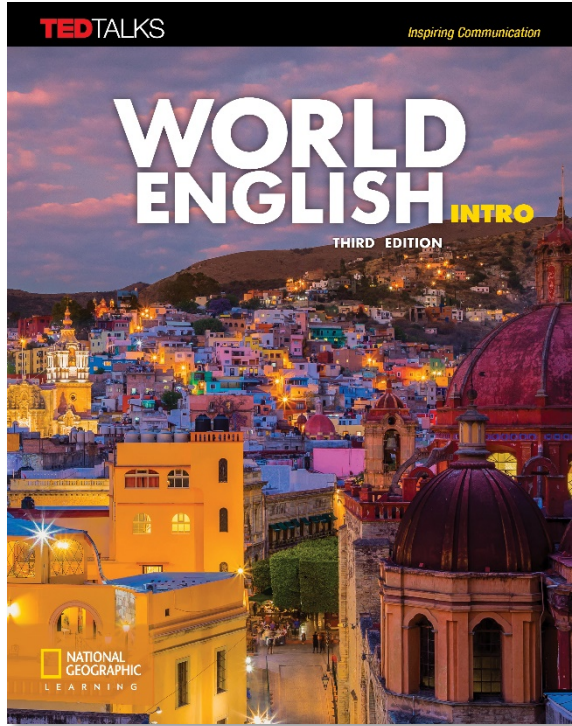
One thing we didn't cover yet is ...

**What should you do next?**

In a session on developing agency, it seems appropriate to leave that up to you!

**Thank You**

**Any  
Questions?**







## Bringing the world to the classroom and the classroom to life

In the spirit of bringing together educators around the world,  
we invite teachers of English to take part in a photo showcase called  
*Learning Moments*, by sharing photos of your everyday life.

### SNAP

Take photos of everyday life: food, landscapes, family and friends.

### WRITE

Describe how you would use each photo as a learning moment in your class.

### SEND

Visit [ELTNGL.com/learningmoments](http://ELTNGL.com/learningmoments) to  
submit up to five learning moments by October 31, 2019!



## Bringing the world to the classroom and the classroom to life

Grab your camera and take photos of everyday life around you!  
We are looking for photos that fall within these categories:

- Food
- Landscapes
- Family and Friends

Describe how you would use each photo in your classroom  
as a learning moment. Include the location and a short  
description of what is happening in the photo.

Submit up to five learning moment photos from  
**October 1 through October 31, 2019.**

Visit **[ELTNGL.com/learningmoments](http://ELTNGL.com/learningmoments)**  
to learn more and submit!

A PART OF CENGAGE

"National Geographic", "National Geographic Society" and the Yellow Border Design are registered trademarks of the National Geographic Society® Marcas Registradas



### Meet our *Learning Moments* Ambassador **Rubén Salgado**

Looking for tips on how to take an engaging photo? Connect with us on social media and the In Focus blog for advice from National Geographic Contributing Photographer Rubén Salgado.

Once the showcase is over, we will select a few learning moments to share. The selected learning moments will be showcased on the In Focus blog and National Geographic Learning social media channels to inspire other teachers around the world!

Connect with us on





Join National Geographic Learning!

# webinars

[ELTNGL.com/webinars](https://ELTNGL.com/webinars)

# in focus

[ELTNGL.com/infocus](https://ELTNGL.com/infocus)

