

Stepping outside the box

By Bonnie Bardaka

Being a teacher who likes to believe that I'm not just on the treadmill of exam preparation, I'm always looking out for ways in which I can show my students that language learning can both enrich their knowledge of the world as well as 'get them ready' for exams.

It's been a couple of years now since I've been reading about the Disabled Access Friendly campaign and their free-downloadable lessons, but time seemed to go by and there appeared to be nowhere to actually get my hands on the material. That's why I was pleased when eventually their website went online (www.disabled-accessfriendly.com) and I was able to go in and try out what had so long been promised. It was well worth the wait.

I wanted to start the New Year with something different for my B2 class but still stick within familiar 'exam' like territory. I felt that I wanted to motivate them for the last term of the year whilst introducing them to a topic which they wouldn't normally find in their course books.

The site is easy to find your way through and in no time at all I'd come across a lesson that had been sent in by Philip Kerr, called "Disability". Despite the title being a little general, I quickly realized that the lesson covered all of my needs - and I was even more reassured to see that there were full teacher's notes to help me through the material. I always find that it's one of the dangers when you use worksheets from the Internet or not from the course book - you're not quite sure what to do with them. Here Mr. Kerr had given his lesson to Disabled Access Friendly, and provided the guidance that I needed, especially on a topic that I wasn't very sure on how to approach with the students.

Once I told the students to close their books and that today we were going to do something else to start the year, there was already a lighter feeling in the room. When I followed with the personalized questions to get the students thinking about the subject, you could tell that they were curious where I was going with this - they were being asked questions that weren't so 'safe'. Often we fear stepping outside that box of exam topics and to ask questions about the real world, but the response was that immediately I had raised their interest. The story of a teenager, close to their age, being faced with a diagnosis of MS came as a shock to many but also allowed other students to talk in a safe environment about people who they knew who were disabled. Asking the students to do the

sentence gap fill just seemed to fit in naturally so that that they could have a fuller picture of the character, rather than doing exam practice.

Once I had the students in full discussion, they were already trying to search themselves for extra vocabulary so introducing how to do the word-building spider on disability both seemed natural and useful rather than contrived.

To be honest, what I had misjudged was my timing in this lesson - I'd thought that it would have been difficult to get the students to open up and actually talk on such a subject - but in fact it was the opposite - a challenging topic had been presented to them and they rose to it. Sorry Mr. Kerr but we never actually got round to the grammar section on positioning words of certainty and I didn't really care. Will they be asked about this subject in an exam - does it matter? They were using the language because they wanted to. At the beginning of a new term, I actually had my students talking and that is something to write home about.