

## ELT under the microscope

### Accessibility and ELT: A Long Journey Ahead?

By Sara Hannam

"Science may have found a cure for most evils; but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all -- the apathy of human beings." - Helen Keller, deaf-blind author, political activist and lecturer (1880-1968)

#### Time for a Change

In *Voices 205* I wrote an article in on how Teachers' Associations are engaging with the issue of SEN and ELT. I found that very few TAs around the world include this important area at events and conferences, or have policies regarding SEN learners or teachers. This is despite statistics showing that disabilities affect approximately 10% of the world's population. To help illustrate the importance of this issue, I decided to tell you about a friend and colleague from Greece who is really trying to make a difference, and whose approach to the issue may end up being one that other TAs and teachers wish to follow.

#### Paul's Story

I first met Paul Shaw 8 years ago. He worked as a teacher, teacher educator, language assessor and had his own company with a partner for a period of time. He then moved into educational consultancy publishing. Paul and I sat on the board of TESOL Northern Greece together from 2003-6 in the role of President and Vice President respectively. I had no idea when I first met Paul that he was dealing with a serious disability on a daily basis. What I saw was an intelligent, creative person full of energy and humour who inspired those around him and who had more energy than the rest of us put together. During our time on the board, Paul had to take a few days off now and then, but always returned quickly and never complained about his health. Through his actions, Paul demonstrated that he wanted to be treated the same as everyone else.

Paul has Stiff Person's Syndrome (sometimes called Stiff Man's Syndrome), a rare auto-immune condition, which affects his central nervous system, causing it to attack itself. This leads to severe and regular spasms. Since our time on the board, Paul's condition has worsened and in September 2008, he entered hospital for a period of six months. Despite numerous operations, treatments and procedures, Paul's spirit has always remained strong, and his positive attitude is something that his friends not only admire, but feel humbled by. Paul is now permanently in a wheelchair, but he is still living, working and contributing to ELT and is as much part of what we do as he ever was.

#### Greek Disabled Friendly Campaign

In 2009, Paul decided that he needed to raise awareness in Greece on the issue of special needs and ELT. In response to an article he had written on the life of a disabled person, he decided to set up a Facebook group called *Disabled Access Friendly* and

within a month the campaign had accumulated 800 members. Paul knew that for the campaign to be effective he had to take it onto the next level so he gathered a core of committed members, from a variety of backgrounds (both with special needs and without) and is establishing a website <http://www.disabled-accessfriendly.com/> to provide members of the ELT world with a forum for sharing experiences.

The website will also provide downloadable worksheets for all levels and lesson plans on the issue of raising awareness of disability. In addition there will be practical advice to schools on what steps they can take to allow access to all. A sample of the kind of information that the campaign is sending to stake holders in Greek ELT can be seen in the leaflet.

### **Taking it Further**

I hope you might consider how you could make a difference for those living with SEN. Some ideas might include:

- Setting up a SIG in your local TA and raising awareness,
- Including a section in your next talk/article on this important topic
- Raising the issue in your classroom
- Helping organizations you are part of have a clear Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy which takes into account the 10% of students and teachers who are affected and their needs.

I hope IATEFL will consider organizing a conference symposium on SEN and ELT and revisit their own policy to ensure that our disabled members are a visible part of our community. As Helen Keller's words demonstrate, we need to get active if things are going to change, and improving access to our profession is in our hands. Thank you Paul for your help in writing this article - it is dedicated to you.