



"If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" (George Orwell)

by Katie Quartano

EFL teachers already know how difficult it is to teach students not only how to convey meaning, but how to do so appropriately. It's not just what you say that counts, but how you say it, both in terms of tone and the choice of words and register you use. With this in mind, let us consider the language we ourselves both use and teach our students when talking about people with disabilities.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that people with disabilities are first and foremost people, people who have individual abilities, interests and needs, who are seeking to lead ordinary lives. They are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, neighbours, colleagues, students and teachers, just ordinary people with common goals, such as a home, a job and a family.

Secondly, people with disabilities do not want to be labelled and they do not want to be defined by their particular disability or medical diagnosis. Would you like to be known for your ingrown toenails, short sightedness or baldness, or by other characteristics? People have diseases, impairments, and disabilities, but they are not the sum product of their medical conditions. People have paraplegia; they are not "paraplegics". Never equate a person with a disability, for example, by referring to someone as an epileptic or a quadriplegic. After all you would not refer to someone as being a myopic, but as someone who wears glasses.

Therefore, it is preferable to use "people first" language and first refer to the person as an individual, who may be further defined in terms of his/her disability if this is appropriate and necessary. When we put the disability first, we unfairly label the individual, and labels carry negative stereotypes. For example, it is better to say a person who is deaf, rather than a deaf person, say a woman with arthritis, a child who has a learning disability, or a person with a disability. This way, the emphasis is placed on the **person**, not the disability. It should also be people first, when indicating disability groups. Talking about the disabled, the blind or the deaf implies a homogenous group, separate from society as a whole.

Have a look at the following examples and see whether the image created in your mind or the emotion in your heart is different according to how the same information is presented.

My friend is a handicapped patient and the victim of a terrible disease. In fact he is a tetraplegic.

<i>My friend is a person with disabilities, who has a disease which means he can't walk.</i>
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At this hotel the handicapped, the disabled, invalids and people who are wheelchair bound or afflicted by other medical problems can use the disabled parking, disabled rooms and the disabled toilets. Handicapped buses can be booked for tours.

At this hotel accessible parking, rooms and toilets are available for people with disabilities, and accessible buses may be booked for tours.

Both thoughts and words can shape reality. Thomas Merton (1948) first coined the term "self-fulfilling prophecy", meaning that the words used about a person have a powerful impact on that person. Words have a powerful impact on society too, and as a society's language changes, perceptions and attitudes will change too. This is not just political correctness but good manners and respect, which will help create a more inclusive and empowered society.

The Disabled Access Friendly Campaign encourages language teaching that raises awareness about people with physical disabilities, and aims to sensitise children and teachers both in and outside the classroom. The campaign encourages the use of "people first language". Can you build it into your vocabulary and that of your students and **help raise awareness of the world in which we live and try to make it a better place?**

Look out for the launch of our website, with free downloadable teaching material that can be used in class for skills building as well as examination practice, but that will at the same time raise awareness about issues affecting people with physical disabilities. Feel free to contact us at disabledaccessfriendly@hotmail.com, or join us on Facebook "Disabled Access Friendly".

