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## Free ELT lessons in life that matter



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Are you the kind of teacher who wants to use the ELT classroom to do something more than just teach English? Do you want to be able to help students become adults who will take responsibility for the world in which they live? Do you believe that you could use your ELT teaching to develop students' social conscience and encourage critical thinking through a curriculum of social empathy? Good teachers know that in terms of the person, education is a process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, and intellect sharpened. In terms of the community, they understand that education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving the community a better place than you found it. On a global scale, and as Nelson Mandela so aptly stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." At the Disabled Access Friendly campaign we have taken these principles on board.

But before I continue, let me first ask you some questions.

1. Were the ideas above all part of the vision you had when you started your career as a teacher?
2. Did this vision maybe slowly start to slip onto the back burner when the constraints and requirements of the syllabus, the course book and exams reared their head?
3. Do you sometimes find the topics in course books a bit too squeaky clean? (If you do, then probably your students do too).
4. Do you have the time and energy to create from scratch materials that raise awareness about possibly sensitive social issues? About the "no no", topics? About disability, for example?

Keep reading, this can all be sorted out.

In the last edition of Linguaglobe I gave an account of the background, goals and achievements of the Disabled Access Friendly campaign. This voluntary initiative uses ELT to raise awareness about **mobility** disability. (I have put mobility in ***bold italics*** to stress that the campaign does not cover other forms of disability, only mobility disability). Even if you don't have a permanent disability, at some point or other some kind of mobility disability is likely to afflict all of us, maybe as the result of old age, an accident or an operation. Disabled Access Friendly centres on a website [www.disabled-accessfriendly.com](http://www.disabled-accessfriendly.com) with free English language teaching material at all levels. This material provides students with the information necessary to allow them to put themselves in the shoes of someone with a mobility disability and stimulates them to think about the issues these people face on a daily basis and understand better how they feel. The material also encourages them to challenge their own attitudes and preconceived ideas about disability and to examine their own behaviour. At the Disabled Access Friendly campaign we believe that if students are given information about mobility disability, then having understood more about this issue, they themselves will at some point demand and ensure that appropriate improvements are made. In this way ultimately people with mobility disability, and all of us, will benefit, and that is the campaign's overall goal.

Big words, big ideas, big goals. 126,000 page hits in 2013 from over 135 countries worldwide tells you already how warmly teachers have embraced the campaign's work. The campaign would not have had this kind of success if it simply encouraged teachers to walk into the classroom with a somber look on their faces and announce that "Today's lesson is about **disability** and the 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional." You can imagine the kind of reception that would get. We try and take a back door approach. As Pat Jackson said in his recent article about the campaign, "It's impossible to care about something you know nothing about, so teachers providing information about life as a person with a disability are building the pathways for caring and action." ([www.ELTNEWS.com](http://www.ELTNEWS.com), 26 July, 2013).

If you are teaching in Greece you may like to know that all Disabled Access Friendly's resources have officially been approved by the Institute of Educational Policy of the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religion for use in primary and secondary education.

Let's take a look at some of the campaign's free material so you can see what kind of issues the campaign's material covers, and how you can use it in practice and engage your students. I'll start with young learners.

### **Young learners**

When you are teaching young learners, a good course book can provide a great feeling of security, both for the teacher and the students. It gives you the teacher a well organised framework that enables you to deliver the building blocks your students need in order to learn English, and the format and topics used are specially designed to appeal to young children. Pets, families and sports tend to feature heavily. How can you introduce a sensitive issue like mobility disability to students with very limited English language skills, and little experience of the world? I suggest you consider using some of the campaign's graded reading texts and lessons in parallel with your course book. These combine the following elements:

- Language suitable for A1/A2 level
- Topics appealing to young children
- Texts and follow up exercises prompt children to think about issues facing people with mobility disability and to consider attitudes and behaviour towards people with mobility disability.

One such reading text is entitled “A dog on wheels”. It is about a dog whose back legs are injured and it is therefore harnessed to wheels so it can move. The text provides practice of the present simple tense and uses very simple vocabulary. The dog’s friends ask it inappropriate questions, which focus the conversation on its disability. They also make various negative assumptions, for example that the dog’s life must be miserable because of its disability. The dog explains that this kind of behaviour makes him feel bad. In this way the text indirectly provides children with information about how a wheelchair user can feel and how to behave towards someone with a mobility disability. This is consolidated in the follow up exercises, where the dog’s experiences are transposed to a little girl who uses a wheelchair.

“Party time” is about another little girl, who is getting ready for a party. Like most little girls, she takes great pleasure in getting dolled up. The text provides practice of the present simple tense and uses vocabulary about clothes and appearance. Only at the end is it revealed that the child is a wheelchair user, and readers discover that she feels she is made unattractive by her wheelchair. The text puts the reader in the position of the little girl, and stimulates thought on the issues she faces and how she feels.

You can see that in neither of the above examples were the students initially aware that the underlying issue was that of disability. They were led in through the pleasant and familiar gates of pets and parties, and came out the other end with some different information and thinking about something a bit more meaningful.

You could consider another “safe” topic, that of sports, to get young learners thinking about issues of infrastructure and accessibility for people with a mobility disability. A lesson plan on *can/can’t* uses the familiar idea of two friends, Helen and Jenny, both of whom *can* play various sports. There is no need to mention that Helen is a wheelchair user or even draw attention to this fact; the students can see a photo of her for themselves. After the girls have worn themselves out playing basketball and tennis, they want to go to Jenny’s house to relax together. A photo of Jenny’s house, which has a flight of steps up to the front door, produces the first sentence with “*can’t*”, as Helen can’t go to Jenny’s house. She is excluded from such a simple pleasure because the building is inaccessible to her. Again, there is no need to say anything, your students will be thinking all the right thoughts on their own.

“Babies love learning about the world” practices both the present simple and the present continuous. The text talks about how babies reach, grab, crawl and learn to walk, and how these skills enable them to explore their environment. Young readers are introduced to a really cute baby, who has the same instinctive desire to explore her world, but is unable to do so easily because of a mobility disability. A video clip can be shown, which shows a kind of wheelchair for babies that enables them to move around by operating a joy stick. The text indirectly shows how someone with a mobility disability is restricted in reacting with his environment, and how technology can help.

So you can see how by using the Disabled Access Friendly campaign’s free material, even at young learner level, you can introduce issues concerning mobility disability into the classroom in a non-threatening, non-preaching way. You can stimulate thought on infrastructure, accessibility, opportunity, and other people’s attitudes and behaviour whilst at the same time doing your job of teaching and practising English with your students.

Bonnie Bardaka, an ELT teacher in Greece specialising in young learners, used material from the Disabled Access Friendly campaign in her class and told us “My students didn’t know much about disability, so it was hard for them to care about these issues. They are now aware of simple things that make a difference.” One of her nine year old students made the following comment “Now I say to my

Grandpa: Please Grandpa, don't park your car on the pavements." This child has taken what she has learned out of the classroom and is applying it to her family. Bonnie also told us that her class insisted on going round the neighbourhood, leaving notes on cars parked on the pavement or on ramps, and that they also got their parents involved in this activity. The lesson moved out of the classroom and into the community. Remember that somewhat pompous statement at the beginning of this article that said "Education is for leaving your community a better place than you found it". Bonnie seems to have managed this by using material from the Disabled Access Friendly campaign with her class.

### **Lower intermediates**

Teaching students at lower intermediate level can present a challenge. You've probably exhausted the familiar topics of hobbies, summer holidays and celebrations, and would like to work on something with a bit more substance. You want to encourage your students to know that they are not helpless to overcome the gaps between ideals and reality. When they "finish" with English, you would like to feel that in your class they learned something more than just a foreign language.

With this in mind, you will need material that fulfils the following criteria for younger lower intermediate students

- It is suitable for B1 level
- The topic appeals to young students
- The content raises social awareness, without making the text unappealing or boring

With older or adult lower intermediate students you need to find material that incorporates the following:

- It is suitable for B1 level
- The topic appeals to older students or adults
- The content raises social awareness, without sounding patronising or insulting the reader's anticipated existing level of knowledge on the subject.

### **Younger lower intermediates**

For younger lower intermediate students you could try using a text entitled "Facebook asks what you dislike most about being a wheelchair user". The text uses familiar and appealing Facebook layout and colloquial language, and is based on responses received from actual teenage wheelchair users. Unsurprisingly students are quickly engaged. The text highlights inappropriate behaviour towards wheelchair users. For example, pet hates include people addressing the wheelchair user's companion rather than the wheelchair user himself, or treating the wheelchair user as though he has mental disabilities as well as physical disabilities. Readers are prompted to think about whether they can see beyond someone's disability and whether they would interact with a wheelchair user in the same way as they do with someone without a disability. Don't worry – you'll still be teaching English. There are follow up activities and exercises including uses other than ability of the modal verb "can" and the modifier "too".

Still with younger lower intermediate students in mind, a text about a pop group will easily attract their attention. "Staff Benda Bilili" is a successful pop group from Africa. The band members are all wheelchair users, and although not popular in their native country of the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, they have achieved considerable success in the UK. The text's vocabulary is based on the music industry. The text makes readers think about how rare it is to see performers with a mobility disability, and to consider integration, as the musicians were not welcomed by other bands because of their disability.

### **Support from eminent ELT figures**

At this point I would like to state that the Disabled Access Friendly campaign is very grateful for the support it has received from internationally respected and well-known ELT experts and materials writers, including Sean Banville, Lindsay Clandfield, Kieran Donarghy, Carol Everhard, Rachel Finnie, Simon Greenall, Mike Harrison, Ed Joyce, Fergal Kavanagh, Philip Kerr, Vicky Loras, Sue Lyon Jones, Ian Mackenzie, Malcolm Mann, Cliff Parry, David Petrie, Luke Prodromou, Nikoletta Rapti, Marjorie Rosenberg, Michael Swan, Adrian Tennant and Ken Wilson. These people have all kindly endorsed the work of the Disabled Access Friendly campaign by voluntarily contributing specially written lesson plans for the site. Let's look at two of these, which are suitable for older or adult students at lower intermediate level.

### **Older lower intermediates**

Sue Lyon Jones contributed a lesson plan entitled "Anna's new job". The lesson encourages students to think critically about their attitudes towards people who have a mobility disability, and to question general stereotypes about people with disabilities. Anna tells us how excited she is about her new job working part-time at a library. Students are invited to comment on whether they think Anna will only be able to do easy tasks; on whether her employer must make sure her workplace is suitable for her needs; on whether they think she won't be able to work very fast; and on whether they think she will spend a lot of time off sick. The text practices expressing likes and dislikes, giving personal information and asking simple questions.

Lindsay Clandfield's lesson entitled "See the person I can" is based on two YouTube video clips. In case you don't have internet access in your classroom, the Disabled Access Friendly campaign has made sure that any video clips used in their lessons are also available in MP3 format on the site. Clandfield's lesson requires a degree of lateral thinking and encourages students to see the person first and not the disability. The statement in the opening paragraph "Education is a process by which character is formed" was not only referring to children.

### **Upper intermediates**

There is tremendous pressure on both the teacher and the students in an upper intermediate level exam class. The school's reputation and your own ability as a teacher seemingly hang on your students' ability to pass an exam. Under these conditions it may be that you feel your lessons are reduced to just making sure that your students have done the necessary groundwork and developed the required exam technique in order to reach this goal. This can be disheartening for everyone as this is not really what education is all about; you know that, and deep down, so do your students.

As I have already suggested, an announcement along the lines of "Today's lesson is about the 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional and disability" would not be met with whoops of joy, but the dreaded 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional is something that has to be covered at this level. Nikoletta Rapti's lesson "An accessible kitchen" presents students with an illustration of an ordinary kitchen. You can teach or revise the vocabulary first (tap, cupboard, sink,...,etc.) and then go on to ask whether it would be easy for a wheelchair user to use the kitchen. This produces sentences using the modifier "too", such as "The cupboards are too high for him

to reach”, and you can move quite naturally into the 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional by asking students for suggestions for improvements. “If the cupboards were lower, he would.....”. The 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional has emerged smoothly from the context and at the same time students have given some thought as to the many practical difficulties faced by people with mobility disability that most of us have never even realised. Had you ever given much consideration to the fact that the difficulties go way beyond steps and a lack of ramps? That there are difficulties even in the kitchen?

After using material from the Disabled Access Friendly campaign, Clementine Afthonidou, a state school teacher in Greece working mainly with students in B2 exam classes, told us “Mobility disability is not included in the school textbook. My students put themselves in the position of the wheelchair user and tried to understand his feelings and the difficulties he faced.” Here also is some feedback provided by one of her students “ I think that *everyone* can do something to support these people. “Let’s give it a try.” The student has put herself into the equation and is on the road to taking on responsibility. Her comment reflects the social model of disability that says that improvements to make life better for people with disabilities can be made by everybody and not just by members of the medical profession or other experts.

Why not be brave and use a reading text that is not only about the “no no” subject of disability, but also mentions the “no no” subject of heaven. “Are there wheelchairs in heaven?” is a quite philosophical piece adapted from an article written by a wheelchair user. In terms of language it practises gerunds. The article refers to a eulogy for a recently deceased wheelchair user, in which it is suggested that death has set him free, as in heaven he will be able to walk again. The issue raised is whether this was an acceptable thing to say. Uncomfortable issues often provoke a real desire in students to express their opinion, and thus a need for language and vocabulary. If you can create that kind of need in your classroom through your choice of material, your students will be highly motivated to learn and participate in class.

On a lighter note, “My wheelchair wedding” talks about the difficulties a wheelchair user experienced when choosing a bridal gown that would not get caught up in her wheels. The topic will appeal to young adults, and like the example with the kitchen, introduces a practical consideration that most people have probably never thought about. And what about buying clothes in general, what about carrying your purchases home when you need both hands to push your wheels, and what about the best handbag to carry? There are many opportunities to develop a lively classroom discussion that will get your students thinking and talking.

### **Advanced levels**

One of the joys of teaching more **advanced level** classes is that your students’ level of language is sufficiently proficient to allow you to explore abstract as well as concrete issues with them. You need material that not only builds and practises skills, but also stimulates their interest and motivates them to participate in discussions and follow up activities. Raising awareness about the world in which we live in order to improve it is a cornerstone of education. Your students want to come away from your classes feeling that their eyes have been opened to something more than just the difference between the past simple and the present perfect. They covered that last year, and the year before.

Antonia Vasileiadou, a state school teacher working in Greece with proficiency level students, used the warm up question “How often do you see people with disabilities in the streets?” Student responses

reflecting the situation in Greece included “I don’t often see wheelchair users because there aren’t that many” and “Most of the people I see in wheelchairs are beggars.” She went on to use a lesson plan that she wrote herself for the Disabled Access Friendly campaign. Vasileiadou’s lesson “Stepping into their shoes” is built around two video clips, one about the difficulties faced by wheelchair users in getting around Athens, and one showing wheelchair dancing. Vasileiadou said “The warm up revealed stereotypes and the material encouraged them to recognize their own responsibilities as citizens.” One of her students told us “After the lessons I definitely started thinking differently. In addition I learned to appreciate my life and deal with my problems differently.” These comments reflect what we said about education being about character building and for leaving your community better than you found it.

Vasileiadou followed up with a second lesson entitled “Attributes”. This concentrates on enriching students’ vocabulary and provides a long list of characteristics of personality, such as amusing, argumentative, bright, conceited, dependent, depressed, fun to be with, good natured etc. The exercises require students to match these characteristics to pictures of two young women, one of whom is a healthy athletic type, and the other is a wheelchair user. The exercise reveals stereotypes, and invariably results in far fewer positive attributes being attributed to the wheelchair user, even though none of the words have anything to do with a person’s physical capabilities. The point can be hammered home by later revealing that in fact the photo of the wheelchair user is actually posed by an actress, and that it is the healthy, athletic looking type who is actually the one with a mobility disability. In this way students are stimulated to examine their own preconceived ideas about disability, to examine how disability is portrayed in the media, how this has coloured their own opinions, and to ask themselves whether what they see first is the person or the disability.

### **Business English**

When you are teaching Business English it can be difficult to find reading texts that are both relevant to your students’ purpose in learning English and of an appropriate level of language. At the same time, you want the text to be thought provoking so it can generate a stimulating class discussion or follow up activities, and you don’t want it to insult your students’ existing level of knowledge or intelligence. Nor do you want it to be so specialised that you would first need to take a masters degree in banking and economics in order to be able to understand it yourself.

“Wheelchairs and the workplace” is a personal account of a wheelchair user who graduated from university and entered the workforce. Her internal check list when considering employment opportunities, such as training, career development, location and salary, also had to include the equally important subjects of lifts, ramps, and accessible toilets. She was determined not to accept a job solely because of the ease of accessibility. Just like everyone else, she was looking for a job to fulfill her desires, interests, and goals. The text raises the issues of accessibility, motivation, and moral and legal obligation for employers to make accommodations for people with mobility disability. Similar ideas are raised in a text at a much lower level of English entitled “Access, all areas”. The text shows the author’s humiliation at being forced to conduct his banking business on the pavement, because he could not enter the bank in his wheelchair, and also the bank’s attitude to people with disabilities. It is based on a newspaper report about the resulting court case.

Ethical business issues are introduced in a text called “Segregated community of people with disabilities”. This text is based on a newspaper report on a community of dwarves who charge an admission fee for visitors to come and look at them. Since they are unable to find employment, this is how they sustain themselves. Shocking items usually provoke animated class discussions.

Marjorie Rosenberg's lesson entitled "Making business accessible for all", which is kindly shared by Cambridge Professional English Online, includes a lively group activity, the instructions for which are as follows: "You have been asked by your company or your institution to come up with a plan to make your premises, business or institution more accessible to those with disabilities. You will have to present your plan to the board and the best plan will be the one implemented. Work together to come up with ideas that are feasible and can be carried out. Think about the costs to the company and how your plan will become cost-efficient in the long-run." This is a hands-on, practical exercise for students of Business English, which will introduce ideas and concepts that hopefully they will take with them when they leave the classroom.

### **How can I support the Disabled Access Friendly campaign?**

Apart from using Disabled Access Friendly's teaching resources, there are many ways you can support this totally voluntary campaign.

#### **Spread the word**

- Show your colleagues the Disabled Access Friendly website and share teaching material you use
- Post information about the campaign on your Facebook wall and Tweet about us and encourage others to do the same
- Post information about the campaign on relevant sites and blogs
- Download, print and display our poster
- Add our downloadable banner to your blog.

#### **Become an ambassador**

If you are attending an ELT event, either as a participant or as a speaker, maybe you could consider:

- Distributing leaflets or making these available at the event
- Putting up a poster
- Talking to colleagues about the campaign
- Including a slide about our work in your own presentation

(Our current ambassadors include Hassan Ait Mane, Julie Aliverti, Lindsay Clandfield, Jeffrey Doonan, Ben Goldstein, Jamie Keddie, Sue Lyon Jones and Gerard McLoughlin and Waleed Nureldeen).

#### **Contribute teaching material**

You could send in a simple idea, suggestion or worksheet, or contribute a full lesson plan with activities. We welcome contributions from teachers or other interested persons - you do not have to be a materials writer to contribute. If your contribution is published on our site this can enhance your CV. For more details please see Authors' Guidelines on our site.

#### **Involve student teachers**

If you are a teacher trainer then encourage student teachers to write a lesson plan or worksheet that helps raise awareness, with the incentive that perhaps it will be uploaded to the Disabled Access Friendly site and used by teachers globally.



### **Be a teacher who makes a difference**

I would like to close with a quotation from Luke Prodromou, which has become one of the campaign's slogans: "The best teachers and schools have always done more than just prepare students for tests. They raise awareness of the world in which we live and try to make it a better place."

Please visit our site [www.disabled-accessfriendly.com](http://www.disabled-accessfriendly.com) for material to help you be one of those teachers and watch one of our presentations online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqTqmOndYv8> or <http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2013/sessions/2013-04-09/lessons-life-matter> to understand more. Even if you only manage to open the eyes of one student, you have got to the heart of education, and that could be the student who will change the world.

### **References**

Pat Jackson, [www.ELTNEWS.com](http://www.ELTNEWS.com), Pat on the Back "Hey, Teacher! What are YOU for?" 26 July, 2013

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