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A campaign using ELT to promote social awareness

Katie Quartano describes the growth of the Disabled Access Friendly campaign.

The idea to create a campaign which would use ELT to raise awareness about mobility disability issues had its beginning when an article, entitled “A day in the life of a disabled person” and published in December 2009 by an Athens-based English language newspaper, provoked a tremendous response from ELT colleagues in Greece. The article was written by Paul Shaw and was a very personal account touching on both his positive and negative experiences of being a wheelchair user living in Thessaloniki, N. Greece. Shaw has been working in the field of ELT for 20 years in Greece, as a teacher, teacher trainer, academic advisor, examiner and freelance project manager and editor for international ELT publications. He was also Chair of TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, Northern Greece. EFL teachers working in Greece used Shaw’s article in their classrooms as a springboard for stimulating discussion on the issue of mobility disability, a topic which rarely features in ELT coursebooks. The positive response and level of interest shown by their students prompted these teachers to ask Shaw whether similar articles or teaching material were available for them to further explore issues of mobility disability with their students, and the Disabled Access Friendly campaign was born.

Shaw started to think about how he could combine his experience in ELT with his more recent experience of being a wheelchair user, to help make the future better for people with a mobility disability. At this point, the main goal was to encourage private language schools, of which there is a vast number in Greece, to improve accessibility to their premises for students with mobility disability. As a first step Shaw started a Facebook page called “Greek Disabled Access Friendly” with the idea of raising awareness about mobility disability. The page very quickly got a huge following and Shaw began to consider how to take this initiative further.

At this early stage in 2010 he was joined in his efforts by Katie Quartano, who, like Shaw, is based in Thessaloniki, Greece. She brought her experience in business administration and marketing to the campaign. Quartano works for the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, is a qualified teacher of EFL and has worked as an oral examiner for Cambridge ESOL and the Hellenic American Union for many years. Shaw and Quartano soon realised that the really powerful tool they had in their hands was access to practically every child in Greece, in other words to a whole generation of children. This is



due to three reasons: 1) English is part of the national curriculum in Greece from a very early age; 2) the vast majority of children in Greece also have out-of-school private tuition in English; and 3) EFL teachers in Greece have a high degree of flexibility and autonomy in choosing what material they will use in their classrooms.

Teachers are in a prime position to enlighten the younger generation. Nelson Mandela said “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” and the teaching of EFL can be a powerful and important vehicle for raising awareness about social issues. Teachers know very well that education is not only about acquiring knowledge and skills; it embraces social improvement, respect for others, and the promotion of well-being, truth, fairness and equality. Good teachers encourage students

“Many EFL teachers in Greece had started their careers with the vision that they would be able to do something more than just teach the English language, but this vision had somehow got lost along the way.”

to realise that they are not helpless to overcome the gaps between ideals and reality. They realise that education should equip children to become adults who will take responsibility for the world they inhabit, and to think and question what they see and hear. After all, an awareness of the world in which we live and the belief that through their own actions students have the ability to make improvements, are at the heart of education. Shaw and Quartano had the impression that many EFL teachers in Greece had started their careers with the vision that they would be able to do something more than just teach the English language, but this vision had somehow got lost along the way, due to the constraints and requirements of the syllabus, the coursebook and examination preparation.

A win-win opportunity was beginning to show its face, as Shaw and Quartano came to the conclusion that they could provide EFL teachers with material that would not only teach English, but would also help develop students' social conscience, make lessons meaningful, and encourage critical thinking through a curriculum of social empathy. Everyone would gain – teachers would have the opportunity to raise social awareness in their classrooms and do something possibly more valuable than teaching the intricacies of tenses in English, and students would have the chance to explore issues not usually covered in the coursebook. Shaw and Quartano felt that if students were given information about mobility disability, then having understood more about this issue, they themselves would then at some point demand and ensure that appropriate improvements were made. In this way people with mobility disability would also benefit, and that is the overall goal.

Shaw and Quartano wanted to make sure that the campaign's teaching material would demonstrate that people with mobility disability are disabled more by inaccessible infrastructure and other people's attitudes and behaviour than they

“People with mobility disability are disabled more by inaccessible infrastructure and other people's attitudes and behaviour than they are by their own physical situation.”

are by their own physical situation. It is largely through omission and ignorance that they are isolated, disempowered and excluded from actively participating in everyday activities. They wanted the campaign's material to challenge the stereotypes of disability, and not to focus on the superheroes of disability – the overachievers who somehow overcome their disability to perform acts of outstanding achievement, people with paraplegia who climb Mount Everest, for example. They did not want inspirational heart-warming stories or patronising accounts that evoke pity or present people with disabilities as victims. They wanted their material to be in line with the social model of disability, which promotes the idea that since a disabled person's body cannot be restructured, a restructuring of society is necessary, so that any barriers preventing someone with a disability from being able to function effectively, autonomously, safely and with dignity in all areas of society are removed. They wanted reading texts and lesson plans that talk about ordinary people – mothers, fathers, colleagues, classmates and friends, whose existence is not defined by their disability, and whose lives revolve around the same things as everybody else's – family, work, friends and interests. If EFL teachers could show people with mobility disability in this light, then students would begin to realise that people with disabilities do not have to be an invisible minority, but vibrant and valued members of society. In this way EFL teachers would be playing a part in making the future more enlightened.

The Disabled Access Friendly team began to network and promote its aims very intensively in Greece. Luke Prodromou, who is a freelance teacher, teacher-trainer and materials writer, who has published numerous articles and written textbooks for all ages and levels, joined the team, and helped extensively with spreading the word. The team also contacted key figures in EFL to ask them if they could promote the campaign through their own networks and at EFL events worldwide. The campaign called these people “ambassadors” and Lindsay Clandfield, Jeffrey Doonan, Jamie Keddie, Aleksandra Strahinic and Julia Tanner were amongst the first to offer their invaluable support. They have subsequently been joined by Ben Goldstein, Gerard McLoughlin and Sue Lyon-Jones,

EFL publications started to show a keen interest in the campaign and 15 articles by or about the campaign appeared in 2010 in the EFL press. The campaign gave EFL teachers the message that even if there are no children with mobility disability at the foreign language centre or school where they teach, they can still do a lot to help them. They encouraged teachers to persuade students that even if they rarely see people with mobility disability going about their daily business in the streets or shops, or in places of business or entertainment, they can still make their lives better.

The campaign's bank of specially designed teaching material, which would not only teach English skills at all levels, but would also raise awareness about different aspects of mobility disability, began to grow.

The issues covered were related to infrastructure, other people's attitudes and behaviour, the experiences and feelings of someone with a mobility disability, and legal issues amongst others. Shaw and Quartano understood that if someone doesn't know anything about mobility disability, it is almost impossible to care enough to want to make changes. So their task was to find a way to provide information and food for thought via the ELT classroom. They also felt that it was important that the subject of disability should emerge as naturally and unobtrusively as possible from the context of the

lesson, which should appeal to students firstly on another level. For example, announcing to a class of teenagers that the lesson is going to be about disability is not likely to get the same positive reception as announcing that the lesson is going to be about a national basketball player. The fact that the player is a wheelchair user can emerge later, and the subsequent issues raised come in through the back door with greater impact.

One of the major underlying concepts behind the campaign is that no-one is making any money and no-one is promoting their personal career.

It is a completely voluntary effort that is an opportunity for people to use ELT to put something good back into the world. Shaw and Quartano approached well-known EFL authors such as Sean Banville, Lindsay Clandfield, Malcolm Mann, Philip Kerr and Michael Swan amongst others, who showed their support of the aims of the campaign by contributing on a voluntary basis specially written teaching material. They also invited EFL teachers to contribute ideas and worksheets, and many responded. Once edited, all this material was uploaded to the campaign's website, which was launched in December 2011 (www.disabled-accessfriendly.com). In the first month alone the site had 869 visitors and 4,272 page hits.

The site is very simple and easy to use. No registration, no passwords, no verification and no personal data are required to be able to download all the material, accompanied by teacher's notes and keys, for free. The teaching resources consist of lesson plans, worksheets, graded reading texts and a gallery of photos and video clips, all of which will open students' eyes, and maybe teachers' too, to issues of mobility disability. The material has no expiry date and can be used over and over again for new classes of students. It is relevant to ELT teachers worldwide as it is not culturally bound. The teaching material helps demystify the issue of disability, breaks down the barriers that exclude people with mobility disability from many areas of life and addresses society's sometimes patronising and negative attitudes towards people with physical disabilities. The resources can be used as supplementary material, for project work and examination practice. The website also provides foreign language centres and schools with information explaining how they can make small changes to their premises to facilitate people with mobility disability. There is also advice on how to behave around a wheelchair user.

The initial response to the material from teachers in the field was very positive and encouraging, and

DISABLED ACCESS FRIENDLY CAMPAIGN

www.disabled-accessfriendly.com

Using ELT to raise awareness about issues affecting people with mobility disability.

The campaign's website provides free EFL teaching material and graded reading texts for skills building, projects or examination practice.

This material also stimulates students to put themselves in the shoes of someone with a mobility disability for a better understanding of their needs and feelings.

The best schools and teachers 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.

disabledaccessfriendlycampaign@gmail.com

BRITISH COUNCIL

DISABLED ACCESS FRIENDLY



the campaign received feedback such as “Keep inspiring teachers and students!” The campaign also started to attract the interest of EFL bodies such as the British Council, Greece, City and Guilds English Exams (Peoplecert Group), EKADAVE Association of State School English Teachers of Northern Greece, The Greek Ministry of Education, Religion, Culture and Athletics, The Hellenic American Union (HAU), International House, Spain, International Publishers Exhibitions and Seminars (IP), Panhellenic Association of Language School Owners (PALSO), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) France, and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Macedonia-Thrace Northern Greece, all of whom provided letters of support for the work of the Disabled Access Friendly campaign.

In 2011 the campaign looked beyond its home country of Greece and promoted its work at 26 EFL events in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Turkey and the U.K. Thirty articles were published either by or about the campaign in the EFL press. The core team expanded to include Effie Nabhan, who has been involved in teaching and social work for the past 35 years. She was also

responsible for the social welfare service at CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) in Thessaloniki, Greece and has a long background of experience in voluntary work. Also a number of volunteers were recruited in Greece, who very professionally helped man the campaign’s stands at major EFL events and exhibitions in Greece, such as the International Publishers exhibitions in Athens and Thessaloniki.

In 2012 the campaign continued to promote its work at 42 EFL events worldwide in Austria, Brazil, Dominican Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Turkey,

and UK. Twenty-two articles were published and the Disabled Access Friendly campaign was awarded the Julia Tanner memorial scholarship co-sponsored by TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, N. Greece and Burlington books, which allowed Shaw and Quartano to present the campaign’s work at the IATEFL conference in Liverpool in 2013. The campaign’s Facebook page was improved, a Twitter account was created, and mailings were sent regularly to approximately 6,000 ELT colleagues worldwide. The content of the site was increased to provide over 60 EFL free lesson plans and 40 free graded reading texts at all levels, as well as a specially produced video clip on Wheelchair Etiquette, starring Luke Prodromou and David Gibson. The video is a humorous sketch showing everything you should not do when interacting with a wheelchair user, and forms the base for a number of lesson plans. The campaign’s website was selected by the EDTECH HUB as their website of the month and New Editions/Cengage Learning initiated an e-mail campaign and the distribution of campaign poster/leaflets to foreign language schools in Greece. Sales representatives from Burlington books also started distributing flyers to foreign language schools in Greece.

Currently the site receives about 10,000 page hits a month from visitors from over 120 countries. Shaw and Quartano had no expectation whatsoever that their work would have such a huge impact worldwide.



Good news stories emerging from Greece at a time of severe economic recession are rewarding and inspiring for those actually living the measures of economic austerity and the general climate of gloom and doom, and the campaign is proud that its face reflects a positive light on Greece, when the news about this country is so often depressing and negative.

2013 continues to be a busy and rewarding time for the Disabled Access Friendly campaign. In cooperation with the Greek Ministry of Education, Religion, Culture and Athletics, Shaw and Quartano gave a series of seminars to English teachers working in the state sector, giving them practical examples of how the campaign's material can be used in class, even with very young learners, to raise awareness about mobility disability. The IATEFL conference in Liverpool was a highlight on the campaign's calendar, and at this event not only did Shaw and Quartano give a presentation, but they were also interviewed by the Liverpool online team. Both of these clips can be found on the Liverpool online site <http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2013/>. This means that the campaign's work reached IATEFL delegates around the world. Quartano also gave a presentation at the International ISTEK Schools ELT conference 2013 in Istanbul, which you can watch on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqTqmOndYv8> and Shaw and Quartano were also key speakers at the 6th Virtual Round Table Web Conference https://lancelot.adobeconnect.com/_a875817169/p68rxwuocht/?launcher=false&fcsContent=true&pbMode=normal.

In the next edition of *Modern English Teacher*, we will be featuring specific lesson plans and graded reading texts produced for the Disabled Access Friendly campaign, and showing you in detail how you can use these in your classroom to explore issues of mobility disability with your students. In the meantime we suggest you have a look at the campaign's site www.disabled-accessfriendly.com.

REFERENCES

Paul Shaw *A day in the life of a disabled person* The Athens News, 13 December 2009

Paul Shaw and Katie Quartano



Paul Shaw has been involved in the ELT field for 20 years. He has worked as a freelance writer, project manager and editor for International ELT publishers and also as an academic advisor, trainer, seminar speaker and examiner. He was also Chair of TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, Northern Greece for two terms. Shaw is the founder of Disabled Access Friendly after becoming a wheelchair user himself and spends a lot of his time, with the team, helping to raise awareness of equality and diversity for people with mobility disability. He has written several articles on the subject, which have been published both in the ELT and mainstream press.



Katie Quartano has a background in business administration and tourism and has worked in this field in Canada, France, the USA, Switzerland and Greece. She was employed for 13 years by Swissair and Austrian Airlines, in Thessaloniki, Greece. She currently works for the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In parallel, she is a qualified teacher of EFL and has worked as an oral examiner for Cambridge ESOL and the Hellenic American Union for many years. She has been involved in the Disabled Access Friendly campaign since its inception, and has written several articles on issues of mobility disability, which have been published in the ELT press in Greece and abroad.