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Thoughts from an oral examiner

by Katie Quartano



As an EFL oral examiner of many years standing I consider it a great privilege to have the chance, twice a year, to come into contact with a large number of young people, and even within the rigid and highly controlled structure of an exam, to be able to listen to what they have to say. Oral exams in EFL typically start with a “warm-up” when candidates have the chance to touch on familiar everyday topics often related to themselves. A simple closed question is generally followed by an open ended question such as “tell me something about yourself” and I never fail to be saddened by the frequency of the response “I’m a good student”. When encouraged to expand or clarify this statement, the candidate will usually explain that they get good grades. Is this how they define themselves? Is the first measure of their own identity and self worth reflected by academic achievement, by a number? A follow up open ended question might be to enquire as to what they hope to do in the future, and even from very young children I invariably hear about the difficult academic path to university entrance and post-graduate studies abroad that they aspire to. In general you hear a lot about passing exams, but not too much about learning about the world.

Don’t get me wrong, I am a strong supporter of academic achievement and commend these children for their ambition, but I wonder how many school children could relate to the idea expressed by Marian Wright Edelman, an American activist for the rights of children that “education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it”? It is very rare that I hear of children wanting to put something into the world, but I hear a lot about what they plan to get out of it.

Good teachers aim to give their students a sound knowledge base and skill set on which they will be able to build as they are exposed to different life experiences. For education is not only about acquiring greater knowledge, transmitting accumulated skills and knowledge from one generation to another, nor just about training a workforce; it embraces social improvement, respect for



others, the promotion of well-being, truth, democracy, fairness and equality. Students should learn that they are not helpless to overcome the gaps between ideals and reality, and their education should equip them to become adults who will take responsibility for the world they inhabit, and to think and question what they see and hear. An awareness of the world in which we live and the belief that through their own actions students have the ability to make improvements, is at the heart of education. Education is a process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, and intellect is sharpened. As a result one should be able to stand on one’s own two feet. But what about those who will literally never be able to stand on their own feet, maybe because they have a mobility disability or use a wheelchair? Will your students be thinking at all about them?

People with mobility disability are currently disabled more by infrastructure, other people and their attitudes than by their own physical situation. Only by showing children that people with disabilities do not have to be an invisible minority, but vibrant and valued members of society, can we expect future generations to want changes. Only by providing children with the information necessary to allow them to put themselves in other people’s shoes, to understand others and to feel what others feel can we expect those changes to be made. Only then can the future become a more enlightened one.

Herbert Spencer said that “the great aim of education is not knowledge, but action”. The **Disabled Access Friendly** campaign can help EFL teachers act by providing them with material that can be used in teaching and skills building as well as examination practice, but that will at the same time raise awareness about issues affecting people with mobility disability. As Ralph Ellison so wisely stated “education is all a matter of building bridges”. It would be good if the bridges your school builds incorporated ramps as well as steps.

The best 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.

Visit our website www.disabled-accessfriendly.com, contact us by e-mail: disabledaccessfriendlycampaign@gmail.com or join us on Facebook “Disabled Access Friendly”.

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