

An Interview with Katie Quartano – The Disabled Access Friendly Campaign

Posted on March 20, 2013 by [Vicky Loras](#)

Vicky: Katie, welcome to the TESOL Greece blog.



Katie Quartano

Katie: Thank you Vicky! It's a great pleasure to have the opportunity to make a contribution!

Vicky: Could you introduce yourself to our readers and tell us about what you have been involved with?

Katie: Well, I was born in Holland, and we moved to London, U.K. when I was very young. I grew up in London in a multi-cultural family, as my mother was Dutch and my father's roots are Greek /Swiss. After finishing my studies in London in Business Administration and Tourism, I worked in Canada, France, the USA and Switzerland and finally ended up in Greece, where I have now lived for 30 years. I worked for Swissair and Austrian Airlines in Thessaloniki for 15 years, and am now employed by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in an administrative post connected with UNESCO. In parallel I have taught English (I have a CELTA qualification) and have worked as an oral examiner for many years for Cambridge ESOL and the Hellenic American Union.

Vicky: Can you share some highlights of your career so far?

Katie: Actually Vicky, I don't really consider that I have had a career as such. Living and working in several different countries has been very rewarding and interesting, but once I had my kids, work for me was really just a means to an end, which was being able to build a home, bring up four daughters and keep my head above water without killing myself.

Vicky: You are involved in an amazing project called the [Disabled Access Friendly Campaign](#), which is also the topic of your talk for the TESOL Greece Convention. Can you tell us more about this?

Katie: It began when an article by Paul Shaw called “A day in the life of a disabled person” was published by the Athens News in 2009. The article provoked a lot of response, and encouraged Paul to take things one step further and to start a Facebook page called [Disabled Access Friendly](#).

At this point the campaign aimed only to encourage private foreign language schools in Greece to improve access for people with mobility disability. Since then we have changed direction. Now our focus is on offering free English language teaching materials that raise awareness about issues affecting people with mobility disability.

The material prompts students to put themselves in the shoes of someone with a mobility disability to understand their needs and feelings. The long term aim is to pave the way to positive changes being made both in terms of infrastructure and attitudes and behaviour.

We started small in Thessaloniki, but the campaign has reached further and grown bigger than we could ever have imagined. Currently we get over 10,000 page hits a month on our site from over 115 countries worldwide. This means we are having a considerable impact and the feedback we get both from teachers and students is very encouraging.

We have worked hard to promote our campaign; last year, for example, we were present or represented at 42 EFL events worldwide and 22 articles were published either by us or about us in the EFL press.



The Disabled Access Friendly Campaign

Vicky: That is great! Who can join the project and what kinds of materials can they contribute?

Katie: The campaign is entirely run by volunteers, no one is promoting themselves or making money, and we welcome anyone on board who has something to offer or who wants to support us in whatever way they can. So someone could get involved by using our material with their students, spreading the word via social networks or by displaying our poster, offering their expertise or time, representing us at EFL events, or as you say, by contributing material.

The lesson plans and reading texts we have available for free download on our site have been contributed both by professional materials writers and ordinary teachers who may never have had a lesson plan published before. We have guidelines available on our site for people interested in contributing material, and we are happy to work with anyone who has a good idea that could be developed into a fully fledged lesson plan. It is a great opportunity for teachers to be able to give something back to the world using the expertise they have developed over the years.

Vicky: What other important issues need to find their way into ELT classrooms, do you think?

Katie: I think it is important that English language teaching is not divorced from the real world. Why should the topics discussed in an ELT classroom be any different from those you would discuss with your family or friends? As long as you follow the norms of appropriacy according to the age of your students, why should any issue not be suitable for discussion? Why should the ELT classroom be a sterile environment that ignores anything controversial or sensitive?

Vicky: Some teachers say that issues like disabilities, discrimination and so on are too sensitive and some don't even tackle them, because they feel that they do not belong to language teaching or teaching in general. How do you feel about this?

Katie: I believe that ELT topics should reflect students' lives and the real world.

The ELT classroom provides a great opportunity to raise awareness about all kinds of social issues. As one teacher who used our material said "the deeper you touch your students, the better the results you get". We use three great quotes in our presentations, which sound rather pompous, but are actually quite profound:

Education is a process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, and intellect sharpened.

Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community better than you found it.

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

How can you do any of that if the topics you discuss with your students are only the "safe" ones like hobbies, holidays and sports? How can you do any of that if your only goal is to teach the present perfect?

Vicky: I wholeheartedly agree, Katie. Amazing insights! Thank you very much for this interview, Katie! See you very soon.

Katie: Thank you too Vicky! We are looking forward to the TESOL Greece convention, and also to IATEFL in Liverpool, where we have two presentations. It will be a great pleasure to meet new people and reconnect with others at these events.