

To Speak or Not to Speak – That is the Question!

By Sara Hannam, IATEFL Associates' Coordinator & Graham Hall, IATEFL Treasurer

Sara and Graham ask you, the members, if you think IATEFL should get involved in issues that affect English Language teachers in their working lives beyond the classroom

Taking Positions

You may have noticed that the statement *Our Position on Positions* has recently been removed from the IATEFL website. This statement had outlined how IATEFL, as a charity, would not make public statements on matters happening in society at large due to restrictions in UK Charity law and because such a move could go ahead only if all our members agree. This is what the statement said:

We are sometimes asked to make statements on IATEFL's position on world events e.g. the invasion of Iraq or on concepts such as multilingualism. We thought it would be useful, therefore, to make public our position on positions! Historically, we have never been an advocacy organisation unlike TESOL, whose activities do include advocacy. We are, of course, a registered charity, which can somewhat limit our ability to take up politically contentious positions. Because the way we work is very much by consultation and consensus, if we were to make a change in this regard it would mean that for each position raised we would need to have the agreement of everyone from our Patron David Crystal to the most part time of our own activists and volunteers and members. This would be difficult to achieve and also extremely time consuming. We have thus chosen to continue our policy of not being involved in the intricate matters of protocol involved in lobbying/advocacy. This of course does not preclude lively debates within any of our many fora, including our newsletter 'Voices', and our Special Interest Groups (SIGs), for example the Global Issues SIG.

Yours sincerely
Tessa Woodward
President IATEFL 2005-2007

However, the law has changed, and the recent 2006 Act allows us to take positions if they further our charitable aim. So, we would now like to go back to the drawing board and consult our members on what you would like us to do. We now know what is and isn't possible within the confines of the law, so the next step is to add your voice to this discussion. Do you think IATEFL should take a position on issues or not? This article will outline what we found out and will then invite you to respond, making suggestions of how IATEFL could become more involved **if** that is what **you** want IATEFL to do.

IATEFL and Issues

You will have already noticed that "Voices" sometimes contains articles that discuss topics that are not just about our role as an educator in the classroom, but are about things that go on in the outside world such as our recent article on ID cards and increasing surveillance in the UK [Issues 198] or the article on ageism in ELT [Issues 168]. The writers of those articles express an opinion about something that affects us not just as teachers, but as citizens of the world – such articles invite us to take a global perspective. Historically IATEFL as an organization has not taken a position in non-classroom related arenas, in contrast to TESOL Inc. based in the USA, for example, who have a

series of position statements on matters such as teacher rights and the current government's treatment of key educational issues. IATEFL has the Global Issues Special Interest Group which tends to focus on social issues and inequality both within the world at large and within the profession of ELT, but the discussion has been limited to membership of a specific SIG rather than being addressed throughout IATEFL at large. We would like to ask our members if this model is still valid or if it needs updating - to enhance the valuable work already being done by GI-SIG on a wider scale.

What kind of issues are we talking about?

Although we set out to investigate if IATEFL can take positions on all relevant issues of a social nature, we were initially prompted by particular requests from some members and non-members from the wider ELT community. Sometimes IATEFL gets approached by individual teachers asking us to say something about important issues such as the role of English teachers in war situations such as Iraq, or the status of native and non-native teachers, as, in their view IATEFL is a large organization which people look to for advice and help on all matters. Some of our members feel that IATEFL's role is not just about sharing best practice, but is also about sharing the realities of our profession and what is happening to it socially and economically too. Focusing on wider issues could also be seen to fit in with our mission statement to link, support and develop teachers throughout the world, both in and beyond the classroom.

One particular request for involvement that has come up quite a lot over the last year or so is that of EL teachers' pay and conditions which a number of our members feel is deteriorating particularly recently in the UK, and for longer in some of the countries that our non-UK members come from. Why, asked some of our members, doesn't IATEFL take a position and get involved in helping teachers to achieve a better standard of living, particularly, another member stated, when EL Teachers do not often have any Union to represent their interests and are increasingly "at the mercy of an industry that doesn't always invest in its teachers" [a quote from a further member]?. What about the chalkface teachers and their rights, IATEFL was asked? So, with this in mind, we started our investigations. We know that we have members from all levels and areas of ELT, and would like to know how people would like us to proceed with these requests. We found this particularly pertinent as the issue of pay and conditions has been appearing in other areas of the ELT media lately through a number of articles in the British based EL Gazette, and also the recent discussion on changes in university teachers' conditions in the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic purposes [BALEAP].

Who Did We Consult?

We asked an expert in Charity Law, an expert in Campaigning from the National Council for Voluntary Organizations in the UK, a senior member of TESOL Inc. in the USA, and a small selection of IATEFL members [both Native English Teachers and non-Native Teachers who live and work in the UK and in other countries, both European and non-European] what their

opinion was. We also checked what similar educational organizations which have the same charitable status as IATEFL do about issues that affect their members. The information we were interested in finding out was twofold: firstly are there any restrictions on what IATEFL can do legally? And secondly in what ways could issues be raised and given space within our organization to reflect what members actually think would be beneficial?

What Were the Findings?

Charity Law does not prohibit IATEFL from becoming involved, and in fact there is a strong ethical argument encoded in the 2006 Charities Act that says it is charities like IATEFL who ensure a fair and democratic society by representing voices that might otherwise not get heard. It is for that reason that the most recent version of the Charities Act clearly invites charities to consider their role in raising important issues. IATEFL cannot act in the role of a Union, but it can take on a role of awareness raising about an issue that is important to its members and needs to be conveyed to the outside world and to other influential organizations in ELT. When discussing the issue of pay and conditions, it was also pointed out that not saying anything is actually taking a position of letting things continue as they are despite the obvious need for an immediate discussion on the state of ELT and particularly the role of teachers.

Campaigning can take various forms and could simply mean making sure that issues that are important to members get more coverage and are discussed more in our publication "Voices", thereby naming them as important. Alternatively, it could mean bringing these issues into clearer focus at our Annual Conference making it clear to potential speakers that such topics are an area of IATEFL's remit. It could also mean formulating position statements which concur with IATEFL's charitable aims (for example, that native and non-native speaker teachers should be treated equally; that language diversity should be respected or that all teachers are entitled to a reasonable standard of living). These various forms of action need discussion by our members.

TESOL Inc. see advocacy work and taking a position on key educational issues as part of their role, and believe strongly that they attract more members and have a more vibrant organization as a result as it represents a broader range of interests. They helpfully pointed out that the issues that would be up for discussion need to be agreed on by the membership and also the way in which they are raised needs to be organized by the coordinating committee to ensure that a unified position is presented.

What Can You Do?

By carrying out the research and writing this piece for Voices, we have shown that we consider issues that relate to the social world as important and worthy of our consideration as those that relate directly to the classroom. We felt strongly that it was worth drawing this to your attention and asking you to get more involved. It is not only our views that matter, but yours, the members. If you think the debate we have raised here is worth continuing, please let us

know; and, equally, if you think that the discussion is not what you consider to be IATEFL's mission, again, please let us know.

We would like to hear from you with your responses to this article so please send them to hannam@city.academic.gr. A selection of suggestions and comments will be published in a future edition of "Voices" so we have a clearer picture of what you, the members, think. Please feel free to approach either of us at conference in Exeter 2008 to discuss this issue face to face.