

# What are your top tips for teaching English?

## Transcript



# Episode transcript

**The transcript highlights words that are classified under different CEFR levels**

CEFR B2 words are highlighted in **yellow**.

CEFR C1 words are highlighted in **green**.

CEFR C2 words are highlighted in **blue**.

Further information about the underlined words can be found in the show notes.

# Transcript

**We'am:** Hello and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council – Series Two

**Chris:** A podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

**We'am:** We are your hosts We'am Hamdan

**Chris:** and Chris Sowton

In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways. In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue.

**We'am:** Across the ten episodes of Series Two we'll hear from Teachers, Trainers and Researchers in a wide range of contexts including Ukraine, Romania, Egypt and the United Kingdom.

**Chris:** In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work.

**We'am:** Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to **relevant** websites.

**Sting:** This is episode Ten: What Are Your Top Tips for Teaching English?

**We'am:** Our last episode in this series will be a bit different. So we have nineteen **ELT practitioners** who will share with us their top tips in English language teaching.

**Chris:** We put these tips into five **categories** which we'll explore **throughout** the episode. My top tip, We'am, would be to really listen to what our students say. I think too often in the English language classroom, and I've definitely been guilty of this myself, we're just too **focused** on hearing students, whether they're using the right words, the right **grammatical** form, but we don't actually listen to the things that they're saying, the **actual content** that they're saying, and for many students, actually sharing those views, sharing their thoughts is a really, really big thing. So if we're not really listening to what they're saying they're going to not be **motivated** next time to actually say what is on their mind.

**We'am:** I totally **agree with** you, Chris. One tip I would share with others is to do more with less. So instead of spending hours preparing for a lesson, you can do a lot more with less **content** or less materials. And one way to do this is to capitalise on the information provided by students on the **emerging** language that comes in the class. Ali did say this, how can I say it in a different way? So it's all about just using what students say, to inform the **content** in the classroom.

**Chris:** I think you're right. I think too often, we and **inspectors** and so on **focus** too much on

the performative **aspects** of teaching rather than looking at the student experience and learning **outcomes**. Those should be really the only two drivers of good English language education, or indeed I think any kind of education. So in our first set of clips, we're going to look at the importance of personalisation and **context**.

**Bhavna:** What are my top tips for teaching English? Namaste, I'm **Bhavna** an ELT professional based in Mumbai, India. For me, a real English lesson teaches about language and life in order to make connections with the real world. And stories are one of the best ways to do that. I use stories to teach the two S's of language: the skills and the systems. And have now introduced a third s society where I look for opportunities to talk about topics like **climate action**, **inclusion**, **poverty**, **gender equality**, social **emotional** learning, and much more. I **adopt** the three S's **framework**: skills, systems and society, in my storytelling, and in all my lessons so that I can prepare my **learners** to become **emotionally** intelligent, **global citizens** who will create a better world for themselves and for others.

**Raya:** Hi, everyone. My name is Raya, and my top tip for teaching English is making things personal. Instead of trying to get your students interested in what you're teaching, be interested in them. It's often **overlooked** how **learners** not only aim to understand English speakers, but also want to be understood themselves. So pick relatable material and design lessons based on your student's own interests by using personally **relevant** examples or questions. Instead of **distant scenarios related to** the **target** culture and the **target** experience only. For example, avoid **talking about airport travel**, if your students have yet to travel abroad. **Alternatively**, you could discuss the transport they use to get to your class that day. This will make them want to engage and have them learn the ways in which they can **express** themselves and communicate their own ideas.

**Tiff:** Hi, I'm Tiff Griffin. And my tip is to really get to know your students. They may be **learners** of language, but they're not **learners** of life. Back in the **mists** of teacher training, we learn about student **motivation**, but go deeper. Every face in front of you has a backstory and a future **beyond** the face of a desk and the pen in their hand. Get to know your students, never **assume**. Who they are is inextricably **linked** to why they're sitting in front of you. Share who you are, and if they feel seen as **individuals** by a teacher who's taken time to understand them and who believes in them. Well, then you're pulling in the same direction not dragging a grammar book **uphill**. Teaching languages teaches communication. Let's **focus** on language **versus** being understood and remove the **pressure** of **perfection**. We're learning how to say things. Take time to ask who are you? What do you want to talk about, and where do you want to be? How do I know this works? I got to know my students and I asked them.

**Chris:** So, We'am, Tiff mentioned about about dragging a grammar book **uphill**, have you ever felt like that in your teaching?

**We'am:** When you're following a certain **syllabus** sometimes you often forget about personalising the material, because just want to go through a book and finish the exercises. But we need to keep in mind that your audience and how to make their experience more personalised.

**Chris:** It's a conversation almost isn't it between the students and teachers about that, that we can teach the same material that's in the book, but perhaps we can do it in a different way. I think Raya said something similar didn't she, about about airport travel, where I think Raya is based in Palestine and I think, you know, for a lot of students there its **simply not possible** for them to travel on an aeroplane. So it's about making that **relevant** to their **context**

**We'am:** And a lot of the time the materials created by ELT is created by **professionals** who maybe don't know much about a **context**.

**Chris:** I was also struck by something Tiff said about students not being **learners** of life. Remember in episode three, Laura there she said that beginner **learners** are not beginner **thinkers**. And I think, you know, that's a message we heard early on in this series, and I think it's a really important message to be reminded of as we come to the end.

**We'am:** Yes. And it's not just that they, they want to **express complex** ideas sometimes **complex, complex** thoughts. That's why it comes across as a difficult **task** to learn a language because be thinking to yourself, how am I going to **express** this **notion** and this and that and a different language? So a lot of it is learning how to think... And the **theme** of the second clip is on criticality.

**Rose:** Hi, I'm Rose Aylett, and my top tip for teaching English is to approach the teaching and learning materials we use in our classrooms from a **critical perspective**. So this means when looking at our course materials, written or audio texts, or **visual** or moving **images**, for example, we can ask some simple but really important questions. These are questions like in what way are the materials **biased**? Who's included in them and who is **excluded** from them? How are the different characters **represented**? Are they in positions of power? Or are they disempowered? And if so, why are they **portrayed** in this way? And what **assumptions** lie behind these **representations**? What are the **implications**? Sometimes these questions can be very difficult, even uncomfortable for us to answer. But the more we **engage in critical** materials **analysis** as teachers, the better we'll be able to support the development of our students' own **critical literacies** something that's becoming **increasingly** important in the world today.

**Scott:** My name is Scott Thornbury. I really believe that nothing can change life in the classroom so much as questions, the way you ask questions who asked the questions. So my tip for you is for any question that you ask where possible, follow it up with a question like: how do you know that? So for example, if you're doing an exercise, what's the answer to number one? Yes, Juan. The answer is, I went to the shops yesterday. Good. But how do you know that? Or, you know, what's the capital of Peru? Lima. Good, well how do you know that? That seems to me a really good way of starting a conversation about learning and about language. So I hope that it's something that you can **integrate** into your teaching.

**Chris:** I'm Chris Thorne. And my tip for teachers is to include **reflection** within every lesson. We can do that **simply** by asking students to think about and note down or leave themselves a voice note, or to discuss with a partner, the thing that they found most important or most useful from the lesson, and why that is so important for them. And also a question that the lesson has left them with, it could be to do with the language or maybe some of the topics that have been explored. Those questions can be really useful for, for you as a teacher to **identify** things to go into and explore a little bit more in future lessons, but also for the students themselves, as it encourages them to find answers to their own questions.

**Chris:** Lots of nice ideas there We'am. What are your feelings on that?

**We'am:** Being **critical** is very important in today's world because students are faced with a lot of **resources** they need to **evaluate** whether this is **effective** or not. And sometimes when you just ask them a question, like how do you know that? Or a question that you thought about when we discuss this topic? It's more of a directed way to draw their attention to, you know, maybe some thoughts that they are scared to **express**.

**Chris:** Yeah. And what I really liked about the three contributors here is that they're really

looking at **critical** thinking as something much deeper and more **profound** and essential to being a **learner**. I think sometimes **critical** thinking in textbooks is **presented** as another skill to learn and to **acquire** and to **demonstrate** knowledge of, but I think here the three speakers are really looking at how it can become a part, a **fundamental** part of your **identity** as a **learner**.

**We'am**: And in the previous section, we also mentioned that you teach them how to think, so critical thinking is, you know, an important **aspect** of that. Teaching them how to ask questions and also how to answer questions that are raised.

**Chris**: And in set three, we look at humanistic approaches to teaching language

**Dasha**: Hello everyone, I'm Dasha and I'm an English teacher from Ukraine. It is my **belief** that the most important thing we can do for our students every day is to make them happy. So please find a favourite, song, video, game, whatever, and spend up to five minutes, playing, watching, singing, doing whatever they would like to do together with you. If you can make at least one student happier it means that you make a difference. So let's enjoy our superpower because we are great teachers.

**Nina**: Hello, my name is Nina I am an English teacher from Romania. I usually use different classroom tips and **strategies** for my English language **learners**. First of all, I **focus** on creating a safe learning environment for my students in order to make them feel safe and supported to **express** themselves. I always try to connect with my students and find out their needs and their interests too. I plan and create **engaging** lessons by **incorporating** the interest of my students into the lessons or sometimes I **incorporate** some technology in order to keep them engaged and interested in the subject. I use all the time games, group work, **interactive** activities in order to practice vocabulary and communication skills. And last but not least, I always try to inject some fun into my classes.

**Oksana**: Hello everyone. My name is Oksana. First of all, I would speak about the atmosphere you create in your classroom because your students might not remember something from the materials you teach them but they will definitely remember how you make them feel. So make sure they feel comfortable and feel relaxed and at the same time concentrated on the material. And to organise that, in my **humble** opinion, we need to be ourselves. A lot of **buzzwords**, a lot of stigmas around the **personality** of a teacher, a teacher must be beautiful, a teacher must be wearing something really cool clothes and so on so forth. But honestly this is not true. You need to be yourself. You cannot be a machine, you're a human being. So it's like in your own family. You want your children to love you and to understand you. I think the same needs to happen in the classroom. So this is my number one tip.

**Rania**: My name is Rania. And my top tip would be to create a safe learning environment for our **learners** and a learning environment where students are **motivated** to learn, where mistakes are considered learning opportunities. I believe learning a foreign language requires students to be **risk-takers** because they are already **fluent** in their own language. But they need to experiment with new vocabulary and new **structures** and even new pronunciation. This can be done by building good relations with our students a relation based on trust and respect respecting their needs and differences. And in turn, they trust that we are there to help them reach their **potential** and this requires a lot of **patience** and **empathy** from the teacher. But once this has been **established**, our students will be ready to get engaged with our lesson plans and activities and even the homework that we set for them.

**Steven**: Hi, my name is Steven. And my main tip is to trust the **learners**. Trust that they

understand more than you think they do. And don't **assume** that they don't know because **learners** can surprise us but also trust them to work together without you and do things and get on with things in the classroom without you. This can include speaking together without you, learning about grammar without you. If you trust them, you will listen more to them and **adapt** your lessons to their needs and interests and put them first and think about them rather than what you want to teach or do in the class. If you trust them as well, **learners** become more responsible and you can hand more things over to them. They're also more comfortable with taking **risks**, and trying out things that they wouldn't try out normally.

**We'am:** Taking into **consideration** the humanistic side of learning a language, I think is very important. This might be the only space where let's say maybe adult students have a space to **express** themselves. So sometimes we don't have this **outlet** and the English language classroom can be a place for you to be yourself and **express** yourself. And it is our role as educators to adhere to that humanistic side by making students feel safe, by making this experience **pleasurable**, and by trusting your **learners** can make a huge difference in the classroom.

**Chris:** Yeah, I think that word trust is absolutely **crucial** in these discussions really. Without trust, I don't think they can be good language learning because to speak in a different language is a scary thing. It is an **anxiety-provoking** thing. And if students don't trust the teacher, other students, they're never gonna go **beyond** safe talk. They're never going to push themselves to **extend** themselves are going to stay within the language that they know. And if they really want to develop, that's not the approach that they need to take. And so that humanistic approach can really help with language learning **outcomes**, as well as experience

**We'am:** And it can start by something very simple, like how do you feel?

**Chris:** In clip four, we look at different forms of social media and how they can be used in language teaching.

**Laura:** My name is Laura. And my top teaching tip is to use more photographs in class, whether that's something that you've taken from the internet or a newspaper, or maybe like pictures of your local area, or photos that students have on their own phones, and they just seem to **generate** so much **authentic** discussion, then you kind of get this really rich, emergent language that you can deal with. And there are so many activity types that you can do with photographs, **learners** can describe them or they can compare them. They can **speculate** about what's happening in them or what's about to happen. They can talk about personal experiences **related to** them, there's all sorts, I mean, sometimes I've gone into a lesson with just a couple of **images** and two hours later, we're still **talking about** them. We're still dealing with the language that's come out of them. And it saves a lot of time on planning. So it's a win all around so my top teaching tip is to use more photographs in class.

**Sergio:** Hello, this is Sergio. And I think a good tip I can give is to use social **media** to teach English, especially Twitter. Get two or three tweets about a certain topic and use them for reading comprehension. There is nothing more **authentic** than that short, concise and **straightforward** language the **learners** read all the time anyway. Everybody has access to Twitter, it is cheap and interesting as **learners** are usually keen on learning about real trends

**Chris:** Have you ever used photos in the classroom, We'am?

**We'am:** Yes, I'm a **visual learner**, and I like to use photos and pictures. I think in many cases pictures can **capture** both feelings, action and descriptive language. So it is a great **source** to learn a language and it's a great **source** for teachers.

**Chris:** I completely agree and I've used photos a lot in my teaching and training before I think using non-verbal ways of starting verbal interactions can be really really effective it can be sometimes when we start with the language that can be quite scary for some students. If we start with something that is visual, it might be say a photo or picture in the newspaper an emoji whatever it may be. But it starts the process in a sort of gentler way and I think it's a real way of promoting inclusivity in your classroom as well because it brings in all students whatever their levels, whatever their interest, it can be a good starting point.

**We'am:** I think pictures are very much relatable so when you show them a picture, say how do you feel about this picture? What do you see in this picture? It can be a way to break the ice also and to raise their confidence.

**Chris:** I think people often get have more confidence in talking about pictures than they do about text I think text is still seen as such an important part of life and people sometimes feel reluctant to question texts or to criticise texts, but they're much more likely to talk openly I think, about something visual.

**We'am:** Yes, social media is also very relatable, Twitter in specific but also other platforms can be relatable these days. So the tool differs but towards the same aim

**Chris:** Absolutely, and there's no harm in you know, for example, homework is often a problem in whatever part of the world we care to look at and actually saying to students well rather than doing this set of closed questions on the present continuous or whatever it may be as homework, it's saying well make a TikTok video about the present continuous show your understanding in this way, use a form, a medium that you are comfortable with, that you know more than me about this can be your way of showing your understanding of this topic. If you don't know about that topic then I can help you with something I know more about, so it can be quite a good leveller in the classroom as well.

**We'am:** Yeah, and Twitter also has a lot of critical content sometimes people commenting on certain topics. So it's specifically good for adult students and also to spark that conversation around critical issues or sensitive matters...

And the last theme for our tips is pedagogy

**Alejandra:** I'm Alejandra and I would like to share with you all a tip when you deliver online sessions, online classes. It's very important to have a very comfortable chair, to be in a nice, well-ventilated and with a good light, room so that you can be as comfortable as possible, and also to have a glass of water because you will need it throughout your lesson. Also it's important that you have some time to do short breaks to walk around, not to stay all the time sitting.

**Richard:** Hi, my name is Richard and here's my top tip. Listen very, very carefully to your learners. And don't just listen to the errors. Listen for what they're trying to say and then from there, you can help reformulate what they're trying to say in order to help them say what they want to say in a more effective way. So I think for me, I've watched a lot of teaching over the years, and I've done a lot of teaching myself. I'm more and more convinced that you know, we've got to focus on meaning in the classroom because if that's the key function of language, which is communicating thoughts, feelings and beliefs, then that's what we've got to focus on in the classroom. And listening is key.

**Diane:** Hello, lovely people, this is Diane. So one piece of advice I personally use is word recycling. Which means if I see a word I like, I write it down and I visit at different times especially before I go to bed. And then over time, this word becomes part of my internal



dictionary. Another method they use in learning English is chunking which means I study language in **context**. So if I study groups of words together, instead of one single word. For example, I don't only study the word 'recovery' alone. I learned the **entire** sentence 'I wish you a speedy **recovery**' as one chunk or one piece and I find that it makes learning English easier for me.

**Alla:** Hello, I am Alla and I want to share with you this tip regarding **inclusive** education. So to be fair in your teaching is to give every **learner** what he or she needs, and what learning suits him or her and to use **appropriate assessment** tools. And we should know that not all students need to learn in the same way. And not all students need to achieve the same things, but all students need to be supported to achieve according to the fullest **potential**. So we can use different tools of **assessment** in the classroom.

**Chris:** So again, some nice ideas there, We'am, a range of different pedagogical approaches that we can use to make our teaching **effective**. Any there that **stood out** for you?

**We'am:** I think the word cycling one learning language as a chunk. This is how I **tend to** learn another language. And by repeating that **multiple** times, or sometimes I had my students repeat that or what we call it drilling. It provides a chance to learn connected speech, for example. Also inclusivity and **assessment**, that is a very good tip because we often teach to assess, unfortunately.

**Chris:** Yeah, what I thought was also interesting with all of these four approaches is it's very much **focusing** on the kind of language, the kind of approach that support students in using the language in real life, in real life situations, in **meaningful context**. So not just learning English in order to pass an exam in order to get to the next stage. You know, we're actually seeing how English can be used as a way of **engaging** with the world around rather than just as, as getting a particular score on a test.

And that brings us to the end of series two of Teaching English with the British Council, our thanks to all our many, many contributors across the ten **episodes** of this series. We're very grateful for your time, knowledge and expertise that you shared. And also many thanks to the British Council for the continued support in promoting good language teaching with teachers **worldwide**. We'am, this is your first experience of running a podcast. How's it been?

**We'am:** It's been a pleasant experience with you, Chris. I've been wanting since so long to **engage in** such a conversation. And I think any teacher or maybe a group of teachers and their schools and their place of work and **engage in** similar conversations, so it's not just me and you having a conversation it could be anyone.

**Chris:** Exactly. I think it's about promoting **dialogue**, sharing ideas, listening to other people. But then very **importantly**, doing things with that knowledge, not just keeping that in our head. I think too much training, too much knowledge, just sometimes sits in our brains and we don't do anything with it. So what we very much hope that you have taken away from this podcast is a few ideas to try out in your classrooms, wherever they may be in the world.

**We'am:** And you definitely got me thinking about lots of points and lots of issues around ELT, teachers can always do that with their, you know, work and with other colleagues. It makes their profession more enjoyable, and it makes her classes more interesting for sure.

**Chris:** Exactly, and with that I will say farewell, We'am, and good luck with your future studies.

**We'am:** Thank you, Chris

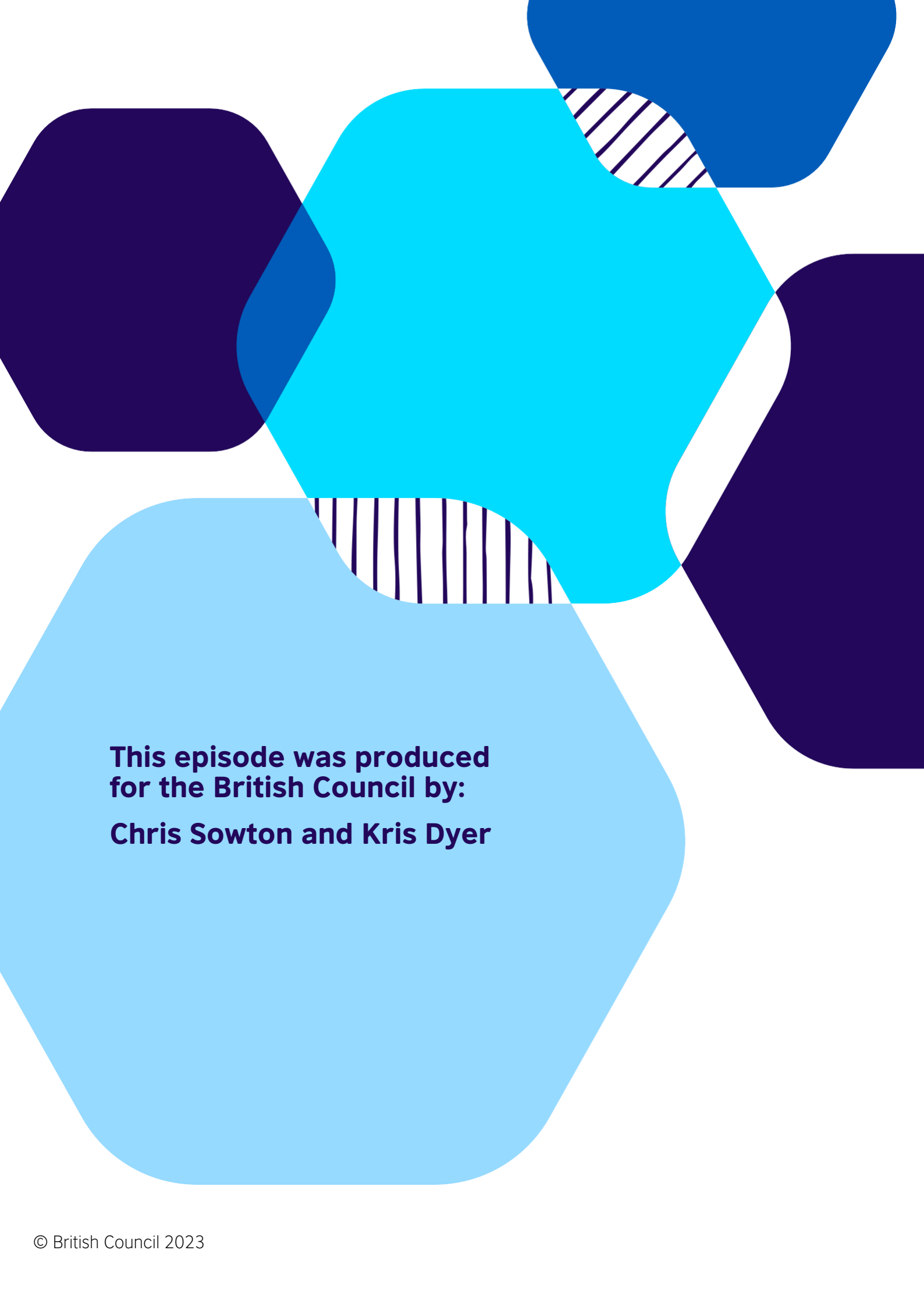
**Chris:** That's it! Thank you for listening to Teaching English with the British Council, I've been Chris Sowton

**We'am:** And We'am Hamdan

**Chris:** Goodbye!

**We'am:** Goodbye!





**This episode was produced  
for the British Council by:  
Chris Sowton and Kris Dyer**