

How can we use virtual reality to teach 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

Introduction and discussion

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

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

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

Chris: and Chris Sowton

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 Two: How can we use **virtual reality** to Teach English

We'am: Hello and welcome to **episode** two of teaching English with the British Council and today's **episode** is very exciting. It's going to be about how can we use **virtual reality** to teach English

Chris: So We'am, how much experience do you have of using digital learning **virtual reality** for teaching English?

We'am: I haven't really used virtual reality to teach English but I found it really interesting although I worked with teachers to deliver online trainings, but we never actually used **virtual reality**. And I think in the setting that I was in, it's a bit difficult to introduce these new technologies. So it would be interesting to see how they're doing that in other **contexts**.

Chris: What's your view of digital learning more generally I know it's something that you're **looking at** more **broadly** in your PhD studies?

We'am: It's very important to teach, to **integrate** teaching digital skills with **content**. These days everything is becoming at the hands of people using digital approaches. So I think it's very important that people become digitally **literate**, and sometimes keep up with the market, people looking for jobs, for example.

Chris: I agree. I think **virtual reality** is something which feels like it's just **coming into** the **mainstream** now and it's not something I know a lot about either, but we were lucky enough to talk to someone who does know a lot about this: Nergiz Kern.

We'am: Nergiz is an **educational** technology professional specialising in **virtual reality**, blended learning and metaverse.

Chris: And here is me We'am and Nergiz **talking about virtual reality**.

Chris: Thank you very much for **coming on** Teaching English with the British Council, Nergiz

We'am: We're so happy to have you today

Nergiz: Thank you for having me

Chris: So Nergiz, many of our **listeners** won't know a lot about **virtual reality** and how it can be used for language learning. Perhaps you could just give a short **overview** of how it works and what you see are its main benefits.

Nergiz: VR can be many different things. One of the things that teachers might have **heard of**, or have probably even tried is using 360-degree videos in the classroom. And then we have VR experiences that take place in a cartoonish world and you can have live classes or students can also go in on their own for project work, for example, but it can also be used for online teaching, for **remote** teaching where teachers and students are in different locations to bring them together. And this for me is how I personally like to use it and see the most value of it yeah, many different ways. Now benefits you can have a more social learning experience and you can **socialise** also with each other. A very recent report from EDUCAUSE that came out just a couple of days ago in the US says for example more university students prefer online teaching to face to face teaching. But where they do prefer face to face is when they're **socialising** and when they want to study together. And this is a gap that in online teaching that virtual reality can actually close because you can have the **socialising element** meeting in a place, in a space and doing things together.

Chris: is there any research that shows about how **effective** that socialisation is in an online space **versus** an offline space?

Nergiz: For learning in general and for language learning, we know that social learning is very important. You can't learn a language in **isolation**. You need other people, you need to **interact** with other people role plays for example, in different environments very difficult to do, authentically, **realistically** in a video conferencing room, but you can do this in **virtual reality** because you have these spaces and you feel present in these spaces

Chris: It's also very difficult for some students to do in real life as well.

Nergiz: Absolutely. In the classroom, we have the same **limitations** you have to imagine a lot as a student in the classroom where you have desks and a whiteboard and so on, imagining that you're now in an airport for example. And if you can be **placed** really in that environment, then it feels completely different and we know from research, again that this kind of experiential, active learning and being placed in that **actual** situation and environment helps memorability. Another important point for many students is that it reduces **anxiety**. There is again research that proves that VR reduces **anxiety** because you're **represented** by avatars you're not really yourself, you know, that helps a lot. And incredible things can happen like we have one research partner taught children and what they found is students had classroom based lessons and VR lessons and the same students within the same space of time spoke at different levels I think it must have been A2 in the classroom and B1 in VR. That is **remarkable**.

Chris: So do you think that's **to do with** that they're just using safe language within the classroom but they're being more **experimental** in the online space?

Nergiz: I think several of the things that I've just mentioned is that it reduces **anxiety**, it's also that it feels more **authentic**, it feels you are in a different environment, not in the classroom, it's not a lesson, it's an experience.

We'am: I have a question and it is **related to** the **limitations** of the VR setting. You mentioned that it gives more chance for students to **engage** with each other. But do you see any **limitations** of that **virtual context** as **opposed** to a classroom **context**? And from your experience, what has been the experience of students, did they enjoy it?

Nergiz: There are certain **limitations** that one has to take into **consideration** when teaching in VR. For example, if students are wearing a headset, they don't see the **physical surroundings** and they can't then take notes, for example. I personally thought also that where avatars still don't have full **facial expressions** in VR, it's coming but at the moment, is pronunciation when you have beginner students I would create a blended course. So where you are in, you know, in certain stages you are in VR, or in one lesson you're in VR and in another you're in the classroom, and complement that. In most cases, I feel that with blended learning you can, you can **enhance** learning in general.

Chris: You're getting the best of both worlds really aren't you there because I think sometimes people see technology as the silver **bullet** that's gonna solve all our problems, but it's about using it well isn't it, about using it **appropriately** when it's **relevant**.

Nergiz: Absolutely. Yeah, people replicate classrooms and school buildings, and lecture theatres in **virtual reality**, and your avatar just has to sit there and listen, we know already from the **physical** world that that's not the best way of teaching or **lecturing**. But so here just by switching to a different environment or a different technology, there is the **assumption** is that alone will **make it** better but of course, it won't, you have to use it in **appropriate** ways to make the best uses of the benefits that VR brings in this case. Yeah, I agree.

We'am: You talked about adaptation, and that makes me think about the role of the teacher and is it any different from their own real classroom setting?

Nergiz: You know, I think in both perhaps in many ways, it's the same thing, isn't it? You can lecture as we just said in the classroom, the teacher can lecture or they can set activities where learners work on their own, discover things, work on projects, and the teacher is just there monitoring and guiding and helping when necessary. And we see the same thing in VR guiding students, they have experiences they do role plays, for example, they can go on field trips and then the teacher is again, just guiding, helping. And then taking notes, of course for feedback because as we know, feedback and reflecting on the learning is very important.

Chris: And Nergiz, can I ask a little bit about how you see the future scope of virtual reality learning because it's quite hardware intensive, quite expensive to get up and running, you need stable Wi-Fi equipment all the rest of it. What is the potential for using VR in less well-resourced contexts for example, in the Global South, how do you see that playing out?

Nergiz: Very good question because I'm also interested in low-resource contexts. One thing I don't agree with some people object to using virtual reality or new technologies because they say not everyone can afford it, but I think if we want to move forward, we have to some teachers have to start looking at new technologies, but that doesn't mean that what we have already isn't good, or shouldn't be used anymore. It's a gradual process. We've seen that with smartphones. So I see the same thing happening with virtual reality. But you can use just smartphones you can use desktops, tablets, to access certain virtual worlds and applications or cheap headsets. You also don't always have to have a complete set for the whole class. You can have one in the classroom, you can have stations you know what we're at one stage of the lesson, a group of students goes into the VR experience while the other students can do something different. It can be remote teaching where only the students with the headsets join. All of these options exist.

Chris: I think as you're seeing that we need to see VR is a sort of one arrow in our quiver of options that we've got as teachers rather than is the only solution or the only thing we should do and that can be adapted in different contexts if people know about it and are sort of able to make those changes

We'am: What is the future of VR language learning? If we were to repeat this interview in ten years' time, what would we be talking about?

Nergiz: We need to look at it here from a wider perspective because a lot of things are changing in education. Some of it has to do with the development of technology and some doesn't, but the way technology is going, we will have a big shift, in particularly in online teaching or online learning because of the development of the internet from flat 2D Internet to Web3. All this means is that the internet is going to gradually become more immersive, more 3D or spatial. And that's what we mean by 'metaverse'. So people will be used to interacting in this 3D environment in their daily digital online interactions just like we are used to now using the internet so you don't have to tell at the moment explain to your learners and onboard them to use the internet. So the same will happen with virtual reality. And in this

environment once we have this metaverse where you can you have interconnected virtual worlds and you can travel from one to another. This is actually going to be a great opportunity for **learners** because what they will be able to do, particularly for **learners** who can't easily travel to another country to learn a language because either it's they don't have the time, or the **finances**, or visa **requirements** are in their way and so on. They can still **go into** the metaverse and meet people from other countries from other cultures and practice and learn the **target** language. So that's a huge benefit that I see. For language schools and teachers it can be a **risk**. It can also be an opportunity. So it's important to not immediately jump into this and think I need to close now my **physical** school and open the metaverse school, but **observe** what the developments and start little by little but by trying teaching in VR because here I really see the possibility that fewer **physical** schools will be needed because some students will be able to do a lot more in in the spatial internet than in a classroom.

Chris: Final question. In one sentence, what would you say to a teacher who's thinking about trying VR in the classroom but isn't sure about it?

Nergiz: Follow some of the teachers who are already using **virtual reality**, there are teachers support groups, and they can follow me or follow my website and from there, find out about the other teachers there are groups that meet regularly and experiment with this and share their knowledge.

Chris: Nergiz, thank you very much for your time today.

We'am: Thank you very much Nergiz.

Nergiz: Thanks a lot.

Chris: Our thanks to Nergiz for her time. We'am, anything that particularly struck you from our interview with her?

We'am: Just the fact that she is doing something that is very niche, I would say, and lots of teachers need support with **emerging** technologies. There are a lack of **resources**, I would say and lack of support of teachers, especially in low-**resource contexts** of how to use these technologies and, **efficiently** and **effectively** in the classroom. So I think Nergiz is doing a great job at providing us with **practical** steps on how to use **virtual reality** in the English classroom.

Chris: And we talked a little bit about the low-**resource context**. Do you see for example, how the technology can be used in somewhere like Gaza, where people cannot leave the area that they're living in? But the world can be brought to them?

We'am: I think yes, because it provides them with a believable setting. So that is very **stimulating** for their imagination, and therefore it will **stimulate** their communication. So when you **stimulate** someone's imagination, they're more encouraged to speak about a situation.

And we do that through role plays, for example, but I think **virtual reality** can provide us with that believable setting.

Chris: And one of Nergiz's roles is as Head of Research at Immerse which is a platform that different virtual reality **providers** use in order to teach English. And we're going to now listen to a field report from one of those **institutions**, the University of Sheffield in the **United Kingdom**, where we hear from David Read, who's going to explain to us how he and his team use **virtual reality** to teach language **effectively**. We're also going to hear from his colleague Laurie, who is teaching students from Yamaquchi university in Japan.

David: Hi, I'm David Read director for technology-**enhanced** learning at the English Language Teaching Centre, University of Sheffield. I'm going to explain some of the tools which you can use for language teaching in **virtual reality** and how you can use VR **successfully** in the classroom.

Excerpt from teaching: *Welcome, welcome to the restaurant. Have a look round you'll see there are some things you can pick up please don't steal the food of the other customers*

Okay, so I'm just putting on the board the phrases from the video so these are going to be useful for you when you're ordering the food.

David: I mean, we start off in this what's called the welcome area and this is quite **nicely** designed actually. Because then you can kind of go around here and this is a good place to help students kind of learn, particularly the first lesson how, or if you've got a new student, how to use the different things. So you know, it's here that they can kind of learn how to pick up objects, that kind of thing and they can look in the mirror. And as a teacher I can, there's a lot of nice controls where I can show students things because it's so, how do I grab and move objects? And if I click this **backward** show **tooltip** that'll actually show the students on their hands how to actually do this or it will show you which buttons to press and things like that. So it's been quite well designed with all these kind of guides and tips built-in as well. And you know, you can sort of take them around this area to **look at** different things. You know, they can pick up pens and write on whiteboards if they want to do that as well. So it allows for a lot of sort of **interactions**.

Excerpt from teaching: *So we're going to do a roleplay activity. I'm going to be the worker in the fast-food restaurant. And first I'd like you to take it in turns to order some food from me. So I'm going to **go over** here behind the **counter**, I'm going to put on my fast-food uniform.*

David: And I think when we first started using VR, we were doing kind of lessons in there almost, in the sense that you can in any of these situations they do actually put up like screens. And you can put up you can put on things like **slides** and if you want like **Google Slides** or anything like that, you can put them up there or you can put YouTube videos or you can just use it as just as a sort of a whiteboard if you like. And this is where you've got these nice teacher tools down the left-hand side. You can even just place things in the environment, so they have a thing called '**placeables**', and you get, you can even just bring

up like a little whiteboard, stick a little whiteboard down and then type into that if you want to do quick correction or something like that. Well you know, it's a very smart little way of post-activity correction or something like that if you if you want to do it. So like I said, I think it's well-designed software there are a couple of new **features** about it, which I think are really useful as well there's what's called 'quick text', which allows you to just pop like a little **bubble** above your head because a lot of so much language and sort of incidental in lessons where someone says something and you want to **clarify** okay, but what's that word? So you can just quickly pop it up and it will just pop up above your head. So you can just see the spelling of a word. The other thing I really like about this is it supports something called a little **summary** button. So whenever you put like a little word up click this button and its **added to** a **summary** and then down again, this is one of your Teacher Tools, it's what's called your class notes, if you click on them, you'll see it'll be **added to** kind of a list of any words that have **come up** during the lesson that you've **added to** this **summary**. And at the end, you can copy that as like a list and then just put it on a document or send it to them or share it with them or something like that.

Excerpt from teaching: *I think you are at the front of the queue. What can I get you I have coke.
And anything else?
I have burger, that's all.
Okay, thank you. That will be about, that will be \$6.98 please.
So I guess, maybe you can you can ask for them to send the bill to your school, maybe we can send the bill to the school. Okay, don't worry about paying, we'll just **pretend** we are paying, we'll just **pretend**!*

David: It has all these tools so you could use it for listening and traditional lessons if you wanted to. But it seems an unnecessary addition to make students sit there for 20 minutes doing a listening in VR when they could do that on a computer screen and wearing a heavy **headset** at the same time. So you really want to take advantage of the situational **aspects** of this, whether it's putting them on aeroplanes, because you can **go into** the aeroplanes themselves here and **get into** the conversations like Oh look, you're sitting next to someone on the plane and chat with them and then another person can play the role-play of the stewardess or the hostess or whatever, take the drinks to them and that kind of thing. So there's that really nice kind of authentic sort of roleplay out **aspects** to it which, you know, in a classroom is can seem a bit silly at times, you know, or can seem a little bit **inauthentic**. But in this **context**, I think it just does feel a little bit realer. The fact that they're hidden behind an avatar, the fact that they're not **looking at** each other's faces, there's not that kind of fear of perhaps making a mistake that you would have in a classroom **context**.

Excerpt from teaching: *So what can you say when you want to find out how much something costs?
How much is it?
Yeah, exactly. Is it \$8.47 please
\$8 and 40, wow, ok, bill it to my school please*

David: I think certainly the research suggests that one of the real benefits of VR is this idea of transferring contextualization, that language transfer is much stronger from VR to real life

than from the classroom to real life because of that, they're seeing the language in that **context** I suppose.

Frequently in the lessons because my students certainly at the moment are quite low level, we're doing like holidays and stuff like that. I'll put up like useful phrases so that when we're discussing things, they've got those **prompt** in the background, to have a **look at** if they if they need to. This is from a lesson this morning I was doing which was at a hotel resort and so we're in the hotel resort and they're discussing things about holidays and all that kind of stuff and they can they can **refer to** this if they need to.

Excerpt from teaching: *What we're going to do one person is going to come behind the **counter** and be the worker, the other person is going to order the food. Once you've had a go **swap** over so the other person can have a go at being a worker.*

David: And there's lots of things they're like, again, they've got things like food and drink and the students always find it quite amusing to pick up the wine bottle and pour it in the glass and things like that. And they can drink it and stuff or pick up the various food objects and the hotdogs and you can eat they can eat them if they **stick to** their mouths and stuff like that. I think one of the first things I had to do was to click freeze button to stop. So I think obviously, I mean I teach adults mainly so it's not such an issue. I think when you got a group of teenagers all throwing stuff at each other, so they had to **implement a focus mode**, on the bottom left hand corner, something called **focus mode** which I think just freezes everything so they can't pick anything up!

We'am: I would have liked to be a student in that lesson. It sounds very interesting. And it's important to mention that it's very important to orient students ahead of the lesson because some students sometimes they, you know, have this fear from **experimenting** with technology. So giving them clear instructions, and orienting them ahead is very important. I would say that this should work particularly well with adults as **opposed** to young **learners**. Because sometimes when you tell adult **learners** to imagine a situation I find it particularly difficult with them to imagine situations. So providing them with the virtual reality setting can break their fear and maybe **motivate** them and make them more **courageous** in speaking and in using the language so it mainly depends on learning through doing which I find to be a **core** for learning English as a second language.

Chris: So you said you would have enjoyed being in this class, We'am, here is Rina, who was also in this class sharing her experiences of being there.

Rina: It's more **practical** than normal online class. I was able to **participate** all the time by moving or talking rather than just listening to classes online.

We'am: Would you have liked to have taught that class, Chris?

Chris: I do like the idea of **virtual reality** in teaching, I'm very **supportive** of technology in the classroom where it can add value. My issue with it is sometimes we think that education or technology is a silver **bullet**, which can solve all our problems. If we just get more computers, more laptops, or tablets then language learning will follow. But what I like about **virtual reality**

is the functional **aspect** of it is the fact that you're in these situations and it feels real. So that to me is the real advantage. You talked a little bit about that with adults who sometimes find it hard to imagine being in that situation. So for me it's that functional **aspect**, which I think can be really, really **beneficial** for **learners**. So yeah, I would like to give it a go. I think you can also take the good parts of virtual reality, whatever context you're in, and adapt them to whatever your situation is.

We'am: And I think that **functional aspect** to the virtual reality can be done with certain topics, but it might not be possible with other topics like let's say **academic** English.

Chris: Yeah, I agree. And I think for me, you know, I've worked a lot with **refugees** and asylum seekers and so on, and I think **virtual reality** would be hugely valuable for students in these sorts of situations because they don't know what the **script** of going to the doctor **surgery**, of going to the dentist's, of talking to other parents at the school gates, they don't know what that script looks like. And what **virtual reality** can do is to give them that script, so when it happens for real, they feel much more confident in talking to **native speakers** of the language.

We'am: Absolutely. And one final note to add is that the new generation is, these **barriers** between virtual technology and reality is less **visible** than maybe the old generation and sometimes we call it digital natives, although it is a bit debatable. But I think that newer generation would appreciate these methods to be used in the classroom.

Chris: Exactly and I think is people's, **quote** unquote - real lives - and their second digital lives become closer and closer. It seems strange to have a kind of **artificial barrier** between the two.

So we hope you enjoyed this **episode** of teaching English with the British Council. In the next **episode**, we'll be **looking at** how we can teach difficult and taboo subjects, but for now, it's goodbye from me

We'am: and goodbye from me.

Chris: Goodbye!



**This episode was produced
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