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How can we teach difficult or taboo subjects?

Show notes

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In this podcast series from the British Council, we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

Each episode explores a specific topic through interviews, a focus on recent developments or reports on British Council initiatives in English language teaching. Practical show notes, classroom activities and transcripts are available to download for each episode.

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Episode overview

Teachers often ask to what extent they should be responsible for teaching challenging material in the classroom, for example topics such as sex, sexuality, racism, politics, religion and economic inequality. Given that in most teaching situations, teachers will have to teach difficult issues at some point, it is important to think about the best way to do this, in order to minimise any problems or embarrassment, and to maximise learning for the students. In our interview, we talk to Rose Aylett, who tells us all about PARSNIPs, and suggests many innovative ways in which these issues can be managed in the classroom. And in the field report, we go to Cardiff, in Wales, to hear about how the not-for-profit Oasis Centre discuss these issues with their refugee and asylum seeker clients.

### In this episode

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**There's a Ukrainian woman who said something really wonderful to me earlier this year… ‘without this, there'll be a wall between me and this country’.**

**It's really important to remember that beginner learners are not beginner thinkers.**

**Both teachers and students in many countries are increasingly contemplating social justice issues and actively bringing them into their classrooms.**

**I actually try to avoid using the term taboo because I think it sort of suggests to me at least that, that there are topics that can't be discussed anywhere and I don't think that's the case.**

**Something I'd recommend initially is setting kind of ground rules. So using or agreeing, a code of conduct with your group of students.**

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### Detailed notes

Additional information about particularly interesting, relevant, or challenging terms are given in the table below.

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| Phrase used | Explanation and further information |
| **Introduction** |  |
| Critical race theory | Critical race theory (CRT) is a cross-disciplinary examination, by social and civil-rights scholars and activists, of how laws, social and political movements, and media shape, and are shaped by, social conceptions of race and ethnicity. CRT is also used in sociology to explain social, political, and legal structures and power distribution as through a ‘lens’ focusing on the concept of race, and experiences of racism. |
| Typewriter project | You can read more about the project which We’am mentions [here](https://globalstudies.wustl.edu/events/not-your-habibti-typewriter-project) and [here](https://www.thenationalnews.com/lifestyle/fashion/not-your-habibti-how-one-palestinian-woman-is-clapping-back-at-harassment-with-her-designs-1.820336). |
| Rose Aylett | Rose is a very active member of the international ELT community. You can see one of her online talks [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgbCQCQDRxc). |
| CELTA | CELTA is an initial teacher training qualification for teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL and EFL). It is provided by Cambridge Assessment English through authorised Cambridge English Teaching Qualification centres and can be taken either full-time or part-time. |
| IATEFL’s global issues special interest group | More information about this group, GISIG, can be found at <https://gisig.iatefl.org/>. |
| Training of Master Trainers in English programme | You can discover more about this programme [here](https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/international-development/consultancy-opportunities/current-consultancy-opportunities/bdesh-teachtrainers-tmte#:~:text=The%20Training%20of%20Master%20Trainers,primary%20schools%20are%20not%20of). |
| **Interview with Rose Aylett** |  |
| PARSNIPs | There is a great write-up of a talk which Rose gave at an IATEFL conference about the topic of PARSNIPs. You can access it [here](https://wanderingelt.wordpress.com/2018/04/11/iatefl2018-making-parsnips-palatable-by-rose-aylett/). |
| Climate emergency | The ‘climate emergency’ is a phrase used to emphasise the importance and serious of what is happening with the global climate. The British Council has made a 10-part podcast series, entitled ‘the climate connection’, which explores the relationship between the climate crisis and language education. It can be accessed [here](https://www.britishcouncil.org/climate-connection/get-involved/action-language-education/podcast). |
| Traffic light model | A traffic light model is one which uses a colour-coded system. ‘Red’ normally means something you shouldn’t do, or is challenging. ‘Green’ is something positive, or which you should do immediately. 'Amber’ (yellow’) is somewhere in between. |
| Beginner speakers are not beginner thinkers | This is a lovely quotation which Chris stole from Laura, who uses it in the field report. |
| **Field Report** |  |
| ESOL | ESOL is an abbreviation which means “English for Speakers of Other Languages”. In its general sense, it can also be known as ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language), EAL (English as an Additional Language) or ENL (English as a New Language). |
| Oasis Cardiff | Oasis Cardiff ([www.oasiscardiff.org](http://www.oasiscardiff.org)) is a not-for-profit organisation which is based in Cardiff, Wales. Their main aim and vision is to help refugees and asylum seekers integrate into the local community. One of the ways they try and achieve this is through English language and skills sessions. |
| Refugees and asylum seekers | A refugee is someone who has left their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations, and their claim to asylum has been recognised by the government of the country in which they are living. An asylum seeker is a person who has, similarly, left their own country because of the danger they are in, but their claim has not yet been decided, and they are awaiting an official decision. |
| Cardiff is a multicultural city | Cardiff has historically had an ethnically diverse population due to its past trading connections, immigration after the Second World War, and the large number of foreign students at its universities. The 2011 census reported that 15% of the city’s inhabitants identified as being non-white. |
| Participatory pedagogy | According to [this very useful academic article](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10124364/1/Participatory_Pedagogy_in_Practice_Using.pdf) about the topic, participatory pedagogy “aims to promote the ideals of equity, equality and co-agency with the aim of modelling this effectively within our classrooms so that it reflects and spreads across the school community and wider society.” A participatory pedagogy is one in which students play an vital and active role in the development of the course itself – particular with regards to its contents, and the specific areas of focus. Dogme ELT is a well-known example of a participatory pedagogy. |
| Prompt | Something you say as a teacher to give your students ideas – short pieces of information which get them thinking, and going in the right direction. |
| Early bird or night owl | An early bird is someone who likes to get up early. A night owl is someone who prefers to stay up late at night. |
| Citizenship skills | Citizenship skills can include, but are not limited to, skills such as: critical thinking, expressing opinions, negotiating, conflict resolution, cooperation, self-improvement, respect, fairness, and patience. |
| **Discussion** |  |
| LGBTQ rights | ‘LGBTQ’ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer / Questioning. A range of different abbreviations are sometimes used, e.g. [LGBT](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT), [LGBTI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersex_and_LGBT), [LGBT+](https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/living-with-mental-illness/wellbeing-physical-health/lgbtplus-mental-health/#:~:text=LGBT%2B%20stands%20for%20lesbian%2C%20gay,common%20in%20the%20LGBT%2B%20community.) and [LGBTQIA+](https://www.depts.ttu.edu/lgbtqia/understandinglgbtqia.php). |

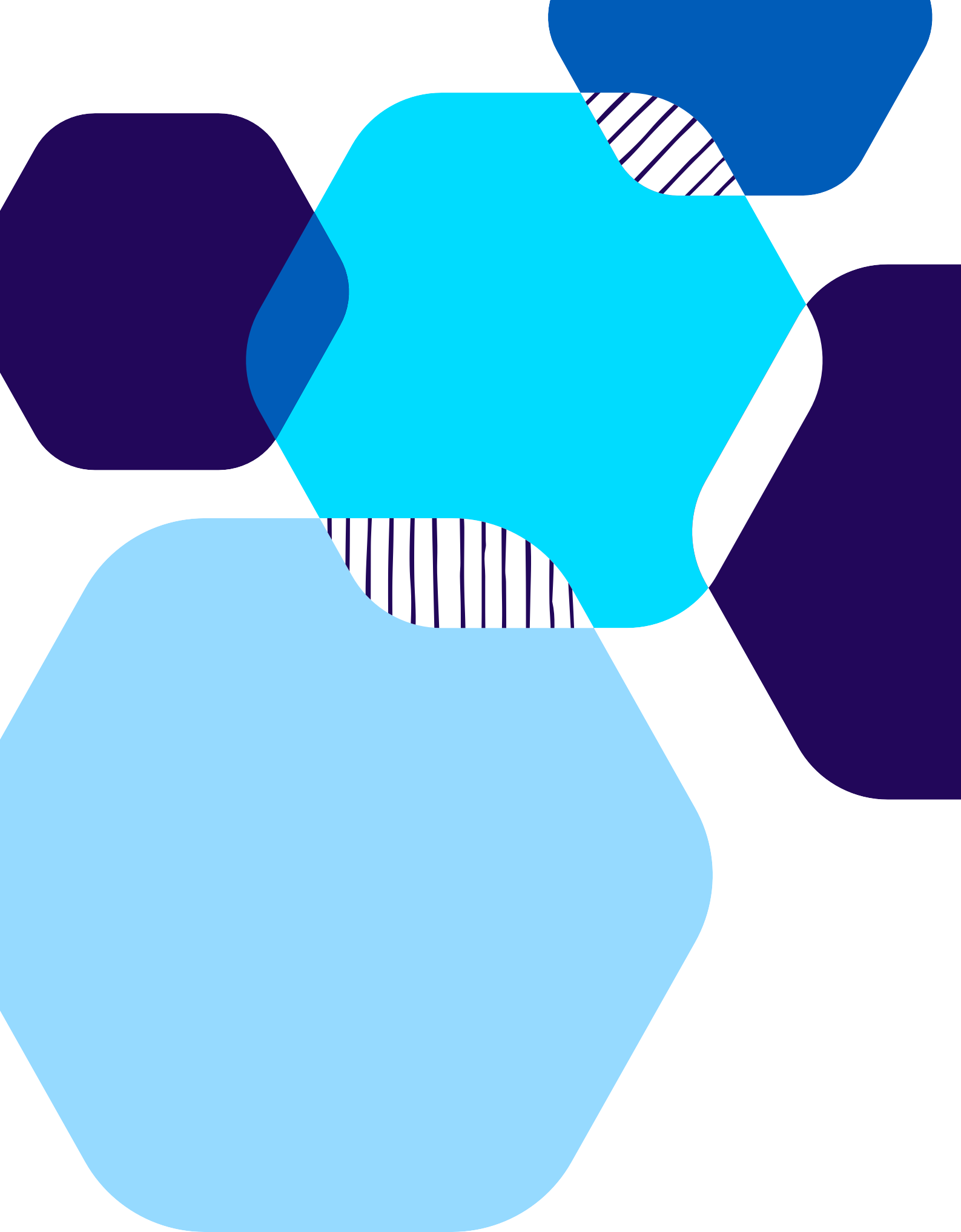
### Using this podcast for lessons or training



* You can download a transcript of the episode from the podcast homepage. To help you and your learners with preparation and language analysis, all words at the B2, C1 and C2 CEFR level have been highlighted.
* The British Council have produced an ‘activity pack’ for this episode, which contains activities which you can use in your classroom. The activities focus on speaking, listening, grammar and language. They are available in both pdf and in editable PowerPoint format, in case you wish to edit them to make them more relevant for your specific classroom.

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