

How can we teach difficult or taboo subjects?

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** Three: How can we teach difficult or taboo subjects?

Chris: Hello and welcome to **Episode** Three of Teaching English with the British Council. In this episode we **look at** how we can teach difficult or taboo subjects. First of all, We'am, what do we mean by this term: difficult and taboo subjects?

We'am: Those are issues that are not often **tackled** in the classroom and could be **sensitive** to **tackle** them in certain cultures. Like maybe **talking about** sexuality in the Arab world, not in all Arab countries, but in certain **settings**, maybe **talking about slavery** or **critical race theory** in the UK. So it **differs** in different **contexts**.

Chris: And what about it from your own experience of working and living in Palestine? There must have been lots of **controversial** issues that have **come up** in the classroom and so on. How did you deal with them as a teacher and a teacher trainer?

We'am: I remember one activity that I did with my classroom, and we called it the typewriter project. It was a project where students wrote about their stories of **sexual harassment**, but they were all anonymised. And we put them around the classroom and it was like a gallery. And that just gave the students a space to talk about issues that are not very often **talked about**. And that was very empowering for both **males** and **females**. And I think that is something that can be used in all **contexts**.

Chris: And was that seen as controversial when you did that? What was the response of the students when it was introduced?

We'am: I think at the beginning students are not used to it but once they realise that this is reality, this is happening. And once you can use this to empower their skills in reading and writing and talk about something that is personalised, I think that is very empowering for them.

Chris: And of course, that's one example of a controversial or difficult issue. There are many others and that's what we're going to look at today in our first interview. And our first interview is with Rose Aylett, who is a freelance teacher trainer and CELTA tutor, the coordinator of IATEFL's global issues special interest group. She's currently based in Bangladesh working for the British Council on their training of Master Trainers in English programme.

We'am: Hello, Rose

Rose: Hi there.

We'am: So when talking about taboo subjects, we often hear the word PARSNIP used to describe topics which should be avoided when teaching English language. Could you firstly explain what is PARSNIP and secondly, your thoughts on whether these topics should be avoided?

Rose: PARSNIP is like an acronym. It's used to describe common topics that are often omitted from globally published coursebooks. And what potentially shouldn't be included in these materials that are written for an international market. So you might be wondering what each letter of the acronym stands for: the first P in PARSNIP is for politics. A is for alcohol. R is for religion. S is for sex or sexuality. N is for nudity or narcotics. I is for Israel or isms. This can include political movements like feminism or discrimination like racism, political ideologies, like fascism or communism. And finally, the second P is for pork. And I think it's worth saying that there's obviously an overlap between some of these different categories, like alcohol and narcotics, for example. I think this concept of PARSNIPS is now quite widely known, and I think it's been discussed more and more as global citizenship education is becoming more mainstream, and both teachers and students in many countries are increasingly contemplating like social justice issues and actively bringing them into their classrooms. And in answer to the second part of your question, whether I think these topics should be avoided or not, the short answer is absolutely not. Personally, I don't think that there are any topics that are inherently taboo. 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. So no matter how difficult a topic is for teachers and students to talk about, I think you can guarantee that it's been touched upon in a classroom somewhere in the world. I think what makes the topic controversial or not, is actually who is discussing it. And among one group of people a topic like the climate emergency might not have the potential for much disagreement, but in a completely different group of people, it might actually lead, that discussion might lead to conflict. So I think as teachers we have to be really careful. Think carefully about our classroom context and decide which topics are appropriate for our learners. Its context that matters more I think, and, and having a familiarity with the culture you're working in, being able to predict at least to some extent, how they might react to more challenging content, and also knowing why they're studying English because that would play into the reason why you would choose to discuss a topic in the first place. With a term like PARSNIPS there's a little bit of a danger that if we as teachers buy into this idea that there are topics that are completely off limits, we're doing a disservice to our learners. We're kind of censoring their classroom. And I think a classroom should be a safe space to, if students want to, to be able to discuss issues that they can't explore elsewhere. And sometimes, of course, it's actually the learners that bring the topics into the classroom. So even if a teacher has

decided to avoid a particular topic, they might find themselves in the middle of a learner-generated discussion on it. That's something we all need to be prepared for.

Chris: It's always something that confused me with PARSNIPs in that if you're going to a different country, if it's an English speaking country, and people are going to ask you about your views on alcohol or your religion, or you need to know words connected to pork or whatever it may be, to not allow the student to develop that kind of knowledge seems actually sort of contradictory in some ways.

Rose: Yeah, definitely. Students need to have the vocabulary to be able to talk about these issues, even if it's something that they don't want to talk about or that they don't want to do. They still need to be able to discuss that right.

Chris: So where does it come from then? Because if it doesn't make sense of that logical functional perspective, is it just something here we see in the classroom, it's the views or the wider community, or the system that the students are, are coming from and if that is the case, what can teachers do in those situations? You might want to talk about these issues or think it's important to talk about these issues. But there is a background and landscape which prevents them from doing this.

Rose: Yeah, so I think there's lots we can do as teachers to make sure that there is a classroom environment that is safe for students to discuss these kinds of topics. And for me, that's, yeah, creating this kind of inclusive classroom atmosphere is really important. Students need to be able to feel like they are their authentic selves in the classroom, and that they can express their opinions on a particular topic openly and honestly, there's this obvious exception of, kind of, you don't want students to be able to make offensive or discriminatory comments, or at least for them, if they do make them that they can't go unchallenged.

Chris: Would you say it's the case that they're more likely to make offensive comments if they haven't had the opportunity to try that language out within the safe space of the classroom?

Rose: Potentially, yes, but I think the thing is that, as a teacher, as you need to model the behaviour that you expect to see from your students when you're discussing these kinds of issues. So when I'm negotiating a conversation like this with students, I'm always trying to model the skills of good dialogue in the classroom, which are the same skills that you would use to have a good conversation outside of the classroom about a difficult topic. So it's things like really listening to different opinions, being genuinely open to and exploring new ideas that you may not share. Being prepared to change your own mind, being able to challenge your own views and perspective on a particular issue. It's like being able to see things in technicolour rather than just in black and white. It also means in the classroom, giving students the space to be able to share their ideas if they want to, and challenging stereotypes. It can be uncomfortable for the teacher because having your own ideas and opinions challenged is uncomfortable, but that's okay and that's learning. That's definitely something we need to model for our students to be able to respectfully disagree about topics.

We'am: And speaking about space: how can you create a classroom space where students feel comfortable to share different views on these issues? You mentioned that you do not prefer the word taboo. But if you were to replace it with another term, what would you call it?

Rose: Yeah, so I suppose I would talk more about, like I talk about controversial issues. Yeah, there's lots of things you can do to prepare students to talk about these issues. So I wouldn't go in on day one, if I had a new group, a new class, I wouldn't discuss a potentially controversial issue with them on the first day of teaching them. And also if I know a topic to be particularly culturally sensitive, perhaps, and I think it's something that I would want to talk with my students about, I might try and give them a heads-

up before introducing it in the class. So, which would give them the opportunity to **come to** me and tell me if they **didn't** want to discuss that. And another way I've used in the past of kind of pre-emptively **assessing** students opinions on things is to include a sort of PARSNIP style needs **analysis**. So I've used a **traffic light model**. I've given students a list of topics and I've asked them to **allocate** a different colour to each topic. Green means that they **actively** want to discuss this issue. Yellow is that they don't mind, they're **indifferent**, or maybe they don't know very much about it yet. And then red means they definitely don't want to. And so doing something like that before the class can give you an idea about how **learners** feel about a particular issue.

Chris: I like what you're saying there, Rose. It seems to me you're saying that we shouldn't be seeing these issues as **controversial** as some sort of binary, some things are controversial, some things are not **controversial**, but more of a **spectrum**.

Rose: Yeah, definitely there's fluidity there isn't there?

Chris: Thinking about the practicalities of this, it may be that a teacher wants to talk about some of these issues. What can teachers do in that situation where they have to teach a certain body of information, but their class is perhaps hungry to talk about some of these other, as I say, more **controversial** issues?

Rose: Yeah, so I think the **reality** is that probably most coursebooks don't include **controversial** issues, or PARSNIP topics, whatever you want to call them. So most teachers probably will have to look **elsewhere** to find ideas or **potentially** create their own materials. There are different ways of **integrating** this kind of **content** into your classes. You don't have to teach a whole lesson on a **controversial** topic. It could just be that you start by adding in some more thought-**provoking** questions to a list of discussion questions. It could be that you just go with the flow when students bring up the topic themselves in the class and you don't shut down the conversation. But also if you're looking actually to find materials, I'm the coordinator of the IATEFL **Global** Issues SIG so that's somewhere that I would definitely direct people to go is to our website, we have a lot of free and **openly accessible resources** and materials there. Just find the kinds of things that your students are interested in. If you see video clips, short films particularly make fantastic teaching material, and so you can you can find them, **bookmark** them and then just use them in class.

Chris: And something I've often encouraged teachers to do in training I've done is to **look at what micro resistances** they can also put in place even if they have textbooks which have, for example, very traditional **gender** roles or it **represents** particular **dominant** groups within the society, is to **simply** encourage that space for **critical reflection**. So asking questions like, does this **reflect** the **reality** of your society? Or if you're doing something like acting out the story is changing the role so that boys play girls or girls play boys or whatever it may be.

Rose: Yeah, definitely. I like that, what was it, micro **resistances**? That's really nice. I'm going to start using that. It makes me think of something I did the other day. I was, I'm teaching in Bangladesh at the moment, and I think I was **defining** marriage or providing an explanation for marriage. And it was just **inserting** the word "usually", instead of saying this is a **partnership** between a man and a woman, it's usually a **partnership** between a man and a woman. So that's not **necessarily opening up** the discussion, but **learners** will notice.

Chris: And it's also an act of **solidarity**, I think with **learners** in that class if they, for example, if they do have particular views about their own sexuality in that class, just someone like you, in that position raising that issue is an act of **solidarity** and empowerment with that person that they don't **necessarily** feel as isolated or as alone as they as they may often feel.

Rose: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And that can, you can **insert** that all over the place in your teaching. It is an approach isn't it, an attitude to your teaching rather than just doing an activity?

Chris: Exactly.

We'am: How can you create a classroom space where students feel comfortable to share different views on these issues, such as **gender** roles, maybe sexuality, **religious viewpoints**? What about when you as a teacher have very different views of your students?

Rose: We've obviously all got different views on things and this is what makes the world such a rich, **diverse** and interesting place. I think **disagreement** isn't a bad thing per se, however, in a classroom **context** with students who don't know each other very well and who are perhaps not able to **express** themselves as clearly as they might otherwise want to, this has the **potential** to **lead to** classroom **conflict**, which is obviously something we want to avoid. Something I'd recommend **initially** is setting kind of ground rules. So using or agreeing, a **code** of **conduct** with your group of students. And this actually might be something you do already at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of every term. You might already have one on your classroom wall, or you might want to create one with your students in advance of a **specific** discussion that you're about to have on a particular topic. I think it can be really helpful to do this and then **refer** back to it during the discussion. Another thing that's really useful can be to **engage** your students in kind of improvisation and drama games, drama activities. And these I found can be really great to **gradually**, little by little, remove students **inhibitions** and create this really fun, **supportive** classroom atmosphere, that you want to be able to discuss these issues.

Chris: Perhaps, just one final question, Rose, if we've got teachers who are listening, who want to do this sort of thing, but are nervous about doing this, what would be a starting point, where could they? Where could they go from?

Rose: Yeah, so I think the first thing I would say is know that you're not alone. If that's you, that describes a lot of teachers, including me, I would include myself in that. But I don't think that's a bad thing, like I said earlier, I think a little bit of **discomfort** because that's learning that's that's important. So my advice would be just have a go. Start with the subjects that your students are interested in. So I think again, it's really important to find out what they are. Think about political and social issues that really grab their attention at the moment. There might be local social issues that are important to them that are particularly **relevant** to your **learner's** context, or aren't covered in the coursebook because you're using a global coursebook, **to start with** those. And I think you will feel more confident as a teacher if you know that the topic is going to **engage** your **learners**, so yeah...

Chris: Maybe just one thing to **add to** that from my own experience is that beginner speakers are not beginner thinkers, you know, and they may have those ideas there, it's how we, as a teacher can bring those things out, rather than just say, Oh, they're only A1, A2 level or whatever it is. They're only seven years old. They have no ideas. No, it's, it's finding out how to **engage** with them rather than just **rejecting** that idea.

Rose: Yeah, definitely. And there's no reason why you can't have the conversation in the students L1 first, especially if you as a teacher, share it with them, why not have it in L1 first and then help them to have it in English or a **simplified version** of the same conversation in English?

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

We'am: Thank you very much, Rose.

Rose: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

We'am: I think this is such an important **episode**. And it's a skill by itself to be able to teach students how to talk about difficult issues in a polite **manner**. So I think our role as educators is more of **facilitating**, and that includes **facilitating** difficult issues that are not often **talked about** in the English classroom.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think one of the things we **talked about** in the interview was about social and political challenges, but there's also **economic** challenges and the **reality** of living in a new place and **struggling** to get by day to day. We're now going to listen to our field report and this is something I recorded with a group in Cardiff. So at the Oasis Centre we hear from a group of **refugees** and asylum seekers who are **struggling** to make ends meet and who are able to talk about that within the safe space of the classroom.

Lesson extract

Laura: My name is Laura Phelps and I'm the head of ESOL at Oasis Cardiff. So Oasis Cardiff is it's a charity that's for **refugees** and **asylum seekers**. A lot of our **clients come to** us when they haven't been in the UK very long. So some of them arrive with really a very low level of English and perhaps not, not always very strong **literacy** skills in their **first language** depending on, on their sort of **educational** experiences before. Obviously, a lot of them have come from quite **traumatic circumstances**. Sometimes the journeys that people have made to, to get here have been very difficult or people are sort of worried about what's happening to their family or their friends back home. So I think they're sort of **processing** an awful lot of things that are **happening to** them and at the same time then, sort of, finding the **motivation** to, to understand like a new culture and learn a new language. It's kind of, there's a lot, a lot going on there.

Lesson extract

Laura: I think it's, you know, although obviously the main purpose of the ESOL classroom is to help people with language, like it is a lot more than that and people do kind of anecdotally they say they're coming here partly for language and partly for friendship. There's a Ukrainian woman who said something really wonderful to me earlier this year about, you know, without this, there'll be a wall between me and this country. And it's kind of, it's that just to kind of understanding even having like a series of teachers, **volunteer** teachers that you can just you can just ask things to about of cultural questions: why is this happening? And yeah, just meeting people from all over obviously, that's kind of you know, Cardiff is a multicultural city. That's what the wider world is like. So I think it's, it's not only about language, but about the kind of the, the broader social **context** of what an ESOL classroom is like. I don't see the sense in **separating** the ESOL classroom from the real world, like the people that are coming here, they're, they're adults. You know, obviously they are **aware** of what's happening in the world, very much **aware** of that. I remember when I first started teaching, one of my managers said to me, you know, it's really important to remember that beginner **learners** are not beginner **thinkers**, I found that's really something that stayed with me and like, of course, it's I think sometimes that when you have these kinds of issues that people do have things to say about that are really **relevant** to their own lives. That's it's a much better way of kind of, of teaching language. So the language kind of **emerges** much more **naturally** from the **context** that you're describing, and you can work with the language that **comes up** rather than the teacher deciding this today as present perfect day or today is this set of lexis. It's kind of what you want to say about those topics. And then you can kind of support people in finding the language they need to do that.

Lesson extract

Laura: So I mean, the methodology that we - I **hesitate** to say train because it's not quite as **formal** as

that, but then we kind of encourage people to use is participatory pedagogy. So **basically**, the teacher is not deciding the **format** of the lesson, but they will bring something that **acts as a prompt**, for example, an **image** or a newspaper headline or something like this. And then the students kind of have you know, they work with that prompt. So the teacher is not really directing it, the students are able to meet you where they're ready to meet you kind of like linguistically and in terms of, you know, their feelings about particular things. So if there's a topic they don't want to talk about, they'll always be an option, just not to talk about that. And there'll be more than one option of things to discuss so that no one ever feels sort of **backed** into a corner and feel that they have to talk about a particular thing. I think good teachers do this anyway, of just sort of being **aware** of what's happening in the classroom, how people are feeling if someone you know who's normally a bit **chatty** has gone a bit quiet or if they, you can kind of tell them a sort of a change of mood. And then it's, you know, it's about sort of not pushing a particular **agenda**. So you know, even if the teacher thinks like, it'd be interesting to talk about this, like, it's really not up to the teacher, it's up to the teacher to create a **context** in which a **dialogue** can happen if the **learners** are kind of happy to do that, and if not, then to, you know, to **withdraw** and, and just **basically** being sort of guided by the people that you find in your in your classroom.

Lesson extract

Laura: There was an issue with one of our other teachers who is qualified but not terribly experienced. And it was when, after the Ukrainian **conflict** had quite recently **broken out**, and we had here some Ukrainians and some Russians in the same class and it had **come up** he certainly wasn't pushing to discuss that he was doing a lesson about sleep, sleep patterns, you know, are you an early bird or a night owl and somebody said, a Ukrainian **learner** had said: "Well, usually I sleep very well. But you know, now I can't sleep at all because of these Russians." And, you know, this Russian students who went sort of terribly quiet and the teacher was **aware** that that wasn't, that wasn't great. And he **came to** me afterwards and said how, how should I how should I manage that? And of course, I don't I don't think there is a should. Again, just being **aware** of and sort of neutralising that and, you know, being able to say that obviously in this situation now it is it is really difficult and it can be quite **upsetting**. You know, maybe that's we can have a chat about that at the end of the class. Maybe it's that you know, rather than letting that kind of escalate during the lesson.

Lesson extract

Laura: I mean, I think if you're considering sort of **critical** thinking as part of your essential curriculum, or sort of citizenship skills as part of your curriculum, I think these kinds of things **emerge** quite **naturally**. So it's certainly not about you know, the teacher deciding that we're doing today we're going to talk about a difficult issue, but we are going to talk about maybe you know, what it, what it means to **participate** in society in a particular way and, and to encourage **learners** to kind of like, to question things and to create a culture where people feel able to kind of to ask questions or to raise kind of more, more difficult points, perhaps.

We'am: I specifically, like the part where Laura said that this is not only about teaching a language but also about the humans involved and I think as humans, we **tend to** want to **express** ourselves and our views. Maybe the environment is not always **supportive** of that. But our role as educators and as teachers is to empower students by giving them the atmosphere or the environment that is suitable for them to **express** their opinions. And that **relates to** what Rose mentioned that she prefers not to call this taboo subjects but rather difficult subjects. I also liked that she's using participatory pedagogy, which is very empowering for marginalised people, especially **refugees**, once they're given agency and autonomy over their learning and over the topics they can discuss in the class that is very **engaging** and also very good for them for their **mental** health as because of what they are experiencing in **reality**.

Chris: Absolutely. And talking to some of the **participants** in the class afterwards, they were saying, you

know, there may be no other place that they have where they can talk about these issues. This is the one place they can go, they feel safe to talk about these issues, and it was, you know, and they can also find solutions here as well, because they can learn from each other. They can talk about these challenges, and through that, through that participation, as you're saying, they're making a direct and **explicit** link between the acquisition of a language and their social and **economic reality**.

We'am: Yeah, and there are some topics where you cannot imagine yourself **talking about** it in your **native** mother tongue language, but once you speak about it in other languages, gives you kind of a **motivation** to explore it a bit more. As a second language **learner**, I found this to be very true. There are topics maybe that I am more, or maybe I shy away from speaking about in my **native** tongue, but I'm more comfortable speaking about it in English because of the **universal tone** of English language.

Chris: So, for example?

We'am: I would say things like maybe **LGBTQ rights**. Yeah, I find the terms maybe are more, yeah, there are more terms to talk about it in English than in other languages.


Chris: I guess as well with something like LGBTQ **rights** are, I don't know, but in Arabic are the words translated from English into Arabic? Is the act of translating those words says something about the **perception** of those words as well?

We'am: Yeah, because in Arabic we only have one word so, while LGBTQ **stands for** different **categories**, so yeah, just seeing that and exploring that **aspect**, the language and how can we **analyse** the language, culture, you know that **dynamic** between language, culture and social norms and **religious barriers** maybe. It is very **transparent** in language.

Chris: And I think teachers can bring that out in classes as well, they shouldn't be afraid to **go into** like things like linguistics rather than language where you're actually saying, well, what are the words for these things in say, Arabic and say, in English? And so there is a difference, why is there a difference? What does that say? And that can actually **lead to** lots of interesting learning points as well.

We'am: Thank you for listening to **episode** three, join us in our next **episode** where we will talk about the difference between **academic** and general English

Chris: See you next time!





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