What is the difference between academic English and general English?
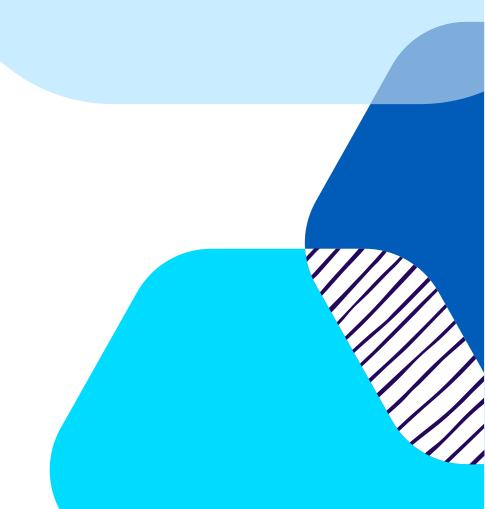
Transcript

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 Four: What is the Difference Between Academic English and General English?

We'am: Hello and welcome to Episode Four of Teaching English with the British Council. In this episode we look at the difference between academic English and general English.

Chris: So, We'am, I think you have a foot in both camps here, because you've both been student of academic English and taught it, what was your experience being on that on both sides of the equation?

We'am: I think as a student I looked at academic English, at the beginning it was strange to me because a lot of the English I knew from my previous learning experience was mostly general English. So I wasn't used to academic English and I did not really differentiate between the two. But with more practice, as I did English literature, I think it improved with reading, with listening and writing assignments. And with my teachers, you know, drawing attention to some key phrases you can use in academic context, it's work in progress. And now as a PhD student, I still look at it as work in progress. And it definitely takes me more

time to write than a native speaker, but at the end it works. Languages are different and the register of a language differs in different contexts and this is similar to Arabic. In Arabic, we have fosha, which is written only, it's not spoken. And we have Amiyye which is general English. So once you draw their attention to that because there's, I think, a notion that English is just the same in different contexts. So once you draw their attention to that I think they are more aware that the register is different in different contexts.

Chris: These are some of the main issues we're going to pick up in our interview with Tracey Costley.

We'am: Tracey Costley is Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Language and Linguistics at the University of Essex. Her research interests include academic literacies, English as an additional language learners and student identity and writing at University. Hello Tracey

Chris: Hi Tracey

Tracey: Thank you for having me

Chris: So Tracey, for those of our listeners who may be unfamiliar with the term academic English, could you please explain how it is similar or different to general English?

Tracey: Yeah, I think maybe a simple but not uncomplicated answer might be that perhaps academic English might be the type of language you'd expect to hear most in schools, in universities, and the type of language we would use when we're thinking of formal assignments. One challenge with that simple answer is it suggests that there's just sort of one type of academic English or that academic English is the only English that exists in those spaces. So a type of English that is used in a particular way to achieve tasks around education

Chris: What are some of those similarities or differences, for example, between different academic disciplines?

Tracey: Yeah, absolutely. So I think you're absolutely right. This is one of the areas where that idea of one academic English becomes really difficult. So we could think maybe of the way in which people do science but science is a really big term as well. So if we think of Chemistry or Biology, within that there are also ranges of the types of things that people might be doing. So if we've got so for, in my own context at the university, we've got undergraduate Biology maybe, but that might be a first year, second year, third year level, postgraduate Biology. So the language would look quite different there again depending on the kind of things people are doing. So I think one of the things that is relatively consistent is that there's a certain formality to academic language, maybe that isn't always present in more general English. And so the ways in which we might talk about science to you know, our friends, or in a kind of informal context might use slightly different language to if we're presenting it at a seminar, or if we are presenting it for publication or for assessment. So I think often the register, so the tone or the formality, and the types of words that we would choose, are more formal in written and spoken academic work than they would be in more general English.

Chris: So the key thing is, it's not something that's fixed, it's something that changes. Is that slightly problematic in terms of how you're preparing your students for that and the perceptions of some of the academics that you're working with as well who may have a more sort of fixed sense of what academic English is?

Tracey: No, absolutely. I think, you know, for teachers, for learners, I think if you say this thing changes and is fluid that can be quite intimidating because you think, how do I learn and how can I keep up? How do I know if what I'm doing is right or not? So I think there are core areas that you could focus on in classrooms. And so there are certain types of vocabulary that we know remain relatively consistent.

Chris: Could you give some examples of that maybe?

Tracey: Yeah, so I mean, maybe not as a scientist, as someone working within in linguistics, for example. So a word that often comes up in the type of classes that I'm teaching are around sort of pedagogy. So we know that that's a kind of a, you know, a word relating to teaching that, you know, is a specific type of academic word. So those kinds of things I think might be something, or if we're thinking specifically about applied linguistics, then things around target language, again, kind of in an academic context means something you know, very particular. So the type of language that you're trying to learn L1, L2 these types of expressions. This language maybe even though L1 and L2 is problematic, but we know that those things are there and they're there in the literature and we can see them. So I think there are spaces for teachers to be able to say, yes, things change, and yes, this language is in motion like all language. But there are really key features. I think one of the things that often effective students or effective teachers also do is to sort of help students, pay, or raise their awareness to how that language is working in texts as well. So we're always reading things in academic context, aren't they? Often you know, we're reading for the content and people try to understand what are these concepts so if we're looking at language learning theories, you know, real interest in trying to understand what is being said to us, and also then that attention to how is it being said so we can start to raise kind of awareness to how language is used, what types of structures are there. For me, I think if we think about what we're trying to do, so those types of practices, maybe then that's also a way that the language can be kind of controlled a little bit more, maybe

We'am: You spoke briefly about some of the main challenges for students or educators to use academic English. I'd like you to explore more of the challenges for students in using academic English.

Tracey: Absolutely. So one, one area I think is how this type of language and these types of institutions I think can often be quite intimidating for people. They don't feel like they should be speaking in these very formal ways or writing in these formal ways. So kind of encouraging people to feel comfortable with that language. I think there's some quite interesting work looking at this idea of academic language and how often it can be put against general language or general English or whatever language we're talking about. Somehow there's an opposite like academic language is better than something. And I think that binary or that tension is often a difficulty for students and something that isn't really

necessary I think. So if we think that you know, we have all kinds of language that we use so trying to understand where are students coming from? What language are they coming into the classroom with? And how can we build on that? Rather than say, you know, this is wrong, you've got to have this language. We say, okay, well, what do we need to do? How do we need to do it? How are people within our different disciplines or different subject areas? How are they talking about these things? And that this type of language is being a choice. So it's not something that kind of comes in and replaces, you know, other language because somehow that other language isn't good enough or isn't appropriate enough, but actually, if we're trying to achieve this task in a way that is expected of us in terms of assessment or in terms of, you know, other external requirements, then we might need to make adjustments

Chris: So it's more of a greater awareness of register or genre because equally, whilst it may sound strange if you use colloquial language in a seminar, if you use a formal academic register in the cafe that would be just as strange in that situation. It was also interesting, Tracey you talked a little bit there, or you refer to using the resources that students come to the classroom with. I wonder if you could say a little bit about how you see students could use their own languages or their repertoire of languages in order to develop their academic English skills

Tracey: I think increasingly the field of English for Academic Purposes in general, but universities also trying to look at ways in which multilingual classrooms work, whether we think of multilingualism as being across different languages or across these different varieties of languages as well. So I think some of the most exciting presentations I've been to or some of the most exciting talks or some of my most effective learning, I think has probably taken place when people are able to take really complicated ideas and present them in a really simple, fun and engaging way. And I think there language is great because it has that adaptability and it doesn't have to be formal to be clever or formal to be clear. Sometimes you'd need that formality but sometimes that sort of colloquial, or that movement between, that fluidity is really helpful. Having that ability to move between your own resources as you're trying to develop writing or you're trying to develop your ideas and speaking. So one of the things that, you know, we tend to focus on a lot in any kind of language development is you know, how you, you're writing, drafting redrafting. And I think there's often a pressure on students to feel that it's got to be perfect from the start. And I think more in my own writing now as well and writing isn't something I always find at all easy, but I write in a way that I might speak just to get the ideas out and use that as a base, and as a base to then build on and say, okay, well, I know, I can't use this word in the final version, but what do I need to be able to replace that with. I think anything really, that can help in terms of, again, that confidence of trying to be sure that what you're trying to say is what you want to be able to say

Chris: Otherwise I guess, people just end up staying within safe speak and they're not really saying what they want to say. Academics can sometimes not realise how difficult it is what we're trying to ask the students to do. We're asking to do something which is conceptually hard and linguistically hard at the same time. And it seems silly not to say, well use your first language or one of your languages as a scaffolding to get to where you want to be.

Tracey: For sure, because I think for a long time, there was this sort of dogma of think through English, try and only use English. And I think you know, that was a product of the training. For most multilingual speakers there isn't always a sense of oh, I'm thinking through English. It's a much more fluid process. That there is much more fluidity to how people are mobilising their knowledge and their information. So to replicate that as much as possible in classrooms, I think is also really valuable because that's what's happening.

We'am: What about services like Google Translate or similar online translation software? Do they enable students? Do you see them as more of replacing maybe the teacher role?

Tracey: If you're trying to understand something like using those things, I think can facilitate understanding and facilitate meaningful exchanges, especially if you've got students working in multilingual contexts as well as Google Translate works really nicely there. Students are able to kind of work, you present ideas in a language and then their classmates translate that into a language that they might be using. In academic contexts, some concerns often about Google Translate, should this be allowed in assignments? Should this be allowed in tests? Yeah, the reason behind it, I guess, the purpose for using it is something that I think would be interesting.

Chris: I guess it becomes very hard for you, though, to sort of, you know, to want to see, where does Google Translate sort of end and where does the students' own writing start?

Tracey: Yeah, personally, I don't think it's really bad. I think that's how writing is. But if you will do so well, actually, this is helping me to understand this meaning and then I'm using that to track back or I'm using that to then go back to the references and make sure I understand it or I'm using that to add to the conversation. But also as well, you know, one question we had a discussion in our department recently about if you don't acknowledge the role that potentially Google Translate can play in those types of assessments and those types of assignments that I think that maybe that's a mistake, but if you say okay, you're using this technology, explain how you're using it, explain how you've used your own understanding of this language to add to the translation or correct the translation or see where the translation perhaps isn't correct. Those types of practices happen all the time in kind of translation work as well, so, again, I think, you know, if we're trying to mirror skills and practices from, you know, schools and universities to, you know, other life contexts, then I think, again, taking account of how we do stuff is helpful and important.

We'am: And moving on from that, What advice would you give to teachers who would like to go into the field of English for Academic Purposes?

Tracey: The happiest teaching I think I've done has been within EAP because I think it is dynamic because I think it is a kind of a changing subject and because as an EAP teacher, I think you often are required to be really stretched and stretch in different ways. So you're trying to understand different subject areas. I mean, if you know, in a perfect world, I would always be working within the field of, you know, applied linguistics or TESOL, or things that I think I might know something about. So I think the role of an EAP teacher is really interesting in that sense. It's, it's not boring ever, I think an EAP tutors role so I think anyone that's interested in going into it, I would say yes, but also go into it knowing that it's a constant

process of learning and relearning and engaging and there isn't a sort of a one size fits all wonder lesson or approach but I think what makes EAP really rich is that there are multiple voices and increasingly more multiple approaches to how you get to that end product and I think that's really exciting.

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

Tracey: Brilliant, thank you.

We'am: One of the things that Tracey mentioned is intimidation or imposter syndrome felt by students and teachers and this is something I also noticed with my students, they are intimidated by academic English and I think it's because it's mostly combined with you know, assessment or some of them want to apply for academic IELTS and sit for an exam or to apply for a university. So there's, you know, this intimidation about academic English.

Chris: Yeah, and I think one of the problems of it is that students sometimes see academic English as a sort of gatekeeper. You know, it's about getting to the next level, it's about what do I need to know in order to get my IELTS 6.5 or 7 or whatever it is, what do I need to be able to get a merit in my essay, what do I need and and it's always kind of what do I need to get to that next level rather than actually, how do I understand this? How can I understand my topic more deeply? How can I sort of talk to other people in my field in a way that you know, I can really express what I want to say and what I know about, so I think sometimes there is that slight difference of what academic English is for, a different perception of what academic English is for

We'am: There has to be some fluidity when teaching academic English. And by that I also mean using tools that can, you know, improve the learners experience like Google Translate, because I know in exams students are not allowed to use these tools, but in reality, we use these tools.

Chris: We're now going to hear our field report, which in this episode comes from the University of Leicester and the University of Leeds and their refugee programme.

Aleks: My name is Aleks Palanac and I'm from the University of Leicester and I'm one of the two refugee programme directors. Basically, over the past few years, there have been an increasing number of universities who've started offering degree-level sanctuary scholarships for refugee backgrounds students. One of the schemes that encourages this is the Universities of Sanctuary Award Scheme. But the issue is that many of the students who want to apply for these places on degree programmes need to be able to improve their level of academic English first, and some universities are able to make free places available on pre-sessional academic English programmes or IELTS courses and things like that. But actually, there just aren't enough places available on those sorts of programmes to meet the need of the number of students who need those sorts of programmes. We decided that it would be a good idea to put on an online academic English programme specifically to meet the needs of refugee background students.

Deirdre: I'm Deirdre McKenna and I'm working at the University of Leeds, I'm the other refugee programme director. The idea of the programme is to give the students a taster of what it would be like to attend a pre-sessional or EAP course. What we're trying to achieve is to give the students more awareness of the type of language and the skills that they would need for an EAP course. And so those things that we're trying to help them develop our awareness of what it would be like to study in a UK HE context, how to study independently, how to manage their own time, working together in a group, developing critical thinking skills, presentation skills, essay writing and reflection skills. So there's lots of things that we're trying to help them to achieve.

Aleks: It's not just in the teaching itself, that we're trying to mitigate the effects of trauma, but it's also even in the comms with students like even the emails that we send to students. We try to be trauma-informed, and very responsive. If a student has not attended a lesson, then we contact that student we just check in, it's like a pastoral sort of check in, see if they're okay, let them know that there's support available if they need it. And that has been really appreciated by the students and really effective.

Deirdre: What's different about our usual EAP course, I think, is that we've been trying to help students become more a part of the course by making decisions in, even in small ways, so we've taken a 'students as partners' approach in helping students become more involved in decision making and to kind of have more insight in how decisions are made rather than just imposing things on them. One of the core things that we've been trying to bear in mind when designing the materials is the level of personalisation. So trying to be aware of themes that could bring up traumatic experiences for the students. So for example, topics like home, we're a bit cautious of that and giving students a choice as to the level of personalisation that they want to bring into the classroom as well. We also have tried to take a very flexible approach in terms of things like submitting work or getting things done to deadlines and you know, trying to respond to the students needs in that way and not be so strict on something that might normally be on a different EAP course.

Frances: My name is Frances Acton I teach on the refugee programme. But why I'm really pleased to be teaching on this is that there's been a growing demand for something more structured, something more academic, that gives the students a set of skills that they can use when they go on to do academic study at an institution - a college or university. It also means we are very aware of the special circumstances of these students. We do training on trauma-informed pedagogy and we also tried to be very inclusive so there's an element of social justice. A classroom situation could become another traumatic experience if you don't take account of, of these particular issues and needs. Often it's one size fits all whereas with students as partners, you can help students to understand the different say, educational, academic culture, learning culture, and once they start to understand that to then feedback and help us to actually meet their needs better, which I don't think is happening very often in EAP. We deliver it, it's done to them.

Michael: My name's Michael Cook, and I'm a tutor on the refugee programme. I think a lot of refugees spend a lot of time, years sometimes, basically in limbo, waiting for someone else to make a decision about something. And for a lot of people who are going to spend the rest of their life in the UK, their life is on pause for a long time and if we can help them get back

to their studies, get back to having qualifications and continuing with their profession or whatever, then that's a very, very important thing to do. While we tend to be quite protective and quite proactive in terms of giving them the freedom to talk about something or not talk about it as they wish. At the same time, we are aware that, for example, if they want to go to university, go through that whole higher education process and get degrees and stuff like that, that other people will be making other demands on them that will potentially be a lot less flexible than we are. When universities or the government as part of their visa requirements says you have to have this then they're already discriminating against people who don't have the money. The students on this programme are often people who, some of them anyway, are people who actually have a career and they actually have qualified in something already, and this has been kind of stopped then that's quite different from a lot of Pre-sessional courses where you know, they're about to go into an education system, they're about to get those kinds of qualifications.

Apopheia: My name is Apopheia and I teach on the refugee programme as well as help out as an assistant research participant. With refugee background students there tend to be several factors that impact on their attendance and confidence, sometimes general language learning, I would say. There was one student who clearly had accommodation issues. He arrived late and explained that you know, he had to leave one place and had just started to settle in another place. And that was the reason for his lateness, you know to open up and have a conversation that involves what they have experienced takes time, not only to build up to that trust, you know, that level of trust, but also to discuss it takes time.

Monther: My name is Monther Awadhi and I'm from Syria. I came here two years ago about two years ago. The teachers are doing a great job. Exactly great job. They are watching us on the right path towards academic writing, and to achieving our goals. After twelve years without study, this course has come to remove the rust on my brain and make me ready for academic research. I challenge myself to achieve more, I will research and I've already contacted some universities and they welcome me, told me just send your documents and we will offer you, write your offer to you.

Sam: Hi, my name is Sam, I arrived in August 2021. But this course is focusing on academic writing, academic sources and everything is academic. First of all, I should mention that the tutors behaviour really encourages me to study more, study better and according to all methods of learning, and they use really new method of teaching, which I never saw anywhere else. I'm looking forward to going to university for master degree and I apply for some universities which gave us some sort of scholarship and I got some offers but all of them were conditional. I need to gain English qualifications so I am waiting for my English qualification and this year hopefully I'm going to university.

Deirdre: Yeah, we have had to be very responsive and flexible and understanding as well that you know our students are coming from challenging backgrounds and have to work and under challenging situations as well, so maybe things that normally work don't necessarily work for this cohort.

Michael: The UK, for example, is extremely lucky to have these people here many of whom are very, very qualified. Who, despite all the things that have happened to them are so positive.

Monther: As for me, I would like to recommend this course to all refugees. I would like to say to RefugEAP to expand this experiment to involve more students in this programme because as I think majority of us need this course, other courses are highly expensive. I just advise RefugEAP to extend that to involve more students.

Chris: So that was the refugee programme at the University of Leicester. We'am, any thoughts on what you heard there?

We'am: It sounds like a great programme for refugees. And I specifically like that they personalise the experience for refugees and that they give them a voice. And I think that's very important, especially for refugees to be able to choose the topics and to be able to engage with the content and it's also a trauma-informed approach. So it takes into consideration their past experiences, sometimes we tend to neglect that those people had experiences and that we should take that into account when they come to the classroom. They come with that baggage, which definitely can affect their learning and their learning outcomes. So it's great that can be taken into consideration. It's not just for refugees, it's for students in general, people, students come with that baggage and they also have the notion that academic English is a bit rigid and difficult to learn. So giving them that flexibility makes it more engaging for them.

Chris: That's all for this episode of teaching English with the British Council. Please join us next time where we look at the issue of how we can use story to teach English until then, goodbye

This episode was produced for the British Council by:

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