

How can we use 'story' 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.

Introduction and discussion

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

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

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

Chris: and Chris Sowton

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

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

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

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

Sting: This is **Episode** 5: How can we use story to teach English **effectively**?

Chris: Hello and welcome to **episode** five of teaching English with the British Council. In this **episode**, we **look at** how we can use story to teach English. Now, We'am, in your teaching career, did you use story much when teaching your students?

We'am: I did use it with both young **learners** and with adults. With young **learners** I like to use The Very Hungry Caterpillar. Have you used it before?

Chris: I know the story from my own childhood and also from my, with my own children as well.

We'am: Students love it. Especially when you can give them the chance to make their own stories afterwards and draw what the caterpillar ate during the day.

Chris: What do you like so much about The Very Hungry Caterpillar, We'am? For those of our **listeners** who may not know the story?

We'am: I think the **visual** of it, students, the students get excited when something **transforms** you know from an ugly caterpillar to a butterfly. Yeah, it attracts their attention.

Chris: What is it about story that you think is so good for students? Why do they like it so much? Why is it such an **engaging** topic for them to use in the classroom?

We'am: If we **look at** it, everything around us is based around stories. You know, life is based around events and stories and the more you **engage** with these stories, it's live material, it's **authentic**. When a teacher comes to the classroom and tells a story, I find it very **intriguing** and I would listen to them more carefully than, you know, a **formal introduction**.

Chris: And in our interview this week. We are going to talk to Jamie Keddie. Jamie is a Barcelona-based teacher, author and storyteller. And he's also the **founder** of Lesson Stream: a **community** of teachers and educators which explores the possibilities for using story to **engage** students to get them thinking **creatively** and communicating in English.

Interview with Jamie Keddie

Chris: Hello, Jamie, and welcome to the podcast.

Jamie: Thank you for inviting me.

Chris: So first of all, Jamie perhaps we could just begin by talking about what we mean by story, storytelling and so on. How do you see these different terms?

Jamie: It's, it's a good place to start. Because in my experience when you talk about storytelling, which is something I do a lot, teachers often **assume** that we're talking about teachers of young **learners**, also, using maybe folktales or stories from a long time ago. But we're talking **specifically** about storytelling, I think about it in a much more broad way. Storytelling is something that can really come up and does, anytime in a lesson let's say, can be led by the teacher, but it's a lot more **flexible** than the sort of special times for this special activity. I always think it's impossible to teach without using story in some way or another because it's there in the **authentic** materials, it's there in the people, it's there in the language. So that's kind of how I **differentiate** the term. Storytelling is the thing and story is the thing that we do, the activity and story is the software, let's say

We'am: Why do you think using story is such a useful **strategy** for teaching English language?

Jamie: It's impossible not to use story. And so really, it's about raising our awareness. That's what we're actually doing. If you ask your students, for example, what did you do the weekend? That is using story. I think that really a story is really the way to **unlock** ideas and create **curiosity** and make human beings want to speak and talk and think and so that makes it such a great approach for the language classroom.

Chris: Teachers often think they can't do storytelling because they may not have the **resources** to do that. And I think what you're saying and certainly where we're coming from as well is the, you know, need only read a text for story, using story as it were. It's more of a, an approach, a mindset and which taps on **creativity** and inclusivity and all those sorts of things really. So I think I think it's quite nice to move away from thinking well, I haven't got a **graded** reader in this so therefore I can't do it.

Jamie: One of the ideas is in order to **unlock** the discussion or the stories from students a teacher has to kind of lead by example, by the way I think this is one of the things that **scares** teachers. They feel well I can't be the one that doing the talking at students, you know, but I think really it's, we have to lead by example. We have to stop being scared of talking for short periods of times.

Chris: My question then, my follow-up question when you work with teachers, or when you work with education systems, and often in these textbooks, story is seen as just something that's a **basis** for reading comprehension, for grammar questions for learning vocabulary, and so on. The story is almost just a vehicle for these other broken-down bits of, of language learning. How do you help teachers see the opportunities which story can bring?

Jamie: If we're looking at **authentic** texts, for example, I think a lot of teachers would maybe be led to believe that we turn away from the course book and on to **authentic** texts because they provide a **source** of **authentic** language. We're drawn to **authentic** materials because that's where the best stories are. My starting point is often to recognise this, to recognise that what we're working with is a story. How that, actually how human beings **interact** with that when we're using video, for example, it's very easy to see the video as being something which is there on the screen that everybody's watching, it's maybe a digital file, an mp4 file, and it never changes, you can play it 10 times will always be the same, but really, that's not the **resource**, the **resource** is what's going on in the minds of the students. If you've got 15 students in your class, you've got 15 different **narratives** taking place at once there. 16, if you include the teacher. Story is always there in the class, the moment you set foot in the classroom, there's a kind of arc in the lesson. I mean, a good storyteller would never say to you: now today, you're going to learn to use adverbs of frequency and you're going to do so so that you can talk about things you like doing and say how often you like doing them. That would, no good good storytelling would ever take that approach. And yet so often, we are led to believe that we have to **state** our aims and **objectives** at the start the lesson. Storytellers don't do that they like to they like the audience to know they're going somewhere to get some kind of **glimpse** of that journey let's say, but to keep a lot hidden back. And so these are the kinds of ideas that I'd love teachers to take away when the courses that I do.

Chris: And that all sounds fantastic, but this **contradicts** a lot we've, what a lot of teachers around the world are expected to do in their sessions where there are **stated outcomes** in **syllabuses** and the all rest of it so how do you, how can we encourage teachers in those situations to follow some of the things you're talking about whilst not getting into trouble with their principal, or their **inspectors** or **whoever** else it may be?

Jamie: Everything that we do that they do, can be done. It's just a case of **strengthening** the **narrative** or recognising the story **aspect** within it. To give you an example back here, I'm not saying that if the **requirements** **dictate** that we have to teach **adverbs of frequency**, I'm not saying we should not I'm just saying there's different ways to do it. Don't let your students know that's where they're going, for example. I mean, if I would prefer to **go into** the classroom and tell students a very short story about something that I do, and try to **incorporate** into the text some of the **target** language in this case adverbs of frequency that students are then required to, to **look at** and after the story after the discussion, then we could see finally **look at** this language. I think, you know, as soon as you **state** your **objectives** at the start of the lesson that's going to kill the story. A lot of students all over the world need to know what their **objectives** are, and I know that. But not all of them, I think that's an easy excuse for teachers to make, that my students needs to know and expect this and I know, I've got lots of experiences of students and I don't think that they always do need to know that I think the students like a bit more of a surprise, they like that **curiosity** to be nurtured. So it's not about saying you take all this, throw it out the window, it's about doing what we do, but doing it better, and doing it better **specifically**, by recognising the story and **strengthening** the **narrative** that accompanies it.

We'am: Yeah, maybe giving them the chance towards the end of the lesson to articulate what were the aims of the lesson after listening to the story, or working with the story. I think that is very **beneficial** for their learning. But it is often felt that storytelling is a more useful **strategy** with younger **learners**. Do you agree with that? And how can storytelling be used or

adapted for older students?

Jamie: I've learned a lot from teachers of younger learners, telling stories to their students, keeping them really, you know, active and engaged and curious, but that's only one way of doing it. I think if you think of older learners, adults or teenagers to think that there's a time when story just stops, is a big fiction. Think of the number of stories that will come up if you're at a job interview, if you're having a coffee with a friend, stories are an incredibly important part of why we speak, why we communicate, why we talk. Teachers of adults have almost been led to believe that maybe we shouldn't share stories with students. Teachers will still go and source a piece of material, a video perhaps in order to introduce a topic. Rather than using video, use a story, collect them, become aware of the possibilities and the value that they have.

Chris: And it develops trust as well between the teacher and their students and any kind of language use has to have trust involved in that process. It cuts across other things we've talked about in teaching English. So we talked about working in crisis and emergency situations in those sorts of situations trust is even more important, but story can be a vehicle for helping to process some of the trauma or to explore things that otherwise wouldn't get explored.

Jamie: One of the ways to gain trust is to take off your mask and show your students who you are. It's a potentially powerful resource, it doesn't always work. It's not just a case of use story. It's a question of what stories to use and how to use them.

We'am: Are there any strategies, multilingual strategies in specific, that you use with stories or using story in the classroom?

Jamie: I would put myself into the shoes of a language learner myself to answer that question, and I, I've learned or developed my storytelling skills in English, but I do find that it's transferable. So if I want to tell a story in Spanish, it's a question of preparation and I find that to be a very fulfilling and rewarding thing to do is to be able to take a story I know how to tell in English and prepare it in Spanish. And so really what I'm doing is just trying to give a good storytelling performance the same, as good a performances it is in Spanish as it would be in English.

Chris: For example in your work if you were to tell a story in English and you tell the same story in Spanish, do you do things differently when you tell it in Spanish? Are you more, for example, experimental well, how does it work?

Jamie: I would by inclination say No, it'd be the same. I mean, so I think it's very, I think it's very common for people to say that they become somebody else when they speak another language. For me, I tend to say tend to stay the same person and I if I do find myself becoming someone else, it's usually a person who's more frustrated.

Chris: If you were to give any piece of advice to teachers who are wanting to use story more thinking about it, but a little bit unsure about how they should approach it. What would you say to them, what would you say to them to encourage them to use story more in their teaching?

Jamie: Well, I think any teacher that feels that way has probably already got some experiences under their belts and I think sometimes what teachers feel is that these moments cannot be planned or prepared for and I think that in fact, they can. Recognise them, collect them, and importantly, develop them. The last thing here is that it's not about it, not necessarily I should say, about being spontaneous and improvising. The key to success

here is preparation. All good storytellers make that part completely, well, it's **invisible** but not **apparent** either. And that's an **illusion**. Every great story you hear is the result of a **craft**, preparation, and a lot of careful **consideration** to **structure** language choices, meaning and purpose, you know, and that last thing, if I can give you one more thing, is don't go for the **remarkable**. Try and find the stories which are unremarkable, but **meaningful** because they're the ones that will be **relatable**. You don't want to go in and **impress** your students and blow them away. They'll be **impressed** but where do they come back from that, you know?

Chris: We need to allow them the space to breathe and to add their own ideas and thoughts into that.

Jamie: Exactly.

Chris: Fantastic. Jamie, thank you so much for your time today.

We'am: Thank you, Jamie.

Jamie: Thank you so much to both of you, thank you.

Chris: Our thanks to Jamie for sharing his views on using story to teach English language. We'am, your thoughts on the interview?

We'am: He made a **distinction** between using story and storytelling and I thought that was very important. When you think about it as a storytelling, you think about it in a more traditional way, and **conventional manner** but when you think about it, as everything around me is a story, so you're using story, I think it is easier for the audience to **relate** to it and be able to work with it to improve their language.

Chris: And it also **opens up** the possibilities I think as well. If you think everything is story, then as Jamie said, it becomes more of an approach rather than a thing or a goal in itself. If your mind is open to this thing you are, you are ready to **respond** within a lesson if the opportunity **arises**. And I think again, so it links to things like **flexibility**, listening to your students, going with what they're interested in, tapping into what they really want to talk about, and these are all the sort of, some of the good teaching techniques that we, that we try and promote within the field of ELT.

We'am: And for second language speakers language can get complicated for sometimes, when teachers teach the **narrative** tenses, for example, you cannot teach it with sources other than storytelling or using story because that makes students realise the meaning behind the tenses.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think the other thing I really liked what Jamie was saying is that story should be seen as something in its own right, not just as something that can be used as a piece of text to teach language or grammar or whatever it may be, **exploited** for comprehension questions. It is actually something by itself. It's something that we should **strive** for itself.

We'am: Definitely.

Field report

Chris: And using those ideas, we now go to our field report. And our field report this time is

from the same place we visited in episode three, in the Oasis Centre in Cardiff, but this time with a different group of **participants**. And here we talk to Lizzie and her class about storytelling.

Lizzie: We have a guest in our class today, Chris. He is recording the session to go on a podcast.

Lesson excerpt: Okay, I think everybody knows me. My name is Lizzie. Okay, so today we have a story...

Lizzie: I'm Lizzie. I am an ESOL **volunteer** here. I think the storytelling sessions are **effective** for a few reasons, partly because they are fun and everyone really enjoys them. So it's a way of creating an entertaining class. And it uses a lot of different levels because people who are quite advanced **learners** can just enjoy your story and they can maybe pick up on some of the more advanced **grammatical structures** or the more **complex linguistic aspects**, and enjoy the story in the same way as the people who are complete beginners who will enjoy the story and maybe pick up on a few keywords. So it's a very mixed level class. The storytelling classes that we do follows the same kind of **structure**, usually, where we choose a traditional story, sometimes from Wales, a lot of a lot from Wales, but also from anywhere around the world. We start off by showing pictures that **illustrate** the story. So usually about six to ten pictures. Each one shows a different part and as you go through showing one picture at a time that draws out the **narrative** of the story and then **highlights** different **aspects**.

Lesson excerpt: So we've got the family here. And these are two brothers. This brother is rich. And this one is poor. The poor brother has a big family, he has seven children.

Lizzie: Once everyone has kind of got an idea of the **bare** bones of the story, as a teacher we'll then do a full narration.

Lesson excerpt: He says to the wind. Why? You've blown my flower away? What am I going to do now? And the wind says: don't worry. It's okay. Don't worry. It's fine. I'm so sorry. I blew the flower away. I will give you a gift. The gift is a tablecloth. So the rich brother who says: can I borrow your magic tablecloth? The poor brother says: yeah, of course, of course, take it. Yeah. Yesterday, you helped me and now I'll help you. The rich brother brings back the magic goat, he brings back the magic tablecloth. Now the family has plenty of money. Plenty of food. They're not **suffering** any more. Everyone is fat. Everyone is happy. That's the end. Do you like it?

Lizzie: And then after that we'll ask the students to work in pairs or little groups and tell the story back to each other, which then gives them a chance to practice the language they've just heard.

Lesson excerpt: So now can we work together and tell the story together?

Lizzie: We show the text of the story and let people read it by themselves. **Highlighting** new vocabulary they've come up with text that wasn't in the initial telling and then we'll go through that vocabulary altogether. People can take turns reading a story aloud. And then at the end, we'll invite someone or usually two people together to come up to the front and tell the story to the class.

Lesson excerpt: Okay, so, generous. What does it mean? To give a lot? Exactly yeah, someone who gives a lot. So which brother is it? The poor one. Stingy? The rich brother, yeah. This one is stingy. Can everyone say stingy? Stingy.

Lizzie: The stories are **complex** enough to mean that people can **relate** in different ways and I think it's **effective** as well because the **emotional** identification of the story helps. It really helps you to remember them because of their feelings it gives them a chance to, to **express** themselves really. It gives people a way of connecting with the others in the class because you just shared a common experience where you've all heard the same story but it provides a means of connecting to, to the other people in the class.

Lesson excerpt: Shall we have a break? For ten minutes? NO!

We'am: That was absolutely fantastic. And you can see how students were so **thrilled** they didn't want to leave the class. And I liked how she elicited language after telling the story like the rich brother is stingy. So it was kind of, it was a chance for the teacher to explore more words with the students or to test their knowledge on of certain words.

Chris: She was really good I think, at giving **prompts** rather than telling them the language guiding them towards it rather than giving them the language.

We'am: I think you can use story in different ways. In one of my classes I used to show a **visual prompt** for students. So I would show them a picture. It's not of myself of someone and I would tell them, you need to make a story out of this and you need **to start with:** this is me when... and they would build on that **visual**. It was used as a cue to make a story. I found that very **enriching** for their learning.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think sometimes just giving students those stems, those **prompts**, and it can lead to all sorts of **weird** and wonderful language, things that you had no idea that they knew. And the great thing in that situation is that if they don't know the words in the **target** language, they will ask you for the words and that's where they can really develop that rich language, the language they want to use, and they won't stay within that safe language. They'll go **beyond**, they'll push themselves. And that, as we know, is where really good language acquisition takes place.

We'am: Yeah, and that **element** also of **curiosity**, what's going to happen next, what should I say? What does that mean? I think that all **builds up** and makes them you know, they want to learn more about this topic and they want to improve their language.

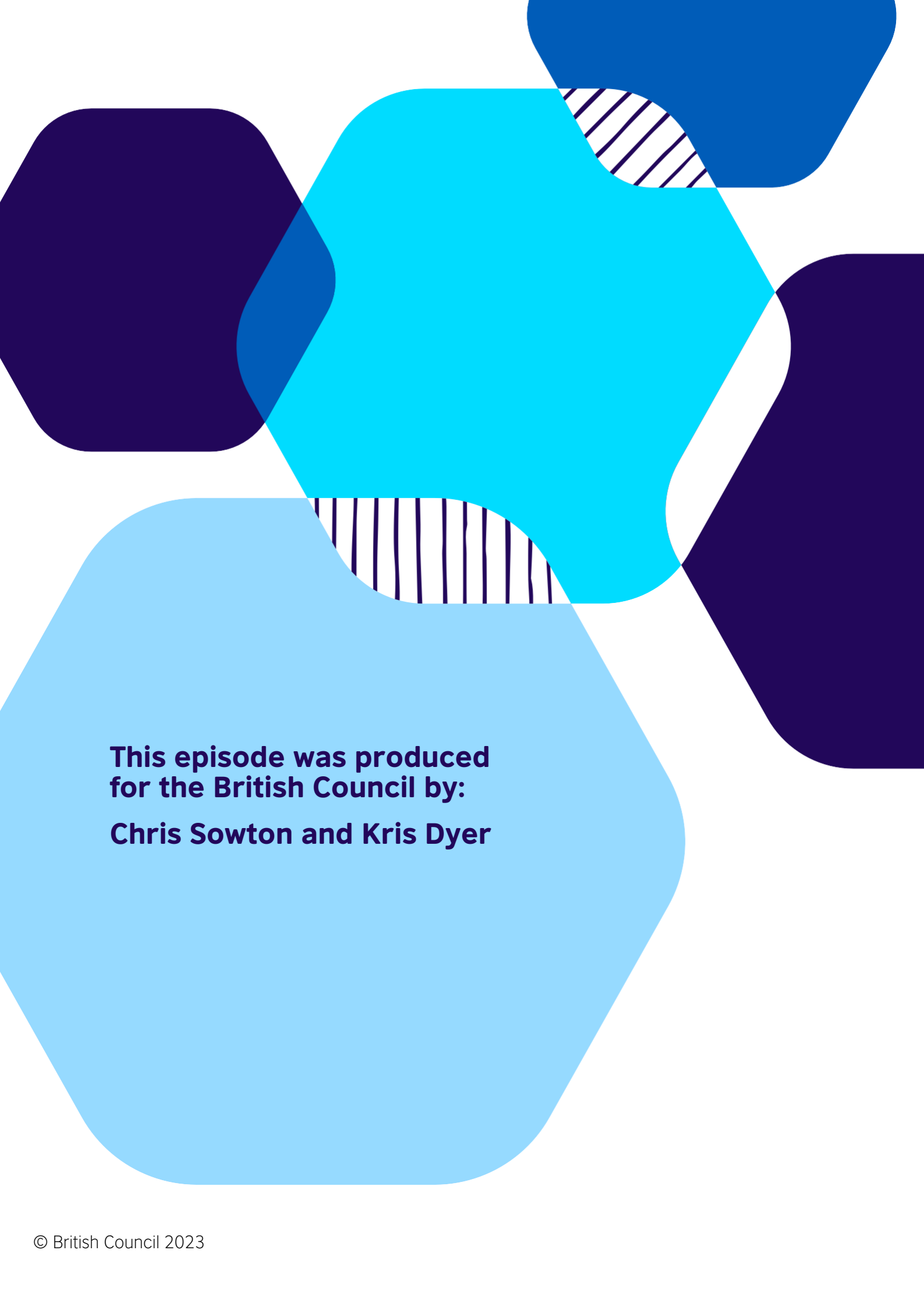
Chris: Absolutely. And it's a really powerful message for you as teacher, to give to students, to say that because in their everyday lives, that sort of **curiosity** may not be encouraged. You know, it may you know, they may be so focused on doing well in exams and being a good son or daughter or whatever it may be that actually, they aren't allowed to explore some of those ideas, those **weirder** and more wonderful kind of areas and the English language classroom I really think can be a space where we can allow that to happen and let it **flourish**.

We'am: Yes. And I saw that when students **flourish**, they're very happy and you can see that their **personality** even changes once you give them that **confidence**.

Chris: Absolutely. Thank you for listening to **episode** five of teaching English with the British Council how we can use story to teach English. Please join us next time for **Episode** Six: how and why should we teach English in **crisis** and emergency situations? Goodbye from me...

We'am: and goodbye from me.





**This episode was produced
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