

## How can we use the creative arts to teach English?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 9 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, classroom, language, puppet, teaching, paintings, English language, indigenous cultures, art, learning, creative arts, picture, painting, artwork, lesson, visual art, storytelling

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Teaching English with the British Council

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'We want to create that sense of wonder in our classrooms'

'Art is something that allows us to express ourselves, allow us to explore our imagination'

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Teaching English with the British Council

### This is episode nine: How can we use the creative arts to teach English?

**Chris:** Welcome to this episode of teaching English with the British Council: How can we use the creative arts to teach English? So are you artistic, We'am?

**We'am:** I grew up with an artist sister, so it's nice to see that process. But I thought how creative it is, how, how much it involves deep thinking that is perhaps not very visible often to the viewer. And I integrated that into the classroom, having students reflect on paintings or art that involves a deeper kind of thinking.

**Chris:** What kind of paintings would you use?

**We'am:** I like graffiti art, as in Banksy. It's relatable for my students.

**Chris:** Could you say a little bit about him and who he is?

**We'am:** He's an anonymous England-based street artist. His art often includes themes of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism existentialism in general. And his work is known for presenting social and political issues with humour, often with the artwork itself becoming part of the message through its location.

**Chris:** So something that is often of, very interested by, kind of, young people and teenagers the ideas that he's talking about. But it's also slightly ambiguous sometimes, and it's not necessarily clear. So again, we're thinking about using it in the language classroom, there's different perspectives that can be used, there's different views on that, so it's a good source of discussion.

**We'am:** Yeah, because you can ask, for example, what's students' speculation about the meaning of this and then you can maybe provide the interpretation.

**Chris:** And it links to something we talked about in our last episode, on motivation, where we said, you know, if you can talk about things that your students are interested in, if that's the source material, then you're halfway there in terms of getting them to talk about it.

**We'am:** Yeah, and it's also accessible art, as in it doesn't cost to go see it, it's available for anyone to see and to reflect on.

**Chris:** Exactly. That's an interesting aspect of graffiti in general is that it is a public piece of art.

**We'am:** For students when they see or view art that is relatable for them, that imitates life and that requires them to reflect on aspects of their life.

**Chris:** We now hear from **Chrysa Papalazarou**, who is an expert in using the visual arts in the ELT classroom.

**We'am:** Welcome, Chrysa.

**Chrysa:** Thank you so much.

**We'am:** I was looking at your website and was really fascinated. I went to the lesson plans and I was intrigued specifically with a lesson plan that said **'War and Peace'**. Can you tell us a bit about what you do and how do you use visual arts for teaching and learning?

**Chrysa:** That was actually one of my very first attempts and which ignited my enthusiasm around this way of working with my upper primary school students. And it started with *Guernica*, and I could have never imagined the reactions, the way they responded to that painting. I had used also some set of routines borrowed from Harvard's Physical Thinking Approach, and it was such a rewarding experience that it led me to pursue more and more.

**Chris:** And can I ask, how did your students respond to it? It's obviously, *Guernica* is a very graphic image of the Spanish Civil War. How did your students respond? Could they make those links between that and the modern day?

**Chrysa:** I think that subjects, topics like war are beyond age. There is this everlasting quality in them. I mean, it can apply to all ages, to all generations, to all eras. I basically wanted them initially, to focus on the artwork, to observe. The first set of questions that I asked them was 'What do you see?', 'What do you think about it?' and 'What does it make you wonder?' One of the wonderful things was that without me telling them anything about the artwork, they captured the essence of the painting. I remember that they had noticed the shapes, that there were corners in the shapes, aggressive kind of quality, and they had associated right from the beginning that with war situations, but another very interesting thing was the way

a student phrased it. He had captured the essence of Picasso's artistic technique. He had described this painting as a 'war of shapes'. And that's quite close to the heart of **Cubism**.

**Chris:** It's a really profound sentence for a lower, lower intermediate speaker to use.

**Chrysa:** Yeah, isn't it? It dawned on me that really students, once shown something powerful, something interesting, they go beyond what one would expect of them.

**Chris:** And it's that they're using that language creatively. You know, it's, you know, it's like you say a war of shapes. It captures what that student wanted to say.

**Chrysa:** Exactly, meaningful language, language a teacher is happy to read, is happy to work on, this language that emerges through this sort of work.

**Chris:** You use the word 'wonder' there, Chrysa, and I think a lot of our listeners would find that word really empowering and encouraging. We want to create that sense of wonder in our classrooms. What would we say to teachers who are fighting against teaching the textbook, against the relentless pressure of curriculum, of high-stakes assessment and so on and so on, who would maybe say 'Well, we haven't got time for this. We haven't got time for using images, pictures, artwork. We need to be teaching language and grammar, etc.' What would you say to teachers or senior management in that kind of situation?

**Chrysa:** The first thing that teachers may be **sceptical** about is that first of all they may lack confidence to give such an approach a trial, or not be sure exactly how to go about. And when sharing my practice with colleagues in seminars, in workshops, I often ask participants, first of all, what they used to think before and what they thought after the session. For example, they often say that they used to think that art belongs to artists, or it's complex, tricky, difficult to deal with inside the classroom, or they thought that teaching grammar was enough, or that it would be a bit boring, or that it would create a chaotic atmosphere in the classroom. And then I tried to explain that I've used artworks extensively. I'm neither an expert nor an artist myself. So then I start telling them how I practically work towards that direction in the classroom. There are a few steps that might be helpful for teachers to help them overcome these misconceptions. Like, for example, choose a painting first. Don't be afraid to opt for paintings which handle issues like hunger, like disability, sensitive issues, because the subtle language of paintings is a great way to introduce such topics to students. Then decide on a set of questions you will possibly want to ask and that which even better should allow the students to relate personally, on a personal level, with the artwork. I give them examples of such frameworks and then I show them how I work. Have students first work in pairs or in groups. Discuss their ideas. If you can, distribute colourful sticky notes and ask them to jot down their answers initially. Be invisibly visible as a teacher while pairs or groups are working. Move around the classroom, prick up your ears for the discussions taking place. Be available in case they need you for support with language while making progress with a task. Then from pairs and groups, bring the discussion to the whole class, **scaffold** and facilitate it. Encourage students to take notes during the discussion. Be yourself an example of note-taking and aid this note-taking process by jotting on the board words, phrases that you consider worthwhile. Be alert to both listening, really listening, to what the learners have to say, as well as to how they say it. Everything can be developed in terms of language, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension skills, listening, speaking. Explore the language that emerges. Repeat, rephrase. Think of a few writing tasks probably that you could assign. It may be in the form of a class journal, story writing, sentence writing, something produced digitally, many options, and make room and think about how you can relate or recycle and capitalise on everything that has emerged. So, this is a realistic framework because I did it.

**Chris:** What you've described there, Chrysa, is an amazing, very integrated approach to language development, where you're student-centred, all the skills and systems are interlinked, and the teacher becomes more of a facilitator rather than a, you know, being in charge. But I suppose...

**We'am:** And not only that, Chris, but also like observing, describing, you're also speaking at the same time, and you're using creative expression and also making connections and developing metaphoric thinking. I was also wondering, in this age, the digital era, how do you see the role of arts, using arts in the classroom in maybe improving the emotional intelligence of learners?

**Chrysa:** Art will save the world. To put it simply!

**We'am:** That's a great way to put it!

**Chrysa:** Yeah, but it's all about time, because for all these things that you described, We'am – to express themselves, to observe, to think, to share their ideas, to represent – for all of these things, time is needed for the students, and to absorb learning. I was lucky enough to teach within a curriculum that although coursebook-driven, it was not exam-oriented for my primary school students, and then lived some scope for teacher initiative. Within this context, I was able to satisfy my professional curiosity and look into coursebook alternatives. Maybe school managers could think, could seriously think, that such kind of education is really well rounded. It's well grounded and well rounded. It's profoundly rooted in our values, in our very human essence. And it is also the kind of education that I think that in the future will be called for to act as a counterpoint to this virtual-reality dominance that we are now in and whose rapid evolution will definitely need people with a clear articulation of ideas, thinking and healthy links to the social world.

**Chris:** So it's a way of **humanising, or rehumanising, language teaching** to use the visual in that, in that way, and, and I think from what you're saying, Chrysa, it doesn't have to be something which completely dominates every single lesson you do. It's very much it can be used at particular points or as a link to the textbook and, and so on.

**Chrysa:** No, it's something that I started out as regular breakouts from the coursebook. And seeing that children responded positively to that, I went on more regularly, depending on the situation, on the year. So it's not something that is binding.

**Chris:** And one way of promoting that maybe – you know, if parents or if students themselves or senior management are suspicious of this – it's just to ask the students what they thought about it, you may enter into a conversation about that and, you know, overwhelmingly I'm sure students will enjoy this kind of session.

**Chrysa:** It's very interesting that you bring up this point, Chris, because always at the end of such a session, I ask students to evaluate in a qualitative way what we're doing, so I pose the question and ask them to answer to that in writing of 'What do you think about working with paintings and with other artworks?' The first answer the students gave was that 'I think that we learn and enjoy ourselves at the same time'. And the beautiful thing when students are exposed to a painting or to a work of art, there is this 'Aha' moment. It's as if a signal is transmitted throughout the class that 'OK, now, you can relax, you can slow down', and this feeling of non-threat can work miracles with language learners. It breaks barriers of fear and hesitation which are often prominent among learners of a foreign language. The other thing that they usually respond 'I loved how we talked, how we shared their ideas', and this is another great thing, that working towards that approach evokes a lot of questioning. From the most basic questions you can ask – 'What do you see' or 'What's going on?' – there is a multitude of follow-up questions. It promotes

language use. Children never ever saw it as entertainment. It was something mixed. They enjoyed it and learned through it.

**We'am:** And I think a lot of it has to do with the curiosity that art sparks in people and that just automatically drives the brain to activate the schemata and try to find connections and then articulate these through language. Thank you very much, Chrysa.

**Chrysa:** Thank you so much, and I hope teachers around the world might give it a try.

**Chris:** So she talks about this painting, *Guernica*, by Picasso. Is it, is it a painting you've seen before, We'am?

**We'am:** Not in reality.

**Chris:** So it's one I saw it myself and it had a huge impact on me as well. And I was absolutely, I was quite blown away by that description by the student talking about it as a war of shapes, which I think is a brilliant and amazing kind of way of describing it. And I'll show you the picture now. See what you think. See if you agree and how you might describe it.

**We'am:** I see a bull and a horse, faces, I don't know. It looks chaotic and then there's a crisis or it's like they're in a prison or something.

**Chris:** Do you think it's a beautiful picture?

**We'am:** It's unsettling, I would say, more than beautiful. Yeah, it's like you feel the dynamics, as in there's something happening or something urgent happening, though there's a person whose hands are up. It's ugly, but in a good sense.

**Chris:** Yeah, I think that's, yeah, I think that was my feeling, it's kind of like, again, it's beautiful, but it's shocking. It's appalling, but it's somehow very captivating in its, in its own way. But again, I think it's an amazing picture to use in a classroom because there's, there's so much there. There's no way that you can't have an opinion on it. You know, we sometimes talk about the difficulty of making students speak or getting them to share their views, but there's no way that you can't have a view on this, on this painting. We'll put a link to this picture in the show notes and, please, have a look and make up your own mind about what you think about it. Do you have a favourite painting, We'am?

**We'am:** I like paintings by Sliman Mansour. He is a Palestinian artist known for his vivid and powerful paintings, and it's very relatable for my students.

**Chris:** And how would you use those paintings in a classroom situation?

**We'am:** Well, you display it to the class. I ask them 'How do you feel about it?', 'What does it make you feel?', 'Why did he use this imagery?', or maybe 'What is the purpose of using this colour?' Yeah, just focusing on the details of the painting.

**Chris:** Do you want to try that with me now with one of his paintings?

**We'am:** I could do that. Yeah. So what do you see here, Chris?

**Chris:** So I see an old Arab man. He's wearing a grey cloak. He's hunched with a sort of basket on his back. And he's carrying an image of a city in that. I think it may be Jerusalem?

**We'am:** Yes.

**Chris:** And so it suggests to me he's got the weight of this issue on his shoulders, that he feels the longing for, for Jerusalem, and he's carrying it with him at all times. And it feels to me that if he ever put that down, he wouldn't be able to pick it up again.

**We'am:** Yeah. How do you think he's feeling?

**Chris:** I think he's feeling very sad, I think he's feeling probably that he's fixed in his situation and that he can't necessarily do much about it. It's a sort of burden he can neither shake off nor carry.

**We'am:** But he's still carrying it, although it does seem heavy, as in he's hunching his back.

**Chris:** Yeah. And have you used this in your teaching before? Or would you?

**We'am:** Yes. I mean, it's an entry for something else, but does work as an entry because students relate to it, in my context. You can lead that conversation or you can maybe give cards to students with the questions they can, to start like prompts to start that conversation and just listen to them discreetly and collect notes. So it doesn't have to be the teacher leading that conversation.

**Chris:** Yes, interesting, because it's a very beautiful picture in its own way, but it represents something quite sad. And I think that is quite, it's quite a complex set of feelings, you know, to process for students.

**We'am:** With adults it works, with teenagers also I found that it works. With young ones you also want to give them something that doesn't also overburden them with emotion, so something more age-appropriate. You can find more about the picture I showed Chris in the show notes. It's called *Camel of Hardships* by Sliman Mansour.

**Chris:** So one of the underlying philosophies of this podcast is that we want to hear from teachers all around the world and to get their expertise, whatever situation that they're in. Sometimes, though, that means we speak to teachers who are in areas where there is poor Wi-Fi or low connectivity, which means that the quality of the recording is not as good as we might like. So in the next interview, it's a little bit difficult to hear sometimes, but we feel it's really important to give voice to people who are working in these contexts.

**We'am:** In this interview, we will speak to **Sirhajwan Idek**. He's an English language teacher from Borneo.

Welcome to the podcast! I've been looking at the project *Dau Dau*, and what I really liked that it's very holistic, using art and also culture, all of these aspects, to integrate learning. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

**Sirhajwan:** I'm an English language teacher. I teach English language in, in the rural area in, in Sabah, which is a Malaysian state, it's located in Borneo. So *Dau Dau* it means 'a long time ago' or 'once upon a time' in Bajau language. My colleagues and I have been discussing in bringing art into the classroom, and this project, we started this project in 2021. The whole world was still under lockdown. Schools were closed, so we were teaching from home. We wanted to start something that is interesting for the students to take part in, because students were getting bored at home. So that's where we can, we came with the



idea of the *Dau Dau*. So *Dau Dau* it means 'a long time ago' in Bajau language, and we picked that word because when it comes to storytelling, we often start by saying 'A long time ago', 'Once upon a time', so I think it's pretty universal in every culture. So we want to bring that to the class, English language teaching and combine it with great art, because art is just, it's amazing. Art is something that allows us to express ourselves, allow us to explore our imagination, so that's where we combined art with **folklore**. There are so many activities going on, you know, it was during the pandemic. Since the students they did not have core curricular activities, and they only have online classes, so they were able to concentrate in doing all these sort of things. So let's say the students they got their own stories and then once they finished writing the stories, you know, we teachers, we read it, and then we say 'Turn it into a script for performance'. So they were able to perform it according to the format of their own choice. So they could, they could do puppet show – a puppet show is pretty much the manipulation of objects. And what we found out, it means students build language confidence because sometimes students they felt very embarrassed to speak directly to the people. What we discovered with puppet shows, they are still speaking and performing, but in a direct way, in a way that they are performing through the puppet.

**Chris:** One question I had was something that seems in common with all of these things that you're talking about is that you're using creative arts, but also a foreign language, a dominant international language, as a way of enabling the students to understand more about their own cultures and identities as well.

**Sirhajwan:** Yeah, yeah, the goal is to learn English language. The idea is to, let's say, to bridge the gap between **indigenous** culture and indigenous language with the target language to bring the indigenous cultures and indigenous languages into the classroom, so that, and bridge them, so in a way it actually helps to promote and to preserve the indigenous cultures and at the same time it helps them to improve the English language.

**Chris:** What it does as well is by using things like puppetry, for example, it's also drawing on indigenous culture, which makes it feel safer for the students in the classroom because they're using a form that they, that they know well, that they've kind of seen all their lives, so it can be another form of scaffolding for developing their English language skills.

**Sirhajwan:** Exactly, exactly, so I think it provides them that platform to really practise their language skills. I think, like what you say, it provides them that sort of scaffolding that they need to really reach the next level in their language acquisition. So, yeah, it definitely gives them the platform to practise the language and to really concentrate on getting the pace, of their intonation in a way that they feel, like you said, that they're very comfortable doing it, having fun with it. It helps them to improve their attitudes. And I think that's very important in English language, you know, having that attitude where you, where you think you can really learn the language and master the language, that will make a huge difference.

**We'am:** That also change in attitude, it's the thing that drives the change mostly in teachers, yeah, in learners' actual learning or outcome. The word *Dau Dau* reminded me, in Arabic we say *kan yaman kan*, and it's really fascinating title for a project, but not only that, the idea of folklore and tales. How important is it that students have materials that reflect their own identity?

**Sirhajwan:** I think that's very interesting, We'am, the question that you're asking now. When we include the material, their own respective cultures, I think it makes them feel included. And I think that's the thing that we had been missing, maybe in the past decade.

**We'am:** What would you say to teachers who feel nervous about using creative arts in their classrooms?

**Sirhajwan:** First of all, I think when we are using creative art, we are allowing the students to individually express themselves. It's very important to have the students feel like they can just be themselves, they embrace them, embrace who they are, and really express their own thoughts, their own ideas without feeling that people will reject it or people will judge them. So I think that's the thing about creative art. It really helps them with individual expression, which is very vital in learning. There are always ways to align creative art and the strategies and the activity that we are doing in classroom with our syllabus. There is always a way of doing it. That's usually what Malaysian teachers, you know, are concerned about when they want to do something, when they want to bring something new into the classroom, so 'How about the syllabus?', 'How about the final examinations?' When we teach to the test, that's, that's what's happening most of the time. When we are teaching to the test, we are losing the fun in learning and we are not getting our students motivated to actually improve their language so that they can use it not just to answer the exam papers but to actually be able to learn and use the language in the real world. Sometimes people learn, you know, English for years, and then even after they graduate from schools, they can't speak it very well, because we are missing all of these components to really get them to have that intrinsic motivation to learn the language.

**Chris:** What you're saying, Sirhajwan, is Malaysia is such a rich diversity of different cultures, different languages, etc., that we should draw on that as a, as a language resource rather than seeing it as something which we shouldn't encourage in the classroom or we shouldn't draw on. Thank you very much for your time today, Sirhajwan. It was very, very interesting hearing you talk about *Dau Dau* and hearing your other thoughts on the creative arts.

**We'am:** Chris, you seemed really excited when puppets were mentioned.

**Chris:** I think puppets can play a huge role in English language teaching. So, it's something I've used myself in, for example, when I did some work with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with, with young students there, and they made their own puppets just out of really simple material, kind of like a stick with a bit of string and, you know, it doesn't have to be much at all. Because, you know, children in these situations have very little and they can feel very nervous about coming into a classroom and learning English. The very formality of being in a school can be quite stressful for a lot of them because they've missed so much education, and so on and so on. But when they make their own puppets, they've got a sort of a friend, because not only something which can comfort them, it's also something which you can use for learning. So, for example, you know, you've just taught something and then if it's like 'Well, now tell your puppet what you've just learned', you know, and there's that idea of sharing that with someone else, with communicating that, of having responsibility, having a function. It gives them that autonomy, it gives them agency, but it also means they are using the language and they are remembering it and deepening their understanding of it. And in context, particularly where students can be scared about that kind of thing, puppets can play a hugely important role. *Dau Dau*, as we heard in the interview, means 'once upon a time'. Do you know what the Korean equivalent of this is?

**We'am:** I don't know the Korean. I know the Arabic – we say *kan yaman kan*.

**Chris:** OK. What does that mean?

**We'am:** That's how we start all stories. And then when you say that, actually, the students automatically know that there is a story to be told.

**Chris:** The reason I asked about the Korean is it's one of my favourite pieces of, sort of, random knowledge. In Korean it's 'Long ago, when tigers smoked tall pipes'. That's the Korean equivalent of that,



which I think is such a beautiful phrase. Talking about a magical time. So that idea of storytelling, why is it so powerful?

**We'am:** With storytelling, you're using all skills together. So it's retention, you're trying to remember vocabulary that you could use, tenses that are suitable for that context, creativity as well, because you want to narrate, you want to be coherent, you want to engage others. So all these skills improve your language because you're listening, you're speaking, you're collaborating maybe.

**Chris:** And our story for this series of Teaching English with the British Council is nearly over. This was the penultimate chapter. Next episode is our last chapter. We invite you to join us, where it's the 'Ask me anything' episode, where all the questions that you have asked our three experts will be put to them, and we'll get their answers. So join us then for our final chapter.

**We'am:** The end.