

## What do you want to ask us?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 10 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, teachers, collocations, English, learners, associations, teaching, language, talking, class, writing, engage, working, tasks, learning, activities

Welcome to Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council: the podcast for English language teachers around the world.

In each episode we look at a critical contemporary issue in the world of ELT.

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'You can show students interesting pictures and ask them to, say, write a story or description based on what they see, and this can help them visualise and create more vivid descriptions.'

'Remember, as a teacher you can adapt, you can adjust these tasks and make them more relevant to students and more engaging, and I think using imagination is one of them.'

'It's collegiate, it's that generally non-judgemental support from fellow teachers, and I think that's really, really important.'

Teaching English with the British Council

### This is episode 10: What do you want to ask us?

**Chris:** Welcome to episode 10 of Teaching English with the British Council, the final episode of our series! And over the last few weeks, we've been asking you, the listener, to ask us and our colleagues questions that we haven't addressed so far in this series. We got loads and loads of questions from you, and we've selected the best nine to ask our panel of three experts. Before we get into that though, We'am, as this is our final episode, I wanted to ask you what were some of your highlights from across the series?

**We'am:** I think all the episodes were brilliant, Chris, I cannot really make a choice. But let me try. I specifically like **episode 9** on creative arts and the use of arts in the classroom. It's something I've always been passionate about but I didn't perhaps know how to integrate it in my classroom. But hearing all the advice and all the practical suggestions from our speakers made me think of practical ideas on how to integrate this in the classroom. So that episode stood out for me. And another episode was **episode 8**

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around motivation. I think motivation is something all educators struggle with, and some of the advice around how to motivate ourselves as educators as well were very helpful. Did anything stand out for you, Chris?

**Chris:** Yeah, so one of the things I really enjoyed was speaking to so many people from so many different parts of the world. We had interviewees from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, Europe, all over the world, and I think they were all able to give their unique perspectives on their ELT experiences. As for particular episodes, I really liked **episode 7** on critical thinking. It's a topic which is really talked a lot about in the world of ELT, but I think what we explored in that episode was about taking it that little bit further. For teachers to really understand their role and their position in the classroom, and how they can support students becoming good citizens in their particular country. And I thought this was a really a fresh and interesting look at the issue of critical thinking. And also **episode 4** on AI. As we know, AI – massively growing phenomenon in the world, but in education in particular, and I think we did a really interesting job there of exploring the different aspects of that, looking at how it can support teachers in the classroom, but also maybe considering some of its challenges.

**We'am:** If you missed any of our **episodes from Series 3**, you can listen to previous episodes on our website and you can download the episodes or listen on the following platforms: Apple Podcasts, Spotify or YouTube. You can also search for British Council TeachingEnglish wherever you get your podcasts.

Teaching English with the British Council

**We'am:** And the first expert we will be talking to is **Chris Graham**. He has a wide range of experience across the world of English language teaching and is the vice president of **IATEFL**.

**Chris:** The first question comes from the **MENA Community of Practice working group**, and they ask: What is a teacher association? And what do you see as the most significant benefits for teachers who join and participate in these teacher associations?

**Chris Graham:** Oh, well, a teacher association is, I suppose, at its most basic, any grouping of teachers. It has to have certain documents saying we are an organisation and this is what we do, we're working probably to improve standards of teaching, to support teachers, whatever, but it is any grouping of teachers. Generally, they operate at, I suppose, three levels: there's the national level, for example **English Teachers Association of Serbia**, which I happen to know, one I've been working with recently. That's a geographically limited one. You of course got the international ones like IATEFL and **TESOL**, which are still teacher associations, they're just very big and they'll include many member associations, probably from around the world. And then some of the large associations, like **JALT** in Japan and **IATE** in India, have chapters, local, if you wish, regional or city-based associations. But for me, I often say – it sounds like a daft thing to say – that teaching is quite a lonely job, but it actually is quite a lonely job because you're in a classroom with teenagers or primary or whoever you teach and you are on your own, and it's very nice to have that sounding board sometimes to say 'It's not only me that has trouble with that', 'Oh, it's not only me that doesn't understand that' or 'Please can you tell me how to do this?' or 'Can you remind me that ...'. It's collegiate, it's **collegiality**, it's that generally non-judgmental support from fellow teachers. And I think that's really, really important, because you lose that sometimes. You're just on your own or you're caught up in the kind of chaos and busyness of school life or university life. So I think that's what they're good for. But to get the best out of them, it's get involved. Teacher associations are run largely – completely, apart from the two very large ones – by volunteers. So I think it's getting involved. And it's a **cliché** that volunteering is

good for the soul, but I think it probably is. Whether it's joining one of the committees, if you've got really good social media skills, you're good at getting stuff on Facebook or LinkedIn, then that's often something associations need. If you've got particular knowledge of, say, primary or of assessment or some aspect of ELT, and you'd like to share that knowledge doing some workshops. There's a whole range of different things. If you have come from a financial background, they're always very happy to have a treasurer. So I think it's getting involved, and it's good for you. You make contacts, you learn a lot, and not so much just about teaching, but you learn a lot of other skills, about working on committees, leading meetings, working with people. Get involved is the answer. And every TA in the world that I know, I know quite a few are always asking for volunteers. So get involved.

**We'am:** And our second question to Chris comes from Haroun, who asks: What should be the **ratio** of teacher to student talking time? What is meant by student learning time and how can we reduce teacher talk time?

**Chris Graham:** Well, let's start with teacher talking time. Fashions change in ELT, don't they? At one point, teachers, it seemed, were barely allowed to talk at all in the days of **the silent way**. We moved on from that now and there is still, in my view, an obsession with the quantity of teacher talking time, and I'm not sure that's what we should be looking at. We should be looking at the quality. I say to teachers, it's not how much you speak – it's going to vary from lesson to lesson with the objectives of different lessons – it's what you're saying. It's what you're trying to achieve. Are you maybe modelling language? If you are, it's going to be more teacher talking time. It might be a writing lesson. Where you've got students working in groups of two or three writing, you're probably going to be much quieter then, because they're going to be leading the way themselves. The right formula, I think, is to be self-aware. And, I think, what's the purpose of my talking? I guess teachers sometimes talk because of anxiety, because of – what is it? – the most dangerous sound in the jungle is silence, isn't it? Just before you become something's lunch, it goes very quiet. And I think a lot of teachers worry about that, so they like to fill the spaces in with stuff. I get why they do that, of course I get why they do it, but I'm not sure it particularly helps the students. So I think it's quality rather than quantity. And I think increasing student time, I suppose, is absolutely proportional to that, because almost certainly, while you are speaking, they will not be, as a general rule. So I guess it's a kind of push-and-pull thing. You know, as you feel that students are engaging in their groups or pairs on the activity, then you take that step back. But equally, if you do feel things are beginning to flag, or they're losing motivation, or they're obviously confused, you come in and you speak. So I think it's push and pull. And as for student learning time, I assume that's what we call lessons, isn't it? For me, that should be quite a lot of the lesson, or I worry a bit about what's going on. I think rather than worrying about what student learning time is, I'm more concerned about teachers who are not able to measure or understand if learning is occurring, and of course not occurring all the time. Students are human beings. But I think it's understanding when it's going on is what matters. So as with teacher talking time, it's that constant monitoring, humming away. It's a bit like sort of **autopilot**. It's always there, checking and saying 'that's good; oh, we need to ...; oops, we're going the wrong way, we need to change that'. And I think that's what a teacher does, really, isn't it? Monitoring, checking and 'I've got to intervene now quickly', 'I'll leave that one', that kind of thing.

**We'am:** And we also have a question from Marouan, who asks: Hello, is there any fast and interesting way to determine my students' types of learning from the very beginning of the year to have effective results?

**Chris Graham:** Well, this is our old friends, visual, aural and kinaesthetic, I imagine, the famous learning styles. Well, I wouldn't waste time trying to do that. The **VAK** – the V A K – has been pretty much

discredited now, I think, by people far smarter than me. Neuroscientists, psychologists are saying very superficially, makes a bit of sense, actually, there is very little scientific evidence to suggest that people do have these individualised learning styles, and it's been removed, I think, from the **CELTA** curriculum now and from other areas in terms of syllabus and curriculum. It's largely been discredited. So I actually read a quote from a psychologist earlier that said don't waste your time on it. There are other things you can get on with in class. But having said that, I'm not unsympathetic to the idea of trying to understand individuals' approaches, but I would look in other areas. I would be very interested in people's motivation. Why are they trying to learn English? Now, of course, it may be 'Because I'm at school'. OK, you don't get very much choice. But if you're working with adults, it might be 'Why are you learning English?' 'Because I'm trying to get another job', something like that, or 'I'm doing it because I want to go to the US and do a master's degree or scholarship' or something. So it could be that. So understanding people's motivations, understanding people's attitudes towards English, which may be individualised, may also be societal. How is English perceived? Things like that, I think, do have an impact on how people learn. I think it's really interesting for people to say 'Well, ...' I mean, my first teaching job was in Italy, many years ago, and learning English then was basically fashionable. I can't describe it as anything else. It was the thing to do. I'm not saying ... it's probably quite a good motivation, I don't know. Collectively, English was a good thing to do. 'You don't speak English. What's wrong with you?' That kind of thing, which ... I'm really interested in, particularly, why adults do take the trouble to learn English. With younger learners, there's not much choice because they're at school, but again, you can drill down with them because you say 'You like English, don't you?' 'Yeah.' 'Why do you like English?' 'Oh, well, because I can chat online, on Facebook.' OK, so it's social media, which is probably quite a big thing, but I wouldn't waste time at all looking at these learning styles. Forget that. I would think much more: 'I've got 25 students here. Let's try and think of what their individual motivations are.' And also, going back to why I love local teachers so much, is how are these people in their own language, in the corridor, when they're interacting with their friends elsewhere in the school, because that will tell you a lot about their character. A lot of people say 'Well, she never says anything in English, she's really shy.' 'What's she like in French?' 'She's really shy.' Well, there you are, it's not anything to do with English, is it? She's just shy. And making her come to the front of the class and do a five-minute presentation in English is an ordeal, and it would be in French as well. So I think it's just taking time to try and pinprick a few individual characteristics of people that will guide you towards perhaps how best to manage them, but the VAKs are behind us, I think.

**We'am:** So, Chris, what were some of your reflections on Chris Graham's advice?

**Chris:** I was particularly interested in the third question there about learning styles. Learning styles are one of those things – certainly when I, my initial training, you know, a long time ago, learning styles were very much in vogue, and they were kind of well known and kind of widely believed and kind of used in practice – but I think that the academic research has changed a lot in recent times, as Chris was saying. And I think this highlights an interesting point that, as teachers, we need to be able to constantly adapt and upgrade and be willing to put some of those things which we maybe used to believe behind us and to change according to what the research is saying or what the research is saying differently. This isn't something that's always easy to do, because we've always done it in a certain way, but I think it's really important for us to grow as teachers. For us to be as effective as possible in the classroom, we have to take these sorts of things on board.

**We'am:** I agree with you, Chris. I think that's very important for teachers to, OK, use, you know, the techniques and strategies that we learn from research, but it's also important that researchers be in touch with what's happening in the classroom and in touch with issues that teachers have in the classroom. And

oftentimes you find this gap between policy and practice, and it's because policy is informed by research, but much of research is done by people who are a little bit away from the classroom. So it's important to bring all those elements together and bridge these gaps to better inform teachers. So a lot of the things sometimes like, for example, also the teacher talking time, I remember in the past, there was an almost an obsession about the teacher talking time to, like, minimise it to the least. But how can learners understand if a teacher just speaks a minimum? So it's also about the quality of the talk, and whether that talk adds anything to the learner, and it goes back to anything in the class. That's why I personally like action research, because it's a research that is very much inspired by the classroom and the issues that teachers find relevant in their classrooms, and trying to solve that with strategies that can also work in their classrooms.

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**We'am:** Our second expert is **Silvia Nassar**, a postgraduate teaching associate and PhD researcher at the University of Exeter.

**Chris:** The first of the three questions for Silvia comes from Maria, and she asks: how can I make my students aged between eight and eleven get engaged in writing, **descriptions**, story, and so on? It's the only skill which fails, and I feel satisfied with all the others.

**Silvia:** So to engage students aged eight to eleven in writing descriptions and stories, it's important to make the writing process fun, interactive and relevant to their interests. And from my experience, I can suggest some strategies that you can use with the students so you can incorporate interactive activities, such as using creative prompts or story starters to spark students' imagination. For example, you can ask them 'What would you do if you found a magic door in your backyard?' or 'Write about a day in the life of your favourite animal'. You can also engage students in collaborative and interactive storytelling. You can start the story and have each student add a sentence or two, depending on their age. This can be done early, first, to engage the students, and then could be written down. Another thing you can make use of is the visual aids, so you can have picture prompts. You can show students interesting pictures and ask them to, say, write a story or description based on what they see, and this can help them visualise and create more vivid descriptions. And then maybe you can try and use writing games such as **Mad Libs**, where students fill in the blanks to create funny stories, they can come up with funny words. This does not only make writing fun but it can also reinforce parts of speech and sentence structure. You can also use writing challenges or contests for the students. For example, you can say 'Write a story that starts with the sentence: "It was a dark and stormy night ..."' and they have to imagine how to go on with these sentences. I also believe that it's very important to provide clear structure and scaffolding, and I used to do that a lot with my students. So, for example, you can provide them with graphic organisers like story maps, Venn diagrams or character charts to help students organise their ideas. And that could be done in a lesson or two before they start writing. And of course they may need help in that, so we have to ensure that we offer step-by-step guidance. You can also plan to display students' writing around the classroom or create a class book. And I think this gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment, and that would motivate them to write more.

**Chris:** And the second question for Silvia comes from Lydia, and she asks: How do I make use of the fast learners in class, as they finish their work early and sometimes distract the others?



**Silvia:** I think the secret lies in planning the lesson – after, of course, learning about your students and their prior knowledge and their level and all of that. So, first of all you need to set individual learning goals with your fast learners, discuss their interests and create a plan with tasks that cater to their strengths and areas they wish to improve. So what can you do to effectively manage fast learners in your class? You can provide extension activities. That could be done by preparing advanced tasks, such as preparing additional, more challenging activities related to the lesson. This can include higher-level reading comprehension questions, for example, or creative writing prompts, or maybe advanced grammar exercises, or even maths or numbers, fun activities, worksheets, word searches if they like that, just to keep them occupied. Another good idea that many teachers use is peer support, and this could be done by pairing fast learners with classmates who may need extra help. They can assist them with explanations, or they can guide their peers through difficult tasks. Again, this depends on their age, but this could reinforce their own learning while helping others. And if your classroom setting allows, maybe you can try and set up independent learning centres that could include various activities that fast learners can independently work on, such as vocabulary games, reading corners or writing challenges. Or you can have students rotate through different centres, ensuring that fast learners have something engaging to do once they finish their main task.

**Chris:** And the third question comes from the MENA Community of Practice group, and they ask: How can we best teach **collocations**?

**Silvia:** Well, teaching collocations effectively involves helping the students understand how words naturally combine in the language. And, of course, it's a good idea to introduce collocations in the beginning, to start by explaining what collocations are and why they are important. So maybe we can start using simple definitions and examples, such as 'make a decision' versus 'do a decision'. Then maybe you can highlight common collocations by providing lists of common ones in different categories. Another strategy could be contextualising learning. So, for example, you can use authentic text. So, for example, you can incorporate collocations from authentic texts, such as books, dialogues or videos you can highlight. Or you can have the students to highlight collocations within the text and discuss their meaning and usage. What you can also do is provide sentences or short paragraphs where collocations are used in context, and you can ask students to identify and practise using these collocations in similar contexts. Some other activities that you can use to teach collocations could be matching exercises, where students match words to form collocations, or you can have students play bingo with collocations. And what you can also do is have students practise and repeat, so use drills to reinforce collocations by having students repeat sentences. You can also, er, another idea, you can also use flashcards, with one word on the one side and its collocate on the other. Students can also use these flashcards to quiz each other or to test themselves or to review.

**Chris:** So We'am, what in particular stood out from what Silvia was saying there?

**We'am:** I really liked the prompts that she provided that help her students engage with writing. All the examples that Silvia has provided were very creative. So it engaged learners in, in a process which is thinking about something out of the norm and thinking creatively about it. And this is very important, because we always talk about 21st-century skills, and creative thinking is one of those skills we talked about, critical thinking. So I think creativity is also another aspect, and creativity is also very important for writing. So engaging learners in that process of imagining, brainstorming, working together in a group and then coming up with an engaging piece. It could be a poem, it could be any other form of writing is very important, and the way to do it with learners is also, plays a huge part in how they produce this language

and how they think about language. So much of their production and writing is about what you give them as a teacher. How do you engage them in that topic? How do you make them relate to it? And I think young learners, in specific, and also teenagers are very imaginative. They have imagination, so it's very important to use that and to capsule on that to make learners produce the kind of language that they want to use or the language that they find important. And that also relates to ... sometimes, as educators, we follow a certain script or rigid topics and curriculums, but remember, as a teacher, you can adapt. You can adjust these tasks and make them more relevant to students and more engaging. And I think using imagination is one of them.

**Chris:** Yeah, one of the nice prompts she used, I think, was the magic door in your backyard, and to use that as a way, because that sort of literally opens up so many different ideas. It allows students to really draw on their imagination, but to be creative with language. And it's something I think that we've talked about in many other episodes, is about students are more motivated and more engaged if they can be creative with their language. So I want to ask you, We'am, if there was a magic door in your backyard, where would it lead to?

**We'am:** It will take me, maybe, to my grandmother's garden. It's a beautiful garden.

**Chris:** Is there an olive tree?

**We'am:** There are olives, there are apricots. You have pomegranates, cherries, almonds, all sorts of trees. She had also a peppermint kind of pot. Every time in the morning I would help her with the plants and ... by watering them in the morning. Sometimes I would sleep at her place because she was next to our house. So if I had that imaginary door, probably I'd go there and speak to my grandmother and just be in her garden and watering all these beautiful plants.

**Chris:** Lovely. Thank you, We'am. Thank you for sharing that.

**We'am:** And our third expert is [Lina Mukhopadhyay](#). She's a professor at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, India.

**Chris:** Since Lina is an expert in multilingual education, many of the questions focused on this area, but the first one, which comes from Joshan, he asks: How do you help your students develop their lesson plans, and what are your top tips?

**Lina:** So, lesson plans are a very important document for the teachers that help them be on track, as well as creatively think about their classes in advance and take some decisions as to what they would include in the lesson, but in the end what happens in the class is much more of a flexible nature. And so when I think of, you know, my teacher trainees and the kind of lesson plans that they would be using for their multilingual classrooms, I help them look at the unit and then develop the lesson plan according to three or four stages of the unit. So the idea is that they are able to, you know, address most of the tasks and the sections of the unit in their lesson plans, and then so have a comprehensive lesson plan for the entire unit, which they can then break up according to whatever time they have. So some schools, they have 40 minutes period, some schools have 30 minutes, and so on and so forth. And so to align the plan with the unit is a very important tip that I would say, because it's a working document and teachers need to have a sense of structure that how they are going to deal with the unit, in terms of all the aspects that the unit has. So to align the lesson plan closely with the unit, it is very useful. And another useful strategy that the teachers could use is also, you know, think of wherever in the lesson plan they would be using L1 or home

language input. So, for example, they would be aware of the nature of the students they would have, right? Their language profile. So, for example, a teacher in the north-east of India knows that 'OK, my children would know Assamese, or some registers of Assamese, and English and Hindi'. Then she could plan some language inputs in her lesson plan using all the three languages. So wherever possible, bring in the L1 input so that it becomes easy for her to also, you know, use it in class in a very structured way.

**We'am:** Our second question to Lina is from Laquan, who asks: Hi, I would love to know your opinion about the use of Language 1 in teaching. To what extent is it useful or harmful? My students appreciate it when I use it, but I see it dominating the classroom.

**Lina:** I would say that the use of L1 in the English classroom, there is a way in which, you know, we have to calibrate the use of L1 during teaching. For example, if we constantly use to explain the meaning using L1, to a certain extent that is good, but then the teacher should also make an attempt to introduce English words and phrases into that explanation. And then maybe a good strategy to follow would be, like, you know, do bilingual instructions, so you give the instruction in English, and then you also give the instruction in some of the home languages of the learners. So that could be done as a, like, a regular strategy, but let's say in terms of reading aloud a text, then that can be done only through English, because they have to get, you know, the meaning, and they also have to get the knowledge of intonation, chunking of a text, so on and so forth. So we have to be judicious and we need to know where the use of L1 in teaching would help. So, for example, making lexical connections – so word translation or phrase translation – would be excellent, but in terms of meaning explanation, the teacher can heavily rely on L1 but then also, in a graduated manner, bring in the use of L2 or English, and in the student interaction, she can encourage, you know, every time the students make an attempt to use an English word or an English phrase within their repertoire, then the teacher could appreciate and then would encourage the learners to use more of the target language. So if we use the language in a calibrated manner, definitely the teacher is going to find that the use is very significant for the learners, it is beneficial and it has a lot of positive impact. Where it can become harmful is where habitually the teachers, you know, only use L1 to explain things, and that's like a coping mechanism, or that's like a shortcut, which probably in a chemistry class or in a history class is fine, but in an English class, the teacher has to make an attempt to develop the target language in a certain manner, using L1 inputs, and not only, you know, rely on English-only inputs, because that can alienate the learners.

**We'am:** And our last question to Lina is from Assalam, who asks: Which method we should follow while teaching multilingual classes of English?

**Lina:** In multilingual classes it is very important that we recognise that there are other languages that children bring to the class, right? And we have a way of utilising those home language resources, the culture from those languages in the classes, so that we do not alienate the learner by making him or her think that 'Oh, you don't know enough of the language so you don't know enough about the culture and therefore you are not good'. So that would be very detrimental, yeah? So if we want to take all our learners along and if we want them to progress in the target language, it is very important that we respect their home languages resources. We could use creative ways to include the L1 or the home languages. It need not be, like, every time it is the teacher who is giving instructions to the learners. The multilingual classes can..., I think they provide a fantastic opportunity for the teacher also to extend their multilingual repertoire. So if the teacher can make active development that they also engage with the other languages of the learners and try to learn something from that, that would benefit or that would motivate the learners to also learn the target language.



**Chris:** We'am, you've spoken a lot this series about multilingual education in different ways. What were your thoughts on what Lina shared there?

**We'am:** I really liked how Lina engages her learners' home languages. She mentions some really useful strategies, like grouping students with similar languages and also helping them with instructions using home languages, and what I specifically like is the intentional use of home language to facilitate learning, so it's not just talking to save time or to save time for teachers rather than explaining in English but it's rather an intentional way to use home languages to facilitate learning. Translanguaging is one technique to do that, also asking students to explain to each other what the teacher has said in their home language can be also useful or drawing comparisons between English and their home languages. I think learners, when they feel that the teacher is interested in their background, interested in their culture, also interested in learning their language, I think that also helps learners to be motivated and to be more engaged in the classroom. I think one thing with multilingualism that is difficult for teachers is that there might be more than one home language in the classroom and the teacher might not be even familiar with the home language. In a mixed-ability classroom and in large classes, that can be very challenging to deal with. So I think students get a sense of how the teachers perceive them or perceive their culture. They get that sense, so when they sense that you are interested in their culture and in their languages, I think that very much helps with motivation. So it goes beyond the direct impact of using a language to, I think, to the well-being of students, because you have that rapport and understanding of their backgrounds and I think that aspect, the emotional side of learning, can be boosted using home languages in the classroom.

**Chris:** There's also a respect there, isn't there, for the student, and it says something about the teacher's approach to learning that if they're engaging the students within their own languages, they are treating them well, they're treating them positively, it's a more, sort of, democratic classroom as well.

Sadly we've now reached the end of Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council and we've had great fun along the way and we've explored all manner of subjects related to the world of English language teaching. Thanks to the British Council for all their support in producing these podcasts, thanks to the listeners and thanks to you, We'am, for being such a great co-host.

**We'am:** Thank you, Chris. It's been a pleasure working with you, working and also laughing at the same time, it was such an enjoyable time. I'd like to also thank all the teachers for their amazing contributions and for keeping the conversation alive, giving us ideas; and also our experts for their suggestions, for their advice, for just being with us and sharing this knowledge with the wider audience; the producers, thank you for your guidance.

**Chris:** You up for Series 4, We'am?

**We'am:** I'd love to, Chris!