

The beautiful game - English, football and ELT

Ben Goldstein kicks a few ideas around.

The English language, like football ... began here and has spread to every corner of the globe ... Indeed, English is much more than a language: it is a bridge across borders and cultures, a source of unity in a rapidly changing world.

(UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown)

The parallels between English and football are not difficult to see. Even politicians like Gordon Brown make comparisons between them and yet, surprisingly, the 'beautiful game' is rarely discussed in relation to English language teaching. In World Cup year, I thought it would be timely to reassess the relationship and see how this popular cultural phenomenon can be analysed and exploited for use in the classroom. David Goldblatt in his book *The Ball is Round* (a title that clearly has a language-class ring to it) says this of the relationship between the two:

'Is there any cultural practice more global than football? ... The use of English and the vocabularies of science and mathematics must run football close for universality, but they remain the lingua francas of the world's elites, not of its masses. Only the most anodyne products of America's cultural industries can claim a reach as wide as football's, and then only for a fleeting moment in those parts of the world that can afford them.'

Although Goldblatt perceives English to be an elite language, if the number of English speakers continues to

grow at the current rate, the popularity of the language will certainly reach a par with that of football. Consider the use of English in mass musical genres such as hip-hop: those lyrics certainly do not reflect an elite usage.

Status

On my travels, one link I have found between football and English is their joint status as a *lingua franca*. Get into a taxi almost anywhere in the world it seems and there's a good chance that the small talk between you and the driver may revolve around football. In

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my case, living in Barcelona but brought up in London, there is usually plenty to discuss! Currently, Barça's Argentine forward Leo Messi would get a mention and/or at least a few exclamatory noises suggesting approval of the man's skill. As a subject of casual chat, there is almost nothing that can beat football. The omnipresent *Did you see the match last night?* could be translated into an infinite number of languages and lead

to a similar set of verbal encounters in most countries in the world. Misguided religion or opium of the people for some, the truth is that this *lingua franca* is growing beyond anybody's imagination. Countries such as China or Japan, whose citizens previously had little interest in the sport, now represent its biggest consumers. And for once, this product of globalisation has not come from the United States.

Identity

Like English and its multitude of speakers, football is also a cultural phenomenon that can be refashioned, reinvented and appropriated by its followers. In this way, it can lead to the creation of unexpectedly diverse voices, and often forms an integral part of a person's make-up, their 'cultural cards' if you like. In this way, much like English, football can play a part in transcending cultural and national boundaries. This is tied up with issues of identity and desire: What does following a team say about you and your identity?

Devotion to a club may be expressed in various ways, with English often playing a key role. For example, walking down the Ramblas in Barcelona, you can buy a flag claiming that Barça are 'the best of the world' (a direct translation from the Spanish or Catalan). During the FIFA World Club Cup final between Barcelona and Estudiantes, played in Abu Dhabi, the

camera at one point panned to a group of female fans holding a banner that read *All Syria Love Messi*. In the same way that musicians may insert their own brand of English into lyrics to reach a wider audience, here we can see football fans spreading a meaningful message to the largest possible number of people.

The terraces at Barcelona's Camp Nou are also the place for political placards written in English. When a big match is on and the fans know the world is watching, you will find flags proclaiming *Catalonia is not Spain*. This suggests, of course, the significance that the sport can have in different contexts and the reason why certain football rivalries remain so highly-charged. Whatever the cause, English is central to spreading the word. The more passionately felt is the message, the greater the need for English to disseminate it.

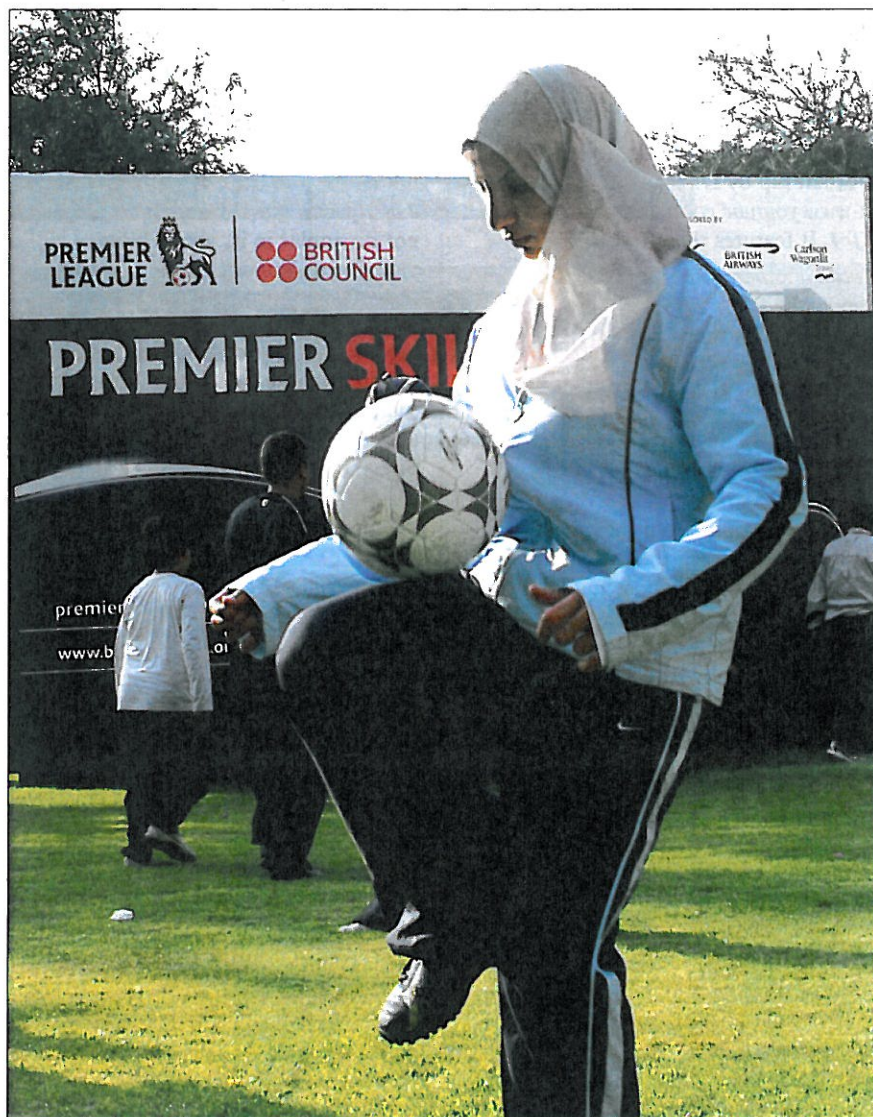


Reading Alastair Pennycook's work on the topic of hip-hop and global Englishes led me to seek out more parallels between these fluid cultural phenomena and football. Pennycook uses the term *transcultural flows* to address the 'ways in which cultural forms

move, change and are reused to fashion new identities in diverse contexts. This is not, therefore, a question merely of cultural movement but of take-up, appropriation, change and refashioning'. I see a clear parallel here with football in that both the sport and hip-hop are powerful phenomena that 'unsettle common distinctions between the local and global, the traditional and contemporary, and reflect the flows, fluxes and fluidity of life in an era of globalization'. The power of football to subvert and shape communities and identities is undeniable in this respect.

Diversity

Football is, therefore, an excellent vehicle through which teachers can incorporate aspects of global citizenship and intercultural dialogue into the classroom. Consider the UK's Premier League today. What was once a largely monocultural environment now has more than 300 foreign players from more than 68 countries. However, the diversity that exists within this particular sport can, of course, be viewed in various ways, depending on the media. Despite the changing demographic of UK teams, a largely xenophobic British tabloid press still sadly makes fun of many foreign players. Fortunately, the excellent British Council website Premier Skills (<http://premierskills.britishcouncil.org>), a joint venture with England's Premier League, has done much to redress the balance. The site examines UK clubs' projects to promote inclusion and diversity within their community and elsewhere. It even features interviews with footballers not talking about the sport itself, but referring to subjects as diverse as language learning and their



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experiences of adapting to life in the UK. As such, it can be linked to work on challenging stereotypes, learning styles and autonomy and concepts of immigration and 'home'. It also has a teachers' area with a host of practical ideas for integrating football into your classroom.

YouTube is another great resource for seeing football personalities in an entirely different light. Here, we can track how Fabio Capello's English has improved since he took over management of the England team. There are also a number of online interviews with players such as Liverpool forward Fernando Torres, whose intermediate-level English is also very interesting to analyse in class. In fact, Torres talks very candidly about personal issues, which may relate directly to the learners' lives (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvplL_dm5E). Because of this, he acts as a sympathetic role model for students, which is in stark contrast to the way that celebrities are usually treated in coursebook materials.

Stereotypes

There are also several websites which help challenge the negative stereotypes associated with football, such as fan violence, racism and homophobia. A good place to glean material for this topic is www.kickitout.org. Likewise, stereotypes such as the common one that women don't like football can be challenged by reading texts about cultures where there is clearly a great deal of female support. One such country is Iran, despite the fact that women are not allowed to attend games there (the Iranian film *Offside* captures this situation brilliantly). Other surprising angles include the fascinating relationship between football and popular music in Brazil, with countless songs celebrating the game. Elsewhere, there are a number of events which show the topic in an unexpected light, such as the Homeless World Cup, a tournament that has been held yearly since 2003 to give homeless people an opportunity to represent their country and turn around their lives (see www.homelessworldcup.org). In terms of



sites particularly designed for the language classroom, another excellent source of material is the website www.ello.org (English Language Listening Lab Online) which features a number of interviews with non-native speakers on the importance of football in their countries. Episodes 98, 440 and 926 have some great authentic listening texts. You might also like to check out a football rap by Dr Brown on *YouTube* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGLzsGgKfc4. It features these lyrics:

Name another sport that can capture imaginations

Bring together races

From a million places

All about your skill

Not what colour your face is ...

Metaphor


Talking of skills, could there be a correlation between those that you need to play football and those required to speak a language? Leo van Lier sees an analogy in the self-organising nature of learning both activities and the fact that the skill emerges from a combination of trying it yourself and watching others, of guided discovery and explicit instruction:

'When they start playing, children tend to run after the ball in a single swarm, kicking it around in seemingly random directions. Then at some point a "feel for the game" emerges. The game reorganises itself (not for all players at once, but for some) from "running after the ball wherever it rolls" to "moving the ball around collaboratively in strategic ways". At that point, the rules of the game become learnable, in an interaction between bottom-up discovery, and top-

down instruction, within the social context of playing the game.'

Maintaining flow in a conversation could, therefore, be seen as something comparable to keeping the ball in motion, and a succession of passes as stringing your sentences together. There is also a link here with exposure: football is all around us and you can start playing it virtually anywhere with minimum resources. It seems that these days speaking and listening to English is not dissimilar in its accessibility, visibility and universality.



In much of the world, English is akin to a background hum and football has that buzz to it, too. For good or bad, I imagine that during the four weeks that the South Africa 2010 World Cup is on, people will be talking about little else. 

www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page14289.asp

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