

## French through a footballing lens: engaging boys in language learning

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*Suzanne Ritchie*

*SCILT*

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**Abstract:** The initiative "SLR – Le Foot" integrates French language learning with football to engage boys, who traditionally show lower interest in continuing language studies. SCILT collaborated with four Glasgow-based secondary schools to pilot this interdisciplinary competition in 2021-22, expanding nationally in 2022-23 to 17 schools. The project covers topics like sports, personal introductions, healthy living, and French-speaking cultures, using football as an engaging context. Students create football drills and videos in French, encouraging creativity and practical language use. Beyond language skills, the project supports broader educational goals such as Developing the Young Workforce, decolonizing the curriculum, and promoting anti-racism and global citizenship.

Football, with its global appeal, motivates students, particularly boys, by presenting "French disguised as football." This dynamic approach also enhances employability skills, intercultural competence, and understanding of colonial history, making it relevant to global careers. The project's transferable skills can be applied to other languages like German or Spanish, promoting multilingualism. The competition's focus on real-world applications makes language learning both relevant and fun, fostering cultural awareness and critical thinking. Ultimately, the integration of football and language learning not only improves linguistic abilities but also prepares students for a diverse, interconnected world.

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**Keywords:**

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### Introduction

Football, known globally as the "beautiful game," transcends borders, cultures, and languages. Its universal appeal makes it an ideal and stimulating context for teaching and learning languages. This may be particularly the case among boys, who have historically tended less towards continuing their language learning beyond BGE level than girls.

With this in mind, SCILT worked in partnership with four Glasgow-based secondary schools (Knightswood Secondary School, Lourdes Secondary School, St Roch's Secondary School and Shawlands Academy), to develop Le Foot et La Francophonie, an interdisciplinary competition combining French and football. Launched initially as a pilot project with these four schools in 2021-22, the first national competition took place in 2022-23, and attracted 17 schools from 14 local authority areas. By engaging with this competition, which integrates language learning with football, practitioners were able to cover a diverse range of core topics with their language learners at second and third levels, including personal introductions, sports and hobbies, daily routine and healthy

living, while simultaneously encouraging learners to discover more about the French-speaking world in a context that is relevant to their lives and interests.

Language learning was not the sole focus of this competition, since the context of football also supports broader educational goals such as Developing the Young Workforce, decolonising the curriculum, and promoting anti-racist education and global citizenship. Furthermore, this truly interdisciplinary project was supported by criteria based on learning outcomes in Modern Languages as well as Health and Wellbeing, with input from PGDE students and lecturers of P.E. at the University of Strathclyde.

## **Football as a Relevant Context for Language Learning**

Against the backdrop of low language uptake by boys in particular, football's popularity provides a stimulating entry point to engage them in language learning. One teacher during the pilot project commented that the competition allowed learners to experience "French disguised as football" and the anecdotal impact on learner motivation amongst boys has been very positive. Learning materials developed during the project, including judging criteria referenced to modern languages and health and wellbeing Experiences and Outcomes and Benchmarks, are available on the SCILT website ([SCILT Le Foot et La Francophonie](#)) and some schools, such as Biggar High School in South Lanarkshire, have begun to run their own regional competition, such was the impact on learner motivation. Feedback from some of the learners who were involved in the pilot project highlights the reasons for increased motivation:

"I enjoyed the opportunity for group work and creativity outside what we normally do in a classroom."

"I like being able to use French and be active as well."

The competition was judged on two main elements: the production of a football training drill in French to showcase learning about both French and Health and Wellbeing experiences and outcomes; and a video to highlight French learning; for example, a player interview, a match commentary, or a short film. Participants were encouraged to explore their learning and be as creative as they liked in producing these two outcomes in the target language.

## **Diverse Topics and Cultural Awareness**

Using football as a context for language learning provides a platform to cover a wide range of topics. Beyond sports vocabulary, lessons can include discussions on healthy living, such as nutrition and exercise, using examples from athletes' diets and training regimes. This approach naturally leads to discussions about different cultural practices related to food and lifestyle, promoting intercultural competence. A lesson on healthy eating, for example, could explore the diets of famous French-speaking footballers, which can then segue into discussions about traditional foods in Francophone countries. This not only enhances vocabulary related to food and health but also provides cultural

insights, helping students understand the broader French-speaking world. As one teacher commented: “The kids have absolutely loved it. We intend to continue with this topic for future year groups, as it covered a lot of the language we would have been covering as part of our S2 course and the IDL aspect, linking into HWB, was fabulous.”

## **Developing the Young Workforce and Employability Skills**

Learning languages through football also supports the development of key employability skills. As the world becomes more interconnected, intercultural competence and multilingualism are increasingly valued in the global job market. By engaging with football—a global sport with a vast international following—students can gain insights into the cultural nuances and communication styles of different countries. This knowledge is crucial for careers in international business, sports management, tourism, and beyond. Learners become more aware of the career opportunities open to them in the world of professional sport. Indeed, some of the facilitators of the pilot project themselves had experience of working in professional football thanks to their language skills.

## **Decolonising the Curriculum and Promoting Global Citizenship**

Integrating football into language learning can also contribute to decolonising the curriculum. Football, with its colonial and postcolonial histories, provides a lens through which educators can discuss issues of colonialism, cultural exchange, and global power dynamics. For example, exploring the history of football in French-speaking Africa can open discussions about colonialism, cultural identity, and the impact of globalisation. This helps students develop a critical understanding of historical and contemporary issues, fostering a sense of global citizenship.

Moreover, football can be a powerful tool for anti-racist education. The sport’s global nature and diversity among players and fans make it an ideal context for discussing racism, inclusion, and the celebration of cultural diversity. By learning about the experiences of players from diverse backgrounds, students can engage in meaningful discussions about racism and discrimination, both within and beyond the sport. As one learner noted when asked if they had learned anything that surprised them: “I was surprised by how many French football players have African roots”.

## **Transferrable Skills Across Languages**

The various skills acquired through learning French in a football context are not confined to one language. As a sport with global appeal, this project can easily be adapted to German, Italian, Spanish, or any other language. This cross-linguistic approach not only broadens linguistic competence but also fosters an appreciation for linguistic diversity, encouraging students to explore additional languages.

## Conclusion

Learning languages through the context of football offers a dynamic and engaging way to teach languages like French, while also equipping students with transferrable skills for other languages such as German, Italian, and Spanish. This approach not only covers a wide range of topics but also supports broader educational objectives. By developing the young workforce, promoting employability skills, and fostering global citizenship, this method addresses key aspects of modern education. Crucially, learners react positively to this fresh context for language learning. Educators can inspire a new generation of language learners who are not only linguistically skilled but also culturally competent and socially aware. These observations about learner motivation were offered by three of the participating teachers:

“It is not about uptake yet as French is mandatory up to S4 BUT it definitely made them more interested and motivated. It also gave them a great confidence boost!”

“We have been struggling with uptake for French in our school - pupils can only select six subjects for S3/4 and we often lose pupils to science. For next year, we have a class of 20 pupils going into S3 French which is a big improvement. We have increased our uptake amongst boys, in particular!”

“From the class of 23 S3 pupils who participated, 22 are choosing N5 French.”

The intersection of language learning and football holds great promise for enriching the educational experience and preparing students for a more interconnected and inclusive world.

\* As well as [Le Foot et la Francophonie](#), practitioners interested in teaching French or Italian through the theme of football can consult two further resources recently published by SCILT: [Francofoot and Calciamo](#).