

FOOTBALL CULTURE.NET

<http://www.footballculture.net>

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Language: English

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Overview

If you agree with the assumption that football is a consuming passion; if you do believe it has a relevant cultural dimension; if you are tired of fighting against your students for commenting football matches instead of learning English; if you think football is a suitable vehicle to learn English; if you wish to add some fun to your English classes ...then ***footballculture.net*** is the right site for you. And for your students. Authored by the British Council and the BBC, it combines the former's language expertise, built up in tens of years of EFL teaching around the world, and the latter's universally acknowledged information handling ability and accuracy. Launched in 2001, the site was immediately selected by Yahoo.co.uk, as the best sports and recreation site of the year. Two years later it is still an excellent site "fun and informed, but with a genuine social value", as William Rowe from the *Guardian Unlimited* words it, as well as "definitely innovative" and with "a natural world audience."

Accuracy

Considering the authority and prestige of the two institutions authoring the site, it is no surprise that materials are plentiful, accurate and interesting. One would expect nothing less, so to say. Nor is it surprising that all topics, even the most controversial, are dealt with from an intercultural and cross-cultural perspective. The commitment of the BBC and the British Council on the matter is too well known for that. It is certainly more surprising that the authors chose to report users', either native or non-native, contributions or opinions without any apparent selection and/or editing, thus giving a feeling of authenticity and language in use by real speakers, so difficult to be purposefully achieved.

Authority

Though it would be hard to find somebody who never heard about them, the BBC and the British Council felt the need to qualify themselves all the same. Here's what they write in the "About us" section, with a slight hint of British understatement. "The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for educational and cultural relations. The BBC is a trusted global broadcaster of quality programming." Using the site for teaching purposes or recommending it to students for self-study can thus be done light-heartedly.

Currency

As already mentioned, the site was originally launched in 2001. Different sections are regularly updated, a few weekly, some monthly, others occasionally. Only a few sections have remained more or less unchanged, such as "Photos" or "Colours". Contributions provided by users are added on a regular basis, while new themes for debate are often introduced. All the materials, features, interviews, language activities, games, quizzes, etc. are archived, clearly indexed in each section's menu as well as in the site map, and made available to users that can retrieve them easily, either by clicking on the left side menu or searching for them through the "search" function. Users who want to "keep up to date with what's new on the site" may join the site's mailing list and get a newsletter. One may safely state that the information provided is current and relevant enough to catch up and keep visitors' interest alive, and so rich and varied that even regular users are bound to come across some unusual football facts, or a strange piece of news.

Objectivity

Everything in the site is *above board*. The aim is clearly stated: "to explore the culture of football around the world". Information on copyright, safeguard of privacy, safety, eligibility for competitions and use of cookies is provided, since the site has a free access and users contributions and ideas are openly sought for.

The site content is informative and educational, as well as recreational and it covers a wide range of topics to cater to as large an audience as possible. Reported facts and figures are reliable and updated. Different points of view are always provided and articles do not seem to be biased, even when dealing with highly controversial topics. This is also true in surveys in which users provide their views on different issues. Opinions are apparently reported with no editing but, though highly personal occasionally, they are never offensive or abusive.

Content

The site is meant for learners of English, who love football and wish to take advantage of their passion to learn the language in a more relaxing and less structured way. The content is arranged into 9 main sections: *Teams, Players, Fans, Colours, Insider, You're on!, Photos, Games, Football English*. Here's an outline of what users may find in each section. In *Teams* learners can read interesting features on national teams, clubs and rivalries from all over the world, but they can also find information on football-team names and nicknames, with reference to their origins and meanings. *Players* section provides interviews and features on past and present footballers from around the world. Here learners are bound to find lots of material to satisfy their curiosity. The *Fans* section is centred on team's supporters and on how team supporting differs in different countries and cultures. In the December 2002 issue there is a very interesting feature on *The Collapse of Soviet Soccer*, investigating both the fans' need for new loyalty for new national teams and their longing for former glories. *Colours* deals with origins and meaning of team's kits. Users may nominate their own best or worst kit in the world as well as reading what other users think. The *Insider* section contains views of football from different perspectives. In the current issue the opening feature is devoted to *The Humble Football*, the forgotten hero of the game. In *You're on!* fans have the chance to contribute their football memories in the form of

fans file. They may also take part to cultural debates around football. There's a new theme suggested every month. December's theme was *Football and Home*. Other interesting themes currently under debate are *Football and Love*, *Violence*, *Football and Gender*, *Football and Faith*, and many more. *Photos* provides interesting and somewhat unusual football-related pictures divided into different categories. The most interesting ones? See "Weird and wonderful scenes, from mascots to flags" in *Stuff*, or *Fans around the world*. *Games* contains a "collection of fun football games, prize winning quizzes and rubbish distractions." Here users can have "loads of timewasting fun", as the slogan goes. Finally in *Football English* learners may improve their English through different types of activities, cloze tests, feature quizzes; football phrases and phrases quizzes, guess the word, make a sentence.

Style and Functionality

The site is laid out clearly and logically with well organised subsections. It has highly intuitive navigation bars both at the top and the bottom. A pull down left-side menu provides access to all sections and subsections. Sections content is concisely indicated. Clearly labelled, home, back, next, go to top links are included on each page, as well as links to other sections A search function is provided for material retrieval. The design and lay-out are quite impressive, a deep pitch green background is the base for a smaller sized and lighter green page on which content is arranged. Fonts, which used to be quite small in earlier issues, are now big enough to allow a perfect level of readability and beautifully match the site design. Thumbnail images and pictures are all well suited and can be easily enlarged. In a word, the site is appealing visually, easy to navigate, with interesting and fun enough materials to engage visitors.

Learner Fit

The site is highly suitable for self-study. Most materials focus on reading providing comprehension activities to ease understanding and appreciation (see feature quizzes). The *Football English* section offers plenty of motivating language activities, covering almost any aspect of language. New activities are added regularly. The activities are self correcting and can be done over and over again. Both learning materials and activities are unmarked, that is, with no level indication. This is no serious drawback, though, since no learner beyond an intermediate level could possibly make a profitable use of the site and each learner can try by him/herself which activities suit him/her best.

When reading features or interviews, playing games or doing quizzes, completing language activities or joining a debate, playing for one's national team or finding out about unusual football facts, one experiences the feeling of really learning while amusing oneself. It may be said, then, that all the materials and activities provided comply with the aim claimed. It is a real pity, though, that the site does not provide any kind of interaction tool, either synchronous or asynchronous. Offering users the opportunity to be in closer touch through, say, a forum or a chat room would have meant fostering real language practice.

Teacher Fit

As stated, the site contains an ELT Handbook for teachers to provide them with a practical guide on how *footballculture.net* can be used in the classroom. The Handbook exactly matches the site structure and is divided into two parts: *Teachers' notes*, containing activity ideas, and *Teachers' resources* providing the worksheets and game sheets for selected activities. As the handbook clearly indicates, online access to the site is not indispensable. Most activities may be carried out in the classroom using the site as a source of materials and/or support. According to the Handbook introduction "the activity ideas in the handbook may be used in any stage of a lesson but are particularly suitable to reinforce previously taught language". Though the Handbook is a precious teacher's aid, teachers themselves may imagine many more ways of using the site, provided they feel a personal appeal for the topics dealt with.

The site can be used for almost any kind of language activities, except for listening, since, unfortunately, no audio or video recordings are provided. Apart from reading activities, which have the largest share, teachers can use the materials for speaking activities: discussions, debates, role-plays, pair works can easily be devised for nearly any suggested topic. As for writing, lots of activities can be implemented: note taking and précis, essay writing of any sort, short feature articles, you just name one. As well as being suitable for self-study the site may also prove an invaluable teaching tool.

Conclusion

Aren't there any flaws in this paragon site? It is difficult to say. I could only spot a couple. I was really surprised that there are no audio or video recordings of any sort in the site. This sounds strange indeed considered who the authors are. Both the BBC and the British Council would be perfectly able to provide quality listening materials. One wonders why they chose not to do so and regrets they didn't. The second one is the low level of user interaction. The site features a mailing list and openly requests and publishes users contributions, but there is no other form of either synchronous or asynchronous interaction. Would the site be less safe if users could join forums or controlled chat rooms? Maybe. But only imagine the amount of hot, live language practice that could be gained that way.