



Making languages relevant



The author
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What makes you tick?

“I’ve always loved languages!” – something I have never said. In fact, when I was a teenager, the best way to convince me not to carry on with languages was to tell me how much you enjoyed it.

To be clear, I had nothing against people enjoying languages. I just couldn’t relate to that feeling. Back then, my view on languages was that it was one of the duller, less meaningful subjects that I studied because I had to, not because I wanted to.

GCSE languages was compulsory for everyone when I was going into Year 10. I had studied French and German lower down the school,

and for GCSE I chose German. I had planned to drop this after GCSE, but when choosing my A-Levels, I had room for one more subject and, after some gentle nudges from my parents and teacher, I agreed to 2 more years of German.

I did surprisingly well at A-Level German. I messed up my speaking exam but scored highly in Reading, Listening and Writing. I was starting to warm to the idea of continuing with German at university, but I still had that reluctant side of me niggling away. I discovered European Studies: a course consisting of Politics, Management and German. I needed to choose a fourth module, so I chose Beginners' Spanish. This felt like a decent combination – but I still needed to find motivation.

If there is one thing I am truly passionate about – possibly even obsessed with – it's football. Particularly Arsenal, and England when there's a major tournament. It's been that way since primary school.

How is this related to my languages journey? Well, I'll link anything to football! I used to pick up languages by associating my learning with players: Idolising German players like Jens Lehmann and Mesut Özil made German phonics easier. The word in French for "bicycle" – "vélo" – was close (enough) to Arsenal's legendary French captain, Patrick Vieira. (I realise that last one will make little to no sense to most people – and won't be appearing in any revision guides or pedagogical studies any time soon – but it worked for me).

I used to gaze starry-eyed at my heroes like Arsène Wenger and Thierry Henry, giving interviews to the media, effortlessly switching between English, French, Spanish



and other languages they had in their locker. Listening to new players, who had arrived from other countries, develop their English fascinated me to the point that I became more conscious of how I communicated – even in English, and to other native English speakers – to make sure my message landed clearly and correctly.

One of the most attractive parts of studying languages at university for me, was the year abroad. Since I was studying German and Spanish, I got to split my year in half: six months in Stuttgart, followed by six months in Madrid. Spending my free time watching Bundesliga and La Liga matches, making friends with other football fans and improving my language skills in the process.

It was little surprise that my first job after leaving university combined what had become a love of languages with my love of Arsenal, running a community outreach project aiming to inspire school pupils to learn languages. Working with Arsenal's

international players to create French, German and Spanish lessons for schools? This was my Heaven.

People often ask me who my favourite players were to work with. Unsurprisingly, it's pretty much those with whom I shared a common language. I'll start with Mesut Özil. For such a massive star, I found him so chilled and humble. Per Mertesacker, Petr Cech, Granit Xhaka and Héctor Bellerín were also super friendly. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, Santi Cazorla and Lukas Podolski are the funniest players I've worked with – it was so hard to get anything done when they were around! On the Women's side, Vivianne Miedema, Lia Wälti, Manuela Zinsberger and Lisa Evans were all fantastic colleagues for languages. Even the managers were incredibly helpful, from Wenger, Emery and Arteta to Pedro Martínez Losa and Joe Montemurro.

As I discovered at Arsenal, whether you're interested in football or not, there are so many job opportunities behind-the-scenes that would benefit from having language skills. Who organises English lessons for new international players, or helps them find a house? Who supports them with all the challenges connected with moving abroad? That's the designated Player Care team. When you consider the number of players in the Men's team, the Women's team, the junior ages, their families, where they all come from... no wonder many recruiters appreciate language skills for this kind of role.

Before any football match on TV, the commentators announce the starting line-ups, with all sorts of graphics and shots of the players posing in different positions. Those poses need filming at the start of every season, in the home, away and third-choice kits. With a shortage of language skills within the workforce, I was asked to attend a Media Day to help some of the new players fulfil their media obligations. It took several hours in a large hall, multiple camera stations and each TV channel had their own poses and angles to capture. I was assigned to Lucas Torreira, a new player from Uruguay. Lucas spoke practically no English and seemed overwhelmed by the amount of media presence.





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When that time comes, you travel with them! Think of it like a school trip, where you’re the teacher, and the players are the pupils you’re responsible for. If you like the sound of traveling the world in your job, this sounds like a dream role, even if you’re not a football fan.

Pupils sometimes ask me: “What about other languages?” It doesn’t have to be the language you learn in school. If you have languages in your family – for example Arabic, Polish or Turkish – keep using those languages as much as you can. Imagine if you were a football agent, negotiating transfers and salaries for your players and giving them the best possible career advice. The players will appreciate an agent that speaks their best language, so you could be looking after the next Mo Salah, Robert Lewandowski or Arda Güler.

Since leaving Arsenal, I have set up my own business, Mingalaba, delivering motivational talks and workshops in schools across the UK to promote languages through football. I’ve visited over 200 schools and worked with over 45,000 pupils – more than the capacity of Chelsea’s stadium! One thing is clear: thousands of young people are still searching for that spark that will motivate them to continue with their languages journey. Football was my tool and it may be yours too but whatever the topic or theme, just imagine how meaningful languages could be to your future.

The camera operator blurted abruptly: “Okay Lucas, straight down the lens!” Lucas was lost. “¡Mira a la camera!” I said quickly, off-camera. A reassured Lucas looked into the camera, and the shoot could begin. I never thought I would need to say “hands behind your back”, “cross your arms”, or “tap the badge three times” in Spanish, but several hours’ worth of shoots later, Sky Sports, TNT Sports, BBC and all other broadcasters had the shots they needed.

Now imagine working for a Champions League club, in the Travel team. You’ll organise everything to get the players to the match – flights, hotels, and so on. Don’t be surprised if you have to travel to each city several weeks before to check out the airport, inspect the hotel, solve any problems before the players travel.