



Smart football

Tien Minh Mai sees Lady Gaga take on Adele in a fun football game.

This activity can be done with students of any level and any age, although it works best with young learners and teenagers. The students don't even have to be particularly interested in football for it to work. The aim is to create an exciting classroom atmosphere for a revision lesson, to teach some vocabulary related to football and to foster cooperation within teams and the development of tactics and strategies that will enable the teams to put their players in the best positions to win the game.

It will take between 20 and 40 minutes to play the game and it doesn't require anything in the way of materials. The only preparation you will have to do is to draw up a list of questions designed to revise recently-taught language and to draw a football pitch on the board with stick figures representing the players of two teams (use different colours). You can have as many or as few players as you like, but the teams should have the same number of players (see below for how to deal with an odd number of students).

Teach the terms for the various positions in football: *goalkeeper*, *defenders*, *midfielders* and *strikers*, plus *red card*, *yellow card*, *referee* and *penalty shootout*.

The photo on the next page shows the pitch in a game played by one of my classes in Vietnam. You will see that some of the students are using their own names; some have chosen the names of their favourite footballers; others have chosen to be singers.

The game

- Once you have drawn the pitch and the players on the board, divide the class into two equal teams. Decide which team is going to be which colour and allow them to choose a team name and appoint a team captain. In the game shown in the photo, the red team have chosen to be Vietnam and the black team Spain. Each team member draws their own face and writes their name (or the name of someone they want to be) under one of their players. They should discuss as a team who to put in which position: *goalkeeper*, *defenders*, *midfielders* and *strikers*.
- Explain to the class that they are going to play a game of 'Smart football', which requires them to respond quickly to your prompts with vocabulary they have learnt recently (or whatever you want to revise). The game can also be played with general knowledge questions if you prefer.
- Each turn in the game involves two players only, and will consist of a duel between *midfielder* and *midfielder* or *defender* and *striker* or *striker* and *goalkeeper*. The aim is for the students to react to your prompts or questions quickly and correctly, get the ball (a magnet or something that will stick to the board), pass it to their next line of players and try to move it down the pitch until finally they defeat the goalkeeper and score a goal.
- At the kick-off, each team chooses one of their midfielders to take part in the first duel. You then ask a question or give a prompt. For example, if they have been studying food vocabulary, you might say *They're yellow and monkeys love them*. The first student who answers *Bananas* wins the ball and it is moved to their team's next line of players (the strikers). The next duel is between one of the strikers of the team with the ball and one of the defenders from the opposing team. If the striker wins, the next duel is between one of that team's strikers and the opposing goalkeeper. If the goalkeeper wins, the ball goes to one of the defenders of the goalkeeper's team who then has to duel with one of the strikers again.
- After each goal, the team captains may change tactics by changing the positions of their players.
- The winning team is the one which has scored most goals when the allocated time for playing the game is over. If the game is a draw, you can conduct a penalty shootout, with a series of duels between each goalkeeper and all the opposing players. If the game is still a draw, you might just flip a coin to decide the lucky winner.
- During the game, you play the role of the referee. Your decision on whether an answer is correct or not and which student got it first is final. You may give a yellow card to any student who cheats by shouting out the answer to a teammate and a red card to anyone who does this more than once (they are then out of the game). If you like, you can appoint a commentator. This is particularly useful if you have an odd number of students in the class. This person can give a running commentary on the game. For example:



'Vy gets the ball, now, who will you pass it to, Vy? Neymar? OK. Now Neymar has the ball. Who will defend? So it's Hiên against Neymar. Listen to the prompt ... Incredible answer from the striker Neymar. Now he's facing the goalkeeper, Phúc ...'

Variations

With higher-level classes, you could choose a student to be both the commentator and the person who asks the questions or gives the prompts.

The game could be used to revise pronunciation (minimal pairs) or everyday phrases.

If you have a lot of space, you could put the students in position around the classroom and use a real ball, which they have to pass to a team-mate after giving a correct answer.

To increase language practice, the winner of each vocabulary duel could be asked to make a sentence using the answer.

Benefits

Playing 'Smart football' can benefit students in a number of ways:

- **Enjoyable learning.** The students can play the roles of famous footballers such as Messi and Neymar (or singers like Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars) while revising language. They feel as if they are participating in a real football match, and they cheer when a team-mate wins and are disappointed if a team-mate loses. They feel guilty when they receive a yellow card. This enjoyment enhances their extrinsic motivation.
- **A more positive learning experience.** This activity can be done to check that the students have done their homework. Checking homework is often a negative experience,

especially when the students have to write down answers to gap-fill exercises: a football game is much more fun and may help the students to remember new language better.

- **Teamwork.** 'Smart football' involves teamwork: each player tries to win the duel to contribute to the success of the whole team. It develops team spirit and cooperation.
- **Fair play.** Girls and boys have an equal chance of winning, as the game requires quick thinking rather than physical strength. The winner is the person who outsmarts their peers.
- **Strategic learning.** The students can discuss useful strategies for winning the game: Where should they put their better players and their less capable players?
- **Learner autonomy.** I have occasionally seen some of my students playing 'Smart football' at break time, testing their vocabulary themselves, without any input from a teacher. ■

This game was inspired by resources at <https://premierskillsenglish.britishcouncil.org/>.



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