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More Than Football: Intercultural Learning and Social Awareness through The Beautiful Game in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses the pedagogical potential of film as a tool for fostering intercultural awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom through the sports drama The Beautiful Game. Drawing on Byram's framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence and perspectives from critical pedagogy, the paper explores how themes of dignity, marginalization, and social inclusion portrayed in the film can encourage meaningful cultural reflection among language learners. In particular, the narrative surrounding homelessness and participation in the Homeless World Cup provides a platform for discussing issues of discrimination, resilience, and social identity. The paper outlines several pedagogical strategies that teachers may employ when integrating film into language instruction, including pre-viewing activities that activate students' background knowledge, guided viewing tasks that support comprehension, and post-viewing discussions that encourage critical reflection. These activities allow students to engage with authentic language while also examining the broader social themes presented in the film. By connecting language learning with socially relevant topics, film-based instruction can promote empathy, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking in the classroom. The discussion suggests that sports cinema can function as a valuable multimodal resource in EFL education, supporting culturally responsive teaching practices and contributing to the broader goal of developing globally aware learners.

Keywords: EFL classroom, intercultural communicative competence, film-based activity

1.Introduction

Sports, particularly football, can play an important role in reducing social discrimination by promoting cooperation, equality, and shared goals among individuals from diverse backgrounds. In team sports, players must collaborate regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status. This collaborative environment encourages mutual respect and understanding. When individuals focus on achieving a common objective—such as winning a match—they are more likely to overlook social divisions and appreciate each other's abilities and contributions. As a result, sports can create inclusive spaces where merit, effort, and teamwork are valued more than social identity (Coakley, 2017).

Moreover, sports can influence broader social attitudes. When athletes from marginalized groups succeed, they challenge stereotypes and inspire social change. Football, one of the most globally popular sports, often brings together communities and fans from different cultural backgrounds, fostering unity and a sense of shared identity. According to the United Nations (2003), sport has the potential to promote social inclusion, peace, and mutual understanding across diverse societies.

Another important social issue connected to discrimination is homelessness. Homelessness remains a significant global problem caused by poverty, unemployment, conflict, and lack of affordable housing. The United Nations estimates that more than 100 million people worldwide experience homelessness. Individuals in these situations often face social exclusion and negative stereotypes. However, sports initiatives can provide opportunities for empowerment and reintegration. For instance, the Homeless World Cup Foundation organizes international football tournaments for people experiencing homelessness, helping participants build confidence, teamwork, and social connections. In addition to real-life sports participation, sports-themed films can also contribute to reducing discrimination by presenting narratives of inclusion and perseverance. Films such as Remember the Titans and Invictus portray teams overcoming racial and social divisions through cooperation and leadership. By dramatizing these experiences, sports movies allow audiences to emotionally connect with characters from diverse backgrounds, fostering empathy and encouraging reflection on social inequality (Brown & Fraser, 2004). Consequently, both sports participation and sports films function as cultural tools that promote social integration and challenge discriminatory attitudes in society.

In contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, fostering student engagement while promoting meaningful learning remains a central pedagogical challenge. Traditional reading-based instruction, although academically valuable, may not always generate sustained motivation or deep cultural reflection among learners. To address this concern, educators increasingly incorporate multimodal resources such as films to enrich classroom experiences. Film, as an authentic and culturally embedded medium, offers a dynamic platform for integrating language learning with critical thinking and intercultural exploration. When guided by structured pedagogical objectives, films can transcend entertainment and function as powerful tools for cultivating empathy, cultural awareness, and global perspectives.

Among various cinematic genres, sports films hold particular relevance for students. Sport is a universally recognized social practice that transcends national and linguistic boundaries. Football, in particular, occupies a unique global position as a shared cultural phenomenon. It is played in streets, schools, stadiums, and informal community spaces across continents. Due to its familiarity, football provides a meaningful entry point for discussing broader social themes such as teamwork, resilience, conflict, identity, equality, and dignity. Rather than viewing sport solely as competition, educators may encourage learners to critically examine what lies beneath the surface: What values are embedded in sport? How are social hierarchies represented? Whose voices are amplified, and whose are marginalized? Through such inquiry, sport becomes a cultural text open to interpretation.

The British sports drama *The Beautiful Game* (2024) offers a compelling case for film-based intercultural learning.



Figure 1: www.wikipedia.com

The Beautiful Game (2024)

"The beautiful game reveals beautiful hope."

The Homeless World Cup is an international football tournament created to raise awareness about homelessness and promote social inclusion through sport. The initiative was founded in 2003 by Mel Young and Harald Schmied. Their idea emerged from discussions about how football could empower people experiencing homelessness by building confidence, teamwork, and social connections (Young, 2010). The first tournament was held in 2003 in Graz, Austria, with teams from 18 countries participating. The matches were played using a street football format, consisting of small-sided games on a compact pitch. This format made the game accessible, fast-paced, and engaging for both players and spectators. The event quickly attracted global attention because it combined competitive sport with a strong social mission: helping individuals experiencing homelessness regain dignity and reconnect with society (Magee & Jeanes, 2013). Since its founding, the tournament has expanded significantly. Every year, national partner organizations select players who have experienced homelessness, participated in recovery programs, or lived in unstable housing conditions. These players represent their countries and compete in the annual tournament organized by the Homeless World Cup Foundation. Beyond the competition itself, the program aims to improve participants' self-esteem, social skills, and opportunities for employment and housing. Studies suggest that participation in the Homeless World Cup can have positive long-term impacts. Many participants report increased confidence, improved social relationships, and greater motivation to change their lives after the event (Sherry, 2010). Today, the Homeless World Cup is recognized globally as an influential sport-for-development initiative that demonstrates how football can contribute to social inclusion and awareness of homelessness.

The film *the Beautiful Game* based on the true story of the Homeless World Cup, portrays a group of homeless men representing England in the Homeless World Cup tournament. Each character enters the team carrying personal struggles, emotional wounds, and social stigma. Their participation in football is not merely about winning matches; it represents an opportunity to reclaim dignity, rebuild self-esteem, and reconstruct identity. Throughout the narrative, tensions arise among teammates who initially judge and misunderstand one another. Internal conflicts, distrust, and pride threaten team harmony. However, as the story unfolds, empathy gradually replaces hostility, and cooperation emerges from shared vulnerability. The film also portrays international teams from diverse cultural backgrounds. These representations invite viewers to reflect on how nationality and cultural identity are constructed cinematically. For instance, one team may appear reserved and understated, yet demonstrate discipline and quiet determination during gameplay. Another team may initially seem less competitive but display unexpected resilience. Such portrayals encourage students to move beyond superficial judgments and question stereotypes about national character. Rather than presenting cultures

as fixed or hierarchical, the film suggests that strength often lies in humility, mutual respect, and collective effort.

A particularly meaningful contrast in the narrative lies between teams driven by pressure and those guided by acceptance. Teams that focus excessively on victory appear fragmented by stress and ego, whereas those who approach the game with trust and emotional balance demonstrate stronger cohesion. Importantly, the film reframes success not solely as winning medals, but as restoring human dignity. The beauty of the game is not limited to technical skill or athletic achievement; it resides in friendship, solidarity, and the courage to confront one's past.

Dignity serves as a central thematic thread throughout the film. Individuals experiencing homelessness are frequently portrayed in media through deficit-based narratives emphasizing weakness or dependency. In contrast, *The Beautiful Game* foregrounds agency, resilience, and aspiration. The characters seek acceptance not only from society but also from one another. Their journey illustrates that belonging is a fundamental human need. As trust develops among teammates, the emotional tone of the film shifts from fragmentation to unity. This transformation offers rich pedagogical opportunities for discussing inclusion, empathy, and social justice in the EFL classroom.

2. Discussion

1. Film-Based Intercultural Learning in Practice

The findings from this classroom project suggest that the use of film as a pedagogical tool can create meaningful opportunities for EFL students to engage with complex social issues while simultaneously developing their language skills. In particular, the film *The Beautiful Game* provides a narrative framework through which themes of homelessness, discrimination, and social inclusion can be explored in the classroom. Through guided discussions and reflective activities, students demonstrated an increased awareness of the social challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness and the role that sport may play in promoting dignity and social participation.

Previous research has emphasized the potential of sport to function as a vehicle for social inclusion and community engagement. For example, studies of the Homeless World Cup Foundation indicate that participation in sport-based initiatives can help marginalized individuals rebuild confidence, develop social networks, and reconnect with society (Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012). Similarly, Magee and Jeanes (2013) argue that sport programs linked to homelessness initiatives can challenge social exclusion by providing participants with opportunities for empowerment and visibility. These findings align with broader scholarship suggesting that sport can contribute to social development and collective identity formation among disadvantaged populations (Coakley, 2017; Spaaij, 2012). In the context of language education, integrating socially relevant media such as films can support communicative learning by encouraging students to express opinions, negotiate meaning, and reflect on global issues. Film-based learning has been shown to stimulate emotional engagement and critical reflection, which can enhance students' motivation and participation in classroom discussions (Brown & Fraser, 2004). Moreover, the representation of real-world issues in film allows learners to connect linguistic practice with broader sociocultural contexts, supporting the development of intercultural awareness.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that students' positive reactions to film-based learning may sometimes be influenced by the novelty or entertainment value of the medium rather than deeper intercultural understanding. To address this concern, the present approach incorporated structured reflection and guided discussion tasks designed to encourage critical analysis of the themes presented in the film. By asking students to identify examples of

discrimination, social exclusion, and personal transformation, the activity aimed to move beyond passive viewing toward more analytical engagement with the material.

Overall, the findings suggest that film-based pedagogy, when carefully structured, can provide an effective means of integrating language learning with discussions of social justice and global issues. In this way, films such as *The Beautiful Game* may serve as valuable teaching resources for promoting both linguistic development and critical awareness of social inequalities.

To embed sport-themed intercultural learning within a reading-focused EFL course, a structured pedagogical sequence was designed. The instructional process began with a sport-related reading text that explored the social role of football in uniting communities. Students engaged in guided discussions about the sports they regularly play and examined both advantages and disadvantages of football participation. These pre-viewing activities activated background knowledge and encouraged learners to articulate personal experiences related to teamwork, competition, and cooperation. Subsequently, students viewed *The Beautiful Game* in a library theater rather than a conventional classroom. This deliberate environmental shift aimed to simulate an authentic cinematic experience and enhance emotional engagement. Creating a theater-like atmosphere contributed to collective immersion and minimized distractions. A clear guideline was established: mobile phone use was not permitted during the screening. This policy encouraged sustained attention and allowed students to experience the film as a shared communal event rather than fragmented individual viewing.

Following the screening, students were divided into small groups for collaborative discussion lasting approximately 15–30 minutes. Each group was tasked with analyzing key themes, including dignity, cultural identity, teamwork, and media representation of homelessness. Group representatives then presented their insights to the class, promoting oral communication skills and intercultural dialogue. To ensure inclusive participation, all students completed an individual Google-based reflection sheet after class. This reflective component provided quieter students with an opportunity to express personal interpretations and respond to peers' perspectives.

Analysis of student reflections revealed overwhelmingly positive responses. Many students reported heightened emotional engagement, particularly due to watching the film collectively. The absence of mobile phones enhanced concentration and fostered a sense of unity similar to that experienced by football fans supporting a team. Learners expressed empathy toward the characters and recognized parallels between the film's themes and real-world social issues. Several reflections indicated a shift in perspective regarding homelessness, demonstrating the potential of film to challenge stereotypes and broaden worldviews. Here are some reflections:

Watching it with friends is fun in a different way because it creates a lively and enjoyable atmosphere. we can share our thoughts, laugh together during some scenes, and discuss what impressed us after the movie ends. This makes the experience warmer and more enjoyable. We can also cheer for the competition together and feel excited about what will happen next in the story. For me, if the movie has a warm and meaningful theme like this one, I prefer watching it with friends because we can share ideas about the characters and discuss different scenes as they happen.

Student A

Watching with friends can make emotional or touching scenes feel even more meaningful because we can share our feelings and talk about them. Personally, I prefer watching with friends because it creates a warmer and more enjoyable atmosphere, especially for an inspiring movie like this. It also makes the story more exciting as we experience the

emotions together.

Student B

2. Pedagogical Significance

Integrating *The Beautiful Game* into the EFL classroom illustrates how sport-themed cinema can function as a bridge between language development and intercultural competence. Through structured discussion and reflection, students practice linguistic skills while engaging in critical cultural inquiry. They learn to interpret symbolic meaning, evaluate representation, and articulate nuanced opinions. Importantly, the film provides a safe narrative space for discussing sensitive social issues indirectly, allowing students to explore complex themes without personal vulnerability.

Football, as portrayed in the film, becomes a metaphor for dignity and shared humanity. The "beautiful" aspect of the game emerges not only from technical performance but from empathy, cooperation, and reconciliation. By examining these dimensions, students are encouraged to reconsider narrow definitions of success and reflect on the ethical values underlying competition. Such reflection aligns with broader educational goals of fostering global citizenship, cultural responsiveness, and socially aware language use.

In sum, this study positions film not merely as supplementary entertainment, but as a structured pedagogical tool capable of deepening intercultural learning in EFL contexts. Through engagement with *The Beautiful Game*, students move beyond surface-level cultural knowledge toward critical awareness and empathetic understanding. The intersection of sport, dignity, and dialogue offers fertile ground for developing language proficiency alongside global consciousness.

The film *The Beautiful Game* provides a compelling example of how sports narratives can highlight issues of homelessness, discrimination, and social reintegration. Furthermore, the film emphasizes how sports initiatives can raise public awareness about homelessness. By portraying homeless individuals as talented, determined, and resilient athletes, the narrative challenges common stereotypes that often portray homelessness as a result of personal failure. In doing so, the film encourages audiences to develop empathy and a deeper understanding of structural inequalities in society. Therefore, *The Beautiful Game* serves as a valuable cultural text that supports the argument of this study: both sports participation and sports media can contribute to reducing social discrimination, promoting empathy, and encouraging social integration for marginalized groups such as people experiencing homelessness.

3. Pedagogical Implications

The use of film as an instructional resource can provide meaningful opportunities for integrating language learning with social awareness in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The film The Beautiful Game offers a particularly valuable example because it combines themes of sport, homelessness, discrimination, and social inclusion within a compelling narrative. By engaging with such content, students can develop not only their linguistic competence but also their intercultural and critical thinking skills. EFL teachers may structure film-based lessons into three stages: *pre-viewing, while-viewing, and post-viewing activities*. During the pre-viewing stage, teachers can introduce key vocabulary related to homelessness, discrimination, and social inequality, while also activating students' background knowledge through brainstorming or short discussions. This stage prepares learners to engage more deeply with the film's themes and dialogue.

Pre-viewing activities play an important role in preparing students for meaningful engagement with film-based learning materials. Before watching the film The Beautiful Game, teachers should provide opportunities for learners to develop both conceptual understanding

and linguistic readiness related to the themes presented in the film. Such preparation can facilitate comprehension and promote deeper discussion during and after the viewing process.

One effective strategy is to begin with a brainstorming activity designed to activate students' prior knowledge. In this task, students may be asked to share what they already know about homelessness as a global social issue. Through guided discussion, learners can reflect on possible causes of homelessness, social challenges faced by individuals experiencing housing insecurity, and common stereotypes associated with this population. This activity encourages students to connect the film's themes with broader social contexts while also creating opportunities for communicative language practice.

In addition, teachers should introduce key vocabulary related to the film's central themes. Terms such as *discrimination*, *social exclusion*, *dignity*, and *opportunity* can be presented and discussed prior to viewing. Familiarity with these concepts helps students better understand the narrative and the social issues portrayed in the film. Vocabulary preparation also supports students in expressing their ideas more effectively during subsequent classroom discussions.

Another useful pre-viewing strategy is a prediction activity. Teachers may present the film's poster or trailer and invite students to speculate about the storyline. Students can discuss potential challenges the characters might encounter and consider how sport might serve as a pathway for empowerment or social inclusion among individuals experiencing homelessness. Engaging in prediction tasks encourages active participation and stimulates curiosity about the film's narrative. Overall, these pre-viewing activities help establish a foundation for comprehension and critical engagement, enabling students to approach the film with greater awareness of its thematic and social significance.

During the while-viewing stage, guided tasks can help students focus on both language and content. For instance, learners may track specific characters, identify examples of discrimination or social exclusion, or note expressions related to teamwork and resilience. These structured tasks encourage active listening and help students process authentic language in context.

In the post-viewing stage, teachers can facilitate reflective discussions that encourage learners to connect the film's narrative with broader social issues. Questions may focus on how sport can promote social inclusion, why individuals experiencing homelessness often face stigma, and how communities might address these challenges. Follow-up activities such as reflective essays, group presentations, or small research projects on homelessness in different countries can further deepen students' engagement.

Overall, incorporating socially themed films into the EFL classroom can foster a learning environment that integrates *language development, intercultural awareness, and critical reflection,* supporting a more holistic and socially responsive approach to language education.

3. Suggestions



Figure 2: www.wikipedia.com

To help students become more engaged with the themes of dignity, homelessness, and social justice, teachers can incorporate carefully selected films into their lessons, for example, Invictus, the Blind Side, Remember the Titans, Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray and so forth. One highly recommended film is *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story* (2003). This movie tells the inspiring true story of Liz Murray, a young woman who grew up in extreme poverty and homelessness but remained determined to change her life through education. Despite many challenges, she worked hard, continued her studies, and eventually gained admission to Harvard University. By watching this film, students can better understand the struggles faced by people experiencing homelessness and reflect on the importance of perseverance, resilience, and dignity. The story also provides a powerful role model, showing students that difficult circumstances do not necessarily determine one's future.

Overall, movies can be highly effective teaching materials that help make lessons more engaging and meaningful. Teachers can select films that connect with the topic being studied and introduce the main themes before students begin watching. Providing guided questions or discussion prompts can also help students focus on important ideas and think critically about the story. In particular, films based on true stories are strongly recommended because they allow students to relate the issues in the movie to real-life situations more easily.

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