

# The language of rugby inspires world-first study

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Stuart Benson and his Japanese rugby team. Credit: Victoria University of Wellington

Rugby union may have one sporting code but Stuart Benson says it has many technical terms that can be misinterpreted by players from different cultural and language backgrounds. As part of his Ph.D. in Linguistics, he has created a list of these words, and developed a first-of-its-kind English for Special Purposes (ESP) course for rugby players.

"I went to Japan as a high school exchange student, and to assimilate into a new country and culture, I joined the school's rugby team," says Stuart. "The technical [vocabulary](#) was not the only linguistic barrier I needed to overcome. Pronunciation of this vocabulary and new and altered phrases were tricky, and in Japan at that time there was no rugby on television."

Stuart surveyed 86 coaches and players in Japan and New Zealand on the language difficulties they had found when traversing cultural barriers.

"I was surprised at the number of people that had also experienced language difficulties when playing rugby. Of the 86 survey participants, 84 noted that language difficulties affect their ability to play or [coach](#) the game. This is worrying, as there is an ever-increasing number of players and coaches taking their expertise abroad to play or coach professionally."

He says the lexicon of sport has not been researched extensively in any code until now. "The few studies that have been conducted are in football/soccer. Although the majority of those studies are sociological investigations, in which language is just one part of the study, [language](#) is shown to be a major aspect that hinders the immersion of players and coaches in any foreign team."

Stuart discovered that [language difficulties](#) arose playing the game as well as during practice, due to a lack of fluency in both everyday and technical vocabulary. The ESP course he developed as part of his research includes a needs-analysis for players when effectively communicating in rugby.

"This has led to a principle-based course that contains tasks and goals to meet the players' needs. I have created four technical vocabulary word lists for use in the rugby classroom. This course uses these word lists so players can learn the most frequent vocabulary in rugby."

He says ESP courses have become more prevalent over the past decade or so. "If you can learn specialised English that is on a topic you are interested in, you will be more motivated to learn. We usually see these courses for business English or other professional concerns," says Stuart.

"This is the first ESP for sports, so I am interested not only in providing this course for [rugby](#), separately targeted at coaches and players, but also for other sports, like football."

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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