

So, what is the Basque for offside?

I'm not sure I'd recognise him really," said Josu Amezaga, my guide on my visit through the Basque country, much to my surprise.

"I only have a small TV set and the picture's not much good."

We were waiting to meet Koikili Lertxundi, Basque football star and Athletic Bilbao's hard hitting defender.

The young man in question stepped out of a battered Mercedes van wearing a very plain T-shirt and herringbone Harrington jacket, a mobile phone clutched to his ear.

It was not the entrance I was expecting from a professional footballer. Where was the flash car, the designer outfit and the obligatory outsized headphones?

But then Koikili is no normal player. We had come to a technology park on the edge of Bilbao to meet Koikili, his father, Jabier, and their six-strong consultancy team which trains football coaches, exclusively in the Basque language.

I'd been doing something similar myself here in Wales, though I was more of a pub team substitute player than a European superstar. Almost every Saturday morning for the last 10 years I have paced the sidelines of football pitches shouting instructions in Welsh at junior football teams.

It's the Urdd, the Welsh language youth movement, who are responsible for all this. The coach of my son's mini football team was returning to North Wales and it was made pretty obvious to me: "If you don't take it on - DIM pêl-droed. No football."

They call it the Big Society these days, but I guess I was just doing my bit. The whole point was that these football sessions were the only times the children got to hear and speak Welsh outside school. I had always been hooked on the football, but now I became a bit of a zealot.

One morning the freezing sleet started hitting us horizontally at Parc-y-Dwrllyn outside Cardiff. Big game this. The Urdd under-8s versus Penttyrch Rangers. Despite the shocking weather the lads battled on, soaking shirts clinging to their skinny bodies.

Jake's mother begged me to call the game off. "Na!" I said, "It will do them good," and I think we went on to win.

As the years went by and the boys turned into youths, the English language started creeping into the training sessions. "Trwy'r canol!" and "Pêl fi!" became "Get stuck in" and "Through the middle".

I never made an issue of it, but I was intrigued to find out how coaches in other countries helped normalise a second language. Football is a great way of bringing people together and I was sure it could help young boys and girls see Welsh as an important part of their

Saturday football dad Tim Hartley travelled to Bilbao to see how Basques keep a second language alive with involvement in the beautiful game. There he discovered a number of parallels with the Welsh language. This is how he got on



Athletic Bilbao's Koikili Lertxundi with Tim Hartley, right

Friends at the Welsh Language Board knew of my obsession with football and were also keen to see if we could learn from the Basque experience.

They put me in touch with the European Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity. I completed the application form and, to my surprise, my one-man diplomatic mission was on. And that's how I ended up on a windswept training ground outside Bilbao talking to a real life professional footballer.

More than 600,000 people speak Basque, or 'Euskara', across the northernmost provinces of Spain and into France. Following decades of decline, the Basque language is making something of a comeback.

Many schools teach exclusively through the medium of Basque. There are Basque language television and

The K in Koikili is sounded as a G - just one of the quirks of this impenetrable language which predates all other Indo European languages. Basque is not related to any other language and with its juxtaposition of the letters X, Z and K, it must be a Scrabble players' dream. Or nightmare.

This is a passionately nationalistic country which has seen an armed struggle with the Spanish authorities in far away Madrid. The ETA terrorist group, which has been fighting for full political independence, has only recently put down its arms.

Now the people of the Basque country are seeking self determination through purely democratic means. The culture is cherished and supported by most people, regardless of what language they speak.

Koikili explained how the Basque

generation of speakers, but that the children don't get the chance to speak the language in social settings outside school. His mission is to train a new breed of coaches who make Basque the first language of play in this football-obsessed nation.

"It's all a matter of commitment," he said as he explained how he personally puts up to six hours a day, after his professional training commitments are finished, to nurture young players and coaches. This put my Saturday morning volunteering on Llandaff fields into some sort of perspective.

In my faltering Spanish I asked how many of his fellow professionals at Athletic Bilbao had second jobs like this. Koikili answered in Basque through Josu. "None," he said, "but they are happy to give up some of their time to help us."

Athletic the club is supportive too, providing balls and bibs for the training sessions. In Wales we have the Welsh Football Trust and the Urdd who both do sterling work in promoting football through the medium of Welsh. But the Basques appear, well, somehow even more committed to promoting football through the language and the language through football.

From his dad's offices we followed Koikili in the old Merc van for 20 minutes to a training ground at the village of Sondika.

Sondika runs eight football teams across all age groups and as we arrived, two groups of 12-year-olds were being put through their paces.

"Kaixo, kaixo," said Koikili, greeting everyone in Basque. The TV cameras had arrived and there was a photographer from the Spanish language Basque paper Mundo Deportivo, all keen to get a piece of the player. We had come to see an assessment session, not for the children, but for Koikili's coaches.

The checklist was familiar to me from the Welsh Football Trust courses I had attended back in Wales: preparation, equipment, techniques, feedback.

But top of Koikili's list were the use of Basque by the coaches and how the children responded in Basque. It was no surprise to find out that they all passed with flying colours.

"The coaches must show commitment," said Koikili, "and the children too. They can see that the Basque language belongs to them all and actually offers them an advantage on the pitch. It gives them that extra strength and an unique and powerful bond."

Tim travelled with the help of the European Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity

FOOD & DRINK