

Evolutionary language learning: USFQ's English and French programs in the Galapagos Islands

Aprendizaje evolutivo de idiomas: los programas de inglés y francés de la USFQ en las islas Galápagos

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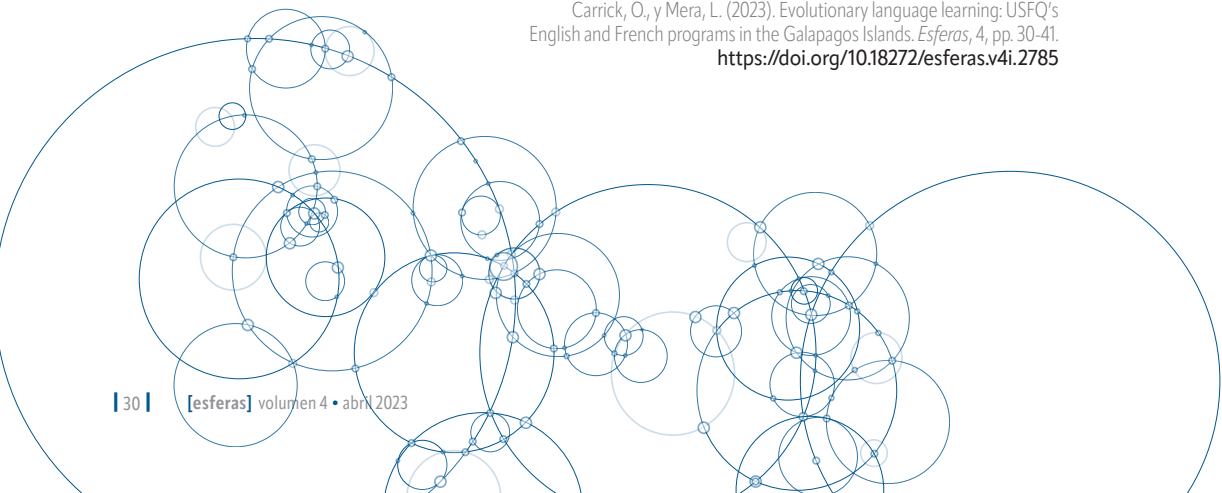
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Abstract

This essay discusses the development of a language learning program for the local community on the island of San Cristóbal in the Galapagos Islands. Second and third language skills are very important to residents of the Galapagos due to the islands' dependency on the tourism sector. In pursuit of UN Sustainable Development Goal Four, Quality Education, the Department of Foreign Languages has implemented formal English and French as a Foreign Language education programs for children, adolescents and adults on San Cristóbal. USFQ's Language Department in the Galapagos is small, but has used bespoke course design based around communicative functions to meet the needs of different groups within the local community.

Keywords: ESL, Education, language functions, Galapagos, bespoke course design

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza el desarrollo de un programa de aprendizaje de idiomas para la comunidad local en la isla de San Cristóbal en las islas Galápagos. Las habilidades en un segundo y tercer idioma son muy importantes para los residentes de Galápagos debido a la dependencia de las islas del sector turístico. En la búsqueda del Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible Cuatro de la ONU, Educación de Calidad, el Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras ha implementado un programa formal de educación en inglés y francés como idioma extranjero para niños, adolescentes y adultos en San Cristóbal. El Departamento de Lenguas de la USFQ en Galápagos es pequeño, pero ha utilizado un diseño de cursos a medida basado en funciones comunicativas para satisfacer las necesidades de los diferentes grupos dentro de la comunidad local.

Palabras clave: inglés como segunda lengua, Educación, funciones de lenguaje, Galápagos, diseño de cursos a medida

Introduction

The community outreach project “ESL for the community on San Cristóbal” began in 2018 with the aim of formalizing the English language teaching that the *Universidad San Francisco de Quito* USFQ provides to adults and children on San Cristóbal island. Since then, the Language Department at the USFQ Galapagos campus has revolutionized the quality and depth of language education offered to members of the local community. The project is now in its fifth consecutive year of implementation. During this time, around 500 beneficiaries have taken our language courses. With many students enrolling in multiple levels, it is commonplace for our educational commitment to beneficiaries to last for over six months.

We have learned to use an agile approach to curriculum design which tailors language learning to the needs of local people and produces bespoke courses aimed at delivering objectives based around communicative skills and products of the learning process. This strategy is in perfect harmony with the theory of evolution for which the Galapagos islands are so famed.

The result is a varied and responsive approach to language learning which never loses sight of the ultimate aim of providing students with the tools they require in order to use foreign languages in their daily and professional lives. This essay discusses the project’s trajectory over the last few years and its objectives for the future.

Geographical context: The Galapagos Islands

Located 600 nautical miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands consist of four inhabited and fifteen unpopulated islands (*Régimen especial de Galápagos*, 2010, p. 5). Due to the islands’ association with Darwinism and natural diversity, they provide a socially, politically and economically unique context, especially from the perspective of conservation. A special regime government is charged with safeguarding the islands’ natural heritage through contextualized policy-making and environmental protection (CGREG, 2020).

The local economy in the Galapagos depends largely on tourism, with English being the lingua franca of many international tourists visiting the islands. Despite this, the state schools in the Galapagos offer a limited English as a Second

Language (ESL) curriculum. This deficiency was addressed in 2021 by the Plan Galapagos 2030 as it outlines the following strategy for ESL education (CGREG, 2021, p. 24, authors' translation):

The necessity to establish English as a second language is evident and that this be obligatorily included in the academic school curriculum.

By pursuing this strategy, the provincial government hopes to create more opportunities for residents who have learned to converse effectively in the English language. Given the number of international tourists from non-English speaking countries, economic opportunities also exist for residents who can communicate in other languages, such as French and German.

Sustainable Development Goals

In relation to the United Nations Development Program's Sustainable Development Goal Four: Quality Education, the language program at USFQ Galapagos seeks to address the following objectives:

- 4.4** By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.
- 4.5** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.
- 4.c** By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.

To be completed in the next year, the latest component of the language program at USFQ Galapagos is a teacher training project for primary and secondary school teachers working in the Galapagos islands.

Language education curricular design

In the Galapagos, the USFQ language program's students vary considerably in age, socio-demographic profiles, and learning needs. For this reason, we have learned to design and develop courses with varied approaches and goals. The focus of course design is the planning goals and learning outcomes which students will attain upon completion of the course (Richards, 2001).

An initial step was to structure our community language program according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This formalized the language learning goals and outcomes the program provides by locating them on a globally recognized framework. The publication of the CEFR in 2001 is considered to be one of the most significant advances in language education, as it enables the standardization of learning and teaching outcomes (Nikolaeva, 2019, p. 18).

The second phase was to employ numerous alternatives to lecture-based learning to create a transformative language learning pedagogy, with vital components being a focus on projects and the creation of products during the learning process. Curriculums incorporating significant amounts of project-based work foster higher participation of language students and dynamic learning environments when they are devised with an emphasis on innovation and creativity (Singh Thakur et al., 2019, p. 1366). Products of the learning process are the end result of the creative dynamic.

All of the program's courses have an emphasis on communicative English as opposed to focusing on the learning of grammatical structures. While encouraging students to use and practice their language skills, strategies for the use of communicative English help to build students' understanding and use of grammar within the communicative competence (Muhammed et al., 2018, p. 69).

Finally, the USFQ Galapagos language department tailors its courses into bespoke products aimed at meeting the specific needs of the student community. The benefits of bespoke language learning are espoused by Santipolo (2017, p. 247):

Exposing students to as many English varieties as possible, regardless of whether native or non-native, right from the lowest levels of proficiency but selecting them on the basis of what might be more useful and usable, or, as it were, more "tantalizing" to them, corresponds to building student-tailored courses and will eventually turn language teaching into Bespoke Language Teaching (BLT).

This is made possible by combining communicative learning with the teaching of language functions, which can be defined as the reasons for which people communicate through language. Van Ek and Trim (1991) allocated language functions into the following six categories:

- Imparting and seeking factual information
- Expressing and finding out attitudes
- Deciding on courses of action
- Socializing
- Structuring discourse
- Communication repair

A later analysis by Casta and Hufana (2016) found that the most common functions contained within five English language textbooks belong to the "Imparting and seeking factual information" category, followed by the "Expressing and finding out attitudes" category. "Deciding on courses of action," "Socializing" and "Structuring discourse" varied in their commonality, while "Communication repair" was always the least common function category taught within textbooks. Courses can therefore be appropriately designed to ensure students learn and practice the most common language functions.

USFQ Galapagos community language program

For adults from the local community, USFQ Galapagos offers the same six-level ESL system provided to undergraduate students from USFQ's main Cumbayá campus. Our ever-evolving program is currently contextualizing the learning activities of each level so that they resonate with the local reality in the Galapagos. This requires the combination of functional language learning with communicative English and bespoke activities applicable to the lives of people residing in the Galapagos.

Bespoke language learning programs

Language course design is influenced by the particular needs of our students. In 2022, we provided a bespoke short course to staff members from the Galapagos National Park based around language functions specifically selected due to their usefulness for imparting factual information to tourists, such as "Greet someone and

introduce myself to them," "Talk about locations in my neighborhood" and "Explain a place's location." (Figure 1)

As such, through a focus on communicative learning outcomes embodied by language functions, our short language courses are able to deliver tailored learning designed to meet the specific needs of particular student groups.



FIGURE 1. Employees of the Galapagos National Park during the bespoke short course "Communicative English through Language Functions"

Another example of bespoke course design is provided by the tailoring of our 2022 summer course for children to help them accustom themselves to face-to-face classes for the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic began. We named the course "Rediscovering the World" and combined ESL learning with collaborative activities and games specifically designed to help children with their social reintegration (Figure 2). For many participants, this was their first face-to-face learning experience in two years. For this reason, special emphasis was placed on the "Socializing" language functions.

FIGURE 2. "Rediscovering the World" summer course for kids, March 2022



ESL education for children

Prior to the community outreach project “ESL for the community on San Cristóbal,” the courses provided to children and adolescents ranging in age from seven to fifteen were often informal and organized into a series of levels. Designing a program for children in such a wide age range with few teaching resources proved problematic as only a small number of levels can be taught at any one time. Eventually, we took inspiration from an instructional system already in operation in the local environment: ballet classes!

Ballet is popular among children on San Cristóbal, and the dance schools organize their programs into a long format with levels lasting for an entire academic year. Pursuing the same design, we created three long-format classes for levels A1, A2 and B1 of the Common European Framework for Languages (Figure 3). Not only does this structure embody Charles Darwin’s natural selection by tailoring language learning according to specific context, but it also enables us to provide a formal education system matching the requirements of the Ecuadorian Ministry for Education (2012, p. 8), which has established the following proficiency levels for school children:

- Level A1: At the end of 9th year General Basic Education
- Level A2: At the end of 1st year Bachillerato
- Level B1: At the end of 3rd year Bachillerato



FIGURE 3. Students from the A2 English class for young teenagers, academic year 2022-2023

At the time of writing, 28 (54.9%) out of the 51 children and teenagers enrolled in the three courses are female. As such, the program more than exceeds UN SDG Goal 4's aim of eliminating gender disparities through offering equal opportunities. Since the Galapagos economy is so dependent upon tourism, and residents have significantly more opportunities when they can communicate in the English language, the program also makes a substantial contribution to ensuring young people and adults have the skills necessary to seek decent employment and develop entrepreneurial opportunities, which is another objective of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education.

French as a Foreign Language education

In 2021, for the first time, USFQ Galapagos decided to offer the local community the opportunity to learn French, with the main objective being to develop a range of communicative skills (Figure 4).

USFQ Galapagos' eight-month French as a Foreign Language program used the creation of products as assessments of the attainment of learning outcomes. From the very beginning of the program, students learned by generating products and using their creativity. To do this, students worked with real documents and adapted them to their specific context, paying attention to the special characteristics of the Enchanted Islands. Students made TikTok videos describing the Galapagos' fauna, presented weather broadcasts, and held interviews with native French speakers to talk about the islands. They even created a webpage called *Blog Français Galápagos* with important information about the islands' wildlife, including animal names in Spanish and French, scientific names, origin, food, predators, and where to find them. As they worked on interdisciplinary projects which connected their learning to the richness of the Galapagos context, students were motivated by processes for language acquisition and their new capacity to use French in their daily lives.

FIGURE 4. USFQ Galapagos French language students on the first day of their learning journey in September 2021



Teaching using products as the final outcomes of the learning process encourages students to be more skillful, smarter, and more efficient when communicating in French. Many of our students work in the Galapagos tourism sector and have been able to apply their language skills with French-speaking visitors. Students have discovered their own abilities to give information, “help” and express themselves in the French language.

Conclusion

In the birthplace of Darwinism, USFQ's foreign language program has learned to evolve and adapt according to the needs and requirements of students in the local context. A key facet of this adaptability is the capacity to combine formal language learning with the agility to tailor courses. We have learned to overcome contextual limitations and take advantage of opportunities unique to our particular circumstances. Just like Charles Darwin's famous finches, whose beak form varies according to the diversity of their diet, language learning can be tailored into bespoke initiatives suitable to the particular needs of students within the learning environment.

As a result, our English and French as a Foreign Language programs make a significant contribution to the Sustainable Development Goal of providing Quality Education in the Galapagos Islands. At the same time, children and adolescents from the local community are studying to achieve the ESL goals specified by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education. Through adaptation we survive and thrive!

Author contributions

Oliver Carrick is the project leader of the “ESL for the community on San Cristóbal” community outreach project and the main author of the essay.

Lorena Mera is an English and French teacher working on the “ESL for the community on San Cristóbal” community outreach project and the co-author of the essay.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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