CI-UNA: Empowering the Local Community to Face the 21st Century Challenges

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Resumen: La Universidad Nacional es una de las cinco universidades estatales de Costa Rica. Esta universidad promueve una alianza con la comunidad local y el comercio en general a través del establecimiento de proyectos que impulsen la educación continua de los ciudadanos. El Centro de Idiomas, Universidad Nacional (CI-UNA) es un proyecto de extensión que ofrece educación formal en idiomas extranjeros a los ciudadanos de la Región Sur de Costa Rica. Esta zona incluye un cantón de la provincia de San José (Pérez Zeledón) y cinco de la provincia de Puntarenas (Buenos Aires, Osa, Golfito, Coto Brus and Corredores). Este proyecto tiene como fin promover las habilidades lingüísticas de la población a través de la implementación de un programa de idiomas que fomente una educación integral y competitiva.

Palabras claves: proyecto de extensión, educación continua, competitividad laboral

Abstract: Universidad Nacional is one of the five state universities of Costa Rica. This university promotes partnership with the local community and business through the establishment of projects that involve citizens' continuing education. Centro de Idiomas, Universidad Nacional (CI-UNA) is an outreach project that offers formal education in foreign languages to citizens from the Southern region of Costa Rica. This area includes one county of San José province (Pérez Zeledón) and five of Puntarenas province (Buenos Aires, Osa, Golfito, Coto Brus and Corredores). This project was designed to promote the linguistic abilities of this local population.
through the implementation of a foreign language program that pursues an integral and competitive education.

**Key words:** outreach project, continuing education, job competitiveness.

I Introduction

Costa Rican society is deeply concerned about the present and future projections in times of economic uncertainty. Thus, the most recent educational policies should target new paths to ensure individual competitiveness and citizens’ insertion to the globalized world. Every aspect of superior education must be aligned to prepare individuals in order to attain XXI century skills and compete to find a place in the global market. These skills entail the mastery of new technologies as well as the ability to perform in other international languages. Learning these languages has been regarded as a suitable tool to face the challenges imposed by the demands of such a society.

It is an utmost objective of Universidad Nacional of Costa Rica to integrate all the sectors of the community in superior scenarios of welfare, equity, sustainability and democratic freedom (Plan Global Institucional 2004-2011). From this perspective, this state university operates as an agent to assist in the formation of effective citizens. All the programs and projects conducted by this institution guarantee the principles underpinning social change and individuals’ suitability for the marketplace. This commitment with the local community binds the academic personnel to the initiative to start projects and programs in order to enhance citizens’ preparation. CI-UNA, a recent outreach project of Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, is a clear example of this. It envisions citizens’ high preparation to command a second language and insert in this globalized society with more favorable opportunities.

CI-UNA language program is grounded on the principles of foreign language learning and teaching. The teaching process developed during this program views the mastery of a foreign language as a systematized, organized and careful practice mirrored in the hours learners spent in this center. As many may belief, “Immersion is not the only efficient way to learn a language.
For older students, effective foreign language instruction includes direct teaching, systematic practice involving rules and grammar, and plenty of opportunities for conversation (Foreign Language Instruction, para. 5). In this regard, this addressed population benefits from regular sessions of a conversational course founded on a Task-Based Instruction (TBI) methodology. As a matter of fact, this public university offers local citizens integral and social growth through the access to the CI-UNA program which is attuned to the competitive needs of this century’s society.

II Literature Review

2.1 Background of Foreign Language Learning in Costa Rica

The learning of foreign languages in Costa Rica was originated during the Republican Era when coffee was first exported to England in 1820 (Cabrera, 1996, p.1). Upon the first arrival of Europeans in Costa Rica, Costa Ricans were highly encouraged to learn a second language. The main reason to learn a second language was basically an economic one since the newcomers influenced education, industries, family prosperity and arts. As commercial activities increased, a larger number of immigrants came to the country provoking a greater interest in learning foreign languages. Hence, the government decided to guarantee both immigrants and Costa Ricans’ enjoyment of freedom, security and prosperity by providing more opportunities to learn a second language. Thanks to the political stability Costa Rica held at that time, many European professors came to foster the education and culture of our nation. During this period a great phenomenon took place: the immigration of prominent people to Costa Rica and the enrollment of young Costa Rican students in European institutions of higher education. The trip to England of the Montealegre brothers, who studied medicine in London, is an example of this (Cabrera, 1996, p.1). As larger numbers of young Costa Rican students went to foreign countries to study, the need to learn a second language arose.
In the beginning, the study of foreign languages was carried out through private lessons and officially through secondary schools. There were also embassies interested in promoting their languages and culture through cultural centers. As part of this process of foreign language teaching and learning, English became the most studied foreign language in Costa Rica. The teaching and learning of English have been registered as a subject matter in the secondary school curriculum since 1825 in the “Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás” (idem). According to González (1978), the study program of Casa de Enseñanza offered Latin, French and English classes. From 1854 on, the first generations of teachers of these foreign languages spread. In this way, the teaching and learning of English, mainly, was incorporated into the Costa Rican educational system. With the creation of primary and secondary high schools, English lessons became part of the study program (Quesada, 1993, p. 22). Before this time, the people who taught English classes were foreigners and Costa Ricans who lacked pedagogical preparation to work.

Probably, due to this situation, in 1954 Universidad of Costa Rica offered courses to train teachers of English for the first time. However, it was not until 1957 that the teaching of English was professionalized with the opening of the English major by the Faculty of Education of Universidad of Costa Rica. Years later, this same major was initiated in Universidad Nacional, main campus, and was, in time, started in other extensions of UNA, specifically, in Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, Pérez Zeledón Campus (UNASRB).

2.2 Needs of the Local Community to Learn a Foreign Language

The region, where Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension is based, has been privileged by its natural resource endowment and tropical climate. These characteristics have favored a process of socio-economic transformation in the job market recently. Before this transformation occurred, the main job sources were generated by agriculture in this area. From Arce’s viewpoint (2006), tourism has displaced
agricultural activities such as coffee and grains (p.186). The main tourist attractions such as Chirripó National Park and its hot springs, Manuel Antonio National Park, Marino-Ballena Biological Park, Caño Island, Corcovado National Park and beaches throughout the Pacific coast have constituted the top getaways for tourists these days.

The so-called green industry has revolutionized the job requirements of entrepreneurs of this area. Due to the fact that the Southern region embraces these distinctive features, the job market has radically varied its requirements to parallel with the demands of a globalized society by calling for more prepared employees with a competent level of foreign languages. This phenomenon has urged local citizens to seek for continuing preparation in order to develop skills in a foreign language and be able to apply for more advantageous job positions.

2.3 Role of Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension in the Learning of a Foreign Language

Globalization has reached other national regions provoking an increase in the demand for bilingual professionals. As a pertinent response to this phenomenon, in 1997 UNASRB initiated the English teaching major, and later, in 2005 the French teaching major. Even though this event marked the onset of foreign languages teaching and learning in the region, there was not an alternative to learn languages for those who had an inflexible job schedule, could not afford tuition in other institutes and only wanted to learn the foreign language but not teach it. Years later, in 2002, this state university started the Associate’s program in English and a bachelor’s degree in Business Management and Sustainable Tourism\(^4\) to satisfy the needs of that type of population whose only goal was to master the language for communicative purposes.

At this point, the demand for the English language was noticeably rising. Most local citizens needed to learn the language fast and efficiently but did not have the time available to attend classes on a

\(^{4}\) This information was provided by the UNA-SRB Registrar’s office.
daily basis as the study programs of the majors stipulated. Since one of UNA’s missions is to guarantee equal opportunities for all sectors of society to study and develop integrally, there was still a need to develop a program to meet the needs of this part of the population.

III CI-UNA: Empowering the Local Community to Face the 21st Century Challenges

3.1 Establishment of CI-UNA Fundamentals

The world declaration of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on higher education in the 21st century (1998) stated that one of the functions of this type of education is to create an open space to enhance permanent learning, the promotion, generation and diffusion of knowledge through teaching, outreach programs and research. On this account, UNASRB considered the UNESCO declaration by opening a language program of conversational courses in August, 2010. This initiative emerged from the need to train Southern region people to command a second language fluently, and at the same time, to satisfy the social and economic demand tourism provoked in this zone. These are the objectives underpinning CI-UNA outreach project:

Main Objective

- To provide the local community with a high-quality language center in order to reinforce the development of conversational skills in foreign languages

Specific Objectives

- To offer language courses at a low cost in respect of other local language centers and institutes
- To offer high quality courses grounded on Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension’s prestige and reliability
- To enable local people to command languages with emphasis in conversational skills

Nowadays, tourism and business are at the forefront of Perez Zeledón’s economic development; consequently, there is a high social need for this language program to run since the job market demands
English, mainly, as an essential requirement. The perspective of this program can be interpreted through its mission and vision summarized as follows:

- **Mission:** to offer affordable and high-qualified conversational language courses to citizens of the Southern region of Costa Rica
- **Vision:** to improve people’s ability to communicate in a foreign language, and consequently their social and job stability

### 3.2 CI-UNA Modules

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), the language level evaluation system most recognized worldwide, is the core of this language program since it sets the organization of the different course levels and establishes the level of proficiency to accomplish according to the hours taught. The utmost objective in terms of proficiency pursued in CI-UNA language program is B2. According to CEFRL learners at this level can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization, interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party, and can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Since CI-UNA is a relatively young language center, it has just begun with a program to teach English, the most essential foreign language in this area. Regarding the internal structure of the English language program currently available, eleven different levels constitute it; however, nine levels are currently available; they are: Starter, CI-UNA 1, CI-UNA 2, CI-UNA 3, CI-UNA 4, CI-UNA 5, CI-UNA 6, CI-UNA 7, CI-UNA 8 and CI-UNA 9. Each level lasts two months. From the level starter until level eight there is an integration of the four skills with an emphasis on speaking. For levels nine and ten
students take a communicative-based pronunciation and oral expression course. Upon achieving the passing grade of courses CI-UNA 5 and 10, students receive a certificate for the hours of instruction received.

The next chart evidences the CEFRL levels of proficiency, the division of CI-UNA courses as well as the textbook specification and the number of hours of instruction achieved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL)</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basic User</td>
<td>Independent User</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI-UNA LEVELS</td>
<td>STARTER</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American English File</td>
<td>AEF STARTER</td>
<td>AEF 1A</td>
<td>AEF 1B</td>
<td>AEF 2A</td>
<td>AEF 2B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of Achievement</td>
<td>40 hours</td>
<td>200 hours</td>
<td>200 hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overall view of CEFRL distribution of linguistic levels, CI-UNA course levels, AEF textbook, hours of instruction and certificate issue.

3.3 CI-UNA Methodology

CI-UNA offers conversational courses which are aimed at developing the four linguistic skills. Students attend classes five hours a week, one of them is taught in the language laboratory. Students must pay one fee and buy the required textbook *American English File*. In order for students to move from one level to the other they have to pass the previous course. The night and weekend schedule is a key feature that allows citizens to enter the language program. Classes are held at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension’s classrooms. Students attend five hours a week; they are free to choose
their schedule according to their needs and possibilities. They can choose from two main options which are two weekdays (from 6:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.) or Saturdays (8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.). The use of the language laboratory is restricted to one hour a week.

The program requires teachers to use the Task–Based Instruction (TBI) to everyday teaching. This method highlights the exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use, the use of the language to do things such as exchange meaning, a high motivation on the learners’ part to listen and read the language to speak and write (Willis, 1996, p.36). In this methodology, students build communication through problem-solving, the negotiation of meaning and the connection between new and previous knowledge. Also, language instructors must make full use of the textbook and integrate learning that includes reading, writing, speaking and listening with a focus on pronunciation and vocabulary to ensure a successful outcome.

3.4. CI-UNA Evaluation

The evaluation of the courses that guarantees students’ learning is broken down into six different components: oral and written assignments (10%), short grammar and listening tests (40%) standardized mid-term exams (40%) that are divided into speaking (15%) and listening comprehension (5%) and classwork (10%). The standardized tests are designed by one of the developers of this project and administered in the fourth and eighth week of classes. Besides, students who get to the last level have to sit a mock TOEIC test to make sure they achieved a B2 level of proficiency. These results will allow developers to painstakingly analyze the quality of instruction given, the textbook used and the methodology implemented for the first time by the end of the year 2012. Teacher evaluation is highly significant to safeguard the effectiveness and quality of the courses; that is why, a questionnaire to gather this information was constructed and completed by students at the end of each bimester. These
results are later analyzed and given to teachers for them to focus on weaknesses and work towards professional development.

3.5. CI-UNA Participants

One coordinator and three developers, who are also professors at UNASRB, are in charge of the project. The coordinator is in charge of carrying out all administrative processes. The developers work on designing tests and evaluation scales, improving the program, administering placement tests, and generating publicity. The coordinator and the developers hire teachers and evaluate the teachers’ performance through classroom observations. They meet regularly to make decisions and concentrate on improvements.

Students are the central target of this project. They are all citizens from the Southern region who are currently working and/or studying. There is a specific age limit requirement to enroll in the program which is 13 years old. Besides, interested citizens have to buy the course textbook and pay a bi-monthly fee. CI-UNA language program does not require the UNA admission test; instead, students sit a placement test if they want to. Otherwise, they start the program from the starter level.

3.6 CI-UNA Budget

CI-UNA is a non-profit project. As pointed out before, its goal is to outreach the whole population and empower them with enough foreign language competence to face the challenges of an economy-driven society. Nevertheless, payment for instructors and the secretary, publicity subscriptions, equipment maintenance and creation of administrative documents is derived from the enrollment fee students pay at the beginning of each bimester. FUNDAUNA (Fundación para el Desarrollo Académico, Universidad Nacional) along with OTTVE (Oficina de Transferencia Tecnológica y Prestación de Servicios) regulate the flowing of the money deposited in a bank account.
All the money is handled and distributed according to a budget planned ahead by the coordinator of the program through a computerized system.

3.7 CI-UNA Revealing Statistics

The number of students enrolled since the beginning of the course reflects the success of the language program. The program has satisfactorily grown since it started in 2010 with only three groups. The next chart reveals the number of students enrolled in this program since year 2010 up to the present date and the desertion rate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From August to November, 2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>First and Second Bimesters, 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>Desertion</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. CI-UNA enrollment and desertion rate

As shown before, CI-UNA keeps on guaranteeing continuous education for all citizens interested in improving their social status and, in turn, the future of Costa Rica.

IV Conclusions

From all the important data described before, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension is a committed state university that engages in citizens’ social growth through the establishment of different projects, especially through CI-UNA outreach project.
- Local citizens are being benefited by the opening of a new language center concerned with the needs of the low and middle class strata to find more profitable job opportunities and move up the ladder.
✓ Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension through CI-UNA languages center complies with all the requirements of UNESCO that calls for accessible and equal education to all citizens.

✓ CI-UNA’s growth develops in accordance with the current demand for foreign language knowledge and command due to globalization.

✓ As CI-UNA enrollment rate increases and the behavior of the job market shifts, new languages will be incorporated into CI-UNA’s language projection such as French, Portuguese and Mandarin.

V References


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Conferencia Mundial.


**Biographies**

Yalile Jiménez holds a licentiate´s degree in applied linguistic in English and a master´s degree in second language and culture with an emphasis in English from Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica. She has worked for ten years teaching beginning, intermediate, and advanced students at Universidad Nacional. She is currently working at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, in the English teaching major and CONARE-MEP training courses.

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Sandra Palacios holds a licentiate´s degree in applied linguistic in English from Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, and a master´s degree in linguistics from Ball State University, U.S.A. She has taught for ten years at the high-school level and six years with university students. She has also participated in national and international conferences for teachers of English and been a trainer for several courses in the CONARE-MEP program.