

Six hundred miles from mainland Ecuador, in the Pacific Ocean, lies an archipelago of 19 remarkable islands: Las Islas Galápagos. These islands are home to unique species such as marine iguanas, frigate birds, Galápagos sea lions, blue-footed boobies, giant tortoises, and Darwin's finches. They are also home to Sandra Urgilez, an English teacher at San Cristóbal High School (Unidad Educativa Fiscomisional San Cristóbal). Originally from Guayaquil, a coastal city on the Ecuadorian mainland, Sandra has been living and working on San Cristóbal Island for 20 years. Sandra's dedication to her students, passion for her profession, and positive attitude are the building blocks of her teaching philosophy. These traits have kept her going despite the challenges she has faced over the years and especially during the COVID pandemic.



Sandra Urgilez enjoys a beautiful day in Galápagos at the Muelle de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Pier).



Sandra at Punta Carola, a white sand beach and popular stomping ground for sea lions and marine iguanas, endemic species to the Galápagos. The Punta Carola lighthouse (and a rainbow) can be seen in the background.

Many teachers would dream of teaching in the Galápagos. A national park, marine reserve, UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the place that inspired Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, the Galápagos provide a natural canvas for molding the minds of young learners. Sandra is one of the lucky Ecuadorians authorized to legally work in the Galápagos; the islands are protected lands due to their vulnerable and unique situation. While only four of the islands are inhabited by humans, the combined population is around 30,000 and growing at a rate of about 6 percent per year, compared to a slower growth of 2 percent in the Ecuadorian mainland. For many, this increase is concerning and considered an environmental threat. To protect the islands, the government has enforced strict rules regarding who is permitted residency.

Luckily, Sandra obtained her right to reside in the islands two decades ago when Liceo Naval Galápagos, a military school, hired her to teach English. When this school was integrated into the public system, Sandra got a new teaching job at her current school so that she could remain in the Galápagos with her three sons.

While Sandra often misses her days at the naval school, where her classroom had books,

a projector, and even air conditioning, teaching in the public system brought new experiences and professional growth. The system “makes it very difficult to fail a student or hold them back,” she explains, adding that students sometimes lack motivation. To combat this, Sandra utilizes tools garnered from participating in various professional-development activities. She says, “I had a scholarship for a TESOL training from Experiment in International Living (EIL) Ecuador. There I learned a lot about student-centered teaching. When I use those techniques, I find I get good results. For example, the first day of class I make rules with [students]. I say to them, ‘Let’s make a list of classroom rules together.’ They offer ideas, and I write the rules on a board. That [activity] is very successful for me because when I do that, the students know what the rules are in my class, and they are respectful and responsible.”

Sandra’s school is the biggest in town, with about 800 students. Her classes usually have 20 to 30 students. Classrooms have a board, desks, tables, and chairs. She brings other resources—books, markers, a laptop, and a speaker—to class in her backpack. Sandra relies on her creativity to engage students, often incorporating movement and a change of learning environment. “When I start to

Sandra follows a simple philosophy and encourages others to do the same—“First engage them and then start the class.”

teach a class and they are not motivated, I say, ‘OK, everybody, stand up! Let’s go outside. Run. Let’s do some exercises.’ [One day] the vice principal [saw us doing exercises and] said to me, ‘Hmm. You are very good at exercises. You would make a very good PE teacher,’” she says, chuckling. While Sandra doesn’t plan to teach PE (physical education),

she knows movement helps her students stay engaged by allowing them to relax and have fun. She explains, “Sometimes when we are outside, I say to my students, ‘Start breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Jump!’ and they start to whine, ‘No, teacher. I’m tired.’ I say to them, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t remember saying, “Run only if you are not tired,” and they start to laugh. And in that moment, I know that they are engaged.” Sandra follows a simple philosophy and encourages others to do the same—“First engage them and then start the class.”

Sandra maintains a positive attitude and notes that she has a special gift: seeing students as individuals. “I remember one trainer, Juan Carlos Hidalgo. One thing I learned from him was the importance of building rapport with students . . . *Tu tienes que compenetrarte con el alumno and entenderle* [You have to empathize with the student and understand him]. . . . Try to feel in the same way as them,” she says. “When you [empathize], your students are engaged.” The idea of building rapport with students resonates with Sandra. “All the time I ask them what they think. And I listen to them. I realize that they really want people to listen,” she says.

Student-centered strategies inform Sandra’s learning environment. “I don’t like to stay all the time in one place,” she says. “Before



Photo by Vianca de la Torre

As the pandemic spread, Sandra’s students made gratitude jars as a way to stay positive. They decorated the jars and, in English, wrote one thing they were grateful for each day.

Here’s how to make a gratitude jar:

1. Find a jar (or a ziplock bag can work, too!).
2. Make small slips of paper.
3. Write what you are thankful for on the slips of paper and put them in the jar.
4. Decorate the jar.
5. Every week, add to your gratitude jar.

“[Students] have to learn because my mindset is that English is a tool for your life. If you speak another language, you have more doors open in your life.”



COVID, I would take them outside, walk around with them, or I would separate the desks and we would sit on the floor. Sometimes I would let them lie down and write. I like when they feel comfortable, like a family, because we are a community. The book never says that. But I don't care.”

With the onset of the pandemic, Sandra was once again challenged. She says, “My students lost motivation, and many stopped attending classes or sending their assignments. It affected me a lot too. My blood pressure blew up. I felt very bad. But then I thought: I can't change all those things. I can't do that. And I told myself, 'OK, go ahead, Sandra.' Life goes on. ... It was very challenging for me also because I'm a teacher that likes her students to actually learn. They have to learn because my mindset is that English is a tool for your life. If you speak another language, you have more doors open in your life.”



Sandra teaches approximately 150 students per year and insists they rid themselves of a “No puedo” or “I can't” attitude. She also uses her “no excuses” approach with parents she calls or chats with via WhatsApp groups. While many parents don't show interest in their children's education, others are highly engaged. Sandra speaks with some parents as often as twice per week. “I'm strict with both parents and kids,” she says. “I like when parents listen to me ... and sometimes students change because of it. It's not all the time. But if you have 200 students and you can see the change at least in ten students, you can feel that you won because that group maybe will change the world. So that's my goal.”

During the pandemic, Sandra's students began making daily habit journals from recycled materials to practice writing in English and to stay mindful of their physical and emotional health.

This past year, during the transition to remote learning, some students shared with Sandra that they felt anxiety and stress. She turned these feelings into a teachable moment



Pre-pandemic: Sandra's students work on a poster for a collaborative English project about "High School News."

Photo by Sandra Urgilez

and an opportunity for self-reflection. Sandra wanted her students to communicate authentically, so she started projects that promoted connection and incorporated social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL helps students apply knowledge to better manage their emotions and understand their feelings and experiences. To help her students do this, Sandra asked them to make "gratitude jars" and keep daily habit journals. These were fun projects that helped her students practice English and provided spaces for them to self-reflect and express their feelings.

Sandra gets inspiration for her lessons from many places. She utilizes the national curriculum, which the Ministry of Education has recently contextualized for the Galápagos,

for guidance and structure. While planning lessons, she is mindful of Education for Sustainability (EfS) principles and other techniques that she has learned from the Galápagos Conservancy's Education for Sustainability in Galápagos (ESG) Teacher Professional Development Program. As part of the ESG program, the Galápagos Conservancy organizes bi-annual teacher institutes in collaboration with Ecuador's Ministry of Education, the Fundación Scalesia, and the U.S. Embassy in Quito. Bilingual professional-development specialists from universities, public school districts, and Ecuadorian institutions guide around 375 teachers and 30 school administrators in high-leverage practices, maximized to take advantage of the unique features afforded by

Teacher-leaders used their knowledge of sustainability goals to organize a lesson on plastics, a beach cleanup field trip, and other sustainability-themed activities.

“Students in San Cristóbal receive a free training in conservation from the national park through a program called *Mi Pequeño Guardaparque* [My Little Park Ranger], where they become certified ‘park rangers,’” with the knowledge to take care of the environment responsibly.

Galápagos. During the last institute, teacher-leaders used their knowledge of sustainability goals to organize a lesson on plastics, a beach cleanup field trip, and other sustainability-themed activities. These activities help students connect what they learn with where they live and develop a deeper understanding of sustainability in the Galápagos context.

The Galápagos Islands provide plenty of opportunities to make English lessons interesting; when in need of additional inspiration, Sandra uses art-oriented websites like Pinterest. She says, “I like when the curriculum says, ‘Language through the Arts.’ I love that part of the curriculum. Ideas come to me about mixing teaching English with art. And my students feel motivated when I apply art with English. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was writing in my journal, ‘I’m grateful for’ And I realized it would be great to do with my students. So I found on Pinterest ways to do the same activity with my students, but also mixed with recycling to reinforce sustainability goals of the Galápagos. I thought it was a great idea to mix gratitude moods with recycling.

“All the time, my students were complaining about COVID, how they couldn’t go outside. I told them, ‘You have to realize you are very blessed.’ So, they had to recycle any jar, plastic or glass, and make cards in English: ‘I’m grateful for _____’ and why—the reason they are grateful, for 31 days.” Reflecting on the project, she says, “It was a beautiful experience for them. Teachers work and work and work and forget to encourage their students. It’s important to chat with students to find out how they feel. . . . I’m a spiritual woman. I think if you’re in a gratitude mood, things will be better every single day of your life.”

Sandra shares that the challenges with education she has encountered are not unique to the islands. “All over the world, there are dysfunctional families and parents and teachers who disconnect. What we have are global problems,” she says. “Regarding teaching, I need more resources. I would like to have a very functional English laboratory with a computer, projector, and speakers because it would help me teach better, especially listening classes, but—every other teacher wants that, too” Getting these resources is not a reality for Sandra right now, but she feels lucky to teach in Galápagos: “The people here are special. I like that people in Galápagos are humble. No one thinks he is more important than anyone else. Despite everything, they are humble.”

The Galápagos schools offer a special environment to teachers in that they utilize a contextualized curriculum and sustainability goals that provide educators and students with unique opportunities. Sandra explains, “Galapagueñan students have a role to play as residents of Galápagos. Students in San Cristóbal receive a free training in conservation from the national park through a program called *Mi Pequeño Guardaparque* [My Little Park Ranger], where they become certified ‘park rangers,’” with the knowledge to take care of the environment responsibly. “My students are always saying to me, ‘*Yo también soy guardia del parque*’ [I’m also a park ranger]. It’s a beautiful program.”

That “*guardaparque*” [park ranger] identity seeps into Sandra’s lessons. She recalls, “We were doing a lesson on sports and what sports they can do in Galápagos. One student said, ‘jet ski’—I asked the class, ‘Can you jet ski in

“English teachers are excellent problem solvers. We are creative and energetic, and we help each other. We have to.”

Galápagos?’ ‘No, teacher, no. It will damage the marine life,’ they say. They are very aware of the environment.” Sandra is also mindful of sustainability in Galápagos. When students created daily habit journals, she specifically asked them to recycle a notebook. “I [didn’t] want them to use a new notebook,” she explains. “They use things that they have left over from previous years. And we decorate them with their own designs to make them special.”

Sandra didn’t always plan to be an English teacher. She says, “I started to study medicine at university, but it was too much time for me. I didn’t want to ask for money from my parents. So I changed my career and studied computing. That was my first degree. Programming and computers. One day, an aunt visited my mom and she said to me, ‘Are you working right now? I have a friend who wants a computer teacher. And you have a teacher appearance. Go to this address.’ And that’s all. I got the job, and soon I was studying another degree in teaching. ... I like to communicate with people from other countries, and I was always the best student in

English. In my school, high school, university. For that reason, I decided to teach English.”

For Sandra, one of the greatest challenges of living in Galápagos is maintaining her residence visa, which is not permanent, even though she is a tenured teacher. “It is very difficult for me because sometimes the government asks for papers that don’t exist,” she says. “Still, I’m optimistic [about the future of education in my country].” Sandra says that being an English teacher is especially helpful in maintaining a positive attitude: “I think English teachers are excellent problem solvers. We are creative and energetic, and we help each other. We have to.” A community of practice of Galápagos English teachers has evolved from the ESG institutes where teachers support one another, nowadays mainly through virtual means. Sandra’s school has four English teachers, and Sandra has recently been selected as a *líder pedagógica* [pedagogical leader] and is influential in helping her fellow teachers succeed.

Sometimes Sandra makes jokes with students in her classes who are contemplating their future careers: “‘I’m going to give you a curse,’ I tell them. ‘The curse is that you will become an English teacher!’” She laughs, “But really, I tell them if they want to be a teacher or study something, just do it. You can do it.”

This article was written by **Danielle Sclafani**, who was an English Language Fellow in Cuenca, Ecuador, at the Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE) in Azogues. She traveled to Galápagos to support teacher-trainers in the Galápagos Conservancy’s Education for Sustainability in Galápagos (ESG) Teacher Professional Development Program, which is how she met Sandra. Since then, Danielle has been supporting teachers in the Galápagos as a Virtual English Language Fellow and Virtual English Language Specialist.



The entrance to San Cristóbal High School (Unidad Educativa Fiscomisional San Cristóbal), where Sandra teaches English

Photo by María Belén León