



S F S THE SCHOOL
FOR FIELD STUDIES

Language, Culture, and Society of Costa Rica

SFS 2050

Syllabus

The School for Field Studies (SFS)
Center for Ecological Resilience Studies
Atenas, Costa Rica

This syllabus may develop or change over time based on local conditions, learning opportunities, and faculty expertise. Course content may vary from semester to semester.

www.fieldstudies.org

© 2025 The School for Field Studies



COURSE CONTENT SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Please note that this is a copy of a recent syllabus. A final syllabus will be provided to students on the first day of academic programming.

SFS programs are different from other travel or study abroad programs. Each iteration of a program is unique and often cannot be implemented exactly as planned for a variety of reasons. There are factors which, although monitored closely, are beyond our control. For example:

- Changes in access to or expiration or change in terms of permits to the highly regulated and sensitive environments in which we work;
- Changes in social/political conditions or tenuous weather situations/natural disasters may require changes to sites or plans, often with little notice;
- Some aspects of programs depend on the current faculty team as well as the goodwill and generosity of individuals, communities, and institutions which lend support.

Please be advised that these or other variables may require changes before or during the program. Part of the SFS experience is adapting to changing conditions and overcoming obstacles that may present. This is a field program, and the field can change!

Course Overview

This course provides two integrated modules: **Spanish Language Instruction** and **Costa Rican Society and Culture**. The Spanish Language Module, taught by professional Spanish instructors, offers reading, listening, oral, written, and practical applications of the Spanish language at three levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) to increase students' comprehension and communication skills.

The Costa Rican Society and Culture Module provides the basic context to understand the history and cultural expressions of the Costa Rican society. A combination of lectures, readings, field experiences and classroom discussions will facilitate the comprehension of the cultural context of Costa Rica. Therefore, the aim of this course is to explain the basics about the cultural context in which most of the Program activities will take place.

To the extent that is possible, we will include activities knowledge and skills, such as cooking, dancing, and playing sports, and sessions of community service (tree planting). These activities may involve interactions with key stakeholders and community leaders. Assignments include quizzes, essays, discussions, and field exercises involving community interactions in Atenas.

Learning Objectives

Spanish Language Module Content: This involves 20 contact hours (14 lessons of ~1.5 hour) with professors who are native Spanish speakers. Student language aptitude levels will be identified through an oral and written placement test administered by the language professors at the beginning of the semester. All oral presentations, tests, essays, and community extension projects will be graded. As with any SFS activity, your participation is mandatory. The Spanish course aims at providing basic Spanish instruction. It is not an immersion in Spanish. If your Spanish level is "beginners" or "intermediate" the course will improve it, but it will not give you total fluency. As a student, you will have opportunities for positive community interactions, either structured or during your free time. You need to take advantage of these opportunities to improve your Spanish.

Costa Rican Society and Culture Module Content: Students will participate in activities designed to provide insight and experiences with the cultural and historical context of Costa Rica. Course activities, including lectures and cultural orientation. Students will learn specific strategies and skills for working within a community-based research context and develop a basic understanding of Costa Rican culture. All these efforts are aimed to support the development of social, cultural, and ecologically-sound alternatives of natural resource use and biodiversity protection within the context of the five-year research plan (5YRP, 2024-2029) question:

How can Costa Rica respond to global and local environmental challenges by supporting resilient ecological and social adaptation?

It is expected that sufficient understanding of the above question will provide the necessary tools to appreciate the impact of globalization, real estate expansion into rural areas, increased tourism visitation, the perception of climate change, and conflicts between parks and people within the cultural context of Costa Rica and the paradigm of ecological and social resilience. Readings will be provided ahead of time and compiled into a printed anthology. This is not a cultural immersion course, since the emphasis of the program relies on the core courses (TE, NRM, JRE, Directed Research). In addition, being

on top of the readings is critical to understand the cultural context of Costa Rica. We encourage you to foster positive community interactions. Please consider that the number of contact hours for the Culture module is less than half of that of the core courses, and thus, it is important to do the assigned readings and be active in the discussions and take advantage of our limited time.

Assessment

Assessment Item	Value (%)
Spanish module	50
Culture module: Quizzes/essays	50
TOTAL	100

Spanish Module (50%)

The evaluation of the students' proficiency in Spanish includes written papers, short reviews, a final exam, and oral presentations. Oral class participation is highly encouraged since it is critical for language acquisition. Field trips will serve as an outlet for students to practice Spanish outside class and be in closer contact with real-life situations and socio-cultural spaces. This activity consists of structured exercises with specific objectives and activities, addressing different levels of proficiency in Spanish. Examples include a visit to downtown Atenas, finding vegetables at the central market, touring a plantation of sugar cane, touring a coffee plantation, shopping at the farmer's market, interviewing the neighborhood, finding groceries in stores, exchanging money at the bank, etc. All these activities have specific goals and a structured handout.

Culture Module (50%)

We expect active participation in the discussion and analysis of classes, readings, and field activities. Some of the classes presented below could change, but updated information will be given sufficiently ahead of time. Material for discussion will be indicated ahead of time. Each assessment item will be evaluated on an individual basis. The culture class provides a basic background on Costa Rican culture and Society but does not have the same number of contact hours as the 4-credits of the other courses in the program, and thus, it does not have the same workload. Quizzes and essays will cover the material of the previous class or a reading assignment for discussion in each class and must be submitted electronically to faculty.

Grading Scheme

A	95.00 - 100.00%	B+	86.00 - 89.99%	C+	76.00 - 79.99%	D	60.00 - 69.99%
A-	90.00 - 94.99%	B	83.00 - 85.99%	C	73.00 - 75.99%	F	0.00 - 59.99%
		B-	80.00 - 82.99%	C-	70.00 - 72.99%		

General Reminders

Honor Code/Plagiarism – SFS places high expectations on their students and we hold students accountable for their behaviors. SFS students are held to the honor code below. SFS has a zero-tolerance

policy towards student cheating, plagiarism, data falsification, and any other form of dishonest academic and/or research practice or behavior. Using the ideas or material of others without giving due credit is cheating and will not be tolerated. Any SFS student found to have engaged in or facilitated academic and/or research dishonesty will receive no credit (0%) for that activity.

“SFS does not tolerate cheating or plagiarism in any form. While participating in an SFS program, students are expected to refrain from cheating, plagiarism and any other behavior which would result in a student receiving credit for work which they did not accomplish on their own. Students are expected to report any instance of cheating or plagiarism by others.”

Deadlines – Deadlines for written and oral assignments are instated to promote equity among students and to allow faculty ample time to review and return assignments before others are due. As such, deadlines are firm; extensions will only be considered under extreme circumstances. Late assignments will incur a penalty of 10% of your grade for each day you are late. After two days past the deadline, assignments will no longer be accepted. Assignments will be handed back to students after a one-week grading period. Grade corrections for any assessment item should be requested in writing at least 24 hours after assignments are returned. No corrections will be considered afterwards.

Content Statement – Every student comes to SFS with unique life experiences, which contribute to the way various information is processed. Some of the content in this course may be intellectually or emotionally challenging but has been intentionally selected to achieve certain learning goals and/or showcase the complexity of many modern issues. If you anticipate a challenge engaging with a certain topic or find that you are struggling with certain discussions, we encourage you to talk about it with faculty, friends, family, the HWM, or access available mental health resources.

Participation – Since we offer a program that is likely more intensive than you might be used to at your home institution, missing even one lecture can have a proportionally greater effect on your final grade simply because there is little room to make up for lost time. Participation in all components of the course is mandatory, it is important that you are prompt for all activities, bring the necessary equipment for field exercises and class activities, and simply get involved.

Course Content

Type: L: Lecture, FL: Field Lecture, GL: Guest Lecture, D: Discussion, O: Orientation

No	Title and outline	Type	Time (hrs)	Required Readings
Spanish Module				
1	Spanish Placement Test Students are divided into different groups according to their level of Spanish proficiency	O	1.0	
2	Spanish Language Instruction	L; D	20.0	
Culture Module				
1	Introduction to the Center Welcome to SFS Costa Rica	O	1.0	
2	Introduction to the Course Overview of the culture and language course	O	1.0	

No	Title and outline	Type	Time (hrs)	Required Readings
3	Intro to the People and Culture of Costa Rica The main cultural traits of Costa Ricans will be outlined making emphasis on understanding the cultural context of CR and contrast it with US culture. The most important cultural codes will be discussed.	L	1.0	Chapter 4: Mitchel, M.G. and S. Pentzer. 2008 "Society and Culture"
4	A Brief History of Costa Rica, Part I: From Native Cultures to the Coffee Oligarchy A general introduction to the history of Costa Rica from indigenous people to the establishment of the coffee oligarchy. Special emphasis will be given to the National Campaign of 1856 in the consolidation of the Costa Rican democracy.	L	1.0	Chapter 1: Mitchel, M.G. and S. Pentzer. 2008 "Geography and History"
5	History of Costa Rica, Part II: From Coffee Oligarchy to the Present A general introduction to the history of Costa Rica from the coffee oligarchy to current events. The impact of the 1948 Revolution and the establishment of the Second Republic. The welfare state and the 30 Golden Years.	L	1.0	Chapter 1: Mitchel, M.G. and S. Pentzer. 2008 "Geography and History".
6	Family Structure, Gender Roles Examine the overall structure of the Costa Rican family and contrast with the American family.	D	1.0	Chapter 8: Biesanz et al. 1998 "The Family".
7	Overview of Costa Rican Music Presentation by a local musician who will review the development of Costa Rican music.	GL	1.0	
8	Ethnic Composition of Costa Rica The history of colonization of Costa Rica by different ethnic groups will be reviewed	D	1.0	Chapter 5: Biesanz et al. 1998 "Class and ethnicity".
	Total		29	
	UMN Instructional Hours*		34.8	

*UMN defines an instructional hour as a 50-minute block. SFS syllabi are written in full 60-minute hours for programming purposes. Therefore 50 full hours = 60 UMN instructional hours (for four credit courses) and 25 full hours = 30 UMN instructional hours (for two credit courses).

Reading List

1. **Biesanz, M.H., R. Biesanz & K.Z. Biesanz. 1998.** The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 307 pp.
2. Coates, A. G. 1999. Central America: A Natural and Cultural History. Yale University Press, 296 pp.
3. Locher, U., J. Sanchez, G. Mayorga, C. Mesa-Lago, S. Marquardt, K. Bowman, P. Palmer, S. Chant, M. Mata-Montero, S. Palmer, I. Molina. 2004. The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, and Politics. Duke University Press, 383 pp.
4. **Mitchel, M.G. and S. Pentzer. 2008.** Costa Rica: a global studies handbook. Global Studies. Latin America & the Caribbean. ABC-CLIO, Inc, Santa Barbara, California, USA. 398 pp.

Spanish Placement Test and Levels

Students come to SFS with different language backgrounds: some have no experience with an immersion program at all, others have a more extensive experience and exposure as well as limited conversational abilities, and finally there are those who may be fluent but need more practice to improve their interaction with native speakers. During the placement test, prior to the beginning of the Spanish modules, the Spanish instructors will evaluate the students' proficiency through conversation and will place them in the adequate language level (basic, intermediate, or advanced). The following description pertains to the level in which you will be placed (either basic, intermediate or advanced).

Basic

Students finishing this level will be able to understand and use familiar, everyday expressions, as well as basic phrases. Students will acquire the tools to introduce themselves and others, and to ask and answer questions about personal details such as: where you live, people you know and things you do. Students placed in this level are challenged to articulate basic sentences and learn basic vocabulary.

At the end of the Spanish course students in this level will be able to:

- Provide information about themselves combining the most common verbs in the present indicative.
- Start to conjugate regular verbs in the past.
- Use the present and past indicative of regular verbs. Use some irregular past and present forms, including the periphrastic future.

Course contents for basic

- | | |
|--|---|
| • Alphabet | • Vocabulary related to money |
| • Syllabic Pronunciation | • The clock |
| • Word structure | • Verb TO BE and use of addresses and landmarks in Costa Rica |
| • Personal identification | • Basic structures: wanting to have, need, love, power, having to |
| • Use of interrogative | • Introduction to imperative verb forms |
| • Personal and possessive pronouns | • Conjugation of the regular present indicative |
| • Concordance in gender and number | • Present Progressive |
| • Adjectives | • Past participles |
| • Structure of questions | • Reflexive |
| • Basic vocabulary related to the body, clothing, colors, etc. | • Some irregular verbs in the present indicative |
| • Everyday life vocabulary, according to interests and needs. | |
| • Numbers | |

Intermediate

Students completing this level will understand the main points on familiar matters encountered regularly at work, school, leisure, etc. Students will deal successfully with most situations likely to arise when traveling. Furthermore, students will produce simple connected texts on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Finally, students will describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for their opinions and plans. Students placed in this level are able to create basic sentences in Spanish, adapt new material to new situations, formulate and

answer questions on familiar topics, are able to handle simple situations (buying a bus ticket, asking for directions, maintaining short conversations), are able to articulate short paragraphs, and are proficient handling present, past and future verb forms.

At the end of the Spanish course students in this level will be able to:

- Use efficiently the present, past and future periphrastic forms of the indicative mode, both regular and irregular.
- Will have notions of the imperfect indicative of compound verbs and use reflexive verbs.
- The level of understanding and fluency will be good.

Course contents for Intermediate

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Irregular verbs that change in the present indicative | • Introduction of time composites |
| • Present perfect simple | • Review of being, be, have, have and do |
| • Irregular past tense | • Uses of the “se” particle |
| • Differences between the preterit and the imperfect | • Use of Prepositions |
| • Comparative | • Vocabulary of interest |
| • Review of reflexive verbs | • Review of the imperative |
| • Direct pronouns | • Future simple |
| • Indirect pronouns | • Conditional |
| | • Introduction of the present subjunctive. |

Advanced

At this level, students will be able to understand the main ideas of complex texts about concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialization. Students can interact with a good level of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers effective. Additionally, students will produce clear, detailed texts on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topic giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Students placed in this level are able to articulate long paragraphs, handle complex language situations, narrate stories using a combination of present, past and future verb forms, explain in the detail the context of a conversation, is able to clearly support and articulate their opinions in Spanish.

At the end of the Spanish course students in this level will be able to:

- Use the indicative forms very well, as well as the subjunctive.
- Will show major progress in their level of oral expression and will develop greater fluency and proficiency with grammatical structures.
- Can use very well all the verb forms of the indicative, subjunctive and imperative. Will expand the use of idiomatic expressions.
- The level of comprehension, speaking and writing proficiency will be high. The common vocabulary is extensive and its structure is very good; should expand the technical vocabulary.

Course contents for advanced (includes all of the intermediate course contents)

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Overview of all indicative modes | • Conjunctions |
| • Mode and all subjunctive tenses | • Relative grammatical forms |
| • Prepositions | • Idiomatic expression |