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## **Virtual Exchange and Curricular Internationalization: A Case of a Spanish Scholar's Experience in Brazil**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The interconnectedness of language, culture, and education underscores the growing importance of internationalization in higher education. This study explores the role of virtual exchange in advancing curricular internationalization through the experience of a Spanish PhD candidate participating in a virtual mobility program in Brazil. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on responses to 11 open-ended questions completed by the visiting scholar at the conclusion of the program. Data were analyzed using content analysis facilitated by Atlas.ti software, resulting in twelve emergent codes aligned with five established categories: academic, sociocultural, linguistic, professional, and personal dimensions. Findings highlight the mutual benefits of virtual academic mobility, emphasizing the enriching experience for the participant and its broader implications for fostering global partnerships and enhancing internationalization efforts within the curriculum of host institutions.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum implementation, exchange programs, international education, language acquisition, virtual classrooms

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### **INTRODUCTION**

More recently, not only has the inseparability between language and culture been emphasized, but also the importance of using, in educational contexts, subjects and topics that refer to local and global levels (Hanna, 2024; Schaefer, 2022;

Schaefer & Heemann, 2024). Our study, as will be seen, is consistent with notions of cultures, meaningful communication, connections, comparisons and communities through theoretical constructs arising from the internationalization of educational institutions. According to Becker (2015), internationalization is related to “the response of universities to globalization” (p. 8), whereas Leask (2015) defines curriculum internationalization as “the process of incorporating international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes” (p. 9). Additionally, the internationalization of teaching and research has been a priority in institutions around the world (Becker, 2015) and is a key change agent in higher education (De Wit, 2020).

In the field of internationalization, O’Dowd (2023) explains that the number of students who can participate in traditional academic mobility programs is extremely low. In line with data provided by UNESCO, only 2.6% of the world’s population has had a student experience abroad. In this sense, to highlight the relevance of a more inclusive internationalization (Schaefer, 2022; Schaefer & Heemann, 2024), that is, one that transcends traditional (physical) academic mobility, the authors of this study made the most of the opportunities facilitated by virtual exchange (henceforth VE). For O’Dowd (2023), VE addresses

The different ways that learners are engaged in sustained online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators. (p. 2)

Considering all that, this study aims to discuss how the VE experience of a Spanish visiting PhD candidate played a role toward curricular internationalization at *Instituto Federal Catarinense* (henceforth IFC), a Brazilian educational institution located in the South of Brazil.

This study has the potential to contribute to curricular internationalization through VE for two main reasons. First, as Hudzik (2011) notes, it is crucial to “move from rhetoric to action” (p. 22) to foster internationalization, meaning that there is an urgent need to systematize theory and practice. In this regard, through the projects that will be described further, how we strove to ensure “dedication to action” (Hudzik, 2011, p. 22) for the fostering of curricular internationalization will be exemplified. Second, Beck (2021) clarifies that “the appeal of online and distance learning internationally has yet to be tested out” (p. 134) and argues that there should be greater appreciation of the subject of learning in virtual spaces. In view of this, it is possible to suggest that this study can provide not only the enhancement of curricular internationalization through international projects, but also the vision that the latter has the potential to enable the development of the field of VE.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Virtual exchange and internationalization**

O'Dowd (2023) makes it clear that the widely held view that living and studying in another country inevitably contributes to students' linguistic and intercultural development is questionable. According to the author, "the quality of the study abroad program and the depth of students' cultural and learning experiences" (O'Dowd, 2023, p.1) is fundamental to enable this development, in addition to the need for students to be motivated, receptive to new experiences and, in the same way, prepared to live with people from other cultural contexts. From this understanding, the author maintains that the linguistic-intercultural development of students can be promoted through VE. O'Dowd (2023) underlines that interactions and activities facilitated by online approaches confer the possibility of ensuring diversity and inclusion regarding students, researchers and teachers who do not participate—or cannot participate—in physical mobility programs, which, historically, have established themselves as a possible means for the internationalization of educational institutions.

Regarding students, O'Dowd (2023) adds that the online interaction between language learners from different cultures has received considerable attention from educational institutions whose objective is to equip undergraduates with a meaningful foreign language and intercultural experience. Following such a line of reasoning, Schaefer et al. (2017) claim that VE is "an instrument of connection with the world, capable of promoting intercultural encounters between students participating in academic mobility programs" (p. 239, our translation), in line with Cuevas et al. (2025), whose results show that internationalization of the curriculum gives the students the opportunity of interacting and opening to other cultures, while O'Dowd (2021, 2023) and Heemann et al. (2020) state that the VE plays a key role in fostering internationalization.

Guimarães and da Silva (2022) warn that "there is a modern/colonial/capitalist perspective" (p. 34, our translation) regarding the relationship between internationalization and language. For instance, a predominant, or virtually exclusive, focus on teaching and learning hegemonic languages to the detriment of the social, political and cultural relevance of other languages; the recurrent implementation of didactic-pedagogical practices in educational institutions in Brazil and other South American countries from central nations such as the United States and England; the commodification of English as if it were a product of purchase and sale, as well as if this language were a necessary condition for the acquisition of "a superior knowledge" in comparison to other languages, for example, Portuguese, German and Spanish.

Decolonial studies in Latin America, which began in the 1990s, aim to contribute to the understanding and deconstruction of narratives of modernity, including Eurocentric worldviews (Guimarães & da Silva, 2022). From this perspective, a decolonial perspective, as a political-academic project of resistance, opposition and struggle, lends itself to overcoming the colonial discourse underlying the logic and symbolic control of modernity. Consequently, it can be

said that decolonial efforts have the potential to help create strategies for the transformation of social reality. To this end, with regard to the scope of internationalization, there must be “decapsulation of modern/colonial/capitalist thinking with regard to languages and linguistic practices” (Guimarães & da Silva, 2022, p. 42-43, our translation).

The study by Machado Pereira and da Silva (2021), entitled *Discursive representations about internationalization by English teachers in continuing education*, analyzed the discursive representations about the internationalization of Brazilian education by English teachers from the Federal Network for Professional, Scientific and Technological Education. The outcomes of the study presented two perspectives of internationalization: one *hegemonic* and the other *counter-hegemonic*. The first identified a naturalized discourse, that is, one that “is materialized through instrumentalist and functionalist practices” (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021, p. 19), which is driven by the concept of globalization as an agent of economic progress based on education. The second perspective, *counter-hegemonic*, revealed a discourse guided by social justice and initiatives that encourage collaboration between subjects, in which “human and social development is recognized as a dimension that can be stimulated by internationalization” (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021, p. 19). In this vein, it is possible to state that a counter-hegemonic internationalization has the potential to foster internationalization processes that transcend dominant trends and worldviews.

In this study, we agree with Machado Pereira and da Silva (2021) that the “overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization” (p. 6), which tend to value, among other aspects, the instrumentalization and commodification of education, competition and the commercialization of knowledge, must be repeatedly questioned. Alternatively, converging with the perspective of counter-hegemonic internationalization, it can be stated that it is necessary to take a critical look toward internationalization; for example, intercultural dialog should be encouraged on, among other topics, inequality and social justice, environmental problems, ethnic-racial discrimination and prejudice based on a person’s gender or sex.

In the same way as Machado Pereira and da Silva (2021), Clifford (2018) clarifies that, unlike the *corporate discourse*, in which education, linked to the economic growth in today’s world, is regarded as an individual good, it is necessary, by means of curricular internationalization, to promote internationalization through the adoption of a *civic discourse*. With this in mind, “higher education is seen as serving and being of benefit to the community and so needing to produce graduates who have developed (...) a sense of duty and responsibility to the wider society” (Clifford, 2018, p. 19).

In what follows, we present an investigation conducted by Luna and Sehnem (2017), which, from our perspective, is consistent with the notion of *counter-hegemonic* internationalization. Put another way, because of the fact that this study, beyond the vision of internationalization that serves solely functionalist and instrumentalist purposes, highlights how it is possible to conceive student

mobility as a generator of academic, sociocultural, linguistic, professional and personal gains.

The objective of the study in question was to interpret the perceptions of teachers and other professionals about contributions obtained by graduates of the Science without Borders (CwB) program (*programa Ciências sem Fronteiras - CsF*). Moraes et al. (2016) make clear that this program, terminated in 2017, “established in 2011, aimed to promote the consolidation, expansion and internationalization of science and technology, innovation and competitiveness in Brazil through exchanges and international mobility” (p. 78-79, our translation). Data were collected using close-ended questions and a semi-structured interview with eight teachers and eight professionals involved in the selection and recruitment of transnational companies. Data analysis revealed five contributions based on the participants’ perceptions. The *academic contributions* were associated with aspects such as “improvement in academic performance” (Luna & Sehnem, 2017, p. 136, our translation) and “differentiated knowledge or skills and/or positive attitudes toward academic activities and experiences” (Luna & Sehnem, 2017, p. 136, our translation).

The *sociocultural contributions*, in turn, revealed that contact with people from other countries and the opportunity to get to know other cultures were the main motivation among graduates, while the *linguistic contributions* were related to communicative resourcefulness and the opportunity to use the foreign language with local people and in academic activities. The *professional contributions* indicated that graduates “seem to return [to Brazil] with a series of elements that distinguish them from other candidates in the workplace” (Luna & Sehnem, 2017, p. 150, our translation). Finally, the *personal contributions* revealed that the graduates developed skills of flexibility, openness and self-confidence through interaction with people in the foreign country, which proved to be “transformative elements in the graduate’s life” (Luna & Sehnem, 2017, p. 155, our translation).

In a nutshell, it should be restated that this study, which is consistent with the concept of *civic discourse* (Clifford, 2018) as well as *counter-hegemonic internationalization* (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021), is placed in the context of internationalization through VE. In this sense, projects involving VE within the scope of curricular internationalization, such as those described in the following sections, can not only lead to academic–professional achievements, but also stimulate critical reflection on, by way of illustration, cultural references, asymmetrical relationships, social inequality and environmental problems. We suggest that this perspective corresponds to a more organic and expanded look at different ways of contributing to the internationalization of educational institutions.

### **In search of actions for curricular internationalization**

To present the internationalization actions further along, we draw on Leask’s (2015) five-stage model for the process of curricular internationalization, namely: (1) *review and reflect*, where the extent to which an institution’s curriculum is internationalized is discussed; (2) *imagine*, implying the search for other ways of

thinking and acting, that is, imagining new possibilities; (3) *revise and plan*, when there is a focus on the necessary changes to an internationalized curriculum; (4) *act*, that is, the implementation of the plan to make the curriculum internationalized; and (5) *evaluate*, the discussion of the outcomes obtained from the implementation.

At IFC, one of the authors teaches the discipline *English for Specific Purposes [Inglês Instrumental]*, which has approximately 20 students each semester, in the 30-hour course *Computer Network Technology [Tecnologia de Redes de Computadores (REDES)]*. This course, according to its 2018 political-pedagogical project (Projeto Político-Pedagógico [PP], 2018), aims to prepare professionals who have “a qualified practical and theoretical vision and the capacity to work on the development, implantation, management and maintenance of logical and physical projects of local or long-distance networks” (p. 12, our translation). The topics of the discipline in question are as follows: fundamental strategies for reading and textual comprehension in English/technical vocabulary in the area of *Computer Network Technology*/semantics and syntactics of English/reading scientific and didactic texts in the area of *Computer Network Technology*.

On the basis of the model suggested by Leask (2015), we initially reflected on the degree of curricular internationalization in relation to the topics in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*, which made it possible to realize that the latter does not cover indicatives of internationalization, for example, (1) sociocultural aspects related to English spoken in Brazil and around the world; (2) issues that make up the discussion agenda on a global level, such as discrimination, cultural stereotypes and climate change; and, finally, (3) the intercultural dialog, through which, according to Helm (2016), “participants explore identities and difference, personal experience and emotions, which contribute to awareness of self and others” (p. 153). We then imagined possibilities to make the curriculum internationalized, and we ultimately chose the VE, since it provides online contact between people from different cultures (Schaefer et al., 2017; Schaefer, 2022; O’Dowd, 2023). Afterwards, we planned actions with regard to the way in which such activities would be implemented, prompting us to select those that encourage critical reflection through the intercultural dialog.

Next, we describe three internationalization actions that were developed with the aim of promoting internationalization processes in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes*.

### **Internationalization actions 1 and 2: Intercultural dialog through VE sessions**

The 1-hour weekly VE meetings of the project *IFC English Conversation: Intercultural Dialog through Telecollaboration* (telecollaboration is another term to refer to VE), which took place in 2021 via Zoom and was coordinated by one of the authors of this study, had the objective of bringing the participants (not only students of the discipline in question, but also people from the external community

in general), while practicing their speaking skills to broaden their intercultural perspectives as well as to expand knowledge. The same goes for the project *IFC Spanish Conversation: Intercultural Dialog through Telecollaboration*, in which the students of the discipline — who were interested in learning Spanish in addition to English — as well as the external public (people from the community where the IFC is located and neighboring cities, different states of Brazil and other countries) participate. Moreover, these projects aimed to work on the development of interactions between Brazilian participants and people from other cultures, facilitating intercultural dialog (Helm, 2016; Schaefer, 2022).

In the VE sessions, participants from Brazil and other countries, including Italy, Uruguay, Spain, England, Puerto Rico, Paraguay, the United States, Mexico, England and Canada, had the chance to discuss different topics suggested by the project coordinator. For example, the topic chosen in one of the VE sessions was *the meat industry*, whereas the participants discussed the challenges of climate change in another VE session. In relation to the latter topic, they first said whether they agreed or not with statements such as that *global warming is driven primarily by human activity*, that *climate change is not caused by human activity*, and that *developed countries are more responsible for the damage caused to the climate than are emerging countries*. Afterwards, they explained the reasons why they agreed or did not agree with these statements, which prepared the way for the intercultural dialog (Helm, 2016; Schaefer, 2022) by means of critical thinking.

### **Internationalization action 3: Participation of a Spanish PhD candidate in English for Specific Purposes**

A Spanish PhD candidate, Francisco, was required by a Spanish university to take at least three months of stay at a foreign university to attain the international modality of the doctoral program in Education. Francisco has not had any previous experiences related to VE, but he is familiar with international exchanges, especially English (C1 level). No other PhD candidates were involved in this project. Then, both the PhD candidate and his supervisor at the IFC arranged a three-month stay to be held in Brazil. However, due to the fact that in 2021 the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic prevented physical academic mobility from happening, the IFC and the Spanish university had to initially conclude an international cooperation agreement to subsequently allow the VE to take place.

Between September 2021 and November 2021, Francisco participated, in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes*, as an international researcher through VE and was supervised by the professor of the discipline in question for the development of his academic activities. Among the activities carried out by the PhD Candidate, the following stand out: (1) participation in the projects already mentioned by the *IFC English Conversation: Intercultural Dialog through Telecollaboration* and *IFC Spanish Conversation: Intercultural Dialog through Telecollaboration*; (2) participation as an observer in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes*; (3) collaboration in the implementation of a project involving

the creation of digital stories in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes*; and (4) collaboration in the presentation of an international academic event, in the area of applied linguistics, held virtually.

In the month following the conclusion of Francisco's participation as an international PhD candidate in the discipline *English for Specific Purposes*, through a questionnaire that was sent by e-mail to the Brazilian professor, he had the chance to collect his thoughts and submit personal impressions regarding his VE participation. Based on this procedure, our research question is how a virtual exchange experience of a Spanish visiting PhD candidate may play a role toward the curricular internationalization at the Instituto Federal Catarinense.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE

### Methodological design

In view of the nature of the internationalization actions and the activities conducted over those three months, this study makes use of the interpretative paradigm (Loayza-Maturrano, 2020) in order to give answer to the research question and, in turn, in the qualitative research spectrum. Qualitative research studies aim to objectively observe the different subjectivities of the participants through their behavior, oral speech, or written words (Owen, 2014). Specifically, our qualitative study can be deemed as a case study (Duff, 2014) because, in addition to the inclusion of a specific participant (Francisco), it is focused on a contemporary phenomenon in its real context. According to Duff (2014), case studies are used "in order to provide an understanding of individuals' experiences [...] within a particular linguistic, social, or educational context" (p. 233).

In this study, we rely on a single individual to explore lived experiences meaningfully, since a single participant can provide data that sufficiently address the research question, and this in-depth examination of a single case can serve as a foundation for future studies. Given that Francisco spent three months participating in internationalization activities at the IFC, he could understand its context and processes developed throughout VE activities. By the end of the stay, his supervisor provided him with a set of 11 open-ended questions, where he was asked about his personal opinion regarding the activities carried out. These questions (which do not conform a validated questionnaire, but an open-ended interview) were designed by the research stay supervisor, and they are shown below:

- 1) In general, how did you like your doctoral stay experience? Explain.
- 2) In view of the various doctoral stay activities included in your Work Plan, which one(s) did you like the most, and which one(s) do you believe was/were more relevant to your linguistic (inter)cultural training/education?
- 3) Do you think that, in some way, your stay experience helped you in academic, professional and personal terms?

- 4) What is your opinion on the fact that your doctoral stay took place in the virtual modality? Have you ever done anything similar before in your academic career?
- 5) How, from your opinion, do you think your stay experience would have been if it had taken place in the traditional (physical) modality?
- 6) What is your opinion toward the mediation/monitoring regarding the professor (supervisor) who was responsible for your doctoral stay at the IFC?
- 7) What did you think of the collaborative activity developed between IFC and *Univali* about digital stories, in which you actually participated in the classes of the discipline *Inglês Instrumental* at IFC?
- 8) What general aspects did you notice in relation to the educational system between Spain and Brazil? And what did you think of the Brazilian students and the other participants in the projects in which you participated?
- 9) Do you think that the international agreement (cooperation) between the Spanish university and the IFC can foster internationalization purposes in both institutions? If so, in what sense? What activities/projects could be carried out?
- 10) In the future, do you intend to develop some kind of academic-professional activity between the IFC and the Spanish university?
- 11) Could you leave any final message to your supervisor and IFC?

These questions were drawn to elucidate what Francisco's VE experience was like, and since they were replied to in a written manner, the corresponding way of analyzing the text is using a content analysis. Francisco replied to these questions in a written document. It is therefore expected that the questionnaire study will lead to unique results that can shed light on the field of knowledge and, consequently, feed the realm of internationalization through VE.

### **Data analysis**

After the data collection, the answers to the questionnaire were registered via a text editor file, the total transcription density of which rose to 2.979 words, and were analyzed using the content analysis technique. To do so, the specific software Atlas.ti was used to codify the questionnaire's content. Then, the data underwent a long process of interpretation and reflection.

The content analysis, which is the PhD candidate questionnaire answer, allowed the creation of the corresponding codes, which refer to the smallest portions with a specific meaning inferred by the researchers. The coding process followed the three coding steps: open, axial and selective coding (Finol de Franco & Vera, 2020). A total of 12 codes emerged inductively from the interpretation of the content, which are explained below in alphabetical order:

- **Adaptation:** changes made before and during the collaboration period, so that the stay could be developed according to the established plan.

These adaptations were mainly caused by sociocultural factors and the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

- **Agreement:** comments related to the consolidated relationship between the IFC and the Spanish university through the signed collaboration agreement.
- **Difficulties:** impediments or complexities found during the stay period.
- **Enjoyment:** moments of amusement, fun and satisfaction.
- **ICTs and telematic means:** Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) resources and telematic elements used to make communication effective for the online meetings and VE activities.
- **Interaction:** interplay and exchange of information among people participating in the VE sessions.
- **Learning:** knowledge acquired throughout the stay period.
- **Outcomes:** results obtained from an activity or from an experience.
- **Thankfulness:** gratitude expressed by the PhD candidate in his questionnaire.
- **Values:** human values, such as respect, empathy and openness, that are mentioned in Francisco's questionnaire when talking about international and intercultural conversations.
- **Willingness:** the attitude of the people to participate in this activity.
- **Working groups:** the concept of working together in a collaborative manner, forming groups of work to carry out the diverse activities of the Work Plan.

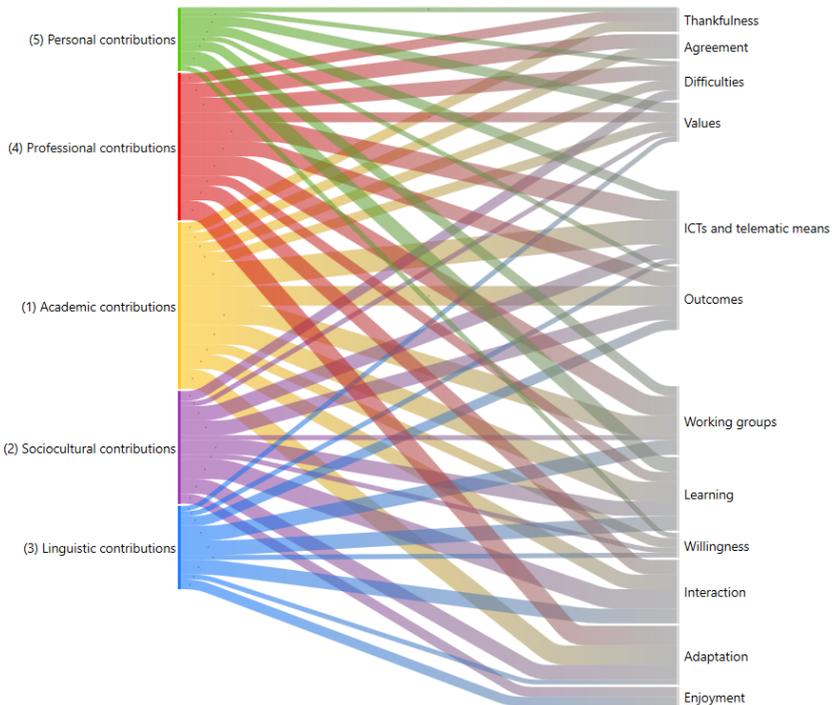
During the analysis, all 12 codes were related to the 5 categories created by Luna and Sehnem (2017), described previously: (1) academic contributions, (2) sociocultural contributions, (3) linguistic contributions, (4) professional contributions, and (5) personal contributions. Therefore, we did not focus on a new grounded theory, but we associated our codes with that existing theory.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of the results obtained from the content analysis has a double nature: first, a descriptive analysis to explain the incidence of every code on the questionnaire answers per category and per question, and second, an exposition of those codes according to the researchers' interpretation and evidence from the text.

In the descriptive analysis of the results, we highlight that every code is mentioned in at least two categories, and some of them appear in the five categories; that shows the importance that all codes' meanings have in the text. The total number of codes assigned to every category is the following: In category (1), academic contributions, all codes except *Enjoyment* were assigned, and there is a total frequency of 15 citations, being the category with most citations. In category (2), sociocultural contributions, all codes except *Thankfulness* and *Agreement* were assigned, and there is a total frequency of 10 citations, where the

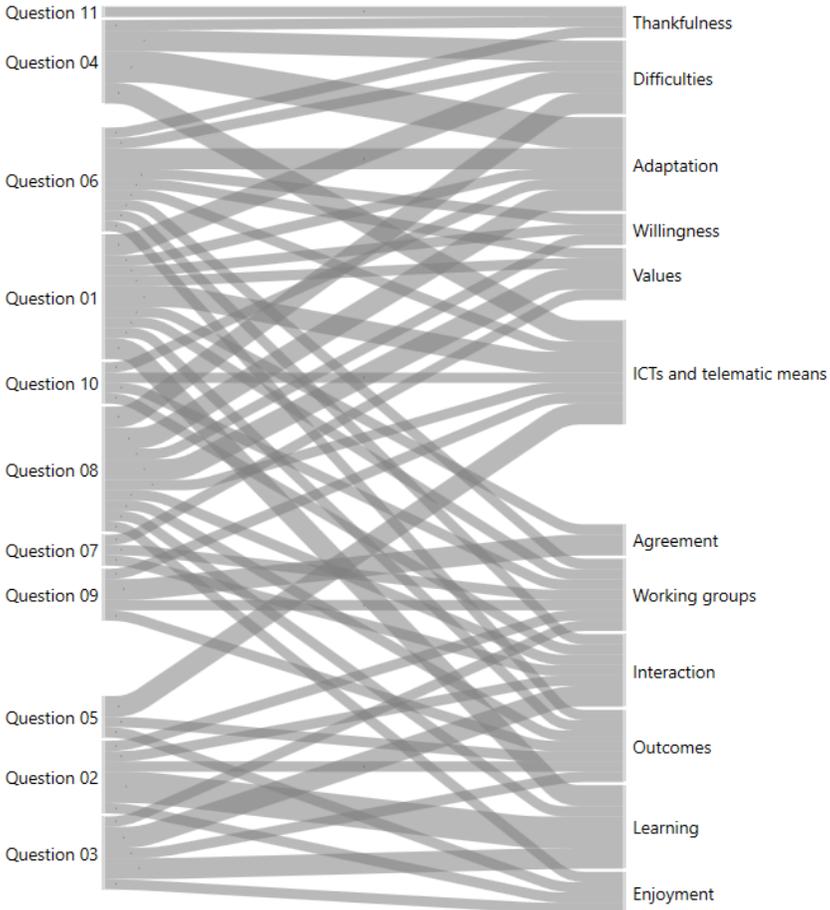
code *interaction* is the most repeated. In category (3), linguistic contributions, all codes except *Thankfulness* and *Agreement* were assigned, and there is a total frequency of 6 citations, which is the category with the lowest number of citations. In category (4), professional contributions, all codes except *Enjoyment* and *Willingness* were assigned, and there is a total frequency of 13 citations, where *Adaptation*, *ICTs and Telematic means*, and *Working groups* were the most cited. In category (5), personal contributions, all codes except *Agreement*, *Interaction*, *Adaptation* and *Enjoyment* were assigned, and there is a total frequency of 7 citations, where the most repeated was the code *Learning*. It all is evidenced by the frequency of codes per category, which is showcased in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Sankey diagram of the frequency of codes per category**

Regarding the frequency of codes per question, it should be stated that all codes are mentioned in at least three answers to the questionnaire in such a way that there is representation of each of them throughout the text, as showcased in Figure 2. Taking into account the general recount, the code *ICTs and telematic means* had the strongest incidence (10 citations), followed by *Adaptation* (9 citations). Additionally, it must be emphasized that *Adaptation* had a strong presence in Question 04, about the opinion of the PhD candidate about having a

virtual modality of a research stay; also, *Learning* is much related to Question 02, about the activities of the Work Plan.



**Figure 2: Sankey diagram of the frequency of codes for each question on Francisco's questionnaire**

In addition to the descriptive results, interpretative results have arisen from our content analysis. We demonstrate those results by type of contribution (categories) and their discussion from the excerpts taken from Francisco's questionnaire. Drawing from those premises, the results shed light on several interesting insights that share perspective with other authors and their research conclusions.

### **Academic contributions**

The PhD candidate questionnaire disclosed that the way of implementing a VE activity had just the same format as any other academic activity: “the result was similar to a formal academic activity” (Question 02, code: *Working groups*), and that structure allowed him to deploy academic skills related to the subject: “Those situations emerged from the outline that [the professor] prepared for every session, and it dove us into unpredictable, improvised conversations, which is a very important element to learn languages” (Question 03, codes: *Learning* and *Interaction*). Plus, the two parties involved generated material from that work together: “We also gave visibility to our work by participating in a congress, which is also clear evidence of our collaboration” (Question 09, code: *Outcomes*), meaning that, thanks to the VE activities, it is possible to connect different parts of the world, carry out diverse intercultural encounters, and promote educational internationalization. Therefore, physical mobility is not the only way of promoting transnational collaboration, since VE makes that collaboration as productive as physical mobility, which is in line with several authors’ conclusions, such as Schaefer (2022), O’Dowd (2023), and Schaefer & Heemann (2024).

### **Sociocultural contributions**

We came across many comments regarding the sociocultural contributions to the PhD candidate, for example, being in contact with people from all around the world: “We couldn’t have developed the telecollaborative sessions so easily and with people from all around the world if we weren’t so used to home working and videoconferences” (Question 08, code: *ICTs and telematic means*). Additionally, regarding the exchange of experiences: “I met a lot of interesting people from many geographics whereabouts of the globe who shared their life experiences, origins and background with the rest of the group, and that helped to build conversations of different nature and with a wide variety of opinions and anecdotes” (Question 03, code: *Interaction*). This kind of intercultural interactions shed light on how necessary it is to take a critical look toward intercultural dialog and to encourage inequality, social justice, environmental problems, ethnic-racial discrimination, and prejudice based on a person’s gender, religion or sex, among other topics, as Machado Pereira and da Silva (2021) state.

Apart from the intercultural experiences, we also noted sociocultural differences, such as the course calendar: “Another fact that has made me think of the differences between both systems is the school year duration: in Spain, the school year begins in September and ends in June, while in Brazil, the school year begins in February and ends in December. Even if this fact seems to be a trivial matter, it has an influence on the perception of the year: both teachers and students do not have the same energy at the beginning of the school year as at the end of it; and we also have to make an effort to get used to the rhythm of the semester in the other country, for example, “it was hard for me to think about final exams’ period in November, which is the middle of my first semester in Spain; or to think about going on summer holidays while I am preparing the first exam period in January” (Question 08, code: *Adaptation*).

Furthermore, we extracted several comments related to the difficulties undergone by the PhD candidate: On the one hand, difficulties around the time zones differ: “I could say that the most difficult part of it was adapting to the different time zones between Spain and Brazil, which is as hard as being able to combine my regular working and personal schedule with our connecting times” (Question 01, code: *Difficulties*), inasmuch as conducting telecollaboration projects entails certain difficulties (Schaefer et al., 2017). On the other hand, there were difficulties regarding the paperwork: “Also, the bureaucracy was hard to handle” (Question 01, code: *Difficulties*).

Overall, despite the difficulties found in the sociocultural process, intercultural dialog contributes to exploring identities, differences, personal experiences, and emotions (Schaefer, 2022): “All in all, I could say that despite the whole procedure that is needed to undertake a project followed by a stay, the resulting experience is enriching and rewarding for a predoctoral candidate because it leads oneself to adapt to different situations, different cultures and different opinions and speeches, which is, no doubt, a whole bunch of learning coming from diverse scenarios: administration, academia, people, and culture” (Question 01, codes: *Outcomes* and *Learning*), as Helm (2016) alleges too.

### **Linguistic contributions**

One of the main objectives of developing a whole internationalization project was precisely the opportunity to practice and learn English, since that was the *lingua franca* to be used in that specific context. That is why there is a clear reference in Francisco’s questionnaire about this: “the concept was closer to a friends’ chat, but the result was similar to any other formal academic activity: we all practiced and learned about linguistics” (Question 02, code: *Outcomes*). Such opportunity corroborates the notion that the promotion of internationalization includes the learning of English as a foreign language (Guimarães and da Silva, 2022).

Besides, linguistic issues are not separated from sociocultural aspects, and there is also written evidence about that: “The reason why I enjoyed the conversations that much is because is the time to get in touch with other people, their opinions, their abilities, their cultural aspects, their preferences, etc., and I could not imagine a better picture of intercultural and linguistic exchange than that one” (Question 02, code: *Enjoyment*). This insight has also been addressed by authors such as O’Dowd (2023) and Schaefer et al. (2017), who argue that living and studying abroad is not the only way in which a student could develop linguistically and interculturally, since this development can also be fostered by VE activities. In addition, as Leask (2015) noted, VE focuses on sociocultural aspects related to spoken English worldwide.

Francisco also shared the following vision around intercultural encounters: “I strongly believe that intercultural activities bring a tolerant and pleasant atmosphere to the activities, since not feeling identified with other cultures but finding a common interest (the language) may result in an added interest and respect, and that improves the quality of the session and, consequently, of the learning” (Question 08, codes: *Values*, *Outcomes*, *Enjoyment* and *Learning*). This

assertion deals with the concept of feeling comfortable when speaking English. In this regard, the more comfortable the students feel, the more they learn, according to Francisco's questionnaire, which means that the less anxiety in the classroom, the better for the learning process, which is also in line with the research developed by Manchado-Nieto and Fielden-Burns (2024).

### **Professional contributions**

The PhD candidate considers that the research stay contributed at a professional stage, which is the reason why he stated that "enrolling in this experience allowed me to widen my horizons regarding collaborations among professionals of higher education at a worldwide perspective" (Question 03, codes: *Working groups* and *Outcomes*). Moreover, in this type of action, the role and attitude of the leading professor are also important: "The professor is a close person who always receives the groups of students with a friendly attitude and explains everything in a very communicative manner" (Question 06, codes: *Thankfulness* and *Values*), a fact that also addresses professionalism.

Referring to the Work Plan, although our international activities took place through communication in English to encourage students to practice this language, how the activities were conducted was much more organic; that is, they took place through critical thinking (e.g., in conversation sessions), intercultural reflection, etc. In other words, with this project, the teaching scope moved far beyond a colonial and market-based vision of the English language, which imposes, even if imperceptibly, processes of domination both in the material and intersubjective realms (Guimarães & da Silva, 2022). Therefore, these outcomes brought to light a more comprehensive vision of internationalization and not just one restricted to the global market's needs (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021).

Nevertheless, professional contributions not only refer to individual enhancement, but also to the welfare of the collaboration between the two educational institutions (IFC and the Spanish university) that were involved in the long-term period. Francisco suggested that these institutions continue the partnership to encourage the strengthening of academic activities between them, which, it is fair to say, can support not only the formal international agreement between the Spanish university and the IFC but also encourage processes of counter-hegemonic internationalization (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021): "I think that the agreement already fostered internationalization between universities, since we have achieved to link people from several institutions and maintain that relationship along the way. In this sense, we have gotten involved plenty of people in the process apart from the students, like the special guests to the English and Spanish conversations or the interns of the [Spanish] university" (Question 09, code: *Agreement* and *Working groups*).

### **Personal contributions**

Human values of the people taking part in VE are vital to make a project of this nature work: "the willingness of the people involved, which is essential to make interesting talks to emerge, is also essential to bring different points of view being respectful with each other, or to share a common virtual space with

tolerance and freedom” (Question 01, codes: *Values* and *Willingness*), and the same applies to group cohesion: “we have involved plenty of people in the process apart from the students, like the special guests to the English and Spanish conversations or the interns of the [Spanish] university” (Question 09, codes: *Agreement* and *Working groups*). Indeed, the cohesion of the group, in line with Francisco’s questionnaire, is as important as generating networks, as expanding contact networks facilitates internationalization processes (Schaefer, 2022; O’Dowd, 2023).

Another aspect linked to personal contributions is how both the physical and virtual exchange experience exert influence on the people who participate in student mobility programs. Hence, as much as the development of VE is highly pertinent and essential nowadays, which is also evidenced in the outcomes of our study, there are advantages that can be achieved through physical mobility: “I also believe that the personal presence makes oneself witness other kinds of aspects, such as the atmosphere, the surroundings of every conversation, the personal treatment with people at the university, or simply the usual things to do at the everyday life, such as taking public transports, going to the supermarket, sharing physical spaces with other people, getting to know the regional weather or visiting touristic places” (Question 05, code: *ICTs and telematic means*). This comparison between physical and virtual exchange was discussed by O’Dowd (2021), who provides a fair solution to this situation: a blended modality, where students can combine virtual and physical mobility.

## CONCLUSION

The previously exposed outcomes elucidated the main insights needed to accomplish that objective: to discuss how the VE experience of a Spanish visiting PhD candidate played a role in curricular internationalization at the IFC. Starting with the idea of envisaging this study through the conception of both *civic discourse* (Clifford, 2018) and *counter-hegemonic internationalization* (Machado Pereira & da Silva, 2021), our results show that it is possible to develop an effective and practical Work Plan for a PhD visiting researcher without losing the comprehensive outlook of the internationalization realm. In this vein, we suggest that the counter-hegemonic vision from the perspective of dealing with the English language organically is beneficial for the good development of VE activities, since there is an impact on the five main areas of contribution according to Luna and Sehnem (2017) (academic, sociocultural, linguistic, professional, and personal).

In addition, we conclude that addressing the internationalization of the curriculum through VE, on the one hand, can actually systematize putting theory into practice, in line with what Hudzik (2011) stated. On the other hand, we tested whether online learning internationally is possible and mainly positive, as concluded also by Beck (2021).

We can consider having just one person’s perspective as a limitation of the study. Future research may include diverse PhD students’ experiences and reflections to make the study more generalizable and to ensure its triangulation.

Despite this limitation, given the high frequency of positive comments from the PhD candidate, as well as his specific vision concerning the learning outcomes plus his whole experience, there is clear evidence that a *civic discourse* is an appropriate educational approach to be taken in VE classes of educational institutions.

Finally, based on the results of our study, it is possible to succeed with VE activities when the aim is to provide online contact among people from different cultures, to explore self and others' identities and emotions, to discuss different sociocultural topics, and to address internationalization issues. Hence, it can be stated that the incidence of those five areas of contribution (academic, sociocultural, linguistic, professional, and personal) had a beneficial effect on Francisco's academic education.

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