

# **Cultivating Translingual and Transcultural Competence in a Multilingual University**

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## **Abstract**

Globalization and its sibling, internationalization, have led to the development of multilingual, multicultural universities, which are often branded as pathways to global success. However, these universities may not adequately consider the challenges that stakeholders face in adapting to these new environments. This paper investigates the implications of internationalization for policy, pedagogy and practice by surveying policy, faculty, staff, and students of three multilingual programs at a Spanish university. A document analysis, questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups were used to explore institutional strategy, student identity and agency, teacher pedagogy and practice, and staff guidance and support. The study applied a translingual and transcultural competence lens that focused on critical awareness, reflexivity, and the ability to operate between languages and cultures while building relationships. The findings reveal a strong programmatic focus on multilingual and intercultural development, a wide range of plurilingual and pluricultural identification and practices among students, the centrality of a teacher's role in facilitating and modeling translingual and transcultural competence, and a presently underexplored at-home/abroad nexus. The study implies a need for more community building beyond the classroom and across domestic and international students, greater empowerment of teachers, and a need for students to reflect and engage with each other.

### **Keywords:**

intercultural communication, intercultural education, multicultural, plurilingual, translingual, transcultural

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## Introduction

Globalization, which connects the world through the cultural flow of media, technology, people, money, and images (Appadurai, 1996), has left no field untouched, including higher education, where a culture of internationalization coupled with a language-as-a-resource orientation (Ruiz, 1984) promises access to plurilingual competences and marketable skills. English-medium instruction has become the default mode of delivery with rising enrollment numbers and increased global competition in rankings. Such an approach views language as capital and as a representational tool (Canagarajah, 2017). It posits Western knowledge as global and indigenous knowledge as local (Larsen, 2016). By foregrounding competition and self-interest, it fails to nurture collective agency, critical reflexivity, and change born out of collective vulnerabilities (Badwan, 2021). However, this purely utilitarian or neoliberal approach to internationalization, as opposed to an integrative strategic process of international education (see Knight, 2008) has conveniently ignored issues of linguistic and cultural agency and identity (Kahn & Misiaczek, 2019) and their relation to “encountered otherness” (Thielsch, 2021). In order to provide an international education that transcends a mere accumulation of skills, a conscious, critical, and cooperative approach is urgently needed, including a focus on language, culture, subjectivity, and community at all levels – top down, bottom up, and intersectional.

One of the effects of globalization, and especially migration, has been the increase and diversification of multilingual and multicultural communities as the default rather than the exception, particularly in urban centers (World Economic Forum, 2017; International Organization for Migration, 2015; Vertovec, 2010). Educational policy makers and institutions have tried to provide frameworks and pathways for developing multilingual speakers, a project that has rather entrenched the phenomenon of “elite multilingualism” (e.g., De Costa, 2019), where marketable languages are studied for their cultural capital. Dewaele and Botes (2019) highlight the potential for multilingualism/multiculturalism to positively influence a speaker's personality and, by extension, the community they are a part of, through the development of such traits as flexibility, open mindedness, and social initiative. Plurilingualism, a repertoire of several languages developed over time, was introduced into language planning in Europe via the policy of “mother tongue plus two” (European Council, 2002) and was expanded into plurilingual and pluricultural competence in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018). This concept revolves around mediation, which requires not only linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills but also volition (Leung & Jenkins, 2020), meaning the willingness of a speaker to use a plurilingual repertoire and pluricultural sensibility to facilitate communication among individuals or groups who cannot do so on their own. Or, as Piccardo (2021) states, plurilingualism emphasizes the connections across an individual's

multiple languages as well as within the underlying linguistic and cultural components of those languages. It also relates individual linguistic repertoires and trajectories to societally named languages, and, echoing the findings of Dewaele and Botes (2019), helps to engender a positive attitude toward diversity and change. Intercultural communicative competence, as a desired outcome of language learning, has been outlined by Byram (1997; 2008), Deardorff (2011), and Fantini (2020) among others as a blending of language and culture for the purpose of international or even intranational understanding, at times with the goal of developing intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2006; Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Critics of this approach have variously suggested a dialogic rather than structuralist perspective (Matsuo, 2014) with a focus on fluidity (Hoff, 2019), reflexivity (Dervin et al., 2020), or subjectivity (Ferri, 2020).

Beyond the descriptive “multi,” the static “inter,” and the resource-oriented “pluri” (cf. Coste et al., 2009), an action-oriented, subject-based trans-perspective was first introduced to foreign language policy by the Modern Language Association (2007), with the stated goal of developing translingual and transcultural competence among language learners. This competence aims at enabling students to:

operate between languages . . . reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture . . . relate to fellow members of their own society who speak languages other than [their own] . . . consider alternative ways of feeling, seeing and understanding things . . . and [develop] critical language awareness, historical and political consciousness, as well as social sensibility.  
(Modern Language Association (MLA) 2007, 4)

Although originally conceptualized as a framework for foreign language teaching in a US context, the principles of translingual and transcultural competence are aligned with the current “trans” approach in applied linguistics, which sees language and translanguaging as interactionally created and performative (Li, 2011), as an appropriation of language ideological space (Chang, 2019) or, to put it in a nutshell, as transformational (Mazak, 2017). At a practical level, this perspective seeks to engender transcultural dispositions (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019a) that echo the volitional component of mediation (Leung & Jenkins, 2020) in order to foster communicative practices that encompass internal repertoires, external contexts, diverse individuals, and multilayered communities. At the same time, transcultural practices not only enable communication with the Other, but also expand the speaker’s own hybrid, dynamic subjectivity by incorporating new stances, habits, and desires into the evolving self (Kunschak & Girón, 2013).

Translingual and transcultural practices occur spontaneously in the marketplace (Canagarajah, 2012), in public spaces in general (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), and in urban settings (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010). They become contested in places of social gatekeeping such as educational institutions, unless translanguaging (Garcia, 2009), post-native-speakerist pedagogy (Houghton, 2018), and the creation of shared repertoires (D'warte, 2018) are embraced and encouraged. Hence this paper aims to explore the space and role granted to translingual and transcultural competence in higher education by answering three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do institutions create spaces for students to experience translingual and transcultural practices and to develop translingual and transcultural competence?

RQ2: How do teachers' linguistic, cultural, and professional identities contribute to the process?

RQ3: What are students' perceptions of challenges and their progress in this area?

## **Materials and Methods**

The present study was carried out at a medium-sized, private university in Spain with a notable international profile. Data were collected from the general institutional website and in three multilingual programs (MLP1, MLP2, MLP3) offered in two departments within the same college. The programs were delivered in both Spanish and English and included language classes in two additional languages (L3 and L4), to be chosen from among Arabic, Chinese, French, German and Portuguese. The investigation was designed as multi-perspectival, mixed-methods research (Creswell, 2015), combining closed-ended and open-ended survey items, with a multimethod extension of interviews and focus groups (cf. Knappertsbusch et al., 2021). A multi-perspectival approach not only allows for the phenomenon of interest to be seen from the viewpoints of various stakeholders, but it also provides ecological validity, a micro–macro lens, and a framework of interdiscursivity (Hocking, 2014) by highlighting the interrelationships between varying discourses and practices. This plurality of viewpoints is methodologically supported by the use of diverse instruments and analytical tools to provide a complex picture of the various intersecting philosophies and pedagogies, expectations, and experiences (Table 1).

Table 1

*Research Design*

Epistemologically, the authors have been following the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017). This stance is collaborative – in that it views participants as co-constructors of knowledge – as well as critical – as it engages with often-conflicting standpoints in the foundational literature. Such a stance is reflective of methods, data, and underlying values; it is conscious of the nature of relationships in research and the language used; and it is mindful of the influence of time, location, and situation on the research process employed and of the data that is generated or that emerges. In this case, not only administrative staff and fellow teachers, but also students, were considered agents involved in a series of methodological choices: Concepts such as intercultural communicative competence and translingual transcultural competence were discussed with teachers, staff, and the head of study; methods, instruments, and questionnaire items were designed to be as transparent, broad, and balanced as possible; a choice of language was offered to all participants of focus groups and interviews (English, Spanish, or German, as preferred by participants). In conclusion, the specific setting of the institution, the researchers' roles, as well as participants' backgrounds not only influenced the research design but interacted with the project as it unfolded.

These preliminary considerations informed a convergent research design for the triangulation of data obtained from a document analysis, a student survey (in English), follow-up interviews and focus groups with students, interviews with the director of study and international office staff, as well as interviews and focus groups with professors (Table 1). Along with López-Hernández (2021), Owen (2018), and Prior (2008), the authors believe that educational policy research needs to consider both people and documents. By analyzing texts that are representative of the university's mission and values as well as program specifications and competence descriptors in the course syllabi of the three programs observed, important policy directives could be contrasted with their pedagogic implementation and effect on the student population as reflected in the other research instruments that were used. The student survey, comprised of Likert-type items paired with open-ended questions covering language, culture, identity, agency, and community, was distributed in class for some groups and made available online for juniors and seniors who were harder to reach. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were designed to enable students to share or discuss their experience with language, culture, and identity over time, from their early childhood to the present. The aim of these discussions was to elicit complementary, detailed information in a narrative format. Students were invited to participate in interviews or focus groups based on their own preferences and availability and could choose to moderate the focus group among themselves. Semi-structured interviews with the head of study and the international office staff revolved around

the underlying institutional philosophy, curricular issues, support for students, educational goals, and challenges. Teacher interviews and focus groups addressed teachers' teaching philosophy, curriculum, pedagogical practice, and their own linguistic and cultural background.

Numerical survey data were analyzed to obtain descriptive statistics, while both researchers manually coded all textual data from surveys, focus groups, and interviews, using an iterative manual coding process (Saldaña, 2021). The coding process began with a cycle of exploratory coding involving both researchers to ensure intercoder reliability, detect emerging themes, and establish a final list of categories and codes. This was followed by a second cycle of theming the data to detect overlaps, differences, and connections between the participants' perceptions.

Direct quotes from the interviews and focus groups with teachers (T), international office staff (IO), and the head of study (HoS) were translated by the authors from Spanish and on occasion German, into English for ease of reading; the original quotes can be found in the appendix. Student quotes (S) are presented in their original English version, including nonstandard language use.

The terminology used in this paper is framed under the overarching theme of "translingual and transcultural competence" as noted in the introduction. However, reference is made to "intercultural communicative competence" in the survey and, also, when discussing the curriculum because this term was found to be more widely used in the local didactic framework. The terms "plurilingual/pluricultural" and "multilingual/multicultural" are used when referring to issues of repertoire and social setting, respectively. In this way, the aim is to accurately reflect the varied terminological landscape encountered in policy documents, pedagogical discourse, and scholarly sources.

## **Results**

When universities engage in an internationalization process, all stakeholders need to be on board, including leadership, administrative staff, teaching staff, and students, in order to ensure high-quality learning environments that offer an opportunity for translingual and transcultural reflection, exchange, and expansion (cf. Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017; Hauptmann Komotar, 2018). To gauge the scope of this process at a specific institution, the authors collated and triangulated data provided by the institution and shared by administrative staff, teaching staff, and students to ascertain the extent to which policy, pedagogy, and practice are aligned in such a way that they can foment the development of critical cultural awareness, reflection on the speaker's own identity, and actual transcultural and translingual practice. The following sections present the key findings by stakeholder group based on institutional documents, interviews

with three administrative staff and 13 teaching staff, as well as 66 student questionnaires complemented by 6 focus groups with a total of 23 students.

### *Policy, or the institutional perspective*

With reference to the extent to which higher education institutions create spaces for students to experience translingual and transcultural practices, and develop translingual and transcultural competence (RQ1), it is worth noting that during the document analysis, no policy document addressing internationalization or language use was found to be publicly available. On its website, seven key statements of the institution's mission and values include "insistence on a critical approach" and a "local, national and international dimension," followed by a nondiscrimination statement that includes a reference to ethnic origin and language, among others. At the overall institutional level, the annual statistics include numbers reflecting a systematic effort at internationalization, evidenced by an international student population of 20%, over 600 international agreements, as well as over 200 international faculty.

The specific information available online for the three, degree programs included in the study addresses the importance of languages, specifically foreign languages in addition to English. However, the information clearly focuses on the utilitarian aspect of foreign language as a tool for improved employment opportunities rather than the intrinsic value of language itself. Little to no mention is made of (trans) cultural aspects. During an analysis of the curricular structures, 22–42% of the 240 ECTS credits were found to be dedicated to third and fourth language (L3/L4) courses (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, and/or Portuguese). Depending on the degree program, 50% to 80% of subjects are delivered in English. The presence of subjects associated with "culture," including those related to regional studies, history, literature, mediation, and intercultural communication, comprise 7% to 10% of the total credit load.

Following an analysis of the presence of language and culture in the curricula, a search for intercultural communicative competencies was conducted by first identifying relevant subjects and subsequently analyzing the presence of competence descriptors and their wording. A closer look at the relevant competencies in the full program descriptions approved by the Spanish National Quality Assurance Agency (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación* or ANECA) reveals no use of the terms "translingual" or "transcultural," but there is an ample presence of references to linguistic and cultural competencies. When divided into knowledge, attitudes, and skills (cf. Council of Europe 2001, p. 5), these program descriptions show a clear predominance of descriptors related



to knowledge and skill and a scarcity of descriptors related to attitude. For instance, no mention is made of critical awareness of personal bias, (post-) colonial history, or ethical implications of globalization.

When examining how these overall competences are reflected in the various course syllabi, the prevalence of knowledge descriptors becomes evident; for instance, knowledge of a given language and/or culture is the most frequently included descriptor, followed by appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism. This is offset by a scarcity of attitudinal descriptors related to reflexivity on personal cultural biases or intercultural power relations. Active skills, such as working in international teams, mediation practices, or problem-solving skills are present but not predominant in the course syllabi.

The three degree programs contain a subject called “Intercultural Communication,” generally offered in the third year of study. The timing for the offering of this subject corresponds to the year after the first study abroad experience in two of the programs and to the actual year of the study abroad experience in the third. The course aims focus on creating an attitude of openness, acquiring knowledge about other cultures, and developing practical communicative skills for communication in international settings. Little to no attention is paid to criticality or postcolonialism.

Representatives of the institution, such as the head of study of the programs under discussion, confirmed that the institution embraces an international orientation. He expressed a belief in the utilitarian aspects of language training for employability, and pointed out study abroad, international internships, contact at home with incoming exchange students, the international faculty profile, English-medium instruction, and the transversal opportunities offered by the university’s international network as the main spaces for intercultural learning. This is supported by comments made by the international office, which suggest a clear top-down implementation strategy and raise the question as to how policy is applied by program coordinators, the head of study, heads of departments, and faculty.

**IO:** Yes, it is an internationalized university. Especially from the top, they try to promote, for example, exchanges a lot, and that helps considerably.

However, institutional representatives agreed that less-structured activities to bring national and international students in contact with each other, such as sports, trips, or tandems, were underexplored and that the resources provided by an international student body were underexploited, thus creating a need for further integration of international students into campus life.

**HoS:** One element where we fail, and I think it is a failure because there is huge room for improvement, is in integration, in the utilization of the exchange students who are here, who come for an international, intercultural experience, and our students actually want to seek them out to benefit from them, but they are two parallel worlds; they are very hardly permeable, so I think this is still a challenge.

To conclude, the institutional framework clearly demonstrates a vision of the university, its programs, students, and faculty as highly international, with a strong presence of English as well as other foreign languages, and a range of opportunities, some underexplored, to develop “trans” awareness and competence.

### *Pedagogy, or the professor perspective*

Teaching staff play a key role in competence development of the student body. Therefore, this paper examines how teachers' linguistic, cultural, and professional identities contribute to the learning process. (RQ2). Similarly to the head of study and international office representatives, professors were clearly aware of the institution's internationalization strategy but expressed confusion about their roles within that strategy and a need for training.

**T:** Yes, there is a policy of prioritizing English. But it is also true that third and fourth languages are very important.

**T:** Our university has come a long way: We hire foreign teachers, you know? But we don't have a clear strategy on what role those foreign teachers have to play in the classroom beyond the language aspect.

While students' critical awareness was seen to be unevenly distributed (cf. “Practice or the student perspective”), professors displayed concern with (post)colonial use of English as a language of imperialism and hegemony. At the same time, in line with the top-down internationalization strategy identified in institutional discourse, faculty do not feel empowered to move the program in a more inclusive direction.

**T:** There is a European program for teacher training in intercomprehension that is interesting, I know you did not ask about this, but as long as this hegemony of English is alive, such programs are practically impossible.

In the context of attitudes to English in particular, and foreign languages in general, native-speakerism was accepted as the institutional and professional norm by many, particularly by professors of language-focused classes. Again, the focus is on the top-down framework provided by the university.

**T:** On the part of the university or on the part of the degree program, we do have the rule that the courses are always taught by a native teacher.

Others challenge the role of the native speaker, specifically in English-medium instruction. However, without institutional support, in which top-down language planning meets bottom-up awareness-raising, the current misalignment cannot be addressed.

**T:** Of course, there again, we need help, strategy, support from the institutions, because the mere fact that a teacher speaks English does not mean that he or she has a deep knowledge of the Spanish and all the English cultures, nor that he or she is an intercultural person.

Overall, professors projected an image of themselves as translingually and transculturally aware and competent individuals who chafe at institutional strictures but are ready to contribute their expertise if asked.

As far as translingual practice is concerned, faculty clearly support the desirability of a plurilingual learning environment at the institution. However, opinions as to how best to provide this varied. Although some teachers insisted on providing a monolingual classroom (**T:** Yes, I teach my class exclusively in French), others proclaimed their transcultural and translingual identity and saw themselves as role models for their students. These faculty based their interactions on a concept of positive transfer rather than negative interference between working languages. As a result, they themselves engaged in transcultural and translingual mediation activities inside and outside the classroom:

**T:** Yes, but I always see the mother tongue as an advantage for learning a foreign language; I don't see it as a problem of interference.

Most language teachers interviewed confirmed the interdependence of translingual and transcultural skills and considered them to be inseparable, i.e., they cannot conceive teaching a language without including cultural elements. They do this by sharing stories from their own lives and professional experiences.

**T:** When you learn a language, you learn a culture: I always try to transmit that, too.

Teaching staff felt that the existing curriculum provided ample opportunity for translingual practice, but they suggested that students needed to improve their transcultural more than their translingual competence. The reasons for this imbalance included students' own backgrounds, a lack of interaction between domestic and exchange students, as well as a lack of specific transcultural learning objectives.

**T:** Cross-cultural issues still need to be developed a little more. Not the interlinguistic ones, because they [students] already come with a good command of English, Spanish, and other languages [...]

However, the previously mentioned top-down approach taken by the institution has, in some cases, led to passivity and resistance to the inclusion of intercultural competence in teachers' professional practice because they felt "obliged" to adopt certain criteria and felt that their autonomy to offer out-of-classroom experiences was restricted. Despite the pressure that some faculty felt, cultural elements were generally considered an integral part of the language class, and, therefore, they were incorporated into the lesson planning.

**T:** I work with books for the topic of culture, civilization, which also see those [inaudible], those three varieties, the standard German of Germany, and also some particularities of the culture, of course, but also what is reflected in the language.

The focus in the classroom, however, tended to be on the acquisition of cultural *knowledge* rather than intercultural *skills* and included activities such as presentations on specific cultural aspects, watching movies to raise cultural awareness, reading the international press, bringing in artifacts from visits abroad, providing talks and conferences on specific cultures, encouraging volunteer activities abroad, or offering gamified activities like treasure hunts.

**T:** And is there a specific learning objective related to intercultural communication or is this more of a secondary effect? Let's see. In the teaching guide of the courses there is [such a learning objective], but it is true that during the short time I have been teaching the subject, perhaps it has not been one of the objectives that I have managed to work on the most this year.

Two of the professors that were interviewed clearly indicated that transcultural competence

was an essential part of their teaching and provided examples of active classroom methodologies to generate intercultural exchange. While such examples were offered by only two out of 13 teachers interviewed, they clearly demonstrate teacher agency in the classroom, if not in curricular matters.

**T:** Then in the classrooms, as I have told you, I would like all classrooms to be mixed teams from the first moment, that is, when the students sit in front of me. I do not want international students on the right side, Spaniards on the left side. I think it is essential to break up this pattern.

**T:** I always try to work on intercultural competence using activities that clearly establish the concept of intercultural competence, which is a meeting of cultures, but which leads to reflection beyond an ethnocentric point of view. I carry out a lot of activities like this in class, or at least I try to.

Frequently, “culture” was presented as fixed, static, content knowledge destined to allow comparison rather than reflect Hoff’s (2019) fluidity approach. That is to say, rather than develop transcultural competence, which is layered, dynamic, and reflective, current practice, in some cases, seems to focus on cross-cultural juxtaposition.

**T:** I always try, like, um, to of course use, um, different tools in order to integrate this translingual transcultural competencies. For example, if they are special holidays or things like that, that are similar in both countries, you can compare, you can show what you do.

One professor mentioned establishing contact between international and domestic students when requested, and another indicated that she assigned the role of “cultural experts” to the international students in her class. Two interviewees mentioned the creation of intercultural teams for group work. Despite these efforts, students persistently requested more contact with exchange students to increase the number of transcultural spaces. Teaching staff, in turn, suggested more opportunities for teaching exchanges as another improvement.

### *Practice, or the student perspective*

Regarding students’ perceptions of challenges and progress in the development of their linguistic and cultural skills (RQ3), participants did not allude to specific institutional internationalization strategies or faculty roles. However, English was generally perceived as a key

vehicular language, essential for academic and professional success and encouraged by university authorities.

**S:** I love the English language and I think nowadays it is crucial to have a good level of English to be able to succeed.

Though student expectations varied due to mixed levels and differentiated needs, students expressed enjoyment and interest in the English language, in addition to its utilitarian value. English-medium instruction, in particular, was perceived as adding value because it provided degree-specific vocabulary. No student comments were recorded relative to (post)colonial concerns with English as a language of imperialism and hegemony.

Student participants expressed their awareness of the importance of L3 and L4 for employment purposes, where English is taken for granted, but another language might have differential value. They also reported specific examples of accomplishments in their L3 or L4 rather than in English.

**S:** French is the language of diplomacy and Chinese opens a door to Asia, key place in the future of IR [International Relations].

Regarding identity, as with professors, students projected an image of themselves as translingually and transculturally aware and competent individuals. When asked, in the survey, to describe themselves in terms of cultural and linguistic identity, only a minority of students considered themselves mostly monolingual or monocultural, while over 50% viewed themselves as plurilingual/pluricultural or translingual/transcultural (Figure 1).

Figure 1

### *Student Identities*

All students agreed that intercultural communicative competence was important to their self-image, by referring to both extrinsic values (such as facilitating communication, avoiding misunderstandings) and intrinsic values (enjoying learning about other cultures). However, when asked what factors had contributed to the development of this competence, family, friends, and travel were mentioned repeatedly, but no reference was made to the university experience.

**T:** Well, in my case I am French–Spanish, and of course, I have had that feeling of transculturality all my life, because though I was born in Madrid, my father is Spanish and my mother French; I studied here at the Lycée Français in Madrid, so I have been bicultural since I was a child.

Given the institutional policy of hiring bilingual/bicultural faculty, teacher profiles frequently reflect a transcultural and translingual identity. Therefore, one would assume faculty might provide transcultural and translingual role models for their students. However, there was no reference to teacher identity in student interviews or questionnaires, i.e., students were clearly not aware of this resource at their disposal.

In order to explore whether the positive attitude displayed by students was underpinned by a critical awareness of cultural filters and personal bias, a series of questions were included in the questionnaire to elicit awareness of personal cultural values, potential difficulties in engaging with other cultures, and the impact of that engagement on students' perceptions of their home culture. In addition to heightened awareness, several students referred to values underpinning their competence, such as tolerance and respect, and desirable "attributes" (Fantini, 2020), such as empathy, impartiality, avoidance of bias or stereotyping, or auto-criticism. Some student comments also demonstrated that the new cultural input having an impact on their perception of their home culture.

**S:** Actually, by knowing how other people saw my country, I knew what image we project to the world and I also knew that I really like my country and I miss it a lot when I'm abroad. Sometimes you don't actually value your country as much as you should, just because you always think – well, I tend to think – that abroad it's better. And my grandma always says to me that that's not true; that our country's really good and it's actually true that other countries are good, too. But I shouldn't undervalue my country for others. And when I went abroad, that's what I discovered.

Evidently, with the curriculum, institution, and staff providing cultural and linguistic input, students displayed an awareness of the positive value of cultural and linguistic diversity, leading to a reflection on the attitudes, beliefs, and roles of all stakeholders in the process of transcultural mediation.

Concerning the availability of learning spaces to put translingual/transcultural competences into practice, Figure 2 demonstrates the high confidence students placed in their own ability to

communicate in a variety of languages for academic or social purposes (“I can make use of my skills in various languages (L1, L2, maybe L3) for academic and/or social purposes”).

Figure 2

### *Students’ Self-Assessment of their Communicative Skill in Foreign Languages*

Student comments include reference to the use of languages for information retrieval, adaptation to new environments, or utilitarian purposes. But, in two cases, they also refer to using languages for volunteer activities or to “help” people by mediating. In reply to a similar question about their intercultural skills, students again self-reported a high confidence in their ability to communicate and engage with other cultures (see Figure 3). However, this was somewhat tempered by text comments related to a fear of stereotyping and racism, insecurity regarding language competence, a desire to obtain access to a culturally diverse group of social contacts, and an auto-critical awareness of possible bias.

Figure 3

### *Students’ Ability to Communicate and Engage with Other Cultures*

During focus group discussions, student participants compared, analyzed, and assessed cultural differences; however, not many actual transcultural interactions, such as the example below, were described. Again, students tended to refer to experiences in their L3/L4 study or travel abroad context rather than to actual encounters on campus or in their local environment.

**S:** I feel like it’s harder to make yourself into a group in Spain because we have these huge groups and these really well-formed structures. In America, I can have a friend and, “hey, do you want to have lunch tomorrow?” And we’ll have lunch. But here, it’s like, “well, half of my group’s here, I can introduce you to the group.” But I know it’s going to be hard for you to be introduced to the group.

There seems to be a discrepancy between students’ self-perception and actual evidence of their intercultural communicative competence being put to the test in real life. Although student participants were grateful for and enjoyed having a pluricultural learning environment, they felt that their transcultural competence was better developed outside of the classroom when socializing, watching movies, travelling, or gaming, for instance.

Students, administrative staff, and teachers all mentioned a number of extracurricular activities provided by the institution that might support the development of intercultural



communicative competence, including a series of talks related to multilingual and multicultural issues, annual debate tournaments in both English and Spanish, and class projects on special occasions, which are exhibited in the main lobby. The institution encourages students to participate by assigning academic credit to these activities, and students value these opportunities highly. However, such activities are highly structured, top-down activities, and the question remains how a university context can best provide opportunities for translingual and transcultural agency inside and outside of the classroom, as well as create opportunities for self-critical reflection, linguistic fluidity, and social sensibility as outlined by the MLA in 2007.

To conclude, transcultural practice appears to be less tangible than translingual practice and more difficult to implement. Despite a well-developed translingual/transcultural identity and some critical awareness in all stakeholders, spaces for actual encounters, allowing for intercultural interaction, are mostly limited to formal, structured environments. Given an environment that shows volition on the part of the leadership and is clearly conducive to translingual and transcultural practice, this paper will discuss which activities can or cannot be considered good practice.

## **Discussion**

In line with current global developments in the field of higher education as well as in the literature, this study set out to critically examine translingual and transcultural competence in the context of three multilingual programs by comparing the perspectives of key stakeholders – the institution, faculty, and students – regarding their understanding, implementation, and experience with dual competence. The following paragraphs present a comprehensive discussion of the findings, highlighting similarities and differences across stakeholders and referencing corresponding studies. The paper concludes with recommendations for ways to strengthen translingual and transcultural competences through interventions in policy, pedagogy, and practice, as well as looking at how future studies could contribute to a better understanding of the experiences and expectations of students over time.

A critical approach and reference to the local, national, and international dimensions in the institutional mission statements suggest a solid basis for a trans-perspective. This is also true of the faculty and student diversity, the compulsory year abroad, and the inclusion of a third and fourth language in the curriculum. However, the high percentage of international students on campus seems undervalued because little specific programming for intentional exchange is visible, a point commented on by all stakeholder groups who were interviewed. It is left to individual faculty members to provide pedagogical models for integrating students, which interviewees reported

doing. While the curricula and syllabi reference cultural knowledge and diversity, skill development, critical awareness, and reflexivity are not specifically mentioned, which may explain students' confidence in their linguistic and cultural knowledge despite limited exposure to actual transcultural practices. The significant emphasis on third and fourth languages, in addition to the predominance of English-medium courses, also contrasts with a lesser focus on culture in the curriculum. Lastly, although the mission statement does not make reference to languages or cultures in relation to internationalization, unlike mission statements in East Asia that seem to foreground culture (Manning, 2021), across the board, faculty highlight the language-culture nexus (Galante, 2022) and describe their various approaches to provide students with exposure and opportunities for practice across languages and cultures.

Within the given framework, mediation between program goals and student needs falls on the teachers, in accordance with their own personal and professional backgrounds as translingual and transcultural mediators. Notwithstanding the institutional focus on native-speaking teachers in the language-focused degree program, some teachers seize on the translingual and transcultural opportunities provided by their teaching context and consider the first language a useful point of departure rather than a potential cause of interference, engaging with languages in all their varieties. The lack of specific training in translingual and transcultural pedagogies, a predominance of English vis-à-vis other languages, and little time and attention given to the transcultural aspect are among the challenges teachers face (see also Galante, 2020). In the end, teachers can and do draw upon their own translingual and transcultural identities, or transcultural dispositions (Lee & Canagarajah 2019b) to guide students by using mixed groups to provide translingual and transcultural experiential learning for students. And, to some extent, teachers try to incorporate comparative cultural activities into their lesson plans.

The students, who have specifically chosen a multilingual degree, display not only a positive attitude toward all their languages, but also a strong identification with a plurilingual/pluricultural or, to a lesser extent, translingual/transcultural identity. However, their lives outside the university, their family background, or previous experience traveling are mentioned as the main factors in shaping their identity rather than any in-class or out-of-class resources offered by the university. Students tend to mirror the institutional and industry-wide focus on the market value of languages, that is, a skill-based international orientation (Mendez Garcia et al., 2021). Beyond the utility of languages in their future careers, though, students do reference transcultural values, such as avoiding misunderstandings and facilitating communication. Here, it should be noted that the volunteering and mediating mentioned by students can be considered evidence of students' ability to apply their actual translingual/transcultural competence. Among the extracurricular activities that

students find helpful are those that are formally organized and count as credits, including multilingual talks and debates. Yet a fair number of students mention the lack of informal get-togethers, such as sports or trips, that they would like to participate in. This echoes findings from the literature, e.g., Dunworth et al. (2021) and Baker and Fang (2021), who insist that intercultural competence does not develop by itself but needs some active nurturing.

This study set out to examine the ways translingual and transcultural competence was envisioned and actualized in policy, pedagogy, and practice at an internationalized university with multilingual degree programs. While the research tried to provide a thick description and multilayered portrait through the application of a multi-perspectival, mixed methods and multimethod design, the resulting picture is necessarily limited in several aspects. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups, while targeting the main stakeholders on campus, were not corroborated through participant observation or mixed-stakeholder focus groups. In hindsight, based on all stakeholders concurring on a lack of integration between domestic and international students, opportunities for participant observation and mixed-stakeholder focus groups should have been more deliberately sought out for inclusion in the study. Finally, a longitudinal approach, which is currently being carried out, could provide a clearer picture of the actual contribution of program versus environment to the development of translingual and transcultural competence.

Considering the resources and challenges mentioned by the various stakeholders surveyed in this project, several recommendations might serve to more fully integrate a translingual and transcultural approach into the present and other higher-education contexts. On the one hand, a generic reference to internationalization, diversity, and career prospects would need to be fleshed out with more specific goals and criteria for becoming global citizens with professional skills, critical social awareness, and personal reflexivity. On the other hand, teachers with a translingual and transcultural background have much more to offer than mere delivery of content and could be encouraged to collaborate in developing specific goals, practices, and criteria to ensure that the program includes critical awareness, social sensibility, and political consciousness beyond the utilitarian model of internationally successful graduates. Most of all, students, who display an openness and eagerness to learn languages and cultures – and who have their own, often unused, plurilingual repertoire to contribute (Darling, 2021) – need to be provided with opportunities and incentives to engage across the domestic–international divide and to critically reflect not only on their study abroad experience but also on their translingual and transcultural engagement, or lack thereof, at home.

Word count: 6544 + 1045 appendices = 7589

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## **Appendix 1: Untranslated participant quotes**

Quotes are listed in order of appearance in the article and are maintained in their original form, without stylistic or grammatical corrections.

**IO:** Sí que es una universidad internacionalizada. Sobre todo desde las altas esferas intentan promover mucho, por ejemplo, los intercambios, y eso ayuda mucho.

**T:** Nuestra universidad ha avanzado mucho, contratamos profesores extranjeros, ¿de acuerdo? Pero no tenemos una estrategia definida sobre qué papel tienen que jugar esos profesores extranjeros en el aula más allá del idioma.

**T:** Sí que hay una política de priorizar el inglés. Pero también es cierto que las terceras y cuartas lenguas tienen mucha importancia.

**S:** I love the english language and I think nowadays it is crucial to have a good level of english to be able to succeed

**T:** Hay un programa europeo de formación de profesores en intercomprensión que es interesante, é que no está en la pregunta, pero mientras se viva esta hegemonía del inglés es prácticamente imposible.

**T:** Por parte de la universidad o por parte de la titulación, sí que tenemos la norma de que las enseñanzas o las asignaturas siempre las imparte un profesor nativo.

**T:** Claro, entonces también ahí, ahí necesitamos ayuda, estrategia, apoyo de las instituciones, porque el mero hecho de que ese profesor hable inglés no quiere decir que tenga conocimiento profundo de la cultura españolas y todas las inglesas, ni que sea una persona intercultural.

**S:** French is the language of diplomacy and Chinese opens a door to Asia, key place in the future of IR [International Relations].

**T:** Pues en mi caso soy franco-española, y claro, esa sensación de transculturalidad la tengo de toda la vida, porque he nacido en Madrid, pero mi padre es español, mi madre francesa, he estudiado aquí en el Liceo Francés de Madrid, entonces esa biculturalidad la tengo desde pequeña.

**S:** Actually, by knowing how other people saw my country, I knew what image we project to the world and I also knew that I really like my country and I miss it a lot when I'm abroad. Sometimes you don't actually value your country as much as you should, just because you always think – well, I tend to think – that abroad it's better. And my grandma always says to me that that's not true; that our country's really good and it's actually true that other countries are good, too. But I shouldn't undervalue my country for others. And when I went abroad, that's what I discovered.

**S:** I feel like it's harder to make yourself into a group in Spain because we have these huge groups and these really well-formed structures. In America, I can have a friend and, "hey, do you want to have lunch tomorrow?" And we'll have lunch. But here, it's like, "well, half of my group's here, I can introduce you to the group." But I know it's going to be hard for you to be introduced to the group.

**T:** Sí, mi clase es monolingüe en francés.

**T:** Wer eine Sprache lernt, lernt eine Kultur, das versuche ich auch immer weiterzugeben.

**T:** El tema transcultural todavía hay que desarrollarlo un poco más. El interlingüístico no, porque ya ellos vienen con conocimientos de inglés, de español, de otras lenguas [...]

**T:** [...] trabajo con libros para el tema de la cultura, civilización, que también ven esos [Inaudible 30:17], esas tres variedades, el alemán estándar de Alemania, y también algunas particularidades de la cultura por supuesto, pero también lo que se refleja en el idioma [..]

**T:** ¿Y hay un objetivo de aprendizaje concreto sobre comunicación intercultural o esto es una cosa más bien lateral? – A ver, en la guía docente de la asignatura lo hay, pero es verdad que con el poco tiempo que llevo impartiendo la asignatura a lo mejor no es de los objetivos que más he logrado trabajar este año.

**T:** Después en las aulas, como te he dicho, a mí me gustaría que en todas las aulas fuesen grupos mixtos de trabajo y desde el momento uno, es decir, que cuando se sientan delante de mí los alumnos, no quiero del lado derecho extranjeros, lado izquierdo españoles, decir eso hay que romperlo, me parece que fundamental.

**T:** Intento trabajar siempre la competencia intercultural con actividades que establezcan el propio concepto de competencia intercultural, que es este encuentro de culturas, pero que lleve a la reflexión fuera de un punto de vista etnocéntrico. Desarrollo muchísimas actividades así en clases, o al menos intento hacerlo

**T:** I always try, like, um, to of course use, um, different tools in order to integrate this translingual trans transcultural competencies. For example, if they are special holidays or things like that, that are similar in both countries, you can compare, you can show what you do.

**HoS:** Un elemento en el que fracasamos, creo que es un fracaso porque hay un margen enorme de mejora, es en la integración, en la utilización de los alumnos de intercambios que están aquí, que vienen por una experiencia internacional intercultural, y nuestros alumnos {en realidad} buscan {y se} beneficiarían de, pero son dos mundos paralelos, son muy difícilmente permeables, opino que sigue siendo un reto.

**T:** Pero quizá el intercambio de profesores a nivel institucional en la universidad, quizá podría, pues, promoverse más.

## List of tables

Table 1

### *Research Design*

Research question	Data source/Instrument	Analysis
RQ1 (Policy): To what extent do higher education institutions create spaces for students to experience translingual and transcultural practices, and develop translingual and transcultural competence?	Document analysis of university mission statement, program curricula, and course syllabi Interview with Head of Studies Interview with representatives of International Office	Content analysis of institutional mission and values statement and course syllabi Thematic analysis of interview data
RQ2 (Pedagogy): How do teachers' linguistic, cultural, and professional identities contribute to the process?	Teacher interviews	Thematic analysis of interview data
RQ3 (Practice): What are students' perceptions of challenges and progress in this area?	Student questionnaire Student focus groups	Descriptive statistics of numerical data from student survey Thematic analysis of interview, focus group, and survey text data

## List of figures

Figure 1

*Student identities*

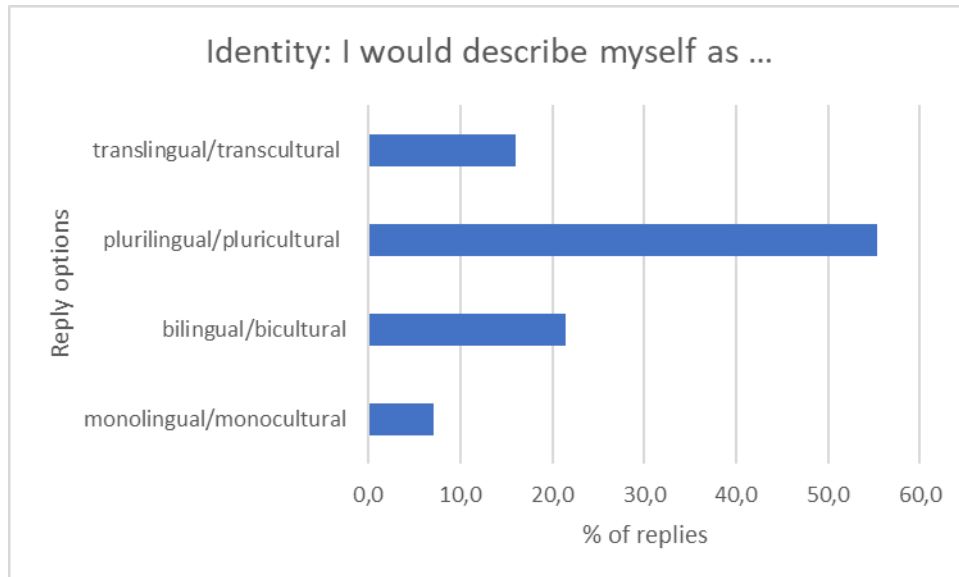


Figure 2

*Students' Self-Assessment of their Communicative Skill in Foreign Languages*

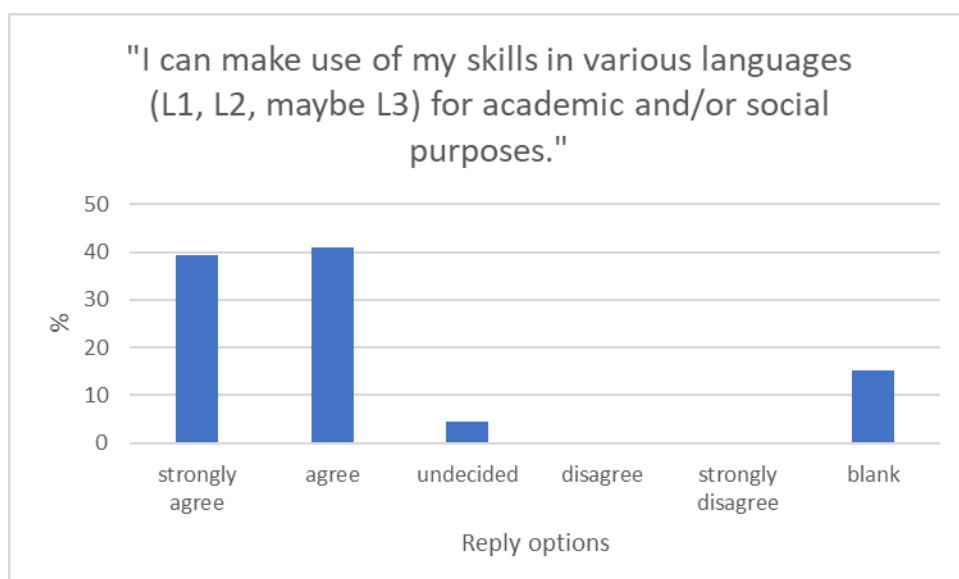


Figure 3

*Students' Ability to Communicate and Engage with Other Cultures*

